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**1**

IT WAS TUESDAY AT one-fifteen in the afternoon, and with the precision of a Swiss watch Tate Baxter’s therapist leaned back in her chair, closed her notebook, smiled, then said, “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?”

Tate’s response was just as mechanical. “No, Dr. Bay. Nothing to report.”

“Well, I have something I’d like to show you.”

Tate lifted her head. One-fifteen was the end of the session. Dr. Bay never went over. Never. “Oh?”

The doctor flipped her notebook over and pulled out a newspaper article. “Take a look at this,” she said.

Tate took the paper, torn between reading the article and watching Dr. Bay. The therapist, whom Tate had been seeing for almost two years, was clearly excited. That hardly ever happened. In fact, it never had. Not like this. Dr. Bay was a behaviorist, always setting up new challenges and goals for Tate to accomplish between sessions. The outcome never elicited anything but a favorable reaction, no matter the performance. Even when Tate had surpassed her own expectations, the doctor had always been reserved. But now Dr. Bay’s eyes were wide with anticipation and her pale cheeks looked flushed.

Tate glanced down and the headline sent her own pulse racing. Kidnapping For Hire. She looked back at Dr. Bay.

“It’s all right, Tate. Please, read it.”

After a moment of hesitation, Tate started reading.

It begins with a list of your wildest fears. For a few thousand dollars Jerry Brody’s personalized kidnapping service will make them come true. Your kidnappers might stuff you into a duffel bag or blindfold you and take you to a faraway cabin. In the dark you might see an alien’s mask or a man in a filthy suit stinking like a garbage Dumpster. No two abductions are staged the same way. Your custom kidnapping could stop at a code word or go on for days. Brody and his team might snatch you when you’re on the subway or showering in your apartment. After the “event,” which some clients compare to meditation, you may feel relief, exhilaration or a newfound sense of personal power.

Tate had to stop. She’d come a long way since she’d first told Dr. Bay about her kidnap phobia and she hadn’t had a full-blown panic attack in months. But this? This was—

“Breathe, Tate,” Dr. Bay said. “Remember what we’ve practiced.”

Closing her eyes, she went to her safe space. After several deep breaths, she focused on each part of her body from her toes to the top of her head.

“You’re safe. You’re in my office and no one’s going to hurt you. Picture the glade.”

Tate followed Dr. Bay’s instructions. By the time she’d finished the awareness exercise she had regained her equilibrium. Her eyes opened to the security of the familiar—and the disappointment that she was still, after so much work, at the mercy of her fears.

“Do you want to talk about this now?” Dr. Bay asked, gesturing at the paper still in Tate’s hand.

“You want me to hire this man? To let him take me?”

“I want you to think about it. I’ve been researching this approach for a long time now and I’ve spoken to a number of colleagues who have used similar techniques. There are reliable case studies where the subjects have been transformed. But remember, it’s simply an idea. You’re doing very well following the course we’re on, and I realize this is unconventional.”

Tate winced at the understatement. She could barely imagine what her father would say about this “unconventional” approach.

“When you go home tonight, I’d like you to do some work in your journal. Not about your reaction to the article but about what your life might be like if you could overcome this fear. Okay?”

Tate nodded. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all anyone can ask. For what it’s worth, you did a great job of calming down. It didn’t take long at all.”

Tate glanced at her watch. It was a quarter to two. Not bad, considering. It hadn’t been that long ago that even the suggestion of something like this would have put her in a panic for days.

She put the article on the side table and grabbed her purse. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Don’t forget to meditate.”

She never did. And it had helped. She went out more frequently these days, and the nightmares weren’t plaguing her nearly as often. Three cheers for the safe place. If only it could exist somewhere outside of her head.

As she was leaving, she nodded at Stephanie, Dr. Bay’s receptionist. There were two people in the waiting room, both of whom appeared perfectly normal. She imagined they thought the same thing about her.

There was no one in the elevator as she stepped in, and she took a moment to push her hair back behind her shoulders, to daub the corners of her mouth, preparing herself for the streets of Manhattan.

Not that she would be on the streets—unless one counted being driven in one of her father’s black limousines. The tinted windows hid her from view, making her feel as if the city was one giant store display.

The elevator slowed at the fourth floor. She inched back as a man entered. He was tall and silver-haired, wearing a tailored black pin-striped suit. His shoes looked equally expensive, and when he smiled she could see his veneered teeth had cost him a pretty penny. Not surprising, given the address. Dr. Bay’s office overlooked Park Avenue. Her clients all understood, even before the first session, that if they had to ask about the fee, they couldn’t afford it.

The man turned to stare at the elevator doors as they rode the rest of the way to the lobby. Only, the doors were reflective and he clearly had no qualms about giving her a very thorough once-over.

She counted the seconds until they reached the lobby, and when the doors slid slowly open she placed her hand strategically so the elevator couldn’t be fetched, waiting until the man was halfway across the lobby before she stepped out.

What would her life be like if she stopped being afraid? She had no idea. It was too foreign a concept.

Despite her improvement, her life was about fear, and it had been forever. At twenty-four, she’d resigned herself to living inside the bubble her father had created for her, going from limo to apartment to business appointments that had all been prescreened and determined safe.

She knew beyond any doubt that anyone looking at her life would believe it was perfect. Why wouldn’t they? She had more money than anyone truly should, she’d been given her father’s fast metabolism and her mother’s striking blue eyes. Her education was exemplary, and if she decided she didn’t want to do anything but shop for the rest of her life, she had the means to do just that.

She knew that her agoraphobic tendencies appeared to many as conceit and arrogance. The fact that she was so terrified of being kidnapped that her world had shrunk to a stultifying routine meant nothing. There were real problems out there; she just had an active imagination and a constant state of terror that kept her from enjoying the gifts she’d been given.

She walked outside the building to the busy street, her gaze fixed on the limo parked just a few feet away. Michael, her driver, opened the back door for her. To those hurrying past he seemed like any other limo driver. Black suit, white shirt, humble demeanor. But behind his dark glasses he was scanning the area with laser intensity and the reason his jacket wasn’t buttoned was so that he could, if necessary, get to his weapon in a heartbeat. He drove her, but that was his secondary job.

She passed him closely as she got into the back of the car and marveled again at his face. He wasn’t classically handsome. Too many sharp edges and flaws. But his looks had grown on her since he’d come on board six months ago. She hadn’t really thought about him that way in the beginning. There were lots of people in her life whose job it was to keep her safe. Some of them were also dear friends—like Elizabeth, her assistant—but most weren’t. Her father didn’t like her getting too comfortable with the staff, and she’d fallen into the terrible habit of seeing them as employees, not people.

Michael had turned into something else altogether. Not a friend, not really. They never did anything except drive. But they talked. About everything.

She’d learned he liked reading the Russians—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev. But he also liked the graphic novels of Frank Miller. She liked to tease him about his comic books, but she’d secretly ordered a few Miller novels online, and they were…well, interesting.

He shut the door, then walked around to the driver’s side and settled himself inside. She could see his sunglasses in the rearview mirror and wished, as always, that he would take them off.

“Where to?”

“Home.”

“No stops?”

“Not today.”

He smiled at her, and she settled herself back on the cool leather seat.

She’d also learned that he didn’t have a girlfriend. Which was a lot more interesting than his taste in books.

MICHAEL PULLED INTO the mess that was traffic in midtown Manhattan, heading toward Tate’s Carnegie Hill penthouse. Something out of the ordinary had happened in the session today. He’d seen that the moment she’d stepped out of the building. He’d wait and see if she wanted to talk or if she would call her friend Sara. He liked it when she spoke to Sara. Tate never hid anything from her closest friend, and for the last few months she hadn’t whispered into the phone when she talked. It was her way of telling him about her life without seeming to bare it all.

His gaze shifted from the road to the mirror, where he was met by a pair of cornflower-blue eyes. He knew she was smiling and he smiled back, although he shouldn’t. When Tate was this flirtatious it meant that she was running from something unpleasant. He’d been right about her session.

“So how’s the doctor doing?”

Tate shifted so all he could see of her was her right temple. “Fine.”

“Wonder what she talks about when she sees her shrink?”

“Probably about how whacked-out her patients are.”

“I don’t know. She seems pretty professional to me.”

“You met her once. For about five seconds.”

He grinned. “Yeah, but she was professional for the whole five seconds.”

Her eyes were back in focus. Smiling. “Sometimes she comes up with some weird ideas.”

“For example?” A cab slipped in front of him, forcing him to slam on the brakes. Hitting the horn was tempting but futile, not to mention illegal.

“Nothing,” she said, her voice softer, flatter.

He didn’t push. The call to Sara would clear things up. The whole phone ploy was actually pretty smart. It didn’t completely break down the barriers between them, but overhearing her chats gave him tremendous insight, which helped him do his job. Besides, she was pretty funny.

Hell, if he had to work as someone’s trained pony, he was glad it was Tate. She might be rich as Croesus, but she didn’t act like most of the trust-fund babies he’d met. He’d wondered, often, whether she’d be so nice if she didn’t live every moment in fear. Poor kid. He wished that shrink would move it along. Let Tate really live while she was still young.

“Did Elizabeth tell you about tomorrow?”

Michael nodded. “She gave me the schedule for the week.”

“Good. Okay, well….”

He glanced in the mirror, but she wasn’t looking at him. The phone call should be coming right up.

He saw an opening for the damn boat of a limo and he took it, daring the Yellow cab next to him to interfere. By the time he’d gone a half block Tate had the slim cell phone to her ear.

“Hey, it’s me.”

He wished he could hear both sides of the conversation, but at least he was privy to Tate’s voice.

“I don’t know, Sara. I think Dr. Bay’s gone over the edge this time. She gave me this article. It’s about this nutcase artist-cum-therapist here in New York. He kidnaps people for money.”

Michael’s hands gripped the steering wheel as he struggled not to turn the limo around, using a sidewalk café as a new traffic lane, and go right back to Dr. Bay’s office.

“You have? When did you hear about this?”

What in hell was Bay thinking? Maybe she’d had one too many Xanax this morning.

“She thinks that maybe if I go through the experience when I know it’s safe, I’ll finally get past it. Trial by fire, I suppose.”

Shit, Tate needed a new psychologist—and she needed one now. He could just imagine what her father would say to this crazy business. William would have a heart attack on the spot, but not before he’d had Dr. Bay’s license revoked.

When Michael had signed up for the job, he’d had a lot of questions, like why this young woman needed a level of security that would make the president feel safe. William had told him that kidnapping was a danger and that he would go to any lengths to protect Tate.

Michael had agreed that someone with her wealth was a target, but guards 24-7? Ex-CIA case officers as a cook and a secretary?

Then he’d heard bits and pieces about the basis for the paranoia. At fifteen, Tate and her cousin had been kidnapped. Tate had escaped out a small bathroom window, but her cousin had been murdered. Tate had done her best to find the kidnapper’s hideout, but she’d been so traumatized she hadn’t been much help. Then, five years after that, when Tate was in college, there had been another attempt. A couple of local idiots had taken her at gunpoint from her car, demanding two million dollars. Luckily the kidnappers had been inept fools, and the FBI had found them within hours, but the experience had scarred Tate deeply, and her father had become determined that she’d never be vulnerable again. As his fortune had grown, so had his security measures.

“I hyperventilated,” Tate said with a self-deprecating laugh. “But seriously, Sara, I promised her I’d give it some thought.”

He finally reached Carnegie Hill and turned the limo toward the entrance to her building, easing up on the gas so he wouldn’t miss out on the end of the call.

“I can’t see it, either,” Tate said. “But she asked me something just before I left. She asked what my life would be like if I wasn’t afraid. I had no answer for her.”

Michael was all for Tate getting over her fear of being kidnapped, but throwing her into the fire was ridiculous. There had to be another way.

“We’re here. I’ll call you later. We’ll talk some more, but don’t worry. I’m not saying yes.”

He pulled the car into the driveway that would take them to the underground garage. There was a spot near the elevator that was reserved for the limo, which made things easier. But he’d ride up to Tate’s place with her, make sure she got inside safely.

The garage itself was extraordinarily well lit. Not just now but day and night. That was courtesy of William Baxter, who spared no expense in keeping his only daughter safe. Elizabeth would be upstairs doing typical assistant things while maintaining her sharpshooter status and carrying a concealed but legal 9 mm Glock. Everyone who worked with Tate had a similar skill set: good at the normal stuff that helped Tate get through her days, great at the stuff that would scare the bejesus out of the most hardened criminals, if they only knew.

Hell, right now three men would be observing every inch of the penthouse via the most sophisticated cameras in the world. If Tate so much as tripped, there would be at least three trained security personnel to pick her up within sixty seconds.

He parked the limo, then got out to open the back door. Tate gave him a look before she tucked her purse under her arm and climbed out. It had amazed him when he’d first started this gig that she could maneuver herself out of the backseat with such grace. Then he’d realized she’d been doing it her whole life. This was the kind of car that had taken her to school. To the movies. It wasn’t just for prom night or a funeral. It was part and parcel of her daily existence.

She headed toward the elevator and pressed the button. There was another example of how she wasn’t like so many other overprivileged women: she pressed her own buttons. She made her own phone calls. She did her best to keep up with the lives of those on her staff, although the ex-agent types tended to be on the private side.

The elevator had one of those shiny doors that could double as a mirror, but he kept his gaze lowered. Tate, who was attractive and always kept herself looking sharp, didn’t like being watched. Which was fine. It wasn’t his job to look at her. He had to keep her safe, which meant looking at everything that surrounded her. Even this elevator. It was checked first thing every morning for bugs, for explosive devices, for anything that could possibly harm its inhabitants.

There wasn’t even a long way up—five floors. Since she owned the whole penthouse, it made security easier up there. All told, there were twelve guys who worked for him, and they rotated duty so that none of them ever got too comfortable. Some of the team had been with Tate for years, but Michael had recruited his four top men. It hadn’t taken long for all of them to become a unit he could be proud of.

The elevator door opened, and Tate glanced his way before she stepped into the hallway.

He joined her, checking the small area for anything hinky. She had her key out, and he watched as she unlocked both deadbolts. She had such delicate hands. Long, graceful. Her nails were on the short side and they were polished some creamy color that was just a little darker than her skin. No rings, no jewelry at all except for the small diamond-stud earrings. She wasn’t a flashy kind of woman. In fact, she did everything she could to blend in. But there was something she couldn’t hide—or change: she was a class act. Everything about her said she had money, background, education. She was different, exceptional. Anyone who passed her in the street would know it.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’ll be in for the rest of the night?”

“I will.”

“All right, then. I’ll wait until I hear the deadbolts click in.”

She smiled and her pale cheeks filled with a blush. He knew she wanted to ask him in. That her flirting wasn’t just about avoidance. She toyed with the idea of having an affair with him, and it made him feel good that she did. Of course, there was no way it could happen. Even if it wasn’t completely unethical and dangerous for him to be with Tate, there was no way. She was American royalty and he was a bodyguard. More than one universe apart.

He took two steps back. That was all she needed to decide that today wasn’t the day to be bold. She went inside and closed the door. True to his word, he waited until both locks clicked into place. Then he got out his two-way radio and made sure the man on duty had her safe and sound.

By the time he was halfway down to the garage he’d already decided he was going to find out everything he could about this joker who kidnapped people for money.

**2**

MICHAEL STRAIGHTENED his tie as he waited for Tate to come to the door. They were going to her father’s place, which never made for an easy day. William was a powerful man who’d made millions—actually, billions—in construction and real estate. He and his brother Joseph had started small, but they’d been smart and ruthless and they’d gotten some prime government contracts that had taken them from their roots in Missouri to penthouses in half the major cities in the world. Although they’d been more successful than anyone could have imagined, there were costs involved, including a daughter and heir so terrified of being kidnapped that she barely lived a life.

Michael knew there was a real threat and that measures had to be taken, but there was also a need for balance. At least some room for Tate to breathe. Unfortunately there wasn’t much an outsider could do. Especially not someone as low on the totem pole as a bodyguard.

He heard the locks slide open one after the other. The door swung open to reveal Tate dressed in a pair of beige pants, a pale yellow silky blouse and enough makeup to tell him that she’d had another crappy night.

“Michael. I’m running later than I should. Come in while I finish gathering my things.”

He stepped inside a foyer as large as his apartment. He’d grown accustomed to the world of the rich, although it never ceased to make him wonder who the hell was in command of the planet.

It wasn’t easy to like the very rich, either, although Tate was pretty decent. She never actually meant to make people feel like poor slobs. It just happened.

She went toward the kitchen, and Michael took the opportunity to do a surprise inspection. He moved his right hand in a specific signal, one that would easily be missed if his people weren’t on the ball, watching his every move on the cameras set discreetly around the penthouse. Two minutes would be all the time he needed. If E. J. wasn’t here by then, he’d be looking for a new job.

He made it in one minute and forty-two seconds. E. J. Packer was young, twenty-four, but he’d been an excellent sniper in the Delta Force when he’d been badly scarred in a shoot-out with Syrian terrorists. He hadn’t lost any of his ability, but he was distinct now, recognizable for the angry red mess that was the left half of his face. Michael didn’t give a shit about that. He wanted a crack team that not only knew what to do at the party but understood that no matter where they worked—or for whom—it was a military operation and there was no excuse, ever, for slacking off.

He nodded at E.J. “That was close.”

“I’ll do better next time, sir.”

“I know you will. Carry on.”

E.J.’s shoulders moved just enough to let Michael know he hadn’t let go of the trappings of being a soldier. Didn’t matter as long as he did the job. As long as he didn’t make Tate feel like a bug under a microscope.

The young man disappeared, melting away as silently as he’d entered. Michael thought about going into the kitchen, talking to Pilar, Tate’s personal chef. But he just walked the perimeter of the foyer, checking out the artwork.

This place had always felt more like a museum than a home. Marble floors, antiques of inestimable worth, paintings he recognized because they were masterpieces. He took in a deep breath to combat the tightening of his throat. It wasn’t that he resented her for having the money. Okay, so he resented it a little. But what really pissed him off is that this was what his life had come to. Babysitting.

“Michael?”

He turned at Tate’s voice.

“Would you like some coffee? I’m going to be another ten minutes or so. I’ve already warned Father.”

“Sure, that’d be great.” He waited until Tate disappeared back into the hallway, then he went into the kitchen.

Pilar was there pouring him the promised cup of coffee. He wasn’t one for fancy java or any of that flavored crap, but he had to admit the coffee in Tate’s kitchen was some of the best he’d ever had. He wasn’t sure what it was and he’d never asked. No chance he’d ever get those beans for his coffeemaker.

“How are you, Michael?”

Pilar was born in Brazil and moved to the U.S. when she went to college at eighteen. Her accent made her seem exotic and sophisticated. Or maybe that was just Pilar. She had trained at the CIA—the Culinary Institute of America—which was one of the reasons she was working as Tate’s chef, but she’d also trained at the other CIA, and that was why she had a chef’s coat with a custom pocket that held her Sig Sauer.

“I’m fine,” he said, taking the too-delicate cup from her hand. “How’s the new kid working out?”

She smiled at him, and he tried to remember if he’d ever seen her without her deep crimson lipstick expertly applied to her generous mouth.

“Don’t you think of anything but business?”

“No.”

She laughed. “No wonder you have no love life.”

“How do you know?”

“Michael, my dear, if you can resist me, then you can resist anyone.”

He held back his own grin. “How do you know I’m not gay? Living the wild life with my lumberjack boyfriend?”

Her laughter actually echoed in the kitchen. It was ridiculously large, like something out of Windsor Castle, all for one woman whose only guests were business associates, all of them involved with the Baxter Foundation, a charitable organization funded by Baxter, run by Tate.

“Believe me, I’d know if you were gay,” Pilar said. She picked up her own cup and took a sip, leaving no trace of her lipstick on the rim. “It’s a shame you don’t let yourself relax, though. It isn’t healthy.”

“I relax.”

“I don’t even think you know the definition of the word.”

“What word?”

Michael turned to see Tate standing at the hallway door. “Are you ready?”

“Not really, and we’re not late. I just got off the phone with a very obstinate woman at the MacArthur Foundation and I need to calm down.”

“So you’re getting coffee?” he asked as she handed Pilar another cup.

“Yes. I am.”

“Okay by me.”

She took the full cup back but didn’t drink. Instead she focused her attention on him. Her expression became pensive and she opened her mouth, but then a blush stole over her cheeks and she turned to Pilar. Two sips and five quiet minutes later they were in the elevator, on the way down to the limo. Tate looked at her shoes the whole time.

SHE STARED OUT HER tinted window, watching New York pass by, chewing once again on the idea Dr. Bay had fed her last week. It was easy to make excuses for her fears, which were, in fact, legitimate. She could be kidnapped, held for ransom, murdered. Such things had occurred, could occur again. It made sense to be wary, to keep her guard up.

On the other hand, her guard was up so high she couldn’t see the world behind it. Yes, it could all go to hell tomorrow. But it hadn’t gone to hell yesterday or the day before or many years before that. She’d put all her eggs in the fear basket, and wouldn’t she feel like the biggest idiot on earth if she went on to live to a ripe old age, completely safe and having missed the whole thing.

She sighed as she gazed at the back of Michael’s head. His dark hair was wavy and thick and she wondered if the messy-chic was on purpose or just truculence. Somehow she doubted Michael owned mousse or gave a damn about how he looked—which, in her opinion, was incredibly juicy even on his bad days. It helped that he kept himself in battle-ready shape. He even walked as if daring anyone to try anything funny.

How had she let her fear of being kidnapped morph into a fear of everything? College had started out so well. She’d finally been able to put Lisa’s death behind her, at least enough to get by, and then—whoosh!—it all had vanished on that one awful day when Ian Stark and Bruce Halliday had kidnapped her.

After that everything had gone to hell. Her relationship with Graydon, never great to begin with, had soured until she’d had to get out. She’d started spending more and more time in her apartment, only leaving to go to class or one of her self-defense classes, which, instead of making her feel more in control, had brought her terror into sharper relief.

She had given in to the panic attacks, the nightmares—and they’d taken over. And now look at her. She hadn’t even been able to ask Michael a simple question. She saw him almost every day. They talked and talked, and yet when it came to something as foolish, as personal, as the origins of the scar on his chin, she became tongue-tied and shy as a kitten. It wasn’t as if she wanted to ask him if he preferred boxers to briefs. The scar was right there for anyone to see.

Pathetic.

HE STOOD AGAINST THE wall in the executive dining room along with the two ex-Secret Service agents who protected William Baxter. One, Jim, was William’s driver, and the other, Peter, was his executive secretary. But mostly they were there to make sure no one got too close. Paranoia hadn’t hurt just Tate but her father, too.

Michael despised this part of his job. It would be different if he’d been protecting a president or prime minister, someone who was doing something for the good of the people, not just an industrialist’s daughter. He’d tried to justify his position, given that Tate ran the Baxter Foundation and that they did help people with their dollars, but that had grown as stale as the sandwich he’d been offered in the staff kitchen.

He shifted his gaze to William. The man was sixty-four but he looked a hell of a lot older. He could afford the best of everything, including plastic surgery for that turkey neck of his, but he preferred to spend his money on things that others would covet. This building, his home, his airplane. His daughter. It was hard for Michael to keep his composure when he was with William and Tate. The man treated her like a child. Like an invalid child. And she let him.

He shifted his position so that he wouldn’t get stiff. In all his years in the military he should have grown accustomed to standing, to waiting. He still hated it. He’d rather face a dozen armed men than do nothing but stand and watch.

Tate laughed, which was a damn rare, good thing. He wondered if she knew that she was pretty. That her long neck, her skin, the way her eyes lit up when she was captivated made her incredibly appealing. He didn’t think she thought of herself that way at all. She dressed in the camouflage of a woman who doesn’t want to be noticed. Beige, cream, taupe, khaki. Pale colors that blended with her pale skin.

His thoughts jumped to the information he’d downloaded about the kidnap artist. Jerry Brody was his name. Michael had read everything he’d been able to find. The guy sounded like a first-class jerk, full of himself and how he was exploring the “human condition.” Michael didn’t understand how anyone could be fooled by his shtick. Yes, he had a degree in psychology, but come on. According to the papers, he’d kidnapped dozens of people, stolen them from their homes, their cars, from movie theaters. He’d tied them up, blindfolded them, taken them to a small, barren room and kept them isolated. Feeding and communication were used as weapons to make the experience more realistic.

That Tate’s shrink proposed this idea was unbelievable. Where had William found this quack? The woman should lose her license over a stunt like this.

Michael had to make sure Tate wasn’t going to agree to it. That was all. If it came down to it, he’d talk to William. No way the old man would put up with this crap.

Tate laughed again. It was good to see her so relaxed, but Jesus. They were at the top of the Baxter Building in the middle of Manhattan, on the sixtieth floor, in the executive dining room. Every table but one was empty. None of the managers or supervisors or whoever normally used this place were allowed in when Tate came to lunch. In addition to Michael and the two Secret Service men, there were also men stationed at the door, in the kitchen and at the elevator.

Her whole goddamn life was one big maximum-security prison.

TATE SETTLED AGAINST the black leather seat of her limo, avoiding Michael’s gaze as he shut the door. She had to blink away sudden tears, swallow a lump in her throat.

The lunch had been fine. Her father was in good spirits, the food superb, the conversation productive. All had been right with the world…until she’d looked at Michael and caught the pity in his eyes.

It was only then that she’d seen the empty tables all around them, heard the echo of cutlery on china. Shame had hit her with a wicked gut punch, and she hadn’t been able to touch her sorbet.

He hadn’t said a word to her, not in the elevator nor in the garage. He’d treated her with respect, as always. He’d even given her one of his rare smiles as he’d opened the limo door. But his look of pity lingered in her mind’s eye.

Pathetic. There wasn’t an area of her life that was free from the effects of her own personal monster. Her father only wanted her to be safe and happy, but she didn’t feel, either. She liked administering the trust, but there again she did almost everything from her home office. Her world had shrunk to a pinpoint. If it wasn’t for Sara…How had this happened?

“Tate?”

“Yes?”

“Home?”

“Yes, thank you, Michael.”

“No shopping to do?”

“Not today, no.”

“Okay.”

His voice sounded normal. No reprimand in his tone at all. And in that heartbeat she made her decision. She would do it. Be kidnapped. She would call Dr. Bay first thing tomorrow and she’d start the process.

Her hands shook at the enormity of the decision. Which just made her more determined. This was her life, and as of this moment she was taking control.

**3**

MICHAEL SAT AT HIS kitchen table, a cold beer half-finished, newspaper and magazine articles spread in front of him. All of them seemed to cover the same territory about Jerry Brody and his lunacy. Unfortunately none of the articles gave him enough information about Brody’s clients to lead him to an actual ID. Michael had put in calls to every one of the reporters, but only two had phoned back, neither one willing to name those who had used Brody’s service.

He’d even left a message with Brody himself, his intention to pose as a would-be client, which would give him a lot of information, and he’d also ask for personal referrals.

He just hoped that all this work was for nothing. He didn’t imagine Tate would be foolish enough to walk into a nightmare scenario like this, but he had to plan as if it were a go. What he couldn’t decide was whether he should tell William about this or just go see Dr. Bay himself.

He stretched his head to the right, then the left, trying to work out some of the tension in his neck and shoulders. What he needed to do was get his ass to the gym. He hadn’t been in three days, and that was unacceptable. Besides keeping him in fighting shape, his brutal workouts were his best defense against stress and depression.

He didn’t belong in New York, at least not like this. He should be in Iraq or Afghanistan, doing what he’d been trained to do. Not babysitting.

He took another swig of beer. Of all the useless things in his life, wishing he could change his situation was the stupidest. He’d left the military of his own free will—but not because he’d wanted to. He still felt the decision was the right one, even if it did mean he’d have to live this life.

Needing the distraction, he went back to reading the last of the articles about Brody. It was as useless as the rest. He turned the page anyway. Maybe—

A knock at his door made him jump, but he relaxed just as quickly. Only one person came to his apartment these days. One person Michael didn’t want to see.

Yep, it was Charlie. The real reason Michael was a glorified babysitter.

His brother knocked again, louder this time.

Michael went back to the table and gathered his work into a file. That he put into the small safe in a cabinet in the living room. Only then did he let his brother in.

“What the hell?” Charlie said as he crossed the living room to the kitchen. “Were you in the crapper?”

“You ever heard of calling first?”

Charlie opened the fridge and took one of Michael’s Heinekens. He looked like shit, but that wasn’t unusual. Charlie was the only member of his family still living, and that was some kind of miracle because the way he played so fast and loose with drugs, booze and the horses, he should have been dead years ago. Nothing worked in Charlie’s life, never had. Ever since Michael could remember, Charlie had been the screwup. Part of that was probably due to their mother’s death when Charlie was only five, but that excuse could only go so far.

Their old man had tried his best to get Charlie some help, but there wasn’t a rehab center on the East Coast Charlie hadn’t ditched.

Michael supposed he loved his brother on some level, but that level was buried beneath a steaming pile of resentment. The old man had made him swear to take care of Charlie. Michael didn’t have the guts to go against a deathbed wish, although it probably would have been better for both of them.

Michael would still be in military intelligence, and Charlie…

“Mikey, listen. I know I promised I wouldn’t ask for no more money, but I’m in a hell of a spot.”

Michael fetched his own beer and sat down in his leather club chair. He might as well be comfortable for the argument that was about to start the moment he said, “I told you, Charlie, the bank of Michael is closed.”

Charlie sat down on the couch, his beefy hand holding on to his beer so tightly Michael wouldn’t have been surprised if it shattered. He really did look like shit. He’d been about thirty pounds overweight for years now, but at least when he was younger he’d been solid. Now there was a look of undercooked dough about him. It didn’t help that he was wearing a filthy T-shirt and jeans that hadn’t seen the inside of a washing machine in God knows how long.

“Mikey, you don’t understand. I’m in a real mess. I had me this sure thing. You remember that trainer I told you about? The guy with the limp and the broken tooth? He swore, Mikey, swore to God himself that the race was fixed, that he’d done the fixing himself.”

“I’m not bailing you out again. We already discussed that. You gave me your word.”

“And I meant it. If I hadn’t heard the words from that trainer guy for myself, I never would have—”

“Charlie, stop it. I don’t care why.”

His brother, two years his junior and as different from Michael as day was from night, gave him a look of such hatred it made him sick to his stomach. He’d bailed Charlie out too many times to count, and this was what he got? One no, and Charlie looked as if he could kill him as soon as pass him the salt.

“It’s Ed Martini, Mike. You know his reputation. He’s gonna kill me.”

“He isn’t. What good are you gonna do him dead?”

Charlie shook his head, a drop of sweat flying off the end of his long, dirty hair. “He said he was gonna make an example of me. You know what that means? He’s gonna kill me, but he’s gonna hurt me—bad—before it’s over. That dude, Jazz, who works for him? I swear to God, he’s a psycho. He loves to hurt people, Mikey. I swear to God.”

Michael figured about ten percent of whatever Charlie said was true. The problem was, which part? “I’ll pay for you to go back to rehab. And if you stick it out, I’ll help you get a job and a place to stay after.”

Charlie got up so fast his beer shot out of the bottle, soaking Michael’s shirt. “I’m not gonna live long enough to go to goddamn rehab. Don’t you listen? They’re gonna kill me!”

Michael swore under his breath as he got up. “Just shut up, Charlie. Sit down and shut up. I gotta go change my shirt.”

Charlie seemed surprised, as if he hadn’t noticed what he’d done, but at least he sat.

Michael went into his bedroom and got another shirt from the dresser. As he changed, he debated giving Charlie the money. It wasn’t as if he was rolling in it, but he could spare some. He shouldn’t. He’d told his brother in no uncertain terms that he was finished. Yet how could he live with himself if Martini really did kill him?

He tossed the wet shirt in the bathroom hamper, then went back to the living room. Only Charlie wasn’t there.

Michael went to the door and looked down the hallway. Charlie was already on the stairs; Michael heard the heavy clump of his brother’s boots.

He shut the door, locked the deadbolts and debated getting another beer. It was after ten, though, and he wanted to get up at five to make it to the gym.

In his tiny living room he wiped the trail of beer off the floor, then turned out the lights. He’d more than likely get a call from Charlie tomorrow. And if he was lucky, he’d hear from Jerry Brody, too.

“IF YOU DON’T WANT to do this, we’ll stop right here.”

Tate tried to squeeze her hands into submission, but the shaking wouldn’t stop. “No, I want to. I just…”

“I understand. But remember, you’ll have your safe word. You can use it anytime, and the moment you say it, everything stops and you’re returned safely to your home. No exceptions.”

“So they won’t cover my mouth.”

“Absolutely not.”

Tate believed Dr. Bay and didn’t believe her at the same time. Jerry Brody sat across from her at the conference table, while Dr. Bay sat next to her. He didn’t look like a performance artist or a therapist. He reminded her, in fact, of the doorman at Sara’s apartment building. Round in the middle, shallow in the chest, his balding head his most striking feature.

They’d been in the meeting for half an hour, and Brody had explained that he wasn’t in the business of hurting people. He would accommodate Tate’s wishes to the best of his ability and he would oversee her adventure himself.

The first time he’d called it an adventure, she’d given him a look that should have seared off his eyebrows. After that, he’d approached her more carefully. Still, she wasn’t sure he understood the depth of her phobia.

“I’d like to add that to the contract, Mr. Brody,” Dr. Bay said. “No covering of her mouth at any time.”

Brody nodded. “That’s fine. You realize she won’t know when we’re going to take her? It’s a natural reaction to scream or call out. I don’t want any of my people being arrested.”

“Please don’t talk about me as if I’m not here,” Tate said. “As for being arrested, it won’t happen if you do your planning adequately. Which reminds me—we’ll have to make sure that Michael knows the plan. If you surprise him, he’ll do a lot more than arrest you.”

“Michael?”

“Her driver and bodyguard.” Dr. Bay put her hand on Tate’s. “Don’t worry. If we decide to go ahead, we’ll bring him into the loop.”

“He’s not going to like it.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Maybe there’s a way we can send him on vacation or something,” Tate said. She could feel her cheeks fill with the heat of embarrassment, which was something of a surprise. It occurred to her that she didn’t want Michael in the loop or to even know this fake kidnapping was being discussed. She knew he’d have serious objections, but worse than that, he’d think she was a fool.

But he wasn’t afraid of his own shadow.

“I’m sure,” Dr. Bay said, “that once he realizes you’ll be completely safe, he won’t have any objections. Perhaps he can take a meeting with you, Mr. Brody, and you two can go over his concerns.”

Brody might be a self-proclaimed artistic genius, but he wasn’t much of an actor. He clearly wanted his show to be run his way, with no interference.

“Let’s continue,” Tate said. “I’ll decide about Michael later.”

Dr. Bay smiled. “That’s a good idea.” She turned to Brody. “Let’s discuss constraints.”

“I typically use rope and handcuffs. Since she—” He stopped, turned his head a half inch so he was looking at Tate. “Since you’ll only be with us for a few hours, the constraints won’t be too extreme. And I’ll be there every step of the way to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“It won’t do me any good to have you go so easy I don’t get any part of the experience. I believe the purpose is to make sure I survive, right?”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Dr. Bay said. “You’ll feel as if it’s real.”

Tate blushed again. She got the message loud and clear: her phobia was so severe Brody wouldn’t have to do much in the way of convincing her. “Fine. Let’s move on.”

“YOU’RE INSANE.”

“Thank you,” Tate said as she handed Sara her plate. Pilar had made a sinful lasagna, which happened to be Tate’s favorite dish, but the casserole was large enough to feed an army.

“I’m serious. Personally I think your precious Dr. Bay has a screw loose. This has to be one of the dumbest things I can think of.”

Tate took her own plate, which had a small square of lasagna and a spinach salad, and her glass of wine and followed Sara as she made her way up to the solarium on the roof. It was their favorite place to eat, to talk. In her little area of New York the buildings weren’t skyscrapers; the view was of Central Park, and her rooftop garden was the highest thing around.

Sara got herself comfy, and Tate thought her friend had never looked better. Sara had been her downstairs neighbor since second grade, when they’d both lived in a brownstone on East Forty-fourth Street. They’d stayed close all these years. She had always thought of herself as chubby, even though Tate had told her that size ten wasn’t in the least fat and that she was beautiful. It was the company she kept that made her feel big. Sara worked as an editor for Vanity Fair magazine, and most of the women she knew were bulimic and looked as if they’d been starved.

This year, though, something had changed. Sara had finally decided that she’d just focus on being healthy—tonight’s lasagna notwithstanding—and she’d been working out with a private trainer for months.

“You look fabulous.”

Sara had just put a large forkful of pasta in her mouth, and at Tate’s compliment she nearly choked. When she finally got her breath back, she shook her head. “No way you’re changing the subject.”

“I wasn’t trying to change anything. I just think you look—”

“Fabulous. Right. Now here’s my question—have you or haven’t you invited Michael inside after work?”

Tate felt the instant rise of heat in her cheeks. “Not yet.”

“Not yet.” Sara put her fork down and somehow managed to look stern and motherly despite the fact that she was Tate’s age and her hair was a mass of wild blond curls. “You can’t even ask Hotty McSwoon into your home, let alone into your bed, and you’re going to get kidnapped? By strangers? With rope and handcuffs? You don’t see a problem with this?”

“I know. It sounds crazy. But the whole reason I haven’t invited Michael in is because I’m scared. Of everything. Or haven’t you noticed?”

“Of course I know you’re scared, but let’s look at the progression here. First kidnap, then sex?”

“Yes. And I don’t know that he’d even want to have sex.”

Sara laughed. “Oh, please. The way you two look at each other in that limo? I’m surprised you both don’t come at every stoplight.”

“Sara!”

“It’s true and you know it.”

Tate got busy with her lasagna, wishing now she’d taken a much bigger piece. Just thinking about Michael was enough to get her all hot and bothered, and even though Sara was her closest friend, she didn’t like to feel like this except in the privacy of her own bedroom.

“Tate, what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Nothing.”

“Talk to me, girl. This is a huge decision.”

“I know. I’m just so tired of being me. If I could have an exorcism, I would. But I don’t think it’s a devil that makes me so scared. I’ve set up my whole life to be safe, but the cost is huge. I would love to go to the gym with you. I’d love to go back to Italy. I can travel anywhere in the world, but all I see is this place.” She felt tears burn her eyes, and dammit, she didn’t want to cry. “I really think this kidnapping thing will change me. I have to take the chance.”

“What does Michael think?”

“He agrees with you. That it’s insane. But I have to go with my gut on this. I’ve made sure that I can stop things in a minute if I need to. I hope I don’t have to. I want to be a real person, not a shadow.” She pushed her plate away, suddenly not hungry. “I need you to support me, Sara. Please. I need all the good karma I can get.”

Sara reached over and put her hand on Tate’s. “I’ll support you no matter what, okay? Think it through. Make sure this isn’t going to make things worse.”

“It can’t get much worse.”

Sara sighed. She looked around the solarium, at all the plants and flowers, the miniature fruit trees and the tall grasses by the fountain. “I want you to be happy. For what it’s worth, I think Michael’s a really great guy, and you could do a lot worse than getting back in the game with him. But let him in on the kidnap plan. Let him make sure nothing goes haywire.”

“No. He can’t be there or it won’t be real.”

“It’s not going to be real.”

“You know what I mean.”

Sara sighed. “Yeah, I do.”

Tate grinned. “Can you stick around for a movie?”

“Sure I can. But only if I get to pick.”

“We’re not going to watch Notting Hill again.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Deal with it.”

Sara lifted her glass of wine. “To stubborn women.”

Tate raised her own glass. “Amen.”

SHE DIDN’T THINK about the kidnapping or Michael until after Sara left. Tate had gone to her bedroom where she’d washed and gotten into her sleep shirt, then climbed into her bed. She wished she had a cat or a puppy, something to sleep with her. Her father was terribly allergic, so she’d never had her own pet, but this was her house, and if he didn’t like it, he didn’t have to visit.

The moment she closed her eyes she knew it wasn’t a pet she wanted sharing her bed. She wanted Michael.

He really was an exceptional man. She knew he wasn’t thrilled with his life, that he wished he was back doing his 007 thing, but when they were together, him in the front seat, her in the back, there was a connection between them. Even Sara had noticed.

Of course, there was no real future with Michael, but that was all right. Sara had hit the nail on the head—Michael would be ideal as her first after so, so long. He’d be gentle and caring….

A fling. That’s all she wanted. Really.

**4**

AS HE STOOD LEANING against the limo, waiting for Tate to finish her shopping, Michael thought once more about going to William. It had been a week since Tate had told him she’d agreed to the kidnapping. In that time Michael had met with Brody, talked with three of his past “victims” and gone over the plan about fifty times. He still thought it was a ridiculous and dangerous game, but Tate had made up her mind.

There was still time to go to William, who would put a stop to this nonsense, but Tate was adamant that her father be kept out of the loop. When he’d suggested that he come along for the stunt, Tate had nearly wept insisting that he stay the hell away.

Wasn’t going to happen, of course. Although Brody had said he’d give no warning before the actual snatch, Michael was going to see him tomorrow to persuade him that it was in Brody’s best interest to take him along. Tate wouldn’t know, and that was fine, but there was no way he was going to let her get taken to some unknown location for an indeterminate period of time without him watching every goddamn second. He could just see himself trying to explain to William how Tate had been hurt—or worse—while he’d been watching basketball on ESPN.

Of course, if Brody continued to object, Michael had a plan B. He always had a plan B.

He checked his watch and figured he’d give Tate another five minutes. She was in the Prada store having a fitting. He still couldn’t figure that damn store out. There was practically nothing on display. It was all hidden in some way that clearly appealed to women.

He’d waited out enough fittings to know he couldn’t rush her, but he also didn’t like her to be out of his sight. Of course, Elizabeth was with her, and he trusted her. Even better, Tate trusted her. A former CIA case officer, Elizabeth knew her way around a weapon.

His cell phone rang. It was George, one of his tech guys who worked on the alarm system at Tate’s. They were replacing some of the equipment, and Michael had asked for regular updates. As in all things concerning Tate, he wanted the hard-core work to be done when she was sleeping or out of the penthouse. She tended to get nervous when she caught glimpses of what it really took to keep her safe.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s all good, boss. We have the equipment in and we’ve just finished the test run. We’ll be all cleaned up in ten.”

“What did you think of the test?”

“It’s everything they promised.”

“Good, I—” He saw Tate come out of the shop carrying two large bags. Just as she reached the center of the sidewalk, she stopped and handed the bags to Elizabeth, then she looked inside her purse. “George, she’s coming. I’ll talk—”

A movement caught his attention, someone in a hooded coat right behind her. A second later the man shoved Elizabeth into a passing group of students. Michael tossed the phone and got out his weapon as he ran. A white van drove up onto the sidewalk, the side door wide-open. The hooded man shoved Tate inside and the van took off.

He lifted his weapon to shoot out a tire, but civilians crowded in front of him and he lost the shot. Brody had covered the license plate with mud, and there was nothing else identifying about the van as it turned the corner out of his view.

He raced back to the limo, cursing Dr. Bay fifty ways to Sunday. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to find Jerry Brody and break his neck.

He picked up the cell phone he’d dropped. It still worked, and as he pulled out of the shopping mall valet parking lot, he hit \*2.

“Elizabeth here.”

“I’m going after her,” he said, “but I’m dropping off the limo and taking my own vehicle. Got that?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry—”

“Just make sure Daddy doesn’t get inquisitive. If all goes well, I’ll have her back by nightfall.”

“Yes, sir.”

He clicked off the phone, tossed it on the seat and pulled out another electronic device, the one the size and shape of a BlackBerry. It was actually a GPS—a global positioning system—with only one target. The moment he saw the light on the map he relaxed. He’d find her and bring her home. There would be plenty of time to kill Brody afterward.

For now, he concentrated on not killing any pedestrians or getting arrested as he broke a great many laws. He had to get out of this limo if he wanted to have the least bit of stealth. He’d taken his motorcycle to work this morning, which was a good thing. He could move quickly and get into tight spots with that baby, and there weren’t many cars on the road that could catch him.

Michael figured the van was registered to Brody and that it was heading toward Long Island, where Brody lived. But he wasn’t a hundred percent sure and he wasn’t going to take any chances.

Tate knew about the GPS tracker—at least the one in her wristwatch. She didn’t know about the one in her purse. But that was fine. She didn’t need to know everything. Besides, if she hadn’t actually passed out from fear, she’d be too busy with her panic attacks to think about global positioning systems.

SHE WAS IN A VAN and there was a bag over her head. Tate could barely feel her hands or her feet, but she could feel the bag being sucked into her mouth as she struggled for breath. The air was foul, sick, and her heart pounded hard in her chest.

“Stop,” she said, only it was a croak, not really a word. “Stop.” It was only a tiny bit better. They wouldn’t hear her. He’d promised to stop if she asked him to, but he had to hear her.

“Stop!”

That was louder, that was more of a scream, but the van kept going, kept rocking, and no one touched her or listened. She tried to kick out, to make them listen, but her legs were tied together and she could hardly move.

“Stop! Stop!” She used all her strength to thrash, to get their attention. And her heart—it was filling her chest and squeezing her lungs so she couldn’t breathe.

“Stop, stop, stop, stop!”

No one answered. She was alone and she was going to die in the back of this van. There was no air, no escape. It was over and there was so much she hadn’t done.

The blackness came from the inside out. It was welcome.

HE MADE IT TO THE garage in Tate’s building, then jumped out of the vehicle and climbed onto his rebuilt Suzuki GSX. He docked his GPS just above the speedometer and squealed out of the garage, heading toward Long Island. He wasn’t exactly sure where Brody lived, but he thought it might be Little Neck.

Didn’t matter. He was following the purse. Brody had no reason to scan Tate for a GPS, so he had no need to get rid of her purse. Even if the pervert wanted to take her clothes, they’d still be in the van.

Trouble was, it was Friday and it was four-thirty, and the expressway was a parking lot. He could get around the cars all right, but there was a great chance he could be popped in the process. The last thing he needed now was to have to explain this to the highway patrol.

He inched the bike forward and thought again about Brody. The man wasn’t exactly living on his performance art, despite charging an arm and a leg for his kidnappings. Michael knew Tate had already given him ten grand—half the fee. But Brody himself lived off his wife’s income. She was some big cosmetic surgeon who Botoxed politicos and movie stars. She was why he could afford to play with his art.

As he put his leg down once again to wait for traffic to move, he watched the blip on the GPS moving steadily forward on the same expressway, only about ten miles ahead.

Screw it. He’d explain to the police if he had to. In the meantime, he was gonna find Tate.

Swerving the bike into the fire lane, he gunned it. He tried to keep an eye out for cops, but between looking at the signal and trying not to be killed by motorists, he had his hands full.

There was a car stuck in his way a few miles in, so he went back into traffic. Despite the laws against it in New York, he did the bob and weave, skating past SUVs and Toyotas with a couple of inches to spare.

He couldn’t understand how the van was making such good time, but as the minutes ticked by and the GPS kept purring, he closed the distance.

Just as he thought he might get a visual, he heard the dreaded sound of a police siren.

Glancing back, he saw the NYHP coming up the fire lane.

Michael slowed down and found himself a nice place to idle right in front of a grocery truck. Traffic moved at about five miles an hour, and he just stayed put, preparing his explanation.

The blip on the GPS went farther away with each painstaking inch, and so did the siren. Finally he saw the lights in his side mirror. Even the cops weren’t going very fast. When they reached his side, they didn’t stop, and he let out a held breath. They were after something else, an accident probably, but with them so close he didn’t dare pull any stunts.

He tried to be patient. He wasn’t successful.

TATE WOKE, STILL IN the darkness of the rocking vehicle. She had no moisture at all in her throat and she felt as if she would choke to death. She tried to cry out again, to tell them they had it wrong, but she couldn’t.

Her tears felt hot on her cheeks as her heart pumped beyond its endurance. She thought of her father, how furious he would be at her for getting herself into this mess. How he would have to live with the fact that her death was her own fault.

She thought of Michael and how all this could have been prevented if she hadn’t been so vain. He would have stopped this, he would have saved her.

She’d wasted so much of her life, only to end up throwing her life away on a stunt. On this idiotic game.

What she didn’t understand is why they weren’t following the agreement. Brody had signed the contract. Didn’t he realize he’d be in trouble once they discovered he’d ignored the rules?

She gasped again, licked a tear off her lip. She would give anything, any amount of money, if only they would let her go. She’d never do anything this stupid again. She’d be good, she’d pray every night, she’d—

The truck turned, causing her to roll to her right, then stabilize again. Maybe they were close to wherever they were taking her. They’d have to listen then, wouldn’t they?

But she probably wasn’t going to make it. Not when she couldn’t catch her breath. Not when her chest was about to explode. It was over. Her life was ending. What a pathetic waste.

IT HAD BEEN AN accident, a big one. Two SUVs, one overturned, a fire truck, an ambulance and several patrol cars. Michael had no choice but to wait until he’d passed the worst of it before he could even get to a decent speed.

The van was already past it all. It had turned off the expressway onto the surface streets of Port Washington. He knew the area, but not well.

By the time he got to the right exit he saw the van heading toward Sands Point. According to Michael’s research, neither Brody nor the wife were Sands Point rich. Hell, he knew of one estate that was for sale there right now—price tag of twenty-eight million. That was William Baxter territory, and it didn’t sit right.

The traffic wasn’t all that great even now that he was off the LIE. Too many commuters coming in from the city, trying to make it to their nice Long Island homes. The blip on the GPS had stalled. He lifted the unit from the cradle and pressed a couple of buttons. Seacoast Lane. That was on the very edge of Sands Point.

He’d driven Tate to Sands Point once about four months ago, to a literary luncheon given by an author who lived there. Susan somebody. Tate and he had talked about the village. She’d told him that there were no stores of any kind in Sands Point. Only homes and gardens and an animal shelter. The residents—who included the CEO of a large pharmaceutical company, a former governor of New York and the family that owned the estate that many believe was the inspiration for “East Egg” in Fitzgerald’s Gatsby—were all rich enough that they could live in this garden suburb where the gates and the security guards kept out all but the anointed.

None of that colorful history helped him now. He drove past well-tended yards and kids toting backpacks filled to the limit. Even the frequent suburban stops didn’t slow him down as much as the expressway traffic, and soon he was in Port Washington, the town that supported the wealthy lives of those who lived in Sands Point.

It was all so peaceful out here. No honking horns, hardly any pedestrians on the main street. Only twenty-five miles from Manhattan, it felt like another world.

As he approached the gated community, Michael turned his attention to his GPS screen. The blip had stayed right there at Seacoast. He pressed another button, moving in on the target.

Not a second later he was looking at an aerial view of 200 Seacoast. It was a huge estate with only one big semicircular road in and out. The house looked large enough to supply a battalion, and the grounds were expansive. It had to be at least twenty acres. The estate was also surrounded on three sides by Long Island Sound.

Michael put all his concentration now on getting to Seacoast. First he had to get past the guards, but that was ridiculously simple. He followed another motorcycle—one with a teenager driving—gave the guard a wave and that was that. Then he found the estate, and it was just as impressive as the GPS had indicated.

Ditching his bike was simple in the vast acres of old trees. The last thing he wanted was for Brody to get wind of this rescue and pull some other stupid stunt. By the time he was finished, no one would find his bike.

He had his gun just in case he needed to get pushy. And he had his GPS, but now he used his old-school skills to lead him to his target. He had no idea what kind of security there was and he didn’t relish setting off any alarms.

It was still light out, this being the middle of March, so he’d have to be damn careful. He hoped Tate was holding up all right. He also didn’t think Sands Point had a psychiatric hospital.

TATE WOKE TO DARKNESS. She lay on a mattress, her right handcuffed to something behind and above her head. Every part of her body ached as she shifted her position.

She tried to think. She’d been in the store with Elizabeth. Karen had been doing a hem. And she’d bought two shirts for her father. It was blank after that.

This was it, of course. The kidnapping. She could feel the familiar symptoms of a panic attack coming over her like a wave. Her accelerated heartbeat, her constricted throat, the narrowing of her vision as she felt as if she was going to die.

“Please,” she said, but her voice broke and turned into a sob. “Please, stop this.”

She wept and struggled for breath as her stomach churned. It felt as if she was on the water, rolling with the waves, but that couldn’t be.

All she wanted was to go home. She’d been crazy to think this was a good idea. It was her worst nightmare come to life. “Please,” she said again, this time louder, but no one answered.

He hadn’t covered her eyes though he’d said he was going to use a blindfold. But it didn’t matter because she couldn’t see anything but dark and she couldn’t hear anything but her own silent scream. Her body spasmed and she barely felt the pain in her wrist. Everything was too closed, too tight, and she couldn’t breathe. If she could just get outside, stop this pounding in her chest…. She would die, and then Michael would never know. He would only remember her being so stupid. God, please, make it stop. Please, please. Can’t breathe. She was going to throw up, she knew it. She would die like this, in this small room, and she hadn’t lived at all.

A light burned her eyes and she struggled more, desperate to get out, get free. Someone was over her, touching her, holding her shoulders.

“Please stop it. Stop. I don’t want this. I have to get out, please!”

“Quiet, you damn fool. You’re bleeding.”

She opened her eyes, adjusted painfully to the light. The man was dark and small and she didn’t know him. She’d never seen him before. It wasn’t Brody. Brody had promised….

“Stop struggling. You’re tearing open your wrist.”

But she couldn’t. The more he pressed on her shoulders, the more desperate she became. The smell of liquor made her gag, and he stepped back. She opened her mouth, ready to plead, to beg, but she screamed and screamed.

He slapped her hard across the face, and it was as if she’d been doused with cold water. She stopped screaming and for a moment, a horribly vivid moment, she was clear, she was there, in this strange room with the awful man.

“Shut the hell up. You’re gonna piss him off—and you don’t want to do that.”

“Let me go,” she whispered, barely recognizing her own voice. “Stop this now. I’ll pay you. You won’t lose any money, but please let me go.”

“You’ll pay, all right, but there’s no way we’re letting you go.”

“Where’s Brody?”

“Who the fuck’s Brody? Just shut up. Be still and it’ll be better for you.”

“What?”

“If you calm down, I’ll put something on your wrist.”

“Who are you?”

He smiled, and his teeth were large and his eyes were small. “Don’t matter who I am. What matters is who you are.”

“You’re not Brody.”

He shook his head. “You want to bleed to death, that’s okay with me, only he don’t want his bed all filled with blood, see?”

“Who is he? Where am I?”

“Listen to me. Just give me your father’s phone number, okay? That’s all you have to do. Then everything’ll be just fine.”

“What?”

“The phone number. There’s nothing else you need to worry about. Just give us the number.”

“Why?”

“Look, just give it up. You’re a pretty lady. You don’t want to get hurt now, do ya?”

“Oh, my God. You’re not Brody. This isn’t the plan. You’ve kidnapped me. You’re going to kill me.”

“Now who said anything about killing you? We just need the number.”

She’d awakened from her nightmare straight into hell. This was the real thing. She’d been kidnapped. Every bad dream she’d ever had was true and right now, and there was no bargaining, no going to a safe place. She would die and all she could think as she closed her eyes was that she hoped it wouldn’t hurt too badly.

She’d never even asked Michael into her home. And now she’d never get the chance.

**5**

NO LIGHTS WERE ON inside the house. From where Michael was hiding, behind a band of large elm trees, it appeared that no one was home and that the exterior lights were all connected to a security system.

Getting to the back of the estate was going to be tricky. The last thing he wanted was a police cruiser catching him trespassing. He supposed he could tell the truth—that he was trying to prevent a fake kidnapping—but he doubted the officers would let him continue on his way.

If it had been his place, he knew just where he’d focus his motion sensors and where he’d put the cameras. There was a very narrow window between this estate and the next where motion sensors became a pain in the ass. It wasn’t wide enough for an automobile, but it would work for him as long as the fence held out. There was only one way to find out.

He took off, wondering who owned this place. Now that he was here, he couldn’t picture Brody living here. The house was ornate, ostentatious. It spoke of old money with its sculptured gardens and heavy drapes behind the closed windows. Brody was modern and eclectic and he would always want to be seen as avant-garde. Unless this was somehow his wife’s estate? That didn’t fit, either.

He made his way back far enough that he could hear the ocean. The salty scent had been in the air for a while, but the sound of water lapping against a pier or a dock or a boat…He’d been in enough oceans to have some discernment, but he’d never been a SEAL.

Would he have taken her to a boat? Was that all part of his plan? If so, it was goddamn stupid. A woman with a panic disorder and the ocean didn’t mix. It was far too easy to picture an ugly death in a boat.

But perhaps there was some other building behind the main house where he had her. He hoped so. It had been too long since she’d been taken. He doubted Tate was handling things well.

Shit, by now her disappearance had to have made a stir. She was Tate Baxter, after all, and the kidnapping had taken place in broad daylight in a very expensive section of Manhattan. William would be going insane and he would want his security chief’s head on a platter.

Well, it had been an interesting job while it’d lasted. Once he got Tate back home, he’d resign and he’d distance himself as much as possible from his team. They didn’t need to collect unemployment just because he’d been suckered.

The edge of the main house came into view, and behind it he could see the ocean. There was a yacht, at least a 65 footer, moored at the edge of a small pier. Parked right by the dock was a white van with muddy plates. Lights glowed from inside the yacht, and as he ran faster, he could see a man’s silhouette.

There was no other building. They had her on the water. But not for long.

“WAKE UP.”

Tate fought to stay cool, but the sharp pains in her wrist and on her arms were more insistent than the man. She opened her eyes. There were more lights on, and she could now see him clearly.

He was of some mixed heritage, maybe black, maybe Hispanic. His eyes were almost golden, which didn’t make much sense. He looked intent and excited; he was smiling as he shook her, and his teeth were crooked, large. He exhaled garlic in her face, and she tried to move her head, which hurt worse than her wrist.

“She’s awake.”

Another voice, a man, older, behind him. She didn’t want to see him, but she looked anyway. He was nothing like his companion. She was right about his age. He was tan, and while his hair was completely white, his face was unlined except around his eyes. He seemed very tall, although from her position on the bed that could be an illusion. He wore a blue shirt and he had a large silver chain around his neck.

“Who are you?”

“You don’t need to know that,” he said. “Move back, Jazz.”

The small man let her go and got off the bed. Now she could see the tall man more clearly, and he reminded her of the men in her father’s club, pampered and false, as if they’d used every trick in the book to stay the hand of time.

“What’s your father’s phone number, Tate?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“Yes, you will. The only question is how much Jazz will hurt you until you do.”

The panic started again and she felt a scream building in her throat.

“Just tell us. It will be so much easier.”

“You’ll kill me if I tell you.”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t.”

“Go ahead.”

“Oh, no. That’s not how we play the game.” He nodded at Jazz.

The small man smiled wider, his glee apparent at the anticipation of her pain. He reached over her head and took her hand in his. He pulled it, hard, and the scream grew as it felt as if he were tearing her wrist apart.

She kicked and found that her legs were no long tied together. It didn’t matter, though. She couldn’t reach anything or stop the tearing. All she could do was scream and thrash, her free arm as useless as her legs.

“Give us the number, Tate. This is only the beginning. He’d like nothing more than to ruin that hand of yours forever. He’ll cut it through the artery. He will. Then he’ll have to stop the bleeding, and the only way he knows to do that is to cauterize it. You know what that is, don’t you?”

The image of her flesh burning made her gag, but there was nothing in her stomach. Maybe she should tell them. Then they’d kill her and it would be over. That was better, wasn’t it?

The big man sighed loudly. “Again,” he said as if he were asking Jazz to change the channel.

Tate closed her eyes as Jazz reached for her hand. The pain took her breath and, with it, her strength. She knew what they wanted from her father, and just like all those years ago, they would win.

“All right,” she said, her voice nothing more than a whisper. “Stop. Please.”

Jazz let her go, but it didn’t help much. The pain shot up her arm and wrapped around her chest. Was it really just today that she’d been picking out shirts at Prada? That she had daydreamed about Michael looking at her with pride?

“Well?”

She wiped the tears from her cheeks with her free hand, wishing for a miracle, knowing none would come. “212…”

MICHAEL MADE IT TO the pier without the police showing up. Nothing mattered now but getting to Tate. It was too easy to imagine her in serious trouble, the kind that didn’t clear up with a cup of tea and a good night’s sleep.

His gun in his hand, he moved toward the yacht, the Pretty Kitty, and tried not to make any noise. If the yacht owner was at all security-conscious, Michael had already set off the alarm. Nothing he could do about that except prepare. He had to remember to ask questions first, which wasn’t his usual MO.

Brody might be an ass, but that wasn’t against the law in New York. If Michael killed him, it would be bad. On the other hand, if Brody tried anything stupid, a bullet in the kneecap might just show him the error of his ways.

He made it to the stern, jumped over the gunwale and got a peek at the main saloon. It was just as luxurious as he’d supposed, nicer than his apartment. Up three stairs was the wheelhouse, but there was no one there, either. Everyone, it seemed, was behind doors.

He kept moving alongside the boat, keeping as low a profile as possible. There was a porthole just ahead, slightly higher than his crouch. Making sure he kept quieter than the water, he made his way there and looked inside.

Tate wasn’t there. Neither was Brody. But he did know the man sitting at the small table, his beefy hand holding on to a beer bottle.

Charlie.

It didn’t compute. What the hell was his brother doing on a boat in Sands Point?

Michael stood, not caring at the moment if Charlie saw him. Unfortunately he didn’t hear the footsteps on the dock until one second before the butt of the gun smashed into his temple.

WHEN TATE WOKE, HER first thought was that death hurt like a son of a bitch, and that filled her with such anger she cried out. Only then did it occur to her that she hadn’t been killed. That her pain meant that she’d passed out again.

Her heart sank as she realized the ordeal wasn’t over. That they were waiting to kill her when she was fully conscious and able to experience everything as it happened.

Didn’t they get it? She’d given them her father’s phone number, and by now he probably knew she’d been kidnapped and was already gathering up the cash he’d need for her ransom. She wondered how much they were asking, but it really didn’t matter. Her father would give them his last cent if he thought he could save her.

But he knew, just as she did, that paying the ransom meant nothing. She would never get off this boat alive. It made perfect sense, now that she thought about it, for them to bring her to a boat. All they had to do was weight her down and toss her overboard. She’d never be found.

She shifted on the bed. Not only was the pain in her wrist getting scary but most of her arm was numb. She was thirsty, too. Normally she drank eight glasses of water a day, but today—was it still Friday?—she hadn’t. Which was probably good, because it didn’t look as though they were going to give her a bathroom break anytime soon.

She used her free hand to pull the small pillow farther down, which seemed to help the pressure on her wrist. Oddly her heart wasn’t beating terribly fast, and she was breathing mostly in the normal range. Even her thoughts were coherent. So, what, now that she was certain she was going to die, the panic was gone?

That made her angrier still. What was this all about? She’d been paralyzed by panic for most of her life and now she got all Zen about death? Oh, come on.

She wished she could have one more talk with Dr. Bay. First she’d tell her that her kidnapping idea? Not so bright. That her friend Jerry Brody had played them all for the fools they were. Except for Michael.

Michael hadn’t liked this from the start. He was the only one who’d told her she was in danger. Of course, he always thought she was in danger. That was simply how he saw it.

But he didn’t only see evil. There was a part of him that yearned for peace—that much she knew for sure. The books he loved, the music he listened to…they were all filled with hope. Yes, even some of the Russians made a case for love and kindness.

She remembered the time he’d told her his favorite piece of music. She’d had to weasel it out of him, and it was the only time she’d ever seen him blush. At first he’d insisted that it was “Highway to Hell.” But she’d wheedled him into his true confession. His favorite song was “Clair de Lune” by Debussy. It was one of her favorites, too, but when she’d asked him why he was embarrassed, he’d said it was girlie music. That had really made her laugh. Girlie music.

How was it possible she was smiling? On the verge of death, and still the thought of Michael made her smile.

Of course, the real Michael, the 24-7 Michael, probably wasn’t close to the man she’d created in her head. Her Michael was, she had to admit, too perfect. The real Michael would never have met her expectations. He couldn’t have. So it was probably good for her to die now, before she’d gotten brave enough to pursue him. Before the disillusionment. Right?

She wiped her eyes, then her wet hand on the bedspread. It wouldn’t have hurt her feelings if they could have slept together. Just once. He would have still been her dream man, but she’d have had one night of experiencing his body for real. God, how many nights had she gone to sleep imagining what it would be like with him? How it would have felt to have Michael fill her, take her. More than that, kiss her.

She hardly knew kissing. Graydon—the only guy she’d ever had sex with—had stunk at it. He practically swallowed her. No finesse, no joy. She’d hated the taste of him, the way she’d had to wipe her mouth. But she’d always known kissing could be wonderful. How, she wasn’t sure. Probably all the books she’d read. All the romantic movies. If that many people seemed to like it so much, there had to be something more to it.

Well, it wouldn’t do her any good to think about that now. The best she could do was try and go out with some dignity. And pray that her father would survive the ordeal.

IT DIDN’T MATTER A damn to Ed Martini whether he threw two bodies or three overboard. All he wanted was to get the ransom money and get the hell out of town. At least until Sheila, that skinny bitch, stopped hawkin’ him about her goddamn alimony. He’d thought about throwing her overboard, and while the idea made him happy, the police would be all over him in a heartbeat. Sheila’d made sure of that.

So he’d take the five million and go for a holiday. Maybe St. Thomas or even just the Keys. When he felt like it, he’d come back. Give the bitch her money. What would he care if he’d already covered his assets?

Ed looked over at the guy tied in the chair. He didn’t recognize him, although something about him seemed familiar. Probably one of Sheila’s hired detectives. Bitch.

“What’s your problem?”

Ed turned to see Jazz poking Charlie in the shoulder. Charlie looked like he was gonna have a heart attack on the spot.

“What’s your problem?” Jazz repeated.

“Nothin’. I’m just wondering when we can go get the ransom, you know?”

Jazz gave him another shot to the arm, but Charlie, he didn’t seem to be so worried about the ransom as he was about the guy in the chair.

Ed leaned back in his leather chair, thinking maybe in a few minutes he’d have the cook bring up some dinner. A nice piece of salmon, maybe. “Jazz, get the guy’s wallet.”

Jazz—the only one in his whole outfit he could trust completely—bent next to the passed-out guy and took his wallet from his back pocket. He opened it up. “Michael Caulfield.”

At the sound of his name, the man in question moaned and lifted his head. It fell back to his chest, but he tried again, and this time he succeeded.

“Hey, Charlie,” Ed said. “You wanna explain to me why we have a man with your last name come to my boat with a gun in his hand?”

“I—I—”

“I’m the one that told him about Tate.”

Ed looked at the brother. Except for the blood seeping down the side of his face, he looked a lot smarter than Charlie. Of course, a potato was smarter than Charlie.

“You did, huh? What exactly did you tell Charlie?”

The brother sniffed, wincing at that small movement. “I told him she was worth millions. That she was planning this fake kidnapping, so nobody would be the wiser if he was the one who took her.”

“And you knew this because…?”

“I’m her bodyguard.”

Ed smiled. It was just what Charlie had told them. “So, great, you told him. And he told me. You both did good. But now I think you both don’t need to stick around.”

“Wait a minute,” Charlie said, his voice high and scared. “I’m supposed to help with the ransom, ain’t I? Isn’t that what you said? That I help with the ransom and then we’re square? I didn’t owe you five million dollars, Ed. I owed you hardly nothing compared to that. Tell him, Jazz.”

Jazz moved over to the big leather chair and crouched down beside his boss. “You know, I don’t care about the brother, but Charlie, we could still use him.”

Ed leaned to his side, keeping his voice as low as Jazz had. “For what?”

“After we kill the others, after we get the money, we make sure the cops start sniffin’ at Charlie. And before they catch him, he has an accident. And they don’t sniff any further.”

This was why Jazz got the big salary. He might look like your junkie cousin, but he was a smart spick. Always thinking. Ed gave him a slight nod, then turned to Charlie. “Relax. I was just kiddin’. Wasn’t I, Jazz?”

“Yep, just kiddin’.”

“About you, at least. I think you’ll agree that your brother has served his purpose.”

Charlie looked at his brother, then back at the two men. His eyes were wide, his nose was runny and he looked like he was gonna puke. “We don’t have to kill him. He told me all about this deal, you know? We wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for Mikey.”

“That’s true, Charlie,” Ed said, “but the man brought a gun into my home. That’s very disrespectful. I’m sure you can see that.”

“He didn’t mean nothin’ by it. I swear to God, Ed, he didn’t mean to offend.”

Ed sighed. “It’s too late for apologies.” He looked at his watch. It was almost eight-thirty. No wonder he was so hungry. He turned to his right and picked up the intercom that led to the galley. That’s where the cook was. And the pilot, too. “Pauly?”

He waited a few beats, and just when he was going to speak again he heard, “Yes, boss?”

“You got some dinner ready?”

“Ten minutes, boss. You want something special?”

“If you have a nice piece of salmon, that would be good.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, Pauly, make enough for…” He looked at Charlie and wished he’d go wash his face. But he’d feed the stupid bastard. Jazz, too. And he had to feed the woman because they might need her between now and when they got the money. “Make enough for four of us, okay?”

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

He put the intercom down and nodded toward the small refrigerator in the bar.

Without a word, Jazz fetched him a beer. Opened it for him, put it down on a nice napkin on the little table next to the chair. Then Jazz turned on the TV that was mounted on the wall across from the table. There were four sets so Ed could watch a bunch of different games. He had to know where his money was coming from. That’s why it didn’t matter where this boat went—he could always be in touch with Ronnie at the office, via satellite. Ronnie, his eldest son, ran the day-to-day.

He took a big drink of the ice-cold brew, then waited for the burp. Once he was comfortable, he turned back to Jazz. “Kill him.”

Jazz grinned and got out his gun. It was a .45, a birthday present from his old man.

“I didn’t tell him everything,” Michael said.

“Don’t even try—”

“I didn’t tell Charlie about the real money.” The brother turned his head and looked at Ed. “The ransom is chicken feed. I know how to get fifty million. Tax-free. No one the wiser.”

“Fifty million?” Jazz slapped his head just where he’d hit him before.

The brother hissed, but he didn’t pass out.

“Hold on a minute, Jazz. Just what are you trying to tell me, Mr. Caulfield?”

The brother swallowed, blinked, then straightened his back. “The woman is worth ten times that. But the money I’m talking about is in a numbered account in the Cayman Islands. If you kill her now, you get five million. If you get her bank account number, fifty million gets transferred to your account. No questions. No taxes.”

“And what do you want from this little deal?”

“You think I want to babysit a spoiled brat for the rest of my life? I figure two hundred thousand in the Caymans? I’m a king.”

Ed leaned forward, his interest definitely piqued. “Mr. Caulfield, I realize you told us this information to save your life. But I must ask—now that you have told us, what do we need you for?”

“I’m the only one who can get you that account number.”

“And why would she do that for you?”

The brother smiled. “She’s in love with me.”

**6**

TATE TRIED TO FIGURE out how long it had been since they’d gotten her father’s phone number. She didn’t have her watch and she couldn’t remember if she’d left home without it this morning or if they’d taken it from her. It had been dark the first time she’d been conscious, and it was still dark, so that didn’t help.

She couldn’t see much from where she lay. There was the low ceiling and the little port window. Across from the bed was a dresser and a small vanity table with chair. Everything was bolted down, of course. There were no loose objects anywhere. The lights, she’d seen when they had come on, were recessed. There were no table lamps.

There was also a second door. They’d come in and out of the one kitty-corner from the berth. This one, she had come to believe, led to the head. Which she would really like to use. Soon.

She still couldn’t get over how calm she felt. Other, normal people probably wouldn’t consider this calm, not with her still-pounding heart and the numbness in her limbs. But given her circumstances? She was doing damn well. She wasn’t going to bet the farm that all her panic issues were resolved, but this was okay. This was survivable. Which was irony at its finest.

In between figuring out the second door and trying to hear if someone was coming, unwanted memories came to haunt her. The first kidnapping, not the second. The one that had cost her Lisa.

They’d been taken from Tate’s bedroom. Lisa, her best friend and cousin, had spent the night, which was something they did often. The two of them had been held in a basement for two days. Somehow, for reasons that had eluded her and made guilt a part of every single day, she’d escaped. Lisa hadn’t.

She froze again, listening hard. Nothing. She heard the lap of the waves against the boat, but even those were soft, barely audible. She heard her own breathing, too. But at least she could hear things over the pounding of her heart, which was an improvement.

She lifted her right leg, making sure to keep her cuffed arm as still as possible. It actually wasn’t that bad. She was able to move without screaming or trying to slash her own artery so she’d bleed out.

Then she lifted the left leg. It worked as well as the right.

One of the things she had done in college was work her body. Thank goodness that, in addition to yoga and Pilates to keep herself limber, she’d taken those self-defense classes. She’d learned to shoot and shoot well. She’d done those things to make her feel courageous, and none of them had worked worth a damn.

But as of this afternoon her universe had changed. She wasn’t sure if she would remember one thing she’d learned from any of her classes or if she’d just pass out again the moment the door opened, but she was going to move forward under the assumption that in this universe she kicked ass.

The first thing to do was to move her legs, stretch the muscles. It was vital that she had control over every part of her that still worked. One hand, two legs and a brain. With luck, she’d get in at least a few licks before they tossed her into the ocean.

“WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE you?”

Michael wished they’d undo the rope that was cutting him across the chest. Of course, if they did, the first thing he’d have to do was kill his brother.

Goddamn Charlie. He must have gotten into the safe when Michael had gone to his bedroom to change shirts. There was no other explanation, and for that, for this, whatever deal he’d made with his father, deathbed or no, he was through with Charlie. Assuming they both weren’t killed in the next five minutes. “You should believe me because you’re here. You think Charlie could have put this together?” He laughed and he wasn’t the least bit sorry to see the look of hurt in Charlie’s eyes.

“Speaking of being here, how did you find us?”

“I got that one covered, boss,” Jazz said, holding up Michael’s GPS.

“That’s great, Jazz. What’s he tracking?”

“The woman.”

Ed Martini, who Michael deduced the tan gentleman to be, sighed. “What on the woman is he tracking?”

“Oh, crap.”

“Want to share, Mr. Caulfield?”

He debated lying, but all they had to do was bring the GPS in proximity to Tate’s purse and it was all over. “Her purse. It’s wired.”

“Jazz, ask Danny to come up, would you? Then have him take Miss Baxter’s purse and dump it somewhere in New Jersey.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Ed turned back to Michael. “I still don’t see how you’d convince her to give you that number. You’d have to kill me and pretty much everyone I knew to convince me.”

He looked back at Ed, willing himself not to move, not to do what his training had ingrained in him: escape. “Tate Baxter has been rich her whole life. The kind of rich that alters her perception of money. I think fifty million dollars is one hell of a lot. But when you’ve got over a hundred billion dollars in assets…”

Jazz whistled. “I knew she was loaded—”

“Look up the Baxter Corporation online,” Michael said. “Look William Baxter up in the Forbes 500. He’s the third wealthiest man in the United States, and that doesn’t include his numbered accounts.”

Michael forced himself to relax and to keep his mouth shut. The ball had been lobbed over the net, and he had to see whether they were going to put it in play.

He wished he’d thought of something smarter, something that would get them both off this boat tonight, but it wasn’t a terrible plan. Ed Martini was a bookie, one of the biggest on the East Coast. He was a man who liked to play the odds. The potential of a ninety percent profit would appeal to the gambler in him.

What did he have to lose by checking it out? Michael knew Ed wasn’t about to forget the five million. No one seemed to be in a huge rush to get it, so they either hadn’t called in the ransom yet or they must have given William some time to gather the cash. Michael’s whole objective was to buy time.

Eventually the circumstances for victory would come his way. This was the kind of thing he’d trained for all his adult life, and these guys? They knew nothing but the brute fundamentals. He’d win and he’d get Tate out of this in one piece. If they believed him right now.

“Yeah, that’s all swell, but the five million, we don’t need her for that. And there’s no guarantee—”

“She’s crazy about him, Ed,” Charlie said. “You threaten to hurt Mikey and she’ll do anything you want.”

Ed barely gave Charlie a glance. “It seems like a lot of trouble.”

“Not so much trouble,” Michael said, “not fifty million dollars’ worth. Completely untraceable.”

“But if she signs over the money, she can just as easily blow the whistle.”

Michael smiled at Jazz. “I don’t see how, unless she can communicate from the other side.”

Jazz’s thin eyebrows came down as he frowned.

While Michael waited for him to comprende, he took a moment to think about a particularly juicy way he would kill the man when the time came.

“Oh. The other side. I get it.”

“Once you know the account is legit and you make the transfer, there’s no way anyone’s going to trace the transaction. Not if you put the money back into the same bank under your name.”

Ed chuckled just as the hatch opened at the front of the saloon. A bald guy came up the stairs. He stopped there and pulled a big tray filled with food up from the hold. Then another. Following the second tray there came a man in a white chef’s coat.

Michael turned his attention back to the bald guy. He was older than Michael by at least a couple of years, but, shit, he was in great shape. Michael would need to bring a weapon along to kill that one.

Evidently he was Danny. The one who was going to lose the GPS tracker. Jazz made him wait as he went into the berth at the inside of the saloon. He came out again holding the Coach bag. Before he handed it to Danny, he took the cash out of Tate’s wallet and her wristwatch.

Michael changed his mind. He would kill Jazz with a dull fish knife instead.

The chef was nothing. A chef. If this was everyone who would be on the boat, he could manage. There was only one guy who truly scared him and that was Jazz. Michael knew the type—he enjoyed his job. The more people he could hurt, the better.

The discussion was over, at least for now. As the chef and baldy set up the table for Ed’s dinner, Ed finished his beer, then told Jazz to cut him loose.

“Take him into the cabin and cuff him next to his girlfriend.”

Michael didn’t show his relief. All he cared about now was making sure Tate was okay.

WILLIAM BAXTER STOOD in his upstairs closet, staring at the shelves of his safe. He’d never given much thought to the heft and weight of five million dollars, but he did so now. He knew, because it was important to know such things, that one million dollars in one hundred dollar bills weighed twenty-two pounds. Therefore, five million dollars would weigh one hundred and ten pounds. He needed a vessel, something he could fit into a public trash Dumpster, something that wouldn’t look suspicious to someone passing by, something that would hold one hundred and ten pounds of hundred-dollar bills. It was a serious matter. One, if he got it wrong, that could mean his daughter’s death.

His eyes closed as he tried to regain his bearings. He kept remembering the phone call. The electronically altered voice.

Your daughter is ours. Bring five million in unmarked hundreds to the Central Park carousel. At two-thirty this morning put the cash in the Dumpster with the red X. No police. No tracking chip or dye packs. You deliver the money by yourself. One thing goes wrong, Tate is dead.

He had to get a grip on himself. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for his daughter, including giving these people his money. If only he could believe that following the instructions to the letter would be enough.

He knew only too well that if a man was capable of kidnapping, he was capable of murder.

It occurred to him that the vessel he was desperately searching for had been so obvious, if he hadn’t been this close to tears. He would use an old gym bag. There were a couple downstairs.

But to go downstairs would telegraph that something was wrong. The last thing he needed was for the staff to gossip. Any oblique reference at all could be enough to cause damage.

He would have to call Stafford, his majordomo. Just as he stepped out of the closet, his intercom buzzed. His heart leaped in his chest, but he made it to the phone. “Yes?”

“Sara Lessing returning your call, sir.”

“Yes. And, Stafford, please come to my room and bring one of those old gym bags from the storage room. Discreetly.”

“Sir.”

William pressed the lit phone line. “Sara.”

“Hi, Mr. Baxter. Is something wrong?”

“Is Tate with you?”

“Uh, no.”

“Would you happen to know where she is?”

“She didn’t say anything to me about having plans.”

“I see,” he said, sitting down before his knees gave out. He hadn’t realized how much stock he’d put in the idea that Tate was simply with her friend and this was all a prank.

“Mr. Baxter, have you tried her cell?”

“Yes. I have.”

“What about Michael? Or Elizabeth? They’d know.”

“Mr. Caulfield is also not available by phone, and Elizabeth suggested Tate was with him.”

“Oh. Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Okay, nothing’s wrong. Not really. Except…well, I wasn’t supposed to tell you….”

“Sara, please—”

“Of course. I’m sorry. Tate is participating in this, well, sort of stunt.”

“Pardon me?”

As William listened to Tate’s best friend outline the lunatic plan, every part of him wanted her words to be true. He hadn’t wept since his wife died twenty-two years ago, but he wept now, knowing that the silly plan to fake Tate’s kidnapping had gone so horribly wrong.

“Sir?”

“Thank you, Sara. I appreciate your explanation. However…”

“Yes?”

“An hour ago I received a ransom call.”

Sara didn’t say anything for a long time. “Michael is with her. He’ll make sure she’s safe. I know he went after her. He was against the whole idea.”

“Was he?”

“Oh, God.”

“I have to go. Needless to say, if you hear—”

“Of course. And if there’s anything—”

“I’ll call you.” He hung up, and only then did Stafford enter the room, carrying a large black gym bag.

“Is this fine, sir?”

It was perfect. All five million dollars fit inside with just enough room to zip it closed. He had several hours to kill until the drop-off. Plenty of time to imagine the hell Tate was in.

THE DOOR OPENED AND all Tate’s bravado vanished. Before she could even see who had opened it, she was hit by a massive panic episode. Heart, lungs, legs, brain…all the things she had counted on were no longer under her control. The fear had her tight and the room dimmed.

“Tate.”

She opened her mouth, but his name wouldn’t come.

“Tate, look at me.”

The side of the bed dipped, and she felt his cool fingers on the side of her face. The tunnel vision, which blocked out so much, softened and let her see who it was. “Michael.”

He smiled. He wasn’t wearing his sunglasses, either, so she could see his eyes. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s okay. You found me.”

“I did.”

“Thank you. I was so scared. I was sure…Is my father here?”

His smile sank and the light in his eyes went out. “Oh, Christ, Tate, I’m sorry. I can’t take you home. Not yet.”

“What?”

“Lover boy here is joining the party.”

Tate looked just past Michael. The small man was there, leering at her as if her heartbreak was better than cable.

“I’m sorry. I followed you, but when I got to the boat, they found me.”

“It’s all right,” she said, even though she could hardly understand. It was Michael, and he was supposed to save her.

He leaned down close. “Don’t fret,” he whispered. “I’ll get you out of this. I promise.”

“Come on, my dinner’s getting cold.”

Michael spun away from her and stood up to Jazz. “Get that cuff off her now so I can clean her up. In case you’ve forgotten, you still need her. Then, when she’s clean and there’s a bandage on that wrist, you can bring in our dinner.”

For a moment it looked as if Jazz was going to shoot Michael, but then he burst out laughing. “Man, you got you some pair.”

“Whatever. Just get the cuffs off her.”

Her breathing grew more stable as each moment passed. Well, as long as she kept her gaze on Michael. He took her into the head to wash her wrist, but then he must have noticed her discomfort, because he left her there, closing the door behind him.

She trembled so violently it was difficult to do the most fundamental things, but she managed, and then Michael joined her again, washing her wrist as if she might break. Which, when she thought about it, was entirely possible.

“I know that has to sting like hell.”

“It’s okay. This is the best pain I’ve had since—”

“I let you down. I’m sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known. Brody has a great deal to answer for. He’s behind this, you know. He might not be here, but he’s the only one who knew about the plan, so it follows.”

He didn’t say anything, but she watched his lips narrow and become pale. Never, though, was his touch anything but gentle.

“Michael?”

“Yes?”

“Did they call my father?”

He turned off the small faucet and got her a towel from a silver bar on the wall near the enclosed shower. With the same care, he dried her. “Don’t touch that,” he said, nodding at the very red and raw flesh.

He looked in the cabinet above the sink, choosing a bottle of aspirin, then in another cupboard near the door he found a first-aid kit. “Let’s go sit. I want you to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I don’t care. You need to eat. To be strong.”

She sighed. “No amount of food is going to help with that.”

“Let’s do this before our friend Jazz gets too antsy.”

She followed him to the bed, where she blushed like a fool as she climbed to the middle of the mattress. This was, for all its horror, a very intimate situation. She’d had her fantasies about Michael, but his actual touch, the scent of his skin, the closeness was something she hardly knew how to handle.

The good part was her awkwardness with Michael kept her from thinking about her own imminent death.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Do I have to put that stuff on?”

He held up the antibiotic ointment. “This? It doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Promise?”

He nodded. “Promise.”

He was true to his word. It didn’t hurt. His touch did, but she didn’t mind. He’d clearly done this kind of thing before. Probably in the military. When it was a matter of life or death.

She was just about to question him about his medical training when Jazz walked in, gun out and aimed at Michael. Immediately behind him came a very large bald man carrying a tray.

“Where’s this supposed to go?” The bald man sounded as if he was from the Bahamas or Jamaica.

Jazz seemed stumped, so Michael took over, setting the tray on the dresser, then setting a napkin in her lap, along with a fork and a dinner plate.

He brought his own over, and when he sat down on the edge of the bed, Jazz said, “Hey.”

Michael looked up.

Jazz glanced from Michael’s food to the other room.

“Get your plate. You can eat in here and shoot us if we don’t pass the salt.”

Jazz didn’t think that was quite so funny. He walked over to Michael and pressed the barrel of the gun into the center of his forehead. “You wanna be careful there, buddy. There’s a big ocean out there and a lot of hungry fish.”

“Got it,” Michael said. “I apologize.”

“That’s better.”

Despite his anger, he did as Michael had suggested. He ate at the vanity, his gun within easy reach.

She did her best to ignore him as she ate. It was superb salmon. In fact, the whole meal was perfectly prepared, but it was still difficult to swallow.

She kept thinking about her father. About how scared he must be. Each time she started to slide to the bad place, she looked at Michael. It helped so very much.

**7**

CHARLIE WIPED HIS forehead, wishing like crazy he could get off this stinkin’ boat. He needed a fix and he needed it now, but Mikey was in there with that skinny chick, and Ed, he wasn’t feeling so generous.

He looked down at his plate, but there was no way he was gonna eat, even if it was all cooked by some fancy chef.

All he wanted was for them to get the ransom. Then he could leave and he wouldn’t owe Martini any more money. Nothing. In fact, with his cut, he’d be able to set himself up just fine. Screw Mikey. He should have helped him, that’s all. If he had helped, none of this would have happened. Goddamn, he’d promised Pop he’d help. Now they were both in it up to their necks.

“Charlie.”

He wiped his forehead again, this time with his napkin instead of his sleeve, then turned to face Ed. Jazz was in the other room with Mike and the skinny chick. So it was just him and Ed. “Yeah, Ed?”

“Charlie, why didn’t you tell me about the bank account in the Caymans?”

Shit, shit and more shit. He didn’t like answering questions. Especially when the wrong answer could get him killed. “I didn’t know.”

“Your brother didn’t tell you?”

“He told me about the kidnapping thing, right? About how she was paying somebody to snatch her. And he told me she was worth, you know, a lot of money. And that’s what he told me.”

“Nothing about the bank account.”

Charlie shook his head. “He doesn’t always tell me everything. He thinks he so damn smart and that I’m just his loser brother.”

“He never mentioned that he was going to follow you?”

“He might have. I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“Tell me more about him. Has he been her bodyguard for a long time?”

“Hell, no. Only about six months. Since he got out of the Army.”

“He was in the military?”

“Yeah. Some big shit. They all kissed his ass.”

“Why isn’t he still some big shit?”

Charlie felt his cheeks heat. He didn’t want to tell this part, but Ed would know if he was lying. “Because of me.”

“Really? What happened?”

“I, uh, took some things from one of his Army friend’s car one time.”

“Things?”

“Some papers about a weapon or something. I’m not even sure what they were. They were just in this locked briefcase, so I figured they must be worth something. I didn’t get to sell it, though. They caught me and I did some time. He said he was through with me, but I’m his brother, you know? He promised he’d look after me.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, I was wondering…what time are we gonna get the ransom? Because I have some, you know, things I gotta do.”

“Not for several hours, Charlie. Just finish your dinner, and I’ll let you know when we’re going to leave.”

He nodded, turned back to his plate. But now he was even less hungry. Damn that Mikey. He shoulda helped out his only brother.

FINALLY, JAZZ LEFT. He turned off the light and he locked the door behind him, but they were finally alone.

“I know,” Tate said, shaking the cuff against the bar. “It’s really uncomfortable.”

After dinner, Jazz had cuffed him right next to her. They were lying down with plenty of pillows behind them. He’d even gotten Jazz to cover them with a blanket. But there was no way he was going to be this uncomfortable for the whole night.

“Tell me something, Tate. What is it you like about that Prada store?”

She didn’t say anything for a minute, then she giggled. Tate was not the giggling type. It sounded pretty good on her.

“It’s not that I like the store so much. I know people there and I like the way their clothes look on me. What are you doing?”

He had gotten his comb out of his left back pocket and was now inching his way up the bed to get in the best position. They’d hooked him up with his right hand, unfortunately, but his left would do.

As soon as he could maneuver properly, he pressed the far edge of the comb down on the pawl. It took him a while to disengage the pawl from the ratchet, but once that was done, the cuff popped open.

“Was that what I think it was?”

He followed the same steps with her handcuff. He left both cuffs hanging from the bar as he moved down and closer to Tate.

“How did you do that?”

“My uncle was Houdini.”

“Really?”

“No. I wasn’t always a limo driver.”

“I know. You were a spy.”

“Sort of.”

“Why sort of?”

He moved even closer to her and decided he’d better just go for broke. “Lift up.” He tapped her on the back of her neck.

She did, and he slipped his arm in back of her, cradling her head.

“I was in military intelligence, which is, yeah, the spy division. We broke into places, stole information, coordinated military operations and the CIA presence.”

“Sounds terrifying.”

“It could be. But when I say I was well trained, I’m not kidding.”

“Why in the world aren’t you still there? Doing important things?”

“Taking care of you is important.”

“Oh, please. I’m a spoiled rich girl with psychiatric issues. How important can I be?”

“To me?”

She didn’t respond except for a little shiver. Good. He didn’t want her to be scared. He wanted her to believe that he could get them out of this. If not tonight, then in the near future. He needed her to do whatever he asked of her, no matter what. And for that she needed to be panic-attack-free.

It would all be so much easier if his own brother wasn’t sitting in the next room. What killed him was that he’d let Charlie get the better of him again. The first time had cost him his military career. This time it would cost a hell of a lot more. He couldn’t even blame his brother. Charlie was Charlie. Nope, this was his own damn fault, and before he got fired, quit, whatever, he was going to make damn sure Ed Martini and Jazz would never bother anyone again. He would make sure that none of the Baxter money was taken and he’d do whatever the hell it took to make sure Tate Baxter went home safely.

“Michael?”

“Yes?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No. No, I’m just angry at myself. I should never have let you go into that store alone.”

“I wasn’t alone.”

“But Elizabeth—”

“Is amazingly capable. She isn’t at fault. I won’t have her lose her job over this.”

He smiled, glad she couldn’t see him. “Okay. Elizabeth stays.”

“Good.”

“Speaking of good, you’re doing damn well yourself.”

“Not really.” She snuggled in closer, and he was glad to have her warmth. “I passed out. Several times.”

“Understandable.”

“And when I was conscious, I was in full panic mode. I didn’t do any of the stuff I was trained to do.”

“It’s a whole different ball game when it’s for keeps.”

“I’m just sorry, that’s all.”

“For what? None of this is your fault.”

“I don’t know. Maybe all these years of focusing so much energy into my fear of being kidnapped…”

“You did not bring this on.”

She sighed, and he felt a small drop of wet on his shoulder.

“Talk to me, Tate. I’ve heard…”

“That I’d been kidnapped?” she asked. “That we—me and my cousin—were taken from my bedroom?”

He wasn’t sure if he should push or just let it go. Maybe talking about it would help, but he was no psychiatrist. Of course, she’d probably told Dr. Bay about this, but Dr. Bay, he now knew, was an ass.

He nodded, squeezed her shoulder.

“Her name was Lisa. She was my best friend. My only friend. Because her father and mine worked together and we were the same age. We did everything together.”

“Same age, huh?”

“Yep. Her mother—my aunt Sharon—made sure we stuck close because my mother died when I was two.”

“I didn’t know you were that young.”

“I don’t remember much about her. But I remember everything about my childhood with Lisa.”

“Tell me about it.”

“She had really long hair and I used to love to brush it. I would pretend I was a hairdresser and we’d play every day. I was sure that’s what I was going to be when I grew up.”

“You? A hairdresser?”

“Why not?”

“I can’t picture it.”

“Back then, when we were little kids, we weren’t really rich. Not like we are now. My father and his brother had gotten some lucrative government contracts, which is basically what made the company, but we were as nouveau as it gets. We were so happy. We traveled, we explored. Lisa and I did everything together. We were as close as sisters.”

“What happened?”

“We were fifteen. So that’s—”

“Nine years ago.”

She nodded and her hair brushed against his neck.

“Since we traveled so much to places like Italy, England, Spain, we’d been taught to be really careful there because of all the kidnappings. Lisa and I barely thought about it, but there was always someone watching out for us. Damn, it was fun. I never felt lonely. We had the same tutors and the same homework. We wore the same clothes. We actually didn’t look that much alike, but everyone thought we were twins.”

“Sounds great.”

“It was.”

That little shiver he’d felt just a few moments ago was back, but it meant something completely different now. He’d seen her tremble just before a panic attack. Just before her breathing became labored and her skin turned deathly pale. He’d meant for the conversation to relax her, to help her trust him. Not send her into a tailspin.

“I never had anyone I was real close to when I was a kid,” he said. “I was into sports, mostly football, but I kept having to change schools.”

“Why?”

“My old man was a drunk. We had to skip on the rent at least once a year.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Yeah, well. He was the reason I signed up for the Army, so I guess it wasn’t so bad.”

She turned to look at him. It was so dark in the room he couldn’t make out her expression, although he had a good idea what it was. “Wasn’t so bad? I can’t believe you’re so cavalier about it.”

“I’ve lived with it all my life. One adjusts.”

“I don’t think it’s nearly that easy.”

“You’ve adjusted.”

“No, I haven’t. That’s the whole point. I should have adjusted years ago. I should have put my fear in the proper perspective. I mean, come on, what are the odds that—”

He heard her take a swift breath, then laughter. Not giggling this time but the real thing.

“What’s so funny?”

Her answer was delayed as she got herself under control. “What are the odds,” she said, “that I’d get kidnapped three times?”

He grinned. “I’d say they were pretty good.”

“Yep.”

He stroked her hair, which was softer than he’d even imagined. “Well, the odds of you getting kidnapped four times have to be astronomical. So once this is over you’re home-free.”

She laughed again, and he joined her, and it was maybe the best thing that could have happened. Her whole body relaxed. Hell, at this rate, she might actually get some sleep tonight. They both needed to eat, sleep, stretch. He had no idea when opportunity would knock, and they both had to be ready.

He thought about getting up, but then her hand went to his chest and he realized she hadn’t finished her story.

“Anyway,” she said, her voice softer now, “we were really careful in Europe but not so much back home. It wasn’t that no one thought anything could happen to us, but—”

“Home turf. It’s hard to stay diligent.”

She nodded. “We spent the night at each other’s houses all the time. The night they took us we were at my place. It was summer, hot. I wasn’t a big fan of the air conditioner, so I had my bedroom window open. It was nice to feel the breeze.”

“Sure,” he said.

“I remember a hand over my mouth. It smelled like stale cigarettes. We were dragged out the window in the middle of the night. Both of us were blindfolded, gagged and tied up. We were thrown in the back of a truck. We rode for a long time and then we were carried inside, down some stairs. It was a basement, and it smelled like cigarettes and beer.

“It gets fuzzy after that. I only remember a few things. Lisa screaming. Someone taking off my nightgown. Praying. Then I was on a street I didn’t recognize and I was wrapped in a white sheet. I was alone.”

“You escaped.”

“I got out, but I don’t know if I had anything to do with it. Someone could have put me there, for all I know.”

She wasn’t shaking. Her voice was steady. Even her skin felt warm and dry. Had she told the story that many times? Or would she fall apart if he said a wrong word?

“I saw a woman in a window and I went to her door. She called the police.”

“Lisa wasn’t so lucky.”

“No. She wasn’t. They found her body three days later in a field that was covered with junk. They hadn’t bothered to dress her, they just dumped her like so much trash.”

“Tate—”

“It’s okay. It’s good to remember. To focus on the fact that it isn’t over until it’s over.”

He pulled her close, resting his cheek on her soft hair. “There’s nothing fair or good about any of it,” he whispered. “I hope the bastards burn for eternity.”

“Yeah,” she said.

He rubbed her arm with his fingers, a very light, hypnotic touch. They didn’t speak, and she didn’t weep, but all the same the next hour was about calming down. About coming back to now.

When finally she sighed, he knew he could do what he had to do, even if it meant leaving her. Not for the whole night but for as long as it took him to do some recon. He’d been too busy fixing her wrist to really check out the bathroom. He was sure he would find something in there he could use as a weapon. Then there was the vanity and the dresser. Probably closets, too, although he didn’t remember seeing them.

He looked over at the door, and there was still light coming in around the edges. Which meant if he turned on the light in here, it wouldn’t be noticed.

“Tate, I have to move. I’m just going into the head. Will you be all right?”

The hand on his chest lifted slowly. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to do this now. The light’s still on in the saloon.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

“I won’t be long.” He climbed out of the bed and went to the door. Even though he knew it was locked, he tried it anyway. Mistakes happened, and sometimes not by him. “Close your eyes,” he said. “Light.”

As soon as his eyes adjusted, he went to the vanity. This cabin was clearly used to accommodate women. He found a hairbrush, a mirror, makeup, creams, sprays. Nothing particularly helpful.

There were clothes in the dresser—women’s, and some of them were mighty skimpy.

The head, however, held his interest. A package of safety razors. Those could come in handy. A long pair of scissors. Some isopropyl alcohol and a book of matches along with a scented candle. He could work with this stuff. He just had to be careful how and when, because Tate was his weakest link. He wouldn’t allow them to use her as a bargaining tool, so he’d have to make damn sure if he struck, he’d win.

There was also the question of Charlie. Yes, he wanted to kill him for his role in all this, but truthfully he wasn’t sure he could, so there was another weak link.

If it had been just him, he’d have had no problem with the crew. He could get rid of Jazz in two shakes. The man was a brute, nothing more. But the bald guy, he might be trouble. The chef was no big deal, and Martini was too used to letting others do the dirty work.

But it wasn’t just him. Tate’s safety overruled everything.

He rearranged some of the equipment in the head, then he leaned out and said, “Just one more sec,” before he closed the door with his foot.

After he’d washed, he went back into the cabin. Tate was still in the same position, the blue blanket pulled up above her breasts, her head resting on a mound of pillows. She looked pale and scared, but she hadn’t simply been resting, waiting for him to return.

There was a fierceness about her he’d never seen before. Curious. Was it the talk of her little cousin? Or was it the laughter that had brought her a few steps closer to fighting back?

“What’s that smile for?” she asked.

He hadn’t realized. “You’ve made a decision.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.” He turned off the lights and was once again amazed at the depth of the darkness.

“Are you going to be able to find your way back?”

“Eight steps,” he said.

“Now that sounds like something a spy would say.”

He got back to the bed and climbed in, shifting until he had her comfortably beside him again. “Those kinds of details make all the difference. Next time you go to the head, count. And when Jazz comes into the room, watch him. Does he go to the right or the left? Is he ready before he turns on the light or does he take a few seconds to adjust?”

Her hand touched his chest again. “Is it always like that for you? Everywhere?”

“Most of the time, yes.”

“So how do you relax?”

He chuckled. “Well, there are a couple of ways….”

There was that little shiver again.

“I have a confession.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve been meaning to invite you for dinner.”

“Really?” Of course, he’d known about that for months, but he wasn’t going to spoil this moment for her.

“I’ve always enjoyed our talks. I thought it would be nice to spend some time with you off the clock.”

“It sounds nice.”

“I know. Unfortunately I’m a big chicken. I was afraid you’d—”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Just afraid.”

“We’re here now. And I don’t see a clock anywhere.”

Her hand moved. Not much and not under his shirt, but it was a start.

He stroked her hair once more and, as he did so, pulled her tighter against him. It wouldn’t be easy to kiss her in such a dark place. He could miss by a mile. Unless…

He took her chin in his left hand and held her steady as he lowered his lips onto hers.

**8**

TATE’S EYES FLUTTERED closed at the whisper of his lips. She held her breath waiting for him to pry her mouth open, for the gaping maw that was all she’d known of kisses. But he barely touched her. Just a brush, an almost that made her quiver. She tried to remain still, to let him show her what he wanted, but the way he teased her, nearly touching, made her arch forward.

Even then, even with him truly kissing her, he was soft and deliberate. As if he were testing, putting his proverbial toe in the water.

The metaphor made her smile, and when he smiled in return, she felt it. Felt his lips curve and his warm breath mingle with hers.

A moment passed, and he must have decided that the water was fine because there was no more teasing. He took her mouth and his tongue slipped inside. In that instant she realized everything she’d known about kissing in the past was wrong.

He didn’t swallow her whole or do anything that would spoil the moment. With his arm holding her head, his fingers still guiding her chin, she felt amazingly, astonishingly safe.

How was it possible to have the worst and best experience of her life happen at the exact same time?

Gathering her courage, she touched his tongue, and that was a sensation beyond thrilling. He let her lead the dance for a moment, then he was in charge once more.

She didn’t mind. In fact, all she wanted was to surrender completely, let herself fall into this, into her dream become flesh.

He pulled away, only to return, nipped her bottom lip, then soothed her with the flat of his tongue. Kissing was wonderful. Better even than in her feverish imagination.

He moaned with his passion and hunger, and she laughed, it was so good. She’d made him moan. This sexy, experienced man of the world.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you okay?”

She sighed. “I’m perfect.” Then she kissed him.

He pulled her closer, and now that he had her, he let go of her chin to stroke her hair, to touch her cheek. Just as she pulled back to bare her neck, the door opened, throwing light all over the bed.

Tate jerked away as if she’d been caught doing something nasty.

“Hey, what the hell?” Michael said, leaning forward to block her from the intruder.

“Sorry to break up the party, but—What the—?” Jazz rushed to the side of the bed and held up the empty cuff. “Are you kidding me?”

“They were uncomfortable,” Michael said.

“I’ll show you uncomfortable.” Jazz shoved his gun into the side of Michael’s cheek. “Get up. Now.”

Without moving, Michael said, “Tate, you just relax, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Jazz said.

Despite the immediacy of the threat, Michael moved off the bed with incredible grace. The moment he stood, Jazz poked him in the ribs with his gun. “Cuff her.”

“She’s not going anywhere.”

“Cuff her or I’ll do it.”

Michael obeyed, and her hand was once more above her head in a position that simply couldn’t be comfortable. That was the least of her problems. Where were they taking Michael? God, what if he didn’t come back?

“Please, can you tell me what’s going on?” she asked.

“Shut the fuck up—that’s what’s going on.” Jazz made Michael take his cuff off the metal bar, then Jazz cuffed his hands behind his back.

“I’ll be back,” Michael said. “You just get some rest.”

She would have laughed if she’d had any control over her breathing. Or her heartbeat. It was all she could do not to beg Jazz to let him go, and when they left the room, slamming and locking the door behind them, she fell apart.

ED WAS STILL IN HIS big chair, but the dishes were gone. There were navigation charts on the table, two different cell phones, a laptop and a bottle of champagne in a silver ice bucket.

Ed looked up when Michael was pushed in front of his chair. “What was all that?”

“They were out of the cuffs.”

Ed’s gaze moved to Michael. “Really?”

“It’s a handy parlor trick.”

“I’ll remember that. Do you have the account number?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too soon. I need some time.”

“You don’t have time.”

“Look, it doesn’t matter if you have the account number. You can’t get the money without Tate. She has to be there in person to sign the papers or the bank won’t transfer that amount of money.”

Ed just stared at him. He didn’t move or frown or anything. “Jazz, uncuff him.”

Jazz seemed affronted by the idea, but the keys came out and Michael was soon rubbing his wrists.

“You go back in there and you make sure this lady is going to do everything we need her to do. If she doesn’t, we’ll kill Charlie. Then her. Then you.”

“TATE? CAN YOU HEAR me?”

Tate blinked as she pulled in an inadequate breath.

“I’m back. I said I would be back and I am. Can you look at me, Tate?”

It felt as if she were swimming up from the bottom of the ocean. There was light up there and warmth and safety, but it was so very far away.

“Come on, honey. You can do it. You’re all right. Nothing’s going to hurt you tonight. I’ll be here the whole time and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She jerked her hand again. She wasn’t sure if she was trying to get loose or if she just needed the pain to jar her out of her nightmare.

“Shit, you’re bleeding again. We need to get you to the bathroom so I can change the bandage.”

“Michael?”

“I’m right here, Tate.”

“They took you and I thought—”

“I know. But I promised—and I don’t break my promises.”

She focused. He was right next to her. The overhead lights were on, so she could see he wasn’t hurt. And he wasn’t cuffed. “What did you promise them?”

He sat back. “What?”

“What did you promise them? It’s okay. I know you had to tell them something or they would have killed you.”

“You’re right. I did. I needed to buy us some time.”

She could feel the real world become solid around her. The pace of her heart slowed, the tunnel vision expanded. It occurred to her that Michael had become her new safe place.

“I told them you have a numbered account in the Cayman Islands. That I was going to persuade you to give me the account number and that Martini would be able to transfer fifty million of your money into his account.”

She thought about what he’d said for a moment. She could see the logic. If they thought they could get that much money, her life became a lot more valuable. “Actually, you’re right. I do have a numbered account at the Grand Cayman Bank. But there’s no way he can make that transfer. Not if I don’t sign the papers in person.”

“I was right?”

She nodded. “I’m surprised you’re surprised. I figured a spy like you would know all about my finances.”

“I don’t know anything about them. It’s not germane. Well, it wasn’t until a few hours ago.”

“Is that going to botch the deal? The fact that I have to sign the papers?”

“No. In fact, I think it can work in our favor. I’m pretty sure they’re getting the ransom tonight. They’re not going to be reckless about it, either. There’s no way we’re getting off this boat just yet. But if Ed believes you have to sign, then we’ve got all the way to the island to perfect our escape.”

“I don’t know about you,” she said, “but I’m not that good a swimmer.”

“He’s going to have to get fuel, supplies. There will be opportunities.”

“I don’t know…. Remember what Jazz said—there’s a big ocean and a lot of hungry fish.”

“The man who kidnapped you is Ed Martini. He’s one of the biggest bookies in the States. For fifty million dollars he’s not going to take any chances. You’ll be fine.”

“Until I sign the papers.”

“It won’t come to that.”

“I’d like to believe you.”

“I came back, didn’t I?”

She smiled. “Yes. You did.”

“What do you say we get that bandage changed.”

WILLIAM CHECKED HIS watch again as he drove slowly along the Sixty-fifth Street traverse. In a few minutes he would be at the carousel, and a few minutes after that he’d put the bag full of money in the red bin.

The drive in itself had been terrifying. He hadn’t been behind the wheel in four years, and that had been in England. It meant nothing. To get his daughter back he would have walked here on his hands.

He’d obeyed the kidnapper’s instructions to the letter, but after his discussion with Sara, he knew that someone from inside his organization had to be involved. He would deal with the incredible idiocy of the whole concept of fake kidnappings later. For now, he was looking at Michael Caulfield as the most likely traitor.

Sara’s conviction that he would never do anything to hurt Tate was simply another nail in his coffin. William had hired Caulfield because he was supposed to be the very best at what he did. But he hadn’t paid enough attention to why the man had been discharged. There was the whole unsavory business with the brother.

There was no question that he would get to the bottom of this. There was also no question that whoever had taken his daughter would pay with his life.

He had already passed the dark and shuttered Tavern on the Green. Everything was closed at this hour. However, the carousel was still illuminated. He would have preferred softer lights with some character to them, but these lamps weren’t to entrance, they were to scare off the drug users and the teenagers who looked for dark corners to get their thrills.

He had to get close to the red-crossed trash bin. Not because of the instructions but because five million dollars was heavy and he wasn’t a strong man. He wished he had followed his doctor’s advice about exercise.

None of it would matter if he didn’t get his girl back. He’d gone all these years with her safety as his vanguard. No matter where they’d traveled he’d spared no expense. Without Tate, he had nothing.

There it was. The only red-marked trash receptacle near the carousel. Though it was large, he’d have to work at getting the bag inside.

He parked the borrowed Cadillac. Stafford had wanted to drive it himself, but William had to do this alone. At least the Cadillac was easier to maneuver than his limousine. Once outside, he took the key to the trunk and lifted the lid. The gym bag was securely zipped. No casual passerby would think it contained blood money.

He took in a deep breath and hauled the bag up and over the rim of the trunk. Staggering as he walked the few steps to the marked bin, he had to rock his body so the bag would hit the opening.

After a moment to catch his breath, he shoved the bag into the bin until the whole thing fell. And fell.

He looked down, bracing his hands on the edge of the bin. There was no bottom. There was a trash-bin-size hole dug through the cement and the earth beneath. But all William could see was the end of his world.

WITH HER NEW BANDAGE and the comfort in knowing she wouldn’t have to be cuffed again at least for the rest of the night, Tate finished up in the bathroom, grateful there were guest toiletries, including a couple of toothbrushes still in their boxes. She wasn’t crazy about using the soap on her face, but as she washed she realized just how insane that was.

She was still alive when it could have so easily gone the other way. In fact, not much about this kidnapping had turned out like her fears.

Because of Michael.

She stared into the small mirror above the sink, wincing at the woman who looked back. Her eyes were red and puffy, as were her cheeks. She looked as if she’d been through hell. She had looked like this when he’d kissed her, and now it felt quite suspicious. Had he just been trying to keep her distracted? Calm her down? Probably. Shouldn’t she mind a lot more?

Of course, she’d clearly gone quite mad when the truth had penetrated that she’d really been kidnapped. How insane does a person have to be to worry that her new potential boyfriend might not like her skin tone when on the brink of death? If they lived through this, she would definitely need a new therapist.

Well, she couldn’t stay in the head all night. It just seemed so odd that he was out there. That they would be sharing a bed.

That sucked her breath right out of her lungs.

They were sharing a bed. It might be her last night on Earth. The math wasn’t difficult. She thought of the kisses and how it had felt to finally have a real man want her. Even if it was all an act, she didn’t care. As far as last wishes went, this was a good one.

A shudder shook her body as once again reality and delusion smacked into each other. This was so different than anything she’d imagined—and she’d imagined so much. In her nightmares there was no rest, no relief from the terror. There was certainly no kissing and no trust that somehow she’d survive.

A tap on the door sent her heart into overdrive.

“Tate? You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

He needed to brush his teeth, to get himself ready for bed. Although she’d like to, she couldn’t stay here for the rest of the night.

She took one last glance in the mirror—which was not terribly smart, considering—then went into the small bedroom.

Michael stood by the door, an easy smile on his lips. Part of her ease with him was a conditioned response. Michael only took off his sunglasses when they were having their wonderful conversations. The more she connected with his gaze, the calmer she felt.

“You need something?” he asked. “There are some clothes in the drawers. Maybe you could find yourself something more comfortable to wear.”

She couldn’t. The idea of wearing someone else’s things…

“I’ll be out in a minute. The door’s locked. You’ll know if someone’s trying to come in.”

She looked at the door, then back at Michael. Selfishly she wished he didn’t have to go, even for a few minutes. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know,” he said. A moment later he was in the head and she was alone. Only it didn’t feel quite so bleak.

She went to the dresser and opened the top drawer. Bikinis. Many of them. All so tiny they made her blush. Second drawer down had cover-ups, but they were mostly transparent. God, what must go on in this boat.

She shook her head at her prudishness. She’d been around a lot of sex in her life, even though she hadn’t been the one having it. In her fancy prep school she’d spent many a night wearing headphones so she wouldn’t have to hear the grunting coming from the other bed.

In college things had gotten more personal. Graydon had taken her to parties where the drugs and alcohol had flowed like water. Inhibitions were nonexistent, and she’d become inured to the sight of her fellow students going at it like bunnies.

But then she’d retreated to her world of fear, and so much of the outside world had taken on sinister tones. At the very least it had become unfamiliar. More real by far was her fantasy life. It was in bed she truly lived. That’s where all her plans were, her dreams. And that’s where sleeping with Michael made sense.

She breathed deeply, closed her eyes. Pictured herself as a warrior, complete with combat boots and semiautomatic weapon. A minute of positive self-talk and she got into bed.

If she’d known she was going to be kidnapped, she would have dressed differently. Certainly she wouldn’t have worn the linen pants. But this was what she had and she’d cope. By tomorrow…No, she wasn’t going to think about tomorrow. Her only decision at the moment was about her shoes.

They were pumps, two-inch heels. Great for shopping at Prada, lousy for self-defense—but better than her bare feet. The idea of sleeping in them was disconcerting.

Nothing to be done about it. She lifted the pillows and pulled back the comforter. The blanket Jazz had brought wasn’t terribly warm, and as long as they could be comfortable, she supposed they should be.

Fully dressed, she climbed into the bed and pulled up the covers. She plumped the strange, too-firm pillow beneath her head and closed her eyes.

This was going to be one long uncomfortable night.

She sighed at the absurd thought. What, was she expecting a designer kidnapping?

Well, that made her laugh because, yes, that’s exactly what she’d expected. Designed to her exact specifications with three gourmet meals a day and furry handcuffs and a stop to it all at her first whim.

God, she was some piece of work.

“Tate?”

She looked up to find Michael standing by the bed. He was clearly concerned at her outburst, but he’d also caught her contagious laughter, so he was grinning, too.

Which made everything funnier. By a lot.

“Tate,” he said, trying hard to keep his cool. “What’s going on?”

“I’m a first-class twit,” she said, although she doubted he understood her because she really couldn’t stop laughing.

“You’re a what?”

The way he looked at her, so shocked his eyes had widened and he was actually blushing, let her know he’d misunderstood. She struggled once more to get some decent breaths. “What did you think I said?”

“Nothing that you would ever say.”

Then she got it. “I said twit.”

“Aah. Much better.”

That was it. She was crying now. Laughing so hard her stomach ached.

He sat down, grinning and shaking his head.

It was just the kind of scene she’d dreamed of, in her bed, alone, in the dark. Everything about him was perfect. The situation wonderful, like something out of a Nora Ephron romantic comedy. Except for the danger that hovered a whisper away.

Before she could catch her breath, he was next to her under the covers and she was in his arms.

**9**

SHE TREMBLED IN HIS arms, and all he could think about was going into the saloon and killing everyone on the boat. Maybe that’s what he should do—end this thing right now. Of course, he had no idea what kind of weapons were stashed up there. He could take Jazz out, but it was more than a fair bet that Ed had a gun on him, and he wouldn’t hesitate to kill everyone in front of him. Martini didn’t get to be in his position without a lot of buried bodies.

Despite Michael’s fury at his brother, he didn’t want Charlie to die. And Charlie would go down first, there wasn’t much doubt about that. As terrible as it sounded, he’d be willing to risk it if it meant getting Tate off the boat and to safety.

That was the wild card. In the old days he’d never consider pulling off a job with so many unknowns. That was how people got killed. Before he’d take out a position, be it a hostage takeover of a plane, a bunker or a terrorist cell, he and his men would know everything there was to know about the targets. There were always risks, but his job was to minimize them, not subject this terrified woman to living her last moments in her worst-case scenario.

“It’s okay, Tate,” he whispered. “I’m here. I won’t leave you. I won’t let them hurt you.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice muffled against his chest.

“No need to apologize.”

She sniffled, then moved her head so her mouth wasn’t pressing against him. “I keep thinking I’m fine, that I’ve got it under control.”

“You’ve been doing great.”

“For the record, you were right. The fake kidnapping was a lousy idea.”

“Yeah, and this one’s not so hot, either.”

She sighed, her body shuddering with the exhalation. “I’m really worried about my father.”

“He’ll be busy trying to find us. Besides, he’s a tough old man. He’s dealt with dangerous circumstances before.”

“That’s what’s got me so concerned. When my cousin was kidnapped, my uncle Joseph did everything he was supposed to. He didn’t call the cops, he got all the money together and took it where they told him to. He followed their instructions to the letter. Once the kidnappers took the cash, they didn’t give Lisa back. She was found three days later.”

“Shit.”

“She was fifteen. They’d hurt her, raped her. Then they killed her. Strangled her to death. Nothing was ever the same again.”

“I thought you were—”

“I was. I escaped. I have no memory of it. None. I don’t know why I got out and she didn’t.”

Michael didn’t know what to say. No wonder Tate was so phobic about being taken. She had every reason to be terrified. And because of him there was a damn good chance she was going to die, just as her cousin had.

He had to tell her about Charlie. No matter what, he couldn’t let her find out on her own. It wasn’t that he didn’t relish facing her anger and disappointment; he deserved everything she could dish out. The problem was that she was hanging on by a thread here, and the only reason she hadn’t lost it completely was because she trusted him.

Telling her that his own brother had given her over to the ruthless bastards out there was going to be a heavy blow. He had no clue if she’d be able to recover from it.

On the other hand, unless they got off the boat in the next few hours, it would be inevitable that she’d find out. Jazz and Ed—hell, even Charlie—had no reason to keep his secret.

He had no choice. He had to get them off this boat. In order to do that, he needed Tate to sleep. It was already late, and he didn’t want to wait until everyone was fresh in the morning. His window of opportunity was in the next couple of hours.

Unfortunately he had no convenient means of helping Tate get some rest. No pills, no booze. He certainly wasn’t going to knock her out.

“What’s wrong?”

He looked down and met her gaze. “Nothing.”

“I felt your whole body tense. What aren’t you telling me?”

The urge to confess about Charlie hit him hard, but he held back. “You need to get some rest.”

“That’s not news. For that matter, so do you.”

“You’re right. So why don’t we both try to sleep?”

Her quiet little laugh made her lips vibrate against his chest. “I have insomnia on good days. You think I’m going to be able to nod off here?”

He brushed the side of her face with his fingers, then lifted her chin so he could see her once more. “There are other ways to forget about what’s out there.”

She studied him while he took deep breaths. He probably shouldn’t do this. It would add insult to injury when she found out about Charlie. But if he did it right, sex should put her right to sleep.

Not that the job would be difficult. He was already getting hard at the thought of touching her. He wanted to make her come so hard she’d pass out. Well, at least fall asleep. The trick would be not coming himself.

He liked to think he could be ready for anything, anytime, anyplace, but even he had to admit that there were certain circumstances…If she’d been a stranger or one of his friends who didn’t think twice about hooking up for a night, there’d be no problem. But he liked Tate. He also knew that this wasn’t a woman who took making love lightly.

The last thing he wanted to do was mess her up in this area, too. Jesus, he couldn’t believe how screwed up this all was. He’d had an outstanding record his entire time in the service. Commendations, promotions. He’d led men into fights with no chance of success, only to come out the other end bloodied but unbowed.

Now he was on the cushiest job he’d had since college, and it was fucked up beyond all reason. The worst of it was that Tate was the one paying for his mistakes.

“Michael?”

He reached down until he had a grip on her, then drew her up so she shared his pillow. He kissed her, wanting to make this as good as he could. He wanted her to know how he admired her, how beautiful she was and how extraordinary.

He might have had his fair share of terrific women, but Tate…Tate was different. Tate was—

MICHAEL TOOK HER mouth desperately. She came alive inside, kissing him back, clutching at his neck in her need to get closer.

It was like drowning in a riptide, being tugged under by forces so elemental there was simply no fighting back. She didn’t want to fight.

Yes, they were out there, but in here she was being caressed by large, warm hands. He pulled his arm from underneath her neck so he could get at her buttons, and she reached for his. Inelegant—in fact, clumsy—they managed somehow to take off each other’s tops and do some serious French kissing at the same time. It would make an interesting Olympic event, one she’d like to train for.

Her bra was off and she wasn’t sure how. All she knew was that she liked the way her breasts felt as they pressed against his chest. Even better was his hand cupping her, brushing her very sensitive nipples before he squeezed her flesh.

Giddy with sensation, she ran her hand down his chest and stomach, amazed at the hardness of him, then down his pants, where she discovered a whole different kind of hardness. He was impressive. Not so big she’d walk funny but large enough she’d fill her diary with exclamation points. He was straining against his pants, hissing as she rubbed him.

Braver still, she found his zipper and managed somehow not to hurt him as she lowered it. Inside was her surprise. Hard, hot, thick, the moment her hand circled his shaft, his cock jumped as if he couldn’t contain his eagerness.

“God, Tate,” he murmured, his moan as deep as his thrusting tongue.

She loved touching him, but her hold was awkward, so she released him and tackled his belt.

That needed a more deft hand than her own, and being attentive, Michael pitched in. A moment later his pants were halfway off, leaving her feeling quite overdressed.

He caught her in another astonishing kiss, then leaned back. “Get undressed,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

The bed felt instantly cold as he left her there, and once she realized he was going into the bathroom, she hurriedly wiggled out of her pants and panties. The rush was so she could get out of her really ugly socks. They were made to wear with pants, but to the untrained eye they looked like old-lady stockings. She wanted so badly to be appealing to him, to not spoil it by doing one of a hundred things she’d fretted about in the past. And, no, it didn’t matter at all that it was too dark for him to see.

With Graydon, she’d worried about looking fat, about making bodily function sounds even though she knew they were perfectly natural. She’d worried about not being tight enough, about being too tight. She had never quite pleased him, although he wouldn’t tell her what it was that made him want to get up after he’d come to watch TV on the couch. He would always fall asleep in the living room, leaving her to wonder.

At least she’d always come. A lot of times she’d had to take care of that for herself, but for an overall selfish man, Graydon had stepped up to the plate his fair share. It still bothered her that they’d stayed together for so long, for all the wrong reasons. Thank goodness he’d found another heiress, someone who matched his family’s net worth. They had broken up with a handshake and no regrets. Well, he’d had none. She’d felt as if she’d wasted the only good years she ever had. So soon after college she’d turned recluse, and that had been the end of a traditional sex life for her. But she was quite certain that being alone was far better than being with someone like Graydon. Of course, being with Michael was best of all.

She hoped.

The bed dipped with his return, and she cursed her bad luck for not watching him. She’d like to see him naked, all of him, standing in good light. She’d pictured him so many times; she wondered if she’d gotten any of it right.

He held up a box. “Condoms.”

“That makes sense, considering the clothes I found in the drawers.”

He got close, his body chilled from his brief foray out. It felt delicious as he pressed up against her. One thing for sure—the trip hadn’t dampened his enthusiasm one bit.

“You feel good,” he said, his fingers brushing her hair back from her face.

“So do you.”

“I’ve thought about this a lot,” he said. “Imagined this a hundred times.”

She raised her head, checking his face for lies. “Really?”

“Really.”

“I had no idea.”

“You weren’t meant to. It wouldn’t have been appropriate.”

She sighed as she settled against him, resting her head on his pillow. “I suppose all bets are off now.”

“Yep,” he said. “Until I’ve got you home, this is a whole new ball game. I want you to tell me if anything is uncomfortable or frightening. Aside from the obvious, of course.”

“I will.”

He touched her chin and made eye contact. “Anything. That means you get to say stop anytime. You can change your mind, and it’ll be just fine. Got that?”

She nodded.

“Seriously.”

“Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“I appreciate it, but I’m in.”

He studied her for a long moment. “Thank God.”

She laughed, but his kiss silenced her. Soon his hands were exploring all her private places, touching her with a fascinating mixture of reverence and greed.

Since she’d always been a fan of quid pro quo, she decided to throw caution to the wind and discover Michael to her heart’s content. She wasn’t satisfied simply to stroke his cock. She cupped his balls. Delighted at his response, she pinched his delectable ass.

“Hey!”

“Shh,” she said before she kissed him again, thrusting her tongue inside him. That quieted him down. Except for his moans, which did strange and wonderful things to her insides.

Nothing she’d felt prepared her, though, for the sensation of his fingers parting her lips, rubbing her all the way up and down, then sliding into her once, twice. Her muscles tightened and her heart beat faster, but there was no panic now. Nothing but excitement and anticipation as his finger found her clit.

He was tender there, the tip of his finger moving in tiny circles, but it still made her eyelids flutter closed, made her abandon his mouth for her own soft, “Oh.”

“You like that?” he whispered.

“Mmm,” she mumbled, moving her hips to the rhythm of his rubbing.

“You’re so wet and hot.” He plunged into her again, this time not so gently.

She eased her left leg over his hip, giving him permission to plunder away.

“You’re making me crazy.”

She smiled. “Me? I’m not the one with the wicked fingers.”

“I was going to ask you about that,” he said. “I’ve always imagined you being very, very wicked.”

“Me?”

“Oh, yes. Don’t forget, I know what you read. What you think is funny. You’re not normal, Tate.”

“What?”

“I said you’re not normal.”

“I don’t know….” she said. “Should I be insulted?”

“God, no. I love that on the outside you’re so prim and together. They all think you’re sweet, don’t they? They all assume you live so quietly because you’re just a good girl who does what she’s supposed to.”

“I am.”

“Yes. But I was there for the discussion of The Story of O, remember? I know exactly how you felt about that one scene in The Big Easy. You may have been on the phone with Sara, but you were talking to me.”

“Oh, God,” she said, burying her head in the pillow so he couldn’t see her blush. “Was I that obvious?”

“I can’t hear you when you mumble into the pillow.”

She lifted her head and repeated the question.

“Yes. You were.”

She groaned, and this time it wasn’t from his busy digits.

“Hey, I liked it.”

She shook her head, not wanting to hear his excuses. She knew he was just being polite, and that killed her.

He leaned down so his mouth was close to her ear. “I used to go home and stroke myself to the memory of your voice.”

A shiver raced down her spine, and she ended up squeezing his finger quite tightly.

“See? You do like to tease. And you can’t tell me you didn’t know the effect it had on me. There were all those times when I stood behind the limo door after letting you out. I can’t believe you didn’t know why.”

Looking up once more, she tried to figure out if he was playing her. Was it all just a way to make her forget that she probably wasn’t going to live to have sex again? He looked sincere, but that didn’t mean a thing. The only real proof she had—if she could call it that—was his very hard dick. Of course, he might be getting off for any number of reasons, only one of them being that he truly wanted her.

“What are you thinking?”

“That this could all be some ploy to distract me.”

“It’s not. But if it was…?”

She smiled. “Good point. Distract away.”

His fingers stilled, his body tensed and the way he looked at her gave her gooseflesh. “Know this, Tate Baxter. I think you’re an amazing woman and I’d never do anything to hurt you. Got that?”

She blinked back sudden tears, but he didn’t see because he was kissing her again. When he pushed her to her back, she went eagerly, spreading her legs for him. It had been a long time, but she was so ready that when he pushed inside her, she nearly passed out from the pleasure.

While he was in her, fully in her, he somehow lifted her butt and shoved a pillow underneath. So when he moved the next time, he not only filled her perfectly but he rubbed her already engorged clit.

She’d read about this neat little trick but always assumed it was fiction. Boy, was she glad to be wrong.

It was her last coherent thought as Michael proceeded to rock not just her world but all the worlds in the galaxy. She came like a Roman candle, and he had to kiss her so she wouldn’t wake everyone on the East Coast.

Flushed, gasping, eyes closed, she felt him remove the pillow from under her butt, then pull the covers up to her chest. She wasn’t sure if his gentle kiss on the forehead was real or a dream or both.

HE GOT OUT OF THE bed and went straight for the bathroom so his moaning wouldn’t wake her.

He pulled off the damn rubber, then turned on the cold water, whispering every curse in every language he knew. He’d held off before, but damn, it had never hurt like this. He was getting old, that’s all. Old and unable to control himself as well.

It seemed to take forever for his dick to calm the hell down, and even then getting dressed made him swear again. He’d done his job, all right. She’d fallen asleep, as predicted. Now all he had to do was make sure she didn’t wake up in the middle of his escape.

He got his comb out of his back pocket. No one ever thought to take the comb. Not only was it good for handcuffs, he could open one hell of a lot of locks with this puppy. It was cheap, too. He’d bought a pack of fifty for five bucks.

He slipped the scissors into his pocket, then turned off the light. He’d get himself into the saloon, praying no one was watching the door. All he’d need was a few seconds of good surveillance and he could go on the offensive.

He stepped out of the head to find Tate still sleeping. Then he turned off the cabin light and made sure there was no bleed of light around the door. It was dark, which was just what he needed.

He quietly made his way to the door, which only took him a minute to unlock. Then he was in the saloon and he closed the door behind him.

Martini wasn’t sitting in his big leather chair anymore. Charlie had fallen asleep on the couch, and Jazz had drifted off with his head on the side counter.

He made his way toward Jazz, determined to get his gun before taking him out, just in case. As he reached for the weapon, pain tore through him like lightning. Then black.

**10**

TATE TOUCHED MICHAEL’S shoulder, really worried now that the hit on the head had done serious damage. He’d been out for hours, and the swelling, despite the damp cloths she’d kept on it, was bad.

Just after he’d been dumped on the bed, the boat had pulled anchor and set out. She had no idea if they were going to the Cayman Islands or simply out to sea to dispose of bodies, but she did know they were traveling fast. When she’d looked out the porthole, she’d seen no land at all in the early-morning light.

If only he’d wake up.

She sat back on the bed watching his chest rise and fall. He’d been so wonderful to her last night. It had changed everything for her about sex, and if this hadn’t been the single worst experience of her life, she’d have been in heaven.

More then ever she wanted to survive this. Not just to get over her fears but to see what would happen between her and Michael. Was she the worst person on Earth to be thinking of their future together while he might be seriously hurt? She supposed it was no worse than her prognosis. They’d either die tonight, in the cold depths of the sea, or in about a week, after she’d signed her money away. Or Michael would recover and he’d save her.

She decided right then to focus on option three.

Her father wouldn’t have hired him if he wasn’t the best, right? And he’d gotten them this far. Okay, so his escape plan last night hadn’t gone so well. But, come on, the guy had had no way of knowing what was behind the door. At least he’d tried.

Things would get trickier now, though. Assuming they were heading for the Cayman’s, they’d have to get fuel. She wasn’t sure how often they’d have to stop, but when they did, there would be a chance.

She looked at his face, at his very dark, long eyelashes. At his lips, perfect for a man. His nose was pretty damn nice, too. Oh, who was she kidding? He was a babe, and even her, with her limited knowledge about men, knew he’d been around the block many, many times. Probably with fabulous women, because, well, come on.

Had he really told her the truth last night?

She shivered remembering his whispered words just before he’d made love to her. God, that was the sexiest thing ever. She sighed, knowing she was behaving like an adolescent.

And why not? She’d stunted her growth, her heart had atrophied—and for what? All that planning, all that fear hadn’t helped one damn bit. She’d still been kidnapped. So she could have been having a fabulous life all this time instead of whining about her regrets.

At least she wouldn’t regret last night. If she had to go, this was the way to do it. Well, not this. This sucked. She needed Michael to be okay. She could face whatever came next if he was beside her. Alone? She’d rather die than be that scared again.

A moan made her freeze, hold her breath. She watched him, afraid to blink, as he moaned again, moved his head. He winced, and that had to be a good sign, right?

“Michael?”

He opened his eyes just a little, then closed them again. “What happened?” His voice sounded thick, dry.

“They hit you.”

“With what? A refrigerator?”

“I don’t know. They brought you in last night. Well, early this morning, although I’m not sure what time. They dumped you on the bed and told me to tell you that if you tried that again, they wouldn’t be so nice.”

He tried to lift his head but just winced again. “Yeah, they were real swell.”

“It was brave of you to try,” she said. “Hold on. I’ll cool down the washcloth.” She took the small blue towel from behind his head, making him hiss, then hurried to the bathroom. The water was really cold, which was good. She wished she had ice, though.

When she got back to the bed she saw he hadn’t moved at all. She tried to be gentle as she applied the cold compress, but she hurt him anyway.

“Is it me or are we moving?”

“We set off sometime around sunrise. I think.”

“Right.” He put his hand on the back of his head, trying to feel the extent of the damage, but in the end he just held the cloth and slowly sat up. “Jesus.”

She reached over beside the bed and brought back a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin. “I got this ready. I figured—”

He moaned again and took the aspirin bottle from her hand. He brought the cap up to his mouth and snapped the bottle open with his teeth. Then he dumped a bunch of the small white pills in his mouth. At least six.

“Won’t that—”

He dropped the open bottle, took the glass and drained it in a few hard gulps.

“That’s a lot of aspirin,” she said.

“It’s a very large headache.”

“You need to eat something, then. Your stomach lining will get very irritated.”

He looked at her through shuttered eyes. “I appreciate the concern, but my stomach lining is the least of our worries.”

“Fine.”

He patted her hand. “Don’t be hurt. It’s good of you to care. But I’ve taken this many before and I’ve been okay.”

“Still…”

“You’re right. I hope they feed us soon. I promise to eat every bite.”

She sat back, adjusting some of the pillows so she could look at him comfortably. “How did you get into the other room? I didn’t even see you go.”

“You were sleeping.”

“I gathered.”

“I’m pretty good with locks.”

“I gathered that, too. But we have no idea how many people there are on board. It would have been pure luck if you’d been successful.”

He winced again, and she was pretty sure it wasn’t about the pain in his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have let things get this far.”

“You’ve done everything you could.”

“Not everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I’ll figure this out. I won’t let them hurt you.”

She reached over and touched his hand. “I know.”

He looked away, and she wished she’d never brought up the subject. “Let me get you some more water.”

“It’s okay. I’ll go.”

“No, you’re—”

“I want to wash up,” he said. “And you should go through those clothes again. I’m pretty sure I saw at least one T-shirt that would fit you.”

“I don’t know….”

“Try. A shower will make you feel better.”

She smiled at him, amazed that even now he was thinking of her. That he could look so good even when he was in so much pain.

Once he’d closed the bathroom door, she went to the dresser and found a couple of men’s T-shirts that she thought they could each wear. There was also a bikini that would substitute for underwear. She’d wash her own in the shower, then…

Would she be alive tomorrow to put on her own underpants? Did she want to die wearing someone else’s skimpy bikini?

Tears welled at the thought of never seeing her father again. He’d overprotected her, but he’d done it out of love. For all his preoccupation with business, he’d always kept her close. Loved her the best way he knew how.

And, oh, God, never to see Sara again? That hurt as deeply as the thoughts of her father. Sara might not be a blood relative, but in every way that mattered she was a sister. A damn good one, too. They hardly ever fought, but she never hesitated to tell Tate the unvarnished truth.

The ache to see her friend again took her breath away, and she sat down on the edge of the bed. It was probably a good thing Dr. Bay wasn’t around. What an idiot. Fake kidnappings. Please. The woman needed major therapy herself.

Tate sniffed, her anger at her therapist distracting her from the pain of her losses. Once again she thanked God for Michael. She’d have lost it without him. She just wished she could do something to make him feel better.

AT LEAST, MICHAEL thought, there was no way he could feel worse. What the hell had happened to him? He was supposed to be a goddamn warrior, a fighter, a champion.

As the water poured down over him in the small shower, he couldn’t think of one thing that had gone right in the last two days. Even the good parts made him feel like shit. Tate was going to find out about Charlie. She was. And he had to be the one to tell her. Only…how? Especially now, when he didn’t have a plan other than to wait and strike at the next opportunity.

He’d be lucky if she didn’t strike him first.

He didn’t even know who’d hit him. Or with what. Or how many people were currently on board. Or what direction they were going.

Maybe it was just his turn. Charlie’d been the bad-luck magnet all these years. Maybe now it would come up roses for his brother while Michael went straight down the tubes.

He grabbed the soap and scrubbed up, shaking off his self-pity and thinking about how he was going to tell her. It seemed so naive, from this vantage point, to think his problems could have been solved by sexing her to sleep. Talk about stupid. Talk about thinking with his dick.

He moaned as he fell forward, then groaned when he actually hit his sore head against the fiberglass wall. He should go into that saloon and fight until he couldn’t fight anymore. With luck, he’d wipe them all out before he flung himself overboard to be eaten by sharks. Then Tate could radio for help. The end.

She’d still find out Charlie was his brother, but he’d have died bravely trying to save her, so that would prove that he hadn’t been…

“Shit.” He sighed deeply, closed his eyes and turned the shower to dead cold.

ED MARTINI FINISHED his eggs Benedict while he watched the final race at Santa Anita. He wasn’t even thinking about the money he’d just made from the race or the five million stashed in his safe back at the house. He was thinking about fifty million tax-free dollars. The dough wouldn’t make a big difference in his life. Hell, he did everything he wanted now. But he’d know, goddammit, he’d know each and every day that he had fifty million fucking dollars that Sheila wouldn’t be able to touch. Not even with those god-awful two-inch fingernails of hers. What the woman wanted with little palm trees painted in green on her fingers was beyond him. They looked like crap, but he supposed they went along with her bleached hair and her wide-load ass.

The trick would be to let her think he had the money. She couldn’t be sure, because if she was sure, she’d sic the IRS on him. But she had to think he had it and he wasn’t giving it to her. That would make her insane. More than any new girlfriend, even one who was twenty-five. More than any new car. It would kill Sheila that he had that much cash that she couldn’t spend. The bitch.

“Hey, boss?”

“Yeah, Jazz?”

“I never been to the Cayman Islands. They nice?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice women?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How long is it gonna take us to get there?”

“This boat? If we hit good weather? Maybe eight days.”

“Fuck. What are we gonna do for eight days?”

Ed leaned back in his chair. He knew just what he was gonna do: conduct his business, like usual. Just ’cause he wasn’t in town didn’t mean he wasn’t raking it in. “Jazz, you just concentrate on keeping your eye on our happy couple. You caught him last night, but he still managed to get out of that locked room.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“Be sure it doesn’t.”

Jazz, who had eaten his bacon and eggs in about ten seconds, then cleaned his gun, lowered his voice. “What about him?” he said, nodding toward Charlie.

“Charlie,” Ed said.

The kid stopped eating, nearly choking on his bacon. “Yeah, boss?”

“You finish your breakfast, then take food in to your brother and his girlfriend. You make sure he understands that if he tries anything like he did last night, it won’t be good for your health.”

Charlie swallowed again. “Okay, sure. He won’t do it again. I swear to God. He won’t. He promised my old—”

“I don’t care. Just make sure he understands.”

Charlie nodded unhappily as he pushed his plate away.

THE SHOWER WAS SO small she kept bumping her elbows. Hers at home was quite large, with three different showerheads. It doubled as a steam room, and she could also simulate the patter of a rain-forest squall if she so desired. Here, the water was marginally warm, the soap was blue and smelled like antiseptic. And she didn’t trust for a moment that one of those men from the saloon wouldn’t burst through the door.

Yes, she still had faith that Michael would stop anything bad from happening, but she’d discovered early on that logic had little to do with irrational fears. Hence the word irrational.

She kept washing, wondering what her hair was going to look like after using that dime-store mousse she’d found. What her skin would feel like after a few days away from her Intensité Volumizing Serum. Oh, well. She’d make do. What choice did she have?

Without even reading the label, she washed her hair, then put conditioner on, and as she rinsed she wished she’d brought the darn razor in with her. Although she wouldn’t have been able to shave her legs, not in this small space. So she’d do it after. She could still rinse off in the shower.

She thought about Michael for the hundredth time since she’d climbed in the shower. He’d smelled awfully good after his. But then, he was a man. Oh, was he ever.

She laughed at herself, wondering if she was going to be this moony teen the whole way to the Caymans. It wouldn’t matter, she supposed. No one would know. And why shouldn’t she do exactly as she pleased?

Most people thought she did, anyway. She knew they didn’t dare compare her to Paris Hilton, but there were other trust-fund babies that were around her age. She’d heard them talk about how ridiculous she looked in her old-fashioned limo, how she dressed like Queen Elizabeth. She wasn’t completely protected from the gossip and the backbiting.

How many nights had she wept herself to sleep watching those awful newsmagazine shows? She hadn’t really wanted to shock the world. Well, mostly. But she had wanted to make some kind of splash, even a little one.

The charities didn’t count. Anyone could do her job. Anyone with the right connections. It was easy to give money away when you had her father’s strict guidelines to follow.

But she’d never been to a big premiere or an opening night on Broadway. She’d never been to any of the clubs or found herself searching for a predawn breakfast after carousing all night.

She didn’t just dress like Queen Elizabeth, she partied like her, too.

Tate turned abruptly, tired of her pity party. She turned off the water and stepped out onto the blue fluffy towel. As she dried off she promised herself that she wouldn’t go to that place again. If she had to dwell on the past, it would be to remember all those self-defense classes, her weapons training.

There was no reason she shouldn’t stand shoulder to shoulder with Michael. Fight no matter what.

She grabbed the tiny bikini and put the sucker on. It was tight. And, jeez, her boobs looked huge. But that was okay. So was the T-shirt. Also tight but not too horrible.

She’d also dug out a pair of shorts—men’s, but they were a size medium, and if she tied the little waistband inside, they wouldn’t fall down.

Dammit. She’d forgotten to shave. She rubbed her leg, and it wasn’t so bad. Tomorrow, though, for sure. For now, she put on the mousse and combed her hair. She debated a moment about using the hair dryer, but it would probably be better if she let it dry naturally.

Then she looked at the makeup that had been left in the bathroom. It was no use. She couldn’t use some other woman’s makeup. Not for anything. It was as bad as sharing a toothbrush.

So she washed her panties and her bra, and as she went to hang them in the shower she heard shouting just outside the bathroom door.

Immediately her heart started pounding as though she was seconds from an attack. When she turned to the door, the tunnel vision started, taking her straight down the road to immobility and failure.

She closed her eyes. Took several deep breaths. She pictured her safe place, but the vision of her waterfall didn’t help. The voices—Michael’s and another man’s—were too loud.

Then she changed her visualization. It wasn’t her old green meadow. It was Michael. His face. His eyes. The way he looked at her, then smiled.

She smelled his skin and remembered his taste. Salty, sexy. She brought up the memory of his fingers on her face, and then his fingers weren’t near her face. He was leaning over her, and his intentions were incredibly clear.

He wanted her. He wanted her.

The vision changed once more, and she was carrying her Sig Sauer. And there was Michael. Tall, handsome as sin. And he had his gun, too. He had her back. And she had his. No one was getting past the two of them.

She went to the bathroom door, and as she swung it open she heard the other one yelling.

“You swore to him, Mikey! You swore to our father that you’d take care of me. You think breaking in to hurt Mr. Martini is keeping me safe? You got to cool it, Mikey, or he’s gonna kill all of us, okay?”

Tate’s vision narrowed once more. All she could see was the look on Michael’s face. Shock, anger. Guilt.

He was in on this. He was in on this. She’d slept with him, and he was in on it.

**11**

MICHAEL SHOT A LOOK at Charlie that had him scrambling out the door, but his main concern was Tate. She looked unsteady, panicked. Everything he’d hoped to avoid.

He went to the bathroom door and put his arm gently around her waist. It was a testament to how bad off she was that she didn’t slap him in the face. “Come on. Let’s get you to the bed.”

She struggled, but so faintly he figured he’d better get her to lie down before she fell down. Goddamn Charlie. It wasn’t enough to fuck up his own life, he had to fuck up Tate’s. Good job, asshole.

As he took her to the bed, he reached for her wrist and got a feel for her pulse. Dammit, it was off the charts, a full-blown panic attack, and he wasn’t at all sure he could help her.

He turned her around and pressed gently on her shoulders. She sat, her hands limp by her sides, her face pale and lifeless. The only thing animated about her was her breathing. She took great gulps, as if the oxygen was far too weak to sustain her.

He wished he could enjoy her shorts, her tight little T-shirt, but he gave them only a glance as he tried to gauge his next move. He needed her to understand what was going on. He expected no forgiveness at all, but he did think they could work together until this horror show was over. If he could just get her to hear him—to believe him.

He sat down next to her, his shoulder touching hers. She didn’t move, but she didn’t lean into him either. “Tate, I need you to listen to me. First, this is all my fault. However, it wasn’t intentional. My brother has been a pain in my ass for a long, long time. I should have cut it off between us years ago, but…

“Anyway, he came to my place, and when I had to leave the room, he broke into my safe. He saw the information I had on Brody. I wouldn’t give him the money to pay off his bookie, so he stole that information and used it as a way of getting out of debt. That’s why you’re here—because I let Charlie into my apartment. I didn’t realize he’d go this far—and I should have.”

As he paused he saw her eyes jig over to look at him, but they went back to staring straight ahead a second later. “I know it’s hard to believe anyone could be stupid enough to let Charlie in the same borough, let alone his apartment. He’s been nothing but trouble from the time he was a kid. He stole, he took drugs, he had no sense about the world. It was always someone else’s fault with Charlie, mostly mine.

“My mother had died a long time ago, and my father did his best to keep Charlie out of trouble. He got sick—my dad, I mean—and he made me promise I’d take care of Charlie. I gave him my word, and that’s not something I take lightly.

“It was all right because I spent so much time overseas. You know I was in intelligence work, but you don’t know why I left the service. It was Charlie, one more time. He stole a briefcase from a fellow officer’s car. He was caught and he went to jail, but because of me they didn’t charge him with treason. I couldn’t stay in the service after that.”

He wasn’t sure, but he thought she’d leaned a little more his way. Hell, he wasn’t even sure if she was listening or, if she was, whether she believed any part of his story. The only concrete change he saw was that she wasn’t struggling quite so hard to breathe.

“You feeling a little better? I can get you some water.”

She shook her head, and he wondered if she was saying no to the water or to feeling better.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Why should I believe you?” Her voice was low, a monotone of bleak expectation.

“There’s no reason at all. I had planned on telling you about Charlie, but honestly I wasn’t sure when. I didn’t expect you to have a minute of sympathy for my situation, but I didn’t want you to hate me so much that you wouldn’t accept my help.”

“You made love to me.”

“Oh, God. That’s what I was most afraid of. I didn’t have ulterior motives—no, that’s not true. There was a hope that, after, you could get some rest. But the motivation for kissing you, that’s been around for a long time. I’m not sorry we did it, only that I wasn’t smart enough to know the best way to handle this situation. You’ve been doing so great. Your attacks have been less frequent and less severe, and if you can keep that up until we’re safe, then it’ll change your life.”

“When did you know?”

“That Charlie was behind this?”

She nodded.

“When I followed you here. When I looked into the saloon I saw him. A few seconds later I was knocked out.”

She turned her head to look at him. At least she had a little more color. “The fifty million, heading off for the Caymans…it’s too much to believe.”

He nodded. “I know some things about Ed Martini. There’s a reason we’re on this boat. Once he’d gotten the ransom from your father…”

“He’d have killed me.”

Michael nodded.

“I imagine he’ll kill me after I sign the papers at the bank. The question is, will he kill you?”

“He won’t kill either of us. I told him about the bank to stall for time. I had to make the prize big enough, so I told him fifty million. I had to make it far enough away that he’d have to take on fuel and supplies.”

“They knocked you out last night when they should have killed you.”

“Because they think I’m the only one who can get you to sign the papers.”

She shook her head a little, and her eyes welled with tears. “You tell a good story, Michael. But then, that was your job, wasn’t it? Telling stories to manipulate people?”

“That’s right.”

“So how can I know? How can I possibly believe what you’ve told me?”

“I don’t know. I do know that I’m going to resign as soon as I have you back safely.”

“I wish I hadn’t heard him,” she said. “It was so much better.”

“You would have found out. It was inevitable. Ironically, I’d planned on telling you right after your shower.”

“Michael,” she said, whispering, “why does it bother me more that you made love to me than that you had me kidnapped?”

He wiped his face with his hand, wishing like hell he could tell her at least one thing that would convince her that he wasn’t lying. “It’s because you doubt yourself. How attractive you are. How smart and funny.”

“Oh, don’t. Don’t do that to me. It’s hard enough.”

“Is there anything I could say that would help?”

“I know that I can’t trust anything you’ve said or will say. I might have a panic disorder, but I’ve been well trained about con men. I’ve got that fifty million. And my father, he’s got so much more.”

Her color was back and her cheeks looked flushed. She wasn’t gasping for breath any longer. Her panic had diminished as her anger had grown, which was good. She needed to be angry.

“I imagine you’ve seen your share of gigolos.”

“Some of the best. That’s why—”

“Why what?”

“I can’t have this conversation.” She stood up and took a deep breath. “I can’t be in this room with you.”

He was the breathless one now. Why had he thought the truth would be enough? It rarely was, and if he were Tate, he wouldn’t have bought it, either. He just hadn’t realized how much he’d wanted a miracle. “I understand.” He looked up at her. “Unfortunately there’s nowhere for me to go.”

She looked behind her, at the door. “You can go be with your brother.”

“Uh, no. Martini already let me know that if I didn’t get you to sign the papers, he’d kill Charlie first.”

“Why should I care?”

“Because he said he’d kill you second.”

SARA WAS GOING TO lose it. They’d heard nothing, absolutely nothing, and William had delivered the ransom hours and hours ago.

She’d paced all six thousand square feet of Tate’s place. She’d tried to comfort William, but he was inconsolable. Believed his daughter was dead. Believed Michael had been behind the kidnapping. There were security people all over the place, all his phones had been forwarded to Tate’s main line. And they’d heard nothing, not a word.

What concerned her most was William having a heart attack. She’d called his personal physician to be here until this was resolved, and the doctor should be arriving any minute. She went to the fridge again and took out a head of lettuce. It wasn’t her usual kind of snack, but it was here and she had to stuff something in her mouth. She broke the lettuce up into chunks and put it in a colander to drain.

“Is there something I can make you?”

Sara jumped at Pilar’s voice. “No, thank you. If I have a bite of something decent, I’ll never stop. I’m going to chew lettuce.”

“I can fix a quick vinaigrette—”

“Thanks, Pilar, but I wasn’t kidding. I will never stop.”

“I understand. Food is oddly comforting.”

“Maybe you can fix something for Mr. Baxter.”

“He’s refused me several times.”

“You know, I think if you put a platter near him with bite-size treats, he’ll end up taking one, and that will lead to more.”

Pilar nodded. “I’ll do that. I’ve got twenty minutes until I have to take the casserole out for the staff.”

Sara sighed as she took the lettuce from under the running water. She let it drip, thinking about how incredible Pilar’s casseroles were, and put a chunk of the not-quite salad into her mouth. It tasted about as good as she’d expected.

“Michael didn’t do this,” Pilar said.

“I know.”

“Mr. Baxter doesn’t.”

“He needs someone to blame. This family has a history with kidnappings.”

Pilar went to the fridge and pulled out an array of goodies. She set up on one of the huge counters and started to prepare delectable treats without a glance at a cookbook. Huge fresh figs were sliced down the middle, then stuffed with a wedge of Gorgonzola cheese. Just looking at them made Sara feel way too sorry for herself.

It was the doorbell that saved her, and she hurried out, all thoughts of figs buried beneath her prayers. Unfortunately it was the doctor, not Tate.

The doctor. She made sure he sat with William, and despite the older man’s objections, he started an immediate checkup. “William, I’ll be back,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

“To pay someone a visit.”

He looked at her, concerned.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. It won’t take me long. I’ll be back before you can blink.”

“Please.”

She strode toward the elevator, knowing this had to be done and knowing she was the right person to do it.

MICHAEL WAS RIGHT—there was nowhere for him to go. But she needed some time to think without looking at him. The only place was the head. She’d been so positive in there, what, fifteen minutes ago? Maybe she could find something to hang on to in there.

Without a word, she went back to the head and closed the door. It looked smaller, uglier. It didn’t matter because Michael wasn’t here.

Michael wasn’t there, either. Not the Michael she thought she knew. What was she supposed to believe? Everything had come together so easily. They had to have been aware of Elizabeth or they wouldn’t have put her out of commission so easily. They’d known exactly where she’d be. How, if Michael hadn’t told them?

She sat down on the toilet and willed herself—uselessly, it turned out—not to cry. The tears were heavy and hot, and her chest hurt as if she’d been kicked by a mule.

He’d set her up. There was no other conclusion she could come to, right? He’d been dismissed from the one job he’d loved and been forced to become a babysitter. It had to be humiliating. It only made sense to want revenge, and since he couldn’t get back at the Army, he could get even with her. The stupid rich chick who was a perfect mark. She was already crazy, it wouldn’t take much to immobilize her. Persuade her that he was on her side. That he would be her salvation. Of course she’d sign over her money if it meant saving her life, but it didn’t, did it? She would never be released. He would sneak about the boat, but he wouldn’t be successful because that wasn’t the plan. All he had to do was have her believe in him. Have her need him again.

The real tragedy? She wanted to. Desperately.

Last night had been incredible. Not just the sex but the fact that she hadn’t spent every single second trapped in a panic attack. She’d slept. She hadn’t had a nightmare.

It was better than anything she’d ever anticipated, better than she’d been even in imaginary scenarios.

More than that, Michael had been the safest of her safe places. She remembered the feelings that had coursed through her body as she’d pictured him in her mind. He’d been right there with her, but she’d never seen him more clearly than with her eyes closed.

Her heart was beating hard even now, just thinking about it. She’d liked him so much. Those talks in the car—those couldn’t have been faked. Wasn’t possible. He’d never known what they were going to talk about. He didn’t know what books she’d read, what movies she’d seen. So his reactions had been real. Honest.

God, what if he was telling her the truth?

She unrolled some tissue and blew her nose, then got some more and wiped her eyes. She wished she could talk to Sara. Sara would know. Sara would tell her the truth and she’d completely look out for her. Unlike Dr. Bay.

SARA FELT AMAZINGLY calm as she read the new issue of Vanity Fair. She’d never get tired of seeing George Clooney as the cover subject. Not ever. She’d seen him in person three times, and he was the single dreamiest man on earth. And, yes, she’d seen Mr. Pitt in person, too. Of course, if forced, she’d also go out with Brad, but her first choice would be George.

The door opened and Sara stood up. She’d had to wait longer than she’d hoped, but it was worth it. Or it would be in another minute.

She approached a well dressed woman. Very well-dressed. Her short, dark bob was perfect and so was her makeup. She lived the life, here on Park Avenue. “Dr. Bay? I’m Tate’s friend, Sara.”

She nodded. “Has there been any word?”

“No. None.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I do have one thing to tell you.”

“If I can be of any help, of course I will.”

“I think you’ve been about as helpful as you’re going to get.”

“Pardon me?”

“There is no pardon for you. What kind of moron takes a girl who’s been absolutely traumatized by her own kidnapping and the death of her best friend and suggests she stage her own kidnapping? I mean, of all the idiotic, irresponsible—”

“Now you just wait a minute. I don’t know who you think you are, but my suggestions to my patient were completely legitimate and not in the least irresponsible.”

“What are you, insane? She’s been kidnapped. For real. And it’s entirely possible she won’t be coming back. Which will only mean one thing—they’ve killed her. You understand what she went through? Her worst fear in the world, and she had to live through it. She had to know she was going to die.” Sara wiped the tears from her face with the heel of her hand. “If Michael wasn’t with her…”

“I’m very sorry for what’s happened to Tate, but you must know that I bear no responsibility. This was purely a coincidence, a tragic one, but it had nothing to do—”

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you—” Sara turned, fury so great inside her that she thought she might burst or go crazy or…She pulled back, and when she swung it was with all her weight behind her. The crack was loud and the pain shot up her arm and hurt like the devil. But Dr. Bay, who wasn’t responsible, who had nothing to do with anything, had gone flying back into her pristine office with the fresh flowers and the expensive furniture. Her hand was on her cheek and she was crying. Finally.

“You’re just lucky it was me who came after you. If it had been Michael, you’d be dead.”

HE SAT ON THE BED, waiting. Remembering when he was a kid, when Charlie was really young and his mom was still alive. Charlie hadn’t been a screwup then. He’d just been a little kid, like every other little kid, and he’d been Michael’s responsibility, even back then. When anything went wrong with Charlie, his mother had given him this real disappointed look.

He still saw that look. Felt it. As fucked up as Charlie was, Michael was still responsible. Even now. With Tate in the bathroom. With Tate believing the worst. Still, the idea of walking into the saloon and shooting Charlie made him sick.

What if it came down to that? To choosing between Tate and Charlie? What then?

His first responsibility was to Tate. That was a fact and nothing would change it. He just didn’t like the idea of Charlie dying. Not because the stupid son of a bitch didn’t deserve it, but Michael had a deathbed promise hanging over his head, and even though he knew it was superstitious nonsense, it didn’t feel that way.

Charlie had crossed the line. If there was a way to save him, then Michael would—as long as it didn’t endanger Tate. If not, well, then he’d tell his father he was sorry when he joined him in hell.

Decision made, he went back to waiting. Worrying. Wishing. It wasn’t like him. He didn’t wish for the impossible. He never had. But when it came to Tate, he did a lot of things he’d never done before.

**12**

AFTER AN EXCRUCIATING night of no sleep, of remembering what it had been like to make love to him, of reliving the moment of betrayal over and over, Tate finally slept as the sky began to soften into day.

She woke, startled at the sound of the door slamming shut. There was Michael in his borrowed T-shirt and his chauffeur’s pants, holding a tray with food and coffee. At the sight, her stomach clenched, and she knew she wouldn’t be eating much. Of course, it didn’t matter, did it? Nothing did. She would die soon and this torment would be over. That’s all she wanted. In fact, maybe there was a way to speed things up. She’d have to think about that.

Michael put the tray on the dresser and turned to her. She wasted no time in slipping out of the bed. She no longer cared about the clean clothes problem or shaving her legs.

“Tate, we need to—”

She slammed the bathroom door closed behind her. By the time she’d washed her face, brushed her teeth and her hair, she’d realized she couldn’t go out there. He would end up convincing her that he’d had her best interest at heart. That he wasn’t a thief, that he’d made love to her because he’d been attracted, or in love or some other fairy tale.

At least she could sit down. Of course, the john wasn’t exactly her idea of a great chair, but it was better than looking at him. Her real shame wasn’t that she’d been deceived but, that knowing she’d been deceived, she still wanted him.

That’s what made her sick. That’s what terrified her.

How could she want so badly to believe him? Why did she have to force herself out of the fantasy where they lived happily ever after? She truly did need a shrink. Not Dr. Bay, of course, but a good shrink.

She laughed as her chin dropped to her chest. Too late for shrinkage now. She wondered if they’d kill her first before they threw her in the water. That’s something she’d beg for, if she had to. The thought of drowning…

“Tate?” Michael’s voice came from directly outside the door. “Do you want some coffee? I can hand you a cup. You don’t have to come out.”

“No.” She waited, but he didn’t respond. She wished there was a peephole. It would have been so much better if she could know where he was.

She stood, whipped off her clothes and got under the shower, not taking the soap or the shampoo; she was there for the water. She’d always had her best ideas in the shower, and now would be a really good time for something brilliant to occur.

She laughed, inhaling water, then choking for a long, long time. Which was when she had the thought. She wasn’t sure it was brilliant—in fact, it was probably an excellent example of how she’d lost her mind—but there it was. And there it stayed. All day.

MICHAEL GLANCED OUT the porthole, not surprised to see the red sky of sunset. He hadn’t taken a drink or eaten a bite because he really hadn’t wanted to bother Tate in the bathroom, but things were getting a bit hairy.

His personal problem wasn’t nearly as worrisome as what Tate was going through. He hated that he’d put her in this position, but he couldn’t figure out what to say to make things better. He’d told her the truth and he feared that anything else would sever any slight hope that she could believe him. But the truth seemed meager and foolish. Perhaps if he had told her the moment he’d been shoved inside the cabin, she’d have bought it. But he’d been an idiot about that, too.

It was difficult not to put all the blame on Charlie. Granted, Charlie deserved a great deal of it. But then, he did, too. As long as he was able to get an accurate picture of what was real, then he had a chance to save her. If he indulged himself in blaming Charlie, he would lose sight of the objective: keep Tate alive. That was his whole purpose, and he could put nothing ahead of that. His second goal was to keep Tate sane. To help her not be terrified every minute. Right now, that was the more difficult task, but again, if he kept his eye on the prize, he could get—

The head door opened. Tate stood in the doorway, leaning on the jamb, her arms crossed over the boys’ T-shirt they’d found in the dresser.

She looked good. Her color was fine. In fact, she seemed a bit flushed. Her chest rose and fell normally. There were no apparent tremors. The only thing that looked off was the puffiness of her eyes, but even that was in the regular range. He wanted to say something, anything, but he held back, afraid that whatever he did say would be wrong and would send her straight back to panic.

“So these are my options,” she said, her voice even and considered. “I can do the completely logical, rational thing and not believe one thing you’ve said. It makes perfect sense that you set me up for this. I mean, who else knew we were going to be at Prada? That Elizabeth wouldn’t be able to get to me in that tiny little window of opportunity? It makes sense that you came after me, knowing I had a great deal of money in a secret account. Why else was I taken to a boat? It made getting the money easy and my disposal a snap.

“It also makes sense that you would bring your brother into this. That he’d know someone who had the boat, had the means, had the manpower. Everything points to you. I’m not being melodramatic, either. Any cop on any Law & Order would nail your ass before the first commercial.”

She straightened, and with arms still crossed, still protective, she took two steps toward him. “Or, against all logic and reason, I can believe you. I can shift my focus to our relationship in the car. How much I enjoyed our long conversations and how much I admired your own logic and reason. I can remember how you made me laugh.

“And I can think about making love with you and how you made me feel. Of course, if I choose to believe you and I find out I was wrong, I will want to die, so that works in your favor. If I’m right, and you’re innocent and then you die…Well, you’re just not allowed to, okay? Because I am taking a huge, stupid risk here. It makes no sense, and if my father knew, he’d strangle me for my own good.”

She walked a little closer to the bed, and when she stood in front of him, telling him in no uncertain terms that she was on his side, she dropped her arms. He looked up at her face. She looked beautiful, with her hair thick and wavy, with no makeup, with no defenses whatsoever.

He stood. “Tate, I can’t believe I’m going to say this. Unfortunately I have no choice.”

Her face got sad and she bit her lower lip.

“No, it’s not like that. Don’t fret. But I have to use the toilet.” He squeezed her shoulders. “You were in there a really long time.”

Desperate now, he dashed the few feet to his objective, kicking the door shut behind him.

Tate stared at the closed door. She smiled despite herself, and a moment later she was laughing, picturing the poor guy crossing his legs as the hours had crawled by. She’d taken advantage of her location a couple of times, but it hadn’t occurred to her that he might need to, too.

She sat on the edge of the bed as she laughed, not just at his predicament but at her own willingness to live knee-deep in denial. It was utter nonsense to believe him, and she knew it, but if this was the end, she’d rather go out with the charming liar, thank you. She’d rather have as much sex as was humanly possible. She’d prefer not to have any more panic attacks and to continue to use Michael as her safe place.

Either way, believing him or not, she doubted she was walking away from this, so what the hell? She’d wasted so much time, so much life, that this seemed the sanest decision she’d made since dumping Graydon.

“So you think that was funny?” Michael had taken her place leaning against the doorjamb. His arms were crossed over his chest, which was too bad. He had a great chest.

“Yes. I think so. Although I do apologize for putting you in that dire circumstance.”

He nodded. Kept staring at her.

“Well? Comments? Suggestions?”

His wonderful lips curled up into a great smile. “A couple of comments. No suggestions.”

“Go ahead.”

“I completely understand not believing a word I said.”

“Thanks.”

“I thought about laying all my theories on the table, but now that seems irrelevant. This is clearly an act of faith.”

“That’s true.”

“I just want to state what I know about you. These aren’t opinions, by the way. They’re facts.”

“Uh-oh.”

His expression grew serious. “Don’t jump to conclusions.” He came to the bed and sat down next to her. When she looked into his eyes, he looked straight back. “I know you’ve got strengths that are invisible to you. I know that you haven’t been helped to see them by your father or your shrink. I know that Sara’s been a damn good friend and that you should listen to her more closely.

“I know that it feels insurmountable, this panic disorder of yours, but I’m damned impressed by how you’ve handled yourself since we’ve been here. By all rights, you should be comatose by now. A drooling mess. But you’re not, are you? You’ve made a very tough decision, and that’s not easy for the sanest people out there. You chose life, Tate, and given all the evidence, you shouldn’t have.”

She turned away from him as the tears threatened to fall. She’d never have guessed he’d use this opportunity to talk about her. To give her the single greatest pep talk of her life. She’d imagined him shoring up his alibi, redirecting her suspicions.

Maybe believing in him wasn’t the stupidest decision she’d ever made.

“There’s food here, and I know you haven’t had any all day.”

She sniffed, blinked, then turned to look at the plates. Each one had a sandwich, a few baby carrots and a bag of chips. Suddenly it looked better than a meal at Nobu.

She grabbed one of the plates and tore off the cellophane. Michael laughed and did the same with his plate. For the next ten minutes they did nothing but scarf. He got up once and went to the vanity, where there were two sodas. Even though neither was diet, she took hers eagerly.

The idyll didn’t last long.

Michael wiped his mouth with the small paper napkin and put his empty can on the clean plate. “That sucked and was great all at the same time.”

She took both plates back to the vanity. “That’s also true.” As she turned back to him, she was caught completely by surprise by an enormous belch. She felt her cheeks heat as she put her hand to her mouth.

Michael grinned as if he’d just seen Santa.

“I’m glad my humiliation pleases you so much.”

“Hey, tit for tat.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “It’s weird not being able to retreat.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“Not right now, but I did about twenty seconds ago.”

“You clearly never had a brother.”

She shook her head. “I had Lisa. Then Sara. That’s it.”

“That sounds pretty good to me.”

Tate had a rush of anticipation for what the night would hold as she walked back to the bed. She sat next to him and touched his thigh. “There’s no Sara in your life?”

“Nope. I had some good friends in the Army. But that’s over.”

“Are you sure your friends are over? Or are you just embarrassed?”

“I’m sure. They’re embarrassed, and that doesn’t tend to work with us military types. It’s easiest for everyone if I stay under the radar.”

“I hope you make more friends after this is over. Without Sara…”

“Hey,” he said. “Sara.”

“You can’t have her. She’s mine.”

“Oh.”

“Not that way. Jeez, are all men so predictable?”

“Yes.”

She smiled at him and he smiled back. She wasn’t going to waste any more time doubting her decision. After all, she’d chosen life.

“ED? JAZZ?” MICHAEL banged on the door a couple more times, then stepped back as he heard the lock click.

“What are you banging for?”

“I need to speak to Ed.”

“He’s busy.”

“I’m sure he is. But I need to speak to him.”

Jazz looked behind him, then sighed. “Wait.” He shut and locked the door.

Michael smiled at Tate as he waited, trying to make her see that this meeting was in her best interest, but she didn’t look persuaded. All he could do was tell her the truth.

The lock clicked once more and the door opened just a bit.

“Turn around and give me your wrists.”

Michael just wanted to talk to Ed, so he made no noises. It was logical that they’d given up on handcuffs with him, but damn, they could have used softer rope.

Jazz tied him up tighter than a turkey, then held his gun on him as he turned. “Don’t do anything funny.”

“I’m serious as a heart attack,” Michael said.

Ed Martini was sitting in his favorite chair. Charlie looked even worse than he had before, and it made Michael wonder if it was strictly withdrawal that had him so torn up.

“What do you want?” Martini asked.

“She needs clothes.”

Ed laughed. “I need more hair.”

“If you’re taking her to the bank, she needs to look like she’s there legitimately. She can’t do that in the clothes she has.”

Ed looked at Jazz, his smile fading, then back at Michael. “What kind of clothes?”

“She’ll make a list. With sizes and designers.”

“You knock again, hand the list to Jazz.”

“When?”

“Tonight. And don’t get any ideas about doing something while we’re docked. I’ve already decided that whenever this boat stops, you’re going to be inconvenienced. Or, if you don’t stay where I put you, dead.”

“Got it.”

“Do the list.”

Michael turned, then stopped. “I’m going to ask for a couple of things for myself.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to make her regret her feelings about me. So I need to look nice. Smell nice.”

“Fine.”

“We’d both appreciate some more to eat. And to drink.”

Ed sighed. “Want a fucking massage while we’re at it?”

Michael turned. “You need her. You need me. We’re not asking for anything outrageous.”

“Get the hell out of here,” Ed said, his cheeks red, his eyebrows lowered.

Jazz shoved him in the back with the barrel of his gun, then made him stand at the doorway to the cabin while he undid the ropes. A second shove, and the door clicked shut.

Michael rubbed his wrists as he moved toward Tate, who was standing at the porthole, staring out at the dark night.

“Can you see anything?”

“No, not really. But it beats staring at the wallpaper,” she said, “or the vanity or the dresser or the bathroom.”

He touched the small of her back. “I need you to make a list of clothes and whatever. Don’t skimp and be very specific. If you want a certain brand, ask for it. Clothes you’d wear on holiday, knowing you’d be going to your bank.”

She leaned back into his hand. “Makeup and hair, too?”

“I’m pretty sure we’re going to dock in Miami or the Keys, so the shopping won’t be an issue. Say what you need. He doesn’t care if he spends twenty grand of the ransom if it means he gets the big prize.”

She didn’t say anything, but when she turned, she kissed him. Not too long, not too deep. A hint of things to come.

FORTY MINUTES AFTER Jazz came for her very complete and somewhat embarrassing list, there was another knock. Michael sent her to the far side of the room before he opened the door. It was Jazz again, with a tray. Michael took it; Jazz locked up behind him.

Michael put the tray on the bed, and when she registered what Jazz had brought, she looked at Michael with new respect. “Lobster tails and wine?”

“It helps to be the squeaky wheel,” he said.

“A tip to file for future use.”

“Want to talk or eat?”

She smiled as they crawled up on the bed together. It was odd to eat here, to sit next to Michael, to be a prisoner with such good wine. Everything felt off, but not in the way she’d expected.

Her fear remained, pulsing in her bloodstream, but somehow she still could function. Was this what Dr. Bay had wanted for her? Not the real kidnapping but this functional panic, this total awareness that she could die any moment, which made every nondeath moment something extraordinary?

“Hey,” he said.

She realized she’d been looking his way—staring, really—but not seeing him. Quickly she averted her gaze. “Sorry.”

“No need. I was just wondering what was going on in there.”

“Random thoughts. I really like this wine.”

“Those weren’t food-review thoughts,” he said, then shook his head. “It’s fine if you don’t want to tell me. None of my business.”

“It’s okay. I was thinking about my ability to talk. To eat, to smile, to sleep. I’d never have guessed.”

“We’re pretty adaptable creatures.”

“Maybe it wasn’t such a horrible idea to be kidnapped. Well, not by these louts but by someone safe.”

His expression darkened. “No, it wasn’t a good idea. None of this was. There was no way you should have been exposed to the possibility of danger.”

“No? The only way to avoid it was to trade my life for safety. You think it was worth it?”

He looked at the dresser. “There had to be another way.”

“Michael…” She put her glass down on the tray. “I wanted to ask you out—well, in—for five and a half months. I’m not talking about wanting to seduce you, I’m talking about dinner. A drink. I was frozen. My fear had leached into every single area of my life. From work to friends to dating. I was as much a prisoner in my apartment and that damn limo as I am here.”

His gaze had come back to her face, to her eyes. She was glad there were no sunglasses. Just his vivid, open stare. Finally, after a long while, he blinked. Frowned. “You didn’t want to seduce me?”

She laughed as she felt her face heat with a blush. He didn’t shift his gaze, not even a bit, and every instinct told her to look away. But she was through being scared. At least of Michael.

**13**

HER FACE CAME ALIVE with her blush. It made her look young, innocent. She was, in fact, both of those things, but in her day-to-day life where she was the administrator of millions of dollars, where she was William Baxter’s only daughter—where she was terrified from morning till night—she looked and acted much older, and her innocence hid behind a mask of tension.

She kept wanting to look away, but every time her gaze skittered, she forced herself to stay with him. The moments ticked on, marked by the sounds of their breaths, the motion of the boat. He waited as patiently as possible for Tate to relax, and finally she did.

It was eventually okay to do what he’d wanted to for a long time. He leaned in, slowly so she’d have time to adjust or, if she chose, to stop him. Her eyes stayed open until her breath, fruity with wine, brushed his mouth.

Only then did he close his own eyes as he touched his lips to hers. Again he had to wait, to let her adjust, which wasn’t easy. His body urged him to take her, to toss the trays on the floor and do every kind of wicked thing to her. But his body wasn’t in control. Not this time.

Tate needed a patient, gentle hand. Not something he was accustomed to offering, but he’d do his best. He didn’t want to spook her. That would be a crying shame for both of them.

It felt odd, this closed-mouth kiss, as if he was standing just outside the candy store. When he couldn’t stand it another second, he parted his lips just a bit, then slipped his tongue out for a taste of her.

Mistake.

The rest of him really, really wanted to play. First thing, though—the trays.

As if diving into an icy stream, he pulled away quickly before he could change his mind. Her soft, disappointed moan made his dick, which was already paying attention, strain for more.

He put his tray to the side of the bed, then he practically sprinted out himself. Both trays ended up on the dresser, but then he was faced with another dilemma. Undress? Stay clothed? Undress her?

She was watching him, her blush back, and damn if she didn’t lick her lips. Maybe if he took off his shirt. Her gaze shifted up, to the lights above them.

He shook his head at his own stupidity. Of course she’d want the lights out. It was Tate. The moment the room darkened he heard her sigh. A good sign. The sound of clothes shifting, a better one.

IT MADE ED NAUSEOUS to even look at Charlie. He gave Jazz a questioning glance, but Jazz, he was on the phone, making arrangements. Jazz was itching for a promotion, and Ed was running out of excuses to let him go. Jazz and him, they’d been together a long time. The boy was nuts, but he could control himself for Ed.

Jazz had recommended Ricky from his Brooklyn off-track parlor to take his place, but Ricky smelled like pickles all the damn time.

His gaze went back to Charlie. What a fucking loser. He had a shower that worked in his cabin, there were clothes that were clean in that room. So why was he still stinking up the saloon? His hair was stringy and he had gunk on the side of his mouth. It was enough to make a man lose his lunch.

If it wasn’t for his usefulness in controlling the brother, he’d toss the bastard over right now.

“We’ll be docked by three,” Jazz said, folding his little phone and putting it in his pocket. “I’ve lined up a shopper to put together the stuff for the woman. Pauly’s got the food being delivered at five. We’ll be ready to take off by ten o’clock, latest.”

“Good job. Did you tell Pauly I wanted those limes?”

“Absolutely, boss. He knows how much you like that key lime pie.”

“Good. That’s the pleasure of traveling without a woman—nobody to nag me about my damn cholesterol. She don’t know what my cholesterol is. She just wants to control me, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I don’t hook up for longer than a weekend. So is this Cayman Islands like Aruba?”

“I was only there once. But, yeah, it’s like Aruba. Only with more banks. And more businesses. Lot of businesses.”

Jazz raised his eyebrows. “They do off-track?”

“I don’t know, Jazz. It’s something to look into once we get the dough.”

Jazz, always on his feet, so much energy, so much going on in that bizzaro brain. The opposite of Charlie, who couldn’t string two sentences together, who thought of nothing but himself, nothing but what he wanted that second. Like a five-year-old, that one. It made Ed wonder which of the brothers was adopted. Had to be one of them.

“Charlie,” Jazz said, poking the listing slob on his shoulder. “Go to the cabin, would ya? You’re making me lose my appetite.”

“Fuck you, Jazz.”

Jazz had his weapon out in two seconds. “What’s that?”

“Nothing, nothing.” He lurched toward the edge of the banquette and stumbled to his feet. “I thought you were someone else.”

“Well, get the hell out of here before I throw you overboard.”

Ed watched Charlie until he was out of the saloon.

“We have to keep him, boss?” Jazz asked. “I can make the brother behave. I can make the bitch behave. Trust me.”

Ed shook his head. “No, I don’t think you can. Those two, they’ve got some strength, okay? We need Charlie. Just until I’m off the boat with the woman. You can stay behind and watch the brothers kill each other.”

“That,” Jazz said, smiling, “I’d pay a nickel for.”

HOW LONG HAD THE dark scared her? It felt as if it had been her whole life. The dark held secrets and bad things, terror and helplessness. Only, she didn’t feel scared. Well, not that kind of scared. She was with Michael and they were going to make love. Finally, at the edge of her life when she wasn’t sure about the next sunrise or the next five minutes, she was sure about him.

Her hands found the bottom of her shirt and she pulled it over her head.

The room wasn’t pitch-black. In fact, she could see him standing at the foot of the bed. Not his expression, not the small details, but enough. So she was pretty sure he could see her, too. He knew she was undressing and why.

As she moved to undo the clasp of her bra, Michael seemed to snap out of whatever had held him so still, directly into fourth gear. Before she’d gotten the bra off, he was down to his shorts. She couldn’t make out the pattern in the dark, which was a blessing.

She tossed her bra to the floor, her blush coming back in spades. But this was her brave life, and she wasn’t going to let her shyness stop her. In fact…

She climbed off the bed to stand in front of Michael. It was tempting to tell him to turn on the light—but, no, she wasn’t that brave. Not yet. But she did continue to take off her clothes. Every last stitch.

And there they were.

He had the physique of a Greek athlete, which wasn’t a shock, considering how serious he was about his workouts. She felt very soft and flabby in comparison. She should have worked harder at her Pilates, that’s what.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

“Me?”

He laughed softly as he stepped closer. “Yes, you. You’re incredibly beautiful. I like seeing you with your guard down. Without those suits you like so much.”

“I like them because they blend in. They make me disappear.”

“I know.” He stepped closer, so close she could feel his body heat. “I like you like this. Naked. Vulnerable.”

She did feel vulnerable. Too much so. She started to cover her breasts, but then he touched her. One hand on her waist, cool, broad, and the side of his other hand lifting her chin.

“And so very brave,” he said.

She looked into his eyes, cursing the dark now. “I’m working on it.”

“You’re doing great,” he said. Just before he kissed her.

She melted against him. His lips, his tongue, the pressure of his hand on the back of her head…it was all perfect. He made her wet and eager and braver still.

She put her hand on his stomach then, kissed him back as she went lower and lower until she felt the small patch of hair down there. A second later he bumped her wrist. She smiled around his tongue as it happened again. Someone wanted attention. Badly.

He moaned, and that’s all the push she needed. She touched his cock. Warm, hard, thick and so very, very anxious. He pulsed in her hand. Strained as she stroked him.

He threw his head back for a second with a long groan, then pulled her to the bed. Before she knew what had happened, she was lying down, her head on the pillow, with Michael at her side, pulling her into his arms, into his kiss.

His leg went between hers, his thigh up to the junction, where he pressed against her. She had no choice but to move, to ride him as he touched her breast, sucked her tongue. They went on like that for long, languorous moments. A gasp or a moan the only break in the accompaniment of their breathing. It was heaven, but it was also not quite enough.

She squeezed his cock, then let go, afraid she’d gone too far.

Michael sat up so quickly she gasped, and he gripped her shoulders tightly. When his mouth was a scant inch from her own, he said, “I can’t stand it. I’m just not that strong.”

His kiss was searing, melting her brain and stealing her breath. His body felt hard and hot.

Another man touching her with his fierceness would have made her cry out, struggle to break free, but she wanted Michael’s possessiveness. A part of her wanted to see bruises, proof, in whatever tomorrow she was granted.

He moaned and she could taste his desire painted on her tongue. The sound of his rough breathing, all through his flaring nostrils, was like sex itself. Even the pulse of his chest against hers made her think of nothing so sweet as making love but of something far more primal. That’s what she wanted from him.

William Baxter’s troubled daughter. The one who was always pale and frail and didn’t know what to do with her hands.

She knew now.

Trembling, still matching him breath for breath, she touched his skin, rubbed him, kneaded his flesh. There was so little give it disappointed her for a moment, but then she remembered it was Michael, not some soft man. He had muscles, big ones—not that you could see from across the room, but when you got close, when he moved—

He pushed her down to the bed, to the blue-and-white checked bedspread. His knee went between hers once more, but this time it was completely different. This time he didn’t ask, he took.

Before her cry had subsided, he pulled her hands up above her head. With his broad left hand he captured both her wrists.

She stared at him as he loomed over her, a willing captive. “What are you doing to me?”

“I don’t want you to forget this. If we die tomorrow, you’ll remember this in your next life. In all your lifetimes.”

He held her gaze as his mouth opened into a silent roar and he plunged inside her.

He filled her completely, but that wasn’t why she wept. The tears were from somewhere very deep, something always longed for, and finally, finally…

He kissed her again, and it was brutal until it wasn’t. Until he caressed her lips with his own, until there was no space between his breath and hers.

He was as deeply inside her as he could be. Michael was part of her. She would have shared her blood with him, her bones, but she didn’t need to because he was right there. Right there.

MICHAEL, BURIED IN wet heat, didn’t really understand what was happening to him. He’d wanted to make this special for her. He’d wanted to be careful, gentle.

Shit. He hoped he wasn’t screwing it up, because there was no way he was gonna stop now.

He’d never been a patient man, not when it came to sex. Most of the time, he was on his way from one danger to another, so he’d mastered the art of the sentimental goodbye. Better to leave them wanting more, right?

But this…Tate was another thing altogether. He’d been with more beautiful women. Certainly tougher women. She was vulnerable in a way that made him vulnerable, too.

He kissed her, wanting the thoughts to stop. She was so responsive. Just listening to her could have made him come. He had to hold back, to not hurt her, but his resolve lasted seconds. And when he did hurt her, she pushed him for more.

They would be gone by tomorrow, heading out across the ocean to the Caymans. His glorious plan hadn’t turned out so well. Nothing had. Except this.

He’d never felt more of a failure—and he’d never experienced a triumph like being inside her.

He lifted his head, took in great, deep breaths, pumped into her until his arms shook. And then he reached between them, sliding his right hand down her belly until his fingers found her clit.

He watched her as he shifted his position, thrusting and rubbing her at the same time.

God, it was amazing. There was just enough light. Her eyes weren’t closed, but they weren’t focused, not on him anyway. Her mouth had opened as she’d arched her neck. It was stunning. He licked the sweat off her temple because he couldn’t lick where he wanted.

Her head thrashed, banging against the wall as he kept up an unrelenting pace, but he knew it was going to end soon. He could feel the tightness in his balls, his muscles tensing beyond endurance.

He had to choose: finger or cock. Cock won.

He pulled his hand out, captured her wrists again, and when he felt her heels on his hips, he goddamn exploded. The top of his head came off, the backs of his eyelids burst with colors, and she just kept squeezing him, her internal muscles sucking the life force out of him.

It seemed to go on forever. When he was finally dry, when there was nothing, not even breath left in him, he opened his eyes.

She was staring up at him with those wide blue eyes. With her auburn hair plastered against her skin, her cheeks blotchy and red. He couldn’t imagine anything more beautiful. Not even close.

Too soon, his arms gave out and he had to crash beside her. She didn’t speak; neither did he, but the sound in the room was loud enough to scare the fishes. Both of them gasping for air, cursing the world that made them need it.

“Holy cow,” she whispered finally.

He grinned. “Yeah, that’s just what I was gonna say.”

She slugged him in the hip. It was a lackadaisical sock with only half a fist. But good for her. He doubted he could have done better.

“Sleep now,” he said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Tomorrow we’ll figure out how to live through this.”

“Okay,” she said, and even in her breathlessness, her doubt came through.

He rallied himself to his side, so his hand rested on her belly and his gaze on her eyes. “You think I want this to be over?” he said. “You think I’m not going to fight for you?”

She blinked. Then she smiled. “Not anymore.”

**14**

IT HAD BEEN DAYS—five days—since the kidnappers had disappeared with William Baxter’s money and Tate. Sara, who’d never had a sister but had always had Tate, was sitting in her friend’s bedroom, staring at the trompe l’oeil window on the wall. Through the painted window she could see a sandy beach, a brilliant ocean and a sky dotted with cotton clouds. It was so real that Sara thought if she moved closer, she would feel the breeze on her face.

But it, like the chances that Tate was still alive, was an illusion. There was a lot of trompe l’oeil throughout the penthouse, designed specifically to make the occupant feel as though she were living in an expansive world. The artist had done a superb job, but now Sara wondered if these fake paintings had been one more wall that had trapped Tate in her mental prison.

It wasn’t fair. None of it was. That she should have been kidnapped at all, that she’d lived so much of her life in terror, that her cousin had been murdered in such a horrible way. Sara ached for Tate, but she also ached for William, who’d done so much to foster Tate’s fear.

He’d aged ten years in these last few days. He couldn’t sleep, wouldn’t take the tranquilizers his doctor had prescribed and barely ate. Sara had taken a leave of absence from her job to be with him. To wait. But for how long?

Was Michael dead, too? Or was he, as William thought, one of the guilty?

Two days ago, she’d taken the bull by the horns. Despite her belief in Michael’s team, she’d called the authorities. The FBI had swooped in, but they hadn’t found much. She’d tried to believe them when they said they’d find Tate.

Sara stood up, knowing she had to go into the other room, face William as he waited another day by the phone. She had to keep things upbeat, if not for his sake then for her own.

She missed her best friend.

“ARE YOU SURE THIS is a good idea?” Charlie asked, trying not to sound too desperate. Jazz liked it when he could hurt people, and even though no one was gonna be beat up or anything, it was gonna be ugly.

“Just take the damn tray, would you? Jesus, you’re such a whiny bitch.”

“I haven’t seen Mikey since—”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass. I’m busy.”

Charlie sighed, but only after his back was to Jazz. He was so sick of this boat he wanted to scream. They’d already gotten the ransom money, so why in hell hadn’t they just let him go? Why had Jazz given him that fix so he’d be out of it when they set out to sea?

He picked up the tray and headed to Mike’s cabin. The cups rattled, but he couldn’t help it. Mikey was gonna kill him, and Charlie already felt like crap. He knew there was some crack on board, but would they let him have any? Hell, no. They saw he wasn’t doing so good, so it was just pure mean that made them act so shitty. And after he’d made them rich! The bastards.

“Well?”

Charlie jumped at Jazz’s voice so close. He hadn’t heard the dude walking, let alone opening the cabin door. “Shit.”

“Do not piss me off, Charlie.”

With as much indignation as he could muster, Charlie walked past Jazz into Mikey’s cabin.

His brother stood up so fast he knocked an empty water glass off the bedside ledge. “What the hell?”

“Relax. I’m just bringing you something to eat.”

“Get out of here, Charlie.”

“I will. Just let me put this down.” He went to the vanity, and as he was depositing the tray, the door to the cabin shut. It was Jazz screwing with him, making it easy for Mikey to wail on him. He turned, fast, but Mike was already in his face.

“How many people are on board?” Mike asked, his voice low, threatening.

“How should I know?”

Mikey’s elbow bent and his arm went back. There was no mistaking the intent of his fist. “Count them.”

“All right, all right. Me, Jazz, Martini, the cook, the pilot guy and some kid that cleans up.”

“What are they planning?”

“You think I know? I shouldn’t even be here. They was supposed to let me out when we brought the money. They tricked me!”

“Gee, I feel real bad for you there, Charlie.”

“Look, I told ya—”

“I know exactly what you told me. And what you did. And what you’re gonna do now.”

Charlie shook his head, trying to inch toward the door. “I gotta go. They catch me talking to you, it’s trouble all around.”

“Don’t you fucking move,” Mikey said, pressing his body closer. “You tell me right this minute how many weapons are on board.”

“I don’t know.”

“Charlie, I swear to God—”

“Mikey, I don’t know. On Ma’s grave, I don’t know. They keep me in the dark.”

“Then find out.”

Charlie was sweatin’ now. He could feel it dripping on his forehead, down his back. “I can’t, Mikey. Don’t ask me, ’cause I can’t. You know I can’t lie worth shit.”

“You managed to lie to me.”

“No, no I didn’t.”

“Find out, Charlie. Every single gun, rifle, harpoon, knife—you hear me? You find out and you get that information to me. If you try to pull something, I swear on Pa’s grave, I will hunt you down and I will hurt you worse than you could ever believe.”

“Yeah? Well, Martini will kill me. He’s already threatened to throw me overboard.”

His brother’s arm went back, and Charlie flinched, but the punch never came. When he opened his eyes, he saw the woman behind Mikey, touching his shoulder. Shit, he hadn’t even seen her when he walked in.

She looked different. Better. Pretty. No wonder Mikey liked his job so much. Must be sweet to get to work with a rich broad who looked like that.

“Get out, Charlie. Get out, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get me what I want to know.”

“I’ll try. That’s all I can do.”

Mikey spun around and Charlie wasted no time getting the hell out of there. Back in the saloon, Jazz was smiling like he’d been to the circus.

“Have a nice visit?”

Charlie almost told him what for, but he didn’t. “No.”

“What does he want you to do?”

He shouldn’t say. Mikey was his brother, after all. His own blood. On the other hand, Martini had never liked him much. And Jazz? He was a goddamn psycho. “He wanted to know how many people were on board. How many guns.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t tell him nothing. I swear. I said I don’t know, ’cause I don’t.”

Jazz gave him the once-over. “Watch your step, Charlie. It’s a big ocean out there.”

Charlie went out on the deck, staring at that ocean and planning how when Jazz wasn’t looking, he’d be the one to go swimming. Next time he wouldn’t tell Jazz a damn thing. He’d show them. Stupid rat bastards. Soon as he got home, he was gonna go to Len Taub’s off-track parlor. Screw Ed. Screw Jazz.

TATE WASN’T SURE what to do. It wasn’t easy watching Michael pace, so angry the vein on his forehead throbbed. But he also seemed to be working something out, at least from the bits and snatches of his mumbles that she caught.

Today was the first time she’d looked at Charlie. Jazz had brought them everything since that day she’d learned that Charlie and Michael were brothers. It had been upsetting, seeing them together, at least at first, but then, watching their interaction after spending so much time with Michael…she knew that she’d been right to believe him.

Michael might be good at his intelligence work, but he wasn’t Olivier. He couldn’t have made up his rage at Charlie. God, they were so different. Like night and day.

She decided she wasn’t going to say a word. Let Michael pace, let him swear and plot and plan. While he was occupied, she took one of the sandwiches from the tray Charlie had brought, then she went to the bed and got the notebook she’d asked for two days ago.

It wasn’t anything special, just an unlined notepad, but it was better than writing on the walls. Jazz had been reluctant to give it to her, too. Why, she had no idea. Who was going to see it? A passing sailfish?

Anyway, she curled her legs underneath her, got the pillow behind her back and turned to a new blank page.

“Dear Sara,” she wrote, remembering where she’d left off. “Jazz brought a bunch of shopping bags into the room, then left us to sort through them. I was thrilled to find underwear—although, jeez, the slime-ball had gotten the most revealing things he could find. I swear, it looked more like he’d shopped at Frederick’s of Hollywood than Victoria’s Secret. Michael didn’t seem to mind, but he played it cool.

“There’s simply no way to forget why we’re here. It’s not a pleasure cruise, and there’s no beach party waiting for us in Grand Cayman.

“I’m just grateful Michael is with me. He thinks he’s failed, that he’s responsible for what’s happened. I can’t agree. It wasn’t his fault he had Charlie for a brother. But I can’t seem to make Michael stop worrying about it and save his strength for when we dock.

“Personally, Sara, I think the real truth is that this whole thing was my fault. And before you say it, yes, I think Dr. Bay was more than idiotic. What I mean…You know the old saying ‘You reap what you sow’? Well, I’ve been ‘sowing’ being kidnapped since Lisa. I know it makes sense that I was obsessed, but I didn’t do near enough to get myself out of that insidious loop.

“I was given tremendous gifts and I squandered them to live in the land of what-if. No more. I am here, today. I am with Michael and he is with me. Together, we’re strong. Even me.

“I—”

He sat in front of her, making her pen jolt like a lightning bolt up the page. “I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

She hid her gasp as he said the words, his face showing her that it wasn’t an idle threat. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what? He got you kidnapped, Tate. He stole from me and he’s probably going to get me killed. If I don’t do something about it, we’ll both die, and it’ll be because of Charlie.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter that he did all this. You can’t kill him. He’s your brother.”

“Not anymore.”

“He’ll always be your brother.”

Michael stood up again. “No. I’ve done everything I could to help him. I’ve bailed him out of jail, I’ve given him money for his bookies, I’ve spent thousands putting him in rehab. He just wants more and more, and I have no more to give.”

“Still—”

“Tate, if it was just me, I could see cutting him a little slack, although it wouldn’t be for him but for my father. But to put you here? No. It’s over. It stops. Now.”

“I understand. I really do. But you’ll have to live with whatever choice you make.”

He smiled at her with a tenderness that made her melt. “I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe. Period. Now are you going to keep writing in that journal or are you going to take my mind off the rest of the universe?”

“Oh, you want to play charades?”

“Ha. You’re funny.” He slipped the notebook from her fingers and tossed it to the floor. The pen was dispatched next.

Then it got really interesting.

SHE SLEPT AS HE TORE a couple of pages from her notebook and found the pen where he’d tossed it hours before. The longer they remained on the boat, the more he worried that he’d never get her home.

The whole reason he’d come up with the idea of the Cayman bank was to give himself time. But had that backfired? Were there so many armed men on the boat that he couldn’t take them?

The fact that he even thought that bothered him more than he could admit. Last year, would he have hesitated? Would he have given this motley crew a second thought?

He could take Martini and Jazz. As long as he knew where they were and no one jumped him from behind, there was no contest. But there were other people on board, and he had no idea where they would be at any given time.

He hadn’t been a complete slouch. At night, when Tate was asleep, he’d done something in the way of recon. He’d only been out of their cabin twice, but he’d gotten a lot of information on both silent trips.

The first, he’d gotten a damn good idea about the saloon and the outer perimeter of the boat. He drew what he remembered now in a diagram that would help him put together the pieces he hadn’t seen.

Charlie and Jazz had been asleep that night, the night before last. Charlie, snoring. Neither had stirred as he’d walked past them, and it had been harder than hell not to take the gun from Jazz’s splayed hand and shoot him beyond recognition.

He’d held himself back. He might have been outside the cabin, but the boat was still mostly unknown. With Tate so vulnerable, he had to make sure. If he’d been killed, her chances for survival were slim. So he’d inched around quiet as a mouse as he’d used the full moon to check for possibilities.

Last night hadn’t gone quite as well.

He’d made it halfway to the cockpit when Ed had come up from below. For what felt like an hour Michael had stowed himself in a ridiculously narrow gulley behind a couch. He’d learned nothing except that Ed Martini liked to cuss at televised sports.

When he finally got a chance to get back to the room, his leg had cramped and he’d missed being caught by a quarter of a second.

Tate had slept through it all, which was what he’d wanted.

He couldn’t be sure when they’d reach Grand Cayman, but both of them had to be ready, starting tomorrow. He had to have plans made, with contingencies. The one he hated the most was where they would take Tate away, off the boat, alone.

She thought she was ready. That she could handle it. He knew better.

He finished the rudimentary diagram of the boat, but he knew if there was a cache of weapons on board, they would be below and they’d be under lock and key. But if he had a gun, any kind of gun, their chances of surviving this would be a lot better.

He turned to the bed. She looked beautiful with her hair in a halo on the pillow. Odd, a woman of such privilege and she never complained about the living conditions. He knew, far too well, all the things that made her life so different from regular folks’. She had a cadre of beauticians, aestheticians, nail people, wax people, makeup people who came to the penthouse on a steady schedule. He didn’t know what half of them did except make her look great.

Aside from her looks, she had maids, cooks, him. She never had to get her hands dirty. Someone was always there to clean up her messes.

She looked better here, though. He’d never even known her hair was wavy. Or that she really liked peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches.

As he watched her sleep, he let himself think about after. Once they were back in New York, on her turf. Would she be embarrassed by the fact that she’d slept with her bodyguard? Would she pretend nothing had ever happened? Would he?

It wasn’t as if they would ever be anything. Not a couple, that’s for sure. William would have heart failure if such a thing were even suggested. Too bad. He’d liked her from the start, and being with her in this cramped cabin for all this time had just proved he’d been right in his earliest assessments.

Tate was an unusual woman, and not just because of her social standing. One thing he’d seen in his travels was that the children of the truly rich didn’t understand the rest of the world. They made noises about helping out the disenfranchised or the handicapped, whatever, but it was all posing. They lived in rarefied air, and those who weren’t like them were as foreign as Martians.

Tate was the exception to the rule. She’d never made him feel as if he were the help. Not intentionally, anyway. Hell, she hadn’t even wanted to admit how badly he’d bungled things with her, even though his mistakes might cost her her life.

So what was a man supposed to do with a woman like that? Save her, that’s what. Make damn sure she had the opportunity to find out what life would be like without her fear of being kidnapped overshadowing everything.

He had to find those weapons. Now.

**15**

THE FBI AGENT’S NAME was Webber, Nick Webber, and he called Sara at four in the afternoon on the ninth day. “We might have something.”

“Go on.”

“We think it might be her purse. There’s no ID, but there’s a GPS tracker sewn into the lining. The security people said that’s where Caulfield hid his trackers.”

“I’ll know if it’s hers,” Sara said. “But let’s meet somewhere. I don’t want Mr. Baxter to know.”

“Fine.”

“Where did you find it?”

“In Jersey, by the GW Bridge.”

“That could mean anything. They could have her anywhere.”

“It’ll help to know if this is her bag.”

“Give me twenty minutes and meet me at Sarabeth’s. You know where that is?”

“Yes.”

“Twenty minutes.” Sara hung up the phone, her heart so heavy she could barely breathe. Was this all they were to have of Tate? A purse washed up from the East River? Was Tate in that murky water right now with the punctured tires and the polluted fish?

William was withering away before her eyes. He wouldn’t eat, and the only sleep he got was drug induced. She’d taken her fair share of tranquilizers, too.

How long was she supposed to hang on? She wanted to believe so badly. So when was the cutoff? Ten days? Twenty? Or were they always supposed to feel that jolt when the phone rang? A year, two years, what did it matter? A purse was not proof. It was simply a purse.

THE DOOR HAD BEEN unlocked for a good thirty seconds, but Michael didn’t turn the knob. He pressed his ear against the door, trying to decide whether the noise he heard was just the television—which was on all the time, as far as he could tell—or actual conversation.

At one-twenty in the morning, he couldn’t imagine who’d be chatting. Those first few days they’d made a point to keep themselves awake, guns at the ready, especially after his first attempt at escape. But the last couple of nights Jazz and Charlie had both been sound asleep and not even the louder-than-loud commercials from the satellite system had made them budge.

He couldn’t tell whether tonight would be an exception, so he opened the door. Not wide—Jesus, no—but just enough so he could let his eye adjust to the light as he peered through the gap.

He didn’t see Jazz, but there was Charlie, leaning back in the big man’s favorite leather chair, mouth agape, snoring like a freight train. Even now, after everything, Michael’s first instinct was to get Charlie out of that chair. If Ed saw him there…

It was just so goddamn typical. Charlie would never change. If Michael could figure out a way to get him out of this mess, it wouldn’t matter because there would be the next mess and the one after that. It made him sad—but not sad enough to forgive. That wasn’t going to happen.

Another few seconds of absolute stillness, then he opened the door another inch. Still no Jazz. Surely they wouldn’t leave Charlie on guard duty by himself? No one was that stupid.

Someone else had to be there. Or in the head or maybe getting something to eat in the galley. Whatever, it meant that tonight Michael wasn’t going to make it below. He wasn’t going to get a weapon, at least not yet.

He closed the door, locking it behind him, then debated the wisdom of getting into bed. Tate was hard to resist, but he wanted to check back in an hour to see if he could make it out. An hour of either sleep or something better wouldn’t be prudent. He’d get too sleepy. Too satisfied.

“Are you just going to stand there all night?”

Tate’s whisper scared the crap out of him, making him glad for the darkness. “What are you doing up?”

“Watching you be superspy. Like last night. And the night before.”

He grinned as he headed to the bunk. “It’s not nice to fool superspies.”

“Hey, you’re not the only one who can do that stealthy stuff. What’s the matter? Someone’s up?”

“I only saw Charlie. But they’d never leave him on his own. I’ll check again in a while.”

“Hmm,” she said, scooting over as he sat on the edge of the bed. “How long is a while?”

He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “It would be wonderful to climb in with you, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. We’re getting too close to Grand Cayman, and either I get a decent layout of this boat or—”

“Or what?”

“Nothing. I’ll get it. But I need to stay alert.”

“I can do that, too.”

“You should get some sleep.”

“Because I lead such an active life? The only thing we do here that burns up calories is sex, and if you don’t want to do that—”

“Who said I don’t want to?”

She sighed. “I know. So what happens once we get there?”

“Ed’s going to take you off the boat. You’ll have to go with him to the bank.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be taking care of business here. You don’t have to worry about that.”

She sat up, then leaned across him to turn on the light. She had on a T-shirt, which she wore most nights, and he wondered whether if they hadn’t been afraid of Jazz barging in, she would have slept naked.

The thought of her long body next to his…Hell, they’d never get any rest.

Squinting against the light, she still managed to give him her “you’re-in-trouble-now-mister” look. “I’ll ask again. What about you?”

“There are things I can do once we’re docked, once they can’t use you as a shield.”

“Like killing people.”

“If necessary.”

“Including Charlie.”

“If necessary.”

“They have weapons.”

“I do, too.”

“Where?”

He shrugged, wanting to reassure her as well as instill her with confidence. He wasn’t sure he could do both. “I’ve been in a lot of situations where it looked as if I didn’t stand a chance.”

“But—”

He put his arm around her shoulder and situated them both more comfortably on the bed. “Let’s talk about you for a while, okay? There are some things I want you to practice here, while we’re alone, before you hit the bank.”

“Like breathing? Not passing out?”

He shook his head. “You’re going to be fine. You’ve been amazing, and there’s no reason that shouldn’t continue.”

“Except that I won’t be with you.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

She looked into his eyes. “Are you kidding? Of course it matters. You’re the only reason I’m not completely comatose. Or dead.”

“You may have gotten some confidence with me nearby, but you’ve done so much on your own. You don’t even break a sweat when they bring in the food.”

“I do so.”

“It doesn’t show.”

She sighed. “Not that much has changed, Michael. We’re living in a bubble here where it’s easy to pretend. But once I have to leave this room…If you’re counting on me, you’d better rethink things.”

“Don’t worry about it. The plan is only viable if you think it’ll work. There are too many unknowns to get too specific.”

“Well, let’s hear what it is. If I don’t pass out now, then maybe I won’t pass out in the bank.”

AT TWO-FORTY, MICHAEL came back to the room. There was enough light from the porthole for her to see the foray hadn’t been terrific.

“What happened?”

He came to the edge of the bed, stripping as he walked. His T-shirt hit the floor along with the jeans they’d bought him in Florida, leaving him in his skivvies. “Charlie lied again.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. I thought I was home-free, everyone accounted for, and was just about to pick the lock where I’m sure the weapons are stored when that cabin boy he talked about—the one who was supposed to clean up—came walking out of the head. He’s monster-size. Thank God he flushed or I’d have been very damaged.”

“I’m very grateful you’re not damaged.” She threw the covers back and patted the bed. “But now you need to get some sleep.”

“Let me get washed up. Don’t move.”

By the time he’d finished brushing his teeth she’d worked herself into a small frenzy of worry. “You can’t do this anymore,” she said as he crawled in next to her. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I have to get to the weapons, Tate.”

“Find another way. I won’t be able to stand it if something happens to you.”

He pulled her close, putting his arm under her neck, positioning himself so he could look into her eyes. “I’ll be here,” he said. “I won’t leave you.”

She believed him as best she could. The closer they came to the island, the worse her fears were becoming. Michael tethered her to the earth, to sanity. If he were gone—

“Hush,” he said. “Stay with me. Don’t be anywhere else but right here.”

She nodded.

He kissed her. It was long and languid and she touched his skin wherever her hand landed. In the days and nights that had sailed by, she’d learned the heaven of familiarity, the comfort of knowing she couldn’t make a mistake.

She pleased him. She knew it, and it brought her an extraordinary confidence. If she could bring that feeling to her whole world…

“A little help?”

She looked at him, startled out of her reverie. “With what?”

“Panties.”

“I don’t think they would look that good on you, but, sure, give it a try.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious.”

“Come on, Michael,” she said, turning her head fetchingly to the side. “Haven’t you ever wanted to try a walk on the wild side?”

“The masculine wild side, sure. Panties? That’s a big no.”

“What a chicken. You’d probably look adorable.”

“The last thing in the world I want to look like is adorable.”

“Right. You’re a lumberjack and you’re—”

“Hold it right there. You want to see some wild-side action? How does a little spanking sound?”

“Hmm. Your bottom all red and rosy?”

“Not mine.”

“Oh, then no. It sounds terrible.”

His mouth opened, but no sound emerged. Finally he just shook his head.

“Don’t worry, Michael. You don’t have to understand. Just smile and say, ‘Yes, dear.’”

“Yes, dear,” he said as he dutifully smiled. “But just for the record, this isn’t over.”

“No?”

“It’s just going to take me a while to figure out my strategy. I’m thinking a surprise visit in the middle of the night. Something kinky but not too startling.”

“All for me?”

He nodded.

She pulled his head down so her mouth was an inch from his ear. “Add some leather to that mix, big guy, and I’m all in.”

“Oh, shit,” he said as he got to his knees and pulled her into a kiss that went on and on.

He didn’t have to remind her again about the whole panty situation. She got naked, fast, tossing her clothes somewhere away, and then she got him naked, too.

By that time he was hard for her, hard all over. She liked to run her hands over his chest and feel the hard buds of his nipples beneath her palms. He liked it when she tweaked him there, and she was happy to oblige.

He’d figured out a lot of her favorite things, too. Like now, when he used two fingers to get her ready for the main event. And how he nipped at the tender skin just below her ear until she shivered with pleasure.

Then oddly, his pace slowed until she pulled back to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, but the look he gave her was as pensive as she’d ever seen him.

“Michael?”

“I would never hurt you.”

“I know that.”

“Maybe. But I want to say it anyway. I miss a lot about my old life—the pace, the adrenaline. It was good for me and I was good at it. But meeting you…”

She swallowed and held her breath, afraid to speak or even breathe lest he stop.

“Meeting you has changed every damn thing. But I want you to understand something.”

He held her tighter, bruising her arm. She didn’t care, not at all.

“I’m going to get you out of this. And when you go back to your real life, you won’t be the same person. You’ll be stronger. Better.”

His eyes searched hers with amazing intensity, but he was starting to scare her now. This wasn’t the speech she’d hoped for. She didn’t know how she knew, but she knew.

“I’m going to miss you. But I want you to know I’ll be rooting for you to have the life you deserve. You will. You’ll be able to travel. It kills me to say it, but you’ll have your pick of men. The world will be yours. All you have to do is take it.”

“So you think I can have any man I want?”

“I know it. You’re beautiful, and that’s the least of it. Don’t you settle for anything less than the best, you hear me? Any man—the goddamn princes of the world—would be lucky to know you, let alone love you.”

She couldn’t have stopped her tears if her life depended on it. His sincerity slipped into her heart, and she knew it would be there forever.

He was also telling the truth. Not about the men who’d line up for her but that he wouldn’t be in that line. This was going to end. One way or the other, Michael was going to leave her. She didn’t want it to be so, but even a woman who’d lived most of her life in the land of magical thinking could see that he couldn’t continue as her bodyguard. Not after all this.

“Tate?”

She sniffed. “Hmm?”

“We still have right now.”

There was something so sweet about his voice, about his face. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for being my safe place. For seeing so much in me. I’ll never forget you.”

“You’d better not,” he said as he laid her down, as he moved between her legs. As he entered her body as completely as he’d entered her heart.

**16**

THEY DOCKED AT FIVE that morning. Tate held on to Michael as she listened for new voices, a chance perhaps to get someone’s attention.

He squeezed her shoulder and kissed her on the temple. She instantly calmed. Not Zen calm or anything, but she could feel the tension ease from her shoulders.

“I know it’s wishful thinking on my part,” she whispered after hearing nothing but Jazz’s voice on deck, “but, hey, we have to try.”

“We do, but I’d feel a lot better if you were off the boat. There’s a much greater chance you can get away.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I know,” he said.

“They’re so damn secretive at the bank. We’ll be taken into a private room. It’s not like going to a bank in New York.”

“Just do what we talked about.”

“I’ll try.”

“You’ll be great. I have complete faith in you.”

“Well, that’s just insane.”

He laughed, then he tilted her chin up. There wasn’t much light, not enough to make out every detail, and yet she could picture every inch of his face. She closed her eyes, holding the image still and strong so that when she was out there she could bring it back.

His kiss was gentle and sweet, a tender counterpoint to last night’s urgency.

After the anchor went down, the boat rocked with a whole new motion. For two hours they lay entwined. Kissing sometimes, touching everywhere. She tried so hard not to think of this as the end, but she wasn’t strong enough.

“Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“I know what you said last night makes sense, but I can’t let it go. If…When we get back to New York, I want—” She felt him tense, and that made her stumble, but she really needed to say this now. “I want you.”

His chest rose, but it didn’t fall for too many heartbeats.

“Was that the wrong thing to say?”

He exhaled and pulled her closer. “No, not at all. I’m really flattered.”

“Screw flattered. Talk to me.”

“I’m going to resign,” he said. “That’s a given. But I doubt all will be forgiven. You’re father’s not going to be happy with me. And he’s right. I was supposed to protect you and I put you in danger.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. Charlie is my fault. I should have cut him off years ago. I should have figured that he’d know how to break into my safe. I was stupid and you’re paying for it.”

“Okay, you have to stop that right now. I know you had nothing to do with Charlie’s plan. You’ve put your own life at risk to take care of me. So don’t even try to go there.”

“Even if I don’t, you’re father already has.”

“I’m not my father.”

“And for that I’m most grateful.”

“Michael. I’m not kidding around.”

“I know you’re not. And believe me, I’m goddamned amazed that a woman like you could want me. I just don’t think you should make any promises. Not yet.”

“I’ve run from promises my whole life. If I want to make one now, I will.”

“Okay, then. Promise away.”

“Please don’t make light of this. I’ve never felt this way before. Not ever. You’ve been a revelation. Not just because you know how to make me tremble, but because—”

He didn’t say anything. But he held his breath again.

“Because of how you see me. I had no idea this was even possible. All I can call it is simpatico. It sounds too fancy for what I mean, but—”

“No. I get it. I understand completely.”

She allowed herself a little grin. “Told ya.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “When we get back, we’ll take a look at how things stand. Just you and me. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now try and sleep.”

“Ha.”

He kissed her temple one more time. “Rest, then. Rest.”

FOR THE FIRST TIME since they’d kidnapped her, Ed came into the cabin. It was just past eight and she hadn’t slept a wink. She’d been too busy thinking, not about the day ahead or what she’d have to face but about a future filled with Michael.

Of course, her father wouldn’t approve, but that was too damn bad. She hadn’t told him, not in so many words, but she loved Michael. Loved him in a way she’d never dreamed for herself.

“Get dressed,” Ed said. “I want you ready in one hour.”

He looked like an island millionaire. He wore an elegant Hawaiian shirt—which seemed contradictory but wasn’t—khaki pants, deck shoes and a Panama hat to cover his bald spot. His tan was deep, his Rolex top-of-the-line, and the diamond on his pinkie could have been used as an anchor.

He turned to Michael. “Make sure she looks good.”

Before Michael could say a word, Ed left, locking the door behind him.

She sat on the bed in her T-shirt. It was already starting. Her pulse pounded, her breathing grew labored. She closed her eyes so she wouldn’t see the narrowing of her vision.

“Come on, kiddo,” Michael said. “Don’t project. One foot in front of the other. You need to shower, right? That’s not scary. You’ve done that a thousand times before.”

She nodded, then looked up at him as her thoughts took a right turn. “Michael, you have to promise me that you won’t kill Charlie.”

“What?”

“Promise me. I know you’re going to fight and do all your spy stuff, and you can feed every one of these bastards to the sharks as far as I’m concerned, but you can’t kill Charlie.”

He straightened his back and flexed his jaw, and it was so easy to see the warrior in him. He’d been on his best behavior when her life had been at risk, but the moment she was off the boat…She tried to feel sorry for Jazz, but she couldn’t. He deserved everything Michael would give him.

“Michael, please. If you do, you’ll regret it forever.”

“Don’t ask me to make that promise, Tate.”

“Why not?”

“I have no idea what I’m going to be facing once you’re gone. Please don’t tie my hands that way.”

“All right. But will you try?”

“I will.”

She stood and went right into his arms. “That’s all I need.”

He took her by the shoulders and looked at her with his green-gold eyes. “I need so much more.”

There was nothing gentle about this kiss. She felt it to her toes, to her chromosomes. She needed to be strong for this. To come back to him.

He broke away. “Go on. Get ready. Remember, one step at a time.”

It wasn’t easy, but she managed to do just that. Shower, makeup, hair, the clothes Jazz had bought her in Florida. When she finally looked in the mirror, she knew she looked just as privileged as Ed. In fact, she looked as if she could have been his daughter.

It had been so easy to step back into the habits of years. The hair not just curled but coiffed, after lessons from some of the most sought-after stylists in the world. The makeup might not have been hers, but she knew how to work it. Subtle in every way. Elegant and understated. To be flashy was to be vulgar. To be one of them.

And how would it be to live with—hell, date—one of them? A man who was her chauffeur, for heaven’s sake? The talk would be incessant, the censure obvious at every gathering. She didn’t give one solitary damn, as she’d never fit in anyway. But what about her father?

He cared so very much. His life was a monument to wealth and everything wealth brought. Including this.

While Michael insisted on blaming himself, she looked elsewhere. As much as she loved her father, her kidnapping now seemed inevitable. After Lisa, it had only been a matter of time.

He’d instilled in her a number of wonderful things: her social responsibility, her respect for hard work. But he’d also raised her to be a victim.

That she had spent so much of her time in captivity not feeling like a victim was a tribute to Michael. And herself. She couldn’t forget that. She’d done remarkably well, considering.

There was a brief knock at the bathroom door. “Tate?”

This was it. She had to go out now, leave Michael behind, act her ass off. She had to be strong and there was no one to depend on but herself.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Ed was there along with Jazz. They looked her over as if she were a prize pony. She felt the heat rush to her face, but she kept it together. Head up, shoulders back, an air of detachment. At least that part was easy.

“You look good. Now all you have to do is keep your mouth shut and sign the papers.” Ed touched her hair and she didn’t even flinch. “Make it look real, sweetheart, and you’ll live to see another day.”

Ed turned to Jazz and gave him a nod. Ed stepped closer to her and pulled a gun from the back of his waistband, while Jazz went to Michael’s side, next to the bed.

“What’s just as important,” Ed continued, positioning the barrel of the gun in her side, “is that your boyfriend here might live, too.”

Before she could even take a step or be scared about the gun, Jazz pulled Michael’s right arm straight out, laid it palm up on the edge of the bedside counter and smashed it with the butt of his weapon. She heard the bone snap like a twig, followed instantly by Michael’s sharp cry.

The blood drained from her head and she gasped for breath as she struggled not to throw up. She could see exactly where it was broken at the wrist.

She turned on Ed and slapped him across the face, the sound not nearly loud enough.

He lifted his weapon, his whole face red and furious. She knew he might pull the trigger, but all she wanted was to punish him for what he’d done, then turn her wrath on Jazz.

“Tate, no!” Michael, holding his arm tight against his side, stepped forward, his left arm out to pull her away.

Ed trembled as he stared at her and she could see the war in his eyes. He wanted so badly to kill her, but it would cost him dearly. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“You have no reason to hurt him. I’ve agreed to give you my money. That’s what you’re after. Not him.”

Ed took another step closer, and now the barrel of the gun touched her temple, the same place Michael had kissed so tenderly. “If you try anything stupid again, I’m going to give Jazz here a call. He’s going to break the other hand and then he’s going to shoot out the right kneecap, then the left. By the time Jazz is finished there won’t be a bone in his body that isn’t broke. You got that?”

The thought brought up the bile in her throat, but she couldn’t break down. Not now. “Yes.”

“Good.” He put the weapon back in his waistband, then covered it with his brightly colored Hawaiian shirt. “Let’s go.”

She looked at Michael’s hand, already swelling. “He needs a doctor.”

“When it’s over,” Ed said. “He’ll get all the attention he needs. Come on.”

He led her to the door, but just before she stepped through, Michael said, “Wait.”

She turned.

“I love you,” he said. “I think I have for a long time. Just know that, okay? Know it.”

WALKING OUT OF THE room was like death. The sun shone warm on her skin, the water sparkled blue and the wind smelled of the sea—and it was all gallows.

She kept hearing that sickening snap over and over in her head. All she wanted to do was kill Ed Martini and Jazz and, yes, Charlie, too, and get back to Michael. It hurt her that he was in pain, that Jazz could injure him so easily.

Too easily.

God, Michael had let that horrible man hurt him to protect her. Because Ed had the gun on her.

Her steps slowed, but Ed’s hand on her back led her onto the small sea taxi, where he sat her down so close to him his aftershave filled her nostrils. She stared at the shore, at Seven Mile Beach, while Ed told her he was now her uncle Ed—Ed Martini, her father’s best friend. That the money was being transferred to his account temporarily and that William would come soon to make different arrangements.

Then he made her repeat everything he’d said. By the time she’d done so for the fifth time, they had docked. As she stood, he touched her arm, her back, then her arm again, and it was all she could do not to slap him over and over until he took her back to the boat, to Michael.

She’d never felt this before, this rage so bright and hot that she knew without a doubt she could take his gun and blow him away. She’d never even guessed she had this murderousness in her. Her vivid imagination hadn’t been enough. She’d always pictured herself as the victim, not the killer.

Although she hadn’t been to Cayman in years, she remembered the soft white beaches here and how she’d enjoyed playing with the turtles and snorkeling. This memory would forever be overshadowed, however long forever turned out to be.

They walked, the two of them, past the seaside cafés and shops, toward the center of town. Toward her bank. He held on to her each step of the way, hurting her as she passed one khaki-dressed police officer after another.

She said nothing. She obeyed and would obey. There was only one chance in a million she could get herself out of this, but she wasn’t going to try even that. Not with Michael’s well-being at stake.

He slowed her down as they crossed the street in front of Grand Cayman Bank. “Who am I?” he asked.

“Uncle Ed.”

“Say it again—and smile this time.”

She forced her lips to curve up. “Uncle Ed.”

He walked into the shade on the right side of the street and took out his cell phone. With one push of his button he was on the phone with Jazz, and she was trembling. “Jazz, let’s see what you can do to his left hand.”

“No!” she said, but he yanked her back, close to a pastry shop window.

“Say it again.”

She looked at him through a red haze of hatred, but she made herself smile, pretend this wasn’t death, that Michael wasn’t being hurt this very second. “Uncle Ed.”

“Again.”

“Uncle Ed.”

“Better. Just don’t forget I have the phone right here.” He patted his pocket. “There’s only one way he doesn’t die, and die ugly.”

IT HAD TAKEN MICHAEL too long to wrap his hand in the bathroom towel, to swallow half the bottle of aspirin. He knew Jazz would be coming back any minute, and when he did, there were going to be some changes.

Now that Tate wasn’t directly in harm’s way, he could do what he’d wanted to when Jazz had grabbed his wrist.

He went back to the bedroom. He could still unlock the door, even with his dominant hand out of commission. But that wasn’t the plan. He needed Jazz to come in here.

Once he’d taken that prick out, he’d move on, but slowly. Each member of the crew had to be taken out before he’d blow the whistle on Martini.

On the one hand, he wanted Jazz to hurry the hell up. On the other, a few more minutes for the aspirin to take affect wouldn’t hurt.

He cursed his luck for the hundredth time. Why had he bailed out Charlie so many times? Why’d he have to promise his father he’d watch out for that loser? And why the hell had he fallen in love with Tate Baxter?

There was no good outcome to this scenario. She didn’t deserve any more anguish, not on his account. Goddamn, he was a fool.

He turned too sharply and pain radiated up his arm. Yeah, some more time for that aspirin would be just great. Was that Jazz? Shit, he had to be ready to do what needed to be done.

TATE SAT AT THE BANK vice president’s desk, waiting for him to draw up the transfer papers. After 9/11, things had changed, even here, and there was a lot more red tape to tamp down on money laundering. If only they knew who Ed Martini really was. But they wouldn’t discover the truth from her.

She’d smiled, answered questions, been attentive, but now she had to remember what Michael had told her. Even though it might be the wrong choice, she had to try. If she could stop Ed now, she could still get to Michael before Jazz had done too much damage.

She began with the breathing. Taking in larger and larger breaths.

“What are you doing?”

“I—”

He pinched her on the back of her arm, and she bit her lip so she wouldn’t yelp.

“Stop it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

He smiled broadly and leaned toward her, bringing his lips close to her ear. “First his right kneecap, then his left.”

She breathed harder, deeper, faster, knowing she would hyperventilate and that would make her pass out. It was her only job, her only shot. To do what she’d done for years—have a panic attack, only this one had to be deliberate and it couldn’t last hours. She had to faint, to be cared for by someone, anyone, except Uncle Ed.

He pinched her again. “Don’t you fuckin’ dare.”

“Please, I can’t help it. It’s the agoraphobia. I have no…no control.”

“You’d better find some, bitch. Or he won’t have one—”

Mr. Granger, the vice president, reentered the room and Ed’s face changed again. He looked up at the man with concern.

“Could you bring my niece a cup of water? She’s not feeling well.”

“Of course. One moment.” He picked up his phone and asked his secretary to bring fresh water. Before he hung up, he asked, “Is there anything else I can do?”

Ed shook his head. “No. She’ll be fine.”

Tate looked at him. Tried to smile. Then everything went black.

**17**

MICHAEL STOOD JUST to the left of the door, waiting. His right hand, immobilized in a towel, was strapped to his back with the aid of two torn pillowcases. It felt weird, but he couldn’t strap the hand in front—it would present too easy a target.

He didn’t think he’d be fighting long. Jazz would come in, Michael would knock the crap out of him using his three remaining limbs and get the gun. The gun would make the rest of his job simpler still.

His only worry at this point was Tate. She was out there by herself. Michael hoped that Ed had ditched his weapon before going to the bank. He doubted very much even an offshore bank would appreciate a customer coming in with a loaded Glock.

But even if he didn’t have a gun to use on Tate, he’d have no trouble getting her to sign the papers. Breaking his hand was the smartest thing Ed could have done. Tate wasn’t used to these kinds of tactics and she had no idea what Michael was capable of.

How could she? He’d been so afraid of getting her hurt that he’d behaved like a civilian this whole trip. He’d been knocked out—twice—caught behind a sofa, tripped up by his brother. She probably thought he’d made up his military training.

He should have kicked ass and worried later. Even with Charlie here, with Tate so vulnerable. He’d never behaved this stupidly before, not on any mission he’d ever had. He’d have been drummed out of the Army for this.

There was a noise outside, a thump, and it brought him right back into the room, into this mission right here. He breathed deeply and evenly, balanced himself to make optimum use of what he had to work with. Jazz was going down. And if it was painful on the way, so much the better.

The lock turned and the door swung open. Michael waited until Jazz walked in, ready for anything. Only, it wasn’t Jazz. It was Charlie. He was crying like a baby, but his gun, silencer and all, was pointed straight at Michael’s chest.

TATE OPENED HER EYES. She didn’t know where she was, who the man standing in front of her was, what was going on, and fear shot through her. She scrambled back, barely realizing she’d been lying on a leather couch, and then she saw Ed.

He made everything worse. Her chest seized, her vision narrowed. And she was pretty sure he wasn’t going to get his money because she’d be dead any second.

“I’ll call the hospital,” the man said, his accent broad and his face terribly worried.

“No, it’s all right,” Ed said. “Just give us a moment. She’s disoriented, that’s all. She had a rough night on the boat.”

The man eyed Ed, then her. “It won’t take them but a moment—”

“No, thank you. We just need a few minutes alone.”

“Very well. I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“I appreciate it,” Ed said, his smile looking so genuine it made Tate’s pulse pound harder.

The moment they were alone, Ed’s demeanor switched to his true self. Malevolent, angry, brutal. He got right into her face, his arms on either side of her. If he’d been a lover, he’d have swooped in for a kiss, but there was nothing but hate in his eyes, in the way he sneered at her. “You have one more chance. You get out there and sign those papers. One more thing goes wrong, and your man is dead. You’ll go back to a corpse, you got that?”

She nodded. “I didn’t do this on purpose. Please don’t hurt him.”

“He’s already hurt. Don’t think I won’t tell Jazz to kill him.”

“I won’t.”

He smiled, stood up. “There, that’s better. I knew you were all right. Let’s go get this paperwork out of the way, then we’ll go relax at the beach. How does that sound?”

“Great,” she said, struggling to make her voice stop shaking and sound normal.

What she couldn’t do was stop the rest of her from shaking. God, how she wanted to, but her body wouldn’t obey. Even when they got back to the office where the papers waited in neat order, she couldn’t hide the way her hand trembled as she picked up the pen.

“If you’d like to wait until you feel better,” the bank executive said, “it’s no problem.”

She looked at Ed, then at the man. “Mr. Granger, I’m sorry. It’s not going to be better later. I’m agoraphobic—do you know what that is?”

“A fear of being in public, yes?”

She nodded. “I know I need to sign these papers in person, but it’s difficult for me. I’m just sorry to trouble you with my problems.”

“There’s no problem at all. In fact, once you’ve signed at the X’s, there’s no reason we can’t do everything else for you and your uncle. We have his information, and I’ll have Joseph give him the new account number right now.” Granger picked up the phone.

While he made the arrangements, she signed each line following a red X. Fifty million dollars would be transferred from her account to Ed’s, and that would be that. Even if he was convicted of all his crimes, she didn’t think the bank could reverse the transfer. It was the Caymans after all, and from their standpoint everything was being done according to the law.

She didn’t give a damn about the money, except that it would hurt her father to realize what had happened. He would have given the bastard the fifty million from his own funds given the choice.

As she signed her name for the last time, it was very clear to her that she was signing her death warrant. Michael was hurt. He wasn’t going to be able to carry out his part of the plan, and she’d botched her part…What was left but for both of them to die?

All she could hope for at this stage was to stop Michael’s pain. If she simply went along with everything Ed said, there was a chance they would be merciful. What a thing to wish for.

“CHRIST, MIKEY, I DON’T want to do this. You know that. You’re my brother, for God’s sake.”

“Then put the gun down.”

“I can’t.” Charlie wiped his nose with the side of his arm. “He’ll kill me.”

“He” was Jazz, standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest, his big teeth shining as he smiled like a child on Christmas morning.

“He’ll kill you anyway, you idiot.”

“No, no. You don’t understand. I brought them this deal. I’m just clearing my debt.”

“You know too much, Charlie. They can’t let you walk away. What if you decide to blackmail them later?”

“Are you crazy? It’s Ed Martini. No one double-crosses Martini.”

Michael took one step toward his brother. “That’s ’cause no one lives long enough. There’s no way you’re getting off this boat, Charlie. Not onto dry land.”

“Shut up. You think you know so much. You didn’t even know I could get into your safe, huh? You didn’t know I watched you that night when I was sick. You thought I was sleeping, but I wasn’t. I was behind the door and I watched you type in the numbers.”

“That was pretty slick, there, Charlie. You sure had me fooled.”

“Yeah, I know. You think I’m an idiot, but I’m not. I thought of this whole plan all by myself.”

“Dad would be so proud.”

Charlie lifted the gun and waved it at Michael’s face. “You don’t talk about him. He trusted you. You were supposed to take care of me—and look what you did. You’re the reason I got to pull this trigger. It’s not my fault.”

Michael felt so incredibly tired and he hurt so goddamn much that he almost wanted Charlie to pull the trigger. Only there was someone much more important he had to think about. Besides, he didn’t want to give Jazz the satisfaction. “Charlie, put down the gun. I’ll get you out of this. Alive.”

Jazz laughed, but Charlie didn’t see the humor. “You fucking liar. You just want to be with your rich girlfriend. Well, screw you!”

“It’s not about her, Charlie. It’s about Dad. About the promise I made him. I don’t want to hurt you. And I don’t want them to hurt you.”

“I’m the one with the gun.”

“You are, but Charlie,” he said, his voice growing calm and quiet, “you’ve never been very good in this kind of situation.”

“See? There you go again.” He stepped closer and pushed the barrel of the gun into Michael’s chest. “I am not an idiot!” he screamed, sending spittle and fear into Michael’s face.

“Oh, Charlie,” Michael whispered. “I don’t know why it had to be so hard for you.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, buddy.”

“It’s too late now.”

“I know, but I’m sorry anyway.”

Charlie looked down at the gun, and Michael spun half a step back, then knocked Charlie’s feet from underneath him. He grabbed the gun, turning it sideways, and as Charlie fell, Michael put a bullet right into Jazz’s chest.

Charlie looked up at him with shock and hurt in his eyes. Michael pointed the weapon at his brother. “I’m sorry,” he said again, but this time it was to his father. He fired once more.

“I’M SORRY, MS. BAXTER, there’s one more thing we need to complete before we can let you go.”

“That’s okay,” she said, trying not to panic. She looked at Ed and willed him to understand this wasn’t her fault.

“What’s the hang-up?” he asked.

“In order to transfer this amount of money, Ms. Baxter and you need to fill out statements that will go on record here. As a cooperating member of the international community, we have to have a signed statement that the money will not be used in money-laundering schemes or for any purpose that could be construed as terrorism or supporting known terrorists.”

“Sure,” Ed said. “We’ll sign whatever you like.”

“Excellent.” He put the papers down in front of them, but Tate noticed there was a slight bulge under hers, toward the bottom. She looked up to find Mr. Granger staring at her. He glanced pointedly at the paper.

She moved the top sheet aside and saw a note in faint script. Are you in trouble?

She wanted so badly to say yes. She looked at him again, smiled as earnestly as she knew how and shook her head.

He nodded. She signed. It was over. At least this part. She still had to make it back to the boat. To find Michael, to help him, no matter what condition he was in. Just thinking about his hands made her sick. What was she going to do if they’d done worse?

AT THE LAST SECOND he moved the gun. The bullet hit inches from Charlie’s head.

Michael couldn’t stop to figure out why he’d done it. He just had to make sure Charlie didn’t call out to Danny or the other one. He dropped to his knees right next to his brother and pulled back his left arm. When Charlie hoisted himself up into the right position, Michael hit him in the temple.

Charlie went down hard. It probably was a good thing Michael’s right hand was out of commission. There had been no kidding around with that punch. It was meant to silence. Sometimes it happened that the silence went on forever. He didn’t think Charlie was dead and he wasn’t going to check. Not right now.

He rose once more and looked at Charlie’s gun. It was a Sig Sauer P-226, a gun Michael particularly liked. He had to use his teeth to check the magazine, which was full. He locked the mag back in the gun.

Jazz had fallen in the doorway, and by the time Michael got to him, he must have bled out—if the shot hadn’t killed him on impact. Michael had wanted to do him slowly, to make him suffer, but he’d take what he could get. He stepped over the scumbag and went on the prowl.

He wasn’t sure how long Ed would keep Tate in the bank, but he wanted everything completed when they returned. Maybe he could take his time with Ed. It would be good to let him know what happened to men who messed with Michael Caulfield’s lady. On the other hand, Tate didn’t need to have any more trauma in her life. Especially not from him.

No one was in the saloon. But there was someone in the wheelhouse. He was on the radio, and Michael figured he’d better get to him double time. It was the cabin boy, the kid Charlie had lied about. Michael got all the way across the saloon before he turned. The dude had a muscleman’s build and a bullfrog’s face. He seemed damned surprised to find Michael pointing a gun his way and made a foolish attempt to retrieve his own weapon from his underarm holster.

He fell across the seat, then tumbled to the deck. Michael picked up bullfrog’s Walther PPK, but he preferred the Sig. He pulled the magazine out of the Walther and tossed it behind the saloon couch. The gun went into a fake potted plant.

Once he had the Sig in his hand again Michael went looking for Danny. The boat was anchored far from any neighboring vessels. There were people out there, but none of them would have heard the silenced gunshots. He doubted they would hear anything more than innocuous pops if he took a dozen shots off the port bow. It didn’t matter. No one was coming to the rescue. It was all on him.

He headed down below. To his right was the galley, and he knew someone was inside from the whistling. “Alouette.” He doubted it was Danny. Probably the cook, which sounded innocent enough until you thought about who he cooked for. No one on this boat was without a weapon—that much Michael knew. The cook, despite his ability to make a very excellent salmon steak, wasn’t gonna make it.

With his right hand throbbing at nearly his pain threshold, Michael was more than ready to have this over and done with. If it was Danny in the galley, so much the better. If not, he couldn’t be far.

Michael inched his way along the teak floor, the incredible interior of the boat showing just how much a bookie like Ed earned for himself. Of course now, with the fifty million in his pocket, he’d probably consider this a toy boat. Something convenient to take him out to his real yacht.

He stopped thinking about Ed. He was all about the whistler in the galley. Whatever the guy was making, there was some chopping involved. That’s all that sound could be. So that meant a knife. Not a problem.

Moving as quietly as he could while keeping his balance, Michael made it halfway to the galley. He had to forget about his right hand, about that arm. If he gave it any attention, his instinct would be to pull it from the safety of his back. It was best to concentrate on the gun in his left hand. He listened carefully to the chopping and the whistling, figuring the size of the galley and where his shot should go. There was no room for error, so the second shot had to be close to the first but lower. Get him in the chest, then in the gut. That would take him down without giving him a chance to shoot back.

After a cleansing breath, he got close, a step away. He turned, aimed, adjusted two inches and pulled the trigger. The first bullet threw the cook forward, over his chopped vegetables. The second severed his spinal cord. At least that’s what it looked like from the way the man fell.

Michael turned to move deeper into the boat. There should only be one man left on board, not counting Charlie.

Ed was gonna be so pissed.

Michael whistled “Alouette” as he continued the hunt.

THEY WERE OUTSIDE once more, in the bright island sunshine. There were so many people on the streets, mostly tourists with gifts in big bags and flip-flops on their feet. There were more cars now, too. And she wondered how many accidents there were here just because the American tourists had to drive on the left.

Ed had his hand locked on her upper arm, but he seemed a lot happier now that he was so much richer. She felt certain that all he wanted was to get back to the boat, wait till nightfall and make sure there was no one left to tell the tale.

He walked her across the street, making her wait for the light. Then they went toward the beach and the water taxis.

“There’s no reason to kill us,” she said. “Now that you have the money, there’s no way for us to get it back.”

“Shut up.”

“Just let us go. We’ll disappear. You won’t hear from us again.”

“I said shut up.”

She did, but with every step her worry grew, and she kept picturing horror after horror of what she’d find on the boat. It was making it hard to see, hard to breathe, but she didn’t want to worry Michael by showing up in a full-blown panic attack.

“Come on,” Ed said, squeezing her arm.

“You’re hurting me.”

“Just get your ass in gear. I want to get back to the boat. We’re celebrating tonight at the Ritz. Figure I’m gonna buy myself one hell of an expensive bottle of champagne.” He tugged her again, practically pulling her shoulder out of its socket.

She stopped and tore her arm free, suddenly so filled with rage she forgot all about her constricted breath and pounding heartbeat.

He was celebrating at the Ritz? Over his dead body.

**18**

“I DON’T CARE WHAT evidence you have or don’t have. I know Michael Caulfield is behind this.”

Sara bit her lower lip, trying hard not to react. Mr. Baxter needed to have his say. She turned to Special AgentWebber and he gave her a small nod. They’d talked a lot yesterday, after she’d cried her millionth tear.

She’d recognized Tate’s purse instantly. That the wallet was still inside shut down the last of her hope. It didn’t matter that the money was gone. Tate wouldn’t have left that wallet. It had been a gift. From Sara.

She’d debated long and hard about telling William about the purse, but in the end she’d decided he had to know. There was no choice.

He’d disappeared into the guest room, then emerged this morning more angry than sad. He’d called the meeting they were having now. Who knows? His righteous anger just might pull him through.

“Sir, we’re doing everything we can to find both your daughter and Mr. Caulfield. We know his motorcycle is missing, but from the state of his apartment it doesn’t appear he planned a trip. There were no suitcases missing, all his clothing was in the drawers and closets. Frankly we’re much more interested in Jerry Brody than Caulfield.”

“I’m interested in Caulfield. He was in military intelligence. I doubt very much he intended anyone to think he’d planned this. I didn’t hire him because he was a fool.”

“I understand, sir. Rest assured, we’re leaving no stone unturned. We’re currently investigating his brother, where there might be some connection.”

“His brother.”

“Charles. He has a criminal record. Theft, racketeering, drugs.”

William stood so quickly he had to grab the edge of his chair to gain his balance. “I knew it. That’s why they needed the five million—drug money.”

“Mr. Baxter,” Sara said, concerned now that he was working himself into such a lather. “I know it seems to make sense that Michael was in on this, but—”

“Enough,” he said.

He’d never raised his voice at her before, and she didn’t much care for it now. But the man was given a pass, at least for today.

“I know what I know.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Baxter?”

Sara, as well as the men in the room, all turned as one to see three of the security team standing by the side wall. They all looked uncomfortable, as if they had thrown a baseball through a stained-glass window.

“Who are you?” Baxter asked.

The tallest one stepped forward. “I’m George Bryan. I work surveillance.”

“I’m E. J. Packer, sir.” Sara recognized him from the scars on his face. “I’m ex-Army intelligence and I run night security.”

They both turned to the only blond, a slender man with horn-rimmed glasses. “I’m also ex-Army intelligence, sir. Name’s McPherson. Bill McPherson.”

“What is it?”

“I served with Mike Caulfield for two years. He is not your man.”

“What?” William looked from the men to Sara, as if she’d been behind this mutiny.

“I also served with Mike Caulfield.” This from George Bryan. “I can’t see it, Mr. Baxter. If he’s involved, it’s because he’s trying to save her. I’ve never worked for a more honorable man.”

“I agree, Mr. Baxter.” E.J. nodded toward Sara. “Ma’am. For my money, looking at Caulfield is looking in the wrong direction.”

“Get out of here, all of you,” Baxter said, his face red with rage. “You work for him. Of course you’re going to say he’s innocent.”

The three men, all with their military stance and utmost respect, took his fury like good soldiers. And when they were summarily fired, they didn’t seem surprised.

But when Sara looked back at the FBI agent, it was clear attention had been paid.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Tate said so loudly the tourists in back of Ed stopped talking to stare. “You murdering bastard. You’re planning on killing us before you have your champagne?”

He laughed as he looked around nervously. With his left hand he pulled out his cell phone. “I’m warning you,” he said, his teeth clamped together as he smiled.

“You’re warning me…what? That you’re going to hurt Michael? You’re planning to kill us. What could hurt worse than that?”

“Stop it,” he said. “These people are going to think you’re serious.”

She was serious. So serious that she didn’t even stop to think, she just turned in front of him, grabbed his arms and kneed Ed Martini right between the legs.

He howled so loudly everyone on the street stopped, and when he fell to the ground, clutching his crotch, more and more people approached. But Tate wasn’t done yet.

She circled around to his back. His piteous cries had the crowd murmuring, but she didn’t care. She lifted his Hawaiian shirt above his waist and plucked the gun away.

Several members of the crowd backed up. Despite the hysteria she felt just under the surface, the gun in Tate’s hands didn’t shake at all. She moved around in front of the man and kept the barrel pointed at his head. “Someone call the cops.”

She didn’t hear any movement. “Someone,” she said again, only a whole lot louder, “call the cops.”

There were footsteps to her right and in back of her. Horns honked in the road, and she assumed the crowd had gotten so large that they were blocking the street. Hell, they probably didn’t see a sight like this every day.

Ed Martini writhed on the sidewalk, holding himself like a child who has to pee. Martini, who hadn’t blinked when Michael’s wrist had been broken, who thought nothing of killing two innocent people, then drinking champagne. The pig deserved to die himself, but maybe it would be worse for him if he had to go to prison here. She didn’t think the Caymans had extradition laws, but that didn’t matter either. He wasn’t going to kill Michael. Not now.

“Hey, hey. Put the gun down, miss.”

She looked up to see two police officers standing on the road. “He’s a kidnapper and a thief and a murderer, and I have proof of all of it.”

“Put the gun down and we’ll talk.”

She didn’t want to. She wanted to pull the trigger. But she didn’t. She just bent, put the gun on the ground and backed away.

The cops, in their crisp khakis and black hats, split up, with one man shooing the bystanders away and the other coming toward her. Two steps in, Ed lunged forward and grabbed the gun.

She leaped back, cursing herself for not kicking the weapon as far as she could.

Ed got to his knees, then to his feet, the gun in his right hand pointing at her chest. His face was a red mess, with tears and more dripping from his nose and chin. He didn’t look so smooth now. What he did look like was a man who didn’t care about consequences. Not when he clearly wanted to kill her so damn badly.

“Sir, put the gun down. Sir…”

Ed didn’t even glance at the cop. He just snarled at Tate. “You bitch. You’re gonna pay—”

“I’ve already paid. Isn’t fifty-five million enough? Isn’t kidnapping and assault enough? You broke his wrists! All he was trying to do was protect me, and you’ve crippled him.”

“He’s long past caring,” he said, lifting the gun. “And in one second you’re going to be, too.”

Tate closed her eyes, prepared for the impact of a bullet to send her crashing into the crowd. But it didn’t come. She heard a scuffle, then a thunk, and she opened her eyes to see the two sturdy police officers on top of Ed, their knees planted on his back as they twisted his hands around for cuffs.

Tears filled her eyes and she laughed and wept as she realized it was over, that Ed was really in custody. And then it hit her, what he’d said about Michael.

Her legs didn’t want to hold her up as she let the truth in. Michael was dead. They hadn’t broken his other wrist, they’d shot him. Of course they had. Why bother to keep him around? She’d proved she would do anything for him, so all they’d needed was her own belief that she could save him.

Michael was dead.

LEAVING THE COOK IN the galley, Michael went back down the narrow corridor toward the master suite and the other berth. Danny, unless he’d taken Ed and Tate to the island, had to be there somewhere. Probably prepared, as the cook’s death hadn’t been all that quiet.

There was a head just before the smaller berth, and Michael slowed as he neared it. His arm and shoulder throbbed to the beat of his heart as he silently made his approach.

Gun at the ready, he kicked the door in, but no one was there. The room was too small to hide in, which meant Danny had to be in one of the bedrooms. If he was on board at all.

The berth, with a couple of beds and very little else, did have space to hide. Although a man Danny’s size would have trouble.

If the roles had been reversed, Michael would have gotten behind the door, listening carefully for footsteps. He wouldn’t wait for his assailant to show up, he’d shoot through the door.

With that in mind, Michael decided to lure Danny out. He still had a lot of ammo in the mag, so he got close, aimed his weapon at the master suite door and fired.

Despite the name, silencers never really silenced a gun. They helped, but for anyone below deck, the gunshot would have been heard. Just in case Danny had headphones on, Michael put the gun under his right armpit—which hurt like a bitch—unscrewed the silencer, then retrieved the weapon. Two more shots, and this time someone would have to be dead to miss the sound.

Michael crouched in the head doorway, waiting. It was tough to be patient. His mind went one of two places—Tate or pain. He had to keep bringing himself back to his target.

Three minutes went by and Michael saw the door to the master suite move.

Danny had ducked—at least that’s what it looked like from the position of his gun. It didn’t matter. He could have crawled out on his belly. For all his size and weight, there was nothing the man could have done to save his own life.

Michael put three shots into the door. Danny fell like a massive tree, his head cracking loudly on the teak floor.

Michael backed up until he could sit on the edge of the john. His whole body throbbed with pain, mitigated slightly by relief. Even that only lasted a minute. Tate was still out there. And Charlie.

He hadn’t heard a thing from upstairs, but that didn’t mean Charlie hadn’t recovered. At least his brother didn’t have a gun. He’d probably end up shooting himself if he had.

Michael stood, momentarily dizzy. Then, after a few deep breaths, he headed back to the saloon. The smell of death followed him, tainting the scent of the ocean. He felt pretty sure that the coppery taste at the back of his mouth would remind him of tropical islands for some time to come.

The saloon itself was in good shape. Michael’s gaze went right to the big leather chair. The government would be selling off the boat once Ed was in prison, and it felt damn good to know the bastard would never sit in that chair again.

Michael needed Tate to get back. Looking toward the beach, he didn’t see any water taxis—but then, they were pretty far offshore.

Shit, he couldn’t put it off any longer. He turned to the small room that had been their prison for ten days. Jazz’s body was still in the doorway, and beyond him, Charlie.

IT HAD TAKEN TOO LONG for the police to get their act together once the street cops had taken her to the station. She’d had to scream to get the right person’s attention, but once Chief Eccles understood what was at stake, he made things happen.

In fact, she had to fill in the details as they sped to a police boat. It was long and sleek and, according to the chief, faster than the speed of criminals.

He brought along six men, heavily armed, in what she assumed to be the British colonial equivalent of a SWAT team. As they flew over the water toward the Pretty Kitty, all Tate could do was pray. If only he could still be alive, she’d give more money to charity. She’d work in a soup kitchen. She’d trade years off her own life. Anything. Just not what Ed had said. Not that.

She stood up, too insane to be still, next to the captain. Wind and sea mist sprayed her face, ruining the makeup she’d so carefully applied this morning. Well, that and her tears.

CHARLIE HADN’T MOVED at all, and as Michael knelt next to him, his chest constricted with a stab of guilt and regret. He put his fingers to Charlie’s throat, searching for a pulse. He thought maybe…but that could be his own heartbeat.

He bent down, putting his ear right over Charlie’s heart. There, damn it. He wasn’t dead. He wasn’t in great shape, but he wasn’t dead.

Relief made his eyes water as he sat back up. Now it was just a matter of time before Tate and Ed came back. Before Michael could finish taking the trash out.

He put his left hand down to steady himself as he rose.

The blow to the back of his head pitched him forward again, and for a second he thought Ed had returned to surprise him. But when he looked up, it wasn’t Ed but the not-so-dead, very pissed off Jazz.

THERE IT WAS IN THE distance, the Pretty Kitty. She’d been brought aboard unconscious and she’d been taken under duress, so this was the first time Tate had really seen the boat. It was gorgeous. Sleek like a cheetah, it was an exceptional yacht in a harbor full of yachts. No wonder they’d gotten to the Caymans so quickly.

The beauty of the vessel paled as the thought occurred again, as fresh as the first time, that it was Michael’s coffin. She chased the image away as quickly as it had come, but there was no more admiration for the boat.

She held on to the dash, willing this boat to hurry. To take her to the man she loved. To find him alive. Nothing else mattered. Nothing.

JAZZ STOOD UNSTEADILY on his widespread legs. His shirt—Hawaiian, like Ed’s—was matted with blood. Blood that dripped down his fingers into the pale plush carpet.

He glowered at Michael with malevolent red eyes. “You’re gonna die,” he said. “You are gonna die slow.”

Michael reached for his weapon, stuck into the folds of his pillowcase brace, but Jazz beat him to the punch with his own second gun at the small of his back. The Derringer was small, but it would kill just fine.

“Drop it,” Jazz said.

“Like hell. It’s over, Jazz. You’re the only one left alive.”

“Ed’s still alive.”

“He won’t be—”

Charlie moaned. Of all the rotten timing…He moaned again and moved his head.

Jazz sneered and moved his gun so it pointed at Charlie. “You still think you can stop me?”

Michael smiled as he got to his feet. “With one hand tied behind my back, asshole.”

Jazz took a step back, a hell of a lot more shaken than he’d been a minute ago. “Stop there or I kill him.”

“Go ahead,” Michael said. “You pull that trigger, it’s the last thing you ever do.”

“Fuck you, man.” He jerked the gun up to shoot, but Michael was quicker. He dived over Charlie, knocking Jazz off his feet. Jazz lost his gun, but he still had his hands and he hit Michael, hard, in the right shoulder. The pain nearly knocked him out, but not quite.

The second blow hit his bad shoulder again. Michael had to get his left hand moving. He had to get his gun up, aimed at Jazz—and this time there could be no mistakes.

He could feel Jazz’s knee come up against his stomach, his fist come down on his shoulder, then his other fist into his head. It was the most inelegant fight Michael had ever seen, but it was working. In another minute Jazz would be out from under him, and once that happened, adrenaline alone would carry him through.

With all the energy he had left in his body Michael pulled his left arm up, raised it above his head, stuck the barrel in Jazz’s gut.

He almost lost it as Jazz bellowed and struck him fiercely in the head, in the shoulder, in the stomach. But Jazz didn’t hit him in the left hand.

Michael pulled the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot filled his head as blood splattered his body.

He tried to move, to get off the dead man, but all his strength had gone with that last bullet.

He felt the dark close in on him. And he felt grateful.

“YOU HAVE TO STAY HERE.”

“I can’t.”

Chief Eccles shook his head, even as he braced himself as the grappling hooks pulled the police boat up against the Pretty Kitty. “We don’t have any idea who’s up there and how many weapons are on board. You could be killed.”

“I don’t care. If Michael is alive, he’ll need me.”

“The ambulance boat will be here in a moment.”

“Please,” she begged. “I have to—”

“I know you want to see him. But I can’t let you on board. I promise I’ll let you see him as soon as it’s safe.”

She couldn’t argue anymore. They were in position and ready to board. Numbly she watched as the men in their heavy armor climbed up into the yacht, quickly disappearing into the saloon.

She’d given the chief Michael’s description, afraid that they’d think he was one of Ed’s men. Even so, the thought scared her. Maybe scared was better than knowing. She could deal with scared.

The minutes ticked by. She heard no gunfire. There were shouts, but she couldn’t understand the words. The ambulance boat pulled up, and as quickly as they could the EMTs climbed into the yacht, carrying heavy bags and a portable gurney.

If they could go aboard, that must mean that the coast was clear, right? What kind of chief would let his EMTs walk into a gun battle?

There was only one cop left on the police boat. His job was probably to keep her from disembarking, but at the moment he was busy on the radio, his gaze on the ambulance boat.

That was all the permission she needed. With strength she didn’t know she had, she jumped over to the ladder leading up to the Pretty Kitty’s saloon. She made it onto the yacht just as the cop assigned to watch her shouted out. But he was too late—she was going to find Michael no matter what.

There was a huddle of men just at the door to their room. EMTs crouched beside someone, but she couldn’t see who.

She took one step, then another, dread and hope battling it out in her head. When she saw them lift Michael’s body onto the gurney, her heart shattered.

She was too late. Ed had told her the truth. Michael—her lover, her hero, her friend—was dead.

They came toward her, one EMT pushing the gurney and Michael. Her horrified gaze took in all the blood, all the bruises on Michael’s face. God, they’d tortured him. Tortured him, then killed him in cold blood.

“Miss?”

She looked up into the dark man’s face.

“Why don’t you come with us? I’m sure he’ll feel better seeing you first thing when he wakes up.”

Tate blinked. “What?”

“I said why don’t you come with us?”

“No—that last part. You said when he wakes up?”

The EMT nodded. “He’s gonna be sore as heck, but he’ll be fine.”

The words took their own sweet time sinking in. And when they did, when she finally got that she hadn’t lost him after all, Tate fainted dead away.

**19**

THE PHONE RANG AT eight-forty, stopping Sara just as she was about to leave Tate’s place. The day had been so horrible, starting with that dreadful meeting first thing, that she’d made an appointment to get a deep-tissue massage to work out some of her stress.

She turned, going toward the nearest phone, but William beat her to it. She smiled at him, then went back to the door. When he gasped, she stopped.

“My God, my God, it’s really you!”

Sara’s heart slammed into overdrive as she hurried back to the phone. She dropped her tote and held on to the living room wall as the truth sunk in. Even if there had been no words spoken, she would have known it was Tate by looking at William. He was pale as a ghost, far too thin and haggard, but the joy in his eyes was like a rebirth.

“Where?”

Sara wanted desperately to hear Tate’s voice. She knew it was real, but she still needed more.

“I’ll be there by morning. You don’t worry about a thing. I’ll come get you and we’ll straighten everything out.”

Sara watched as fat tears slid down the old man’s cheeks. Her own tears started then, and her chest got tight with a mixture of emotions too big to hold in.

“Yes, she’s here. She’s been here the whole time. She’ll come with me.”

Sara nodded happily, wondering a million things at once.

William’s face changed and so did his posture. “We’ll talk about him when I get there.”

Michael. It had to be. Oh, thank God. He must be alive, too, and they’d been together. Finally the whole story would come out. Jerry Brody, the main suspect, had sworn the kidnapping had nothing to do with him, but now everyone would find out for sure.

She didn’t care. Tate was alive. For the first time in ten days Sara could breathe.

When Mr. Baxter hung up, he grabbed her in a hug that would leave bruises tomorrow. It was perfect.

“YOU’RE UP.”

Michael turned at the sound of Tate’s voice to find her sitting beside his bed. His hospital bed. “How’d I get here?”

“The cavalry showed up. Too late to be of much help to you, however.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re here.”

She smiled, wishing now that she’d had a few more moments with a hairbrush and some makeup. She’d done little but cry since she’d been roused on the ambulance boat. Michael had still not gained consciousness at the time, and as she’d waved away the concerned medics, she’d asked them a hundred questions—all of them nonsense, really, because Michael was alive.

She’d ridden with him to the hospital, and while he’d had his wrist worked on she’d called her father. It had been so good to speak to him, to know that Sara was there and that she’d taken care of him. They would all be together in the morning, which was wonderful, but right now she needed to be with Michael. To make sure he was all right and that he wasn’t going to disappear.

“How long have I been out of it?”

“It’s ten. At night, just so we’re clear.”

He looked at his bandaged hand. “Is this all the damage?”

“To you, yes.”

“They found all the bodies?”

She nodded. “There’s going to be an inquest, but don’t worry. You’ll be cleared in a moment. Ed’s in jail and he’s not ever getting out.”

“Charlie?”

“He’ll live. He’s here in the hospital. He has a concussion, that’s all. But I’m afraid he won’t be getting off so easily.”

Michael looked away. “I’m glad he didn’t die.”

She scooted her chair closer to the bed and touched his arm. “I called my father. He and Sara are flying in first thing in the morning.”

“Good. Great.”

“You’ll be released by then. But I’m afraid you’ll be in police custody until the inquest. I was assured there would be no delay. When my father gets here—”

“I’ll hand in my resignation.”

“I was going to say he’ll make sure you’ll have everything you need. I’ve gotten us a room at the Ritz, so as soon as you’re free—”

“Tate…I appreciate all of this. I do. But let’s slow down a little. There’s a lot to deal with, and my head’s still too fuzzy to understand it all.”

“Of course,” she said, embarrassed at her own presumption. “I’ll call the nurse.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m probably going to be knocked out till morning. I’ll sleep better knowing you’re getting some rest.”

“I’m fine. That chair is really comfortable.”

He shook his head. “Go to the hotel,” he said too quietly. “Get a good night’s sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

His tone was gentle and concerned, but his message burned in her chest. He wanted her gone. What she didn’t know was if he meant for tonight or forever.

Frankly she wasn’t in any shape to ask the question. Better to leave it unanswered than to know for sure. “Okay. I’ll send the nurse.”

Michael nodded. His gorgeous face looked even more rugged with the dark bruises and his five-o’clock shadow. She hated that he’d been so badly hurt, but her prayers had been answered. He was alive. It shouldn’t matter that he was sending her away. It shouldn’t—but it did.

She stood, put the chair back, then headed for the door.

“Tate?”

She stopped.

“No kiss goodbye?”

She smiled as she went back to him. She bent over him and brushed her lips over his. He touched her arm with his left hand as he kissed her back.

When she pulled away, the look in his eyes told her everything. When he’d asked for a kiss goodbye, he’d meant it.

THE JET TOUCHED DOWN at seven-eighteen Caymans time. Tate had gotten to the airport forty minutes earlier and had too many cups of coffee as she’d waited.

The good night’s sleep she’d promised Michael hadn’t materialized. She’d lain awake in her very posh suite, thinking. The fact that she’d still felt as if she was rocking on the water didn’t help, either, but mostly she’d just thought.

She’d wanted a kidnapping to change her life and she’d gotten what she’d asked for. She hadn’t bargained on the close calls with death. But then, she hadn’t bargained on Michael, either.

Bottom line, however, was that she would never be the same.

She’d faced off with Ed, and despite his gun and his cell phone, she’d come out the victor. She’d kicked her kidnapper’s ass. That wasn’t opinion, it was fact.

Would she ever have another panic attack? Yeah, probably. There had been that whole passing-out business when she’d found out Michael was alive. But the good news was she wasn’t going to stop living. She wasn’t going to hole herself up in her luxurious prison of a penthouse. She was a free woman. Forever more, if she did have a panic attack, she could think of the satisfying crunch of Ed’s testicles against her kneecap. That would surely get her through.

The bigger question was what she was going to do about Michael.

There was no doubt in her mind that she loved him. That she wanted to be with him, and not just for a fling. But she also wasn’t naive enough to think that scenario wasn’t rife with problems. There was her father to deal with. And the money thing. Then there was his guilt about his brother. None of those issues was going to be worked out with a nice chat.

She was, however, not willing to let him go just because she wasn’t sure about how things would work. They’d just have to take it one step at a time.

Assuming, of course, he was willing to try.

The glass door between the tarmac and the terminal slid open, and there was her father.

She ran to him and gave him a hug he’d never forget. Fresh tears came from that never-ending supply, but these were joyous, so maybe they didn’t count.

He petted her head as he rocked her back and forth. She felt like a little girl again, safe in her daddy’s arms.

Finally she pulled back, kissed him on the cheek, then jumped into another fierce round of hugs with Sara.

It took a while, but they all finally finished crying and hugging and went off to the hotel.

She talked the entire way, and after they’d checked in, she continued the tale in her father’s suite. She emphasized that Michael had saved her life many times over, but her father could be the most stubborn man.

“Don’t get me wrong—I’m grateful he saved your life. But if it wasn’t for him, you wouldn’t have been in that position in the first place.”

“Stop,” she said. “I know you want someone to blame, so here’s a really good solution. Blame Ed Martini. He’s the one who kidnapped me, who threatened me. He was going to kill me that first night, after he got the ransom. Then he was going to kill me as soon as he got the big money. He tried to kill me in the middle of the street in George Town. That’s who you can blame. And when you’re done with that, you can go to Michael Caulfield and you can thank him for your daughter’s life.”

Her father looked at her for a long time, and while a stranger would have thought he was completely unmoved by her speech, she knew he had listened. More importantly, he’d heard.

“You care about him,” Sara said.

She looked at her oldest friend. “I do.”

“Is he really going to resign?”

“I believe he is.”

“And?”

Tate sighed. There was no time like the present to let her father know exactly where she stood. “I don’t know. I need to make some phone calls. Michael needs an attorney and I want to make sure the inquest is in motion.”

She kissed her father on the cheek, did the same to Sara, then went for the door. “Get unpacked,” she said, standing in the doorway. “I’m in 2720. I’d appreciate any help you two want to give me.”

With that, she left the suite. On the one hand, she’d said what she needed to and felt stronger than ever. On the other hand, she was scared beyond words that Michael would disappear before she had a chance to figure out what to do.

MICHAEL SAT IN THE beach chair, staring out at the ocean as the sun rose in splendor. This was the fifth morning in a row he’d come out for the sunrise, coffee in hand—left hand—the day stretching achingly ahead of him.

He’d found this little bungalow a week ago, after all the legal maneuverings had ended and he was once again a free man. After he’d said goodbye to Tate.

Charlie was in prison, and Michael doubted he’d ever be released. It was hard justice, but there was nothing Michael could do to mitigate the circumstances. Charlie had made his bed. Michael supposed he’d feel guilty about it for the rest of his life—but then, that was his bed. His very lonely bed.

His hand was healing and his bruises were all but gone, but he couldn’t stop thinking about Tate. She’d sounded completely convincing when she’d asked him to come back. To try and live a life with her. But he knew the score. Despite his thanks, he knew William blamed him. Hell, he still blamed himself. As for a life with Tate? She was just starting to live. She deserved the world, not him. God, not him.

Sara had come in to double-team him. But at least she’d understood when Michael had explained. Tate still would have none of it.

After many tears and a lot of heartache for both of them, she’d gotten on her father’s private plane and gone back to New York.

So here he was, sitting on a beach, sipping coffee, unsure what he was going to do with the day, not to mention the rest of his life. Missing Tate Baxter more than he’d ever imagined. More than he could take.

TATE STARED AT THE foolish trompe l’oeil window in her bedroom. It symbolized so much. Her pretense of a life. Her false dreams of adventure and romance. Every precious moment she’d wasted in her fear.

She owed Dr. Bay an apology. In retrospect, the kidnapping had been a good idea—the fake kind, at least. Tate truly was a different woman now. Yes, she still suffered from nightmares and she wasn’t going to give up on therapy anytime soon, but she no longer wanted to hide herself away. Life beckoned in the most alluring ways. Unfortunately her new dreams all centered around a man who didn’t want her.

It occurred to her that she might not be thinking in the most rational terms. The experiences on the boat had been traumatic and profound. Perhaps, as her father had suggested, she’d gone through some sort or variation of Stockholm syndrome, where her beliefs about Michael were totally out of proportion to actual events.

But after a month back home of intensive journaling and visits to her new therapist, she didn’t think so.

She missed him. So badly it ached, and not in a metaphorical sense. She yearned to be with him, to hear his voice, smell his scent. She couldn’t stand that he was alone, that his hand wouldn’t heal for a while yet, that he had to deal with the consequences of his brother’s sentence. All alone. He’d put his own life at risk so many times for her. But it wasn’t just gratitude or guilt that made her want him.

She’d become someone new with him. She’d seen herself through his eyes, and for the first time in her life she’d liked what she’d seen.

Michael believed in her. He’d convinced her of her own strength over and over again.

And, she had to admit, she missed making love to him. There was no doubt in her mind that the two of them were meant to be together.

Unfortunately there was a giant roadblock between them, and it wasn’t the fact that he blamed himself for the kidnapping. It was the money.

“Knock-knock.”

Tate turned to find Sara at the bedroom door. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Right back at ya,” Sara said. She was in her workout gear, looking radiant, and she sat on the bed with a plop. “Come with me?”

“I will,” Tate said. “But not today.”

“You said that yesterday. I know you’ll like my trainer. He’s got the best ass in the five boroughs. Seriously. It’s worth all the pain just to watch him bend over.”

Tate grinned. “I missed you.”

“I’m glad. It would have hurt my feelings if you hadn’t.”

“You’re my sister, kiddo. So when I ask you something, I trust you’re going to be honest, right?”

Sara crossed her heart.

“I can’t let go of Michael. I miss him too much. I love him.”

Sara’s smile faded as she nodded. “I figured.”

“I want to go to him. Do whatever it takes to make him see that we can be together. Except…there’s the whole money problem.”

Sara’s head went down for a long time. Tate thought of calling the kitchen for tea, but she didn’t want to disturb Sara’s thought process.

Finally her friend looked up. “It’s a big problem, and I don’t know Michael well enough to predict if he can get past it. But something that might help is the reward.”

“What reward?”

“Your father offered a million dollars to anyone who was instrumental in finding you. Michael was instrumental, all right.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“Yeah,” Sara said. “Go figure.”

“Surely he’d have to agree that Michael deserves the reward.”

Sara laughed. “Your father? Come on, Tate. He’s going to blame Michael for a long time.”

“But Michael deserves—oh.”

“Exactly.”

Tate grinned. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Only if you don’t try. Tate, you haven’t taken a risk in so long. I think taking this one will make up for it. The worst that’s going to happen is he’ll break your heart. And since your heart is already broken, it can’t be that much worse.”

Tate felt her pulse race and her heart pound. Sara was right. It would be scary to go to him—but then, she had faced scary. And she’d kicked scary’s ass.

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER sunrise, and Michael wasn’t getting better. His hand was healing, but missing Tate continued to get worse.

He didn’t understand. Yes, he was depressed. He got that. He’d made some big mistakes and there had been consequences. That wasn’t what was making him nuts.

That had everything to do with Tate. Not Charlie, not the kidnapping, not the killings. Tate haunted his dreams, haunted his waking hours. He kept thinking about how she’d been so brave, how she’d fought so hard. He remembered, too vividly, the way her skin felt, the taste of her flesh, how he felt when he slipped inside her.

He took a sip of coffee, wishing she were there, wishing he could find a way to justify calling her. If he couldn’t do that, he wanted a way to forget her. Perhaps now that Charlie was in jail he could go back to the Army. If his hand healed correctly. If they’d take him.

It would all be a lot easier if he would stop thinking he saw her out of the corner of his eye. Every woman with reddish-brown hair made his pulse race. Until he saw that it was just a woman and not Tate. Then he’d hear a voice, and the cycle would start over again until he saw it was a stranger.

The persistence of her memory had taken him over. Like a virus, she had spread throughout his system. Unfortunately there were no pills or shots to help him.

He felt someone next to his chair, but he didn’t want any more coffee or a drink. He looked up, ready to send the boy away. But it wasn’t a boy. And it wasn’t a dream.

“Tate?”

She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, with her hair down and wild, the way it had been on the boat. She wore no makeup and her eyes were puffy from crying. He’d never seen anyone more beautiful in his life.

“I tried, Michael. I did. I tried to see it your way and I gave your argument all I could. But the only conclusion I could come to was that you couldn’t be more wrong if you tried.”

He couldn’t help laughing at that, even though she looked damn serious.

“Don’t laugh. I mean it. You’re an idiot.”

“I never had any doubts about that.”

“Good, so we’re agreed. And since you’re an idiot and I’m tough and smart, here’s what we’re gonna do.” She came around in front of him and pulled him up by his T-shirt. “We’re going to figure out who we are and what we want and we’re going to do it together. I have no idea if it’s going to last a week or a lifetime, but I’ll be damned if I walk away and don’t find out.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Any questions?”

“What about your—”

She put her fingers over his mouth. “This isn’t about my father. So no questions about him. And it’s not about money, because there was a million-dollar reward for my safe return, which you completely and utterly deserve, so you have money, I have money—and, dammit, money isn’t the issue.”

“Are you through?”

“No. I also want you to know that just because you saved my life doesn’t mean I feel some kind of obligation toward you. I’m not going through a phase and I’m not here because you’re the first man in years to make my toes curl. I’m here because being with you is the best thing that’s happened to me. Ever. You’re an amazing man and I admire every single thing about you. Of course, when we actually live together, I reserve the right to get cranky. But still, I think you’re incredible and I don’t want to spend another day without you.”

“Are you through now?”

“For the moment.”

“Good. Because I love you.”

Her lips curved up in a wicked smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“All that other stuff?”

He shrugged. “We’ll deal.”

“I thought this would be harder.”

He shook his head. “I can’t get you out of my head. You’ve been driving me insane.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Thank God. Because I love you, too.”

He smiled as his whole body relaxed. “Thank God,” he said. And then he kissed her.

**My Secret Life**

by Lori Wilde

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[Chapter 12](file:///C:\DOCUME%7E1\Dell\LOCALS%7E1\Temp\Rar$EX05.266\Jo%20Leigh,%20Lori%20Wilde,%20Leslie%20Kelly,%20Dawn%20Atkins,%20Kelley%20St.%20John,%20Shannon%20Hollis%20-%20September%202007%20Harlequin%20Blaze\oneclickbuyseptemberharlequinblaze.html#pt02ch12)

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[Chapter 14](file:///C:\DOCUME%7E1\Dell\LOCALS%7E1\Temp\Rar$EX05.266\Jo%20Leigh,%20Lori%20Wilde,%20Leslie%20Kelly,%20Dawn%20Atkins,%20Kelley%20St.%20John,%20Shannon%20Hollis%20-%20September%202007%20Harlequin%20Blaze\oneclickbuyseptemberharlequinblaze.html#pt02ch14)

[Chapter 15](file:///C:\DOCUME%7E1\Dell\LOCALS%7E1\Temp\Rar$EX05.266\Jo%20Leigh,%20Lori%20Wilde,%20Leslie%20Kelly,%20Dawn%20Atkins,%20Kelley%20St.%20John,%20Shannon%20Hollis%20-%20September%202007%20Harlequin%20Blaze\oneclickbuyseptemberharlequinblaze.html#pt02ch15)

**1**

KATIE WINFIELD plotted the seduction with military precision.

Exactitude wasn’t her typical modus operandi. On the contrary, she was usually quite spontaneous and, in fact, had a reputation as something of a free spirit. But she and Richard had been flirting for weeks with no forward motion in their relationship. Tonight would thrust them toward a whole new level of intimacy.

Embracing the advance planning she normally eschewed, Katie picked up a pencil and ticked off the items on her To Do list.

Facial and pedicure. Check.

Sexy French-maid costume. Check.

Tantalizing new perfume. Check.

Catch-me, do-me stilettos. Check.

Auburn wig. Check.

Black silk stockings. Check.

Push-up bra. Check.

Erotic face mask. Check.

Lots and lots of condoms. Check.

Just reading over the list made her feel all warm and tingly and soft inside. This evening—during the ultraposh Boston Ladies League charity costume ball thrown annually on the Friday before Labor Day weekend—she intended on bedazzling the pants off Richard Montgomery Hancock the III.

Katie had spent her lunch hour shopping. She’d just returned to work fifteen minutes late and out of breath. Furtively, she kicked the loot farther underneath her desk, and then darted a glance over her shoulder to see if her boss had noticed her tardiness.

“What didja buy?” asked her office mate, Tanisha Taylor, as she sauntered through the door, grande soy latte in hand.

Katie shrugged. “Nothing much.”

At five-nine, Tanisha towered over Katie’s own five feet three inches. They were both twenty-four and they’d started working as graphic artists at Sharper Designs on the very same day ten months earlier. It was the longest Katie had ever worked anywhere and she was starting to feel the strain of being in one place too long.

With her radiant, caramel complexion and deep chocolate-brown eyes, Tanisha was drop-dead beautiful. She wore her hair in a tightly braided shoulder-length style that made her narrow face look even thinner. She possessed the lean muscular build of a dancer, quite the opposite of Katie’s well-rounded, non-athletic figure. They made for an unusual looking pair.

Today her coworker was dressed in a lavender blouse made of pure silk that she wore tucked into a pair of straight-legged, black slacks and sensible black flats. But Katie knew from the wild nights they’d recently spent closing down bars that beneath the buttoned-down attire lurked the adventuresome soul of a Nubian goddess.

Tanisha spied the red-and-black striped bag from Fetching Fantasies and dove for it before Katie could block her. Tanisha set down her latte, perched on the edge of Katie’s desk and peeked inside the bag.

“Oo-la-la, what have we here? Parlez-vous français?” she teased.

Katie snatched the bag away and clutched it to her chest. “Just a costume for the Ladies League masquerade party. No biggie.”

Tanisha grinned. “You are going to be the hussy of the ball in that getup.”

“That’s the general idea.”

“Spill it. Who’ve you got lined up in your crosshairs?”

Returning Tanisha’s sly grin, Katie slowly shook her head.

“Don’t give me that. I know you’ve got something up your sleeve.”

Katie tilted her head, lowered her eyelashes and slanted Tanisha a sideways glance. “Do you know Richard Hancock?”

“Everyone in town knows Richard. What are you trying to do? Ruffle all the blue-blood feathers in Boston?”

That comment pulled her up short. Why did she suddenly feel as if her conscience were the target and Tanisha’s accusation a straight flying arrow?

Bull’s-eye.

“What makes you say that?”

“Why else would you want to hook up with Richard ‘The Dick’ Hancock? He’s sooo not your type.” Tanisha hopped off Katie’s desk and plopped down in front of her drafting board.

“What do you mean? Richard is a very handsome guy.”

“I’m not talking about his looks.”

“What’s wrong with Richard?”

“Nothing is wrong with Richard. What’s wrong is that you’re plotting to seduce him at the Ladies League ball.” Tanisha clicked her tongue.

“What’s so bad about that?”

“Face it, Katie. You’ve got a knack for causing a stir.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“How so?”

“Who got caught kissing the CEO’s son under the mistletoe at the office Christmas party, hmm?”

“Hey,” Katie said defensively. “How was I supposed to know he’d just gotten engaged?”

“That’s my point, K. You don’t always take the time to ask the right questions and it often lands you in hot water. Subconsciously, I think you enjoy causing a scandal.”

“I do not.” Did she?

“Either that or you’re into self-sabotage. Which is it?”

“Neither.”

“If you say so.” Tanisha sounded skeptical.

“I say so.”

“And the Nile is just a river in Egypt.” Tanisha snorted.

Was she sabotaging herself? As the youngest of three sisters growing up in a household run by their loving mother and strict naval-officer father, Katie had done a little acting out for attention, but so what?

She’d played hooky a few times in high school. Once or twice, she’d gotten caught sneaking out her bedroom window to meet a boyfriend. She enjoyed making Great-Aunt Josephine’s upper-crust nose wrinkle in disapproval by listening to hip-hop, using street slang and wearing jeans to family gatherings. Honestly, she’d never done anything too radical. Katie just liked having fun. Her motives were no more complicated than a Cyndi Lauper song.

Well, okay, maybe sometimes it got stifling with her two older, oh-so-perfect sisters. Brooke was the beautiful caregiver, Joey the smart go-getter and they were both as good as gold. By default, that left Katie with the title of wild child. But everyone had a family label, right? And she chose to wear hers proudly.

To be honest, even after their father had passed away five years ago, she and her sisters had still lived a fairy-tale life. They’d been lucky, blessed, until this past year when their world had totally collapsed.

Katie didn’t want to think about it, but the rush of memories overwhelmed her and she felt herself caught in a tornado of emotion that squeezed the breath from her lungs. She forced a smile, determined not to let Tanisha know about the sorrow knotting up inside her.

But a smile couldn’t stop the sad feelings.

In January, Katie and her sisters had received the horrible news that their beloved mother, Daisy, had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Katie denied it for as long as she could. She’d pretended it was all a big mistake, that their mother was fine. But each day Daisy Winfield grew weaker and sicker until Katie could deny it no longer.

After that, she’d gotten angry. When Brooke had told her that she was stuck in the second stage of grief, the comment had pissed her off. Sainted Brooke, who never did anything wrong apparently leapfrogged right over the five stages of grief. She’d quickly skimmed from denial to anger to depression and bargaining straight on through to acceptance.

Katie, according to Brooke, had never gotten past anger.

Maybe she hadn’t. But how was she supposed to get past it? Her mother had only been fifty-three when she passed away in July, only four months after she’d been diagnosed. There hadn’t been nearly enough time to say goodbye.

It wasn’t fair.

Katie closed her eyes and inhaled sharply at the pain of remembering that awful night when their mother had died.

She’d been restless, feverish and babbling about a lost baby. Daisy had clutched her daughters’ hands and begged them to find the baby girl. They had no idea what baby she was talking about. The hospice nurse had assured them it was just the effects of the heavy pain medication she was on, but it had been upsetting to see her mother so distressed during her last minutes on Earth.

Involuntarily, Katie laid a hand across her heart and felt a solid ache for the loss of her mother.

“Katie?” Tanisha’s voice snapped her out of the past and back into the present.

She opened her eyes.

Tanisha had an odd expression on her face. She canted her head and a dark braid fell against her chiseled cheekbone. “Are you all right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You don’t look all right.”

“I am.”

Tanisha nodded at the shopping bags crammed underneath Katie’s desk. “Does this shopping spree and Ladies League seduction, and other crazy behavior have anything to do with losing your mother?”

Her coworker was more perceptive than she imagined. Tanisha’s party-girl personality gave the impression that she wasn’t the type to pry into people’s deep, dark secrets, which was probably one of the reasons Katie had been drawn to her. Katie herself was not a fan of digging into her own psyche.

“Why would you think that?” Katie forced a laugh, but it came out sounding strangled and strange.

“I was thinking that maybe you’re looking to seduce Richard as a way of drowning your sorrow. You know, choking out the pain with pleasure.”

“No, no. Of course not. That’s ludicrous. I can’t believe you thought that.”

“This coming weekend is the two-month anniversary of your mother’s death.”

“So?”

“So maybe instead of facing what’s upsetting you, you’re seducing Richard Hancock.”

“Well, I’m not,” Katie snapped.

Tanisha held up her palms. “Oookay, I was merely checking. No need to get testy.”

“I don’t understand. What do you have against me hooking up with Richard?”

“He’s just not what you need right now.”

“Why not?” she asked. “He’s fun and flirts and likes to have a good time.”

“Exactly.”

“Meaning?”

“You’re two of a kind.”

“Again, why is that a problem?”

“Come on, be straight with me, do you even like Richard?”

Katie shrugged. “Sure.”

“What do you like about him?” Tanisha lifted a finger. “And you can’t say anything physical.”

“He’s…he’s…”

Why couldn’t she think of what she liked about Richard beside his thick blond hair and his radiant white-toothed smile and his big, broad tanned hands? He wasn’t terribly bright, nor was he horribly reliable. But come on, she wasn’t talking about marrying the guy. She just needed to get laid.

“Can’t do it, can you?”

“He’s funny.”

“No, you’re the funny one. He laughs at your jokes.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Oops! Tanisha was right, but Katie didn’t want to admit it. “Okay, then that’s what I like about him. He makes me feel funny.”

“Funny ha-ha or funny weird?”

“Now you’re just giving me a hard time. What’s the deal?”

Tanisha took a deep breath. “Let’s drop the conversation. We’ve both got work to wrap up before the holiday weekend.”

“No, seriously, I want to know.”

“You sure?” Tanisha arched an eyebrow. “You promise not to get mad at me?”

“What do you mean? I’m not an angry person.”

“You didn’t used to be,” Tanisha said.

“But I am now?”

“Well, sometimes, kind of, ever since your mother passed away.”

That stunned her. To hear it from Brooke was one thing. As the oldest, Brooke had often seen it as her job to monitor Katie and correct her behavior, but to hear it from her friend was another story.

“It’s okay,” Tanisha offered. “Everyone understands. You’ve been through a lot. But instead of hooking up with good-time guys like Richard, you might be at a point in your life where it’s time you checked out the other side of the fence. Maybe you should try being with someone more substantial.”

“I don’t get it. Where is this coming from? You party and flirt as much as I do.”

“Yeah, but since I’ve started dating Dwayne I’m looking at things a bit differently.”

“Don’t tell me that you and Dwayne are getting serious! You’ve only known him what? A month? And he lives in Denver. It’s easy to have a great relationship when you rarely see each other.”

“We’re not talking about me and Dwayne. We’re talking about you, and I think you’re doing this as some kind of rebellion you never outgrew. Deep down inside, you’re a lot more traditional than you want people to believe.”

“Huh?”

“If you want to party and flirt and have lots of casual sex then great, do it. Don’t apologize for it. But if you’re doing it simply to prove to yourself that you’re not like the rest of your family, maybe you should take a second look at what kind of lifestyle will really make you happy.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“Winfield,” boomed a gruff voice from the across the room.

Katie swiveled in her chair to see her boss, Max Kruger, standing in the doorway. A persistent frown rode his bushy eyebrows. Max was fiftyish, sported an out-of-style crew cut and had a penchant for wearing chinos with crisply starched white shirts. He looked like a basketball coach and managed his employees with the same sort of affable crustiness.

“Yes, Mr. Kruger?”

File in hand, Max strode into their office.

“You’re going to have to stay late tonight.”

“But it’s the Friday before the holiday weekend,” Katie said, feeling her plans for seduction slipping away. All she’d wanted was to end the evening in bed with Richard. She’d been dreaming about the feel of a masculine arm around her waist, the smell of a man’s scent in her nostrils, the sweet oblivion of an orgasm.

“So?”

“I have plans.”

“Do you like your job, Winfield?”

“Yes, sir.”

Max thrust the file at her. “Then you’re staying late. Kringle’s Krackers didn’t like the color fill on the logo. They want something more urban chic.”

“For overpriced saltines?”

“Hey, it’s what the customer wants.” He paused before delivering the really bad news. “And you’ve got to come up with the new palette by Tuesday. They need it right away for a special promo venture they have planned.” Max turned and stalked from the room.

Katie groaned and swiveled her chair to face her computer. Muttering darkly under her breath, she grabbed the Kringle’s Krackers file.

“Maybe you should look at this as a sign,” Tanisha said.

“What do you mean?”

“That you’re not supposed to seduce Richard Hancock at the Ladies League masquerade ball.”

She paused a moment, giving Tanisha’s suggestion some thought. “I could look at it as a sign,” she said. “Or I could take it as a challenge to see how quickly I can get this project fixed and get over there.”

Tanisha shook her head. “I gotta hand it to you, K. Whenever you put your mind to something, you put your mind to it.”

“Nah.” Katie grinned. “I’m just deeply into self-sabotage.”

The earthy smell of impending autumn hung thick on the evening breeze. Katie hustled from the Sharper Designs offices, nestled among other quaint structures in an older area of Boston not far from downtown.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the stately buildings had once been personal residences. Then in the 1970s, the area had been zoned commercial and most of the families had pulled up stakes and moved on, leaving their homes to be converted into offices by enterprising developers. The renovated homes created a cozy work environment, but parking space was at a premium and the nearest parking lot lay three blocks away.

It was almost 9:00 p.m. and the Ladies League ball would be in full swing. The streetlamps glowed hazy against the dreamy mist of fog rolling in from the harbor. Katie hurried down the street, her arms laden with the packages she’d bought on her lunch hour.

Her stilettos tapped smartly against the cement sidewalk. Underneath her light fall coat, she wore the French-maid costume. Not wanting to waste time by going home, she’d dressed at the office. She felt decidedly naughty and that naughtiness escalated her excitement and strengthened her resolve.

Come hell or high water, she was determined to seduce Richard Hancock.

Feeling both nervous and brave, walking the streets alone in her costume, she took a deep fortifying breath. What would Richard think of her outfit? She hadn’t told him what she was wearing because the French-maid getup was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Richard, however, had promised to come as Jack Sparrow from Pirates of the Caribbean, complete with a Johnny Depp booty pirate’s wig. Pirate and captive was her favorite sexual fantasy.

Katie could hardly wait. The thrill of the chase quickened her pulse.

She scurried past the pet store that had just opened up the week before. Muted low-level lighting was on in the building and as she turned to step off the curb, she spotted him.

Her heart hammered and her breath caught. Her gaze met his and she was a goner.

The puppy, a honey-colored cocker spaniel, was caged inside the window. His big, sweet chocolate-brown eyes locked on hers.

“Oh.” She breathed, changed directions and walked back toward him. “Oh, you are too cute.”

Frantically, he wagged his tail.

In that instant Katie fell in love. How much is that doggy in the window? The song ran through her head.

You with a dog? Ha!

It was a laughable idea. She lived in a condo and was rarely home. Plus, she’d never had a pet, although she had always wanted one. She remembered begging for a puppy as a kid, but her parents had told her she was too irresponsible. She couldn’t even keep her room clean; how could they trust her to feed and walk a pet?

Katie pleaded with her mom and dad. They’d resisted. She made lavish promises. They balked. She found a stray and fed him cheesy puffs from her lunch to get him to follow her home. Their maid had called the animal shelter.

Finally, realizing how determined she was, her father had relented. He told her if she could prove she was responsible enough to take care of an animal, then she could have one. His test consisted of Katie caring for an egg as if it were a puppy.

She had to take the egg with her wherever she went, making sure never to leave it behind. Keeping track of that egg had been darned hard for an eight-year-old, but after two weeks without a misstep, she was picking out names for her puppy.

Then on the last day, Katie ran to greet her father at the front door as he returned home from work, the egg clutched in her hand. In her excitement, she’d tripped and fallen. Splattering the egg across the foyer in a vivid yellow splash of yolk.

She’d been inconsolable. Her parents were right. She was too irresponsible for a puppy.

Her stern yet loving father didn’t hold the accidental egg smash against her. He’d taken her to the nearest pet store and let her pick out the dog of her choice.

She had selected an exuberant cocker spaniel exactly like this one. Same honey-colored coat, same chocolate-brown eyes. She had named the puppy Duke. It had been the happiest day of her eight-year-old life.

Then she’d gotten Duke home and Brooke had immediately started sneezing. Her sister sneezed all through the weekend, her eyes swelling up, and her nose running. Daisy had taken Brooke to the doctor the next day and they’d returned home with the news that Brooke was highly allergic to dogs.

Katie had been forced to give Duke away. Even now, sixteen years later, she still felt the awful punch to her stomach when she thought about it.

“Hey, little guy,” she cooed, and crouched down to the puppy’s eye level and put her hand to the window front. He tried to lick her fingers, his pink tongue rubbing wetly against the glass.

From past experience, she knew that if she scooped him up in her arms his fur would feel soft as doll hair and he’d lick her face until she ended up on the floor giggling breathlessly while he nibbled at her ears.

Her stomach clutched. A mixture of emotions melded inside her—tenderness, regret and lingering irritation with her sister Brooke’s allergies because she had been forced to miss out on the joys of puppy ownership. Petty maybe, but it was how she felt.

You could have a puppy now.

No, it was too late to relive her childhood. There was no room in her busy life for a dog. Maybe someday, but not now.

“Gotta go,” she whispered, rising to her feet and waving goodbye. “There’s a party waiting and I’ve got a gorgeous man to seduce.”

The puppy whimpered and the wagging of his tail slowed. He sensed she was about to leave him.

“It’s better this way, truly. You wouldn’t be happy at my place. You’d be cooped up all day by yourself. It wouldn’t be fair to you. I’m only thinking of your best interest.”

The cocker spaniel stared at her with his big, adoring eyes.

Her heart ripped. This was silly. What was the matter with her? Getting sentimental over a dog. He was adorable. Someone else would buy him. She had no reason to feel guilty.

But somehow, she did.

She had to shake this feeling, had to shrug off the sadness weighing down her shoulders. Had to stop thinking about her mother and Duke, the puppy she’d only had for a weekend, and Tanisha’s eerily accurate assessment of her.

Fun.

That was what she needed. A strong drink, loud music, a roomful of people dressed in colorful costumes.

And a man to seduce who wouldn’t look at her in the morning the way this puppy was looking at her now.

Head down, she rushed away, trying her very best to outpace the mental demons with which she had no desire to wrestle. She was going to that party and she wasn’t about to let anyone or anything keep her from seducing her pirate.

**2**

FOR MOST of his adult life, Liam James had been all about the job. Nothing mattered more to him than the real-estate company he’d built from the ground up and molded into a multimillion-dollar empire by the time he was thirty.

He loved his work and excelled in a crisis. It was the worrying beforehand and afterwards that did him in. He was always on the lookout for trouble. And in an odd way he was relieved when it came.

Troubleshooting was what he knew. Lack of trouble made him uneasy. Edgy anticipation. That was his true nemesis. It threw him off his game.

And he was feeling edgy tonight.

Especially since he was dressed in this ridiculous Pirates of the Caribbean, Jack Sparrow costume. By the time he’d made it over to the costume-rental place, this was the only disguise left in his size. He’d already spotted three other Jack Sparrows at the party. Apparently the costume-supply companies had gone overboard on the pirate theme this year.

“What the hell am I doing here?” he muttered under his breath, and scanned the collected crowd at the Ladies League charity masquerade party.

The expensively decorated ballroom was filled with ultrathin, cosmetically enhanced women and self-important, overfed rich men in lavish costumes. The kind of highbrow shindig Liam loathed.

The question was rhetorical. He already knew the answer.

He was here to get an up close and personal look at the man whose seed had spawned him. The man who’d never acknowledged him, nor sent his mother one penny of child support beyond the three hundred dollars he had thrown at her thirty-two years ago, when he’d told her to get an abortion.

That man was Boston’s incumbent mayor, Finn Delancy. Who was up for reelection and was pegged to win it by a landslide.

For years, Liam had imagined this meeting. The moment when he introduced himself and told him, “Thanks for nothing, you worthless son of a bitch. My mother and I made it fine without you. And FYI, blue blood or not, I can buy and sell your ass three times over.”

But now that he was here, and it was the moment of truth, Liam wasn’t sure exactly how to go about it.

The mayor wore a cowboy costume—ten gallon hat, spurs that jangled, leather chaps, the whole nine yards. He looked utterly foolish but that didn’t stop a bevy of beautiful young women from collecting around him like bargain shoppers to a fire sale.

According to Liam’s mother, Jeanine, Finn had more sexual charisma than Bill Clinton and JFK all rolled into one. He gritted his teeth and fisted his hands. Personally, he couldn’t see the appeal.

“Something the matter, boss?” asked Liam’s right-hand man, Tony Gregory. Tony was dressed as one of the band members from KISS and damn if he didn’t look seriously freaky. Not at all like his normal affable self. “You seem uptight.”

Liam gave a sharp shake of his head. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“So tell me again why I’m here?” Tony cocked his head and sent Liam an assessing gaze.

“My date and I decided it was better if we just stayed friends, so she’s not coming tonight. I had the extra ticket.” He couldn’t really call her his girlfriend. They’d only gone out a few times. “There’s no sense letting two hundred dollars go to waste.”

What he didn’t tell his most trusted confidant was that he badly needed moral support. Willingly admitting a weakness wasn’t something he did, not even to himself. He’d known Tony since their days at Harvard School of Business, but he’d never told him his deepest secret—that he was the bastard son of one of the most influential men in Boston high society.

“You lost another one?” Tony whistled. “Damn, and I really liked Brooke.”

“Don’t worry. We’re still friends.”

“What the hell do you do to chase off so many chicks? You’re rich, good-looking and you bathe regularly. Why don’t any of them stick around for more than a few dates? What gives?”

“I have a low tolerance for the frivolous,” Liam said, narrowing his eyes at Finn Delancy, who had just planted a kiss on the hand of a giggling starlet.

“You’re a workaholic is what you are, and women hate coming second to a man’s career.”

“True enough.”

“Did you like her?”

“Of course I liked her.”

“But you didn’t like her enough to make an effort to keep her?”

“We both realized we’re too much alike. And while Brooke is very pretty, there was no strong sexual spark between us. Plus, she told me she needed a man who could give her his undivided attention and I’m sorry—” he shrugged “—that’s not me. Work always comes first.”

Tony stared at him, mouth dropping open in amazement. “So…you’ve never been in love.”

Liam shifted his weight, crossed his arms over his chest. “What makes you say that?”

“When a woman gets under your skin fully and completely, then you’ll willingly give up everything to be with her.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.” Tony nodded sagely, his ebony KISS wig bobbing about his shoulders.

“If that’s your definition of love, then I’m glad I’ve never been there.”

“It’s how I feel about Jess. She’s the most important thing in the world to me,” he said, an ardent expression on his face. “Nothing comes before her. Ever.”

“Not even your job as my VP?”

“Nope.” Tony shook his head.

“You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“Still? Even after five years of marriage?”

“She fascinates me more each day. She’s my lover, my companion, my best friend.”

Liam snorted in disbelief. It was sad, but true. He’d never been in love, had never met any woman who fascinated him more than his work.

Although, he’d thought he was in love once, during his sophomore year in college, with Arianna Baxter, a high-society beauty. They’d been study partners, and he’d hoped for more but never had the courage to ask her out. Her family was so wealthy, and he was so poor. Then she’d invited him to a lavish sorority party and his hopes had soared. Except when he got there, he discovered the joke was on him. It was a “pauper party,” where the sorority sisters dared each other to bring the poorest, most socially unacceptable guy they could find. The kicker was that Arianna won first prize for bringing him.

“How come you keep staring at Mayor Delaney?” Tony asked.

“I’m thinking maybe I should go introduce myself to him.”

“He’ll just hit you up for a campaign contribution,” Tony remarked.

I’d love the chance to tell him where he could stick his request for money.

“He can ask. I don’t have to give it.”

Tony glanced over his shoulder at the mayor. “You’ve got your competition cut out for you, dude. Delancy’s surrounded.”

“Yeah, but I’ll figure it out. Get to schmoozing, Gregory. We’re here for the business contacts.”

“Actually, I came for the free food. Much as I love her, my Jess isn’t much of a cook.”

“So schmooze the buffet. I’ll catch up with you later,” Liam said, and then started across the crowded room, his glare beaded on the mayor.

The closer he got, the harder his heart thumped. This was the man who’d charmed Liam’s seventeen-year-old mother, bedded her, and then left her pregnant and heartbroken. He’d denied his paternity and waltzed glibly back to his wife. All the old resentment that had been seething in Liam since childhood fisted into a knot of pure hatred.

Revenge. The dish best served cold.

And he was about to dine.

Liam had the speech prepared. He had been practicing it over and over in his head for years. Waiting for the moment when his financial success eclipsed Finn Delancy’s. Waiting for the slam dunk. The one thing he’d never envisioned was giving his speech dressed as a pirate, but what the hell? It seemed fitting.

Every bigwig in Boston—not to mention a nice collection of reporters from the media—was in attendance at the party. His goal was to shame and embarrass the hell out of Delancy in the most public of forums.

And the Ladies League ball—the biggest charity event of the social season—definitely qualified. Determined to see this thing through, Liam reached for the document burning a hole in the back pocket of his black leather Jack Sparrow pants.

It was his birth certificate.

“Mayor Delancy,” Liam said and thrust himself through the circle of women surrounding his father.

Delancy swung his gaze around to fix on him. The man’s eyes were the same color of hazel as Liam’s own. They also shared the same jawline—strong, hard, resolute. “What can I do for you, son?”

Son.

The word hung in the air weighed with a meaning only Liam understood. But soon, very soon, Finn Delancy would understand it, as well, and so would his enamored constituents. What would they think of their illustrious leader then?

“For you,” Liam ground out, and thrust the folded birth certificate at Delancy. He had to clench his teeth to keep his emotions in check so that his hand wouldn’t tremble and give away his barely cloaked rage.

Delancy stared at him a moment, clearly confused. The celebutante at the mayor’s elbow tittered for no discernable reason. Liam stood there with the folded piece of paper held outstretched at arm’s length.

“Oh,” Delancy blinked. “Gotcha.”

The hell you do. I’m the one who’s got you.

Delancy reached in the front pocket of his cowboy vest. Going for his reading glasses? Liam guessed.

But the mayor did not extract a reading-glass case. Rather, he pulled out an expensive ballpoint pen and accepted the folded document.

“Turn around,” the mayor said.

“What?”

“Turn around?”

Liam was so surprised by the request he found himself complying and felt Delancy rest the birth certificate against his shoulder blade, using his back as a support while he scrawled something on the paper.

What the hell?

“Here you go,” Delancy said, proudly.

Liam turned back around, his shoulder tingling from the touch of the man he’d hated for more years than he could count. Delancy slapped the birth certificate into his palm as two burly bodyguards stepped forward.

“Mayor,” said bodyguard number one, “your limousine has arrived.”

“Excuse me.” Delancy flashed Liam an artificial smile. “I have another engagement.”

Bodyguard Number Two took the mayor by the elbow and led him away through the crowd. At the same time Bodyguard Number One gave his arm to the celebutante. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out with whom the mayor would be spending the rest of the evening.

Confused by what had just happened, Liam stared down at the folded birth certificate in his hand.

There, written in Delancy’s shaky scrawl were words that sent shame, anger, embarrassment and hatred shooting through Liam’s veins.

It’s always nice to meet a fan. Best wishes, Finn Delancy.

Liam’s lungs constricted, and he found it hard to breathe. His hand was trembling now from pure rage that no amount of teeth clenching could abate.

An autograph!

The low-life, egotistical, jackass had just autographed his illegitimate son’s birth certificate.

By the time Katie arrived at the Hightower mansion where this year’s Ladies League masquerade ball was being held, the crowd was at maximum capacity. Even in three-inch stilettos, she still had to stand on tiptoe to see above the costumed throng packed into the foyer and snaking out through the grand hallway.

Waiters squeezed through the mob, balancing silver trays laden with flutes of fizzy champagne. The music was so loud she could barely think, and the hum of hundreds of voices was even louder.

Where was Richard?

For one brief moment, she thought about going home, but then quickly reconsidered, recalling how much money she’d spent on this seduction. She reached for a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and took a big swallow to ward off her building nervousness.

The decadently arousing song “Ooh La La” by the British group Goldfrapp came over the speakers, oozing glam sex with a throbbing bass. She found herself twitching her hips in time to the seductive tune and scanning the crowd for anyone she knew.

But the disguises had done their jobs. She recognized no one. Feeling giddy at the weirdness of all her friends looking like strangers, she finished off the champagne and set her empty glass on a nearby table.

Body tingling with taboo sensations, Katie winnowed around Spider-Man chatting up Cleopatra, slipped past Mickey Mantle talking about the New England Patriots with Elvis Presley and then put a hand to her waist-long auburn wig to make sure it was still on straight.

The eyeholes of the wide mask that covered more than half her face were too narrow and she was having problems seeing much of anything in her peripheral vision. It was stifling hot, even though there wasn’t much to her costume, with so many people sardined into the room.

She looked for a side exit. Maybe Richard had stepped outside for some fresh air. It might take her an hour to find him in this madhouse.

Disheartened, she settled her shoulder against the doorjamb leading into the room where the buffet was laid out. The next time another waiter circled in front of her, she reached for a second glass of champagne.

Could Richard have already left the party?

For the first time she noticed that men were brazenly staring at her. Lots of men, in fact.

Katie took a quick peak down at her costume. Good gosh. When she’d dressed so hurriedly at Sharper Designs she hadn’t realized exactly how low the neckline dipped. Her cleavage was practically spilling out of her dress.

Flustered, she crossed her arms over her chest and turned away from the buffet line, only to find more ogling men. She hurried into the ballroom, heart thumping with anxious excitement.

Apparently a French-maid was every man’s fantasy. She was accustomed to masculine attention, but not this intense. Men with cloaked identities lusting after her.

Where was Richard?

Tanisha was right. Pursuing Richard at the party was a bad idea. Go home.

“Don’t panic,” Katie muttered under her breath. “This is a costume party. They don’t recognize you any more than you recognize them.”

And then that’s when she saw him.

Mayor Delancy sweeping through the crowd with his bodyguards, headed toward the front door. Even in his cowboy costume it was impossible to miss the larger-than-life mayor.

But standing in the mayor’s wake was the man she’d been searching for. The very Caribbean pirate she’d come here to seduce.

Resentment pummeled Liam’s stomach like a heavyweight boxer finishing off his wobbly-kneed opponent. Reflexively, he curled his fist around the birth certificate autographed by his biological father. The desire to punch something was so strong he could taste it.

Raw, bitter, black.

For the last twelve years he’d worked toward this moment, worked and waited, and Delancy had pulled the rug right out from under him. What should he do now?

You’ll go at him again. You picked the wrong time, the wrong place, that’s all.

His mother had never wanted him to do this. She was happy now, married to a great guy and living on a farm in upstate New York. She thought he should just forget about Finn Delancy and be proud of everything he’d accomplished without his old man’s help.

But it wasn’t that simple for Liam. He couldn’t let it go. Anger twisted him up inside. The place was filled with privileged blue bloods, no doubt many of whom thought they could treat people any way they wanted and get away with it.

Liam blazed a hard gaze around the room. Frivolous, pampered rich people throwing silly costume parties. If they really wanted to give to charity, just write a check and don’t waste money on lavish celebrations.

You’re richer than most of them.

Yes, but he’d gotten his money the hard way. He’d earned every penny of it, not had it handed to him on a platinum platter.

Adrenaline, anger and frustration coursed through him. He needed to dissipate these feelings. Needed to get a firm grip on his emotions. Exercise. He needed exercise. A run in the park never failed to give him back his sense of control.

He had to get the hell out of here.

But then something caught his eye that made Liam forget everything except the fact he hadn’t had sex in almost a year.

There, on the other side of the ballroom, stood a gorgeous vixen in a French maid costume and she was staring straight at him, as if he were the man of her most forbidden midnight fantasies.

Coyly, she tossed her auburn wig.

Liam drove his hand through his own wig.

She licked her lips.

Drawing in a ragged breath, he hooked his thumbs through his belt loop.

Her eyes widened, and he saw a telltale red flush spread from her generous cleavage up her long slender throat.

His body hardened and he shifted, widening his stance, pointing his boots in her direction.

She lowered her eyelashes, dropped her hands. His gaze fell to the creamy inside of her wrist, and then tracked up her smooth, delicate skin to her shoulders. She peeked at him again and then slyly winked. Even with the barrier of her black mask cloaking most of her face, he was absolutely certain she was winking at him.

Boldly, Liam winked back.

Why the hell not? Sex was better than jogging for blowing off steam and after what had happened before with Delancy, he could certainly do with the distraction.

And she was one fine distraction with those shapely legs encased in lust-arousing black fishnet stockings. He could easily imagine himself tugging that silky material over the curve of her calf.

She angled him a long, lingering look.

He caught it, held it.

Quickly, she looked away again, but there was no mistaking her invitation.

Come play with me.

His blood revved hot.

She turned and walked away.

The thundering in his veins intensified. Curiosity grabbed him by the short hairs and hung on tight. Who was this mysterious woman? Did he know her? Something about her seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

She made her way through the crowd, hips rolling seductively, as aloof as the blue-blooded princess she undoubtedly was. When she got to the doorway, she paused. Her long fingers stroked the door casing as she tossed him a glance over her shoulder. She looked damned provocative, even in a room chock-full of people dressed in suggestive garb.

Follow me, her eyes whispered.

Normally, Liam wasn’t the type of guy who allowed his libido to overrule his common sense. But he was horny and desperately needing something to salve his battered ego, and she was hot and willing.

Why not go for it?

You shouldn’t let your anger at Delancy drive you to casual sex with a frisky member of the Ladies League simply to prove you can bed the social elite.

Maybe not, but his gaze was ensnared on her full, rich mouth that was clearly made for kissing. She pursed her lips, slowly blew him a kiss and then crooked her index finger.

This way.

Liam felt the impact of the gesture slam low in his groin. Simultaneously, hormones and endorphins lit up both his body and his brain. He gulped against the sheer force of the sensation. This French maid wanted to have some fun. Why shouldn’t he be the one to accommodate her?

He shook his head. What kind of spell had she cast over him? His tongue was cemented to the roof of his mouth. His eyes were transfixed by her lithe form. His nose twitched, suddenly sensitized to the scent of seduction in the air. His ears filled with a blinding white roaring noise.

She strutted off a second time.

Mesmerized, he watched her hips sway.

Liam went all Neanderthal then and lumbered after her. Must have woman.

By the time he reached where she’d been standing, she was already in the archway of another room. The place could have been completely empty. That’s how unaware he was of the crowd jostling around them.

The French maid paused again, but this time she did not look back. Apparently, she’d assumed he would follow.

She was correct.

Sending her auburn curls bouncing over her shoulders with a toss of her head, she turned to the right and started down a long corridor.

Liam made a beeline after her.

People were all around him, talking, laughing, joking, drinking, but he could have been stranded on a deserted island or trapped in a timeless vortex. He was that focused on Miss French Maid’s fanny as she slipped through the costumed throng.

She winnowed around a man the size of a boxcar dressed like Paul Bunyan and Liam couldn’t see her anymore. He quickened his pace, but at the next doorway, Paul Bunyan turned, blocking his path.

“Excuse me.” Liam stepped to his right.

Paul Bunyan moved in the same direction at the exact same moment.

Liam corrected, angling to the left.

So did Bunyan.

Was this on purpose? What was happening here? Liam frowned.

“Shall we dance?” Paul Bunyan chuckled, and Liam realized he’d been unnecessarily suspicious. By the time he got around the guy, he found himself faced with a long hallway filled with doors. His French maid had vanished.

“Dammit,” he muttered.

It’s all for the best. He was feeling much too vulnerable to be indulging in anonymous sex. That kind of solace, while great in the moment, wouldn’t fix anything. It wouldn’t make up for the aching for a real father that had dogged his bones since he was a kid.

He stood there in the corridor, staring at the doors, wondering if she was behind one, not wanting to leave in case she reappeared. A minute ticked past. And then another.

Face it. She’s gone.

He turned to retrace his steps when suddenly the door behind him opened and a hand reached out to grab him by the scruff of his collar.

Long, manicured fingernails tickled the back of his neck and the next thing Liam knew, he was being hauled into a pitch black closet.

The French maid wrapped her arms around him and covered his face in kisses. At least he hoped it was the French maid.

She murmured something in French. He didn’t understand the language, but he did get the gist of her suggestive message. He tried to take a step back to clear his head, but her fingers were frantically working the buttons of his puffy white pirate shirt.

“Slow down,” he said, or rather tried to say. His throat was twisted so tight with need the sounds came out as scarcely more than an excited groan.

Her mind-boggling aroma, which smelled like a cross between apricots and stargazer lilies, filled his nose and shot up his desire. He could see absolutely nothing in the darkness, but the rest of his senses were fully attuned and ready to be indulged.

“What…how…who…” He wrenched out the words, unable to form a coherent thought.

“Shh.” She placed an index finger over his lips. Her skin tasted forbidden.

He thought of truffles and Russian caviar and saffron, the most expensive spice in the world. His nerve endings blazed. In the back of his mind, far off in the distance, sounding as if it had been locked up in a dry, dusty trunk for centuries, his muffled conscience tried to get his attention.

Hey, sport, this seems awfully odd. Sexy babe coming on to you, no strings attached. You know there’s always strings attached. Something’s wrong. Pull your head out of the hormone soup. Think this through. Last thing you want is to be like your old man. Hey, hey…

His scruples got no further because his brain short-circuited, closing off everything except the exquisite glory of her hot little mouth on his.

**3**

KATIE COULDN’T believe she was really doing this. It felt so naughty, so wicked, so wrong.

And yet, it felt so damn good.

She should have known Richard would be a world-class kisser. He was one of the hottest bachelors in Boston and very popular with the ladies. Why had she waited this long to seduce him?

He seemed so receptive, so responsive. When she curled her fingers around his forearm, he actually shivered.

She was shivering, too.

His mouth was heated and moist and he tasted of peppermint. His arm went around her waist and he tilted her backward in the closet.

The sleeves of the coats on the rack swayed with their movements, the rough material of the garments brushing provocatively against her bare arms. Farther down on the rod, a couple of empty coat hangers rattled against the sway.

His breathing was as ragged and raspy as hers. The bold pirate was plunging his demanding tongue past her teeth, plundering her mouth with a brazen zeal, taking what he wanted, leaving her breathless and clinging tightly to him.

He pulled her closer, crushing her against his broad, muscular chest. The stiff short skirt of her outfit crinkled at the pressure, and her scalp tingled hotly.

Each strumming beat of her heart was a sexual question mark.

What now?

What was going to happen next?

Would he run his rough hand up her leg?

Would he give her the mind-blasting orgasm she hungered for?

“Woman.” The word was dragged from his damp lips in a husky inhalation of breath. He pulled his mouth from hers and tracked his tongue down her chin to her throat. “You are so, so sexy.”

She threw back her head, exposing her throat, giving him greater access to the pulse fluttering at the hollow of her neck.

Oh, he smelled good. Like candy canes and the joy of Christmas morning. She wondered what cologne he had on. Usually Richard wore a much cooler, more sophisticated fragrance.

Hmm, should she ask him?

And possibly spoil the moment? Was she nuts?

That sobering notion quickened her breathing, but it didn’t scare her. And that, in itself, was terrifying.

What was wrong with her? Why was she so willing to walk the edge, to tempt fate, to push the envelope beyond common sense?

Rhetorical question. She knew the answer. Ever since her mother had died she’d felt an overwhelming need to make her emotional pain disappear.

Without Daisy as an anchor, it was as if she no longer had anything to lose. Why not gamble everything for a little fun? What was the point of holding herself in reserve?

Life was short. Live it to the fullest. That was her motto.

Thankfully, his honeyed mouth was back on hers, forcing the dark thoughts from her head, kissing her hard and deep. His wicked tongue did its job, making her forget the emotional pain inside her.

Katie allowed herself to be swept up by the headlong sensation. She refused to think. Her only desire was to feel.

She teetered on her high heels, lost her balance. They stumbled together, slamming into the back of the closet. He laughed then, a hearty, substantial laugh that made her giggle. His arm tightened around her waist.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“I like this French thing you got going on. It’s very hot.”

“Shh.” She wanted him to stop talking and start kissing her again.

“Listen…” he said, “I don’t want you to…”

“No talking,” she commanded.

The costumes made their encounter that much more exciting, but their garments were getting in the way. Reaching up, she pulled off his wig, wrapped her arms around his neck and plunged her fingers through his thick hair.

Her pirate took the hint and his tongue went back to doing maddening things to her mouth and causing wicked sensation to shoot straight into the center of her sex. His leather masked rubbed against hers, creating a sensation so erotic she made a soft mewling sound low in her throat.

Yes, take me to oblivion.

He made a corresponding noise, decidedly more masculine than hers. He ground his pelvis against her pubic bone and she arched her hips, letting him know exactly what she wanted.

Blood surged through her veins in a headlong rush. The darkness was absolute, the anonymity acute. It was incredible.

He kissed her, fiercely, passionately. He tasted so good—all masculine strength and sizzling heat. Restlessly, she tossed back her head, exposing her throat to him.

“Nibble on my neck,” she murmured.

The minute his sharp teeth sank lightly into the tender flesh at her hollow of her throat, she groaned with pleasure.

Quiet. She had to be quiet. People might hear. But she couldn’t even think straight, much less fret about the potential for public humiliation. At this point, she didn’t care.

His palms skimmed up underneath her flimsy getup, his hands scorching the bare skin of her belly.

Desire exploded into the small tight closet with them, sending Katie on a mission of frantic grappling. She snatched at his shirt, tugging and pulling. She heard buttons pop, spit to the hardwood floor with a series of soft plopping sounds.

Once his chest was exposed, she buried her face there and inhaled deeply. His chest hairs tickled her nose and she held the hem of his shirt, still clutched in the fist of her hand.

He growled.

A tiger.

She was in the dark with a tiger.

A sweet fear washed over her. A sugary terror clogging her arteries and making her gasp for more. Her entire body tingled with fear and joy and hungry, secret longing.

Her knees wobbled. Sensing her weakness, he pressed her back flat against the wall of the closet, holding her in place with his hip.

She was on fire for him. She had never wanted any man this badly.

He didn’t speak.

Golden silence.

This was very good. Dark and anonymous and quiet. Nothing but heavy, excited breathing. Not hearing his voice made her feel as if he were pure fantasy and it escalated her excitement beyond anything she’d ever dreamed of.

She felt raunchy and rash and ready. This was exactly what she needed to bypass all her troubles.

Wildly, she pressed the tip of her tongue to his broad chest and licked a long path up to the hollow of his throat. He tasted like a seafaring man. Gloriously rich and salty.

She heard her own pulse thrumming through her ears and it sounded like a river rushing downstream.

His movements were measured, controlled, but at the same time relaxed and easy. His fingers were now trailing circles around her nipples, teasing them into taut peaks.

In the inkiness, in the masquerade, he was a creature of the night. Sleek and primal, sexual in a way that quickened her breath and slicked her palms, along with other, more feminine parts of her anatomy.

The stagnant air in the closet was heavy with the sound of their rough, synchronized breathing. It smelled of the musk from their throbbing bodies. It tasted twisted and taboo.

Who—she found herself thinking in the short gaps between utter delight—are you?

She told herself it was Richard. It had to be Richard. Who else could it be?

Her mind thrilled to the possibilities. Why did she find the idea of a masked stranger so compelling? Why did she suddenly want him not to be Richard?

Was she losing her mind? Had she lost it already? Slipping over the edge of reason in a smoking-hot French-maid uniform?

He kissed her again, the glide of his tongue smooth and perfect.

Her blood moved recklessly through her. There was that thrill again, rolling like an electrical storm. Searing and stark and scary.

The pirate growled again, low and guttural. The sound vibrated through her, set her nerve endings flaming, causing her hips to twitch involuntarily and the deep folds of her moist sex to burn for him.

He unzipped her costume and slipped it off her shoulders in the darkness. Then he unhooked her bra, exposing her bare breasts. The pirate lowered his head and began to sweetly suckle one of her aching nipples while lightly pinching the other between his thumb and index finger.

The synthetic material of his fake beard tickled her skin.

Something inside of her slipped, a ship freed from its moorings, set adrift at sea. She reached up to plane his face with her hand, feeling the solid jut of his cheekbone against her palm.

His mouth was skillful. Gentle when she needed him to be, firm when she needed that, too. This pirate was taking his time.

While Katie appreciated his unanticipated leisure, at the same time it added to her anxiety. The longer this took, the more likely they were to be caught.

And that sent a fresh set of brand-new thrills and chills chasing up her spine.

His arms were strong, comforting. Oddly, in spite of the unconventional circumstances, she felt safe. She wished it wasn’t so dark, wished she could see his face.

What, and spoil the fantasy?

He reached down and, grabbing one of her legs, lifted it up and cocked her heel against his hip. Katie felt her stocking being stripped away. He peeled off her stiletto. Let it clatter to the floor. Carefully, he let her leg drop, then repeated the process with her other leg.

She’d intended this encounter to be a clothes-on quickie, but it wasn’t turning out that way. He wasn’t playing his part how she’d imagined.

His breath on her bare skin was deep and rich—black velvet. Nimbly, his fingers worked, tickling her skin. She giggled against the lightness of his touch, the freedom it unwound in her.

Soon, she was standing with her back against the wall wearing nothing but black silk panties.

“You don’t have to get undressed,” she said, taking care to keep her voice disguised, to keep the fantasy going. “We should make this fast. In case someone comes looking for us. We don’t want to get caught doing the nasty at the Ladies League ball.”

“Why not?” he said rough and low. “It’s the perfect high-society sacrilege.”

She frowned. What did he mean by that? She wished she could see his face.

The room was ebony. Only the light from underneath the crack in the door penetrated the darkness.

He said nothing, but she heard the quiet whisper of his zipper sliding down.

She sucked in her breath.

Wet heat gushed through her body. The muscles deep within her pelvis tightened. Her heart beat faster and she surprised herself by how quickly she grew slick.

His hand was a hot pressure as he reached out to trail it across the soft silk between her legs. He stroked her gently, his fingertips executing a slow, deliberate circle.

Whimpering softly against the erotic sensation, she grasped his arm for support.

He kissed her tenderly while his fingers kept exploring. A warm, soft kiss of satisfaction.

Lust swamped her. She had to have him. Had to have him or she would surely die. She ran her tongue around his lips and he made a masculine noise of enjoyment.

He slipped her panties down then, edging them over her hips, below her thighs. When her panties fell to her ankles, she kicked them off and curled against him.

He sank slowly to his knees.

Uh-oh. What now?

She felt the touch of his lips against her upper thigh and pulled in a hissing breath as his mouth inched toward the place Katie most wanted him to touch with that quicksilver tongue.

Wanted it, but was she ready for it? Few had ever gone there. She put a hand to the back of his neck. “Wait, I…”

He lifted his head. “Don’t be shy,” he whispered, and then made a promise. “I won’t hurt you.”

His strong outer lips rested against her soft inner lips. Instant heat. Boiling, building. She was a teapot—hot and ready to let off steam. She had no idea she was capable of feeling such physical intensity.

He made a sound of hearty appreciation and clasped her tightly in his muscled arms, pressing her hips firmly against the wall. Pinning her. His prize.

Her hands were frantic, raking through his hair. She was desperate. Raw. Hungry need personified. Taking lust, turning it into trust.

Foolish, perhaps, but here she was.

She accepted what he gave her. She didn’t ask for more. There was no reason. She did not require it. He conferred upon her everything she desired.

No one had ever touched her in the way Richard was touching her. Inside. Deep inside. He found all her secrets, exploited them to full advantage.

It felt so good it almost hurt. This free-falling pleasure and pain.

Lost. She was afloat in the sweep of his tongue, the moist heat of his mouth. The tension was impossible. His tongue teased and pleased. Taunted and tamed.

She wanted to cup his head in the back of her hands, drop to her knees and face him in the darkness.

But she was afraid. Afraid to learn too much. Afraid to ruin the fantasy. Afraid of being caught in a whirlwind of chaos from which she might never recover.

His head was buried between her legs, his tongue stroking her hooded femininity. She savored the wild ride. This encounter was special. Something she’d remember to the end of her days. She did not want reality to intrude.

He teased her clit, circling slowly at first, and then faster and firmer, pulling her toward a beautiful climax. But he wasn’t going to let it be that easy. He eased off on the pressure, slowed down. And then he took her up again. Up and down in a tumult of sensation until she thought she’d go mad with need.

“I want to feel you inside me,” she murmured. “I have to…feel you. Now.”

He pulled back, rose to his feet. She heard him rustling. What was he doing? She was so wet and hot and achy. She needed him. Now, now, now.

“Do you have a condom?” she whispered.

“Got it covered,” he said.

There was a slight tearing sound of a small package being opened.

She touched him down there, through the opening in his leather pants. Her hand closing around his steely shaft, and she heard his low groan of pleasure.

He was so hard. So big.

“Hurry,” she insisted, growing suddenly scared against a nameless sense of dread crowding inside her chest. “Hurry, hurry, hurry.”

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he said, pushing her shoulders against the wall, “and grab the clothing rods.”

Heart pounding, she did as he asked. One hand wrapped around the hanging rod on the right, the other on the left, her legs serpentined around his hard waist. She could feel the tip of his penis throbbing against her bare buttocks.

She felt like an acrobat, a trapeze artist. It added to the excitement.

Carefully, he entered her warm wet center. She could feel the material of his pants rubbing against her thighs as he moved. Katie reflectively closed her eyes, gasping in reverence.

What an incredible sensation.

She was entranced, filled up by him. She relished the wonder of his body, the excitement of her fantasy, of the life force pulsing through him and into her and back again.

He pushed into the hilt.

And then he began a slow, meticulous thrusting.

Swept away, she matched his tempo, arching her back, pushing against him, using the hanging rods as a fulcrum, increasing the tension. The rhythm between them was quite extraordinary. They were so in tune with each other.

He thrust, she parried.

It was almost mystical.

This slow, sweet journey. The intensity rising and swelling, dropping and climbing.

“More,” she gasped, barely hanging on to her French accent. “I’ve got to have more.”

“Greedy,” he accused.

Yes, yes, she was greedy and not the least bit remorseful.

Biting need flowed through her body. She needed this intimacy, needed him. Her legs were wrapped around his waist and she held him tightly.

The orgasm rose in her, in a hot, loud knot. She let go of the hanging rod so she could stuff her right fist against her mouth to hold back her cries of ecstasy.

He gave one last thrust and his body twitched with the power of his own climax. The sound of his breathing was rough against her ears.

And just after his release, she came as she’d never come before. Wave upon wave. An entire ocean crashing through her.

He held her as she shuddered in his arms. Then, after they’d recovered, he dressed her in the dark, tenderly slipping on her stockings and her shoes. When he was finished he pulled her to his chest and kissed her softly one last time.

“Oh, Richard.” She breathed. “You were magnificent, as I knew you would be.”

He made a startled noise and stepped away from her.

“What’s wrong?” Katie felt his alarm. Hurriedly, she pulled the mask that had gotten pushed up on top of her head back down over her face and quickly adjusted her wig.

“Richard?”

He did not answer, but the coats mumbled as he brushed past them in his effort to get out of the closet and away from her.

Katie fumbled on the wall for the light switch and found it just as he opened the door.

The closet was bathed in light.

Their eyes met.

The pirate captain raised his palms. Katie found herself staring at the barbed-wire tattoo encircling his left wrist. Alarm shot through her, but her brain was still not processing what her eyes were telling her.

This man was not Richard Hancock.

This man was Liam James.

With dawning horror, Katie gasped and slapped a hand over her mouth. She’d just had sex with her sister’s boyfriend!

STUNNED, Liam could only stare as the woman in the French-maid costume almost knocked him down getting past him. In the stark glare of the closet light bulb, he saw her auburn wig was knocked askew, blond curls were peeking out around it.

“Wait,” he called.

She tossed him one last panic-stricken look over her shoulder. Even with the mask covering most of her face, she seemed oddly familiar. Did he know her?

He shook his head to clear it. Who?

Brooke. She reminded him of Brooke Winfield.

The synapses in his brain fired rapidly as alarming thoughts crowded in. Had Brooke dressed up in the French-maid costume to seduce him at the party? But Brooke had brown hair and she was taller than this woman.

And then it dawned on him and he recognized where he’d seen that saucy little walk before.

She was Katie Winfield. Brooke’s baby sister.

Shoving a hand through his hair, Liam groaned aloud.

He had to go after her, had to explain himself. Had to justify what he’d done. Had to make sense of what they’d done together.

Liam took off after her, but she’d already disappeared in the crowd. People were staring at him, pointing and tittering. Agitated, he glanced down and saw that his bare chest was exposed from where Katie had ripped the buttons off his shirt and that his pants were unzipped.

Frantically, he tugged up his zipper as he ran. He was desperate to talk to her before she got away. But by the time he reached the front door, she’d already fled to the parking lot.

“Katie!” he yelled as he stumbled down the stairs and out onto the asphalt road, just as her red BMW convertible sped past him.

All he saw were her taillights disappearing into the darkness, leaving him feeling like the world’s biggest jerk.

**4**

KATIE SPENT the remainder of the weekend holed up in her condo. She sprawled out on the couch, eating handfuls of caramel popcorn, guzzling hot chocolate and immersing herself in a romance-classics movie marathon. When Katie was a kid and feeling down in the dumps, her mother would get out the popcorn, the cocoa and the old movies to pick up her daughter’s flagging spirits.

Normally the self-indulgent trick pulled Katie right out of the doldrums. This time, however, it hadn’t worked. For one thing, it reminded her of Daisy and that made her sad. For another, watching lovers repeatedly meet, mingle, mate and marry hammered home what she already knew—sisters don’t stab sisters in the back by sleeping with their boyfriends.

She would never be able to look Brooke in the eye again.

Cut yourself some slack. You didn’t do it on purpose.

No, Katie might not have done it on purpose, but once again, she hadn’t looked before she leaped. Witness the result of her recklessness.

She was so ashamed.

Brooke doesn’t have to know. No one has to know.

Except Liam knew.

Maybe not, she hoped. Maybe he hadn’t recognized her with the costume and the mask. She prayed it was so. But here was the terrible truth: sex with Liam was the best sex she’d ever had, and she wanted to do it again and again and again.

It wasn’t him, she tried to convince herself. It was the masquerade, the semipublic location, the forbidden thrill of it all.

Oh God, she’d made such a mess of things.

By Monday evening, she was so sick of her own company she picked up the phone and called Tanisha.

“How was your weekend,” she asked her best friend.

“Great,” Tanisha purred like a satisfied kitten. “Dwayne and I spent the entire weekend in bed. In fact, he just left. How was your weekend?”

“Sucky.”

Tanisha hissed in her breath. “Things didn’t go so well with Richard?”

“I wasn’t with Richard,” Katie mumbled.

“Oh?”

“I had sex with my sister’s boyfriend,” she blurted.

“What?”

“I didn’t mean to,” Katie wailed. “I thought he was Richard. He was wearing a pirate costume. It was an honest mistake but now I feel so—”

“Hold the phone, girlfriend. I’ll be right over.”

An hour later, Tanisha showed up on her doorstep, a bag of takeout from the Chinese restaurant down the block clutched in her hand and a half gallon of chocolate-chip-cookie-dough ice cream in the other.

“This sounded like the kind of emergency best soothed by food,” she explained, and breezed into the condo. “Besides, I’m starving. Dwayne and I must have burned up a thousand calories.”

“Braggart,” Katie accused.

“Don’t pretend you wouldn’t be doing some bragging of your own if the shoe was on the other foot.” Tanisha dished up sweet-and-sour chicken and several kinds of dim sum on two paper plates. She passed one of the plates to Katie and handed her a set of chopsticks.

The delicious smell teased Katie’s nose and she realized she hadn’t eaten anything but caramel popcorn all weekend long. They sat at the wrought iron bistro table in the breakfast nook.

“Give me all the details,” Tanisha said. “Don’t leave anything out.”

Cringing, Katie told her everything.

“Look,” Tanisha said when she’d finished, “it was a case of mistaken identity. No one can fault you for that. If anything, he’s the one who should be ashamed for sneaking off with someone else when he’s dating your sister.”

“That’s true.” She perked up. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I betrayed Brooke.”

“You didn’t do it on purpose. How serious is Brooke and this guy, anyway? And what’s his name?”

“Liam James.”

Tanisha’s eyes widened. “The real-estate mogul who was nominated Boston’s most eligible bachelor by Young Bostonian?”

“That’d be the one.”

“All I gotta say is, girl, when you screw up, you do it in style.”

Katie groaned and sank her head in her hands. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t do anything.” Tanisha shrugged. “Forget all about it.”

“I can’t.”

Tanisha studied her for a moment. “This is really eating you up inside, isn’t it?”

Katie nodded miserably.

“Your guilt only underscores what I was trying to tell you on Friday.”

“Which is?”

“You’re into self-sabotage.”

“You’re probably right,” Katie said glumly, poking at her dim sum with a chopstick. Of all the dumb things she’d done in her life, this had to be one of the dumbest.

“There’s a cure, you know.”

Katie looked up from her plate. “And that is?”

“Give up casual sex.”

Katie arched an eyebrow. “This coming from the queen of casual sex.”

“Not anymore,” Tanisha said.

“Oh?” Katie straightened.

Tanisha giggled girlishly, which was a surprise because she was not the giggly type. She pulled a key from her pocket. “Dwayne gave me a key to his place and I gave him one to mine.”

“Seriously?”

“I think my wild partying days are behind me.”

“That’s great.” Katie got up to give her friend a hug.

“Thanks,” Tanisha beamed. “I feel so happy.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“I wish you could find someone. When was the last time you had a serious boyfriend?”

Katie gulped. She’d never had a serious boyfriend. She’d been having too much fun playing the field. “I’m not really ready for a serious relationship. I just want to stop making stupid mistakes.”

“Then turn over a new leaf and empower yourself.”

“I thought I was empowered.”

“If you were empowered, then you wouldn’t be feeling miserable over it.”

Katie blew out her breath. “Okay, so how do I empower myself?”

“Stop basing your decisions on an if-it-feels-good-do-it philosophy. Think about the consequences of your actions,” Tanisha instructed.

“Can you bottom-line it for me?”

“When it comes to sex, you’re going to have to go cold turkey.”

LIAM SPENT the weekend working. Or at least trying to work.

Hell, who was he kidding? He hadn’t gotten a lick of work done. He’d spent Saturday and Sunday at the office staring at the contracts on his desk and all he could see was Katie Winfield decked out in that devastating French-maid outfit.

He had taken his anger at Finn Delancy out on her, and he had no idea how to make amends.

Maybe you shouldn’t make amends. Maybe you should leave well enough alone. She’s obviously embarrassed that she mistook you for this Richard dude, or she wouldn’t have run off. Let it go.

But Monday afternoon, when he still hadn’t been able to concentrate, he was starting to get concerned. He’d never been stymied like this. He didn’t like it. To clear his head, he went for a jog in the park, but it didn’t help.

Finally, not knowing what else to do, he telephoned Tony.

“Red Sox are playing tonight,” Liam said. “Wanna go?”

“Just you and me?”

“Yes. Unless Jess wants to come.”

“She’s over at her sister’s helping her redecorate her living room.”

“So we’re on?”

“I don’t believe it. You? Taking time out for a ball game with your best buddy?”

“We’ve got season tickets, no sense in wasting them.”

“But we haven’t gone to a game without a business client tagging along since…well, never.”

“We went in college.”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Really? I could have sworn we did.”

“Didn’t happen.”

“Well, I guess it’s time we rectified my oversight. Meet you at the ticket counter. They throw out the first pitch at seven.”

Tony was lounging at the front gate when Liam arrived at Fenway Park.

“You gonna tell me what this is really about?” Tony asked as they made their way to their seats juggling beers and hot dogs.

“What? I want to watch a few innings with my best friend.”

“You sure there’s not something you want to tell me?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it. But if there was something, you’d tell me, right?”

“You’d be the first to know.”

“I doubt it,” Tony mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“You keep everything bottled up, buttoned down. You don’t talk to anybody about anything except work.” Tony waved at hand at Liam’s starched shirt. “I mean, have you ever in your life, just once, let yourself go?”

“No,” he said, but then he thought, French maid in a closet.

“What are you so afraid of?” Tony asked.

“Who says I’m afraid of anything?”

“Everybody’s afraid of something. I’m trying to figure out why you push yourself so hard?”

It sounded like a dumb question to him. How could he not push himself hard? He had a lot to prove. “Money,” he said.

“Don’t give me that. You have enough money to last you a lifetime.”

What was he afraid of? Failure? Falling in love? He gulped back a swallow of beer. “Okay,” Liam admitted after a long moment, “it’s about a woman.”

Tony sat up straighter. “Brooke?”

“No. Her sister, Katie.”

“I’m listening.”

Liam glanced over his shoulder to see how close the nearest fan was sitting and lowered his voice. “I hooked up with her at the masquerade party.”

“Hooked up as in—”

“Yeah.”

Tony whistled and slugged him lightly on the upper arm. “You dog. Who knew you had it in you?”

Liam glowered. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Balancing his hot dog on one knee, Tony held up a palm. “Nothing, dude. Settle.”

Agitation had him shifting in his seat. “The deal is, I can’t get her out of my head.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“Of course it is. I can’t concentrate on work.”

“You’ve never really felt this way about a woman before?”

“No.”

“How many girlfriends have you had?”

Liam shrugged. “I don’t know. Six, seven. But none of them ever messed with my head like this.” Other than Arianna, and that was a whole different kind of head game.

“That’s because—since I’ve known you anyway—you’ve always picked career-driven women who complemented your lifestyle. You’ve never been out with one who made your question your priorities.”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe that’s the problem.”

“I’m not following you.”

“Katie Winfield, this woman you hooked up with at the party, she’s different.”

Liam nodded.

“Totally not right for you. Impulsive, I’m guessing. Adventuresome.”

“Yes, yes.” Impatiently, he tapped his fingertips on the back of the seat in front of him. “What’s your point?”

“For the first time in your life you’ve found a woman who makes you feel totally alive.”

He wanted to deny it, but it was true.

“Compared to her,” Tony went on, “work seems dull and pointless.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“Got bad news for you, buddy boy.” Tony grinned. “There’s only one way to beat this thing.”

“How’s that?”

“Embrace it.”

Liam didn’t like the direction this conversation was headed. “What do you mean, embrace it?”

“You’ve been working nonstop since you were what? Sixteen?”

“Yeah.”

“And all this time, you’ve been keeping your emotions in check.”

“What’s your point?”

“It was bound to happen.”

Frustration had him fisting his hand around his beer. “What was bound to happen?”

“You gotta have a little fun at some point. Kick up your heels. Let your libido run wild.”

“You think so? You think if I embrace this feeling and go with it, have a good time with this woman, it will eventually pass and then I can get back to work?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Hmm. It was a thought.

“So what does Katie Winfield do for a living?” Tony asked.

“She’s a graphic designer at a small advertising agency.”

“There you go. It’s perfect.” Tony dabbed mustard off his chin with a green napkin.

“There I go where?”

“Hire her advertising agency to do some work for us. Those downtown warehouses you’ve renovated into condos are opening soon. Throw the ad campaign her way.”

“And then what?”

“Seduce her. Have a good time if she’s game. Besides, it’s way past time you sowed a few wild oats.”

“You think that would work?”

“Worth a shot. Here we go boys!” Tony jumped to his feet and almost spilled his beer. “Home run Red Sox!”

COLD TURKEY?

Easy for Tanisha to say. She had a key to her boyfriend’s place. Katie had to admit she was jealous.

And lonely.

Maybe Tanisha was right. Maybe it was time for her to turn over a new leaf.

Bright and early Tuesday morning, Max stuck his head into the office she shared with Tanisha. “Excuse me, ladies. We have a new client. Meeting in the conference room at ten.”

“Should we put together a preliminary pitch before the meeting?” Katie asked. “Who’s the client?”

“He’s only here to get preliminary bids. But bring your A game. This fish is a big one.”

An hour later, the creative team assembled in the conference room, buzzing with speculation about this new high-profile project. Katie was still preoccupied with what had happened at the Ladies League ball and she wasn’t paying much attention.

That is until the door to the conference room opened and Max walked in, followed by their new client.

At the sight of him, Katie’s heart stumbled drunkenly against her rib cage. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

Liam James, wrist tattoo and all, came striding into the room as if he owned it.

The memory of their rendezvous in the cloak closet came rushing back in gloriously shameful detail. The hot kisses, the frantic shedding of clothes, the quick, powerful thrusts in the inky blackness.

She hiccoughed.

Did he recognize her? Katie kept her head down as she slipped into a leather swivel chair at the far end of the conference table and prayed that he did not.

Max went around the room, introducing him to everyone on the team. When Liam’s eyes lighted on Katie, a bone-clutching chill shot through her, immediately followed by a gush of thrilling heat.

Oh, this was bad.

“Katie,” he said, his voice oozing charm. “It’s nice to see you again.”

What did he mean by that remark?

He shook her hand and her gaze fixed on the now familiar barbed-wire tattoo encircling his wrist. A quick pulse of energy surged between them.

Lightning in a jar.

She jerked her hand back from the contact. His hazel eyes darkened and a slight but suggestive smile tipped his lips.

He knew!

“Hi,” she said because that was all she could manage to squeeze past her constricted throat.

Play it cool and act as if Friday night never happened. You’re going cold turkey.

“You two know each other?” Max arched an eyebrow.

“He’s dating my sister,” Katie explained.

“I’m not.” Liam’s eyes never left her face. “Brooke and I are just friends.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He smiled at her.

Relief washed over Katie, along with a surge of hope and a heightened sense of excitement. Settle down.

Liam turned to Max. “Actually, Katie’s the reason I’m here.”

“Really?” Max said archly.

“I’ve seen the graphic designs she did for the new campaign for Worthington’s Department Store. She’s a very talented artist. You scored big when you hired her.”

Liam’s compliment brought a flush of pride to Katie’s cheeks. Brooke worked for Worthington’s and she must have been the one to show Liam her design.

Max looked at Katie as if seeing her for the first time. “She’s not bad. A bit raw, but maybe she could become great with time and dedication.”

Coming from Max, that was a magnanimous admission.

Liam, broad shouldered and lean hipped, pulled out the chair beside Katie and sat down. Her heart thumped.

My legs have been wrapped around those hips, she thought.

The large conference room suddenly seemed claustrophobically small sitting this close to him, his crisp, masculine scent wafting over her. He smelled startlingly wonderful—like minty toothpaste mingled with rainy autumn days and…sweet, sweet sin.

Max took a seat, as well, steepled his fingertips and leaned forward. “So tell us about your new project, Mr. James.”

“Well,” Liam said, his gaze lingering on Katie so long she was certain he must have guessed her secret identity. She wanted to look away, but she simply could not. “It’s all about sex.”

“SEX?” Katie whispered.

Sex?

What in the devil had made him say that?

Katie Winfield, that’s who.

Liam hadn’t failed to notice the sweet curve of her ass as she’d gracefully eased it down into the plush leather chair. His palms itched to knead her sweet, firm flesh sheathed so provocatively by the silky material of her skirt. The strength of his need was shocking.

She was staring him straight in the eyes, not intimidated in the least by his frank appraisal.

Courageous. He liked that.

His gaze fell to her full, feminine mouth and hung there. God, she had gorgeous lips. It felt as if the conference room were empty and the world had narrowed to just the two of them. Staring into her eyes, Liam recognized the same out-of-control sensation that had gripped him at the masquerade party.

“Sex,” he repeated, as if that’s what he’d intended on saying all along. “I’m renovating downtown warehouses into condos and I want an ad campaign that appeals to hip, young, well-to-do urbanites.”

“And sex sells,” Katie said.

“Exactly.”

“We can do that,” Max Kruger interjected.

“But,” Liam spoke, never taking his gaze off Katie, “I want Katie in as the art director.”

“Katie?” Max sounded nonplussed.

“Me?” Katie squeaked.

“You.”

“Katie’s never served as art director on a campaign,” Max said.

“First time for everything,” Liam replied.

“Max is right,” Katie said. “I’d be out of my league.”

Liam shrugged and started to get up. “All right, if you don’t think you can handle success.”

“Excuse me.” Katie’s eyes sparked.

Had he made her mad?

“Could I speak to you out in the hallway for a moment?”

“Me?” He arched an eyebrow.

“You,” she said curtly.

“Why, sure.” Liam couldn’t stop the grin this time. “Max, do you mind?”

“It’s your dime.” Max waved a hand.

Katie marched out into the hallway. Liam followed leisurely, enjoying the view below her flouncing skirt hem. Damn, but the woman had a gorgeous pair of legs.

She pulled the door closed tight after him, sank her hands on her hips and spun to face him. “What in the hell are you trying to pull?”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. I know what you’re up to.”

“You do?”

“Yes, and stop smiling at me.”

“You don’t like being smiled at?”

“Not by you.”

“What’s wrong with me?” He was enjoying teasing her.

“You…you dressed up like Captain Jack and took advantage of my case of mistaken identity.”

“Hey, now—” he raised a finger “—you were the one who pulled me into the closet.”

“So why did you come here today?” She folded her arms protectively over her chest.

“To get an ad campaign rolling for my new condos.”

“Liar.”

“Okay,” he admitted, “that wasn’t the only reason I chose Sharper Designs. I wanted to see you again, Katie, and apologize for what happened in the closet.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. It happened. It’s over, and now that I know you’re not Brooke’s boyfriend, well, I don’t even have to feel guilty about it anymore, now do I?”

Liam angled his head and studied her face for a long moment. In spite of her words, she was still feeling guilty. “You made quite an impression on me.”

“Let’s get something straight,” she said. “You’re hiring my talents as a graphic designer, nothing more. As far as I’m concerned, Friday never happened. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re still doing it,” she said.

“Doing what?”

“Smiling at me. Stop smiling at me.”

“What’s wrong with smiling?”

“Because you look adorable when you smile.”

“I know,” he said, his grin widening. “I’m trying to be irresistible.”

“It’s not working,” she muttered. “You’re resistible.”

“You are such a bad liar.”

Her earlobes turned pink. She ducked her head, but then peeked up at him from underneath those long eyelashes. His heart slammed when he spied the hint of vulnerability in those blue depths. Her eyes narrowed the world to only him.

Liam felt special.

In a nervous gesture, she slipped her fingers through her hair, and tucked a sleek blond strand behind one perfectly shaped ear. Her breasts rose and fell beneath the V-neck of her crisp white blouse, and he spied the sexy blush of a pink bra underneath the white top.

Oh, yeah, she knew how to get to a man.

She spun another strand of golden hair around an index finger in a graceful motion. Her fingernails, he noted, were painted a soft high-society color of pale rose. She wore a single gold chain around her neck and her earrings were plain gold studs. But everything she had on was of the highest quality. It was the understated attire of a true blue blood.

She was contradictory. There were her classically tailored work clothes, and then there was the French-maid persona she let loose in closets. He liked the paradox.

His gaze hung on her lips. Rich, ripe, painted the color of summer strawberries. He caught his breath and waited.

For what, he didn’t know.

Katie flicked out her tongue and touched the tip of it to the glistening gloss of her upper lip. Slowly, she traced around the moist pink edges of her mouth with the cool certainty of a woman who knew exactly the effect she had on a man.

The overhead florescent hallway lighting slanted a shaft of illumination across her face. He looked down at her and was surprised to see a glimpse of sadness in her eyes. Tender feelings rose up in him. Feelings he’d never felt before and didn’t understand.

As they stared into each other’s eyes, the air leaked from their lungs in a simultaneous exhale.

Liam knew he was a goner. His gaze beaded on her lips. Lips he yearned to kiss again. He leaned forward, resting his arm on the wall above her head. Not thinking, just wanting.

Katie didn’t pull away. She was so near he could feel the heat of her skin. If they weren’t standing in the corridor of Sharper Designs, he would have kissed her.

They stared at one another with an astonishing mix of surprise, delight and stark sexual heat. He had to have her. Tony was right. The only way he was ever going to get Katie out of his system was to embrace his desires and find a way to charm this bedazzling woman into his bed.

“I’m coming back on Friday. Around one o’clock,” he said. “That gives you three days to come up with an art design for my condos. Do you think you can handle it?”

She lifted her chin. “I can handle it.”

“Oh, and there’s one other thing.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I’m expecting to have my socks blown off.”

**5**

“ARE YOU SURE it has to be cold turkey?” Katie asked Tanisha after Liam had left Sharper Designs and they were in their office again. “Can’t I sort of taper off impulsive sex?”

“Absolutely not. It’s like when you’ve convinced yourself you’re only going to have one Oreo cookie and you end up scarfing down the whole box.”

“You are a tough taskmaster,” Katie grumbled.

“It’s for your own good,” Tanisha said sagely. “Builds character.”

“Sure, I’d like to see how good you’d be at giving up sex.”

“I’m not the one who was caught doing the deed with the wrong man at a masquerade party.”

“Touché.” Yes, while initially Liam might have been the wrong man, Katie found herself wondering if fate, in its roundabout way, might have actually dealt her the right man.

She thought of how he’d stared at her when she’d called him out into the hallway for their private chat. How very close his lips had been to hers. She felt hot and bothered all over. But before she had time to fully ride that train of thought Max marched into the office.

“Winfield,” he barked.

“Yes, sir?”

“I don’t have to tell you what landing the James account means to this firm.”

“No, sir.”

“And if making you art director is what it takes to seal the deal, then of course, I’m agreeing to it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I’m not happy about this development. I don’t know what you’ve got going on with Liam—”

“Sir, let me assure you, there’s nothing going on,” Katie said.

Max snorted. “Please, I saw the way the man was staring at you. If nothing is going on yet, then he’s looking to start something up.”

Katie’s face heated. Was their attraction that obvious? “Nothing’s going on,” she reiterated. Hadn’t she just turned over a new leaf?

Max impatiently waved away her denial. “Here it is. I don’t know what’s happening with you two and I really don’t care. All I care is that you pull off this campaign to his satisfaction. Personally, I don’t think you’re ready for the art-director position. You’re too young, too unmotivated.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Max cut her off. “I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt. Do well with this project and the promotion will be permanent. But if you screw this up, you’re out on your can. Got it?”

“Got it.” She resisted the urge to salute.

“As long as we’re clear on this. Now, get to work.” Max turned and stalked out of the office.

Katie slumped down in her chair. Talk about pressure.

She only had three measly days to come up with a design plan that would blow Liam’s socks off. If she wanted to keep her job, she had to make sure their attraction stayed firmly under control.

How to accomplish both goals?

She spent the remainder of the workday pondering the question. On the way to her car that evening, she passed by the pet shop and noticed that the cocker spaniel was still in the window. The minute the pup spied her, he went up on his hind legs, pushing his front paws up against the glass, tail wagging madly.

“Hey, boy.” She greeted him.

The pup barked.

Katie started to back up.

He barked louder.

Katie’s heart melted. She cupped her hands around her eyes, pressed her face to the glass. The lights were on inside and she saw customers moving around. The store was still open.

The quaint silver bell over the door tinkled welcomingly as Katie stepped inside. The woman behind the counter greeted her with a New Englander’s slow, syllabled “Hey-ya.”

“Hello.” Katie smiled at the woman, but her eyes were on the puppy. She leaned over the barrier keeping the cocker penned in the window and tickled her fingers over his soft fur. The puppy licked Katie’s hand with his warm, wet tongue.

Katie giggled.

It would be so easy to fall in love with him.

Like there’s any room in your life for a pet. You, who’ve killed every houseplant you’ve ever owned.

Yes, but she was doing things differently now. No more late-night partying. No more random hookups. No more impromptu weekend trips out of town. There would be room in her new lifestyle for a puppy.

It was a nice thought.

Better make sure the changes stick before you rush headlong into buying a dog.

Yes, just because she was giving up men didn’t mean she could use a puppy as a substitute. Sighing wistfully, she left the pet shop.

Twenty minutes later, she walked through the door of her condo, the daily mail tucked under her arm. She kicked off her stilettos in the foyer, tossed her sweater over the back of a kitchen chair, then made a beeline for the refrigerator and the leftover dim sum takeout Tanisha had brought over the night before.

She heated the food in the microwave and ate standing over the sink as she leafed through the stack of mail. Catalog, catalog, bill, circular. She tossed those aside, but stopped when she came to a jazzy pink envelope with her name embossed with gold foil calligraphy.

Hmm, what was this?

It looked interesting. She glanced at the return address, saw it was from a nightclub called Chassys. Frowning, Katie tore into the envelope, trying to remember if she’d ever been to this bar.

Dear Ms. Winfield,

You are invited to join Martinis and Bikinis. We are a social club offering group encouragement and support for women seeking personal growth and empowerment through pushing themselves outside their comfort zone.

You are exactly the kind of member we’re looking for.

Smart, educated, influential. If you’re interested in joining our group, we meet the first Thursday of every month at Chassys nightclub. Please find driving directions enclosed. We’re looking forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Beckham

President, Martinis and Bikinis

How timely. It was as if this Lindsay Beckham person had read her mind. Empowerment and personal growth. That was exactly what she needed right now.

And the Martinis and Bikinis’ next meeting was this Thursday.

What did she have to lose? She might as well go. Who knew? This group might be the thing she needed to stick with her new plan to tread the straight and narrow.

WHEN THURSDAY evening rolled around, Katie dressed in black slacks, a blue-and-white angora sweater, black boots and modest gold jewelry. Following the driving directions that accompanied the invitation, she ended up in an older neighborhood of South Boston, currently undergoing an economic resurgence.

Chassys was located at 431 Beaumont Street in an older brick building next door to the Yarn Barn. Just a few buildings down from a brand-new Starbucks. Here, apartments were located over most of the shops, restaurants and nightclubs. After circling the crowded block a couple of times, she found a parking spot on a side street and walked back to the bar. Her boots clacked with a clear, determined sound against the uneven sidewalk.

This is it. The fresh start to my new life. Viva female empowerment.

It was a high-traffic area. This time of the evening, there were lots of couples and groups of young singles milling about. The area was a far cry from the upscale establishments she normally frequented.

But when she pushed through the mahogany-paneled door, Katie stepped into a dazzling oasis. Chassys was unexpectedly classy. The furnishings were sleek, new and thoroughly modern.

The floor was constructed of a cherry hardwood, the bar and tabletops dark granite. The barstools were black leather with chrome trim. White Japanese lanterns hung from the ceiling, offering lots of subtle lighting. Chic, atmospheric music filtered in through a state-of-the art sound system, setting the mood with a rhythmic beat.

The bar was packed with a hip, lively crowd and Katie, who was usually right at home in nightclub hot spots, suddenly felt intimidated. Clutching the invitation in her hand, she inched her way through the crowd and headed for the bar.

“What can I get you?” asked the hunky, dark-haired bartender in black denim and a black T-shirt, who had to shout to be heard over the humming throng. Any other time, Katie might have been inclined to tease him. But she’d put aside her flirtatious ways.

“I’m here for a meeting,” she shouted back and waved the invitation for him to see.

“Then you’ll be wanting the Passion-tini.”

“No—” she shook her head “—I got invited to join a group called Martinis and Bikinis.”

“That’s right.” He nodded and flashed a white-toothed grin. “Chassys prepares a different Bikinitini every month. September is Passion-tini month. It’s a sassy mixture of passion fruit, mint, fresh lime juice and citrus vodka. Addictive stuff.”

“Hook me up.”

He made the drink and slid it across the bar. She reached in her purse for a twenty, but he held up his palm. “Drinks are on the house for Martinis and Bikinis first timers.”

“Really?” Ooh, she liked this club already. “Thanks.”

“The group is meeting right through there.” He jerked his thumb toward a curtain at the back of the room. “I think everyone’s pretty much here.”

Suddenly, she felt a little weak-kneed with nervousness. Katie took a long pull of the Passion-tini. It was delicious and powerful enough to bolster her determination to change her life.

Tentatively, she edged back the black silk curtain and stepped into a room with black upholstered banquettes on both sides and several small tables in the middle of the room.

There were about thirty women in attendance, each holding a Passion-tini and clustered in small groups, engaged in animated conversations. Apparently the official meeting had yet to begin.

Not knowing anyone, Katie felt out of place.

A tall elegant-looking blonde standing in the front of the room caught Katie’s attention. Her hair was combed back off her forehead, revealing a stunning widow’s peak. She had high, beautiful cheekbones that put her in mind of Meryl Streep. Her eyes were deep blue and she had a smile on her face, but it was easy to see she was a reserved woman who held her real emotions closely in check.

“Hiya,” said a short, breathy-voiced woman with curly auburn hair, snapping brown eyes and apple-dumpling cheeks. She stuck her hand out. “You must be new. I’m Tanya.”

One look in Tanya’s eyes and she immediately felt welcome. “Nice to meet you, Tanya. I’m Katie.”

“I just joined M&B a few months ago myself.” Tanya giggled. “I kid you not. These ladies saved my life after a lousy divorce. Are you divorced? A lot of women join M&B after a divorce.”

“Never married.”

“Good for you. That’s one way to avoid ending up with a louse.” Tanya giggled again and that’s when Katie realized the giggling was a dodge for her nervousness. Knowing Tanya was nervous, as well, soothed Katie’s own trepidation.

“Who’s that?” Katie nodded her head at the sleek blonde.

“Oh, that’s Lindsay Beckham. She’s the owner of Chassys and founder of our group. She’s quite the businesswoman and so daring. She’s an example for us all. She’s helped empower so many women. Including my best pal, Kim.”

“Which one is Kim?”

“She’s not here tonight.” Giggling, Tanya lowered her voice. “She’s recovering from getting a boob job that was part of her Martini dare.”

“Martini dare?”

“You’ll see. It’s the reason for the club. The group dares you to go beyond your comfort zone and then offers emotional support for you in the process.”

“So let me get this straight. The group dared your friend Kim to get a boob job?”

Tanya shook her head. “No, they dared her to do something she’d always wanted to do, but had been too afraid to take the leap.”

“So what have you dared?” Katie leaned down closer to whisper to Tanya and her gaze strayed to the woman’s ample bosom.

Tanya caught the look, giggled and wiggled proudly. “These are all me. I haven’t done a dare yet.”

“How come?”

“Lindsay doesn’t think I’m ready.”

“Oh, so Lindsay gets to decide who takes a dare and when?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Lindsay sounds like a bit of a control freak.”

Tanya’s eyes widened as she looked around Katie’s shoulder. “Um, Katie…”

“She’s standing right behind me, isn’t she?”

Tanya just giggled.

Oh, gosh, when was she ever going to learn to keep her big trap shut? This certainly wasn’t an auspicious start to her first Martinis and Bikinis meeting.

Cringing, Katie turned to face the woman and sheepishly wiggled her fingertips. “Hi, there.”

“Lindsay Beckham, resident control freak.” A bemused look was in the woman’s eyes, but she wasn’t smiling. Katie couldn’t tell if she was pissed off or amused.

“Katie Winfield.”

Lindsay studied her with an appraising look and she took so long in responding that Katie began to think it might be best if she just slunk out of there.

“I have an invitation.” She held it up. “See?”

Lindsay looked past Katie. “You came alone?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, it’s nice to have you. Please take a seat. The meeting is about to start.”

Tanya plopped down at an empty table and patted the seat next to her. Kate sat down beside her.

The program started with the women who’d completed their dares from the previous month regaling the rest of the audience with the details of their adventures. One woman had gone skydiving, and she rhapsodized about the experience. Another had dared to ask out her handsome new neighbor, only to discover to her disappointment that he was gay.

The group gave them a rousing round of applause and then Lindsay stepped up again. “And now, we’ve reached the part of the evening where two members of our group are chosen to pick a scroll from the sacred Box of Dares.”

A ripple of excitement ran through the crowd as Lindsay made a big production of bringing out a heavy wooden box.

“As always, we recite the rules first.” Lindsay pantomimed unrolling a parchment and held up the invisible rules in front of her. “The members chosen for the dare must be approved by a majority of the membership present. As you swore when you joined Martinis and Bikinis, once you agree to pick a dare, there’s no backing out. Period. Even quitting the group will not exempt you from your most serious obligation.” She looked out over the gathered women. “Hands up if you understand.”

Everyone except Katie raised their hands. She was only visiting.

“Then by the completely nonimportant authority vested in me by the Martinis and Bikinis Organization, I announce that Sherry will take the first dare this month. Everyone agree?”

It was a unanimous vote.

Sherry, a thin but curvaceous blonde with short spiked hair and crimson lipstick, bounced up to the front of the room. Katie noticed her hand shook slightly as she drew out a scrolled piece of parchment wrapped with a red ribbon. These women took their dares seriously.

After untying the ribbon, Sherry rolled down the scroll and read her dare aloud. “Take a ride in an expensive Italian sports car, but do it completely in the nude.”

The women hooted and catcalled and craned forward with interest. “Go, Sherry!” someone shouted.

Pfft, that sounded easy to Katie. She thought of the Babes Gone Braless video she’d appeared in during spring break her sophomore year of college. Now that was a dare.

Remember, you’ve sworn off doing rash things. Maybe this group isn’t for you if they encourage people to do rash things.

“Katie.” Lindsay held up the box and shook it. “Your turn.”

She splayed a hand to her chest. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“But…but I’m new.”

Lindsay looked around at the group. “Anyone opposed to Katie picking tonight?”

Katie was the only one who raised her hand.

“Majority rules.” Lindsay wagged the box. “You’re up.”

“I’m not even an official member,” Katie protested.

“You can join tonight.”

Katie shook her head. “I’m not sure I’m ready to make that commitment.”

“What’s the matter? Are you too afraid to empower your life?” Lindsay challenged.

Katie narrowed her eyes. She knew what this was about. Lindsay was getting even with her for that control-freak comment by making her choose a dare on her very first night.

Not one to back down from a challenge, Katie shot to her feet. For a split second, a wave of panic washed over her. Here she was again, jumping headlong into something without considering the consequences. But she wasn’t about to let Lindsay see her hesitate.

With a toss of her head, she marched to the front of the room, stuck her hand in the box and drew her first dare.

She slipped the red velvet ribbon from the crisp parchment scroll, unrolled it and read out loud to the room. “You have drawn a three-part dare. Each of your dares is to be completed within one week’s time. The second and third dares will be mailed to reach you by the Thursday of each week. For this week, your dare is to make love to the man of your dreams in a forbidden place.”

Stunned, Katie turned to gape at Lindsay. It was as if the dare had been tailor-made for her. Correction. Tailor-made for the old Katie. The one who used to do foolish things like make love to strangers in closets.

“Ball’s in your court, Katie.” Lindsay smirked. “Are you all talk? Or do you dare?”

ANTICIPATION.

A heightened sense of expectation had been nipping at his heels for three days. Liam was so stoked about seeing Katie again that he pulled into the secure parking lot three blocks down from Sharper Designs fifteen minutes ahead of their scheduled Friday meeting.

All week long, he’d kept thinking about Tony’s advice.

Seduce Katie Winfield. Have a good time. Sow a few wild oats.

His body tensed with the thought of her. His mouth filled with the remembered taste of her sweet lips as he hopped out of his Lamborghini, briefcase in tow and headed for Sharper Designs.

And then, as if he’d conjured her from thin air, Liam spied Katie standing on the sidewalk, peering into the window of a pet store.

Irresistibly, his eyes were drawn to her. Her sleek blond Boston Brahmin hair was capped off by a bright red beret. She looked incredibly jaunty as she raised a lithe hand, doffed the beret and lightly combed her fingers through her tousled tresses before putting it back on again.

She wore a soft fuzzy sweater the same color as the beret. He had no doubt it was made from the finest cashmere. The hem of her swingy black skirt molded to her slim thighs when she moved, fluid as water. Just watching her caused his muscles to tighten.

She seemed to encapsulate all the things he longed for, but feared he could never have. Good breeding, perfect manners, high-born status. A genuine sense of fun.

Did she have any idea how impossibly beautiful she was, with that silky smooth skin, long, swanlike neck and the cutest little overbite. Did she have a clue as to how many men would give their right arm to be with her?

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said as he approached, but then felt like a total idiot for saying something so stupid and clichéd. Smooth move from the guy dubbed Boston’s most eligible bachelor of the year by Young Bostonian magazine.

She turned and the minute she saw him, her face lit up, warming him from the inside out. “Liam.”

Their gazes met and he saw such a melancholic expression come into her eyes that it made him pause.

What was she so sad about?

His gaze drifted to the pet-shop window. There was a cocker-spaniel puppy in the window, paws pressed against the glass, eyeing Katie with total puppy love. A feeling he understood well.

“Friend of yours?” He smiled.

“I drop by to see him every day on my lunch hour. Sometimes I even go in to pet him. Honestly, I can’t understand why he hasn’t been adopted. Isn’t he the most adorable thing?”

“Yes, he is,” Liam said, but he was looking at her, not the puppy. “Why don’t you buy him?”

“Me? Oh, no.” She shook her head. “I can’t even keep goldfish alive.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone in my family.” She chuckled. “Just ask them.”

“I’m not asking everyone in your family,” he said. “I’m asking you.”

Katie shrugged. “My apartment doesn’t allow pets.”

“Oh, is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

His gaze caught lazily on her lips. “Would you like to take him for a walk?”

“We’ve got a meeting in ten minutes.”

“I’m the client. I can delay the meeting if I want to. Would you like to take the puppy for a walk?”

“We could do that?”

He shrugged. “When you’re Boston’s most eligible bachelor…”

“You can do anything,” she finished for him, and grinned.

“You’ve got it.”

“But what’s Max going to say?”

“Let me take care of Max.” Liam pulled out his cell phone and gave Max Kruger a call to tell him he was commandeering his employee and pushing the meeting back for half an hour. “We’re all set.”

Five minutes later, Liam and Katie left the pet shop with the exuberant puppy, headed for the nearby park. The sun was warm, the breeze cool and the smell of autumn crisp and fresh. The puppy tugged hard on the leash, happy to be out of the window and exploring the world.

“Did you ever have a dog when you were growing up?” Liam asked.

“Once, but I wasn’t allowed to keep him. Brooke turned out to be allergic. You?”

He shook his head. “We couldn’t afford the food and vet bills.”

“Poor us. We’ve been so deprived.” She laughed; a soft melodic sound that lit him up inside.

You can say that again.

“Look at the way his hair flows, so soft and silky.”

“I’m looking,” he said, but his eyes weren’t on the cocker spaniel.

“He’s so proud and proper, the way he holds his head up and prances.” Katie tilted her own head. “I wonder if he has a pedigree.”

“Why do you think I had to put down a three-hundred-dollar deposit just to take him for a walk?”

She graced him with a beatific smile. “Thank you for that.”

“You could change apartments, you know?”

“What?”

“If you wanted to buy him, that is. You could always move.”

“It’d be a big commitment,” she hedged.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I’m not ready to tackle such a long-term obligation.”

“If you were ready, what would you name him?”

“Something befitting his nobility. Duke, perhaps. That’s what I named the puppy that was mine for a weekend.”

“It suits him.” He nodded.

“Oh, look,” she said, “an ice-cream vendor. Want some?”

Without waiting for an answer, she and Duke took off toward the ice-cream vendor pushing his cart through the park. Liam tagged along, enjoying her enthusiasm.

She bought an orange push-up. Liam hadn’t seen one since he was a kid. It was orange-flavored ice cream on a stick wrapped up in a cardboard container festooned with cartoon characters. You were supposed to push up the ice cream as you ate it. The theory was the cardboard kept sticky confections off messy children.

“Mmm, wanna bite?” She pushed up the orange ice cream and offered it to him.

“No, that’s okay. You go ahead.”

“Come on. It’s great.” She waggled it under his nose. “I dare you.”

He smiled, shook his head.

“What? Are you afraid I’ll give you girl cooties?”

Cooties. Something else he hadn’t heard since childhood.

“I’m not afraid of girl cooties.”

“Prove it,” she goaded.

She had no idea of the craving ripping and clawing through him as he looked at her lips, dotted with a spot of ice cream, or she wouldn’t tempt him so glibly. If she had the slightest idea about the appetites he kept tightly leashed, the hunger that even now, in this park, in the bright light of the noonday sun, stressed every atom of his self-control, she would run for her life.

Liam didn’t want to eat ice cream. He wanted to eat her.

“Come on,” she cajoled.

Impulsively, he bit off a bite of her push-up. She was right. It tasted delicious.

He thought he might scare her with his abrupt about-face, the slippage of his control. But, no, she wasn’t the least bit fazed. Her tongue flicked out and she licked the part he’d just bitten into.

“Mmm.” She winked seductively. “Now I have boy cooties. Guess we’ll have cooties together.”

“I guess so,” he smiled, turned on by her antics.

Duke whimpered.

“Don’t worry,” Katie said, pushing up the remainder of the ice cream for the puppy to lick, “we haven’t forgotten you.”

A few minutes later, they rounded a corner and came upon a pond where a group of picnickers were feeding bread to a flock of hungry ducks.

The minute Duke caught scent of the waterfowl, he went berserk. The cocker spaniel jerked on the leash, almost yanking Katie off her feet.

Liam grabbed for her elbow but she was already gone, pulled toward the water by the feisty Duke, who no longer looked so regal with his teeth bared, issuing a bark so commanding it sounded as if it could have come from a Doberman.

The picnickers gawked.

The ducks scattered.

Katie tried pulling on the leash, but apparently Duke held an entrenched hatred of ducks. The mild tugging on his neck wasn’t enough to stop his forward motion.

Liam sprinted after them.

Duke hit the water with a loud smack.

Katie teetered on the bank, holding tightly to the leash.

“Let go,” Liam called.

But his warning came too late. The heel of her right boot was wedged between two pathway stones. She jerked backward in an attempt to extract herself, but the dog was swimming in the opposite direction.

The next thing Liam knew, a bootless Katie was tumbling headfirst into the water.

**6**

KATIE CAME UP sputtering. She shoved wet hair from her eyes and looked up to see Liam on the bank laughing his ass off.

“Very funny,” she growled.

“It’s kind of funny,” he said, but at least he made an effort to stop laughing.

“I’m soaking wet.”

She raised an arm. It was only then, as she watched Liam’s gaze hone in on her breasts, that she realized when wet, her sweater was practically transparent. Instantly, she crossed her arms over her chest, hiding her silhouetted breasts.

He held out a hand.

If she uncrossed her arms to take his hand, he would have an extremely good view of her nipples gone hard in the cold. Oh, why had she worn a camisole today instead of a bra?

“Take my hand,” he invited.

She didn’t want to, but it was going to be darn difficult getting out of the muck without a boost up. Reluctantly, she took his hand and tried not to notice when he watched her nipples pebble.

“Where’s Duke?” she asked, teeth chattering.

“You sit.” He led Katie to a park bench and draped his suit jacket around her. The now familiar scent of him surrounded her like a welcome hug.

He retrieved her boot from where she’d lost it, then got down on one knee and slipped it onto her foot. Talk about a Cinderella complex.

“Duke,” she repeated. “Three-hundred-dollar deposit.”

“I’ll go find him.”

He returned a few minutes later with a scraggly, squirming, soaking wet Duke tucked under his arm. Liam took one look at Katie and shook his head. “You can’t go back to work like that.”

“I’m blaming this on you.” She grinned at him, not the least bit mad.

“Me?”

“I would never have thought to rent Duke out for a walk. I guess I’m an all-or-nothing kind of woman.”

“Okay, I accept full responsibility. Let’s take Duke back to the pet shop and I’ll drive you to my apartment. It’s just a few blocks from here. I can send your clothes out to the one-hour dry cleaner in my building, while you take a shower. I’ll let Max know that we’ll need to postpone the meeting for another time.”

Katie could have told him that her own condo wasn’t far away, either, but she didn’t. Bad as it sounded, she wanted to see the inside of his apartment. In fact, her heart was thumping eagerly and quickly.

She soon found herself riding in the elevator with him up to the penthouse of James Towers. She might have come from old money, but overall, she’d lead a very sheltered life. Her parents had been quite strict when she and her sisters were growing up, and it was only since college that Katie had really stretched her wings. She’d never been to a penthouse apartment before, alone, with a man she barely knew.

Her stomach tightened, sending sexy messages shooting straight to the most feminine parts of her. She tried to ignore the sensations, but she knew she was in serious trouble.

Remember the new leaf? No more meaningless sex.

Yeah, but what about the Martini dare she’d drawn the night before?

You don’t have to do it.

But that was the thing. She wanted to do it.

When they stepped inside his living space and she got a bird’s-eye view of downtown Boston from his wide, curtainless window, Katie forgot to breathe.

Incredible.

“Bathroom’s down the hall, first door on your right,” Liam announced, tossing his car keys on a table in the foyer.

The penthouse was straight out of Architectural Digest. Sleek, modern and totally staged. The place was devoid of any personal touches. As far as she could tell, there wasn’t a bit of the real Liam here.

It made her feel a little sad to think he lived in such a sterile environment.

Katie slipped his jacket from her shoulders and draped it over a black leather couch. It was only then that she caught him watching her with heavily lidded eyes as he took in the way her damp clothes molded against her body.

Quickly, she turned and beat a hasty retreat, desperately searching for the bathroom and some small shred of self-control. She locked the bathroom door and sank against it with a shaky sigh.

He knocked on the door and she jumped, hand to her heart.

“Yes?”

“Put on my bathrobe,” he said, “It’s hanging on the back of the door. And then hand me out your clothes. I’ll pop them down to the dry cleaner’s while you shower.”

Katie stripped off her clothes. She thought of his long, strong masculine fingers touching her garments and she shivered at the image.

Stop thinking like this.

She put on his bathrobe that smelled of sandalwood shampoo, opened the door a crack and thrust her things at him.

“Thank you,” he said.

Why in God’s name did that sound like a come-on? It was just a simple thank-you.

Cold shower, cold shower. Get in, get washed off, get out.

She did exactly that. Five minutes later, she was showered and wrapped in his bathrobe again. She took the time to rinse her undergarments out in his sink, then drape them over his shower-curtain rod. Then she searched the bathroom for a blow-dryer, but couldn’t find one.

“Liam,” she called, leaving the bathroom, her wet hair twisted up in a towel, and padded into the living room. “Where do you keep your blow—”

He was standing in the middle of room, stripped bare to the waist.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He turned and a wicked grin tilted up the corners of his mouth. “Duke got me a bit wet and muddy, too.”

“Well, could you cover up or something?”

“What’s the matter?” He strolled toward her. “You don’t like what you see?”

“No, no—” she cleared her throat “—I like. Too much.” She waved a hand. “Now, cover up, please.”

The muscle in his throat jumped as his eyes traveled the length of her body.

He came closer.

Katie backed up until her butt hit the wall. “Um,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“What I’ve wanted to do all afternoon.”

“It’s not a good idea,” she whispered as his mouth dipped closer.

“No?”

There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room. You’d think in a condo this expensive there would be enough air in the flipping room. And his brownish green bedroom eyes were smothering her with closeness.

Her heart thundered at the feral look in his gaze.

He wanted her.

And she wanted him. Wanted his sweet, moist lips on hers and his masculine tongue thrusting deep inside her heated mouth.

Not only was there not enough air, but it was way too hot in here. Sizzling, in fact. It was a downright devil den.

He took her in his arms and pulled her up tight against his bare chest. Her pulse galloped madly. She wasn’t so sure about this. Things were suddenly slipping rapidly out of her control.

“I…” She started to say that she didn’t think this was such a great idea, but she got no further.

His mouth came down on hers for real and it tasted good.

That night at the masquerade ball had been exciting and wild and quick, but this was different. This was up close and personal and lingering, with no disguises to hide behind. She had time to really savor his kiss. To taste cinnamon on his tongue and smell his deeply masculine scent.

Liam’s tongue seared hers. She had no idea a kiss could be so intense. The towel came unwrapped from around her hair, falling slowly to the floor. Liam pushed his fingers through the damp strands, cradling her head in his hands.

Katie felt as if her entire body had short-circuited. Her stomach jolted. Her lips parted. Her toes curled. Her eyes widened.

Delight detonated in her mouth. A wildfire rolled through her nerve endings. He was suddenly more essential to her than the air she’d craved earlier.

How unforgettable he tasted. How safe she felt in his arms. It was strange to feel this way considering the circumstances, but that was how it was. As if he could and would protect her from anything.

She wanted to make love to him so badly her insides throbbed.

He tightened his arms around her. She relaxed her jaw, and his tongue speared deep inside. Moaning softly, she slid her arms around his neck.

More, she had to have more.

His chest was hard muscle against her soft breasts. She ran her fingers through his hair and made a fist. He growled low in his throat and used his hand to trace her spine to the small of her back. Then, through the cloth of his bathrobe, he gently kneaded her backside.

Her body, which seconds before had been tense and resistant, turned fluid and supple at his touch. She was clay—pliant and malleable. Anything he asked of her she would willingly do.

Wait a minute, whispered the voice in the back of her head, what about turning over a new leaf? What about no longer rushing in headlong where angels feared to tread?

Right. As if she could slam the brakes on when Liam was kissing her like this.

Don’t you want to be something more than everybody’s good-time girl? Aren’t you afraid this will jeopardize your working relationship? Or that you could lose your job over this?

Nah, she didn’t care about any of that. All she cared about was the magic of this moment.

And you wonder why no one takes you seriously.

But Liam took her seriously. He’d made her art director of his ad campaign.

Maybe that’s just because he was hoping to get into your panties.

Hush.

Determinedly shoving the ugly little nay-saying voice aside, she closed her eyes, made her mind blank and inhaled him.

She explored his mouth, taste by taste, texture by texture, layer by layer. He tasted honest and clean. His flavor was all masculine substance—solid and efficient.

Katie had to hand it to him. He was one helluva great kisser.

His lips soared her higher, flying her to a glorious realm where fantasy and reality merged into frenetic excitement.

He tasted like summer vacation, like long, hot nights in the backseat of a big old American car. Like Fourth of July fireworks—dazzling and explosive. He tasted like hard work and commitment and trustworthiness. His taste made her feel safe and supported and honored.

He kissed with the power and authority of a man completely in control of himself. And she realized his self-control frightened her because she had no control of her own. He scared her because she found herself wanting something she could not even identify. Something she’d never wanted before.

His lips hummed with strength and go-getter magnetism. His kiss whispered of all that could exist between them if she just had the courage to close her hand and make a fist. To take a tentative step toward something more than fun and frivolity.

She wished she could frame this moment in time, hold on to it like a snapshot. Kiss him on and on and on forever.

The thought jolted her. This quick jog on the wild side had landed her in mental quicksand. Should she flail around and try to get free? Or should she embrace the fall?

Suddenly, the struggle was taken out of her hands.

Liam broke the kiss, pulled back, stared down at her.

“What?” she whispered, peering up into his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

He stroked his index finger down the length of her jaw, then stopped and pressed his thumb against her lips. “We have to stop now, or I won’t be able to stop.”

“Why stop?” she asked as the weight of his thumb caressed her cheek.

He drew in a ragged breath. “Our first time together was sex-crazed and anonymous. I want us to take our time and to get to know each other before we do this again.”

“But I like sex-crazed and anonymous.”

He had one arm around her waist, one hand tilting her chin up to meet his gaze. He was looking at her as if she were special, like something to be treasured. No man had ever looked at her like that before. Katie held a breath.

“That might be the case,” he said. “But you deserve so much more. No matter how much I might want to, I’m not going to have sex with you again.”

“You’re not?” Why did it feel as if he were denying her keys to Shangri-La?

“No.” He shook his head. “Not now. Not yet. Not until I know everything there is to know about you.”

She laughed because she didn’t know what else to do.

“I’m serious,” he said.

One look in his eyes told her it was true. She felt a rush of panic so strong that if she hadn’t been naked underneath his bathrobe, she would have bolted straight out the front door.

But the ringing phone saved her from replying.

He let her go, easing his arm from around her waist and stepped to the cordless phone docked on the glass end table beside his leather couch.

“Yes,” he answered. “Okay, thanks. Please send someone up with them.” He ended the conversation, turned back to her. “That was the dry cleaner’s downstairs. Your clothes are ready.”

Yes!

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said with the same take-charge manner she assumed he used to run his real-estate empire. “You’re getting dressed and I’m driving you back to Sharper Designs. Because I have an appointment at three, I won’t be able to review your designs for the ad campaign. With that in mind, I’ll pick you up tomorrow night at eight for a business dinner meeting. So have your proposal ready.”

“I have plans,” she said, just to be ornery. She didn’t have any plans beyond her usual Saturday-night clubbing, but she balked at being ordered around. Even if it was by the most eligible bachelor in Boston.

“Then cancel them.”

“I ACTED LIKE a self-important, arrogant ass,” Liam confided to Tony as they jogged together in the park on Saturday morning.

“She got to you, so you reacted out of instinct. Doing what you do best. Taking charge, bossing people around. It works on the job, not so great when it comes to romance.”

“I can’t explain it, but something about that woman brings out the caveman in me.”

“You feel protective of her.”

“Yeah.”

“And you can’t stand the thought of her dating someone else.”

“Yes,” Liam admitted through gritted teeth. The mere thought of some other man touching Katie twisted him inside out.

“She drives you so crazy you can’t think.”

“Exactly!”

Tony chuckled.

“What? It’s not funny. It’s irritating.”

“You’re falling for her.”

“I’m not,” he denied hotly. “It’s just that she’s so damned sexy.”

“So have a casual fling with her.”

“I tried. I couldn’t go through with it.”

“Why not?”

“She looked so vulnerable. Like she trusted me completely. She doesn’t know me. She shouldn’t trust me so easily.”

“Why do you care?”

“She has no idea how terrific she is,” Liam huffed as they rounded the home stretch of their five-mile run. “As an artist and as a woman. You should see her graphic designs. Amazing.”

“What’s she like?”

“She takes chances. I like that about her. She’s upbeat and energetic and full of surprises. Lively, spontaneous, freewheeling.”

“In short, all the things you aren’t.”

Liam dodged a park bench. “Yeah.”

“So what do you want from her?”

Good question. One he’d spent the night pondering as he’d tossed and turned and remembered their incredible kisses.

“Sex?” Tony asked.

“For sure.”

“But you want something more or you would have just done that again.”

“Maybe,” he admitted.

“Commitment?”

“Hey, wait, slow down. Slow way, way down. All I’m saying is that she’s interested me more than any woman has in a long time.” If ever.

“So you’re looking for a little romance? Nothing more than a good time.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“But you don’t really know how to romance a girl because you’ve spent your entire adult life getting ahead, amassing your fortune. And when you’ve had relationships in the past, it was up to the woman to put forth all the effort to keep you interested.”

“Something like that.”

Tony hooted. “I love it. Now you’re sweating because you’re scared that you’re not exciting enough for her.”

His best friend had seen right through him, but he was loath to admit it. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Wanna know how to keep her interested?”

“No.” Yes, yes!

“I’ll tell you because I know you’re only saying no to save face.”

“I am not,” he lied.

“You keep her guessing.”

“Guessing?”

“I know it’s hard for you to wrap your one-track mind around this concept, but to keep a fun-loving woman like Katie entertained, you’ve got to be unpredictable.”

“Unpredictable?”

“You know, do something impromptu, unexpected. Send her a gift no one else would ever send her. Something that would have special meaning for her. Take her someplace you would normally never go, like to a monster-truck rally.”

“A monster-truck rally?” Liam snorted. “That’s the best you have to offer?”

“Okay, that was a stab in the dark, but use your imagination. Take her salsa dancing. Or kayaking. Or ice skating. Have fun.”

“Fun?”

“You know, the thing you haven’t done since you were a kid.” Tony eyed him as they jogged side by side. “But this isn’t the kind of woman who’s going to be impressed by fancy French restaurants or long-stemmed red roses and boxes of chocolates.”

“Too predictable?”

“By far. Convincing her you’re good for anything more than a hot time between the sheets is going to take some thought and effort on your part.”

Liam blew out his breath. “You make it sound like I don’t stand a chance.”

“She’s going to be a challenge for you, but come on. When have you ever shied away from a challenge? Just put the same effort into pursuing Katie that you’ve always put into buying and selling property then you’ll be A-OK. Throw the woman a curve ball or two.”

Easy enough for him to say, Tony knew how to chill out and have a good time. Liam was fighting against thirty-one years of hard work and determination to get ahead at all costs.

Think, think. What can you do to delight Katie? What will keep her guessing?

Just as they finished the last leg of their run, inspiration hit. Liam knew exactly what he was going to send that would both intrigue and surprise her.

M AKE LOVE in a forbidden place.

Katie read the Martini dare she’d tucked into the corner of her dresser mirror as she sat at her vanity wrapping her hair around a curling iron.

She’d been anxious all afternoon getting ready for this business dinner with Liam. She’d gone to the mall, bought a new dress and new pair of shoes. She’d had a manicure and a facial. She skipped both breakfast and lunch because she was too nervous to eat. She was acting as if it were a date.

It is a date.

No, it was a business meeting.

So then how come no one else on the creative team was invited?

Yeah, why was that?

He wants you, you want him, go for it.

“But I’m turning over a new leaf. Giving up casual sex, going cold turkey,” Katie said aloud to her reflection.

And then her gaze strayed to the parchment again. Make love in a forbidden place.

Why did it have to be cold turkey? Why couldn’t she sort of taper off? Plenty of people used the patch to wean themselves off smoking. Couldn’t the three Martini dares serve as Katie’s swan song for casual sex?

Liam was the perfect person to perform her dares with, she convinced herself. They were attracted to each other. He was temporary, only in her life for as long as it took to oversee the graphic designs for his campaign. Plus, they’d already made love, so by continuing their affair she was actually taking it out of the realm of one-night stands.

She loosened her grip on the curling iron and the warm curl escaped to fall gently across her cheek. She picked up a second strand of hair and twisted it around the heated rod.

The memory of what had happened in his apartment the afternoon before popped into her head. She remembered the feel of his lips, the pleasure of his tongue.

And then she thought of the way he’d looked at her. No, not at her…into her, as if he could see straight to her soul. Past the wild-child image she projected. Past the carefree persona she’d perfected. Past the clothes and the parties and jokes to the wounded woman who’d lost both her parents before she was twenty-five. To the girl who’d always felt as if she had to show others a good time in order to be loved and appreciated.

Katie shivered and pushed that disturbing thought away. She didn’t want to examine it too closely. She had other things on her mind.

Make love in a forbidden place.

“I’ll do it,” she whispered to her reflection in the mirror. “I’m going to use Liam to complete my Martini dares.”

Just saying the words made her feel empowered. Yes. This was good. This was exactly what she was looking for.

But is it fair to use Liam for your own personal empowerment?

The doorbell rang, interrupting her internal seesaw. She turned off the curling iron, got up and padded to the door. She peered through the peephole and spied a bike messenger standing on her front step. She put the chain on and opened the door a crack.

“Special delivery,” he called. “You gotta sign for it.”

What was this? Katie was a city girl who knew how to take care of herself. “Who’s it from?”

“Mr. Liam James.”

Magic words.

Katie signed for the package, then almost ripped it out of the delivery guy’s hands. Her curiosity was piqued. What had Liam sent her?

She tore off the brown paper to reveal a rectangular white box with the name of a famous jewelry store embossed in red letters on the lid. Her heart thumped.

Jewelry? The gift was presumptuous. Jewelry implied strings were attached to their relationship and she certainly wasn’t interested in getting tied to anything. She suddenly felt claustrophobic, as if the walls of her condo were closing in.

Maybe she should reconsider her decision to use Liam as the means to complete her Martini dares.

Tentatively, she slid the lid off the box and peered inside to find…

A dog collar?

The dude had sent her a dog collar.

Albeit a very handsome dog collar. Made of black leather and studded with blue onyx and faux diamond rhinestones. When she lifted it out of the box, the stones glistened in the light.

At the bottom of the box lay a small card. She plucked it out and read the message that had been printed in strong, masculine block script.

Dear Katie,

For when you’re ready to claim Duke as your own. Looking forward to seeing you tonight.

Liam

P.S. You’d make a terrific dog owner.

A dog collar for a puppy she didn’t even own? It was a strange gift, but she found the gesture incredibly touching because Liam had paid attention. And he’d understood both her desire to own a dog and her anxiety over such a commitment.

A wistful feeling swept over her—part longing, and part…hope.

The fact that Liam had gone to all the trouble to pick out this dog collar and have it couriered over stirred something deep. He could have sent generic flowers or candy or nothing at all. But instead, he’d sent the one thing that said I believe in you.

She was moved.

The gift spoke volumes. Clearly, tonight was not just a business meeting.

Katie had a date with Boston’s most eligible bachelor.

**7**

“THANK YOU for the dog collar,” Katie told Liam when he came to pick her up. “It was very thoughtful.”

“I wanted to encourage you to get that puppy, if that’s what you really want.”

“I don’t know that I want a dog that badly, but thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Don’t want it? Or too afraid to want it?” Liam challenged.

Damn, being with this guy wasn’t easy. He didn’t let her slide on anything. She darted a quick glance at him. He was standing in her foyer, gorgeous as all get-out.

He wore a black pullover V-necked sweater and a pair of formfitting black trousers. The wind had sexily tousled his well-groomed hair, giving him a relaxed look she found appealing.

Her gaze tracked over his face, soaking up his chiseled cheekbones and strong chin. She noticed that the bridge of his nose was crooked, bent slightly to the right as if once it had been broken.

Liam looked so different from the pampered playboys she normally dated. His life experience was evident not only in the sharp focus of his intelligent hazel eyes and the out-of-character tattoo at his left wrist, but also in the powerful way he carried himself, in the commanding way he spoke.

This was a man of substance.

She was surprised to find the observation made her edgy. Very edgy. Suddenly, all her self-confidence evaporated. What did she know about pleasing a high-powered businessman who’d bootstrapped his way to the top of his profession by age thirty? And she was a woman who’d been born with a blue-blooded spoon in her mouth.

His standards were high. He was a self-made millionaire, well on his way to becoming a billionaire. He was everything she was not. Logical, responsible, dedicated, driven.

Was that why he fascinated her so? Because she could never hope to understand what made him tick?

A smile tipped his lips and as his eyes met hers, his face lit up. He looked as if the Dow Jones had jumped twenty points.

Katie’s heart fluttered. He had the power to make her feel special. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

“Wow, you look amazing.” The appreciative expression in his eyes went a long way in reviving her poise and earning him bonus points for noticing the special care that she’d taken with her appearance.

Approvingly, his gaze traveled from her fresh new hairstyle, across the swell of the tight bodice of her aqua dress to the hemline that hit her midthigh to the three-inch stilettos that enhanced the shapely curve of her lean legs.

Noticing everything. Missing nothing. Making her feel very desirable.

“Thank you,” she said, and tried not to blush at his frank assessment.

“Are you ready to get down to business?” His hazel eyes smoldered with a mesmerizing sexuality that pushed all the air from her lungs.

“Business?”

“You do have your designs with you.”

“Yes, yes,” she said breathlessly. Oh, she’d almost forgotten about the designs.

“Good,” he said. “I can’t wait to see what you’ve come up with.”

“I hope you like them.”

“I have confidence in you.” He winked.

He took her to Carmine’s Ristorante, a quaint family-owned Italian restaurant off the beaten path, but not far from Boston’s north end. It wasn’t the sort of place she expected a real-estate mogul to frequent. That alone impressed her.

He’d opened the door for her, lightly placing his hand at the small of her back to guide her over the threshold.

The pressure of his hand had her sucking in her breath. She didn’t know what to make of his proprietary touch or the way her skin tingled.

Her pulse leaped and instantly a dozen erotic images from the night of the Ladies League ball popped into her head. She heard the clatter of coat hangers, the sounds of their delighted groans. She smelled the scent of their merged bodies, musky and rich. She tasted the sweet flavor of sin on her tongue.

“Hello, Mr. James,” greeted the attractive, overeager young hostess. “We’ve got your usual table waiting.”

The hostess led them through the brightly lit dining room to a table in the corner. Katie wondered if he often brought dates here. It didn’t seem like a regular date place. No singing waiters. No candles in Chianti bottles. No private booths to hide away from the crowd. Most of the tables seated six or more and they all seemed to be filled with families or groups of coworkers or friends on an outing.

Maybe this really was a business meeting.

The man was sending mixed messages and she wasn’t sure how to read him. Her interest notched higher. Who was Liam James behind his reputation and his stunning success? What had made him the man he was today?

“I hope this place is okay,” he said anxiously. “It’s not trendy, but the owner and his family are friendly and the food is great.”

He was trying so hard in that moment, as if her approval meant a lot. He’s as nervous as I am, she realized with a start. She was touched that he cared enough to be nervous.

“Did the Young Bostonian article drive you underground?” she said. “Or do you always prefer to frequent out-of-the-way places?”

“You saw that article,” he said, pulling her chair out for her.

She sat down and slid her briefcase under the table. “Oh, indeed. Who could miss it? Impressive piece about Boston’s premiere hotshot multimillionaire. You’ve got the buzz, babe.”

He sat down across from her. A look of embarrassment crossed his face. “It’s a lot of hype.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

The waiter came over. Liam ordered a bottle of modestly priced white wine and antipasto as an appetizer. He wasn’t trying to impress her. Why not?

Katie was confused. She knew he was attracted to her, but he wasn’t pulling out all the stops. What was the deal?

The waiter returned with their wine and the antipasto plate heaped with buffalo mozzarella, salami, black olives, sun-dried tomato relish and thin slices of toasted garlic-bread rounds.

“Are you ready to order your main course?” the waiter asked.

“Oops,” Katie said. “I haven’t even looked at the menu.” Because she’d been too busy looking at Liam.

“They have excellent veal marsala,” he suggested.

“Veal marsala it is,” she said, and passed her menu to the waiter and thanked him.

Once the waiter had gone, she leaned in closer. The scent of Liam’s cologne mingled with the delicious smell of the antipasto. It was a bracing fragrance, hearty and substantial. “Thank you for bringing me here. I adore Italian food. It’s my favorite.”

“Mine, too.”

Strange. She’d pegged him as a sushi lover or maybe upscale French cuisine. Mr. Young Bostonian, and all that.

“Why don’t we take a look at the mock-ups while we eat?” she said. “Kill two birds with one stone.”

“Actually,” he said, reaching across the table to rest his hand on hers to stop her from reaching for her briefcase, “I have a confession to make.”

“A confession?” She studied him, still thrown by the mixed messages he was sending. It wasn’t often that any male knocked her off-kilter.

Using the food as an excuse, she slipped her hand out from under his and reached for a toast round, scooping a spoonful of the sun-dried tomato relish onto the garlic bread.

“This dinner isn’t strictly business.”

“No?” She chased the antipasto with a measured swallow of wine but never took her gaze from his face.

“Surely you knew it was pretext.” His smile was positively wicked and spiked up the heat already invading Katie’s body. “We could have had the business meeting at Sharper Designs on Monday.”

They stared at each other across the table.

“Listen,” they said in unison, then both broke off, chuckling.

“Why don’t you go ahead and show me the designs you’ve come up with?” Liam said. “Let’s get the business portion of this meeting over with so we can—”

“Get down to the pleasure?” Katie impishly finished for him.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

“No,” she countered, “I’m certain you’d planned on being much more diplomatic.”

“You think I’m a stuffed shirt?”

“I think that’s the image you portray, but I know better. I’ve seen the real you in action.”

His face flushed. “You’re referring to the Ladies League ball.”

“I am.” She lowered her eyelashes.

“That’s not the real me. You just caught me on a bad night.”

“Not from my point of view.” She winked. “I thought you were very, very good that night.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “I took advantage of you.”

“That’s not the way I recall it. In my memory, I clearly took advantage of you.”

“Either way, it was a life-altering experience for me.”

“How’s that?”

“Ever since that night I’ve been unable to think about anything but you.”

“Really?” she said.

“Believe me, that’s not normal.”

“Way to flatter a girl,” she teased, “telling her it’s not normal to be wanted.”

“That’s not what I mean…” He pressed a palm to the back of his neck, chuffed out a breath. “I’m handling this badly.”

She studied his face, clean-shaven, honest, aboveboard. If this had been the Middle Ages, he most certainly would have been a dutiful knight, stalwart and well-intentioned.

Something scary shifted inside her. Maybe she shouldn’t try her Martini dare on him. He was too nice of a guy and she didn’t want to hurt him. “Liam, I…”

“Yes?”

The way he was looking at her caused her feminine sex to clench with a swift squeeze of ravenous need. A deep-seated tightening of desire. She had to have him, never mind the costs.

Befuddled by lust, she dropped her gaze, fumbled blindly for her briefcase, heard her heart pounding blood rapidly through her ears. “I…I’ve got your proposal right here. I’ve gotta warn you, the designs are a bit racy, but you did say you wanted sex.”

The word sex hung in the air, as provocative as heavy breathing.

Unnerved, Katie pushed aside the appetizer plate, scooted her chair closer so they could both see it and placed the file folder on the table between them. “Obviously we’re appealing to young, urban professionals with a high income.”

“Obviously,” he agreed, and leaned over her shoulder. The warmth of his breath fanned the hairs along the nape of her neck.

She flipped open the file, then looked at him to gauge his initial reaction to the graphics of her mock-up.

Suddenly, she understood exactly how much she wanted his approval.

Liam tilted his head to study the photograph with interest, but his face remained unreadable. Damn him and his perfect self-control.

In the ad, a lithe young woman was stepping naked from a patio hot tub underneath a starlit sky. She was holding a white terry cloth towel in her hand that barely covered her explicit parts.

Seated on a lawn chair, in the dark, at the far end of the patio was a man equally as naked, his explicit bits hidden in the shadow cast by a glistening chrome barbecue grill. The man’s eyes were hooked on the woman, the unmistakable signs of feral lust on his face.

The woman was as blond as Katie, the man as dark-haired as Liam. The setting was totally intimate. The choice of models and setting had not been accidental. She’d worked very hard to create an erotic, atmospheric draft that was still subtle enough for mainstream media. It had been a tricky balance, getting the right play of light, capturing the seductive interplay without going over the top.

“We’re thinking of a caption along the lines of—James Place Condominiums…Where Your Most Forbidden Fantasies Come True,” she said. “But the copywriters are still working on it.”

He raised his gaze from the photo, locked eyes with her. “It makes me want to sell my penthouse apartment and move in tomorrow.”

“You really like it?” His approval gladdened her heart.

“It’s exceptional work. You’ve accurately captured exactly what I was going for. The color, the mood, the marketing elements. You’re a master at this, Katie. You can go as high as you want in your career.”

The way he was looking at her made her feel competent and accomplished and reliable. She could honestly say no one else had ever made her feel quite this proud of her work. Katie wasn’t accustomed to impressing a man with her artistic skills, especially a man with as much business savvy as this one. He made her want to truly commit to her career. To throw herself into it the same way she threw herself into romantic adventures.

It was a new experience, this desire to be industrious and self-reliant. She liked it.

And she liked him.

Then he did something completely unexpected.

Liam reached over, took her hand in his, stared deeply into her eyes and said, “After dinner, would you like to go bowling?”

B OWLING ?

Why in the hell had he invited her to go bowling? Liam had never bowled a day in his life.

Why? Because Tony had advised him to throw her a few curveballs. And his friend’s advice had seemed to work with the dog collar and taking her to Carmine’s when his instincts had been to send long-stemmed roses and take her to the fanciest French restaurant in town in a limo.

But bowling? Maybe he should have given the monster-truck rally more consideration.

Unfortunately for him, Katie had been excited at his suggestion. Apparently the girl loved to bowl. Who could have suspected a well-bred Brahmin blue blood would go for bowling?

The alley was alive with noise. He was seriously out of his element as he laced up the two-toned rented shoes. Why on earth was he doing this? His forte was the boardroom, not the bowling lanes.

Then he looked at Katie with her face aglow and he knew why. Her smile made him happy. The realization surprised him. The happiness surprised him.

Absentmindedly, he raised a palm and pressed it against his heart as he watched her pick up her bowling ball and take aim at the ten pins. She looked adorable in those ugly bowling shoes, the hem of her dress swirling around her firm thighs and her hair tumbling over her shoulders in untamed abandon.

He loved her gung-ho spirit and her lively personality. She could turn something as mundane as taking out the trash into a grand adventure. Life with Katie would be lots of fun.

Trouble was, Liam wasn’t used to fun. If he wasn’t working, he felt guilty for leaving things undone. He hadn’t made it where he was today by goofing off with frivolous activities such as bowling.

Being with Katie made him understand how much he’d been missing out on. And he was tired of missing out. Even if it meant he had to make a fool of himself at the bowling alley.

She bent over to take the shot.

Underneath his palm, he felt his heart rate kick up.

She wiggled her butt and he couldn’t help but think she was teasing him. Then she was in motion, floating gracefully down the lane as only a bowling, blue-blooded princess could. She let go of the ball. It rolled down the alley, mowing down every pin.

“Strike!” she yelled gleefully, and spun around toward him, a huge smile on her face. She came trotting over to where he sat. “High five.”

He slapped her upraised palm. The smacking sound, the resulting tingle as his flesh met hers, caused a stirring deep inside him. A stirring unlike anything he’d ever felt before. He had no name for it and that bothered him.

Her gaze met his. Nervously, she flicked out a tongue to lick her lips. It wasn’t a calculated gesture, of that he was sure. But the sight of her sweet pink tongue darting out to moisten those full red lips caused his stomach to contract and his penis to harden.

“Where’d you learn to bowl like that?” he asked. “Last time I checked they don’t have bowling alleys in Beacon Hill.”

“My mother,” she said.

“Bowling isn’t a sport that high-society mamas usually encourage their daughters to take up.”

“My mother was an exceptional woman.”

“I’ve got to hand it to her. She certainly raised an exceptional daughter,” he said.

Katie smiled at his compliment and he discovered he felt quite pleased to bring that smile to her face. “Mom did a lot of things with us you wouldn’t expect from a woman with her advantages and privileges. Sometimes, it earned her criticism from my dad’s family.”

“What about your mom’s family?” he asked.

“Her parents had passed away and she didn’t have any siblings.”

“What about cousins?” he asked. “Aunts or uncles?”

“That was always sort of a mystery,” Katie admitted. “My mother never talked about her extended family. My sisters and I got the impression she was estranged from them. We didn’t really ask about it. My father’s family was so close-knit.”

“What else did your mother like to do besides bowl?”

“Ice skate, bicycling, anything active. She even took us go-carting one time. I loved it, but Joey fell out of her cart and skinned her knees. Dad forbid any more go-cart excursions after that.”

“It sounds as if you and your mother were a lot alike,” he commented.

Katie looked surprised by the suggestion. “I hadn’t really thought of it that way, but, yeah, maybe so. We were the two who never seemed to fit in with the Winfields.”

“Tell me more about your family.”

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to. You’re the kind of guy who hates to lose and you’ve seen what a whiz I am on the lanes. No more stalling. It’s your turn. Get out there.”

“But I’m enjoying getting to know you better.” He patted the hard vinyl seat next to him.

“What’s the matter?” she taunted. “Are you afraid you can’t live up to my strike?”

“Absolutely.”

“Get up.” She reached out, took him by the hand and hauled him to his reluctant feet.

“Bowling’s really not my strong suit.”

“I promise, I won’t gloat when I beat your pants off.”

“I don’t believe you. You seem like the type who would gloat over her prowess,” he teased.

She raised two fingers. “Promise.”

“Here’s the deal. I’ve got a confession to make,” he said as she tugged him toward the lane.

“Oh?”

“I can’t bowl.”

She canted her head. “Quit stalling and get out there.”

“No, honestly, I can’t bowl.”

“Really?”

He shrugged.

She rested her hands on her hips. “Then why did you suggest we come here?”

“I was hoping to surprise you with a fun activity you wouldn’t expect me to suggest.”

“And you did.”

“I had no clue you had the makings of a pro bowler. I thought we could look silly together. Now you’re just going to mop the floor with me.”

Katie giggled. “Don’t be afraid to look silly. No one cares, honestly. Just pick up your ball and take your best shot.”

He walked to the ball carousel, stopped, turned back to look at her. Damn, but she seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of glee in his ineptitude.

“Come on, where’s the fearless attitude that propelled you to king of the heap of Boston real estate? I know you’ve got a risk-taking gene in there somewhere.”

“It only applies to business.”

“I don’t believe that.”

He couldn’t fight her infectious smile. “All right,” he conceded, “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

Liam picked up the ball, figured out where to slip his fingers into the holes and then walked to the edge of the lane. How exactly did this thing work? He sneaked a peek at the bowlers on the next lane over.

“Use the arrows on the floor to line up your shot,” Katie called out.

He looked over his shoulder. “I don’t—”

“What? You don’t ask for help?”

“Not until I’ve exhausted all other options.” He grinned.

She sat back against the plastic seating, knees crossed, one leg bouncing provocatively and sent him a wicked grin. “Stubborn.”

“A man likes to do things his own way.”

“Even if it’s the hard way?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Tough guy going it alone, huh? No need to be part of the pack. Lone wolf Liam.”

“Something like that.”

“Sounds desolate to me.”

“Yeah,” he admitted with a cheerful shake of his head, “maybe a little.”

“Fine. Go it alone.” She chuckled. “I’ll keep my advice to myself.”

“Thank you,” he said, and promptly threw a gutter ball.

Katie hooted.

He sauntered toward her. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“Darn right.”

One look into her eyes and nothing mattered except keeping that wide smile on her face. He kept forgetting he’d hired her to advertise his condos, that she was essentially his employee. As they bowled frame after frame—or rather, she bowled and he pitched balls down the gutter—Liam found himself wanting her more and more. And by the time they ended up at her front door, he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

All evening her laughter had pealed like wind chimes in his imagination, light and free. Whenever she brushed against him, an uncontrollable surge of hormones deployed straight to his loins. And when he drew close to her, he smelled the exotic scent of her shampoo—a piquant blend of lotus blossoms and crystal ginger. It was all he could do to keep himself from burying his nose in her shimmering hair.

“Thanks for a wonderful time,” she said. “I know this was supposed to be a business meeting, not a real date, but I had more fun than I’ve had in a long while.”

“Me, too,” he said huskily.

She turned to slip her key into the lock.

He put his arm on the doorjamb over her head. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d wanted a woman this badly. “You’re not going to invite me in?”

“On our first date, which wasn’t even really a date?” She turned back, eyes dancing. “What kind of girl do you think I am?”

“I didn’t…that wasn’t…um…”

“Lighten up, silly,” she said, “I was just yanking your chain.”

“Oh.”

“But I’m not inviting you in.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she said, “I’ve got something better in mind.”

His curiosity was piqued. “What’s that?”

She wagged a finger. “If I told you, it would take all the fun out of it.”

“You are a tease.” He couldn’t stop looking at her sweet mouth. At his perusal, her lips parted like petals opening.

“Guilty as charged.”

“And remorseless in what you’re doing to me.”

“Where’s the fun in remorse?”

She winked. He loved the way her conspiratorial winks made him feel as they shared a gigantic secret. She looked adorable—grinning up at him, hair tousled, dimples dug deep in her cheeks.

To hell with self-control, to hell with restraint. He’d spent too many years holding back where his love life was concerned. He took a step closer.

She reached up to tuck a hank of hair behind one ear.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he announced.

She placed her index fingers to her lips. “No, not tonight. Wait.”

“Wait for what?” Impatience tugged at him. He didn’t want to wait. He wanted her now.

“Our secret rendezvous.”

“What secret rendezvous?”

“The one we’re going to have on Monday afternoon during your lunch hour.”

“I usually work on my lunch hour.”

“But you won’t,” she said. “Not this Monday.”

“And why not?”

“Because I have something totally erotic in store for you.” She touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip and arched against his body. “You’re going to meet me in front of the Town Crier Theatre in the historical district at noon.”

He was hard for her instantly, mindless with desire. He could barely take in air, much less swallow past the cast-iron lump in his throat. “And what,” he croaked, “will we be doing?”

“Come prepared—” she said the word soft and slow “—to do the forbidden.”

**8**

COME PREPARED to do the forbidden.

Katie’s scintillating parting comment echoed in his head. Did she have any idea how totally provocative those words were? Liam had lain awake all night, his brain conjuring a myriad of tantalizing possibilities. His curiosity was aroused, his blood stirred, his dormant sense of adventured stoked. His body prickled with heightened anticipation.

The woman had one hell of a creative imagination.

Just before noon on Monday afternoon, Liam paced the sidewalk outside the Town Crier Theatre wondering what delicious treats she had in store for him.

The theatre was running a weeklong retrospective of Clark Gable films. The movie du jour, according to the marquee, was It Happened One Night.

Fitting.

The title made him think of the one night he’d spent in the cloak closet with Katie. His mouth was dry from the memory. His hip pocket was stuffed with condoms and his anxiety was off the charts. She had him crazed with lust for her.

Five minutes passed. Then ten.

He checked his watch repeatedly. Eleven minutes. Twelve. His spirits plummeted. Had she stood him up? Or was making him wait part of her wicked game?

If that was the case, she’d won. His self-control—the thing he prided himself on most—was totally shot.

Just when Liam was about to give up and go to the office to try to get some work done, he saw her, strutting up the sidewalk toward him with the confidence of a runway model.

She was dressed all in black, which created an erotic contrast to her wheat-blond hair. She wore a tight black sweater cut so low it was barely legal and, clearly, she was not wearing a bra. The square of black leather posing as a skirt was barely bigger than a cup towel. She had on black patterned stockings and black stilettos so high it was a miracle she could walk in them.

Every guy on that Boston sidewalk was turning to stare at her.

Enthralled, Liam’s jaw dropped and his pupils widened. He was desperate to see more of her. Adrenaline mixed with testosterone. The combo blasted through his veins like a fiery virus, infecting him with a level of lust the likes of which he’d never experienced.

She passed right by him. At first he thought she hadn’t seen him, but then he got that it was all part of her erotic role-playing game.

Be prepared to do the forbidden.

She sashayed up to the ticket counter, bought her ticket and strolled inside without a backward look.

His cock turned to stone.

He followed suit. Buying a ticket and then following her inside the darkened theatre. At twelve o’clock on a weekday afternoon, they were the only two people in the lobby.

The theatre had been fully restored in the cinema heyday of when it had been built. The carpeting was colorful and lavishly patterned. The gold-plated lighting fixtures gleamed, polished to a high sheen. A black-and-white art-deco cat clock on the wall behind the concession stand ticked off the moments until show time. Three, two, one.

The smell of freshly popped popcorn filled the air. Katie stopped and bought a box of three-dollar jelly beans from the elderly woman behind the counter. She opened the box of candy and stood in silhouette so he could watch her pop one into her mouth and suck leisurely on it.

Liam quelled a groan.

“Would you like a sweet treat, sir?” the woman asked as Katie walked away.

“No, thanks.” He shook his head. There was only one sweet treat he wanted and she was escaping.

The woman nodded, went back to perch on her stool in the corner and picked up the romance novel she’d been reading. Liam went after Katie.

She did not go in through the main entrance. Rather, she made a beeline for the marble stairs leading up into the balcony.

Thick red velvet ropes stationed on either side of the steps barred access to the lofty seating. But Katie wasn’t allowing a measly stretch of cable to deter her. She winnowed around the rope, keeping to the strip of carpet running down the middle of the gray marble to blunt the sound of her high heels. She swept elegantly up the staircase.

Mesmerized, Liam flaunted the rules and tracked after her.

She pushed back the red velvet curtain leading into the balcony. He did the same, slipping past the rope. His heart suddenly was pounding so loudly he feared the noise of it would echo throughout the empty theatre and alert the staff to their clandestine rendezvous.

Once behind the curtain, he had to stop and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. The black-and-white movie was just starting, transporting them into a different era.

After a couple of seconds, he spotted her, on the back row of the empty balcony, up high, right underneath the projector, so they couldn’t be spotted from the projection booth.

Excitement twisting his gut, Liam sidled up the remaining steps and eased into the seat beside her.

“Katie,” he gasped.

“My name is Veronique,” she whispered in a seductive French accent. “And I do not need to know yours.”

He felt the blood leave his head and rush pell-mell to deliver massive doses of testosterone to his groin.

“What do you need, Veronique?” he found himself asking her huskily.

“I need adventure.”

“What kind of adventure?’

“Forbidden adventure,” she murmured.

Excitement trembled his hand. The scent of her invaded his nostrils. Her daring spirit clipped him hard. His muscles clenched. The tension was almost more than he could tolerate.

His eyes met hers.

In the darkness, in the heat of the moment, the black of her pupils grew so large they almost encompassed the azure blue of her irises. Was it his imagination, or were her lips trembling as much as his hands?

Foolish as it might be, he had to have her.

Liam realized how very little he knew about her, beyond the fact that she was one of those Winfields. The thought served to send his desire soaring.

He’d never experienced excitement like this. Not in the boardroom, not when making a fabulous deal on a piece of renovated property, not being named Young Bostonian’s bachelor of the year. The closest he had ever come to this sensation was when he drove his Lamborghini over the speed limit.

What a helluva ride.

A sense of rash abandon shoved him headfirst into decadence. It was not an emotion he was familiar with. Liam was normally an expert at delayed gratification. But not today. Not with this amazing woman. If he lived to be a hundred, he would never forget her.

With one slender, well-manicured finger, she raked her nail along his jawline.

Liam stifled a groan. Who knew a gentle scratch would feel so erotic? Katie’s stroking brought a whole new element of awareness into play as he imagined those sweet fingers investigating other, more vulnerable areas of his body.

Her bold self-confidence inflamed him. She was a complex and complicated woman and he wanted to know everything about her. His hungry curiosity almost sent him over the brink of reason.

What did she have up her sleeve?

She’d started this seduction, this exotic tease, but damn if he wasn’t committed to finishing it.

On the screen in front of them, Clark Gable flirted with Claudette Colbert, but Liam didn’t notice. He had eyes for only one woman.

In the muted glow from the light of the projector, he studied Katie. She sent him a look that jammed his libido into hyperdrive, slowly licked her lips, and then leaned over the arm of her chair to lightly run that naughty tongue over his lips.

Blood, fiery and indolent, pooled in his groin. Every nerved ending leaped as electrical impulses shot through the circuitry of his brain.

The lovely Veronique tasted of licorice jelly beans and lusty woman. Their tongues tangoed. First she was the leader, muddling his senses, but then he took over, giving as good as he’d gotten. Making her mewl with escalating pleasure.

He was back in control.

Or at least he thought he was until she broke the kiss, pressed her mouth to his ear and whispered, “I’m not wearing panties.”

Sweat slicked his brow, his chest, his thigh, and the pounding between his thighs intensified. His cock was damned stiff and sensitive, thrusting against the zipper of his slacks.

Shamelessly, she pressed her bosom against his arm and kissed him again, her mouth gobbling up his as if she knew every single outlaw fantasy that crossed his mind.

He brushed his hand against her breast and lightly pinched the nipple straining against the soft material. Her flesh beaded as hard as a pebble beneath his touch.

She sucked in her breath with a sex-fueled hiss. “Oh, yeah.”

“That’s it,” he murmured, proud of his masculine prowess. “Tell me what you like.”

“I want your cock.” She slipped her hand down the front of his shirt to his waistband. Boldly, she eased down his zipper and reached inside.

It was his turn to hiss in his breath.

She nibbled his neck while her hand stroked his rock-hard flesh with a teasing caress. On screen, Clark was stringing up a blanket to separate him from Claudette.

Knowing that they were making out in the balcony of a movie theatre, that any minute an usher could walk in and find them, was beyond exhilarating. It was forbidden, yes, but that’s what made it so awesome.

Liam felt the pulse in her wrist leap hard and fast against the head of his penis and Liam knew Katie was just as turned on as he was.

“I want you,” he growled. “Now.”

“Wait,” she said huskily.

He felt her fumble around in the darkness, heard the sound of something being unwrapped. Condom, he thought, and then she was rolling the rubber on his burgeoning cock.

She straddled the arms of the chair he was sitting in, wrapped her hands around his neck and slowly eased herself down on the length of him. Instinctively, his hands went to span her waist, holding her in place and letting out his breath on a long, controlled exhale.

Her wet moistness engulfed him and he was inside her. “Ride me.” His voice was gravel.

“My pleasure.” She rode him hard and fast until they were soaring together, mindless of the noise they were making. Beyond caring who could hear.

Liam was so crazy with desire for her he couldn’t stop himself. He had to do this. There was no other way out.

Their joining was quick and urgent and very, very dangerous. Everything was borderless, open. They rolled into infinity, and every blissful inch felt right and good and true. Liam couldn’t distinguish who was inside whom. They were both inside, occupying the bones, skin, muscles, cells. Together, they spun.

The tasty expanse of their union multiplied, swelling beyond comprehension. A harmonious, voiceless galaxy whirling quicker than the speed of sound.

Past thinking, with no coherent thought in his head, he was nothing but cock and ass and balls.

Alive with sensation.

Relentlessly, Katie rocked into him. He was aching, gushing, throbbing. He had to bite down on his lip to keep from letting loose with a primal cry. To keep from begging for release from this glorious torture. From the rapture he could almost touch.

Tingling. Humming. Rushing.

Soon. Please, please let it be soon. It had better be or he’d implode.

And then, just like that, it was upon him.

Liam tumbled. Jerking and trembling into the abyss, hurtling. Lost. Enveloped by the chasm. The earth, the sky, the air, the ocean exploded in a ball of white-hot come.

He blinked, befuddled.

Katie collapsed. Sank her head against his.

He wrapped his arms around her and they sat there, sweating, shuddering, panting for breath.

The urgency was gone. His cock emptied. But his mind was one speeding thought after another. Adrift in a darkened world of squeaky theatre seats, red velvet curtains and the smell of buttered popcorn.

They had traveled so far together, had shared such a forbidden intimacy that when they settled back into their separate selves, a fierce melancholy fell over him.

Their lovemaking had been so remarkable that Liam did not know what to do now.

They did not know each other. Not really. They possessed no common ground. No shared history or background in which to salvage their separateness. In the confines of the old theatre, with Clark kissing Claudette on screen, they navigated unknown terrain.

Then, before he could make a move, Katie decided for him. She rose up from his lap, slipped from his grasp. “Give me a two-minute start before you follow.”

Then she was gone.

Several minutes later, as Liam left the theatre on legs so shaky he was amazed he could walk, he realized that this movie would always be branded in his brain as It Happened One Forbidden Afternoon.

LIAM WAS SITTING in his office, scrunched down in his chair, staring out the window when a soft knock sounded and his door opened a crack.

“Liam?”

“Huh?” Liam jerked upright and blinked at his secretary Vanessa Gomez. She studied him with a look of motherly concern. “What is it?”

“I don’t mean to overstep boundaries, but is there something unusual going on in your personal life?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been very distracted lately and your moods are all over the place.” Vanessa was an impeccable employee. Forty-five, caramel-skinned, always professionally dressed and well put together. She also didn’t pry into his private life, not usually. But that could have been because up until now he hadn’t had much of a private life.

“Sorry, my mind was elsewhere.” On his wild lunchtime encounter with Katie.

“On the warehouse-condo renovations?”

“Yeah,” he lied, “that’s it.”

She crossed the room, settled some files on his desk. “These contracts need your signature.”

“Thanks.” He nodded.

Vanessa started to leave, but stopped at the door. “Oh, and one other thing.”

“Yes?”

“Finn Delancy’s secretary called from the mayor’s office.”

“What?” He planted both palms on his desk and shot to his feet. Irrationally, his first thought was, He’s finally calling to acknowledge he’s my father. “When?”

“Just a few minutes ago.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Liam said curtly, his pulse pounding in his temple. “What did Delancy want?”

“Why, to invite you to a dinner party at his house. That whole Young Bostonian thing has the city buzzing about you. Plus, he might want to put the squeeze on you for a campaign contribution.”

Here it was. A second chance to confront Delancy in public. Honestly, he’d been so wrapped up in Katie that he’d almost forgotten about his vendetta against Delancy.

Almost.

“When’s the party?” he asked.

“This Wednesday at eight. Should I tell him you’re available?”

Liam swallowed hard, curled his hands into fists. “You bet.”

“I’ll let his PA know.” Vanessa headed for the door, but paused when she reached it and turned back. “Oh, he’s expecting you to bring a date.”

EMPOWERED BY the bold thing she’d done during her lunch hour, Katie called Lindsay Beckham the minute she sank into the chair behind her desk at Sharper Designs.

“Chassys bar.”

“Is this Lindsay?”

“It is. Who’s speaking?”

“Katie Winfield.”

“Yes?”

“I did it.”

“Did what?” the unflappable blonde asked. Even over the phone, she sounded cool and utterly in control.

“My Martini dare. You know, I made love in a forbidden place.”

“Good for you.” Was it her imagination or was there a self-satisfied note in Lindsay’s voice? “And the object of your affections? What did he think about the dare?”

Katie grinned, thinking of the wiped-out expression on Liam’s face. “I’m quite confident he liked it, too. Although I never told him that he was part of a dare.”

“Excellent. As you know, you’re sworn to secrecy about the details of your Martini dares. Are you ready for the next one?”

Katie sucked in her breath. Was she? Her encounter with Liam had been so intimately erotic she wasn’t sure she was emotionally ready for another dare.

“You have to complete all three dares before next month’s Martinis and Bikinis meeting,” Lindsay reminded her.

“Yeah, okay, sure, send it my way.”

“That’s the spirit.” Lindsay chuckled. “I’ll put the new dare in the mail today.”

“What was that all about?” Tanisha asked, after Katie had hung up.

“Um, nothing,” she hedged.

“You’ve been acting very odd lately,” Tanisha said. “Ever since Max made you art director. I think it’s going to your head.”

“It’s not going to my head,” she denied.

“No?” Tanisha looked as if she didn’t believe it for a second.

“No.”

“Well, something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“You—” she pointed a pitiless finger “—are seriously into denial.”

Feeling badgered, she crossed her arms over her chest. “What makes you think something is wrong?”

“Because your skirt’s on backward.”

Katie looked down and saw that Tanisha was right. Her zipper was twisted around to the front, not in the back where it belonged. It must have happened in the theatre.

Her face heated. Good grief, she was seriously into denial.

Denial that her feelings for Liam were growing too fast and too strong.

Tanisha narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Have you fallen off the cold-turkey wagon? Where were you during your lunch hour?”

Thankfully, her extension rang and she snatched up the receiver to avoid answering her friend’s probing questions.

“Katie?”

She caught a skittish breath. The sound of Liam’s voice, as spellbinding as snake-charmer music, curled through her body. Her tongue was cemented to the roof of her mouth and her hand tightened around the receiver. A dozen erotic images erupted in her mind.

She recalled the way he had looked at the movie theatre, muscles coiled tight, face scrunched up in ecstasy. Her hands tingled, recalling how her fingers had brushed against the smooth skin of his strong, clean-shaven jaw. Her nose twitched in memory of the tangy scent their lovemaking generated. Her mouth watered and her sex clenched with electric shivers. She wanted to do it again.

And soon.

But it wasn’t just the physical act, and her enjoyment of it, that had her aching to be joined with him again. What she remembered most about their adventure in the theatre, what frayed her heart with an emotion she didn’t want to think about, was the way he’d tenderly cupped her face in his hands. He’d stared deeply into her eyes and then kissed her lightly, tenderly, the moment after they’d climaxed together.

“Katie,” he repeated.

“Uh-huh,” she whispered, her pulse skipped a zealous message to her brain. I want him.

“I know this is short notice,” he apologized, “but are you free on Wednesday night?”

“Um…what’s up?”

“Mayor Delancy is having a dinner party at his house and I need a date. Can you come with me?”

Can I come with you? That was a loaded question if she’d ever heard one. “I’d love to.”

“Great, I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty.” He rang off without another word.

Katie hung up, feeling a strange mix of emotions—anticipation mingled with sheepishness and a light dusting of bafflement. She’d been a flirt since childhood. Teasing men, leading them on and then taking off when things got too serious for her to handle. She liked keeping guys off balance, making them unsure of where they stood with her.

But Liam was different. Here he’d gone and asked her for a last-minute date and she hadn’t hesitated. In the past—with any other guy—she would have pretended she had another date. Instead, she eagerly accepted Liam’s invitation without thinking twice. How messed up was that?

Katie put a hand to her stomach, alarmed. Something very strange was happening to her. Something she could not control or explain.

And she wasn’t at all sure she liked the path she was headed down.

**9**

LIAM PACED his penthouse apartment, his nerves shredded, even though he was loath to admit Finn Delancy held that much power over him. Tough guys didn’t get nervous over being the guest of honor at dinner parties thrown by their illegitimate fathers.

The only thing that calmed him was the knowledge that he would have Katie by his side. She knew how to successfully navigate blue-blooded waters. One ally. That was all he needed to give him the strength to confront the man he’d never called father.

He picked Katie up in his Lamborghini at seven-thirty on the dot. She opened the door looking exactly like what she was—a well-bred Boston Brahmin. She wore a little black cocktail dress that fit her curves perfectly and showcased her sleek blond hair. The dress showed enough cleavage to be enticing without being vulgar. The skirt hem hit right above her knees. Not too long, not too short.

A five-carat diamond lay draped around her long slender neck, and she had on a matching bracelet. She’d twisted her hair up off her shoulders like Aubrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany’s—his mother’s all-time favorite movie.

She’d struck exactly the right note.

He stared, stunned by the simplicity of her beauty. “You look amazing.”

Her smile was surprisingly shy. “Thank you.”

“I brought you a corsage.”

“I can see that.”

He suddenly felt like a giant dork standing there with the vibrant red rose corsage in his hand. He’d gotten it on Vanessa’s recommendation, but now the gesture seemed way too high-school-promish. “It’s a dumb idea.”

“No, no.” She reached for the corsage. “Flowers are never a dumb idea.”

“Should I pin it on for you?”

“Please.”

He took the corsage out of the box and stepped forward to pin it on her dress. She smelled so good, so tempting. His knuckles grazed the curve of her skin, his fingertips brushing the velvety material of her dress. She felt so warm and alive.

Katie lowered her lashes, watching him pin the corsage in place. The fact she was watching him threw Liam off his game. Her succulent aroma, mingled with the smell of the roses, enticed him. He wanted to lean over and nibble on the creamy expanse of her exposed neck.

“Your thumb,” she exclaimed. “Look, Liam, you’re bleeding.”

It was only then he noticed he had poked his finger with the pin while putting on her corsage. He’d been so overwhelmed by her that he hadn’t even felt the prick of pain.

Katie snatched a tissue from a nearby box, reached out, took his hand and dotted away the blood.

Something knotted inside him at her tender touch. Something alien and scary.

He wondered how he looked to her, successful entrepreneur in a tux, Boston’s most eligible bachelor, all suave and debonair, sticking his finger with a pin and not even paying attention because her beauty had so preoccupied him.

“Where did you get that tattoo?” she asked. “It doesn’t fit with the rest of you.”

He stiffened. He was sensitive about the tattoo. He wore wide watchbands to hide it, but when he looked down he could see the inky barbs peeping around the edge of his Rolex.

“I got into some trouble when I was a kid,” he admitted, hoping a simple explanation would be enough.

“What kind of trouble?” She breathed, and he could tell she was intrigued.

“I got mixed up with a gang,” he mumbled.

“A real gang?”

“Real enough.”

She blinked. “I don’t believe you.”

He didn’t know what possessed him to do what he did next. Her tone of voice, maybe. Or perhaps he had a desire to shock her. But the next thing Liam knew he was stripping off his jacket and unbuttoning his shirt.

A smile curled her lips. “I like the way this is going.”

Her teasing frustrated him. He aimed to stun, not titillate.

He whipped off his shirt and then tugged down the right side of his trouser waistband, revealing the jagged silvered scar just above his hipbone.

Katie’s eyes widened to the size of quarters. “Ohmigod!”

Talking about being stabbed was more difficult than he’d thought it would be. But Liam was not prepared for what she did next.

Katie crossed the distance between them, sank to her knees and softly pressed her lips to his scar, leaving behind the scarlet imprint of her mouth branded against his skin. The gesture sent quivers shooting through his groin. Uncontrollably, his penis hardened. Disturbed by her response and his reaction to it, he held out a hand to help her to her feet.

“Tell me,” she whispered, and touched his arm, leaving him wishing he’d never started this.

He lifted his shoulder, shrugging as if it had been no big deal, rather than a defining moment in his life. “It was the stupid mistake of a fourteen-year-old kid, looking for a place to belong.”

“Why did you feel the need to belong that badly?”

“I grew up without a father. My mother worked two jobs to make ends meet. I spent a lot of time alone.”

“What happened to your dad?”

He certainly hadn’t intended on getting into all this now. “I never knew him. He took off the minute he found out my mother was pregnant.”

“Wow, none of that was in the Young Bostonian article about you.”

“I don’t tell many people about it.”

Her eyes softened. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How did you get from there to where you are today?” She studied him intently, her gaze heating up his skin as he fumbled with the shirt buttons.

“After this—” he swept a hand at his scar “—my mother knew she had to get me out of that neighborhood or I was going to end up dead.”

“How did she get you out of that environment?”

“She took a job as a cook’s helper at a private school in upstate New York. Even though it paid a lot less than her two jobs in Boston, we were allowed to live in a two-room apartment on the school grounds and I received free tuition. If it weren’t for the sacrifices she made, I wouldn’t be here today.”

That might sound overly dramatic, but it was the honest truth. He would have been killed or in prison, of that he had little doubt.

“How come you don’t have the tattoo removed?”

“I keep it as a reminder of where I’ve been, of what I’ve escaped. I’m not proud of it, but it’s important not to forget my past.”

“Oh,” she said as if she understood, but he knew she had no concept of what his life had been like. How could she from her ivory tower?

Looking at the regal tilt of her head, he felt like that fatherless fourteen-year-old boy again who’d grown up in the South Boston housing project. Unsure of himself and desperately longing for success, but terrified he’d never fit in with Katie’s kind, no matter how hard he tried. He’d come a long way, but there were some barriers that could never be breached.

Who was he to think he could ever possess a woman like her? He could amass all the money in the world and never be in her league. To believe otherwise was folly. His tattoo was proof of that. You couldn’t change your DNA.

But part of his DNA was as blue-blooded as her own.

The part he hated.

Liam stepped back, hoping if he put some distance between them he could think more clearly, but he could not.

Katie met his gaze with a knowing smile. He had the frantic notion she could see right through him like an X-ray.

Afraid of his vulnerability, Liam cleared his throat. “We better leave if we don’t want to be late for the mayor’s party.”

Delancy lived in one of the largest mansions on Beacon Hill. A valet hired for the evening parked his car. Liam took Katie’s hand and guided her up the cobblestone walkway.

He noticed the carved lintels and decorative ironwork. Delancy was living here while he and his mother had been crammed into a six-hundred-square-foot apartment on the wrong side of the tracks and then later in an equally small garage apartment behind the dean’s house at Fernwood Academy for Boys.

The old rage caught fire inside him.

Katie must have picked up on his mood because she stopped on the front doorstep and looked at him. “Liam, is everything okay?”

“Yes.”

“You seem tense.”

“A bit nervous, I guess.”

“You?” She sounded surprised.

“I’ve never met the mayor before.” At least not officially. Not outside of a pirate’s costume.

“Don’t be so impressed with Finn Delancy. My family’s known his for years. People on Beacon Hill are like people anywhere else and most of them have a skeleton or two in their closet. Blue blood or not, you’re twice the man Finn Delancy will ever be. Relax. You’ll do fine.”

Her words washed away his anger. She squeezed his hand, strengthening his courage and then reached out to rap the door with the heavy brass knocker.

A reserved-looking young woman wearing a starched white apron answered their knock.

“Liam James and Katie Winfield,” Katie announced to the woman.

The mayor’s home was something straight out of a nineteenth-century novel. The foyer towered two stories above their heads and the walls were paneled in luxurious mahogany. The rugs were Persian, the artwork original masterpieces and the massive chandelier looked as if it had come straight from the home of a Venetian artisan glassblower.

While my mother and I were eating macaroni and cheese, Delancy was living in a palace.

The woman took Katie’s wrap and handbag and ushered them into the library where a group of Boston’s elite were gathered around the fireplace sipping cocktails. The room was stocked floor to ceiling with books and overstuffed chairs. Liam would have killed to have access to such a library when he was in school.

“Katie, darling,” a straw-thin, middle-aged woman with a face smoothed by plastic surgery crossed the room to greet them. Liam recognized her from photos he’d seen in the newspaper and on TV as Delancy’s wife, Sutton. “Don’t tell me you’ve landed our city’s most eligible multimillionaire bachelor.”

“No, no,” Katie said quickly. “Liam’s a client of Sharper Design.”

Her immediate denial that their relationship was anything more than business bothered him. Would it have been so terrible to let Sutton assume they were a couple?

Sutton linked her arm through Liam’s, tugging him away from Katie. “You must tell me all about yourself, dear boy. You might be Boston’s most eligible bachelor, but I’ve asked around and no one seems to know much about you other than the luscious fact that you’re fabulously wealthy. Who is your family?”

He had to be careful. Much as he wanted to blurt out the truth, this wasn’t the time or the place. He was here to get the lay of the land and to find out as much as he could about the enemy.

Finn Delancy broke away from his cronies at the fireplace and walked over to join Liam, Katie and Sutton in the middle of the room. He cradled a crystal tumbler of Scotch in his hand.

Liam didn’t miss the lecherous look Finn sent in Katie’s direction. He had to fight to suppress an overpowering urge to plant his fist in the older man’s kisser.

“How do you do, Mr. James? I don’t believe we’ve ever met.” Delancy stuck out his hand.

Liam gritted his teeth. It was all he could do to civilly shake the man’s hand. “No?”

Delancy looked confused by the questioning tone in Liam’s voice.

Liam said nothing, just stared Delancy in the eyes. The mayor was the first to look away, shifting his attention to his glass of Scotch. “Can I get you something to drink?” Delancy searched the room for the maid, snapped his fingers at her and said, “Alice, get Mr. James a…”

“Whiskey,” Liam said. He wasn’t much for hard liquor, but this evening was shaping up to be a whiskey kind of night. “Neat.”

Delancy reached up and put a hand on Liam’s shoulder. “Come on over and let me introduce you to everyone.”

He flinched at the intimate contact, turned his head to look for Katie and found her right beside him. If not for her, he would feel like a hapless sheep among a pack of wolves. He might know how to make money and flip real estate, but he didn’t have a clue how to walk the delicate tightrope of high-society politics.

Everyone at the party knew Katie and while Liam had met a few of the people in the room at various functions, he knew none of them personally. He chatted with State Senator Gerard Clarkson and his wife, Nancy, along with two CEOs of Boston’s largest corporations, a retired PGA superstar and their dates.

Alice brought Liam his whiskey and he took a bracing swallow. Katie was charming the crowd, regaling them with stories of her family, taking the pressure off him. He ended up in one corner, shoulder propped against the wall, watching her dazzle the guests. She would make someone a wonderful wife someday.

The thought sent a fissure of jealousy through him. He didn’t want to think of her as someone else’s wife.

Occasionally she paused in the middle of her conversation to cast a sidelong glance his way. There was no question about it—Katie captivated him.

She also scared him.

“Dinner is served,” Alice announced from the doorway.

Everyone trooped into the large dining room. The table was lavishly but very tastefully set with expensive but simple patterned china, genuine silverware and crystal goblets. A roasted goose was the main attraction.

Liam started to sit next to Katie, but Sutton Delancy intervened. “No, no, we don’t sit with our dates.”

Her chastisement over his faux pas sent a heated rush of embarrassment through Liam, reminding him how out of place he was here.

He remembered something he’d read once. When riding in a car, lower-class couples sit beside their spouses, middle-class couples sit with men in the front seat and women in the back, and the ruling classes sit with each other’s spouses.

And here he was, uncomfortable with the ruling class. He looked over at Katie, who seemed totally at ease.

“You’re the guest of honor,” Sutton went on. “You must take your place here, young man.” She pulled out the chair at the head of the table.

Delancy took the spot directly opposite Liam at the foot of the table and guided Katie to sit at his right hand. Sutton sat to Liam’s left as the remainder of the guests found their places.

“So tell us,” Sutton began, after the maid served the first course of bouillabaisse, “how did you get started in real estate? The way you’re going, you’ll own half of Boston within the next five years.”

Liam shifted, uncomfortable in the hot seat. “I fixed up my first car when I was a kid, sold it for double what I paid for it. Did that enough times until I could afford to by a small house and I renovated it. Then I flipped it, reinvested the money in a new house and the rest is history.”

“Goodness,” said Nancy Clarkson, fanning herself. “He’s wealthy, handsome, passionate and hardworking. Hang on to this one, Katie. He’s a keeper.”

“Your initiative is impressive,” Delancy said.

Liam glared down the end of the table. He contemplated blurting out the mayor’s dirty secret right then and there, and he took perverse delight in imagining the shocked reactions.

But then his gaze caught Katie’s. The last thing he wanted was to look like anything less than a hero in her eyes. The realization bothered him, but it was the truth.

“I read in the Young Bostonian article that you grew up in a South Boston housing project,” Delancy said.

The hairs on his forearms lifted. He drilled his gaze into the mayor’s, holding on tight to his anger. “That’s right.”

Katie was watching.

“You’d be the perfect person to introduce me at this year’s ribbon-cutting ceremony for my Habitat for Humanity project,” Delancy continued. “Local gang-banger not only turns good but becomes a multimillionaire in the process.”

Rage tinged with degradation froze Liam’s blood. He curled his fingers around the silver spoon in his hand. Could Delancy have figured out who he was? Could that be the real reason he’d been invited here tonight?

“Has a certain cachet, don’t you think?”

Liam forced a slow smile, smacking his gaze hard against Delancy’s, giving the mayor a menacing, predatory stare. “How do you know I was in a gang?”

Delancy’s returning smile was uncertain. “Why, Katie told me a few minutes ago.”

Liam swung his stare around to capture Katie with it. Nervously, she licked her lips. “I…didn’t know your past was a secret.”

Her betrayal of his confidence wounded like a razor’s blade. He bit down the inside of his cheek, mentally berating himself for having trusted her.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, but had the strength of courage to hold his gaze.

He realized then he’d been looking at her the same way he’d been looking at Delancy. As if she were the enemy. Her blue eyes pleaded with him for forgiveness. God, how could he hold a grudge when she looked so remorseful and beautiful?

Liam shrugged, softened his gaze. “It wasn’t a secret,” he said. “I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“Then you’ll introduce me at the Habitat for Humanity ceremony?” Delancy prodded.

Liam kept his eyes on Katie. It was the only way he could hold his contempt for the man in check. “All right.”

What was it about Katie Winfield that twisted his insides into knots? Just the act of tracking the snowy skin between her pear-studded earlobes and slender collarbone made Liam forget everything except pressing his lips to that vulnerable spot.

“It’s settled, then.” Delancy dusted his palms together. “The ribbon-cutting ceremony is on the twentieth at noon. Make sure to mark your calendar.”

“I won’t forget.” Liam looked back at Delancy, silently acknowledging that he’d just agreed to do a favor for the creep. Tension locked his neck muscles. But then it occurred to him that the ceremony—complete with media coverage—was the prime opportunity and the perfect venue to exact his revenge upon Delancy.

The maid reappeared to clear the soup bowls and to ask if anyone needed fresh drinks.

“Could I have another whiskey, please?” Liam asked. It was the only way he was going to make it through this damnable dinner.

Katie, Liam noted, missed nothing. He could see it in her eyes and the way she held herself with a calm stillness. She might be young, but in some ways she was much more worldly than him.

She put a smile on her face and lavishly praised the Caesar salad that was served as their second course.

By the end of the meal, Katie had managed to defuse any tension running through the room, although there was still plenty of tension coursing inside Liam that even two tumblers of the finest whiskey in the world could not stop.

“It was so interesting to meet you,” Sutton said as she ushered her guests toward the front door. She took Liam’s hand in hers and squeezed it. “I’m so looking forward to the Habitat for Humanity ceremony.”

After a round of goodbyes with everyone who was still there, Katie took Liam firmly by the elbow and escorted him out the front door. The valet brought his car around and handed Liam the keys.

But as he reached for the door, Katie closed her hand around his.

“Give me your keys,” she demanded, and held out her palm. “You’ve had too much to drink and I’m driving you home.”

“You could take me back to your place and have your way with me.” He winked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Given the circumstances, I’ll pass. Keys, please.”

“Have you ever driven a Lamborghini?”

“No, but it can’t be that hard.”

He didn’t want to give up control, but the determined set to her chin told him she was right. He shouldn’t be driving. Not so much from the whiskey, but more from the distracted edginess lingering inside him. The last thing the streets of Boston needed was one more case of road rage.

“This point is nonnegotiable.” She looked him in the face, a combination of concern, disappointment and resolve written in the depths of her blue eyes. “Give me your keys, Liam, or I’m calling the cops.”

He laughed at her. She looked so fierce.

“I’m not kidding.”

“When you put it like that, what choice do I have?”

“Precisely.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “But let this serve as a warning. You wreck my car and you’ll live to regret it, Winfield,” he said before handing over his car keys and opening the driver-side door for her.

**10**

KATIE’S FOREARM burned from the brush of Liam’s knuckles as he closed the car door. Her breath hung as she watched him hurry around to the passenger side and then climb in beside her. It took him a couple of seconds of fumbling before he had his seat belt locked securely in place.

She stuck the key in the ignition and the Lamborghini’s powerful engine rumbled to life. The leather seats wrapped around her. She reached over and snapped on the radio. Classical music poured from the stereo speakers. Mozart, she recognized. One of his more gallopy tunes.

“It’s a manual,” Liam said. “Six-speed. You know how to handle a stick?”

She lowered her lashes, slanted him a surreptitious look. “I know my way around a gearshift.”

A whiskey-laced smile languidly curled his lips. “What about a five-hundred-horsepower, ten-cylinder big block engine? Know how to handle one of those?”

“You tell me after the ride.”

“You know these babies go from zero to sixty in four seconds.”

Katie licked her lips. “That’s a lot of thrust.”

“It is.”

“Impressive,” she said. “But there is something to be said for a more leisurely ascent.”

“Top speed is a hundred-and-ninety-two miles an hour.” She could hear the smile in his tone.

“You’ve been holding out on me, James.”

“How’s that?”

“Pretending that you’re staid Mister Workaholic without an adventuresome bone in his body, but then you’re driving a work of art like this.” She patted the leather dashboard. “There’s danger lurking in your soul. You’ve been covering it up.”

“You think so?”

“I know so, and I intend on rocking your world.”

“You already have,” he said. “So don’t rock my car.”

She laughed and put the Lamborghini in Drive. Her nipples tightened, part excitement, part fear. She was glad he could only see her profile, glad the night was dark. But even as she told herself this, she couldn’t help turning her head for a better look at him.

His shoulders were angled toward her, his gaze beaded on her. The glow from the dashboard light threw shadows over his angular jaw. His scent heightened her awareness. Expensive whiskey, combined with woodsy cologne and the rich smell of leather. Her father used to have a similar fragrance—manly, grounded, trustworthy.

Liam was looking at her with a kind of wonder.

In the dimness, his face appeared craggier, more rugged than in light. His thick dark hair stood up slightly in the back, an errant lock refusing to stay down. The look in his eyes changed. And along with it the intensity of the tugging sensation in her belly increased. There was a flicker of something golden in his eyes, something wild and unexpected.

The form of his lips changed, his posture, the slant of his eyebrows. He was someone else entirely. Bachelor of the year no more, this man was darker. He’d seen things, dark things. She thought of his childhood brush with street gangs and her heart tweaked.

Katie was thankful for the console that kept their thighs from touching. Otherwise, she doubted she could have kept all four tires on the road.

Her fingers gripped the smooth ball of the gearshift head and slipped it into the next gear as they left the driveway and merged onto the street.

LIAM SAT beside Katie, his pulse pumping faster than the Lamborghini’s heated pistons. He didn’t like being in the passenger seat at the mercy of her driving skills, out of control of his own vehicle. He wished he could edge her aside and slip behind the wheel, but she was right. He’d had too much to drink and his reaction time wasn’t what it should be.

Neither were his cognitive skills, because he found himself thinking thoughts that were better left suppressed. Enticing, dangerous thoughts about what it would feel like to ride in the car beside her every day for the rest of his life.

“You wanna see how I handle big boys’ toys?” She challenged and, without waiting for his reply, hit the freeway doing seventy.

She tossed her head like a high-spirited filly. Her hair fell forward, the tips of the light blond strands grazing the top of her cleavage. She reached up to slide a lock of hair behind one pearl-studded ear.

Liam felt the rhythm of her movements rush straight through his stomach and into his groin. Something about the way she handled the quivering thrust of his V10 engine inflamed him. She was like a luxury sports car herself, with fine rounded curves and bosoms protruding like headlights.

Enveloped in their cocoon of precision machinery, she rushed him through time and space. Speed, wrapped inextricably with sexual need, gushed through his brain, his limbs and his entire body. She was fast and adventuresome and exciting. And he worshipped her in an orgy of pure velocity.

Liam was so busy filling up with testosterone that her next comment took him by surprise.

“You want to tell me what happened back there with the mayor?” Katie asked. “Or are you just going to let me believe you’re a total horse’s ass?”

“You picked up on that?”

Katie grinned. “Give me some credit, will you? A blind woman could have picked up on your animosity toward Delancy. Thing is, I get the distinct impression he has no idea that you hate him.”

“You’re very perceptive.”

“Don’t sound so amazed. Just because I like to keep to the lighter side of things doesn’t mean I’m clueless.”

“I never said you were clueless.”

“You thought it.”

“Never. Impetuous yes, clueless never,” he admitted.

“I also noticed that you didn’t answer my question,” she prodded.

“Which question was that?”

“Why do you hate Finn Delancy?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Guyspeak for you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

“Why not what?”

She cocked her head and gave him a piercing glance before returning her attention to the road. “Why don’t you want to talk about it?”

“Because it’s none of your business.”

“It might not be any of my business, but you certainly look like you need to talk about it.”

“I don’t need to talk about it.”

“How long have you kept this—” she waved a hand “—complicated thing bottled up?”

“All my life,” he said, and then immediately regretted it.

“You’ve got a dark secret.”

“Not really. Just something I’m not particularly proud of.”

“You might feel better if you got it off your chest,” she ventured.

“I seriously doubt it.”

“The thing about secrets is,” she went on, ignoring his denial that he had a secret, “once you tell someone about them, they no longer hold any power over your life.”

“I don’t have any secrets. In fact,” he said, “I hate secrets and dishonest people.”

“So is Delancy the dishonest person with the secret?” she guessed. “Do you have something on him?”

“Sort of.”

“And you don’t approve of him.”

“I hate him.”

“If you dislike the man so much, how come you accepted his dinner invitation? How come you agreed to introduce him at the Habitat for Humanity event?”

“Can we not talk about Delancy?”

“Okay.” She surprised him by suddenly letting go of the conversation.

Silence fell. All they could hear were engine sounds and road noises.

From the time his mother had told him his father’s identity when he was sixteen, Liam had plotted and schemed and planned for his success. He’d studied hard in school, played every sport Fernwood Academy offered and did lots of volunteer work. He got straight A’s and won a merit scholarship to Harvard. He cut clippings of his achievements and made scrapbooks. He’d graduated cum laude from Harvard Business School, all the while buying run-down houses in South Boston and restoring them for resale.

Because of his achievements, women were crazy for him. And other than his glorious mistake with Arianna, there hadn’t been room in his life for romance. He’d had a few girlfriends, yes. But somehow he’d managed to always keep things casual. It was easier that way. Nobody got hurt.

The truth was, he secretly longed for a family of his own while at the same time he feared it. What did he know about being a good father? He’d certainly had no role models. And what if he couldn’t stop his workaholic pace? His work had always defined him. If he wasn’t driven to succeed, then who was he?

And Liam had been keeping his relationships superficial for so long, he realized he didn’t know how to take things deeper with a woman. He didn’t know how to let go of his work and enjoy his life, mainly, because real estate was his life.

Liam watched her downshift around a corner. She almost ran a red light, the yellow slipping to crimson just as she made it through the intersection.

“Yellow means slow down, not go faster,” he said.

“Not in a Lamborghini it doesn’t.” She grinned wickedly.

His heart chugged. “You’re one sexy woman, Katie Winfield.”

“Oh, don’t start. You’re drunk and I’m pissed off at you for not trusting me with your dark secret.”

“I’m not that drunk.” He reached over to lightly finger a strand of hair curling at her shoulder. “And you’re not that pissed off.”

“I am,” she asserted.

“What will it take to get you unpissed?”

“Tell me what’s going on inside that head of yours. What’s your beef with Finn Delancy?”

Liam cocked his head and studied her for a long moment. Confess. Maybe this was what he needed to do in order to take things to a new level with her. “You really want to hear the whole sordid story?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“Promise you won’t pity me?”

“I promise.”

He took a deep breath. “Pull over.”

“I’m not letting you behind the wheel.”

“I don’t want to drive, just find a place to pull over. I need to get out and walk.”

“Are you sick?”

“I’m not sick. I just…I’ve never told this story to anyone and I need to get out of the car, clear my head, make sure I want to do this.”

She obeyed his command, slowing down, driving through a residential neighborhood until she found a community park. She pulled into the vacant lot near some swings and parked beneath a maple tree near a streetlamp. She cut the engine and leaned back in the seat.

“Let’s walk,” he said.

They got out. The air was nippy, but not uncomfortably so. He headed for the jogging trail, Katie at his side. They walked for several minutes without speaking.

“I’m a bastard.” Liam found himself saying in a calm, unemotional voice.

Katie clicked her tongue in sympathy. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. So you had a little too much to drink and looked a bit sketchy in front of the mayor and his guests. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I’m a bastard. For real.” He laughed harshly. “Although some people might argue I’m the other kind of bastard, as well.”

“You’re saying your mother wasn’t married to your father when you were born?”

“That’s right.”

“Big deal.”

“Big deal?”

“I read something like thirty percent of children are born out of wedlock these days. No one cares.”

“Spoken like someone who grew up in a loving, nuclear family.”

“Hey, my life hasn’t been a bed of roses. My father was strict military and a prominent member of Boston society. You have no idea the expectations that entails. Plus, I’ve lost both my parents within the past five years. Everyone has their cross to bear, Liam.”

KATIE BURROWED deeper into her coat and scurried to keep up with his long-legged stride. Liam had increased the pace. In the distance a dog barked and a porch light went on. He was clearly ambivalent about this subject. “You don’t have to tell me any more about it, Liam. Forget it. I don’t want to be the cause of you having to have therapy.”

“No, no.” He stopped walking and made an about-face to stare at her. “I want to tell you.”

“So tell me. I’m listening.”

He heaved in a breath. “Okay, my mother came to Boston from Ireland when she was only seventeen. A friend got her a job working in a factory that made parts for sailing ships. The owner of the factory was a Beacon Hill Brahmin with eyes for my mother. She didn’t know he was married when they started dating. He wined her, dined her, treated her like royalty. Told her the kind of lies that make a young girl’s heart light up. Then when she found out she was pregnant with his child, he threw three hundred dollars at her and told her to get an abortion.”

“It must have been awful for your mom.”

Liam was breathing hard. He had his fists clenched. The muscles in his neck were bunched so tightly Katie could feel his anger. “Yeah.”

She touched his arm. “And for you, too.”

He didn’t say anything for so long that she finally prompted, “So what did your mother do after that?”

“There wasn’t anywhere she could stay. There was a home for unwed mothers in Boston, but you had to give your child up for adoption if you stayed there. She refused to give me up. I was all she had. She’d lost all her family in Ireland. That’s why she’d come to America.”

“How did she get through it?”

“She had two jobs, worked in a different factory at night, pressed clothes in a dry-cleaning shop by day. Hard, backbreaking work, but the owners of the dry cleaner’s allowed her to bring me to work with her after I was born. On weekends, she took classes and earned both her U.S. citizenship and her GED. She raised me all on her own without one penny of assistance from my so-called father.”

Katie’s heart hurt. For Liam, for his mother, for the struggles they must have endured. “I think I understand you,” she said.

He stared at her with his sharp, intelligent eyes. The look unsettled her. “Have I scared you off because I’m so damaged?”

Katie raised her chin. “Everyone’s damaged in one way or an other. Besides, I don’t scare easily.”

He nodded, but he shrugged as if he didn’t believe her. Suddenly, she didn’t believe what she’d said, either.

Every impulse in her body was urging her to kiss him, but she didn’t want him to misunderstand it. Hell, she didn’t want to misunderstand it. She felt something for this man. Something too powerful to take lightly. He could hurt her. She could hurt him. They could hurt each other very badly if they weren’t very careful.

“I haven’t told you the biggest secret yet.”

“I’m listening.”

“Finn Delancy?”

“Yes?”

“You want to know why I hate him?”

She nodded, but she already knew what he was going to say. He merely confirmed it.

“He’s the guy. He’s my father.”

Katie concentrated on his features. It explained a lot, and now that he mentioned it, she could see a bit of physical resemblance between the two men. “But he doesn’t know who you are.”

He gave a harsh laugh. “No.”

“You resent people born into wealth and prominence, don’t you?”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Not admirable, but it’s the truth.”

Once he admitted it, a bleakness fell over her. He was with her because of her pedigree, who she was. That’s why he’d invited her to the dinner party, in effect, flaunting her. Making this subliminal statement: Hey, look at me. I’m from the streets and I’ve nailed me a woman who can trace her family tree back to the Mayflower.

Wretchedly, she closed her eyes, then opened them again to find him focused on her.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re using me.”

“What?”

“You’re using me to get what has always been out of your reach, no matter how hard you’ve worked. I’m your entrée into Boston society. You made the money on your own, but you can’t buy a pedigree.”

“No,” he vehemently denied. “I’m not.”

She was feeling sick to her stomach. “Really? First you date Brooke and when there is no love connection between the two of you, then you come after me.” She turned and walked back to the Lamborghini, but he caught her by the arm and spun her around to face him.

“That’s unfair. You seduced me at the Ladies League Ball.”

“You expect me to believe my last name doesn’t have anything to do with why I’m here with you?”

“Okay,” he said. “Maybe Brooke’s heritage was the reason I was initially attracted to her, but the minute I met you, all bets were off. You…me—” He pointed from her to him and back again. “This thing between us has nothing to do with our social standing or our past.”

“I wish I could believe you,” she said, not knowing what to think, unable to decipher what she was feeling.

He tilted her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “I won’t ever lie to you, Katie. All I ask in return is that you never lie to me.”

“If I was dead broke and named Katie Smith, you’d still be here with me.”

“Damn straight.”

LIAM WAS ALARMED to think she could believe he was using her for his own gain. He had to show Katie how much she meant to him. He pulled her to him, slid his hands up the back of her neck to cup her head in his palms.

Her hair was a soft and silky slide beneath his fingers. And the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest sent his own breath reeling. A heated awareness pricked his skin. Their mental connection was undeniable. He’d never felt so conscious of anything in his life.

She looked at him, her eyes shining bright and eager in the glow of light from the overhead vapor lamp. She made him feel unique, and yet he had no right to feel that way. Katie was an adventurous woman, no doubt about it. From her mischievous grin, to her rakish smile, she appreciated sex.

And no woman had ever aroused him so intently.

She was playful and flirtatious and spontaneous; he was reserved and sober and scrupulous. She was windblown; he walked the straight and narrow. She lived to shock; he kept his feelings to himself. She was a blue blood and he’d been born with a plastic fork in his mouth. She was foie gras; he was a TV dinner.

And he was falling for her hard and fast.

Falling so hard and so fast that he didn’t even notice where they were.

You’re just horny, he told himself but Liam was afraid that wasn’t the whole truth. He was terrified he was starting to care more for her than she could ever care for him.

She pursed her lips.

He kissed her then, every cell in his body humming in harmony with hers.

She kissed him back, increasing the pressure, upping the tempo. Her lips blasted him into another realm of awareness, making him forget everything except the feel of her mouth under his. Her short fingernails dug into the back of his head. A deep flush of arousal painted her face, spread down her neck to her perky bosom. She was ready for action.

The flick of her tongue over his teeth was lazy, sultry, teasing him by degrees. Slowly at first, but then with steadily building pressure.

Liam didn’t remember how, but they made it back to the car. He wasn’t thinking, just reacting—blindly, crazily—and was mad to have her again and again and again.

They stood beside the Lamborghini, Katie’s back against the passenger side. Liam pressed against her.

His head spun, his heart pounded. His hand slipped down to cup her tight, round bottom. His penis strained against his zipper. Flexing, he curled his fingers into the soft, willing flesh of her buttocks. He heard her quick intake of breath, and it ignited him.

“Now,” she said. “I need you. Now.”

Then she reached up under the hem of her sexy black dress, pulled down her panties and stepped out of them. With her index finger, she made a slingshot of her red thong and shot it through the air. The tiny scrap of silk sailed over his shoulder.

Agog, Liam stared hard as she bent over the back of the Lamborghini, waggled her sweet little ass in the air and whispered, “Come and get me.”

**11**

THE SOUND of his zipper sliding down was incredibly erotic in the still of the chilly, dark night. The crinkling of a condom being opened caused her womb to contract. The feel of the cool, metal curve of the Lamborghini against her belly served to spike her desire even higher. The spicy taste of anticipation filled her mouth. Katie’s heart fluttered.

But the smooth glide of his hot, palm sliding up the hem of her skirt to cup her bare ass was Katie’s undoing.

Liam bent over her, pressed his lips to her ear and whispered, “Wild thing.”

She swallowed desperately, felt his erect penis throbbing through the folds of his pants. He pressed himself against her butt. She felt his body swell harder still. Combing aside her hair, he dipped his head and lightly nipped the nape of her neck with his teeth.

The hot wetness of his lips ignited her and the waves of passion that had been rising inside her streamed molten.

With both his hands now up under her dress and splayed across her bottom, he cocked his knee up and used it to spread her legs farther apart.

His hands slipped from her bottom up to her waist, his wrists pushing up the skirt of her dress in the process. The cool air on her naked skin drove goose bumps up her spine.

Groaning, he rocked against her. “Beautiful, so damned beautiful.”

She whimpered as the deep center of her feminine core constricted and her nipples squeezed down to rock-hard pebbles beneath the silk of her bra.

He reached up to weave the fingers of one hand through her hair at the same time he ground his hips against hers. Holding her firmly in place, he ran his devilish tongue down the back of her neck.

It was totally erotic, sandwiched between Liam’s hot body and the cool metal of one of the world’s most expensive automobiles. Shivering, she flexed her inner muscles, desperate to drive as hard as this precision sports car.

They were in the open park, hidden only by midnight and a privacy hedge shielding them from direct view of the neighborhood development behind them. At any moment a car could drive by and expose them.

The thrill of the notion stole her breath.

Liam’s fingers tightened in her hair, pulling her head up as if she were an untamed mare and he her wild stallion.

“Tell me you want me.”

“I want you,” she panted. “I want you inside of me now!”

Then he was in her, and she gasped at the immediate insurgence of pure pleasure. He filled her up so completely she might not be able to take any more.

“You’re so wet, babe,” he murmured. “Dripping wet for me.”

“All for you.”

He felt so good. Hard, lean, and strong. Her hips twitched against his, the muscles between her thighs clenching tight.

Their breathing pattern altered, grew more ragged, more urgent. Their mating was primal. Ferocious. He plunged heedlessly into her. Driving them closer and closer to the edge.

The stars twinkled overhead. The wind rustled against their fevered skin.

“Harder,” she cried. “Faster.”

Liam’s cock pounded, sending her spiraling upward, higher and higher. Her ears rang. Flashes of heat rolled through her. The feel of his big body behind her, his thick fingers fanned out over her ass, flung her into the stratosphere.

And when she believed she absolutely could not take any more pleasure, he separated her aching cheeks with a palm. His thumb pressed gently against the pucker of her bottom causing a sizzling jolt of white-hot lightning to shoot through her nerve endings.

Katie lost her last shred of control. She’d never felt anything so exquisite. She screamed his name and her spine arched at the piercing intensity of the sensation.

Liam was equally crazed. He slammed relentlessly into her. His cock was a sword and she the waiting scabbard. He moved his hips and his hand in unison, satisfying her sex with his, caressing her in a secret place she’d never been caressed before. Supplying her with new dreams to dream, fresh fantasies.

Glorious.

She gasped.

Her womb spasmed, squeezing him tight as her muscles clenched around his exploring thumb.

“You like that?”

“More,” she pleaded. “More.”

“My pleasure.”

Amidst the sultry haze, inside the warmth of her own skin, Katie closed her eyes and breathed in the power of the moment, experiencing everything—the distinct contrast between the soft velvet of her dress, the hard metal of the car and the friction of Liam’s skin.

This was a memory she planned to treasure forever. She memorized the deep bass thud of her heart; experienced the taste of her desire, sharp and sweet as strawberries; savored the thick ebb and flow of blood rolling through her arms and legs. And, she accepted the uncertain sureness of fear breathing into her ear. Don’t enjoy this too much. It’s only temporary. It’s nothing but a dare.

He drove into her one more time and she was gone.

Katie felt weighted in a deliciously lazy way, as if she were floating, hanging, flying high. Her thoughts retreated. Her mind emptied as her body filled up, dragging away her ability to form full sentences. Words slipping through her head like beads on a pearl necklace.

She. He. The Lamborghini. The luxurious night.

Heat. Flesh. Bodies. Thumbs.

Adventure. Excitement. Lust. Love.

Love?

No, no, not love.

Maybe not love, but sincere like and lots and lots and lots of lust.

There was no escaping the power of their lust for each other. He’d captured her, made her his prisoner, and taken her free will. She was nothing but his sex slave and she loved her sentence.

It took her down.

The orgasm. Splendid and brilliant as a shooting star.

The power took her down. Down, down, down. Into a place she’d never before explored.

She heard Liam cry out. Moments later, he was pulling her up, turning her around and tugging her into the crook of his arm. They clung to each other, their bodies glued with perspiration and honeyed sex.

His fingers stroked her hair, pushing it out of her eyes. She looked at him, searched his face for any signs that what he’d felt was just as monumental as what she’d experienced. Afraid to see the answer, terrified equally of either yes or no.

He smiled softly, dipped his head, captured her lips and kissed away her doubt. He’d taken this as she’d intended. Living in the moment, enjoying himself.

Katie breathed in the scent of him, along with a sigh of relief, but she couldn’t figure out why she suddenly felt so impossibly sad.

DREAMILY, Katie gazed out her office window, her mind on Liam. No matter how hard she tried to focus on the art graphics design for his ad campaign, she couldn’t stop thinking about him.

Or the rather wanton way she’d acted.

Katie cringed. What was the matter with her? Why did she possess this constant need to outdo herself by finding ways to shock and surprise him? The sex had been mindblowing, but she couldn’t help feeling bittersweet about it. Their relationship was based on nothing more than a silly dare.

And speaking of dares, the latest one had arrived in her mailbox that morning. She’d stuffed it in her purse on her way to work, and there it sat, unopened.

Mocking her.

She glanced under her desk at her purse. She could see the corner of pink linen paper peeking out at her. Part of her couldn’t wait to rip it open and discover what exciting Martini dare awaited inside that gilded envelope. But another part of her was scared of what the dare might say.

You don’t have to do it, you know. Just toss it in the trash, forget all about the Martini dare.

But Katie had never been one to walk away from a challenge. She pulled the envelope from her purse and leaned it against her coffee mug. Propping her elbows on the desk, she sank her chin into her upturned palms and glowered at the envelope.

It might sound like a romantic cliché, but she’d never met a man like Liam. When she thought of him, her heart grew full and achy and her stomach twisted up in knots.

She remembered the innocent things about him. The way his unexpected smile made her light up inside, the reassuring sound of his rich comforting voice, the spark of passion in his eyes when he looked at her.

And no man had ever responded to her sexual teasing in quite the same way that he did. Magically, he hardened at the slightest brush of her hand. Provocatively, he took the bait when she challenged him to expand his sexual horizons. Bravely, he followed where she led, and yet he made it seem as if he were the one doing the leading.

His sense of adventure matched hers—even if he was just now discovering it. The power of his life force was a thing of awe. He was secure in his masculinity and self-confident in business. And he made her feel like the sexiest woman on Earth.

She thought about the secret he’d told her—that he was the illegitimate son of Finn Delancy. She tried to imagine what that felt like—growing up without a father, never feeling that he was good enough, having to find his own way in the world.

It explained so much about him and made her love him all the more.

Love?

No, no, she didn’t mean love. She admired him, yes. But that was all. Love was much too strong of a word. Love required too much of her. Most definitely, this feeling wasn’t the budding bloom of love. Maybe it was time she cut the relationship short before things got too complicated.

She thought of how terrific sex was with him. How good she felt when they were together. How simply looking at him or thinking about him made her pulse quicken and palms grow damp.

Her gaze fell on the envelope.

Well, maybe one more date.

She reached for the dare, opened it and read.

You are hereby dared to have sex in an exotic place.

Exotic place? Hmm.

She thought of the bungalow her family owned in Fiji. How easy it was to think of her and Liam walking the white sand beaches, sipping festive umbrella drinks, feeling the balmy tropical breezes on their skin. Not to mention making love in a hammock under a bright starry sky.

Goose bumps scattered up her arm. Erotic and exotic.

But how to get Liam to go to Fiji?

Before she could formulate a plan of action, the sound of Tanisha dragging into the office twenty minutes late drew Katie’s attention to her coworker.

She took in Tanisha’s disheveled appearance, wrinkled clothes, her lovely braids coming undone, eyes red-rimmed. She’d never seen her confident, stylish friend looking so demolished.

Katie sprang to her side. “Omigosh, are you all right?”

“No,” Tanisha whimpered, and plopped down in her chair, knees pressed together, feet splayed apart.

Katie knelt beside her, wrapped her hand around Tanisha’s forearm. “What is it?”

“It’s Dwayne.”

“Has something happened to him?”

“He broke up with me.” Tanisha’s voice cracked, and a single tear slid down her caramel cheek.

That solitary heartbreaking tear startled Katie. She’d never seen her friend cry, much less shed a tear over some guy. She pulled a tissue from the box on the desk and pressed it into Tanisha’s hand. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“He said he couldn’t trust me.” Tanisha pressed the tissue to her eye.

“Why would he say that?”

“Because,” Tanisha mumbled, “I sort of lied to him.”

“Sort of?”

“He wanted to be open and honest. He told me about his past, the women he’d known, and then he wanted to know how many men I’d been with.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“Two.” Tanisha cringed.

“Why did you lie?”

“Because he’d only been with two women. How could I tell him the truth? I was afraid he would think I was slutty or something.”

“So how’d he find out that you weren’t being honest with him?”

“He met Jerome.”

“Your brother ratted you out?”

Tanisha nodded, sniffled. “He said if I would lie to him about this kind of thing, how could he trust me when it came to the important stuff?”

“You were only trying to salvage his ego.”

“I know,” Tanisha wailed.

“He placed you in a no-win situation.”

“Exactly, but he’s an honesty-is-the-best-policy type of guy.”

Katie let out a soft sigh. It certainly didn’t sound like a happily-ever-after ending for her friend. To think, strong-minded, independent Tanisha was reduced to rubble over a man. If it could happen to her, it could happen to anyone. Her heart gave a strange jerk of disappointment and she realized she’d secretly been rooting for Tanisha’s relationship with Dwayne to be of the soul-mate variety.

See what happens when you believe in fairy tales?

Katie rose to her feet. This was precisely why she avoided committed relationships—too much chance for heartache.

“I knew better than to tell Dwayne a white lie. I made a mistake. I know it now. But he won’t even take my calls.”

Not knowing what else to do, Katie patted her friend’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry you’re hurting.”

“You were right to stick to sex and avoid romantic entanglements,” Tanisha said. “Love, marriage, happily-ever-after, it’s all bullshit.”

“No.” Katie shook her head. “I was wrong. Yes, maybe I’ve never been hurt, but I’ve also never had the depth of intimacy you found with Dwayne.”

But you could have it, if you let yourself.

Yeah, right, willingly lay herself open to the kind of pain Tanisha was suffering. No thank you.

“I love him so much. I’ve never felt this way before and it’s ripping me apart inside to think I’ve lost him because of my own stupidity. How can I ask him to forgive me when he won’t even talk to me?”

“If he’s this unforgiving, maybe he’s not the right one for you,” Katie ventured.

“He was the one,” Tanisha said, and shed another tear.

“Then if Dwayne’s the one, you guys will work this out,” Katie said, not believing what she was saying but knowing it was the only thing that would make Tanisha feel better.

“You really think so?”

Katie crossed her fingers behind her back, telling her own white lie. “Absolutely. Give him some time to deal with his bruised ego and he’ll figure out he can’t live without you.”

Tanisha smiled sadly through the tears. “Thank you, Katie, for being such a good friend. You’re probably right, the male ego being what it is. Dwayne really is a stand-up guy.”

Katie forced a smile of her own. For Tanisha’s sake, she prayed it was true.

WHILE KATIE was consoling Tanisha, Liam was staring out the big plate-glass window of his office building watching the bustling city go about its daily activity. He knew she was holding back, keeping her emotions in check. Using sex to keep from experiencing something deeper. He had a feeling she’d been using adventure as a barrier against intimacy for most of her life. He’d just had to figure out a way to knock that wall down.

Truth was, he was out of his league when it came to this romantic stuff. But like any successful executive, he knew where to turn to find answers. Breezing past Vanessa, he headed down the corridor to Tony’s office.

He knocked at Tony’s door but charged in without waiting to be invited.

Tony glanced up from his paperwork. “Hey, boss, what’s up?”

“I need your advice.”

“Sure.” Tony tossed down his pen, leaned back in his chair. “What can I do for you?”

This suddenly seemed like a stupid idea, and Liam almost turned on his heel and walked away. But the thought of winning Katie’s heart had him taking a seat across from his best friend’s desk.

“I’m here for you. What do you need to say?” Tony arched his eyebrows.

“It’s complicated.”

Tony steepled his fingers. “Do you want my advice or not.”

Liam cleared his throat. “Okay, here’s the deal, I think I’m falling in love with Katie, but she’s terrified of intimacy and I don’t know how to get through to her.”

Tony snorted. “Katie’s not the only one afraid of intimacy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How many years has your love life taken a backseat to romance?”

“Thirty-one,” Liam admitted.

“Exactly.”

“But that’s not because I didn’t want to fall in love. I was just too busy.”

“And why is that?”

Because he’d been determined to prove to Finn Delancy he was worthy of his respect, but he couldn’t tell Tony this. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Because you were terrified you’d screw it up.”

Liam laughed harshly. “Okay, that’s a fact. So what do I do about Katie?”

“Tell her you’re falling in love with her.”

Liam swallowed. The thought was daunting. “I’m afraid she’ll run away.”

“Then take her someplace where she can’t run away. A place where she has to face her feelings and talk things out with you.”

“And where would that be?”

“I dunno. A tropical island.”

“You mean, take a vacation?”

“I know that word isn’t in your vocabulary, but if you want to romance this woman, then you’ve got to think of her desires. You both need time away from work and family to create a fantasy world all your own.”

It made sense. “But what if she doesn’t have real feelings for me?”

“Better to know now and cut things off clean than to keep dating her and hoping she’ll start to feel something. It’s like a real-estate deal. You’re either in or you’re out.”

Tony was right and Liam knew it, but cutting things off with Katie was easier said than done.

“You gotta take a leap of faith, man,” Tony said sagely. “Take a risk with her the way you take a risk on the stock market. Make your plans, do your research, dive in and pray for the best.”

“And if I fail?”

“At least you tried. And, hey, I’ll be here to help you pick up the pieces.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.” Liam got to his feet.

Tony came around the desk to punch him lightly on the arm. “Go get her, dude. I’m living proof the rewards are worth the gamble.”

**12**

KATIE CAME UP with a brilliant plan for luring Liam to Fiji.

Their mother’s will bequeathed the Fiji property equally to Brooke, Joey and Katie. Briefly, they’d discussed the idea of selling it, but so far, none of them had either the heart or the emotional energy to fly out to the Pacific island paradise and check on the bungalow.

She now had the perfect excuse to complete her Martini dare.

There were so many things she wanted to do to Liam. She wanted to sleep with him in a macramé hammock hung between two palm trees. She wanted to make him cry out her name in ecstasy as they made love over the vibrating engine of a snorkel boat. She was dying to do it in a secret alcove of a rocking dance club, in the swimming pool, in the lanai of the bungalow. She fantasized about riding his hard-muscled body in a volcano grotto, beneath a waterfall, in the hot tub.

During her afternoon break, she slipped off to the employee lounge and called him up on her cell phone.

“Liam,” she murmured, all hot and bothered by her fantasies.

“Yes.” He sounded curt, abrupt. She must have interrupted him in the middle of his work. She almost apologized and hung up. But her determination to complete the Martini dare kept her hanging on.

“It’s me,” she said, then cringed. What if he didn’t know who me was?

“Katie.” His tone immediately melted into a buttery soft timbre.

Did the sound of her voice make him as horny as the sound of his voice made her? “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“I was about to go into a meeting, but I have a few minutes. What’s up?”

“Um…since you’re an expert on real estate, I was hoping you might be willing to give me your opinion on some property my mother left me and my sisters. We’re considering selling it, but we don’t know if that’s the best way to go. Do you think you might be able to look at it for us?”

“Sure,” he said. “Where’s the property?”

“Um…that’s the thing.”

“Oh?”

“It’s in Fiji.”

“As in South Pacific Fiji?”

“Uh-huh. I’d pay for your airplane ticket, of course. We can stay at the bungalow. I can put in for three vacation days and we could make a long weekend of it.” Please, please let him say yes.

She heard his intake of breath and she could almost see him standing there, thinking about the work he’d be leaving behind if he took off for five days. Was his attraction to her strong enough to overcome his addiction to his work?

“You could have your own room,” she ventured. “Keep this strictly a business trip.”

“Now, why in the hell would I want to do that?” he asked.

Glee tickled down inside her. She grinned. How she wished he was with her so she could fling her arms around his neck and kiss that firm, angular mouth of his.

“So you’ll go?”

“Under one condition.”

Her heart squeezed. She held her breath. “What’s that?”

“We take my private jet.”

THE VIEW OF Fiji Island from the window of Liam’s jet was breathtaking. The water was a mesmerizing color of turquoise, the sky cloudless. Even from the air, you could make out the lush growth of brilliantly colored flowers—bougainvillea, anthurium, birds-of-paradise, a stunning palette of red, yellow, orange and green.

Luxury hotels with private bungalows ringed the beach among a proliferation of palm trees. The smell of plumeria blossoms filled the air the minute they stepped onto the tarmac. In the terminal, they were greeted by smiling hostesses with leis made of orchids, along with the soothing, rhythmic sounds of island music. The scenery was so beautiful it felt surreal.

They had taken off from Boston nineteen hours earlier, but the flight had been so much fun it had seemed like nineteen minutes. They’d talked and played cards, watched in-flight movies, napped, eaten filet mignon, drank wine and talked some more.

She found out his favorite actor was Tom Hanks and she confessed to having a mad crush on Orlando Bloom. She learned he liked his steaks well done while she preferred hers rare. He was a whiz at gin rummy, but she thrashed him soundly at poker. But when she suggested a hand of strip poker, Liam refused because he knew he’d end up naked within five hands. Katie told him that was the point.

They’d also done a little kissing—okay, they’d done a lot of kissing—but that was all. Even though Katie had tried her best to initiate him as an official member of the mile-high club, Liam had been equally determined to hold her off. His theory was they’d heighten their enjoyment of this trip by making her wait for sex.

They grabbed a cab at the airport and Katie gave the driver directions to her family’s bungalow on the beach. It was tucked into a quiet area. Liam carried their bags inside and Katie immediately ran to open the sliding partition that opened out onto a large private lanai. The ocean rolling softly against the shore lulled them with a sweet hypnotic sound.

“I forgot how beautiful it is here.” She sighed and breathed in a deep draw of air as she stood looking out at the beach. “We used to come here every summer when my father was alive.”

“You miss him, don’t you?”

“Something fierce. He was a great father. Strict but fair.”

“I wish I knew what that was like,” he said. “Having a father’s love.”

“I wish you did, too.”

Liam studied her and his heart reeled. She looked incredible in a pair of white denim shirt shorts and a tangerine halter top with her hair pulled back into a girl-next-door ponytail. No one could have known just by looking at her that she was a Boston blue blood.

This was it, his big chance to take their relationship to a new level. But was she ready? Could he convince her he was a man worth overcoming her fear of commitment for? He prayed he could.

Liam realized how much his outlook on life had changed since he’d met her. Suddenly, something was more important than his work and she was standing right in front of him.

She turned in the doorway to grin over her shoulder at him. Damn if her smile didn’t warm him from the inside out.

He grinned back.

She crooked her finger at him. “Come ’ere.”

Liam sauntered over.

Katie wrapped her arms around his waist, leaned back to look up into his face. “Let’s have sex on the lanai.”

“Whoa, slow down. We just got here.”

She reached up to stroke her index finger down the length of his cheek. “You’re doing this on purpose,” she said, pretending to pout.

“Doing what?”

“Withholding sex to tease me.”

“Yes, I am,” he admitted. “There’s something to be said for delayed gratification.”

“How long are you planning on holding out on me?”

“For a while.”

“You sure you want to get into this?” Her eyes danced.

“Get into what?”

“Making me beg for sex. Because buddy, two can play that game.”

“Yeah?”

She licked her lips. “Yeah.”

“Go ahead, hit me with your best shot.”

“Oh, it’s on,” she said, and proceeded to untie the string of her halter top.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Getting naked.”

“Give the man a cigar.” She grinned and let her top drop to the floor.

Liam ogled as she reached for the zipper of her white denim shorts. Did the woman have any idea how hot she was making him?

She wriggled out of her shorts and kicked them across the room. She stood, hands on her hips, wearing nothing but a skimpy peach-colored strapless bra and matching thong panties. In her navel, she sported the cutest little gold ring.

Sassily, she stuck out her tongue, and then reached around to unhook her bra. She twirled it over her head a few times before tossing it in his direction.

“It’s not working,” Liam said through gritted teeth. He could handle this. Yes, he could.

“Coulda fooled me with that world-class boner.” She cast a knowing glance at the zipper of his pants, strained with the outline of his rock-hard erection.

She shimmied out of her panties and strutted out onto the lanai naked as the day she came into the world.

He followed her. The sun was warm on his skin, the ocean spray salty against his tongue. Watching Katie’s bottom twitch as she strode toward the lounge chair at poolside, experiencing his desire for her rocketing hard, made Liam feel as if he were a one-celled animal, responding to every stimuli.

Everything about her was intoxicating—the wave of her hips, the perky jut of her breasts, the patch of pecan-blond hair curling at the apex of her thighs.

Glancing over her shoulder again, she gave him a saucy wink and settled herself down on the chaise lounge, legs provocatively spread. She wet her index with her mouth, and then slowly trailed it down to her breasts.

She was driving him insane.

Every whim of her body made the hairs on his wrist quiver. Every vagary of sunlight dappling across her sumptuous breasts registered spiky and vibrant on his retina. Sensation after sensation washed over him. Nothing was lost in translation.

His senses were on high alert, his body tuned for pleasure.

She looked at him with an extraordinary light in her eyes. It worried him and he evaluated her, trying to decode what was going on inside her head. His body took stock of his surroundings, of this moment, like a strong but cautious corporate raider moving through an intricate negotiation, searching for hidden agendas and subterfuge. The novelty of her, the surprise of the expression she was giving him, riveted him.

Life had taught him to be wary. His mother had taught him to be strong and in control. It was difficult for him to drop his emotional armor and allow her to see his vulnerabilities. But he was willing.

Too willing.

She astonished him. Not only by her stunning individuality but also by the way she made him feel special. He had to face up to what was happening inside him, but at the same time he feared it.

It was time to let go of his fears. Time to understand there was something valuable to be had in this experience. Time to realize there was always something new to learn, always valuable insights to be gained. His life did not have to be buried in work, success and the pursuit of revenge.

“Make love to me, Liam,” she begged.

“Dammit, woman.” His cock throbbed as he watched her touch herself.

“You know what you gotta do to have me.”

Liam stalked across the patio. He grabbed her by the shoulders, pinned her against the chaise and kissed her with a fierceness that pulled a feral growl from his throat.

Katie let out a soft, whispered breath.

In that moment, her small sigh told him something important. She had goaded him into this because whenever things started to get emotionally intimate between them, she reached for a physical remedy.

Katie Winfield, he now recognized, was afraid of her tender feelings.

The seductress image was all a ruse, a protective defense mechanism she hid behind. She cloaked her real self with sexy clothing, adventurous sex and casual relationships. The real Katie disappeared inside parties and flirtatious behavior and frisky role-playing. But there was so much more to her than her sexuality.

Here, with his body pressed against her, he could feel the emotional surging of this deeper, richer, more complex personality. He wondered if she even understood the dynamics of her alluring behavior. Somehow, he doubted it.

Liam felt himself dragged down into the tempting whirlpool of mystery. They stared into each other’s eyes and his world narrowed to one simple thing.

Katie.

She was right. He couldn’t resist her.

Compelled, Liam scooped a giggling Katie into his arms and carried her back toward the bedroom. She nibbled on his upper arm, driving him straight to distraction. He couldn’t wait to get out of his clothes and into her.

He laid her gently down on the bed, but immediately, she popped to her feet.

“Let’s do it on the floor.” With a wicked gleam in her eyes, she reached for his belt buckle.

“The bed’s more comfortable,” he said, tussling his T-shirt over his head as she pulled his belt through the loops in a sensuous slither of leather.

“The floor’s more adventuresome.” She undid the snap on his jeans.

“Adventuresome sex makes me come too fast. For once, I want to take things nice and slow.” He kicked off his shoes. “Which is damned hard to do.”

“How about on the bathroom counter in front of the mirror?” She tugged down his zipper.

“How about you resting on fresh sheets with a pillow tucked under your beautiful butt while I find new ways of pleasuring you with my tongue?” He wriggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“How about in the swimming pool?” She tugged both his jeans and his underwear down his hips in one fluid motion, releasing his aching erection from its restraints.

Liam kicked out of the jeans. Feeling giddier than he had the first time he’d made love, he flung himself onto the bed, grinned at her wolfishly and patted the spot beside him. “Come here, Miss Winfield.”

KATIE SHOOK her head. Her throat constricted and her fingers went inexplicably numb. “How about we do it on the kitchen table?”

He lay on his side, propped up on his elbow. He looked like a lion, long and lean and powerful. “I know you like adventure, sweetheart, but there’s something to be said for tradition. Let’s just rock this bed till the slats break.”

Sweetheart.

It was the first time Liam had ever called her sweetheart. The word formed a precious knot of terror inside her stomach.

She shook her head. “How about in the shower?”

Liam sat up, cocked his head and gave her the strangest look. “What’s wrong with the bed?”

Katie shrugged. How could she begin to explain this nameless sense of dread at the thought of sinking down onto the mattress with him?

A look of sudden insight crossed his face. “You’re afraid to make love in a bed.”

“I’m not,” Katie denied.

“Then prove you’re not afraid. Come here.”

Katie stayed at the door. Her knees wavered strange and loose and her hands were shaking. “I don’t have to prove anything to you.”

“Why, you’re stone-cold terrified.”

“No one is scared of making love in a bed,” she scoffed, but her voice came out breathless, airy.

He held out a hand, curled his fingers in a come-hither gesture.

She hung back.

“What’s wrong? I thought you were hot for this?”

She shrugged.

“Katie?”

“It just feels weird.”

“It’s not weird. You’re used to hiding behind masks and darkened movie theatres and the shadow of midnight.”

“Not necessarily.”

“And you like it hard and fast and anonymous. When you have sex, you pretend to be someone else, don’t you? A French maid, a 1920s movie siren, a good-girl blue blood gone bad.”

“I don’t,” she squeaked.

“What are you so afraid of, Katie?” he murmured.

“I’m not afraid,” she denied. But it was true. All of it. She’d never made love in a bed and she preferred having wild, quick sex in adventurous places while role-playing. “I like sex to be exciting and spontaneous and innovative and—”

“Impersonal,” he finished.

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Maybe not, but it’s accurate.”

Until this moment, until he’d called her on it, she’d never caught on that she avoided having sex in a bed. She thought it was because she was impulsive and creative, but now she knew that wasn’t the truth. Now she understood the reason why she’d eschewed beds for floors and swimming pools and closets and movie theatres. Why risk and danger and quick, hurried mating with men she barely knew had been her modus operandi.

Beds were where married people made love. Beds were for committed, long-term relationships. And she just didn’t have that kind of staying power. Everyone said so.

“What are you so afraid of?” Liam repeated

You! The way you make me feel. The stark terror that if I let myself love you, somehow I’ll lose who I am.

He swung his legs over the bed, got up and stalked toward her, his naked, erect penis bouncing jauntily with every step.

Katie took a step back from him until her bare bottom butted up against the door. She wanted to turn and flee, but Liam wasn’t about to let her get away.

He planted both hands against the door over her head, leaned in, lowered his head and looked deeply into her eyes. “I understand you completely, Katie Winfield. Maybe even better than you understand yourself.”

Hypnotized, she stared into his eyes, waiting for him to tell her what was wrong with her.

“Doesn’t it get tiring?” he asked.

His question was unexpected and made her feel as if he were peeling off the edges of her skin, digging for the woman who lay beneath the surface. Her throat was closing off.

“What?” she whispered.

“Staying in motion, staying busy, trying to outrun your feelings.”

“I’m not…” Katie broke off at the tenderness in his eyes. She couldn’t talk against the pressure weighing down on her chest.

“It’s okay to be ordinary,” he murmured. “It’s okay for things to be boring once in a while. There’s nothing wrong with taking a time out. In fact, when you slow down, you’re really able to experience your adventures.”

“Oh, that’s rich.” Her laugh sounded hollow. “Coming from you, Mr. Workaholic.”

“Hey, it’s the lesson you taught me. You’ve helped me to realize, all work and no play makes Liam a dull boy. But what I’m trying to tell you is that all go and no staying power makes Katie incomplete. Slow down with me, sweetheart. Let’s explore this whole new experience together.”

As she looked into his eyes, she knew he saw her for who she really was. He saw past the flirtation and the fun and the flair for the dramatic. He saw the vulnerable Katie who was hiding behind a live-for-today motto. He knew her.

To the very essence of her soul.

Tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. Liam dipped his head and kissed them away. Then he gently lifted her up into his arms again and took her back to the bed.

This time, she didn’t protest.

“Just look into my eyes until the fear passes,” he said. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Katie smiled up at him through a mist of tears. He settled her against the pillows, tenderly brushing his fingers through her hair.

He was watching her, his eyes taking in every curve and dip of her body. His glance traveled from her shoulders, to her breast, to her waist and lower, up and down the length of her legs. Then stopping to linger a moment at the blond apex between her thighs.

Awareness and a dazzling heat prickled her skin. She’d never felt so exposed. She’d thought that night he’d taken her on top of the Lamborghini was sexually charged. But that time, because he’d taken her from behind, she’d been unable to read his reaction to her body. Now, she saw every erotic thought that crossed his face.

And she understood fully the power she held over him. It simply blew her away.

Her body ignited with the heat of his gaze. That unabashed stare of appreciation caused her heart to knock against her rib cage.

He kissed her lightly, sweetly, drawing it out.

“That’s it sweetheart,” he said when she moaned softly. “Relax and enjoy every minute of this. We’ve got all weekend and then some.”

Lowering his head, Liam pressed his lips to her bare belly and then kissed his way back up to her nipples, which were aching with desire.

She quivered at the luscious sensation.

“How’s that feel?”

“Mmm.” It was all she could manage.

He flicked his tongue over one straining bud and then carefully bit down. Reedy blades of pleasure sliced deliriously throughout her breast. She moaned louder.

“You like?”

“No.”

“No?” He stopped.

“I love,” she purred.

He grinned and went back to work—his mouth suckling, his tongue caressing, fingers tickling.

Brilliant. It felt like shooting stars.

After a long, leisurely exploration that left her hauling in shallow gasps of air, he left her nipples and traveled downward. He spent some time at her navel, playing with that little gold hoop, teasing it in and out of his mouth. The gentle pulling sensation produced crazy, erotic ripples in her belly that undulated all the way down into her throbbing clit.

When his lips reached her straining, hungry clit, he stopped short of touching her with his tongue. His breath was hot against her sensitive flesh, inflaming her beyond understanding.

She arched her hips again, trying to bring his mouth and her clit into contact but he moved with her, keeping his mouth just out of her reach.

“Brute.”

He laughed.

“You enjoy torturing me.”

“Oh, yeah,” Liam admitted. “Stick with me, sweetheart. We’ll get there and I promise you it will be worth the wait.”

She didn’t want to wait. She wanted him to make love to her with his mouth right this very minute. Her brain glazed with lust, her blood pumped feverishly.

Gingerly, Liam spread her thighs wider and moved his body around so that he was positioned between her legs. “So beautiful,” he murmured.

The head of his cock throbbed against her knee as he leaned forward. Katie’s excitement catapulted. What sweet, desperate pressure.

His big fingers caressed her clit as his tongue probed her folds. Katie’s eyes slid closed, blocking out everything except his touch.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes.”

His tongue captured her hooded cleft.

Never in all her life had she been pleasured this way. It was rapture. It was ecstasy.

Liam seemed to know exactly what she needed even better than she knew herself. He reveled in her and he made her feel cherished. It was dangerous territory, these tender feelings, but she couldn’t stop them, so she rode, letting the anxiety build, experienced it and then allowed it to drop away.

While he toyed with her clit, Liam slipped an index finger into her slick, wetness. The walls of her womanhood tugged at him, gripping and kneading him in rhythmic waves, pulling his finger deeper and deeper into her.

Sound was altered and she existed in the delicious void of ocean waves and heavy breathing. She floated, bodyless. She was total awareness, her entire being a giant throb of sexual energy.

She surfed his tongue, owned it. She hovered on the brink of orgasm, but he would not let her experience release. A steady strumming vibration began deep in her throat, emerging as a wild moan.

“Liam, Liam,” she cried his name.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“Make me come.”

He let loose then, giving her everything, holding nothing back. His tongue danced, his fingers manipulated. She let go and allowed him to take over. It seemed he was everywhere. Over her, around her, in her, outside of her.

He was magic. He was wonder. He was amazing.

“More.” She thrashed her head. “More, more. Give me more.”

He gave it to her just the way she asked for it, pumping his hand into her with his fingers. His thumb pressed her clit like a trigger, shooting off the secret button of her release.

“Come Katie, come for me,” he coaxed.

She exploded.

The orgasm overtook her in great, writhing pleasure moans.

She cried out, her voice echoing around the room. Laying there, she trembled with the power of what he’d just done to her.

And she realized that making love in a bed hadn’t been boring or predictable or uninspired. In fact, it had been the most intimate, intense, moving experience of her life.

**13**

LIAM TOOK HER to dinner at an elegant restaurant, specializing in Pacific fusion, not far from the bungalow. Utilizing indigenous seafood, the chef paired French cooking and Asian flavors. Adventuresome Katie ordered squid and sushi. Liam, sticking with more traditional fare, went with the tuna.

They were seated at the best table near a romantic waterfall surrounded by exotic vegetation. He looked dashing in his suit, although she couldn’t wait until she could get him out of it again.

Liam ate like a man whose appetite had been whetted. Tilting her head, she watched him in the candlelight and couldn’t believe she’d underestimated his passion. This was a man who could really enjoy himself when he allowed his playful side to come out.

Briefly, they discussed both his ad campaign—which was almost finished—and the bungalow’s profitability. Liam’s opinion was that her family could make more by keeping the bungalow and renting it out than by selling it. Then, he presented the downside to renting versus selling. But this dinner wasn’t about business and they both knew it.

“Which way would you go do you think?” Katie quizzed. “Sell or rent?”

“When you’ve got something valuable, you should hang on to it.” He was gazing at her, and she knew he wasn’t talking about real estate.

“Is that the outlook that turned you into a tycoon?”

“No. What’s got me where I am today is recognizing a great opportunity when it falls into my lap.”

Katie felt a blush of heat radiate up her neck. The more she was around him, the more she found to like and admire. He was strong and masculine, but also tender and kind. And he made her hope for something she’d never hoped for in her life.

She savored her dessert of bananas foster while Liam sipped a brandy. He raised his glass and winked at her.

Katie winked back, noticing how his hazel eyes darkened with appreciation whenever he looked at her.

He paid for the meal against her protest that she owed him for flying all the way to Fiji to assess her family’s property, but he hushed her by saying, “We both know that’s not why you invited me. Nor was it the reason I came.”

For one heart-stopping moment, she thought he knew about her Martini dare, but she quickly realized that was impossible. She’d almost forgotten about the silly dare herself.

He held out his hand to her as they left the restaurant. “Stroll on the beach?”

“How about skinny-dipping in the moonlight?”

“To be honest,” he said, “I never found sex on a beach quite what it’s cracked up to be. Too much sand in all the wrong places, and now that I’ve been introduced to the wonders of regular bed sex, I don’t want us to lose our momentum.”

“Okay,” she agreed without protest because she was enjoying the bed sex more than she wanted to let on. She slipped her arm through his, snuggled up close against his warm body. Sated happiness, sweet and light, filtered from her head to her toes.

When they reached the sand, Katie took off her sandals and hooked them around two fingers. Hand in hand they walked along the beach, the surf lapping at their feet.

The night breeze was balmy, but the heat rolling off his body was sizzling. Her own body heat was inching upward as she thought about what would happen when they got back to the bungalow. Every time she caught a whiff of his cologne, she felt a jolt of desire deep inside.

She loved the feelings he generated, wished she could feel them forever. He let go of her hand to slip his arm around her waist, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

Fifteen minutes later, having gotten their fill of ocean and moonlight, they picked their way up the path to the bungalow.

Liam took the keys from her, unlocked the door and held it open for her. Once they’d crossed the threshold, he drew her into the circle of his embrace. While he kissed her, he inched down the zipper on the back of her aqua-and-white floral sheath dress.

Every nerve in her body came alive. Katie shivered as his mouth moved slowly from her lips to her chin to the smooth column of her throat. Her dress slipped off her shoulders, fell past her hips. Dreamily, she stepped out of it.

Wearing only panties and pearls, she turned to unbutton Liam’s crisp white shirt. Once the buttons were undone, and she wrested the shirt off his shoulders, Katie splayed her hands and pushed her palms over his bare chest.

“Ssss,” she hissed in appreciation. “I love your chest.”

“No more than I love yours,” he said, and cupped her breasts in his hands.

She giggled and reached for the waistband of his pants.

Liam took her hand and led her slowly into the bedroom. This time, she did not try to avoid the bed.

“You know,” she whispered as he laid her down, “you’re the only man I’ve ever made love to in a bed.”

“I kind of figured.”

“How did you know?”

He kissed her forehead. “You can’t hide anything from me, Katie Winfield.”

Suddenly, she didn’t want to hide anything from him. She wanted to tell him everything. All her secrets, all her shame. But their bodies were too fired up for more conversation.

They were looking at each other and their tandem breathing quickened. Falling and rising in spiky inhalations and shuddered releases. The moonlight streaming in through the lanai sensitized their sense of touch, taste, hearing and smell.

His palms weren’t calloused, but they were manly—strong and flat—as they skimmed over her breasts. The sound he made had her picturing a panther prowling his cage. And his scent—so masculine and musky it filled her nose and stirred her libido.

He pulled her up tight against his chest, pressing her to his hard angles that promised so much enjoyment. She tilted her head and planted a kiss on his chin.

Their chemistry took over and they descended into rapture.

Katie whimpered in desperation. She wanted to feel him the way he was feeling her. She gripped his hard-muscled back, dug her fingernails into his skin. Desire rolled through her veins, tugged her down on an upsurge of sexual need. Tossed her heedlessly toward a destiny she couldn’t fathom but lusted after. Her sex clenched hard, eager to meld with his.

His erection stabbed through his briefs, the hard ridge of him pushing against exactly the right spot on her.

Katie moaned soft and low. She swayed into him, bumping her hips against his.

He nibbled her earlobe, growled into her ear. A lightning bolt of desire shot straight to her womb. He brought his pelvis hard into hers, his erection poking provocatively, offering erotic possibilities of what was to come.

Katie wanted to feel him inside her. She was overtaken by the feeling, flooded with need and being needed. There was no restraint.

She wanted it.

Wanted him.

Wanted to feel everything all at once.

She grabbed the top of his briefs and pulled them down. He helped her, kicking them over his feet.

Naked together again.

He touched her, gently pushing his thick middle finger inside of her, stroking her ache.

She nipped his shoulder and then sank her teeth lightly into his flesh.

He touched her in places that ignited thoughts of what it would feel like when he was between her thighs, pushing deep enough inside her to soothe that throbbing ache.

She stroked his erection. He pulsed and throbbed against her hand. His entire body shuddered.

“Condom?” she whispered.

“I’ve got it.”

His mouth caught hers again in a possessive kiss that made her quiver. Caught her, arrested her. They were swept up by a maelstrom of passion. Completely and utterly vulnerable to each other.

Her fingers tingled to skate down those masculine curves and hard-muscled ridges.

He clamped a hand around her bottom and drew her up tight against his hardness and she melted. Into him, into the darkness of midnight.

Liam leveled himself into her, slipping in with surprisingly gentle movements considering how fired up they both were.

She hissed in a breath. The minute Liam was snug inside, her muscles contracted around him.

“Oh, no, ma’am, don’t start that yet,” he said, “or I won’t last a minute.”

But he felt so good, so big and thick that she couldn’t resist squeezing.

Slowly, he began to move. Their bodies fit. Hand in glove.

“What a woman,” he growled. “You are magnificent.”

He cupped her chin with his palm, raised her face up, rained kisses onto her chin. Her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks, her forehead. Then he took her mouth again, kissing her more deeply than she ever thought possible. Taking her breath, taking her heart, taking everything she had.

She felt every manly inch of him as he slid in and out of her warm moist folds, his movements languid and pointed. Clearly designed to drive her quite mad. She could feel it coming, gathering in her womb, rumbling up from deep within her.

His thrusts lengthened, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on for dear life.

Legs braced wide, penis sliding in and out of her, Liam anchored her to the mattress, his strong arms holding her in place. Like a dedicated explorer, he took his time, gradually getting to know the feel of her.

She slid the fingers of one hand down his back, feeling the bumps in his spine, grateful for him, for this moment, for this delicious pleasure.

They kissed repeatedly, their mouths coming together for a quick taste of heaven, and then pulling apart on a sigh as activities demanded.

They glided together under the covers, writhing, mating, swept up in the heat, the intensity, the slick seduction.

His thrusts quickened. She egged him on with hot little gasps and soft, hungry moans. Her contractions gripped him tight, pulling him deep within her. Holding on for dear life, she whispered his name over and over again.

Tension mounted.

Liam drove into her. Forceful now, demanding. His early gentleness evaporating in the face of urgent need.

She tightened her legs around his waist. He fondled her buttocks in his hand, spearing her hard, banging into her.

The inside of her thighs rode his hips. Relentlessly.

She could feel his legs quivering, knew he was on the verge of climax. It was gonna be big.

They exploded, shattering into pieces, the orgasm tearing through them simultaneously. She felt it ripple from her womb. Felt the shot of his heat flood through her.

At that very moment, Katie fell deeply in love.

LIAM HAD NEVER FELT happier in his life. He propped himself up on one elbow and lay watching her sleep, his eyes tracing the outlines of her dear face.

She’d spoiled him for good. After her, no other woman could ever compare.

And he was deliriously happy about his ruination.

To his mind, Katie was the sexiest woman in the world and he wanted her all the time. They had such fun together. Both in bed and out of it. He admired the way life delighted her. And her unfettered heart unfettered him.

Her impulses were elegant, lovely things, and it was troublesome, but astonishing, to appreciate the way she managed him. It wasn’t deviousness on her part. It was just the way she was and she had him twisted around her little finger.

Because of his past and his issues with Finn Delancy, Liam feared he might never be able to able to have an open and honest relationship with a woman. But his growing feelings for Katie overrode his trepidation. His need for connection was stronger than his fears that he didn’t measure up.

Liam acknowledged that she needed more time, that her own fear of commitment wouldn’t disappear over night. That was fine. He had all the patience in the world. In the meantime, he was determined to show her exactly how much she meant to him.

And that she could depend on him to be there for her, no matter what.

LATER, Katie woke to find Liam’s leg thrown over her waist, his hair sexily ruffled, his gaze fixed upon her face. She closed her eyes and smiled when he leaned over to kiss her.

She had to admit it. They were glorious together. Sex with Liam was the best she’d ever had.

He nuzzled her cheek lightly. She lifted her lashes partway, still smiling, and slanted him a flirtatious glance.

The way he looked at her made her feel as if she were the sexiest woman who’d ever lived. She thought she knew her body well, but through the lens of his eyes, she was different. Unknown to herself. And he was adventurously charting her unexplored territories.

Liam pulled her close. She rested her nose against his collarbone, smelling his essence, resting her chin against his curly black chest hairs. They lay unmoving, enrapt by the sounds of their own heartbeats.

Slowly, she became fully aware of the weight of their touching bodies. She eased from the circle of his arms, kissing his skin as she went.

Eyes flashing, he edged his fingertips up the slope of her inner thigh, tickling her.

Katie’s laugh, thick and erotic, oozed out into the room. She sounded husky and languid, as if she were changing, becoming someone new.

And Liam was the channel, guiding her into being more than she’d ever thought she could be.

In the process, she was learning to let go of her need for constant excitement, adventure and stimulation. Learning she could, indeed, trust these tender feelings swelling inside her. Liam had brought her to his bed, brought her into the daylight. He’d taken away her deepest fear—that she had no staying power for the long haul.

She grasped his shoulders to steady the fluttering of her pulse against the tingling of his gentle strokes. He rested his head against her belly. Her breath came quicker, deeper. A thrust of understanding expanded her heart.

He raised his head to look at her. They gazed deeply into each other’s eyes. Not saying a word, just taking each other in. Katie spied something that she’d never seen in a man’s eyes after lovemaking. It was a certainty. A knowing that only true and honest loyalty could bring.

What did her eyes say to him? Could he tell that he’d changed her? Could he see that she was letting down her guard, letting him in, going where she’d never gone with any man before?

Respect passed between them. A promise yet unspoken, but solidly real.

His erection stirred against her thigh, growing hard and hot all over again. She reached down to caress him, admiring his size and texture.

Anticipation sparked in his eyes as she increased the measured stroking, cupping his balls in her other hand. She delighted at the way they drew up against his crotch. Instantly, she felt a corresponding pressure, a tightening of her own nerve endings.

She bent her head. Kissed his satiny tip, tasted his pungent tang. She slid her tongue down one side of him, tracing his pattern.

He groaned.

Her tongue traveled, roaming over the brilliant territory. As her excitement grew, her control slipped. Her mouth closed delicately over the head of him.

Liam lay motionless, straining against his impulses. She clutched his hips with both hands, sucked him first slowly all the way to his tip, turning her head so she could feel every part of him, then slipping down to the base of his shaft.

Katie dove, her tongue swirling, in one fluid movement.

Sitting up, she moved her hands around his buttocks to the inside of his firm, muscular thighs. Gently, she stroked, moving over him with a shivering lightness. She glided with him.

Yet the whole time she was holding back, holding something in reserve. Their pace quickened and they never lost contact. They swayed in unison.

“Katie, Katie, Katie,” he groaned, his head thrown back, his eyes tightly closed.

His body went rigid. The signal she was looking for. The signal to wait.

Katie did not move, her mouth resting on the base of his shaft, the head of him throbbing inside her.

He shuddered in premonition.

She wrapped her legs around his thighs so he could feel her warm wetness, dripping with excitement. She undulated her hips in rhythm with her mouth, moving up and down him once more.

His hands reached for her. He touched her hair. His fingers moved blindly over her shoulders, trying to find a place to hold on to as he arched his back.

She wriggled away from his hands, determined to focus all her attention on his pleasure, knowing he would return it tenfold. She closed her eyes, calmed her pulsating heart. All her consciousness pooled in her fingers and her tongue.

He was close. So very close.

His breath came in rough gasps. Her body simmered in sweet sweat as they rocked together. She moved her mouth and her fingers took over. With a burst and shudder, he came, his juices leaking over her hand onto his belly.

He cried her name.

And she collapsed against him. Together, they lay breathing heavily, absorbed by ecstasy, until slowly they slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

WHEN KATIE WOKE again, dawn was rising on the skylight beyond the lanai. The morning breeze was slight. Birds chirped happily in the palm trees, greeting the new day.

Beside her, Liam slept like a sexually satisfied male—lying on his stomach, arm slung over a pillow, his gorgeously naked butt on delicious display. Grinning, she slipped out of bed, careful not to awaken him and padded naked into the kitchen to put on the coffee.

After a night of rigorous sex, Katie was feeling a tad achy. She pulled a bottle of water from the fridge and twisted off the top. She found her purse—after stepping over the pile of clothes they’d left scattered at the front door—and dug for a travel bottle of ibuprofen.

As she did, her fingers brushed the corners of the pink envelope from Lindsay Beckham.

Her third Martini dare.

The first two had turned out so splendidly, she was intrigued to discover what the third dare entailed. She swallowed two of the pills and put on Liam’s discarded white shirt. The hem of it hit at the middle of her thigh, and it smelled of him. She pressed the collar to her nose and inhaled the scent of him as she sat down on the sofa. She propped her bare feet on the coffee table and slid her fingernail under the flap of the envelope.

Out fell the parchment scroll wrapped with the familiar red velvet ribbon.

She untied the ribbon and unrolled the scroll to read one single word.

Confess.

Confess? Confess what? To whom?

Puzzled, Katie peered into the envelope in hopes there was something else inside, but it was empty.

“Morning, early bird, I smell coffee brewing.”

She looked up to see Liam standing in the entry way, his hair disheveled, sheet creases on his cheek, looking totally adorable. Her heart melted all over again.

“Hey.” He grinned. “You look much better in my shirt than I ever did.”

She smiled at his compliment.

He yawned and scratched his chest. A total guy. “Watcha got there?”

All at once it was perfectly clear what she was supposed to confess and to whom. “It’s a Martini dare.”

“What’s a Martini dare?” he asked, picking his underwear and pants up off the floor and sliding into them.

“It’s something I have to do for this women’s club I joined. They dare you to do something outside your comfort zone.” She went on to explain the tenets of Martinis and Bikinis.

He sat down beside her on the couch and reached for his shoes. “Sounds interesting.”

“It is.”

He leaned over her shoulder, peered at the scroll. “Confess? What does that mean?”

Katie swallowed. She had a sudden fear Liam wasn’t going to take this dare in the spirit she’d agreed to do it. “I think I’m supposed to confess to you.”

He went suddenly still, one shoe off and one shoe on. “Confess what?”

“That you’re my Martini dare.”

He drilled a hole through her with his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Remember that afternoon in the theatre?”

“How could I possibly forget?”

“It was a Martini dare.”

“They dared you to have sex with me?”

“In a forbidden place.”

He looked as if someone had just kicked him in the gut. “And this trip to Fiji?”

Feeling miserable, she nodded. “Have sex in an exotic place.”

He clamped his lips together and said not another word. He got up off the couch and went to the bedroom. Katie jumped up to follow him. “It was stupid, I know.”

He didn’t even look at her, just stalked to bathroom, and scooped his toothbrush and razor off the counter.

“What…what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” he snapped, picking his suitcase up off the floor and stuffing his toiletries inside.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes.” His jaw tightened as he bent over to zip up his suitcase.

She stared at him. “But why?”

“You lured me here on false pretenses.”

“Oh, come on, you didn’t come here just to assess the value of my family’s real estate.”

He straightened up to glare at her. “No, I came here because you and my best friend convinced me I needed to learn how to relax. That I needed to take a vacation. I came here because…” He shook his head. “Forget it.”

This wasn’t making sense. She couldn’t understand why he was so furious with her. Okay, so her dares were a little underhanded, but they weren’t malicious. They’d both had a good time. Why weren’t they laughing about this over the breakfast buffet?

She touched his forearm, but he shook her off. “What is it?”

His glower cut her like a knife. “I came here because I thought you and I might have a future together. I knew it was going to be tough. I knew you were commitment-phobic, I knew I was taking a chance by laying my heart on the line, but I had no idea you were toying with me. That I was nothing more to you than some stupid dare.”

“You are more to me than a stupid dare.”

“Then why didn’t you just tell me about it?”

“We’re supposed to keep the dares a secret,” she said. “Club rules.”

“And you put your oath to your Martini club above my feelings?”

“I admit it. You’re right. I should have told you about the dare before I invited you out here. I made mistake.”

“Damn right you did.”

Stupefied, Katie couldn’t speak. She stared at him, openmouthed.

His eyes flared with anger. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

He pressed his lips together in a hard line. “And that’s the problem. You don’t get me. I can’t believe that I ever thought you did.”

“Liam, I never meant to hurt you. You’ve got to believe that.”

“I won’t be played for a fool, Katie, and I won’t tolerate deception in any form. Especially, not from the woman I’m dating.” He snatched his suitcase off the bed and carried it out the door.

She stood there dumbfounded, hands on her hips, watching him stride away. She could understand that he didn’t think the dare was funny. She could understand why he might be put out, but this angry reaction was over the top.

See, see, this is why you should avoid commitment, shouted the voice that had always kept her from investing in a long-term relationship.

But then another part of her, a wiser part of her she’d never heard before whispered, This isn’t about you. He’s got an old wound and you just knocked off the scab.

When she returned to the living room, she found him on the phone, calling for a taxi to the airport. “You’re really doing this. You’re really going?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t leave you stranded,” he said as he hung up, forever a man of honor. “I’ll take the next commercial flight off the island. I’ll leave my jet for you.”

“Liam, you’re blowing this all out of proportion. You’re a rational man, I don’t get why you’re acting so betrayed.” She reached out to grab his wrist and pushed up the wristband of his watch in the process, revealing the tattoo that marked him.

All at once the anger rolled out of him. She could see it in the sag of his shoulders, the tired shake of his head. “I’m sorry, Katie, I thought we had something, but now I see we don’t. You’re a blue-blooded Brahmin from Beacon Hill and no matter how much money I make I’ll always be the gangster kid from the South Boston projects.”

“Where you come from doesn’t mean a damn thing to me,” she cried.

“Maybe not,” he said. “But it matters to me.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

He snorted. “How can I be? We were never together. I was only your dare, remember?”

The taxi horn honked outside. He picked up his suitcase, lumbered out of the bungalow.

“Liam, don’t leave. We can talk this out. Work it out. Liam, please!”

But he didn’t hear her. He was already climbing into the taxi, the sound of the ocean wind blowing her voice back into her face with the cold, hard slap of reality.

The man had just broken her heart.

**14**

ABOUT HALFWAY over the Pacific, Liam’s anger evaporated. He thought of Katie and how forlorn she’d looked standing in the doorway of the bungalow, barefooted and wearing nothing but his white dress shirt.

You did the right thing, he tried to convince himself. How could they have a relationship if she was going to keep secrets from him?

Dude, he could almost hear Tony’s voice in his head, it was just a silly dare. Get over it.

Liam shook his head. It wasn’t the dare that bothered him. It was the level of deception she’d gone to in order to lure him to Fiji. It was the fact that she’d used him for her own gratification while he’d been falling in love with her. He thought of how Arianna had humiliated him back in college. Katie was exactly like her, another privileged female toying with the heart of the boy from the wrong side of the tracks for her own amusement.

That’s where you’re dead wrong. Katie is nothing like Arianna and you know it.

In fact, Katie was unlike any woman he’d ever met.

She was sweet and lively, imaginative and generous. She threw herself headlong into everything she attempted. She was unusual, intense, complex and gorgeous as all get out. There were so many things he liked about Katie. Her upbeat attitude and how he instantly felt better whenever he was near her. He loved how she surprised and delighted him with her sense of wonder and adventure. He admired her fearlessness in going after what she wanted.

After he’d met her, he’d put his issues with Finn Delancy on hold. For the first time since he’d found out Delancy was his father, his grudge had taken a backseat to something else. Being with Katie had him letting go of his secret shame and embracing life. And for these past few weeks, he’d felt free.

And he’d walked out on her. All because of an idiotic dare.

What in the hell was the matter with him?

“Would you care for something to drink, sir?” asked the flight attendant as she came around the first-class cabin.

“Whiskey,” he ordered, hoping the alcohol would take his mind off his mistakes.

He remembered the last time he’d drank whiskey. It had been at Finn Delancy’s dinner party. He recalled what had happened later in the park, after he’d confessed his secret to Katie. She’d never judged, just offered her body up to him as solace.

His heart ached and his body tightened with need. Yet he’d never make love to Katie again. Random images of her flashed in his mind—strutting her stuff in that provocative French-maid costume, kicking his butt in bowling, holding his hand as they walked along the beach.

Each freeze-frame tugged at his desire, mocked his stupidity. It was as if his whole life were looped on instant replay, a poignant déjà vu of how he’d flubbed up.

To distract himself from the pain, he tugged the in-flight magazine from the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him and listlessly leafed through the pages, but it didn’t hold his attention.

Liam noticed a man get up and walk down the aisle to the lavatory. A few minutes later, a sexy, long-legged blonde woman followed, squeezing into the same lavatory the man had entered ahead of her.

Clearly, they were angling to become members of the mile-high club. He grinned. It looked like they were in for a fun ride to the States.

Great. He sounded just like Katie. Everything’s a lark, even when it’s inappropriate or probably illegal.

That’s right. Hold on to the negative aspects of her personality. That way you don’t have to remember what her lips feel like on yours, or the adorable sounds she makes during sex, or how good it felt to hold her in your arms.

Determined to lose himself in the printed word, Liam purposely forced his attention onto the in-flight magazine. He turned the page.

The headline of the article grabbed hold of his stomach with a vicious twist. TEN BEST U.S. CITY MAYORS. Quickly, his gaze ran down the list. Boston, he perused. Mayor Finn Delancy.

Bitter disgust rose up his throat. Gritting his teeth, he read the article. It was a glowing review of what Delancy had done for the city. But what really chafed Liam was the section on what a fine father Delancy was. There was a picture showing Finn tossing around a football with his teenage sons on the lawn of his Beacon Hill home.

Liam’s half brothers.

Emotions he’d been suppressing for three decades fell in on him. He felt cheated, wronged, jealous and unloved. But most of all he felt betrayed. He crumpled the magazine in his fist and closed his eyes. Luckily the seat next to him was empty so he didn’t have to defend himself against a prying seatmate.

He reached down deep inside himself, fighting for self-control, trying to tamp down the emotions that until now, he managed to hide under the umbrella of vengeance. He’d wanted to get even with Delancy for betraying him and for hurting his mother.

And then the realization struck him.

He knew why he’d overreacted to Katie’s confession that she’d seduced him on a dare. Why he’d felt so deceived. Why he’d always had a difficult time tolerating deception of any kind.

It was because he’d been hiding from the truth. He’d been deceiving himself. He’d projected his fears and shortcomings onto Katie.

All these years he’d kept his identity a secret, telling no one who his father was until the night he’d confessed to Katie. Even to himself, he’d denied he was part blue blood, had eschewed that gene of his DNA.

There’s only one way around this. Only one way he would find his way back to Katie.

He was going to have to face the man he had become, and to do that he had to confront Delancy.

THE RIBBON-CUTTING ceremony for the Habitat for Humanity project was about to commence as Liam walked up to the site of the new-home construction. A grandstand had been built in front of the buildings, and the media gathered, setting up to film Delancy getting an award.

The irony didn’t escape Liam. Thirty-one years ago, his mother had been pregnant, jobless and homeless because Delancy had discarded her like an old shoe after he’d had his way with her. Now here was Delancy, lauded as a champion of the poor and downtrodden because he’d hammered a few nails in a wall.

“Liam.” Flanked by his bodyguards, Delancy stepped forward, hand outstretched to greet him. “Glad you could make it.”

Liam hesitated before taking Delancy’s hand. He didn’t want to touch the man, but he knew that he must. In order to move on, in order to heal his troubled soul, he had to forgive this man.

Soldiering past the resentment in his heart, Liam reached out and took Delancy’s hand. “Mayor.”

“Please, call me Finn. Anyone who donates a hundred thousand dollars to this project deserves to call me by my first name.”

“What about your son?” Liam asked. “What does he deserve to call you?”

“Excuse me?” Delancy looked confused.

“My mother is Jeanine James.”

Delancy’s blank face told Liam he didn’t even remember his mother.

Liam tensed against the rage running through him. He would not lose control. He would not give this man the satisfaction of knowing how much he affected him. “Thirty-one years ago you knew her very well.”

“Thirty-one years is a long time.” Delancy made a noise that sounded like a half laugh, half snort of derision. “I’ve met a lot of people since then.”

“You never told her you were married. You wined her, dined her. She was a poor, seventeen-year-old Irish immigrant, and she felt as if she’d won the lottery when you took an interest in her.”

“This is a fabrication.” Delancy bristled.

“You got her pregnant, then told her to have an abortion.”

“I never got any woman pregnant other than my wife, Sutton,” Delancy denied.

“When she refused,” Liam went on, making sure to keep his tone low and measured, “you ignored her. She had no money, no place to live and she was pregnant with your bastard son.”

Delancy’s throat worked silently and his face beat bright red. “Nonsense. Utter nonsense.”

“I’m your son and I’ve spent my entire life hating you. I hated you so much I was determined to make something of myself. Determined to convince myself I was better than you. I put myself through Harvard and became a successful businessman. I’m worth almost a billion dollars and I did it because of you.”

“Your mother is mistaken. I’m not your father, James,” Delancy said coldly.

“Your name is right here on my birth certificate.” Liam pulled the birth certificate from his pocket, slapped it in Delancy’s hand.

Delancy’s bodyguards shifted, moving in closer, getting ready to hustle him off. He shoved the certificate back at Liam. “I don’t care what name your mother put on that birth certificate. I’m not your father.”

“Prove it.” Liam lifted his chin, stared Delancy down. Liam’s palms were sweating and his heart was thumping but he’d never felt more like his true self. “Take a DNA test.”

“I don’t have to prove anything.” Delancy turned away from him, turned toward the crowd collecting around the grandstand.

Liam’s old need for revenge reared its ugly head.

The temptation was there—a microphone, an audience, the media. All he had to do was walk over to the mike and make the announcement that could shatter Delancy’s career. He could spill Finn Delancy’s secret all over Boston and finally have his revenge.

But he didn’t reach for the microphone. Didn’t make the public announcement he’d spent years fantasizing about. He couldn’t bring himself to hurt the innocent people involved—Sutton Delancy, his half brothers. But most of all, he couldn’t put the scrutiny of the spotlight on his mother. She’d suffered enough because of this thoughtless, vain, self-centered man.

He’d done what he’d come here to do. Delancy knew who he was. That’s all that mattered.

As Liam turned and walked down the steps of the grandstand, an immediate lightness filled him. A smile tilted his lips and his heart was flooded with the knowledge that he’d just let himself out of a prison of his own making. Delancy no longer had any hold over him. He was free.

Free to love Katie, wholly, completely without any reservation.

Until now, his identity had been caught up in doing and achieving, trying to prove himself worthy of a man who did not deserve his love. But by facing his demons and confronting Delancy, he was finally able to see the truth of it.

Blue blood or commoner. Rich or poor. Bastard son, recognized or not. He was ten times the man Delancy would ever be.

And he owed it all to Katie for helping him to see who he really was deep down inside. Knowing her, being with her, had changed him forever. Changed him in profound and positive ways.

She’d shown him how to embrace his inner child, to have fun and live in the moment. Strange that he’d accused her of deception because until Katie, there had been no hope of true honesty and genuineness in his life.

Before Katie, he’d been quick and competent and capable. He still was, of course, but making a buck was no longer so important. He no longer had anything to prove. What was important now was being true to what had real value to him.

Katie.

He craved her with a longing beyond reason. He had to have her and he was going to do everything in his power to win her back.

THE MORNING AFTER she returned from Fiji, Katie trudged into Sharper Designs. The final art design for Liam’s campaign was due. It had taken every ounce of courage she possessed to show up at the office today. All she’d wanted to do was call in to work, hide under the covers and huddle there for the rest of her life.

She had the misfortune of falling in love with Liam James. She loved so many things about him—his sense of honor, his work ethic, the way he could see past the boisterous front she put up to hide her fears.

But his emotional stumbling blocks kept tripping them up. He was a loyal and complicated man. His feelings ran deep, but he had buried them under his stiff upper lip so that she didn’t believe he was capable of expressing those feelings. And dammit, Katie deserved a man who could tell her what was in his heart.

A few minutes after Katie had slumped in her chair with a mocha latte, Tanisha came bounding through the door, her face all aglow.

“Good morning!” She greeted Katie with a gigantic smile.

“Well—” Katie blinked, feeling a tad bit disappointed by Tanisha’s enthusiasm. She had visions of them washing away their man woes together over shots of peppermint schnapps during happy hour at the closest bar. “You look as if you’ve rebounded nicely from your breakup with Dwayne. Did you have an exciting hookup this weekend?”

“I did.” Tanisha grinned slyly, her hands clasped behind her back. “With Dwayne.”

“You guys made up? That’s so wonderful,” she said struggling to control her heartache.

“We didn’t just make up.” Tanisha’s eyes danced.

“No?”

“We’re getting married!” Tanisha let out a squeal and thrust her left hand under Katie’s nose so she could see the big two-carat marquis diamond engagement ring on her finger.

“That’s wonderful!” Katie jumped up to give her friend a hug. Truly, she was happy for Tanisha, but there was a pity party going on inside Katie’s stomach. She felt so left out.

“He took me to a Red Sox game and there it was up on the scoreboard during the seventh-inning stretch for the whole world to see. Tanisha, will you marry me?”

“Ah,” Katie said, “the grand gesture.”

“Girlfriend, let me tell you, it was a dream come true.”

“I thought you told me once that you weren’t the marrying kind.”

Tanisha waved it off. “That was before I met Dwayne. The right man can change your mind about anything.”

“Tell me,” Katie muttered. She thought she’d found the right man and she’d changed, but then he’d turned out to be the wrong man and she felt like a total fool for following her heart.

“We’re getting married next June,” Tanisha chattered. “And, of course, I want you to be my maid of honor.”

“Sure, sure.” The smile froze to her face.

“I tell you, Katie—” Tanisha grasped both her hands in hers “—I’ve never been so happy.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Tanisha canted her head. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.” Katie forced herself to look perky.

“How was your weekend in Fiji with Liam?”

Katie shook her head. “Don’t ask.”

“Not good?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. This is your day. Tell me all about Dwayne.”

Tanisha shook a finger at her. “Nuh-uh. You’re not getting off that easy. Something is bothering you. You’re not your usual self. Sure, I’m happy, but I want you to know I’m here for you, no matter what. So spill it. What happened in Fiji?”

Katie shrugged, trying to act nonchalant in the hopes that it wouldn’t hurt so much. Quickly, she told her about the Martini dares and how she’d used Liam to complete them. And how upset he’d been when she confessed what she’d been up to. “Was I so wrong?” she finished, lacing her fingers together nervously.

“Not to my way of thinking, but some guys have issues about being completely honest.”

“Liam is definitely in that camp,” Katie said gloomily.

Tanisha shook her head. “I’ve never seen you this torn up over a man.”

“I’ve never felt like this over a man before.”

“Seriously, Katie, you’re not going to let this misunderstanding come between you two.”

If anyone but Tanisha had told her this, Katie would have been inclined to make light of her feelings for Liam. But this was Tanisha, who’d started at Sharper Designs on the same day she had. Who’d let her sleep on her couch when Katie’s condo was being fumigated. Who brought over Chinese food when she was down in the dumps and doled out sharp-witted advice.

She owed Tanisha the truth. Had to open herself up to someone. Tanisha had proven she was her friend.

“It’s too late. I mean, even if he did forgive me for deceiving him, I don’t know if I can forgive him for walking out on me. The least he could have done was stay and fight.”

“Don’t judge him too quickly. Some people withdraw when they’re upset. That’s what happened with Dwayne and me.”

“The one time I finally break down and have sex in a bed, I go and fall in love,” her voice cracked.

“What?” Tanisha’s eyes rounded. “Did you say the L word?”

Miserably, Katie nodded.

“Oh, sweetie,” Tanisha said with such a look of pity on her face that Katie wanted to crawl into a hole and pull dirt over her.

All the years she’d spent playing the field and having fun, keeping her heart safely out of the fray, had come to a crashing end. She was no longer immune to the slings and arrows of love.

And it hurt so bad.

“I’m okay. I’ll be all right. I don’t want to rain on your parade. How about we go out tonight and celebrate your pending marriage.”

“Ooh, I’m sorry.” Tanisha made a face. “We’re going over to my folks to tell them in person. Tomorrow night, maybe?”

“Sure.” Katie bobbed her head. Thankfully, her cell phone rang at that moment. She pulled it from her pocket as Tanisha went off to flash her engagement ring to the rest of their coworkers. “Hello?”

“Katie?”

“Yes?”

“This is Lindsay Beckham,” came the cool polished voice of the Martinis and Bikinis president.

Great. It was the person responsible for her downfall. “What is it?” she asked, only barely managing to control her snippy tone.

“I’m afraid there’s been something of a mix-up.”

“A mix-up?”

Lindsay paused. “It’s totally my fault. I take full responsibility.”

“For what?”

“The last dare I sent you?”

“Yeah?”

“It was meant for one of the other women.”

Katie let out a bark of laughter. “That’s hilarious.”

“Excuse me?”

“Because of that last dare, my life is ruined.”

“Ruined?” Lindsay repeated. “Are you sure you’re not overstating the issue?”

“You told me to confess!”

“No, I told Sherry to confess.”

“But you sent Sherry’s dare to me, so it had the same consequences as if you’d sent it to me.” Katie’s hand was shaking. From anger, from sorrow, from the whole sheer craziness of it. “You know what? I wish I’d never set foot in your bar. I wish I’d never met you and your Martini group.”

“This is worse than I thought,” Lindsay said. “I’m sorry, I never meant for this to happen. If you’d let me make amends—”

“Nice of you to offer, but unless you know how to superglue a broken heart, there’s not much you can do. I’ve got to get back to work now.”

“I hope you won’t give up on Martinis and Bikinis just because of this little snafu—”

“Bye,” Katie said, and hung up, never feeling more wretched.

IN A VAIN ATTEMPT to boost her spirits, Katie made a beeline for the pet shop after her awful day at work. She couldn’t wait for the salve of seeing Duke’s sweet face and happily wagging tail.

“Hey, pup,” Katie cooed as she walked up to the window. Only to find it empty.

Duke wasn’t there.

You waited too long. Someone else bought him.

The disappointment that came over her was perplexing. Why did she care so much about that dog?

Maybe they hadn’t sold Duke. Maybe the store owner had taken him out for a walk. Katie pushed inside the pet store, hoping that was, indeed, the case.

“Hello,” greeted the friendly faced woman behind the counter.

“Hi.”

“You’re the one who’s always coming in here to play with the cocker spaniel, aren’t you?”

Katie nodded. “I noticed he wasn’t in the window.”

The woman’s eyes lit up. “Someone bought him, only an hour or so ago.”

You’re too late. That’s what happens when you’re afraid to commit.

A lump welled in Katie’s throat and she had to blink hard to keep from crying. God, this was so stupid. Getting misty-eyed over a puppy who wasn’t even hers. “Did he go to a good home?”

“A very good home.” The pet-shop woman nodded. “The man said he was buying him as a surprise for his girlfriend. Apparently she’s always wanted a dog, but circumstances have prevented her from owning one until now.”

“It’s good he’s found a great home.” Katie forced a smile. “I’m happy. So happy.”

Quickly, she turned and hurried from the pet shop. She thought of the dog collar Liam had given her. She’d never get to use it on Duke.

She didn’t feel like heading home, but she didn’t want to go to a bar by herself. Not knowing what else to do, she headed for the park.

She walked down the path sniffling into a tissue, telling herself she was sad because Duke was no longer in the window. Denying that her sorrow had anything to do with Liam.

The air was cool but not unpleasantly so. Autumn leaves gusted across the sidewalk. On the yellowing grass, a group of teenage boys played football, laughing and tussling. She could hear the city traffic passing by and in the distance, the sound of a dog barking.

She skirted the pond, watching the ducks swim gracefully across the water and remembered the day Duke had pulled her in. She remembered Liam’s apartment, and her heart swelled against the bittersweet memory. In three short weeks, she’d lost them both, Duke and Liam.

A trio of women on in-line skates scooted past her. The barking dog was getting closer. She passed a park bench where an elderly couple sat holding hands and watching the birds bedding down in the trees before nightfall.

She rounded a corner and up ahead she saw a man in a beige trench coat walking a dog.

It was a cocker spaniel who looked just like Duke.

The dog’s barking grew more frantic as he pulled on his owner’s leash.

Katie’s eyes went from the dog to the man.

Liam!

She didn’t know what to do, so she just stood there, waiting for him to get closer. But Duke wasn’t into the games people play when they’re falling in love. He jerked the leash from Liam’s hand and came barreling straight toward her, his long curly ears flapping as he ran.

She dropped to her knees and scooped the cocker spaniel into her arms. He greeted her with a wriggling tail and exuberant tongue. Liam couldn’t have given her a better gift if he’d presented her with the title to his Lamborghini. “The pet-shop lady told me some man had bought him for his girlfriend.”

“He did,” Liam said.

Katie’s eyes met his. “You bought Duke for me?”

“I did.”

“But my condo won’t let me keep pets.”

“You could always move.”

“Where to?”

“I was hoping,” his voice cracked, “you’d consider moving in with me. But if it’s too soon for that, there’s a vacant apartment in my building.”

LIAM WATCHED HER set the puppy on the ground and stand up to face him. Her soft blond hair floated loosely about her shoulders in a sexy tumble. Her lips were painted a luscious shade of raspberry. She was dressed in black tailored slacks, a starched white blouse and tweed blazer. She looked sophisticated, relaxed and utterly beautiful.

“I can’t answer that question the way you want me to answer.”

He pulled in a breath. He was hoping giving her the dog would be enough to get back into her good graces. He should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. “I screwed up, Katie. I know it. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

It hurt him to see her eyes were red-rimmed and she held a tissue clutched tight in her hand. She’d been crying, and he was terrified he was the cause of it. He reached to touch her forearm, but she shied away.

“You really pulled the rug out from under me, Liam. I was finally ready to take a chance on love and when I did, when I dared to lower my guard and make myself vulnerable, you walked out on me.”

“I had a lot of time to think on the flight home and I didn’t like what I realized about myself. I was projecting my guilt about not admitting who I really was onto you. I went to see Finn Delancy and I confronted him.”

“What happened?”

“He denied he was my father.”

“So nothing was resolved?”

“No,” he said. “I finally figured out there was nothing to resolve. I don’t need Finn Delancy to validate me. I don’t need the fortune I’ve amassed to prove I’m a worthy human being.”

“So where does this leave us?”

“Right here.” Liam couldn’t stand not touching her again. He reached out, took her hands and slowly pulled her toward him.

“All the old resentment toward Delancy is gone?”

“Every bit of it. How about you?”

She nodded. “I feel great. No, better than great. I feel free.”

“Me, too.”

“What about your work? What’s going to replace the drive in your life now that Delancy no longer matters to you?” she asked.

“I was hoping you could help me find a way to fill that void.”

A small smile appeared on her lips. “I think maybe we could work something out.”

“I want to make this work, Katie. I want it so badly. More than I’ve ever wanted anything, even getting back at my father.”

“You’ve forgiven me for using you to complete my Martini dares?”

“I was never mad at you.”

“No? Because it sure felt like it.”

He shook his head. “I was afraid. Afraid of what I was feeling. Afraid that I could never be man enough for a woman like you.”

She cupped his cheek with her palm and gazed at him with such tenderness it made his heart hurt.

“What changed your mind?”

“You did. Your strength and courage inspired me. You were brave enough to do those dares, to put yourself on the line. I had to try. I couldn’t go through the rest of my life not knowing what might have been.”

KATIE STARED into his hazel eyes at the vulnerable man behind the suave facade. What she saw reflected there moved her deeply and swept away any remaining doubts she harbored. Liam had no idea the value of his own worth, but she was determined to teach him.

“I’m ready to start fresh,” he said. “If you’ll forgive me. I’ve made a lot a mistakes and, I swear, I’ll do my best to make up for them.”

“It’s already over. Forgiven and forgotten,” she said.

“Katie.” He kissed her there on the sidewalk while Duke ran in circles around their feet, tangling them up in his leash.

“No more secrets between us,” Liam said, breaking the kiss to stare into her eyes. “Not even silly ones.”

“No more secrets,” she promised.

“I respect you, I admire you, I envy the courageous way you love so fully, so easily. You’re my hero, Katie Winfield.”

“Really?” Her heart filled with emotion.

He hitched in his breath. “And I love you, Katie, and I don’t throw those words around lightly. In fact, other than my mother, you’re the only one I’ve ever said them to.”

She could tell how much it cost him to admit his feelings. He was used to tamping them down, hiding from tender emotions. But here he was laying himself bare, putting his heart on the line for her.

“Thank you, Liam,” she said, “for that most treasured gift.”

He’d said the words she’d most needed to hear. He made her feel cherished and prized and that her opinions were valued.

“You’ve saved me from myself.” He touched his forehead against hers and stared deeply into her eyes.

“Oh, Liam.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you, too.”

THEY WENT BACK to Liam’s place. They fed and watered Duke and made him a pallet on the floor.

Without another word, Liam took off his clothes and undressed her slowly, carefully, and then led her to his bed. When his fingers touched her bare skin, her nerve endings dissolved into a pool of liquid fire.

For Liam, this was all about her pleasure. Nothing mattered more to him than this glorious woman, who’d not only turned his world upside down but twisted his heart inside out and changed everything he knew.

All these years, he’d believed he would never really find where he belonged. He’d been so very wrong. He belonged right here with Katie.

The provocative little moan that escaped her as his fingers kneaded her bare backside caught him low in the gut and inflamed his passion, the way she always did.

Why on earth had he ever placed thoughts of revenge above acts of love? In less than a month of knowing her, she’d given him so much. He vowed to spend the rest of his life giving back more than he got. And if that included dressing up like a pirate, or making love in the balcony of a theatre, then by gosh, he’d willingly do it for her.

He leaned down to kiss the nape of her neck, but before he got there, she rolled over onto her back and looked up into his eyes with such love it took his breath away.

“Get over here,” she said, wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him toward her.

“Now we’re talking.” His body hardened with anticipation as he thought of all the fun that lay ahead of them. She tugged his head down to hers and kissed him with a deep, wet passionate kiss that told him he was the luckiest man in the world.

He settled his body over hers, bracing his weight on his forearms, and looked deeply into her eyes.

“I love you, Katie Winfield, now, tomorrow, always.”

“Oh, Liam,” she said. “That’s all I ever wanted to hear.”

He enveloped her in his arms, listened to the pounding of her heart. He felt truly immortal.

Then they nibbled and licked and touched and suckled. They took their time, fully getting to know each other. No surprises, no disguises.

Just true and honest loving.

The hours streamed by in a blur of sensuous heat, the sating of sexual longings, until at the very stroke of midnight, their two souls merged as one. They knew there would never be any more secrets between them.

Love had changed the physics of their lives and redrawn the boundary of what they’d believed about the world and the magic that was truly possible.

And as they reached love’s glorious pinnacle, separated only by the thinnest rind of skin, their fate was sealed, their destinies forever intertwined.

**15**

WHEN HER CELL PHONE rang the next morning, Katie rolled over with a smile on her face. She glanced to see Liam asleep beside her and Duke dozing at the foot of the bed. Her grin widened. It wasn’t a dream. Quietly, she slipped out of the bed and snatched her purse up off the floor, digging out her cell phone on the fly as she hustled to the living room.

“Hello.”

“Katie, where are you? I went by your condo to see if you wanted to do breakfast but you weren’t there.”

“Brooke, how are you?” She felt so wonderful she wanted to share her joy with her sister but wasn’t sure how she would feel about the news that Katie and Liam were an item.

“I think I’m finally feeling strong enough to go through mother’s things. Joey’s up for it, too. How about you?”

Sorting through their mother’s personal effects was going to be an emotional experience and until now, she’d rigorously avoided it. Honestly, all three of them had. But it needed to be done. And being with Liam had given Katie the courage she needed to face her shortcomings and problems in the moment, and deal with them.

“When?”

“You’ll come?”

“Yes.”

“This afternoon.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You sound different,” Brooke observed.

“How so?”

“You sound like you’ve accepted Mom’s death.”

Katie realized it was true. At some point, she’d let go of her anger. She’d learned to handle her fears honestly and to stop hiding from herself. And in the process, she’d learned to accept the world as it was.

Even though she was sad her mother was gone, she had her memories. So many great memories.

“Actually,” Katie said, “I’m looking forward to doing this. It’s time to give up the grieving and celebrate Mom’s life.”

Brooke made a tiny noise of surprise. “You sound so mature and responsible.”

That acknowledgement from her sister tightened Katie’s throat with emotion. “A lot’s happened to me lately. I’ll tell you about it when I get there.”

Several hours later, after she and Liam had bonded over breakfast in bed, Katie arrived at her family’s home. Her sisters were already there, sitting cross-legged on the floor of their mother’s bedroom looking at photo albums, a box of tissues sitting between them.

“Katie,” Brooke said, getting to her feet to hug her.

How incredibly beautiful her sister was with her dreamy light brown eyes, long, silky caramel-colored hair and arched widow’s peak. They didn’t know where Brooke had inherited it. No one else in the family had one.

Her oldest sister possessed a seriousness that Katie lacked. But Brooke also had a way about her that instantly put others at ease. She was soothing as warm milk on a cold winter night. She wore simple, tailored clothes in muted, don’t-notice-me colors, which was odd for an artistic woman who dressed windows for the most exclusive department store in Boston.

Brooke pulled back and gave Katie the once over. “You’re glowing. You look…happy.”

“You look like a woman in love,” Joey commented.

She was aware of the heat of her sister’s gaze on her face. Joey was a lawyer and quite perceptive. Taller than Katie, she was also thinner, with the lithe gait of a dancer. Her hair was styled in a sleek cut that softened her angular face. She had a Mensa IQ and a wickedly sharp sense of humor that often belied her good-girl image.

At her sisters’ comments, Katie could contain herself no longer. A broad smile broke across her face. “I am in love!”

“That’s wonderful,” Joey said, and hugged Katie, too.

Brooke splayed a hand over her heart. “Who is he?”

Here was the hard part. Katie faced Brooke. “I hope you’re not going to be to upset with me, but it’s Liam James.”

“Well, I am a bit surprised, but why would I be mad? Liam and I are just friends and he’s a wonderful guy. I’m so happy you two found each other.”

“It’s been incredible.” Katie had to blink to keep tears of joy from welling up in her eyes.

Joey scooped their mother’s keepsake box up off the floor. “This calls for a celebration. I’ll put on some tea. Brooke can break out that tin of cookies from Worthington’s. And you can tell us how you hooked up with Young Bostonian’s most eligible bachelor, while we go through the keepsake box.”

“Mom would approve.” Brooke nodded.

Katie followed her sisters through the house to the large kitchen where their mother had spent most of her time. Even though they’d had maids, unlike many Beacon Hill Brahmins, Daisy Winfield had preferred to make meals for her family rather than turn the chore over to a professional cook.

Joey put the kettle on and Brooke got out the cookies. Katie took a seat at the kitchen table and opened up the keepsake box. A few minutes later her sisters joined her at the table, armed with cups of Earl Grey and a platter of Scottish shortbread.

They listened while Katie told them about the Ladies League Ball and what had happened in the closet. When she got to the part about getting a letter from Lindsay Beckham about her Martinis and Bikinis group, Joey put down her cup of tea.

“I got one of those,” Joey said. “I tossed it away.”

“I got one, as well,” Brooke admitted. “I hung on to mine. I thought I might go next month.”

“You can come with me,” Katie invited. “Because I gotta tell you, this dare stuff works. Although I have to admit there were times when I thought everything was coming unraveled.”

“What do you mean?”

Katie finished telling them all that had transpired with her three dares. From her tryst with Liam in the movie theatre, to their trip to Fiji, to the miscommunication that had almost torn them apart.

“Wow,” Brooke said when she’d finished. “Maybe I will give this Martinis and Bikinis group a shot.”

“It certainly sounds like you found your match with Liam,” Joey said. It might have been her imagination, but Katie could have sworn her older sister sounded a wee bit envious of her newfound happiness.

Katie took a deep breath. “The Martini dares have certainly empowered me. If I hadn’t gone through all that, I don’t think I could be with you here today, going through Mom’s things.”

At that, the three women turned their attention to the box in front of Katie.

“We might as well dive in,” Brooke said.

Katie took a deep breath and removed the lid from the box. On top were the Valentine’s Day cards they’d made for their mother when they were children. Red construction paper, crayon lettering, paper lace. Katie took them out and passed them around to her sisters. They looked at the cards one by one, reading I LOVE YOU MOMMY written in messy, childish print.

Underneath the cards, Katie found locks of their hair from their first haircuts, graphed growth charts and their baby booties. There were report cards, school pictures and good-conduct medals for Joey and Brooke. And there was a faded Polaroid of Katie holding the first Duke with a happy, gap-toothed grin on her face.

Tears slipped down their faces at the childhood treasures their mother had saved. Brooke passed out tissues. They laughed and cried and talked and remembered their mother’s life. They drank tea and scarfed cookies and bonded in a way they hadn’t in a long time.

Then hours later, as they neared the bottom of the big wooden keepsake box, they discovered something curious.

It was a large yellow envelope that was sealed. On the outside, in Daisy’s handwriting, they read, To be opened by my daughters, Brooke, Joey and Katie, on the event of my death.

A sudden chill of dread ran down Katie’s spine.

“What’s this?” Brooke frowned and reached for the envelope.

“Go ahead and open it,” Joey said. “You’re the oldest.”

Brooke broke the seal and dumped the contents out on the table.

A second envelope and baby pictures. But not of Brooke or Joey or Katie. They flipped through the pictures, watching the little girl grow from a serious-faced baby to a serious-faced young girl.

“Who’s this?” Brooke asked.

“Maybe it’s one of Mom’s relatives that she never talked about.”

“Flip the photos over and see if there’s a name on the back,” Joey suggested.

Brooked turned over the picture she had in her hand. In one snapshot, the girl was about four, staring churlishly at the camera.

“Lindsay, age four years, three months,” Brooke read aloud.

“Hey,” Joey said, as she opened the second envelope, “these are legal papers.”

The raised hairs on the nape of her neck made Katie afraid to ask, but she was compelled. The little girl looked strangely familiar and the name Lindsay struck a certain resonance inside her. “What kind of legal papers?”

Joey raised her head from the paperwork to meet her sisters’ gazes. “Adoption papers.”

“Mom and Dad adopted a kid we knew nothing about? What happened to her?”

Joey’s face paled as she read on. “No, Mom had a child no one knew anything about. A child she gave up for adoption before she met Dad and now she wants us to find her.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name,” Joey said, “is Lindsay Beckham.”

**Overexposed**

by Leslie Kelly

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**Prologue**

THEY CALLED HER the Crimson Rose.

As her name was announced in sultry, almost reverent tones at Leather and Lace, an exclusive men’s club, an awed quiet began to slither through the crowd. The room stilled, noisy conversation giving way to quiet expectation.

Businessmen in open-collared shirts stopped their whispered flirtations with waitresses wearing tiny black skirts and skimpy tops. Attendees of an entire bachelor party returned to their table, elbowing the groom to watch and weep. Single men who came every week just to see her sat back in plush leather chairs and stared rapt at the stage through hooded eyes. The ice tinkling against their glasses was soon the only sound in the lushly appointed room, even the servers knew better than to interrupt the clientele when the Rose was on stage.

She danced only twice a week—on Saturdays and Sundays—and since the night she’d started, the Crimson Rose had become one of the hottest attractions in the Chicago club scene. Because while the jaded city had long been used to hard-looking dancers taking off their clothes and gyrating to the heavy beat of sexual music, they simply hadn’t seen anything like her.

She wasn’t hard-looking, she was elegant. Her delicate features and natural curves made every man who saw her wonder what it would feel like to touch her creamy skin.

She didn’t strip…she undressed. Slowly. Seductively. As if she had all the time in the world to give a man pleasure.

She didn’t gyrate, she swayed, moving with fluid grace. Every gesture, every turn an invitation to gaze at her.

Her sound wasn’t sexual, it was sensual, erotic and soulful enough to make a man close his eyes and appreciate it. Though, of course, when she was onstage none ever would.

While her job might have diminished some women in the eyes of those around her, the Rose owned it, embraced it, lifted it up to a level of art rather than pure sexual titillation.

She liked what she did. And they liked watching her.

The low, sultry thrum of a smoky number began, but the stage remained dark as the workers put final placement on a portable red satin curtain, used only by her. It had been a recent addition by the management, who’d realized that the high-class, stage performer feel was part of the Crimson Rose’s appeal. As was the mystery.

While most of the other dancers at the club performed under bright overhead light and full exposure, the Rose danced in shadow and pools of illumination provided by precisely timed spotlights. Her red velvet mask never came off. Most figured the management was playing upon the popularity of the aura of secrecy surrounding the Rose.

Finally the music grew louder, the gelled spotlights, ranging in color from soft pink to bloodred, illuminated the stage, dancing back and forth, each briefly touching on one spot: the seam of the closed satin curtain.

“Now, for your viewing delight,” said a smooth male from the sound system, “Chicago’s perfect bloom, the Crimson Rose.”

No one clapped or whispered. No one moved. All eyes were on the center of the curtain, where a hand began to emerge.

It was pale. Delicate, with long fingers and slender wrists. A colorful design—painted-on body art—began at the tip of one finger, with a tiny leaf. It connected to a vine, which wound up her hand, around her wrist. As her arm emerged, more of the leafy vine, complete with sharp thorns, was revealed. It glittered, sensuous and wicked, alluring and dangerous.

Sinuous, slow, unhurried, she emerged from the drape, until she was fully revealed. But her head remained down, her long reddish-brown hair concealing her face.

The tempo throbbed. The dancer stayed still, as if completely oblivious to the crowd. Finally, the spotlights changed color, the vibrant reds giving way to a soft, morning yellow. And, as if she were a tightly wound blossom being awakened by a gentle dawn, the Rose began to move.

Her head slowly lifted, the delicate beauty of her pale throat emphasized by more body art. Her hair fell back as she turned toward the light, as if welcoming the morning.

Her full lips—red and wet—were parted, sending vivid images and erotic fantasies into the minds of every man close enough to see their glisteny sheen…. This was a woman made for the art of kissing. And sensual pleasure.

There the view of her face stopped. A soft red-velvet mask covered the rest. The mask glittered with green jewels like those in the vine, leaving her audience certain that the temptress’s eyes must be a pure, vivid emerald. Most already knowing the mystery of her face would not be revealed, her admirers refocused their attention to the rest of her.

She wore layers of soft fabric, cut in petal shapes. Still like the flower being awakened by the sun, she began to indulge in the spotlight’s warmth. Swaying, she stretched lazily like a cat in a puddle of light. Her movements were unhurried, revealing a length of thigh, a glimmer of hip.

Then the tempo picked up. So did her pace. She arched and swayed across the stage with feminine grace. But to most, she appeared lonely—removed from her surroundings—revealing a sensual want that begged for fulfillment that would never come.

Anyone in the audience would have fulfilled it for her.

Anyone.

Every move she made set the billowing layers of her costume in motion, until the petals nearly danced around her on their own. They parted to reveal her slender legs, providing a peek here and a glimpse there.

And then they started to disappear.

Every man in the place leaned forward. Wherever she turned, another bit of fabric hit the floor. Her hands moved so effortlessly that the layers seemed to fall by themselves. The light pinks and puffy outer veil went first, followed by the heavier satin pieces. Soon her long, perfectly toned legs were revealed up to the thigh. A drape of satin covering her stomach fell next, torn away from the strings of a bikini top.

She continued her siren’s dance as the fabric fell away, the tempo pushing harder, her hips thrusting in response. Finally, when she wore nothing but a sparkly red G-string and two tiny, delicate pink petals on the tips of her breasts, she glanced at the audience, deigning to give them her attention. Normally, at this point, she would offer a saucy smile, pluck the petals off her nipples, then duck behind her curtains. She’d give them a glimpse—quick, heart-stoppingly sexy—then disappear into the dark recesses of the club until her second performance of the night. But tonight…tonight, she hesitated. No. Tonight, she froze.

Because as she cast a final glance at her audience, seeing a number of familiar faces in the crowd, her attention was captured by a shadowy figure standing in the back of the room, beside the bar. Ignoring the expectant hush from those familiar with her performance, all of whom were waiting for the payoff moment they’d come to see, she focused all her attention on him.

She couldn’t see much at that distance, both because of the mask she wore and the spotlights still shining in her face. But she saw enough to send her heart—already beating frantically due to her performance—into hyperdrive.

From here, he appeared black-haired and black-eyed and black-clothed. She could make out none of his features, just that tall, dark presence—broad of shoulder, slim-hipped. He might be dangerous, given his size and the shadowy darkness swallowing him from her view—but now, at this moment, she felt lured by him. Entranced. Captivated.

Their eyes locked. He knew he had her attention. And in that moment, she desperately wanted to walk off the stage, across the room, close enough to see if his face was as handsome as his shadowy form hinted. Then closer—to see what truths lay in the mysterious depths of those inky black eyes.

But suddenly someone whistled…someone else catcalled. She realized she’d lost track of the music and the dance and the audience and her reasons for being here.

Titillation. Seduction. Those were her reasons for being here. Which made it that much more strange that, right now, the Rose was the one who felt seduced.

Enough. Time to finish.

Sweeping her gaze across the crowd, she gave them all a wickedly sexy look, as if her pause had been entirely purposeful. And entirely for their personal delight. In it, she invited them to imagine just who had her breathing hard—licking her lips in anticipation. Who had her skin flushed and her sex damp and her nipples rock hard.

She only wished she knew the answer.

With one more sidelong glance through half-lowered lashes, she reached for the tiny petals—pink, to match the tender skin of her taut nipples—and plucked them off.

The crowd was roaring as she disappeared behind the curtain. They cheered for several long minutes during which she regained her breath and tried to force her pulse to return to its normal, measured beat.

When it did, she took a chance and peeked through the curtain, her stare zoning in on that dark place by the bar.

But the shadowy stranger was gone.

**1**

FOR THE FIRST TWO WEEKS after he’d returned from the Middle East, Nick Santori genuinely didn’t mind the way his family fussed over him. There were big welcome home barbecues in the tiny backyard of the row house where he’d been raised. There were even bigger dinners at the family-owned pizzeria that had been his second home growing up.

He’d been dragged to family weddings by his mother and into the kitchen of the restaurant by his father. He’d had wet, sticky babies plopped in his lap by his sisters-in-law, and had been plied with beer by his brothers, who wanted details on everything he’d seen and done overseas. And he’d had rounds of drinks raised in his honor by near-strangers who, having suitably praised him as a patriot, wanted to go further and argue the politics of the whole mess.

That was where he drew the line. He didn’t want to talk about it. After twelve years in the Corps, several of them on active duty in Iraq, he’d had enough. He didn’t want to relive battles or wounds or glory days with even his brothers and he sure as hell wouldn’t justify his choice to join the military to people he’d never even met.

At age eighteen, fresh out of high school with no interest in college and even less in the family business, entering the Marines had seemed like a kick-ass way to spend a few years.

What a dumb punk he’d been. Stupid. Unprepared. Green.

He’d quickly learned…and he’d grown up. And while he didn’t regret the years he’d spent serving his country, he sometimes wished he could go back in time to smack that eighteen year old around and wake him up to the realities he’d be facing.

Realities like this one: coming home to a world he didn’t recognize. To a family that had long since moved on without him.

“So you hanging in?” asked his twin, Mark, who sat across from him in a booth nursing a beer. His brothers had all gotten into the habit of stopping by the family-owned restaurant after work a few times a week.

“I’m doing okay.”

“Feeling that marinara running through your veins again?”

Nick chuckled. “Do you think Pop has ever even realized there’s any other kind of food?”

Mark shook his head. Reaching into a basket, he helped himself to a breadstick. “Do you think Mama has ever even tried to cook him any?”

“Good point.” Their parents were well matched in their certainty that any food other than Italian was unfit to eat.

“Is she still griping because you wouldn’t move back home?”

Nodding, Nick grabbed a breadstick of his own. For all his grumbling, he wouldn’t trade his Pop’s cooking for anything…especially not the never-ending MRE’s he’d had to endure in the military. “She seems to think I’d be happy living in our old room with the Demi Moore Indecent Proposal poster on the wall. It’s like walking into a frigging time warp.”

“You always did prefer G.I. Jane.”

Nick just sighed. Mark seldom took anything seriously. In that respect, he hadn’t changed. But everything else sure had.

During the years he’d been gone, the infrequent visits home hadn’t allowed Nick to mentally keep up with his loved ones. In his mind, when he’d lain on a cot wondering if there would ever come a day when sand wouldn’t infiltrate every surface of his clothes again, the Santoris were the same big, loud bunch he’d grown up with: two hard-working parents and a brood of kids.

They weren’t kids anymore, though. And Mama and Pop had slowed down greatly over the years. His father had turned over the day-to-day management of Santori’s to Nick’s oldest brother, Tony, and stayed in the kitchen drinking chianti and cooking.

One of his brothers was a prosecutor. Another a successful contractor. Their only sister was a newlywed. And, most shocking of all to Nick, Mark, his twin, was about to become a father.

Married, domesticated and reproducing…that described the happy lives of the five other Santori kids. And every single one of them seemed to think he should do exactly the same thing.

Nick agreed with them. At least, he had agreed with them when living day-to-day in a place where nothing was guaranteed, not even his own life. It had seemed perfect. A dream he could strive for at the end of his service. Now it was within reach.

He just wasn’t sure he still wanted it.

He didn’t doubt his siblings were happy. Their conversations were full of banter and houses and SUVs and baby talk that they all seemed to love but Nick just didn’t get. And wasn’t sure he ever would…despite how much he knew he should.

I will.

At least, he hoped he would.

The fact that he was bored out of his mind helping out at Santori’s and hadn’t yet met a single appropriate woman who made his heart beat faster—much less one he wanted to pick out baby names with—was merely a product of his own re-adjustment to civilian life. He’d come around. Soon. No doubt about it.

As long as he avoided going after the one woman he’d seen recently who not only made his heart beat fast but had also given him a near-sexual experience from across a crowded room. Because she was in no way appropriate. She was a stripper. One he’d be working with very soon now that he’d agreed to take a job doing security at a club called Leather and Lace.

Forcibly thrusting the vision of the sultry dancer out of his brain, he focused on the type of normal woman he’d someday meet who might inspire a similar reaction.

He’d have help locating her. Everyone, it seemed, wanted him to find the “perfect” woman and they all just happened to know her. The next one of his sisters-in-law who asked him to come over for dinner and coincidentally asked her single best friend to come, too, would be staring at Nick’s empty chair.

“Do you know how glad I am that your wife’s knocked up?”

“Yeah, me too,” Mark replied, wearing the same sappy look he’d had on his face since he’d started telling everyone Noelle was expecting. “But do I want to know why you’re so happy?”

“Because it means she doesn’t have time to try to set me up with her latest single friend/hair stylist/next-door-neighbor or just the next breathing woman who walks by.”

Mark had the audacity to grin.

“It’s not funny.”

“Yeah, it is. I’ve seen the ones they’ve thrown at you.”

“You seen me throw them back, too, then.”

Nodding, Mark sipped his beer.

“Doesn’t matter if she’s a blonde, brunette, redhead or bald. Any single woman with a pulse gets shoved at me.”

“And Catholic,” Mark pointed out.

“Mama’s picks, yeah. But none of them are my type.”

Deadpan, his brother asked, “Women?”

“F-you,” he replied. “I mean, I do have a few preferences.”

“Big—”

“Beyond that,” Nick snapped.

Mark relented. “Okay, I’m kidding. What do you want?”

That was the question of the hour, wasn’t it? Nick had no idea what he wanted. It was supposed to be someone who’d make him want this. This sedate, small-town-in-a-big-city lifestyle.

“I don’t know if I’m cut out for what all of you have.”

When Mark’s brow rose, Nick added, “I wasn’t criticizing. You all seem happy. The couples in this family don’t seem as…”

“Boring?”

“I guess.”

“Thanks,” his brother replied dryly.

“No offense. But you’re all the exception, not the rule.”

Mark murmured, “That’s a lot of exceptions.”

It was. Which meant Nick was out of luck. How many great, happy marriages could one family contain?

But damned if he wasn’t going to give it a try. He’d been telling himself for the last three years of his active enlistment that once he was free—once he was home—he was going to have the kind of life the rest of his family had. The dreams of that normal, happy lifestyle had sustained him through some of the wickedest fighting he’d ever seen. He would not give them up now. Not even if they suddenly seemed a little sedate.

“Face it, they won’t rest until you’re ‘settled down.’”

“Like you?” he asked, raising a brow. His twin was a hard-ass Chicago detective who could hardly be described as “settled down.” The man was as tough as they came, despite his occasionally goofy sense of humor.

“Yeah. Like me.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “You are in no way settled down.” He glanced at the cuts on his twin’s knuckles.

Mark smiled, a twinkle in his eyes. “Guy resisted.”

“Does Noelle know?”

The smile faded. “No, and if you tell her I’ll pound you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Leaning back in the booth and crossing his arms across his chest, Mark nodded. “I guess you might be able to hold your own now that the Marines toughened you up and filled you out.”

It had long been a friendly argument between them that Nick had inherited their mother’s lean, tall build like Luke and Joe. Mark and Tony resembled their barrel-chested father. But after many tough, physical years in the military, Nick was no longer anybody’s “little” brother. “I think I could take you on.”

“I think you could take anybody on. So why don’t you come down to the station and talk to my lieutenant?”

“Not interested in your job, bro. I’ve had enough of rules and regulations for a while.” They’d talked about the possibility a few times since Nick had returned home, but he wasn’t about to relent on that issue. He’d done his time on the battlefields of Iraq, he didn’t want to add to them in Chicago.

“Yeah, okay,” Mark said, glancing around the crowded restaurant. “I can see why this is so much more up your alley.”

Nick followed his glance and smothered a sigh. Because Mark was right. Helping at the pizzeria was no problem in the short term, heck he’d helped run the place when he was in high school, putting in more time than any of his siblings. But did he really want to become a partner in the business with his brother Tony, as he used to talk about…and as the family was hoping?

Seemed impossible. But Mark was the only one who would understand that. “I’m getting into protection,” he admitted.

“You gonna mass-produce rubbers?” Mark sounded completely innocent, though his eyes sparkled with his usual good humor.

“I can’t wait to tell your kid what a juvenile delinquent you were. Like when you put the Playboy magazine in Father Michael’s desk drawer in sixth grade.”

“Believe me, my kid will know Dad’s on the job from the time he’s old enough to even think about swiping candy bars. Now, what’s with this protection business?”

“I’m going to work part-time as a bodyguard.”

“No kidding?” Mark said, sounding surprised.

“Joe did some renovation work on a nightclub uptown and got friendly with the owner. Turns out they need extra security, so he set up a meeting. I went in Sunday night to talk to them.”

“Bet Meg loved big brother Joe working in a nightclub.”

Like the rest, their older brother Joe was happily married. Nick knew he’d never even look at another woman.

“So,” Mark asked, “why does a club need a bodyguard?”

Nick knew exactly why this club needed a bodyguard after watching the erotic performance by a dancer called the Crimson Rose. The sultry stranger had inhabited his dreams and more than a few of his fantasies ever since he’d seen her on stage, revealing her incredible body while still remaining, somehow, so above it all. He imagined men with less control might try to do more than fantasize about the woman.

“The performers attract a lot of unwanted attention,” he said, not wanting to get into details. Not because he was embarrassed about his job, but because he didn’t want to start talking about the rose-draped dancer and her effect on him.

Nick didn’t need that kind of distraction in his life. A hot stripper definitely did not fit in with the nice Santori lifestyle he kept telling himself he wanted. Not one bit. Which meant working with her was going to be a trick.

But he’d handled bigger challenges. Besides, meeting her—talking to her—would take the bloom off that rose. Intense fantasies were meant for women who were untouchable, mysterious, unknown. It was, he’d come to believe while living in the Middle East, part of the allure of veiled women living in that culture. The unknown always built high expectations.

The Crimson Rose soon would not be an unknown. He’d see the face that had been hidden behind the mask and her secrets would be revealed. Which would make her much less intriguing.

Wanting his mind off her until it had to be when he started work, he changed the subject. “This place is hopping.”

“So why aren’t you out there taking orders from women who’d like to order a side of you with their thick crust?”

“Even the help gets an occasional night off.”

He cast a bored glance around the room. A line of patrons stood near the counter, waiting for carry-out orders. Every table was full. Waitresses buzzed around in constant motion, all of them overseen by Mama. Nothing caught his attention…until he spotted her. And then he couldn’t look away.

She stopped his heart, the way the dancer had, though the women couldn’t be more dissimilar.

The stranger stood near the door, leaning against the wall. Looking at no one, her eyes remained focused on some spot outside the windows. Her posture spoke of weary disinterest, as if she’d zoned out on the chattering of customers all around her. She was separate, alone, lost in her own world of thought.

Not fitting in.

That, as much as her appearance, kept Nick’s attention focused directly on her. Because he, too, knew what it was like to not fit in among this loud world of family and friends and neighbors who’d known one another for years.

She was solitary, self-contained, which interested him.

And her looks simply stole his breath.

From where he sat, he had a perfect view of her profile. Her thick, dark brown hair hung from a haphazard ponytail, emphasizing her high cheekbones and delicate jaw. Her face appeared soft, her skin creamy and smooth. Though her lips were parted, she didn’t appear to be smiling. He suspected she was sighing from her open mouth every once in a while, though out of unhappiness or of boredom, he couldn’t say.

Dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt, she also wore a large baker’s type apron over her clothes. That made it impossible to check out her figure. But judging by the length of those legs, shrunk-wrapped in tight, faded denim, he imagined it was spectacular. With a lightweight backpack slung over one shoulder, she looked like she’d stopped off to grab a pizza on her way home from work, like everyone else in line.

Only, she was so incredibly sexy in her aloof indifference, she didn’t look like any other person in line.

Across from him, Mark said something, but Nick paid no attention. He continued to stare, wishing she’d turn toward him so he could make out the color of her eyes. Finally, as though she’d read his mental order, the brunette shifted, tilted her head in a delicate stretch that emphasized her slender neck, and turned. Sweeping a lazy gaze across the room, she breathed a nearly audible sigh that confirmed she was bored.

Then her eyes met his…and there they stopped.

Hers were brown, as dark as his. As their stares locked, he noted the flash of heated awareness in her stare. She made no effort to look away, watching him watch her. As if she knew he’d been checking her out, she returned the favor, looking him over, from his face down, her stare lingering a little long on his shoulders, and even longer on his chest. Nick shifted in his seat, his worn jeans growing tight across his groin, where heat slid and pulsed with seam-splitting intensity.

Though he was seated and there was no way she could see her effect on him, the stranger began to smile. One corner of her mouth tilted up, revealing a tiny dimple in her cheek. But it wasn’t a cute, flirty one…nothing about this woman was cute and flirty, she was aggressive and seductive.

Needing to know her—now—he pushed his beer away and slid to the end of the bench seat without a word.

“Nick?” his brother asked, obviously startled.

“I have to meet her.”

“Who?”

Nick didn’t answer, he simply rose to his feet, never taking his eyes off the stranger.

Mark turned around. “Her?” his brother asked, sounding so surprised Nick wondered if marriage had made him entirely immune to the appeal of a hot, sexy stranger. “You have to meet her?”

Already walking away, Nick didn’t answer. Instead, he strode across the restaurant, determined to not let her get away. He had to meet the first real woman—not a fantasy dressed in rose petals—who’d made his heart start beating hard again since the day he’d gotten home from the war.

IZZIE NATALE HAD A SECRET.

Well, she had many secrets. But the secret she was trying to disguise right now was one that would get her thrown out of the windy city for life.

She preferred New York style pizza to Chicago deep dish.

Shocking, but true. In the years she’d been living in New York during her dancing career, she’d fallen in love with everything there, including the food. But she’d be taking her life in her hands if she admitted it. Because, man, they took their pizza very seriously here. Her grandfather would turn over in his grave if he found out she’d gone to the dark—thin-crust—side. Her father, at whose request she’d made this stop at Santori’s, would disown her. And her sister, whose husband ran this place, would never speak to her again.

Hmm. That might be a blessing. Considering her sister Gloria never had mastered the art of shutting up when the occasion demanded it, Izzie felt tempted to tell her that not only did she like her crust thin, but she also preferred the Mets over the Cubbies. That would get her stoned in the street.

How am I going to get through this?

It wasn’t the first time she’d wondered that in the two months she’d been home, taking care of her family-owned bakery while her father recovered from his stroke. If her friends in Manhattan could see her—covered in flour, wearing an apron, working behind a counter—they’d think she’d been kidnapped.

This could not be Izzie Natale, the former long-legged Rockette who’d had men at her fingertips. Nor could it be the Izzie who’d gone on to land a spot with one of the premiere modern dance companies in New York, short-lived though that spot may have been after her ACL injury had required major surgery seven months ago.

But it was. She was. And it was driving her mad.

It wasn’t that she didn’t love her family. But oh, did she wish one of them could run the bakery. Because she was not happy being once again under the microscope, living in this big-geographically, but small-town-at-heart area of Little Italy.

Before she could groan about it, however, something caught her eye in the crowded pizzeria. Make that some one caught her eye. As she cast another bored look around, half-wishing she’d see someone she’d recognize from her other life here in Chicago—the one nobody else knew about—she spotted him.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed man was staring at her from across the place. Even from twenty feet away she felt the heat rolling off him. An answering sultry, hungry fire curled from the tips of her curly dark hair down to the bottoms of her feet.

God, the man was hot. Fiery hot. Global warming hot.

His jet black hair was cut short, spiky. A military man.

His dark eyes matched the hair. They were deep set, heavily lashed…bedroom eyes, she’d have to say. His lean face was more rugged than handsome. The strong jaw jutted out the tiniest bit, and his unsmiling mouth was tightly set, as if intentionally trying to disguise the fullness of a pair of amazing male lips.

His shoulders were Mack-truck wide and his chest was football-field broad. And his attitude was all, one-hundred-percent Santori male.

Because Izzie knew it was Nick Santori who’d met her stare from across the room. Nick Santori who’d risen from his seat and was winding his way across the room toward her. Nick Santori who was making the earth shake a little under her feet, just as he always had when she was a teenager.

She told herself to breathe and not let him get under her skin. He sure had once…like at Gloria and Tony’s wedding, when she’d been a bridesmaid of fourteen and Nick had been a groomsman. He’d had to escort her down the aisle, and his big, bad, going-into-the-Marines-eighteen-year-old self hadn’t liked it. And that day was one she would never live down.

Somehow, though, that memory didn’t steady the floor. Nor did it cool her off as he came closer. Those dark eyes of his were locked on her face as he effortlessly cleared his way through the crowd with a look here or glance there. Everyone made way for him. The men out of respect. The women…well, the women looked like Izzie imagined she did: dumbstruck. All because of the simmering sensuality of this one sexy man.

The one she’d wanted since the first time she’d felt heat between her legs and understood what it meant.

“Hi,” he said when he finally reached her.

“Hey.” She felt almost triumphant at having achieved that note of casual aloofness. She even managed to keep slouching against the wall, probably because she needed the support. She might have learned to handle men but she’d never gotten over feeling like Izzie-the-geek around this one.

“Is there something I can do for you?”

Oh, yeah. She could think of several somethings. Starting with her getting some payback for him ignoring her when she was a chubby, lovesick kid. And ending with him naked in her bed.

But getting naked in bed with Nick Santori would involve serious complications. Her sister was married to his brother. The families were old friends. If she so much as looked at the guy with interest the neighborhood would have them married off with her popping out brown-haired Italian babies within a year.

Uh-uh. No thanks. Not for Izzie. Sex with Nick would be delightful. But it came with way too many strings.

“I don’t think so,” she finally answered.

He didn’t back off. “I’m sure there’s something.”

“What, are you a waiter now?” she asked, amused at the thought of him waiting tables. Especially since that chest of his could probably double as one.

Nick had, like all the Santori kids, worked in the restaurant in high school. Just as Izzie had worked in the bakery—often eating her paycheck to sweeten her teenage angst.

But he’d been in the Marines for years. She didn’t see him slinging pizzas now that he was back in Chicago. Not after he’d been slinging Uzis or whatever those macho soldier guys carried.

“Maybe. Why don’t you tell me what you want and I’ll let you know if I can get it for you?”

Thin and cheesy New York style pizza was the first thing that came to mind, but Izzie didn’t want to get strung up at the corner of Taylor and Racine. “I already placed my order.”

He smiled slightly. “I wasn’t just talking about pizza.”

God, was that…it was. There was a flirtatious twinkle in those blackish-brown eyes of his. He’d been throwing some subtle innuendo at her and it had gone clear over her head.

“Oh,” was all she could manage.

Cake flour must have clogged her femme-fatale genes in the past two months. It was the only way someone with her experience with men could have missed his double meaning.

“Want to sit while you wait for your order?” he asked, gesturing toward a few chairs in the waiting area.

“No, thanks.” She fell silent. If she opened her mouth again, she might do something stupid like throw out a dumb, “Wow, what I wouldn’t have given for you to look at me like that when I was a teenager,” line, which she so didn’t want to do.

She zipped her lips. She’d be Izzie the uninterested mute. Which was better than Izzie the lovesick mutant.

“How about at a table?”

“At a table…what?”

He smiled again, that sexy, self-confident smile that had probably had woman on five continents dropping their panties within sixty seconds of meeting him. “We can sit at a table while you wait for your order.”

God, she was an idiot. “No, I’m fine here, thank you.”

She had to give herself a break for being so slow. After all, Nick Santori had been scrambling her brains since she was ten—right around the time her sister Gloria had started dating his brother Tony. And though he’d always had a way with females, he’d never looked twice at her that way.

Especially not since Gloria and Tony’s wedding. The one where she’d tripped on her ugly puce gown—which hugged her tubby hips and butt—while they were dancing the obligatory wedding party waltz. She, the kid who’d been in dance lessons since the age of three, had tripped.

Maybe it wasn’t so shocking. She’d been worried about what he’d think of her sweaty palms. She’d been terrified that her makeup was smearing off her face and revealing that she’d had the mother of all break-outs that morning.

Nervous plus terrified times the pitter-patter of her heart and the achy tingle in her small breasts from where they brushed against the lapels of Nick’s tux had left her dizzy. So dizzy she’d stepped off the edge of the slightly raised dance floor and crashed both of them onto a table full of cookies and pastries made especially by her parents for the wedding.

It hadn’t been pretty.

Colorful candy-covered almonds had flown in all directions. Her butt had landed on a platter of cream puffs, her elbows in two stacks of pizelles. Her dress had flown up to her waist to reveal the panty girdle she’d worn in an effort to hide her after-school-cookie-binging bulge.

The icing on the five-tiered Italian cream wedding cake—which she’d somehow managed to not destroy—had been Nick. He’d gotten tangled up in her dress, and had landed on top of her, sprawled across her chest.

And right between her legs.

It was the first—and last—time she’d figured Nick Santori would be between her legs, which both broke her heart and fueled some intense fantasies throughout her high-school years. Shocked by the unexpectedness and the pleasure of it, she’d been slow to part those legs and let him up. Slow enough for the moment to go from embarrassingly long to indecently shocking.

She’d thought her mother was going to kill her afterward.

But that wasn’t all. Because Izzie had the luck of someone who broke mirrors for a living, the incident had also been the money shot of the whole day. The videographer caught the whole thing on film, creating a masterpiece that would taunt her throughout eternity.

She’d been a laughingstock. Everyone in the crowd had whooped and clapped and teased her about it for months afterward. She might as well have worn a banner proclaiming herself, “Lovesick pubescent girl who crushed the cookies and dry-humped the groomsman at the Santori-Natale wedding.”

“I haven’t seen you in here before,” he said, finally breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

“I come here a couple of times a week,” she replied.

He shrugged. “I’ve been gone a long time.”

“In the military.”

“Right. Things have definitely changed around here in the past twelve years.”

“Maybe in some ways,” she said. Then she glanced around and saw a minimum of five people she knew—all watching intently as she talked to Nick. Frowning, she muttered, “In some ways it’s still the same small town hell it always was.”

She surprised a laugh out of him. “I somehow think we have a lot in common.”

His laughter softened his tanned face, bringing out tiny lines beside his eyes. It also made him utterly irresistible, as several women sitting nearby undoubtedly noticed.

Nick had been incredibly hot as a teenager. Lean and wiry, dark and intense. As a thirty-year-old-man he was absolutely drool-worthy. Not that he’d changed a lot—he’d just matured. Where he’d been a sexy guy, he was now a tough, heart-stopping male, big and broad, powerful and intimidating.

She didn’t suspect he’d changed on the inside, though. Once a Santori male, always a Santori male. The men of that family had always been good-hearted.

Honestly, looking back, if Nick had been a jerk about what had happened at the wedding, she might have gotten over her crush a lot sooner and this moment might be a lot simpler. She could tell him to f-off, remind him he’d once laughed at her and added to her humiliation. Only…he hadn’t. Curse the man.

He’d been very sweet, carefully helping her up—once she’d released her thunder-thigh death grip from around his hips. He’d gently wiped powdered sugar and cream off her cheek. He’d helped her pull her dress back down into place without making one crack about her chubby thighs or her panty girdle. He’d pretended she hadn’t practically assaulted him. And he’d helped her back up onto the dance floor and continued their dance. Absolutely the only annoying thing he’d done was to start calling her Cookie.

As her mother often said, he’d been raised right. Just like his brothers. He was every bit a gentleman—a protector—and he’d never given her a sideways glance that hadn’t been merely friendly. In his eyes, she’d always been Gloria’s baby sister—the chubby ballerina who looked like a little stuffed sausage in her pink tutu and tights and he’d treated her with nothing but big-brotherly kindness.

Until now.

Fortunately, though, she wasn’t sweet Izzie the cookie-gobbling machine anymore. He hadn’t seen her for almost a decade…she no longer blushed and stammered when a hot guy teased her. And she no longer even tried to imagine she could have been a ballerina with her less-than-willowy figure.

Once she’d stopped eating pastries and hit brick-shithouse stature at age eighteen, she’d known her future as a dancer would come from another direction than the ballet.

She’d also learned how to handle men.

Now, she was in the driver’s seat when it came to seduction. She’d been running the show with men for years. And it was high time to let Nick Santori know it.

“So, when you offered to serve me…what were you talking about?” she asked, swiping her tongue across her lips. It was a move she’d perfected in her Rockettes dressing room. Men used to come backstage, trying to pick up the dancers and they all went for the lip-licking. God, males were so predictable. She held her breath, hoping for more from this one.

And she got it.

“I’m talking about me serving you with a line and you tipping me with your number. But since it’s crowded and I’m rusty at that stuff, why don’t you just give me the number?”

Izzie had to laugh. If he’d come back with a smooth line, the laugh would have been at his expense—because she doubted there was one he hadn’t heard. But Nick had been completely honest, which she found incredibly attractive.

She also laughed to hide the nervous thrill she’d gotten when she realized Nick Santori really did want her number. That he really was trying to pick her up.

Her…the girl he’d once complained about having to dance with at a wedding. What were the odds?

“I think I’ve got your number.” She’d had it for years.

He didn’t give up. “Use it. Please.”

He meant it. He wasn’t teasing, wasn’t trying to make her blush, wasn’t treating her the way he treated his kid sister, Lottie, who’d been one of her classmates.

Nick Santori was trying to pick her up. Which shouldn’t have been a big deal, but, for some reason, had her heart fluttering around in her chest like a bird trapped in a cage.

“My name’s Nick, by the way.”

No duh. She was about to say that, then she saw the look in his eyes—that serious, intense look. He wasn’t kidding. He wasn’t pretending they were just meeting.

She sagged back against the wall, not sure whether to laugh or punch him in the face.

Because the rotten son of a bitch had no idea who she was.

**2**

THE WOMAN HAD FLOUR in her hair. She smelled like almonds. Her apron was smeared with icing and whipped cream. Food coloring stained the tips of two of her fingers.

And she was utterly delicious.

The hints of flavor wafting off her couldn’t compete with the innate, warm feminine scent of her body, which assaulted Nick’s senses the way no full frontal attack ever had. Though they were in a crowded restaurant, surrounded by customers and members of his own family, hers was the only presence he felt. He’d been drawn to her, captured in an intimate world they’d created the moment their eyes had locked.

“You’re name’s Nick,” she said, as if making sure. Her voice was a little hard, her dark eyes narrowing.

Worried she had an ex with the same name, he replied, “I’ll answer to anything you want to call me.”

“Anything?”

He nodded, unable to take his attention from that bit of flour in her hair. He wanted to lift his hand and brush it away. Then sink his fingers in that thick, brown hair of hers, tugging it free of its ponytail to fall in a loose curtain around her shoulders. His fingers clenched into fists at his sides with the need to tangle those thick tresses in his hands and tug her face toward his for a brain-zapping kiss.

She had the kind of mouth that begged for kissing. One that promised pleasure. God, it had been a long time since he’d really kissed a woman the way he liked to kiss a woman. Slowly. Deeply. With a thorough exploration of every curve and crevice.

Recently, his sex life had been limited by proximity and his active status. He hadn’t had any kind of relationship in years. And the sex he had was usually of the quick, one-night variety, where slow, indulgent kissing wasn’t on the agenda.

He could kiss this woman’s mouth for hours.

Nick didn’t understand why he was so drawn to her. All he knew was that he was attracted to her in a way he hadn’t been attracted to anyone for a long time. Not just because she was beautiful under the apron and that messy ponytail. But because of the wistful, lonely look she’d worn earlier that said she didn’t quite belong here and she knew it. Just like the one he’d had on his face lately.

“You’re single?” he asked, wanting that confirmed.

She nodded, the movement setting her ponytail swinging. It caught the reflection of a candle on the closest table, the strands glimmering in a veil of browns and golds that made his heart clang against his lungs.

“What’s your name?” he finally asked.

She arched one fine eyebrow. “We haven’t settled on what we’re going to call you yet.”

He turned, edging closer to her as a group came into the restaurant. The brunette slid along the wall, farther away from anyone else. Nick followed, irresistibly drawn by her scent and the mystery in her eyes. “I guess you have a Nick in your past?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It didn’t go well?”

“I’d have to say that’s a no.”

“Bad breakup?”

“No. We never even dated.” One side of her mouth tilted up in a half-smile. It held no happiness, merely jaded amusement. “He barely even noticed my existence.”

“Then he was an idiot.”

The other side of her mouth came up; this time her genuine amusement shone clearly. “Oh, undoubtedly.”

“He didn’t deserve you.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re better off without him.”

“Nobody knows that better than me.” She sounded more amused now, as if her guard was coming down.

“Enough about him,” Nick said. “If you don’t like my first name, call me by my last one. It’s Santori.”

He watched for a flare of surprise, a darting of the eyes to the sign in the window, proclaiming the name of the place.

Strangely, she didn’t react at all. “I think we’ve already determined what I should call you. You said it yourself.”

Puzzled, Nick just waited.

“Idiot,” she said, tapping the tip of her finger on her cheek, as if thinking about it. “Though, honestly, it doesn’t quite capture you now. It might have sufficed years ago, but for today, I think we’ll have to go with…complete shithead.”

Nick’s jaw fell open. But the sexy brunette wasn’t finished. “By the way, that number you wanted? Here it is, you might want to write it down…1-800-nevergonnahappen.”

And without another word, she shoved at his chest, pushing him out of the way, then strode out the door. Leaving Nick standing there, staring after her in complete shock.

“I’d say that didn’t go well.” Mark stood right behind him, watching—as was Nick—as the brunette marched off down the street like she’d just kicked somebody’s ass.

Well, she had. Namely his. He just didn’t know why.

“No kidding.”

“I see you haven’t lost your touch with women.”

“Shut up.” Shaking his head in bemusement, he lifted a hand and rubbed his jaw. “I don’t know how I blew that so badly.”

“But you sure managed to do it.”

Hearing his twin chuckle, Nick glared. “At least I’m not wearing a ring. I can still try to pick up a hot stranger.”

Mark just laughed harder. Which made Nick consider punching him. Only, Mama was standing behind the counter, glancing curiously at them as she waited on the customers. If Nick went after his twin, she’d come around and whack them both in the heads with a soup ladle.

“Hot stranger…oh, man, you are going to hate yourself when you figure out what you just did.”

His eyes narrowing, Nick waited for his twin to continue.

“You really didn’t recognize her, did you?”

Oh, hell. He should have recognized her? He knew her?

“Still not getting it?”

“Tell me how much trouble I’m in,” he muttered, praying he hadn’t just come on to a cousin he hadn’t seen in years. If they were related—and he couldn’t have her—that would be a crime worthy of a military tribunal. So he prayed even harder that she’d been some girl he’d known in high school.

“Pretty big trouble.”

He waited, knowing Mark was enjoying watching him sweat.

“She is family, you know.”

Damn. All the blood in his body fell to his feet out of embarrassment…and disappointment. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“You shot out of the booth like your ass was on fire.”

Rubbing a hand over his eyes and shaking his head, Nick mumbled, “Who is she? Mama’s side or Pop’s? Please tell me she’s not one of Great Uncle Vincenza’s thirty granddaughters. Otherwise I just might have to re-up and hide from him and his mafia buddies for the next decade.”

Mark’s eyes glittered in amusement. The guy was enjoying this. “Not Great Uncle Vincenza. Think closer.”

Closer. Christ. “There’s no way she’s a first cousin….”

“Not a cousin.”

Oh, thank heaven. “So who?”

“I’ll give you a hint. Did you happen to notice the icing and flour all over her apron?”

Had he ever. He didn’t know if he’d ever smelled anything as good as all that messy, sugary stuff combined with the brunette’s earthy essence. “Yeah. So?”

“You’re not usually this dense.”

“You’re not usually this close to death.”

“Think…the bakery….”

“Natale’s? Gloria’s folks?” And suddenly it hit him. “No.”

“Oh, yes.”

No. Impossible. It was out of the question. “Not Gloria’s baby sister. Tell me that wasn’t chubby little Cookie.”

“She ain’t chubby and I think if you called her Cookie to her face she’d slug you.” Mark threw a consoling arm across Nick’s shoulders, his chest shaking with laughter. “To answer your question, yes, my brother, that was Isabella Natale.”

Nick couldn’t speak. He was too stunned, thinking of how she’d changed. It had been at least nine—ten years, perhaps—since he’d seen her. She’d still been in high school and he’d run into her at a Christmas party at Gloria and Tony’s when he was home on leave. She’d still blushed and stammered around him. And she’d still been girlishly round—pretty but with such a baby-face he’d never taken her crush on him seriously.

Oh, he knew about the crush. Everybody knew about the crush. His brother Tony had threatened to break his legs if he so much as looked at her the wrong way at the wedding.

Huh. He hadn’t looked at her the wrong way. He’d just landed on top of her in a pile of cookies. And had been unable to get up because she’d wrapped her limbs around him like she was drowning and he was a lifeguard trying to save her.

He started to smile. “Izzie.”

“Izzie. Formerly chubby sister of our sister-in-law, turned sexy-as-hell woman, now back in town working at the bakery.”

“Her parents’ bakery up the block?”

“That’s the one.”

“Is she here for good?” he asked, already wondering how things could have turned out this perfectly.

“I don’t know. She’s been home for a couple of months, since Gloria’s father had a stroke. With the new baby, Gloria couldn’t help much, and the middle sister’s a lawyer.”

“So the youngest one came home to take over.” Not surprising. The Natales were much like the Santoris—family meant everything.

It almost seemed too good to be true. He’d finally come across someone who not only made his nerves spark and his jeans grow a size too tight, but who also came with a pre-made stamp of approval from the neighborhood. She was gorgeous. She was feisty. Her smile nearly stopped his heart. She’d had a crush on him forever—and was obviously still affected by him, judging by the way she’d taken off in a huff.

And she was not a faceless stripper behind a mask.

Enough of that. The Crimson Rose was every other man’s fantasy. At this point in his life, Nick wanted reality. He was ready for what his brothers and sister had. And he had just stumbled across a real woman who he sensed could both drive him absolutely wild with want and be someone he could truly like.

“I think I’m feeling a need for some fresh cannoli,” he murmured, smiling as he looked out the window at the sky, streaked orange by the setting sun. Izzie was no longer in sight…she obviously wasn’t too desperate for pizza.

Maybe he’d deliver it to her.

“Judging by the way she bolted, you’d better think again.”

Nick shrugged. He wasn’t worried. After all, Izzie had had a thing for him once upon a time…she had practically chased him down. He just needed to remind her of that.

And to let her know he was ready to let her catch him.

“I SWEAR, BRIDGET, you should have seen his expression. It was as if it was the first time in his life a woman has ever turned him down,” Izzie didn’t even look at her cousin as she spoke. She was too busy punching into a huge ball of dough, picturing Nick Santori’s face while she did it.

Though it had been nearly twenty-four hours since she’d run into him, she hadn’t stopped thinking about him. Drat the man for invading her brain again, when she’d managed to forget him over the past several years. Ever since she skipped out of Chicago to follow her dancing dreams, she’d been convincing herself her crush on him had been a silly, girlish thing.

Seeing him had reminded her of the truth: she’d wanted Nick before she’d even understood what it was she wanted. Now that she knew what the tingle between her legs and the heaviness in her breasts meant, the want was almost painful.

“Didn’t Nana always say the secret to a flaky crust was not to overwork it?” her cousin said, sounding quietly amused.

Izzie shot her cousin—who sat on the other side of the bakery kitchen—a glare. “You want to do this?”

Bridget, who was pretty and soft-looking, slid a strand of long, light-brown hair behind her ear. “You’re the baker. I’m the bookkeeper.” She sipped from her huge coffee mug. “So why did you walk away? You’ve wanted him forever.”

“Maybe. But I don’t want forever in general,” she reminded her cousin as she floured the countertop and began to work the dough with a rolling pin. “You know I don’t want this for any longer than I’m forced to have it.” She glanced around the kitchen, where she was working alone to finish up the dessert orders for their restaurant clients. Including Santori’s.

Not that she’d be the one delivering their order…no way. Her delivery guy would be in to take on that task shortly.

“I know. You’ll be gone again once Uncle Gus is well enough to come back to work.” Bridget didn’t sound too happy about that, which Izzie understood. Her sweet, gentle-natured cousin was an only child, and she’d practically been adopted by Izzie and her own sisters. They’d been very close growing up.

Izzie missed her too. But not enough to stay here. As soon as her father recovered, and her mother no longer had to nurse him at home full time, Izzie would be out of here for good. Whether she’d go back to New York and try to reclaim some kind of dancing career she didn’t yet know. But her future did not include a long-term stint as the Flour Girl of Taylor Street.

It also didn’t include becoming the lover of any guy who her parents would see as the perfect reason for Izzie to stick around and pop out babies. Even a lover as tempting as Nick.

“So how’s your life going?” she asked her cousin, wanting the subject changed. “How’s the job?”

Bridget leaned forward, dropping her elbows onto the counter. “I guess I’m not very good. My boss obviously doesn’t trust me, there are some files he won’t even let me look at.”

“Weren’t you hired to keep the books at that place?”

Bridget, who’d gone to work three months ago for a local used car dealership right here in the neighborhood, nodded. “They’re a mess. But every time I ask him for access to older records, he practically pats me on the head and sends me back to my desk like a good little girl.”

Izzie assumed her cousin meant her boss figuratively patted her on the head. Because, though Bridget was in no way a fireball like Izzie and her two sisters—she wasn’t a pushover, either. It might take her awhile to get her steam up, but Izzie had seen glimpses of temper in her sweet-as-sugar Irish-Italian cousin. That boss of hers obviously hadn’t gotten to know the real Bridget yet. Because she was about the most quietly stubborn person Izzie had ever met…as anyone who’d ever tried to beat her in a game of Monopoly could attest.

“Why don’t you quit?”

Her cousin lifted her mug, leaning her head over it so that her long bangs fell over her pretty amber eyes. She looked as if she had something to hide. And if Izzie wasn’t mistaken, that was a blush rising in her cheeks.

A blush. Cripes, Izzie didn’t even know if she remembered how to blush. The last time her cheeks had been pinkened by anything other than makeup was when she’d burned herself while lying out too long on the deck of a cruise ship a year ago.

Trying to hide a smile, she murmured, “Who is he?”

Her cousin almost dropped the mug. “Huh?”

“Oh, come on, I know there’s a guy.”

“Um…well…”

“For heaven’s sake, you’re looking at a woman who used to schedule two dates a night, just come out with it.”

Chuckling, her cousin did. “There’s this new salesman.”

“A used car salesman?” Izzie asked skeptically.

Frowning, Bridget asked, “Do you want to hear this or not?”

Izzie made a “lips-zipped” motion over her mouth.

“His name’s Dean,” Bridget continued. “Dean Willis. And Marty hired him about a month ago. He’s got cute, shaggy blond hair and big blue eyes—well, I assume they’re big. They could look bigger because of the thick glasses he wears.”

She watched Izzie, as if waiting for a comment. Izzie somehow managed to refrain from making one.

“He’s sold more cars than anyone else because he’s just so…quiet. Easy to talk to. Unassuming.” Sighing a little, Bridget added, “And he has the nicest smile.”

Izzie had never heard her cousin go on like this about a man. Must be serious. “So, have you gone out with him?”

Bridget shook her head and sighed again—only, much louder. “He’s never even noticed I’m alive.”

Snorting, Izzie replied, “I doubt that. You’re adorable.”

Bridget’s bottom lip came out in a tiny pout. “Fluffy teddy bears are adorable. I want to be…something else.”

Sexy. It was obviously what Bridget had in mind. Izzie eyed her cousin, considering making her over. Bridget had the basics—she just needed to bring them out a little. But she didn’t think Bridget needed much. She was so quietly pretty, so gentle and feminine…any guy would be an idiot to want to change her.

Then again, she’d known a ton of guys, few of whom were Einstein material. “So ask him out. Make him notice you.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Just for a cup of coffee.”

Her cousin snagged her lip between her teeth.

“What?”

“Well, he did ask me to go for coffee once, but I was so flustered and nervous, I told him I didn’t drink it.”

Raising a brow and staring pointedly at the industrial-sized mug in front of her cousin’s face, Izzie grunted.

“But it wasn’t a date,” Bridget added. “At least, I don’t think so.” Sounding frustrated, she added, “Maybe I should get a collagen injection. I’ve heard men like big lips.”

Ridiculous. Bridget’s beauty was the natural kind that needed no false crap like the stuff Izzie had seen other dancers do to themselves. But before she could say that—or threaten to lob a handful of ricotta cheesecake filling at Bridget if she did something so dumb—she heard the bell over the front door.

Glancing at the clock, she bit back a curse. It was nearly five—an hour after closing time. She must have forgotten to lock the door after her part-time lunch workers had left for the day and some customer had wandered in for a snack.

She doubted there was much left to serve. Mornings were their busiest time, with regulars and passers-by coming in for pastries and muffins. During the lunch hour, when Natale’s served light sandwiches and salads along with decadent deserts, they were busy, too. Since Izzie had come up with the idea to offer free wireless Internet access to anyone with a laptop, some customers parked themselves at one of the small, café tables and remained there until closing time. They drank a lot of coffee…and ate a lot of sweets. By 4:00 p.m., Natale’s display counter was generally wiped out, as this late customer would soon discover.

“Hello?” a voice called.

Grabbing a towel, Izzie wiped her hands on it and tossed it over her shoulder. “Be right back,” she told her cousin as she walked down the short hallway to the café. “Sorry, we’re closed for the….” The words died on her lips when she saw who stood on the other side of the glass display case, looking so hot she almost shielded her eyes from the glory of him.

“I know.” He shrugged slightly. “But the door was unlocked, so I thought I’d take a chance and see if you were here.”

Nick stood inside the shadowy café, illuminated by the late afternoon sunlight streaming in through the front window. The light reflected in his dark eyes, lending them a golden glow that seemed to radiate warmth. She felt it from here.

“You found me,” she murmured.

“You didn’t exactly need to leave a trail of crumbs, Cookie…this place has been here forever.”

“Don’t call me Cookie,” she snapped.

He held up his hands, palms out. “Sorry.”

Ordering her heart to continue beating normally, Izzie tossed the towel onto the counter, then crossed her arms over her chest to stare at him. “Are you trying to tell me you knew I’d be here because you knew who I was? Try again.”

Nick cleared his throat, averting his gaze. Wincing in a cutely sheepish way, he said, “No, I didn’t know you at first.”

So, he’d recognized her after she had left?

“Mark told me who you were.”

The jerk.

“I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. It’s been a long time.”

Not long enough to erase him from her mind, that was for sure. She’d recognize Nick Santori if she bumped into him blindfolded during a blackout. Because his scent was imprinted in her brain. And her body reacted in one instinctive way whenever he was near—a way it didn’t react with anyone else, even men with whom she’d been intimate.

He made her shaky and achy and weak and ravenous all at the same time. Always had, for some unknown reason.

“Yeah. A long time,” she mumbled, walking over to wash her hands in the small sink behind the counter.

Damn, she hated that he flustered her. She had known more handsome men. She’d been to bed with more handsome men. Maybe none who were as rugged and masculine, or so sensual. But she had dated drop-dead gorgeous actors and millionaires who wanted to notch their bedposts with a professional dancer who could kick her leg straight up above her head. None of them had ever affected her the way this one—who she’d never even kissed—did.

“I have to run, Izzie,” a voice said. “I don’t want to be…in the way.”

Izzie had almost forgotten Bridget was in the kitchen. Seeing the grin on her cousin’s face, she blew out a deep, frustrated breath. She’d intended to use Bridget as an excuse—or at the very least as a five-foot-five chastity belt, to keep Izzie from doing something stupid. Like smearing rich cheesecake filling all over Nick’s body, then slowly licking it off.

But her cousin was bailing on her, already heading toward the exit. “Nice to see you, Nick,” she said.

“How’s your family?”

They fell into a brief, easy conversation, like most people who’d grown up in the neighborhood usually did. Except Izzie—who hadn’t yet rediscovered that easy camaraderie with all the people she’d grown up with. While the two of them chatted, Izzie tried to regain her cool, forcing herself to look at this guy like she looked at every other guy. As nothing special.

Fat chance. She couldn’t do it. He was special.

It had to be because he was the first man she’d ever wanted. Never having had him made the intensity of her attraction build. With no culmination—no explosion when she finally had him and got him out of her system—she’d remained on a slow, roiling boil of want for Nick for years.

So take him and get it out of your system.

Oh, the thought was tempting. Very tempting. Part of her desperately wanted to ask him to go with her to the nearest hotel and do her until she couldn’t even bring her legs together. If she thought he would, and that he’d then forget about it, never expecting a repeat and never—ever—breathing a word about it to anyone, she’d seriously consider it.

But he wouldn’t. Not in a million years. She knew that just as surely as she knew he’d never have even kissed her when she was underage, not even if she’d leapt on him and held him captive. Which, to be fair, she had…at the wedding.

He was a Santori. With everything that went with the name. His upbringing, his family, his own moral code meant he would never have a meaningless sexual encounter with his sister-in-law’s younger sister. The daughter of his father’s friend. The girl up the block. No way in hell.

He was the kind of guy who would have to date a woman he slept with. Dating—neighborhood style—as in hand-holding and miniature golf and pizza at his family’s place and cannolis at her family’s place. The whole deal. Gag.

Not that he’d actually asked her on a date. If he did? Well…that might have thrilled her once—years ago when she had actually thought the bakery and her family and Little Italy were all the world she’d ever need. Now, however, it just made her sad, because as she’d already realized, dating Nick equaled strings. Strings could very well choke her.

“Well, see you tomorrow,” Bridget said as she walked out.

Izzie hadn’t even noticed Bridget and Nick were finished talking. Cursing her cousin for bailing on her, Izzie cleared her throat, about to tell him she had to get back to work.

He spoke first. “So, do you forgive me?”

“Yeah, sure, no big deal,” she replied, forcing a shrug.

A tiny smile tugged at those amazing lips of his and the dark eyes glowed. “No big deal? You seemed pretty mad.”

Damn. He’d noticed.

“I wasn’t mad. More…amused.”

“Sure. That’s why my chest is bruised where you shoved me.”

Her jaw dropped and she immediately began sputtering denials. Then she saw his wide grin. “You’re an ass.”

“And a shithead,” he replied, his grin fading though the twinkle remained in his eye. “I really mean it, Iz, I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you.” Stepping around the counter to see her better, he cast a slow, leisurely look at her. From bottom to top. Then down again. “But you have to give me a little bit of a break. You don’t look much like you did.”

“I’m not addicted to Twinkies anymore,” she snapped.

“You weren’t chubby.”

“I was the Michelin Man in pink tights.”

He shook his head. “You were just baby-faced the last time I saw you. A kid. Now you’re…not.”

“Damn right.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, still watching her as he leaned against the counter. The pose tugged his gray T-shirt tight against his shoulders and chest, emphasizing the man’s size. Lord, he was broad. But still so trim at the waist and lean at the hips. It was the hips that caught her attention—the way his faded, unbelted jeans hung low on them, the soft fabric hugging the angles and planes of his body.

It really wasn’t fair for a man to be so perfect.

“So…about our conversation last night.”

When staring at him—overwhelmed by his heat—she could barely remember her own name. Much less any conversation. “Huh?”

“What do you say? Will you give me your number?”

Oh, what she wouldn’t have given to hear those words from him ten years ago. Or hell, even two months ago—if she’d happened to run into him in Times Square and he’d proposed a sexy one-night-stand for old time’s sake. One nobody in Chicago would ever have to know about. She would have leapt on the offer like a gambler on a free lottery ticket.

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on, you know you can trust me. I’m not some stranger stalking you. We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

Well, he’d known her since she was a kid. From the time she’d met him, Izzie had only ever seen the glorious, hot, sexy man. Even if he had been no more than fourteen.

“Just a night out for old time’s sake?”

He was so tempting. Because the only old times she recalled were the heated ones of her fantasies. And the incident at the wedding. He’d ended up between her legs during both. “Well….”

He moved again, coming closer, as if realizing she was wavering. Dropping his hand onto the counter near hers, he murmured, “No pressure. We could just go grab a pizza.”

She stiffened, any potential wavering done with. The last thing she would consider doing is having a public meal with Nick Santori at his own family’s restaurant. Not when her sister would hear about it and tell their parents, who’d then get their hopes up about Izzie remaining safely in the nest, as they’d so desperately wanted her to do when she was eighteen.

Leaving home after high school had been a struggle. She’d been an adult, legally free, but she’d still had to practically run away in order to pursue her dream of dancing professionally. Especially because she was the only one of the Natale daughters who’d inherited their father’s gift in the kitchen.

Probably because she loved food so much. As evidenced by every one of her porky-faced school pictures from kindergarten through tenth grade.

Her father had been crushed that she didn’t want to work with him. But she had known she had to escape—had to take her shot while she could or risk regretting it the rest of her life.

So she’d gone. She’d hopped a train, determined to stay away until she’d given her dream of being a professional dancer everything she had to give.

Making it at Radio City hadn’t eased her parents fears of her being “out there all alone.” It had actually increased them once they’d realized she was unlikely now to ever come back.

If they knew just how wild her life had been for the first few years she’d been on her own, they’d have felt justified in their fears. Like any good girl kept on a tight leash, she’d taken great pleasure in breaking every rule in the book once she was free and able to make her own decisions. Especially once she had men surrounding her and money to do whatever she wanted.

It had been wild. It had also been reckless—so in the past couple of years, she’d settled down. Stopped partying, stopped hooking up, stopped blowing every dime. She now had a nice nest egg…which she hoped to use to re-establish her life in New York. She’d been approached about going back to work at Radio City, as a choreographer this time. And she knew she’d probably get the same offer from her other modern dance company.

Or she could teach. She could open her own school…she had the money to at least give it a shot. That was among the things she’d been considering doing when she got back to reality.

Her parents, however, would give anything for her to stay here and never go back to that other life, the one that didn’t include them beyond the weekly phone call and twice-yearly visit. Openly dating a local guy—a friend of the family—would raise their hopes unfairly and hurtfully. So she couldn’t do it.

Before she could say so, however, he stepped closer. Close enough to stop her heart. “You’re a mess,” he murmured. He lifted a hand, touching a strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek. Closing his fingers over it, he slowly pulled, wiping away flour or cream or whatever had happened to be there.

The brush of his fingertips against her cheekbone almost made her cry. Almost made her whimper. Almost made her lean forward to press her mouth onto his.

“A sweet, delectable mess,” he added, his fingers still tangled in her hair. He touched her face, rubbing her skin as if he’d never felt anything so smooth, so soft.

Every muscle in her body went warm and pliant, until Izzie wondered how she could still be standing upright. As if sensing her weakness, he moved closer, sliding one foot between her legs, slipping one hand into her tangled hair to cup her head.

“I have to see how sweet you taste,” he muttered, sounding as helpless as she felt. “If only once…I have to taste you.”

Drawing her forward, he bent closer. Even knowing it was crazy and could go nowhere, Izzie prepared for a kiss she’d wanted for more than a decade. She’d cried over that mouth, had fantasized over those lips for more nights than she could count.

And she wanted it, God how she wanted it. Even if it was all she was ever going to get to have of him.

But rather than a simple kiss—the soft brush of his mouth on hers—he shocked her by immediately sampling her lips with his tongue, tasting her, as he’d said he must.

She whimpered, low and helpless.

“Oh, very sweet,” he whispered, licking at the seam of her lips again, boldly demanding entrance rather than asking for it with a more typical, closed-mouthed first kiss.

Izzie couldn’t deny him or herself. With a hungry groan, she opened to him, welcoming his tongue in a deep, sensual exchange that she felt from her head to the tips of her toes.

He’d thought she tasted sweet. She thought he tasted like irresistible sin. He was warm and spicy, his mouth just moist enough to whet her appetite. Just hot enough to send her temperature rocketing higher.

He sunk his other hand in her hair and held her close. Sagging against him, Izzie gave herself over to pleasure, wondering how it was possible for something to be as good as a dozen years of dreaming had promised it would be. It was a kiss more intimate than any she’d had even when making love. Because it was like making love. It was hot and sexy and powerful.

Their tongues found a common rhythm and tangled to it as their bodies melted together. Her nipples ached with need as they pressed against his broad chest. She arched harder against him, easing her legs apart to cup him intimately, whimpering again when she felt his huge erection.

He wanted her. Badly. As much as she wanted him.

The realization was almost enough to shock her into doing something stupid like ending the kiss. This was Nick—the guy she’d always wanted—hot and hard and hungry for her.

“Don’t say no to me, sweetheart,” he whispered as he finally—regretfully—drew his mouth from hers. He moved it to press kisses along her jaw, then down to the throbbing pulse point below her ear. “Say yes.”

Yes, say yes! a voice screamed.

Oh, he was so tempting. And she wanted him desperately—wanted him to pull off her clothes, back her up against the counter and make love to her right on top of it. It would be incredible, the culmination of all her dreams and secret fantasies. She could finally put an end to all the years of restless, hopeless wanting.

But it wouldn’t be the end. It would be the start of something, rather than the end of it. He’d make incredible love to her, make her come with a few more touches of his hands and a few more of those incredible kisses and she’d be alive and happy and completely fulfilled for the first time in her life.

But then he’d want to take her out for a pizza. Or get together with friends. And she’d be caught so deep in a quagmire of family and home that she’d never be able to get free of it.

“Say yes, Izzie,” he ordered, sucking her earlobe into his mouth and nibbling it—a tiny bite that she felt clear to the floor. “Give me your number and let’s finally get this started.”

Get this started. Get everything started.

She just couldn’t do it. Izzie had always been strong and determined and had taken what she wanted. But she couldn’t take him. Not now. It was much too late.

Yanking away, she winced as her tangled hair got caught in his fingertips. Her breathing ragged, her body crying out at the injustice, she shook her head, hard. Then she backed away, wrapping her arms around her waist in self protection. “No.”

He started to follow, his dark eyes glittering…predatory. “You don’t mean it.”

She held a hand up. “Yes. I do,” she said with a firm shake of her head. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, we’re closed and I have work to do in the kitchen.” Taking a deep breath and striving to keep her voice steady, she added, “I want you to leave.”

**3**

ON HIS FIRST NIGHT working at Leather and Lace, Nick showed up in a bad mood. He’d been in a bad mood for two days—since Izzie Natale had shot down his efforts to get closer to her.

The woman was unbelievable. Ten years ago, she might as well have taken out an ad in the Trib declaring her devotion to him. Now she wouldn’t throw dog drool on him if he was on fire.

Damn, she was feisty. Had she always been that way? He figured with Gloria for a sister she had been. But considering he’d never seen her as a woman—just as a cute, lovesick kid—he’d never noticed. Until now.

Oh, yeah, now he’d noticed. He’d noticed everything about her. And he was not going to give up on her yet. Not when she’d become the first thing he thought of every morning and the star of his dreams every night.

Especially since that incredible kiss they’d shared.

Who would ever have guessed that the cute, pesky girl with the obvious crush on him would prove to be the most sensual, kissable woman he’d ever known? He’d suspected he could kiss her for hours. Now he knew better. He could kiss her for ever.

After she’d ordered him out of the bakery the other evening, he’d decided to play dirty, going right to Gloria to ask her for her sister’s phone number. His sister-in-law had been glad to oblige. She’d also been more than candid about how Izzie had felt about him in the old days.

Not that Nick had needed her to tell him about it. He’d been well aware—as had everyone else.

“Not anymore,” he muttered as he parked his truck—which he’d purchased right after getting home a couple of weeks ago—behind the club. He frowned, wondering how much of a jerk it made him now to be disappointed that a girl who’d had a wild crush on him as a kid didn’t give a damn about him anymore. Probably a pretty big one. But he couldn’t help it.

Knowing little Izzie had been crazy about him had been a constant during his teenage years. A given. Just another part of his reality. Certainly nothing he’d ever taken advantage of or embarrassed her about. It had just been…kinda cute, thinking there was a girl out there doodling his name in her school notebook. Innocent. Simple.

Man, he hated that that girl wouldn’t even look at him now. Especially because he didn’t think he’d done anything to deserve her coldness. No, he hadn’t recognized her. But he also hadn’t recognized the kid who had delivered the newspaper and now ran a newsstand on the corner. Or a couple of guys he’d played basketball with at St. Raphael’s.

Mark thought he did deserve it. Not because he hadn’t recognized her, but because he’d counted on her childhood feelings to give him an edge with Izzie the adult.

Hell, maybe he was right. Maybe he shouldn’t have teased her, been so sure of her. He’d known enough women to know how they felt about being taken for granted. He should have taken her out to dinner before kissing her like he needed the air in her lungs to keep on living.

So he needed to start over with Izzie. Start slow, like he would with any other woman he’d just met.

It might not be easy. Because she already affected him more than any woman he’d ever met. He’d dreamed about her this week, thought about her, gone out of his way to walk past the bakery in the hope of bumping into her.

“Tables have definitely turned,” he muttered aloud when he walked through the private, employees entrance into the back of the club. “Which is probably just the way she wants it.”

Yeah, she could be stringing him along out of revenge. But somehow, Nick didn’t think that was the case.

She hadn’t been able to hide her feelings behind those incredibly expressive brown eyes. Though she’d sent him away after their kiss, she still wanted him. But something was preventing her from doing anything about it.

He just had to find out what.

“Nick, you’re right on time!” The club owner, a beefy, good-natured guy with a Santa Claus-like belly laugh, emerged from his office and extended his hand.

Nick shook it. “Mr. Black.”

“Call me Harry.”

“Harry, then. Thanks again for the opportunity.”

The other man waved a hand in unconcern. “Your big brother, he’s one of the few honest contractors I’ve met in this city. Did beautiful work at a fair price. And if he says you’re up to the job, I trust him completely.”

Nick had already bought his brother, Joe, a beer in thanks for setting up his interview. He wished he’d made it a pitcher.

“All the paperwork’s done, you check out exactly like Joe said you would,” Harry said as he gestured Nick toward a seat in his office. “Now, you’re clear on what I need from you?”

Nick nodded. “Have there been problems recently?”

Harry tapped his fingers on the desk and nodded. “The Rose has made a stir. Men want to see her and there have been a few incidents.”

Nick stiffened reflexively, even though he hadn’t met the woman yet. “Incidents?”

“Nothing too serious, thank God. But a couple of grabs, dressing room prowlers. A few disturbing notes.” Harry shook his head, looking disgusted. “Can’t imagine any man saying stuff that crude to any woman. But she was a sport about it, laughed it off.” Staring pointedly, he added, “That’s one reason I hired you—she tends to not take it seriously. And I want someone else to.”

“I will,” Nick replied, confident of his own words.

Harry nodded, obviously convinced. “Other than that, there’s not too much trouble on a nightly basis. A guy’d have to be drunk as a skunk or just plain stupid to think he could go after one of the girls at the risk of taking one of the bouncers on. But we don’t let anybody get drunk as a skunk in my joint.” He chuckled. “And stupid people can’t afford it.”

That wasn’t a surprise. When Nick had come in last weekend, he’d noticed the upscale feel of the club. Far from being seedy or shadowy, like most strip joints, this place was elegantly comfortable, from the earth-toned leather furniture to the framed pieces of classy-looking art on the walls. The prices reflected the ambiance; this was no after-work beer joint.

“I wanted to introduce you to the Rose, but she called and said she’s running a little late tonight. I don’t imagine there’ll be time before her first number.”

Nick stiffened, realizing he’d soon be seeing the woman behind the mask. Somehow, during the past few days when he’d been so focused on Izzie, he hadn’t let the thought of the sultry stripper drift into his mind. Now, however, knowing he was about to see her again, he couldn’t help but remember the way she’d made him feel last weekend.

Hot. Hungry. Needy.

So would any sexy, naked woman after such a long dry spell.

“She’s something else.”

“I noticed last weekend.”

Harry Black shrugged. “Yeah, she’s a looker, but there’s something special about her even when she’s not on stage. Got her head on right—a smart one. But that doesn’t mean I’m not worried about her. She could get herself in trouble.”

Nick could certainly understand that. Considering how attracted he’d been to her, he could see how a much more desperate man might react to her sultry performance.

“She’s not going to like me hiring someone to mainly look out for her,” Harry cautioned. “So we’ll leave that part between us, okay? As far as she knows, you’re just another bouncer.”

“Fine.” In fact, it was more than fine. He wanted as little interaction with the woman he was supposed to be protecting as possible. Not that he was truly worried about her effect on him—it had been a one time thing, that was all.

He’d been telling himself that for days. He’d also been ignoring the fact that none of the other strippers he’d seen that night had so much as caused his heart rate to increase its regular, lazy rhythm. Only her.

Meeting her would take care of that, he was sure of it. She wore a mask, meaning her looks were all from the neck down. She’d have muddy eyes or crooked teeth or a hooked nose. Or a voice like a truck driver. Or she’d snort when she laughed. Something would be wrong. Something would break the spell.

That would be the end of his interest. No doubt about it.

THE CRIMSON ROSE spotted the dark-haired man in black the moment she peeked through the curtains on the stage. And the moment she saw him—immediately recognizing him by his height and the power of his shadowed body—her heart began to beat harder.

He’d come back. For her.

This was the first night she’d been back to the club since last Sunday night, when she’d first seen him during her last performance on this stage. Inexplicably, she suspected this was his first night back, too. When she’d asked the other dancers about him, all had denied seeing such a man in the club during the past five nights.

She had drawn him back. Just as he—the very thought that he might be in the crowd again tonight—had worked to draw her here as well.

Not that she needed much of a draw. She loved what she did. She positively came alive while moving under a spotlight. The fact that her clothes were falling off her body as she did so was completely incidental.

She honestly didn’t care.

“He came back,” she whispered, almost bouncing on her toes, so excited she could hardly stand it.

Not just excited. Relieved.

Because though she’d only seen him from a distance, she already felt incredibly attracted to him. He’d be a marvelous distraction from the other man who’d been occupying her thoughts lately.

The one she couldn’t have.

She began to smile, feeling, for the first time in days, a little upbeat. Working at the club was her one outlet, her only escape from the life she had so wanted to avoid coming back to here in Chicago. She loved these secret, wicked weekends.

And now that she’d realized there was another man—someone else—who could cause an instant, aching sort of want deep inside her, Izzie Natale sensed those weekends simply wouldn’t come fast enough.

“You’re not the only man in Chicago, Nick Santori,” she whispered while the stage crew finished stripping the stage for her signature solo number.

When she’d first seen the ad in the paper for dancers for a Chicago gentleman’s club, Izzie had had no illusions about what the job would entail. She wasn’t some young dance ingénue who’d turned up for an audition only to be shocked at the very idea of taking off her clothes for a bunch of men.

Izzie had taken off her clothes for plenty of men. Sometimes even groups of them.

It wasn’t as if the Rockettes danced in a whole lot of clothes. And during the three months she’d performed with the Modern Dance Company of Manhattan, she’d done two nude artistic performances.

The dancing she did at Leather and Lace wasn’t exactly artistic. But, then again, she wasn’t exactly nude, either. After all, she never took off her G-string.

Yes, her audience in Chicago was after sexual titillation rather than cultural stimulation. But, honestly, judging by the way some of the modern dance aficionados had come backstage and tried to pick up the dancers, she figured the motivations were, at heart, exactly the same.

Dancing was dancing. After the dire prognosis she’d received when having her torn ACL repaired several months ago, she didn’t care where she was performing, or what she was wearing when she did it.

Honestly, now, having had a taste of it, she realized she couldn’t have chosen a better venue. Because here, hidden behind a red velvet mask, she was free to be everything Izzie Natale of the famous Taylor Street Natale’s Bakery was not.

Sexual. Uninhibited.

Free.

Before she’d even dragged her mind into readiness, she was introduced and her music had begun. Izzie moved onto the stage, dancing for herself and herself alone, as she always did, letting the petals fall where they may. She remained above everything, even oblivious to the money being tossed onto the stage—the crew would pick it up when she was finished. She also ignored the gasps and avid stares of the crowd.

Except one man’s avid stare. His, she wanted to see, though it would prove difficult with him standing in the most shadowy area of the place and her nearly blinded by the spotlight. But when the choreography moved her downstage right—closest to the bar, and him—she risked it and looked.

And nearly fell off the stage.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.

She lost the beat of the song and got a little tangled on her own feet. She also had to throw down an extra couple of petals a few measures too soon to try to cover her misstep.

Because in that quick flash when the light had hit him just right, she’d recognized the face, those shoulders, that hair.

It was Nick Santori who stood near the bar. Nick was the same dark, shadowy stranger who’d had her blood pumping through her veins, throbbing between her legs both last week when she’d first seen him here and a few moments ago when she’d glimpsed him again.

The bastard. Was she never going to be free of him? Would no man ever make her feel that crazy/excited/hungry feeling she got whenever he was in the vicinity? And what in the hell was he doing here, anyway?

Worse—what was he going to do about it if he realized she, the woman who’d shot him down in the bakery two days ago, was the Crimson Rose?

Her mind awash with the ramifications of Nick’s presence, Izzie finished her number. As soon as it was over, she darted behind the curtains and stuck her arms into a short, silky robe hanging right backstage. Barely noticing the crew members, who immediately got to work re-setting the stage for the more typical dancers, she hurried down the back stairs toward her private dressing room.

Normally, all the dancers would share one and Izzie was no prima donna who required her own space. But the owner of Leather and Lace had insisted on giving her a private, coat-closet sized room because of how serious Izzie was about protecting her identity. Once he’d realized just how much the “mystery” of the Crimson Rose enhanced the club’s reputation—and brought in more customers—he’d upgraded her to one the size of a small bathroom.

Before she could duck into it, she heard his voice. “There you are! Hold up a second, I want you to meet someone.”

She was in no condition to meet anyone—especially not another one of Harry’s cousins or old fishing buddies. There was always someone ready to play on old friendships or family connection to meet the dancers.

On the positive side, Harry was as protective as a papa bear and the introductions never went further than a quick handshake or a signed autograph. Despite how much some of the men he brought around seemed to want it otherwise.

Pasting on an impersonal smile behind the mask she hadn’t yet removed, she turned around.

“This is Nick Santori. I’ve just hired him to beef up our security.”

Izzie sagged against the wall. If it hadn’t been there, she might have just fallen sideways onto the tile floor, but thankfully, her shoulder instead landed on some hard wood paneling and it kept her vertical.

More than she could say for her heart. It had gone rolling down and had landed somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach, which was now churning with anxiety.

“This is…”

“Rose,” she quickly interjected, cutting Harry off before he could say her real name. She cleared her throat, seeking the sultry, husky tones she’d always used when greeting fans backstage at Radio City. The one that was quite different from the voice Nick had heard at the bakery just a couple of days before. “Nice to meet you.”

He held out his hand. She took it. Time didn’t stop or anything, and the floor didn’t buckle beneath her feet. But, damn, his touch did feel fine.

He had big hands. Strong hands. A soldier’s competent hands. They were capable of brute force. Yet equally capable, she knew, of tender care. Like when those hands had helped her pull her ugly bridesmaid dress into place, then gently lifted her back onto the dance platform and back into their waltz so many years ago.

“Nick’s brother Joey Santori sent him in. You remember him, don’t you? He did all the work upstairs. You met him last month.”

Yes, she had…and it had been a closer call than this meeting with Nick, who could see almost nothing of her face because of the mask. She’d barely had time to duck behind a changing screen before coming face to face with Nick’s older brother.

Now she had to wonder…had Joe seen her? Recognized her? And was he now playing Mr. Neighborhood Protector by sending his baby brother in to watch out for the girl up the block?

Possible.

God save her from Italian men.

One plus—he hadn’t told Tony. Because no way would her overprotective brother-in-law have let Izzie’s new job go undiscussed. He’d have come down on her with some big brother lecture about how she simply had to quit now, immediately, if not sooner. Either that or he’d have told Gloria, who would have had a shrieking meltdown over what the neighbors and her sweet, impressionable boys—wild little maniacs, in Izzie’s opinion—would think.

“Harry, help! Some CEO’s at the door saying he had reservations for ten,” a frantic voice called from the top of the stairs. The hostess who worked the front desk came clattering down three stairs and spotted him, relief evident in her face. “You need to get up here.”

Muttering under his breath, Harry offered Nick an apologetic shrug. “Sorry. Never fails. Tell you what, why don’t you talk to…Rose…get an idea of what her routine and schedule are like and then meet me upstairs in thirty minutes?”

Nick nodded and they both watched Harry walk away. Well, Nick watched Harry. Izzie watched Nick.

She hadn’t noticed at first—she’d been too frazzled herself—but Nick appeared tense. The muscles in his neck were rock hard, his jaw jutted out stiffly. Beneath his wickedly tight black T-shirt, his broad shoulders were squared in his military posture and his hands were fisted at his sides.

Interesting.

If she had to guess, she’d say he wasn’t particularly happy to meet her. It was as if he actively disliked her…which didn’t make much sense.

The only reason he could have for already disliking her was that he had somehow recognized her. That he’d looked into her eyes, revealed behind the mask, and seen something familiar. Or heard a note in her voice that he’d heard before. He certainly hadn’t seemed very happy with Izzie-the-baker when she’d practically pushed him out of the bakery the other evening and imagined he’d convinced himself she was at best a pain in the ass and at worst a complete tease.

But if he looked at her and saw only a complete stranger…what could he dislike about her after knowing her for all of two minutes? Nick wasn’t the judgmental type. She couldn’t see him working here if he had some kind of problem with women stripping.

Besides, his dislike seemed personal, directed only at her. He’d been perfectly fine with Harry.

“So, is tonight your first night?” she asked, keeping her tone low and thick. She sounded sultry—wicked—but that couldn’t be helped. She needed to disguise her voice, at least until she knew for sure whether Nick had recognized her. Or if he’d been tipped off by his big brother.

“Yes.”

“How do you like the club?”

He shrugged, noncommittal.

“Come now, you’re not shocked are you? I imagine you’ve been in places like this all over the world.”

His dark eyes narrowed. “How would you know I’ve been all over the world?”

Oh, man, that was stupid. She’d just tipped her hand. “I mean…you look like the military type, with the hair and the all-black commando look you have going on. Am I right?”

He nodded once, still not unbending one iota.

Izzie had to force herself not to react to all that simmering, intense male heat. Nick had been adorably sexy when flirting with her and trying to pick her up. And incredibly sensual when seducing her with his kiss.

Now…when he was all dark, intense business, he was absolutely devastating. Dangerous, almost, and though she’d never feared him, she couldn’t contain a tiny shiver.

If he decided to kiss her now, it wouldn’t be with sweet, sultry persuasion. It would be with raw, overpowering hunger.

She wanted that kind of kiss from him.

“I saw you here last weekend,” she said, not even realizing she was going to admit such a thing until the words had left her mouth. That probably wasn’t smart. She needed to keep the upper hand here—letting Nick know she’d been aware of him from first glance wasn’t a good way to do that.

“I came in to talk to Harry about the job.”

“And you watched me dance.” She dared him to deny it.

He nodded once. The jaw flexed.

“Did you like it?”

“You’re talented.”

Oh, if only he knew.

“You’re not…uncomfortable around me, are you?” she asked, trying not to laugh. “I mean, having seen so much of me?”

He shook his head. The shoulders tensed. “This is a job, Miss…”

“Rose will do.”

“As you wish. The point is, I want to keep you…all of you…safe. Meaning we need to implement some new security procedures.” He sounded impersonal, but every movement or flex of his body screamed that his tone was a lie. He was definitely reacting to her and Izzie would lay money it had nothing to do with him knowing her real identity.

If he knew who she was, he’d never remain stiff and unyielding, trying to keep up this professional act. He’d be either seducing her—finishing what he’d started the other day—or else he’d be lecturing her for doing something so out of character for a nice Italian girl from the neighborhood.

Nope. He didn’t know who she was. No way in hell. So why he was being so stiff and gruff, she really didn’t know.

“Would you like to come in while I change?” she asked, gesturing to the closed door behind her. It had a cheesy little tinfoil star on it—a joke from one of the other dancers, who’d been remarkably welcoming after the first week or two. Considering their clientele had increased significantly since she’d been performing at the club, she figured they were all benefiting from the “mystery” of the Crimson Rose.

He hesitated for only a moment. Then nodded. “Sure.”

Opening the door, she walked in and ushered him in behind her. “Sorry for the mess.”

The space was crowded—one mirror, surrounded by bright lights, covered an entire wall. A long, sturdy vanity, connected to the wall, ran the width of the room, reducing the floor space to about a three-foot wide aisle. The vanity was covered with makeup and hair products. Not to mention G-strings and pasties.

He saw those and blanched, quickly looking away. Shifting uncomfortably, he moved back the tiniest bit, but was stopped from going far by the door, which Izzie had closed behind him.

A muscle worked in his cheek and he crossed his massive arms tightly across his chest. His feet spreading a little apart, he looked like a sturdy, unmovable sea captain standing on the deck of a ship. Unapproachable, unweatherable, unflappable.

Only, he wasn’t unreachable. Because she’d seen that look at her sexy, glittery underthings. And his reaction to them.

Which was when Izzie started to get an inkling of what was bothering him. It wasn’t a matter of him liking her or disliking her. Of him recognizing her or not recognizing her.

He wanted her. She just knew it.

Nick wanted to have sex with a stranger—a stripper—and he didn’t like that about himself. He didn’t like that weakness. She could practically hear his thoughts now, since she’d been raised exactly the way he had.

It wasn’t good. It wasn’t nice. It didn’t quite fit the wholesome neighborhood-kid image.

It was, however, very honest. And despite how he felt about it, Izzie liked that very much. As a matter of fact, she loved that he wanted her. Not quite as much as she’d loved that he’d wanted Izzie—the invisible girl—but pretty darn close.

Trying to hide her smile, she walked around behind a changing screen and slipped the silky robe off her shoulders. Tossing it over the top of the screen, she murmured, “You’re not…uncomfortable in here with me, are you?”

He didn’t reply at first. Glancing at the mirror, she saw his reflection—saw him shake his head. Then he cleared his throat, answering aloud. “I’m fine.”

He was turned toward the wall—away from the screen, away from the mirror. Which was probably a good thing, considering the reflection ran all the way to the far wall…even on her side of the changing screen.

If he looked in that mirror, the screen would prove to be completely superfluous. He’d see every bit of her…except her still-masked face.

She took her time getting dressed.

“That’s good. If you’re going to be working here, I suppose you’re going to have to get used to seeing a lot of your coworkers.” She licked her lips and almost purred as she added, “Much more than you’d see in a normal job.”

“I’m not easily shocked,” he muttered.

Turn around and we’ll see.

But he didn’t. Curse the luck.

“Can we talk about your routine, how you drive to work, what time you usually arrive?”

Bending over, she slipped out of the tiny G-string, then straightened and draped it over the top of the screen, answering his questions as she undressed. She never took her eyes off him, waiting for him to turn around, imagining how his eyes would widen and his mouth would drop when he realized he could see every move she made in the mirror.

He remained in the same position; however, the flash of movement must have caught his eye. Because his gaze shifted over—quickly, almost imperceptibly—but he definitely glanced.

She watched his reflection, seeing the way his body grew harder. His black trousers highlighted the clench of his muscular thighs and that tight butt. Though he made no sound at all, he dropped his head forward and slowly shook it, desperation rolling off him though he remained entirely silent.

Triumph surged through her as she realized what was happening. He was dying for her. And desperate to resist her.

Izzie continued to take her sweet time as she pulled on a pair of tiny panties—not much bigger than the G-string she’d just discarded. Then she added a matching lacy bra, cut low, almost to her nipples. Not the type of underclothes one would expect of a baker…they were the types of silky things she wore beneath her clothes to remind herself that she was not a sweet Betty Crocker wannabe.

Through it all, Izzie was careful not to dislodge the mask. She was also careful of her clip-in hair extensions. They took her shoulder-length dark brown hair down to the middle of her back, and added reddish highlights that worked well in her act. If he recognized her, the game would be over. And right now, Izzie was enjoying the game too much to let it end.

Particularly because she’d begun to see exactly how it could be played.

With no rules. No restrictions. Complete anonymity.

As the Crimson Rose, she could have him—take him—completely free of the repercussions that would surround her if she dared to do such a thing as Izzie Natale. She could have incredible sex with him, enough to get her deep-rooted need for him out of her system for good, then walk away, without anyone ever knowing the truth.

Including, if she was very lucky, him.

The question was—could she pull it off?

Catching sight of movement, Izzie realized Nick had finally turned around. He was reaching for the doorknob of the dressing room, his mouth open as if he was about to tell her he was leaving. Then he glanced toward the mirror and caught sight of her.

Nick’s defenses dropped. He looked utterly helpless as he completely devoured her with his eyes. Visible hunger—primal and urgent—rolled off him in nearly tangible waves.

And in that moment, Izzie knew she could, indeed, pull it off. She was finally going to have the man she’d wanted for half her life.

**4**

HE SHOULD NEVER have come in here. Should never have walked into a small room with a woman who already had his head reeling and his body taut with anticipation. One he was supposed to be protecting from guys who’d already threatened her.

Nick had been handling things okay up to now. Even while watching the dancers perform—while watching her perform—he’d felt in control of the situation. Yeah, she’d affected him. Any man not affected by the Crimson Rose had to have been castrated or born with no libido. But her effect was purely physical—not mental, not emotional. In his head, he still only saw one woman. Wanted one woman. And that was Izzie Natale.

He’d been feeling cool and confident when Harry had brought him downstairs to meet her. A little of that confidence had disappeared when he’d gotten close enough to her to smell the light, delicate perfume she wore—so at odds with her surroundings and her profession. His coolness had gone right out the window when she’d ushered him into her small dressing room where he’d felt like a bear trapped in a telephone booth.

And now…this…seeing her in the mirror?

Madness.

He’d seen her almost naked on stage and she’d stunned him. Now, close up, she blew his mind. Even wearing something that might pass for clothing on a sun-drenched beach, she was every bit as seductive as she’d been during her naked dance.

She was tall and she was curvy and she was soft and she was breathtaking. Her full breasts were contained by a bra that cupped the bottoms but left the tops nearly bare. Her cleavage spilled over the seam and the dark, pointed tips of her nipples thrust against the white lace, demanding attention.

Every man in the room had seen her breasts upstairs minutes ago, but now, up close, Nick was able to truly appreciate their perfection. How perfectly they’d fit in his hands, how delightful her nipples would taste against his tongue.

Nick drew in a deep breath, letting his attention drift lower. His gaze skimmed over the midriff, the slim waist. It lingered on the generous hips highlighted by the strips of white—the strings of her panties—slung over each one. The elastic top of her panties skated across the pale, vulnerable-looking skin below her hipbones. A tiny tuft of pretty brown curls peeked out from the top of them, the dark shadow behind the white silk was all he could see of the rest.

This was more than she revealed in her dance, and every male cell in his body reacted to the glorious sight. His heart rate slowed, the way it did when the world around him became dead serious. He swallowed—his mouth flooding with hunger. And his cock leapt, raging for release against his zipper.

The vanity interfered with the rest of his view, leaving him ripped with curiosity as his mind filled in the blanks of what he was not seeing. Those long legs. She had legs that could wrap around him twice, he knew that much from her dance.

It was all too easy to imagine lifting her onto that strong, flat surface, spreading her legs, then pulling up a chair to sit between them. He’d push her back, then loop her knees over his shoulders. Dipping his head in close for a thorough exploration, he’d sample those pretty curls and the shiny folds that they concealed. He’d pleasure her completely, devour her until his face was wet with the slickness of her arousal. He’d take the edge off his hunger, then focus only on her, giving himself a long time before he’d look up to watch the pleasure on her face as her orgasm rolled through her.

But in the vision, it wasn’t the masked face of a stranger he saw. It was Izzie’s face. This stranger had aroused him. Izzie was the one he wanted to fulfill him.

He needed to get out of here. Now. Because even if Izzie had shot him down—if there was absolutely nothing between them—she was still the one he really wanted. The one he’d dream about tonight, whether he got his rocks off right now or not.

He could do this stranger…and it might even be good. But it wouldn’t get rid of his hunger. And it sure as hell would complicate things here in his new job.

Logically, he knew all that. The good Santori son who couldn’t imagine bringing a woman like this around his traditional family should have been gone long before now.

Something made him stay. Maybe it was the other Nick. The one who’d grown predatory on the battlefield and bored in the real world. The one who’d been shot down by the reluctant woman he craved and was face-to-face with a willing one he desired.

They just locked eyes, hers mostly hidden behind that mask she still wore. Her lips slowly curled up into a sensuous smile and her chin came up in pure visual challenge.

Nick couldn’t help it. He started to smile, too, a tight, dangerous smile that few would have recognized on the face of one of the affable Santori boys. “I don’t think that screen works very well,” Nick managed to say, his voice throaty.

“I’d say that depends on what I want it to do.”

Knowing better, he asked, “If not giving you privacy to change, what is it you want it to do?”

The smile widened, a glitter of pleasure appearing in those shaded eyes. “Perhaps just heighten the anticipation. It’s amazing how much more arousing it is to see some…but not all.”

“You show almost all on stage.”

“Almost,” she conceded. “But if you noticed, it’s mostly flash and petals, and only a tiny glimpse at the end.”

His jaw clenched. “I noticed.”

“Did it make you want more? Did a glimpse make you hunger for a look…which in turn made you ravenous for a touch?”

Which would make him insane for a taste.

He didn’t answer, he didn’t need to. She saw the answer in his face. As if tired of the game, she stepped out from behind the screen, still wearing only three things: the minuscule panties, the skimpy bra and the red velvet mask which was bigger than either of the other two.

“Why don’t you take that off?” he asked, needing to see her face. He needed to find something about her that turned him off so he could get upstairs where his boss was waiting. So he could put her out of his head and get his libido back under control.

Quirking a questioning brow, she pointed to her bra, which startled a small laugh out of him. Because hell, yes, he’d like to see her without the bra—up close—but he knew he couldn’t let that happen. Not if he wanted to keep his job. Not if he wanted to have the kind of life his brothers had.

Not if he wanted to work things out with Izzie.

“No. I mean that.” He nodded toward the mask.

“I don’t think so.”

“You really take this anonymity seriously?”

“More than you know.”

She moved closer and Nick honestly didn’t know which pleased him more—feeling her warmth as she approached, or seeing her both in the flesh and reflected in the mirror. The woman’s panties were not only tiny, they were thong-style and he could see the succulent curves of her ass in the mirror. His hands clenched with the need to fill them with those curves.

She reached for his left hand and lifted it. “No ring.”

He shook his head.

“So there’s no one…special?”

He hesitated a second before answering. A week ago the answer would have been an unequivocal no. Right now he wasn’t so sure. He hedged. “That one’s in the air right now.”

Her bottom lip edged out in a tiny pout, glistening and wet against the red velvet cupping her mouth.

He wanted to bite it. Suck it into his mouth and lick the plumpness of it, then pull her down on his lap and explore all those curves and soft angles of her body.

“I’m unattached, too,” she murmured, licking her lips as if she’d read his thoughts. “And frankly, in my line of work, I don’t have much use for dating and get-to-know-you chats.”

He suspected he knew where she was going. With some other woman—just about any other woman—he’d watch for signals, wonder if she was trying to pick him up. With this one, he knew she’d be very frank about what she wanted.

Her hand came up, she trailed the tips of her fingers across his shoulder, her nails scraping the cotton of his shirt. He felt the touch everywhere. Her scent overwhelmed him. Her heat screamed to him in pure sexual invitation.

She made it even more clear. “I want to have sex with you.”

His heart skipped a beat. His pants shrunk across his groin and if the woman looked down, she’d know he could quite easily accommodate her. Several times, if she’d let him.

Before he could say a word, she quickly continued, “Despite what you might think since we just met, I’m not making this suggestion lightly. As Harry could confirm…I’m not in the habit of letting men in my dressing room. You are, in fact, the first one I’ve been alone with since I started working here.”

Interesting. She sounded as if she was worried he’d question her morals or think she was trashy. He’d known trashy women. But in his experience, they were women with low self-confidence and lower self-esteem who grasped at sex with anyone in an effort to feed their egos and fill their empty hearts.

He could already tell Rose wasn’t like that. She was incredibly self-confident. She could lift a finger and have any man upstairs ready to give her anything she wanted…and she knew it. She didn’t need physical devotion to feed her self-esteem. In fact, he suspected it was her unshakeable self-esteem that enabled her to take off her clothes in front of a room full of men and yet remain so completely out of reach of all of them.

She could strip for them, entice them, seduce them…but never lower herself to a level that said she’d ever give them what they wanted.

But now, that’s exactly what she was doing. Offering herself…to him. “I’m flattered,” he said, his tone husky.

She reached for him, scraping the tips of her fingers along the waistband of his pants, tugging a little at his shirt.

“But it’s not going to happen.”

Her hand stilled. “You said you weren’t attached.”

“That’s not the only issue.”

“You’re attracted to me.”

He couldn’t deny something so obvious. “We work together.”

Shrugging in unconcern, she stepped closer, sliding one bare foot between his so that her leg scraped against his thigh. “Working together is what makes it so very…convenient.”

She tilted her head, glancing toward the sturdy-looking vanity, and Nick knew she was picturing a very similar scenario to the one that had filled his mind earlier.

It would be shockingly easy to lift her onto that surface, step between her legs and drive into her body. Or to turn her around, lay her over it and come into her from behind. Their eyes would meet in the mirror…but he wouldn’t see the passion in their depths. He could barely make out their color behind the fabric of her mask. And he knew one thing for sure—he would never make love to the woman as long as she wore the thing.

“I’m sorry, Rose. You’re very attractive and sexy, but you’re just not who I’m looking for right now,” he said. “I’ve done the one night-stand-thing and I’ve had enough of it.”

“Who said anything about one night?” Her words were flippant. Her husky tone was not.

The idea of having more than one night appealed to him. But it didn’t change the basics: she was not the kind of woman he needed to get involved with right now. Not even on a purely sexual basis. “I’m sure there are a hundred guys upstairs who’d take you up on this in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t want any of them,” she murmured. “I want you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I don’t have to know you to want to have sex with you.”

“I’m not wired that way.”

She made a sound of disbelief. “You’ve never had raw, wild, uninhibited sex with someone just for the sake of feeling good?”

“Just to get off, yeah,” he muttered, making no effort to be delicate. “But only because time and expediency demanded it. I don’t operate that way anymore.”

“I could make it so good for you.” She lifted his hand again, this time putting it on her bare hip.

Nick couldn’t help squeezing it. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Let me,” she ordered. “Let’s see how good it can be.”

His jaw stiff, he pulled his hand away. “I know how good it could be. I don’t doubt we could screw ourselves senseless and make each other come a dozen times in an hour.”

Her eyes closed behind the mask. He could see her pulse fluttering in her neck. Still talking in that throaty, sultry whisper, she asked, “And what would be so bad about that?”

Nothing would be so bad about that. In fact, it would be incredible. But he’d feel like shit afterward. He knew it as sure as he knew his brother Mark was never going to let him forget he’d been born twelve minutes before Nick had.

Some things were inarguable.

Like the fact that he couldn’t have sex with this woman tonight and still look Izzie—the woman he sensed could be right for him for all the right reasons—in the eye tomorrow. So glancing at his watch, he found some nugget of resolve and said, “Harry’s waiting for me upstairs. I’ll see you later.”

Without giving her a chance to try to stop him, he turned around and walked out of her dressing room. Judging by the way something went flying in that tiny room once the door was closed behind him, he knew he’d left a very angry woman in his wake.

“SO HOW YOU DOIN’, little brother?” Nick heard a woman’s voice ask as he sat in a booth at Santori’s the next day. It was early Sunday afternoon and the church crowd hadn’t yet shown up for their traditional Sunday big mid-day meal, so he’d taken advantage of the lull to grab some lunch. Glancing up, he saw his sister-in-law, Gloria, Izzie’s older sister.

They didn’t look much alike. Gloria was pretty—especially for a thirty-something mother of three—but she didn’t have Izzie’s flamboyant looks. Her face was sweet, not dramatic. Her mouth soft, not sensual. She didn’t have Izzie’s amazing figure. Nor had she inherited her sister’s desire to escape from here.

Gloria personified the world in which he’d grown up. She’d worked in her parents’ business, gone to high school right here in the neighborhood. Married an Italian boy up the block. Gone to work in his family’s business. And proceeded to produce lots of little Italian babies who looked just like her husband.

Though they were both hard-headed and volatile, and had been known to shout the street down when they got going, Tony and Gloria were absolutely crazy about each other. They had the kind of marriage anyone would want to have. The kind he would be lucky to have…once he figured out if he really wanted it.

Not knowing what he wanted was proving to be a real pain in the ass. Made more painful by the very sexy distraction called the Crimson Rose. He’d been able to avoid her for the rest of last night while working at the club, but every time their eyes met, she reminded him that she knew he was attracted to her.

“Nick?” Gloria prompted. “Everything okay?”

“I’m good, where are the boys?” he asked, looking past her for his two older nephews, or the carriage holding the baby one.

“I came in through the back…Tony Jr. and Mikey are in the kitchen with their father.” She raised her voice, never shifting her eyes toward the swinging door leading into the kitchen. “Who had better not be giving them candy outta Pop’s candy jar if he wants to live another day.”

From the back room came the sound of Tony’s deep laughter. Nick would lay money the boys were already high on Pop’s secret stash of gummy bears. “What about the baby?”

Gloria frowned, glancing toward the door of the restaurant. “He should be here any second. It’s hard enough bringing the boys to mass without Tony there to help me. No way could I handle three of them. So he stayed with Auntie Izzie.” Smiling in relief, Gloria nodded. “Here they are now.”

Something about seeing Izzie pushing a baby carriage into the restaurant made Nick’s stomach twist. Not because she looked like an absolute natural doing it…but because she looked miserable. Uncomfortable as hell.

He had to laugh. The woman was so unlike anyone else around here. Maybe that was why he couldn’t get her off his mind.

“Hey, Iz, how’d you do with my little prince?”

“He puked in my hair. Twice.”

Gloria swooped in and lifted the three-month-old out of the stroller, cuddling him close. “Aww, what’d you do to him?”

“I told him if he puked on me again I’d take him to the zoo and drop him in the bear cage,” Izzie muttered. “What do you think I did to him?”

Gloria patted the baby on his back. “It’s okay, Auntie Izzie’s just grumpy because she doesn’t have a sweet man to cuddle up with…much less four like Mommy’s got.”

Nick almost choked on his water at that one. If Gloria had been facing her sister, she would have seen the death ray that had come from Izzie’s eyes. Apparently she heard him…because suddenly that death ray was sent in his direction.

Nick held up his hands, palms out, in a universal peace gesture. “I’m with you. Don’t drop me in a bear cage.”

Her glare faded and she half-smiled. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Careful, Nick,” Gloria cautioned, still focused on the baby, “our Izzie’s not quite the sweet young thing you remember. You don’t want to tangle with her.”

Oh, yeah, he did want to tangle with her. Tangle his hands in her hair and his tongue in her mouth and his arms around her body and his legs between her thighs. Mostly he wanted to tangle in her life…and tangle her in his. At least enough so she’d give him a chance to win back some of that interest she’d once felt toward him.

Before Izzie could say anything, the door opened and more family members poured in. His parents and his brother Joe—with wife and baby in tow—led the way. Folks from the neighborhood followed. Next came lots of cousins and aunts and uncles, all of whom came to the restaurant every Sunday for a big family meal.

Izzie’s whole body went tense. He could see it from five feet away. She didn’t want to be part of this—didn’t feel a part of this. And Nick, more than anyone else in the room, understood. So without saying a word, he got up, took her hand, and tugged her toward his table.

She resisted. “What…”

“Come on, it’ll be okay,” he whispered as he pulled her down to sit beside him. “I’ll tell you who I recognize, you tell me who you recognize and we’ll get through this together.”

She stared at him, her eyes wide, her mouth trembling. Looking for a moment like a trapped deer, she seemed on the verge of fleeing. She appeared unable to deal with something as innocuous—yet painful—as a neighborhood gathering.

“It’s okay,” he repeated. “You can do it.”

It took a few more seconds, but that panicked look slowly began to fade from her eyes. As family friends and neighbors greeted her, he felt her begin to relax beside him. She even chatted a little, smiling at people she hadn’t seen in years.

Everything went fine. Right up until the minute some old lady from the block clapped her hands together, then pinched Izzie’s cheek. “Oh, you’re a beautiful couple!” she exclaimed. “At last you’ve got your man, Isabella Natale. All those years and you’ve finally landed him!”

Everyone fell silent, immediately turning in their direction. Especially Gloria. And Nick’s parents.

“Shit,” Izzie mumbled under her breath. Her face turned as red as a glass of the chianti Pop loved so much.

Nick put a hand on her leg under the table. But she pushed it off. And with a quick goodbye to her sister and the family—and a glare at Nick—she strode across the restaurant and stalked out the front door, not looking back. Not even once.

OVER THE NEXT couple of days, Izzie gradually began to lose her mind. Began? Heck, she’d been losing her mind since the night she’d toppled onto a table full of cookies and Nick Santori had landed on top of her. The man had been consuming her for years. This week, however, he was on track to win the gold medal in the Let’s Drive Izzie Crazy games.

After her failed seduction attempt at Leather and Lace, he’d avoided her as much as he could when on the job. They hadn’t been alone at all the rest of Saturday night, or when they’d both worked again Sunday. Just as well. She was still ticked about what had happened at the restaurant that afternoon.

He did take his job seriously, making sure she went nowhere alone. But he hadn’t been alone with her for one minute. It was as if he feared “Rose” would make another move on him the first chance she got, and was making sure she didn’t get the chance.

Grr…men. So untrusting.

But if Nick was frustrating her with his aloofness at the club by night, he was absolutely killing her by day. He’d come by several times in the past few days, popping into the bakery for a muffin and a coffee. Every time he was all cute and sweet and sexy. So different from the dark, brooding guy at the club that she’d have thought they were two different people.

She honestly didn’t know which man appealed to her more. Probably whichever one she happened to be with at the time. Funny…he knew her as two different women. And while his name was Nick either way, she knew him as two different men, too.

Both of them were messing with her head. She’d been making all kinds of stupid mistakes at the bakery today—like using peppermint extract instead of almond in a batch of cookies.

Giving up in the kitchen since she had several hours before the restaurant orders had to be delivered, she decided to do some paperwork before closing. It was well after lunch, she was working alone but could hear the bell if anyone came in.

But even that didn’t go well. She’d added up a column on a deposit slip four times and still hadn’t gotten it right. She was tempted to call Bridget to ask her cousin to straighten out her books. But judging by the conversation they’d had earlier in the day, Bridget had finally worked up the nerve to ask her shaggy-haired used car salesman out. And Izzie didn’t want to do anything to distract her.

Izzie just wished she had a distraction. Because she couldn’t get Nick out of her head. He’d invaded her life. No, both her lives. When he stared at her across the club and devoured her with his eyes at night while physically spurning her, she felt ready to howl in fury.

Showing up here by day—the handsome guy next door who wanted to lick the cream out of her cannoli—and her having to refuse him? It was pure hell.

She wanted Nick the bodyguard at night. Not Nick the sexy guy up the block by day.

She wanted sex. Not romance.

Wanted temporary. Not ever after.

Wanted to do him. Not date him.

It was simply a matter of wills to determine which of them got what they wanted first. God, she hoped it was her.

“Izzie?”

Startled, Izzie yelped and spun toward the front of the shop, seeing a customer at the counter. So much for thinking she’d hear the bell—she’d been deafened by her own thoughts.

Recognizing the woman, a weary smile curled her lips. Lilith was a regular, who could supposedly read the future. A bit out there, but a good customer, and a nice one. “I’m sorry.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “My head was in the clouds.”

“If the clouds all smell like this bakery, that’s not a bad place to be.”

Maybe for the customers. But after practically living in this place for two months, Izzie was over the nauseatingly sweet smells that invaded her nostrils from morning till night. “Believe me, it’s not so great going home from work with hair scented like anisette and clothes that reek of ginger.”

“On the positive side, they say the scent of licorice is great for dieters because it controls your appetite.”

Didn’t seem to her that the sexy, short-haired brunette had anything to worry about in that regard. Frankly, neither did Izzie. She’d long since lost her taste for sweets…no more cookie-induced panty girdles for her. “Twizzlers can keep it. I try to ignore the smells unless someone burns something.”

“Oh, come on, no one at Natale’s ever burns anything.”

Quickly washing her hands, Izzie had barely dried them before Lilith pointed with impatience at the lone cannoli remaining in the front display case.

When Lilith told her she’d be eating in, rather than taking the cannoli to go, Izzie asked, “Got a reading?”

While she didn’t entirely believe in that stuff, Izzie knew a lot of regulars swore by Lilith’s spiritual readings. Though she’d never considered it before, Izzie half-wondered if the other woman could help her figure out the quagmire that was her life. Especially the Nick part of that quagmire.

“Nah, I’m taking a break from the medium world right now.”

“Just my luck. For the first time in my life I think I’d actually pay to have someone tell me who the heck I’m going to be next week.”

Izzie the baker? Izzie the stripper? Izzie the New Yorker? Izzie the Chicagoan? Izzie the horny?

That was the one she really wanted an answer to. Was she ever going to get laid again, and oh, please, please, please, would it actually be Nick Santori who did the laying?

She didn’t ask Lilith any of those things, though the medium promised she’d try to help her as soon as she was “back in business”—whatever that meant. But that might be too late. She might already have done something stupid—like having sex with Nick the bouncer as the Crimson Rose. Which would be fabulous but would make him hate her if he found out the truth.

Or something more stupid, like going out on a date with Nick, the guy up the block, which would have her parents planning their wedding. Then she’d hate herself.

Ordering a cappuccino to go with her treat, the mysterious brunette made herself at home at a front table, firing up a laptop. After making the frothy cappuccino, Izzie carried it over. “Doing some surfing?”

“I’m going to try. The most I’ve ever used the Web for is updating my Web site and answering e-mail.”

“Don’t forget shopping. Or maybe you’re going to start haunting chat rooms?”

“No, I’m doing research.”

Leaving the woman to it, Izzie went back to work. Concentrating on cleaning out the display cabinet, she was surprised to hear the bell jangle as another late-day customer came in. This one she didn’t recognize—and she definitely would have, if she’d seen her before. The leggy brunette was dressed entirely in sleek, black leather and she looked like a predatory cat. The sexy little motorcycle parked outside the door suggested the woman was a risk-taker and a rule-breaker.

Izzie liked her on sight.

“Hey, Izzie,” Lilith called, “what do you know about computers?”

Offering the new customer a quick smile, she answered, “Well, I don’t know how to find any naked pictures of Heath Ledger, and I haven’t figured out how to send a death ray to spammers, but I do the Web site for the bakery.” It was a basic one, but Izzie was pretty proud of it.

“I hear ya. So you know how to enlarge pictures? Other than ones of naked movie stars?”

Izzie grinned. “Yeah, give me a sec.” She looked at the newcomer. “What can I get you?”

“Espresso and a cannoli.”

“Sorry, Lilith took the last.”

Settling for just the espresso, the woman paid her and waited for her drink. After making it, Izzie went over to Lilith to see what help she could offer.

It wasn’t much. It turned out the medium needed to enlarge a grainy newspaper picture in order to see a ring on some guy’s finger. And Izzie just didn’t have the know-how to do it.

The newcomer in black leather, however, did. Joining them, she asked a few questions, then bent over Lilith’s computer and went to work. Watching her type, her fingers flying on the keys, Izzie figured she was experienced at this. But when the woman acknowledged that she was hacking into the newspaper Web site to try to find the original photo, she suspected there was a lot more than simple ballsiness to the woman.

She was mysterious. Maybe even a little dangerous.

They both seemed that way, really. Lilith with her supposed psychic abilities. This woman with her risky, who-gives-a-damn attitude. So unlike little Izzie of the bakery.

Maybe, however, not too unlike the Crimson Rose. She wondered what these two would think if they knew she wasn’t quite the sweet, simple bakery worker she appeared to be.

“Who is this guy, anyway?” the stranger asked. “Don’t tell me you’re trying to figure out if that ring is a wedding band and he’s the asshole you’ve been dating for the last three months.”

“Ew.”

“So he’s not your lover.”

“Say that again and I’ll dump the dregs on you. He’s a jerk I’m investigating.”

“A jerk?” The stranger snorted. “What makes him different from every other man on this planet?”

“Good question,” Izzie muttered, though her heart wasn’t really in it. Nick had always been one incredibly good guy. The fact that he wouldn’t have sex with her as a stripper didn’t mean he was a jerk.

Even though he was.

She wandered away from the other two, cleaning off the empty tables in preparation for closing. As she worked, she kept up with the other women’s conversation, trying to stay out of it, but unable to when she heard who Lilith was currently dating. Hearing that the sexy medium had hooked up with Mac Mancuso, a nice boy-next-door type turned Chicago cop, she had to put her two cents in. Mainly because their situations—whether Lilith would believe it or not—were very similar.

“Mac’s not a jerk. He grew up just a few blocks from here. Our families know each other. I’d think any woman would love to catch a good, honest cop like him.”

The stranger in black immediately stopped typing. “You’re sleeping with a cop.” Somehow, Izzie suspected the woman was allergic to anyone official—especially the police.

“I’m sleeping with him, not married to him,” Lilith insisted. “Trust me when I say that my definition of right and wrong varies from his by huge degrees.”

Huh. Sounding more and more like Izzie’s situation. She almost wished she and Lilith were alone so they could talk.

“Keep working and your next ten espressos are on me,” Lilith told the other woman.

“I won’t be around that long, but thanks for the offer.”

“Add her to my tab,” Lilith told Izzie. “Any time she stops in, coffee’s on me.” Glancing at the stranger, she asked, “What’s your name?”

“Seline.”

Amused since Lilith’s tab currently took up two pages in her accounts book, Izzie asked, “Does that mean you’re actually going to pay it someday?”

Lilith shrugged in unconcern, watching as Seline kept working. When she finally struck pay dirt and got Lilith the information she wanted, they both seemed triumphant.

Izzie only wished her problems with Nick could be solved with an Internet search. Unfortunately, if she searched for the stuff she wanted to do with Nick Santori on the Internet, she’d probably get inundated with spam from sites like bigpenises.com from now till eternity.

Finishing up her cappuccino and shutting down her computer, Lilith thanked Seline for helping her out, then turned to Izzie. “Thanks for the sugar boost and the wi-fi.”

“Anytime.” Unable to help it, Izzie called out, “Lilith, don’t be so quick to write off a great guy like Mac. Maybe you and he can find a way to make it work, even if you think there’s no way it ever could.”

And maybe she was a sucker who should still be reading fairy tales. But hey, it didn’t hurt to dream, did it? Even if she was dreaming on behalf of someone else.

Once Lilith was gone, the other woman, Seline, approached the counter. Even her walk was feline—sultry—and Izzie wondered if she’d ever danced before.

“Here,” Seline said. She put a one-hundred-dollar bill on the counter. “For her tab. I sense that she needs the money more than I do. And I don’t have to be psychic to figure that out.”

Stunned, Izzie murmured, “Thanks.” She opened her mouth to say more—to offer the money back—but the mysterious woman in black had already turned toward the door, her coffee in hand. She walked out into the bright sunshine without another word, got onto her sleek motorcycle and roared away down the street.

BRIDGET DONAHUE had always known she would never be wildly sexy and self-confident like her cousin Izzie. But there were times when she allowed herself to think that, maybe, since they were related, Bridget had a tiny bit of Izzie-power trapped deep inside her. So ever since she was a kid, she’d played a game. WWID, aka What Would Izzie Do? And then she’d try to do that.

Asking Dean Willis to go out with her one day at lunchtime had definitely been a WWID moment. And Bridget still couldn’t believe she’d gone through with it. But if she hadn’t, she wouldn’t now be sitting at a coffee shop, looking across the table at his handsome face. Make that staring at his face.

Staring. Izzie wouldn’t stare. Bridget ducked her head down, focused on her cup of Earl Grey tea. Not the double shot espresso she probably needed—because of her “I don’t drink coffee” fib—but okay…mainly because of the company.

“You ready for a refill?” Dean asked.

Bridget shook her head. “I’m fine, thanks.”

They weren’t at her uncle’s bakery, but at a big chain place not far from her apartment. Bridget had chosen the spot, which seemed safe, neutral and impersonal. Not the kind of place that said she thought they were on a date. Not the kind of place where a date would be absolutely out of the question.

God, she sucked at this. Izzie would have met him at a hotel bar.

Small steps, she reminded herself. Asking a man out was a first for her. It wasn’t that she’d never dated—or that she was completely inexperienced. But if Izzie was on the top rung when it came to dealing with men, Bridget was still pulling the ladder out of the cellar.

They sat in an alcove by the front window. Bridget had her chair pushed back from the table, to accommodate the length of his legs beneath it. He looked crowded—bunched up in the small chair and the small corner—but he hadn’t complained.

“You must be tired of hearing me rattle on about my landlord problems,” she said as the conversation lagged. “I haven’t seemed to shut up.”

He shook his head. “You’re easy to talk to.”

“You haven’t been doing much talking…just listening.”

“You’re easy to listen to,” he replied with a small smile.

Nice answer. And it was mutual, because he was also very easy—easy to like. But she still didn’t feel like she knew anything about him. “So how do you like working for Marty? You’ve sold more cars in the month you’ve been there than any other salesman has sold in the past three.”

He shrugged. “It’s not hard when you have good products to sell.” Lowering his gaze, he reached for his cup. “I guess you’d know that since you’ve worked for Marty longer than I have.”

Sighing, Bridget shook her head. “Not much longer.”

“Really?”

“I started just a couple of months before you did so I don’t know much of anything, either.”

He frowned. “But you keep the books, surely you know how things are going. I bet the place is raking in the bucks, huh?”

Grunting in annoyance, she admitted, “I have no idea. I see just enough to keep the books balanced and not much else.”

Dean stopped stirring his tea and lifted his eyes to hers. Leaning forward over the table, he asked, “You don’t know anything about what’s going on at Honest Marty’s Used Cars?”

“I know Marty’s a bit of a con artist,” she said tartly. “Honesty is just one of his…embellishments.”

She suspected her boss also embellished some other things—like stuff he told the IRS. But she didn’t have proof and was not about to say such a thing to anyone else.

He persisted. “But you must make the deposits, pay the invoices, keep an eye on the accounts receivable.”

“I take what he gives me and do what I can.” Shrugging, she added, “Honestly, I don’t know much of anything about the business, it’s all I can do to keep the checkbook balanced.”

He held her stare, his blue eyes looking searchingly into her face, as if he was trying to find the answer to some question. She couldn’t imagine what. She had no idea why he was so interested in the financial dealings of their employer.

Then she thought of something. It could be a matter of job security. Dean was personable and a good salesman, but he didn’t exactly dress like someone who had a lot of money. The sports coats he wore to work usually didn’t fit well across his broad shoulders, and his pants were sometimes a little shabby.

Dean hadn’t said a lot about what he’d done before coming to Honest Marty’s. For all she knew, he’d been put out of work by poor management at his last job. That would certainly be enough to make anybody ask questions, especially somebody who lived paycheck to paycheck, as she suspected he did.

Not wanting to embarrass him, she carefully tried to set his mind at ease. “Look, I don’t know specifics, but I know the dealership’s doing well. I see the number of cars coming onto the lot and the number leaving it. You don’t have to worry.”

He frowned, as if not understanding what she meant. Some impulse made Bridget reach across the table and put her hand on his. She almost pulled her hand back right away, surprised to feel a warm tingle where skin met skin. But, swallowing for courage, she left it there. Like Izzie would.

If this was a date, he’d interpret her touch as a signal that she wanted more. If it was not a date, he’d interpret it as concerned friendship. Bridget considered it a little of both. “Your job is secure.”

He was staring at their hands, still touching. “My job?”

He sounded—distracted. As if he was as affected by their touch as she was, which gave her a little thrill. “Marty would be a fool to let you go. You’re the best salesman he’s got.”

He said nothing at first, he just slowly twined his fingers in hers, rubbing at the fleshy pad of her palm with the tip of his thumb. Her pulse raced and she wondered if he could feel it throbbing right there below her skin.

She somehow managed to concentrate on getting a positive message across, ignoring the tingling in her fingers and the flip-flopping of her heart. “It’s okay, I know what it’s like to worry about making ends meet, but please don’t worry about the company. I’m sure you’re not going to lose your job.”

He looked up at her, his jaw dropping. “Lose my….”

“I thought that’s why you were curious.”

Dean’s mouth snapped and he mumbled, “It’s okay.” He pulled the hand she’d been touching away and dropped it onto his lap. “Well, they probably want this table for other customers. I guess we should go.”

Oh, God, she felt like a fool. She’d ruined this, he probably thought she had been pitying him or something. “Dean, I really didn’t mean anything…”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I just wasn’t sure what you meant at first. It’s good to know the company’s doing so well,” he said, still sounding distracted. “Thanks again for meeting me. I’m glad we got the chance to get to know each other better, since we’ll be working together.”

Bridget managed to suck her trembling lip into her mouth, recognizing a brush-off when she heard one. Either he’d never intended this as a get-to-know-you date at all, or he had and she’d blown it. But whatever the case, it was finished now. He was not interested in seeing her again.

WWID…Izzie wouldn’t cry. So she blinked. Hard.

“Bye, Bridget,” he said as he escorted her outside.

She somehow managed to sound perfectly normal when she said goodbye too. But deep inside, she felt anything but normal.

In fact, Bridget felt a little bit broken.

**5**

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Nick went out of his way to change Izzie’s mind about going out with him. He stopped by the bakery, phoned in orders for stuff he didn’t really want and made sure he was the one to sign for any deliveries at the restaurant, just in case she happened to be the delivery person.

She never was.

But he wasn’t giving up. While at first she’d been a sexy stranger who’d caught his eye, she’d now become something of a challenge to him. He wanted to work his way around her protective wall and see if the smiling, funny girl was still there behind that to-die-for woman exterior.

Maybe it was just as well that Izzie consumed his thoughts by day. Because it made it easier to resist temptation by night. It definitely had on Saturday and Sunday night.

He’d worked at Leather and Lace for a second weekend. This time, knowing what he was in for, he’d been careful to avoid being alone with Rose, the club’s sultry star performer, and hadn’t even exchanged a word with her. Even still, it had been impossible to keep his eyes off her.

Especially when she danced.

Especially when she watched him while she danced.

If she’d made another move on him, he honestly didn’t know that he’d have been able to refuse. So ensuring he was never alone with her was probably a good thing.

Hell, he honestly wasn’t sure why he was resisting. As long as he kept the woman safe, he didn’t see Harry Black being the kind of man who’d have a problem with it. After all, he was married to one of his own former star performers.

And letting off a little sexual steam didn’t have to have anything to do with Nick’s normal, daytime life. In fact, nobody in his family ever needed to know about it. There was no law that said an unattached man couldn’t have sex with a willing woman, just because he was interested in another woman.

One who wasn’t interested in him.

Damn. That’s why he hadn’t done it. Because it was driving him crazy that Izzie wasn’t interested in him.

Frankly, he’d never worked so hard to get a woman’s attention in his life. The fact that Izzie was the woman in question made the whole situation that much more challenging.

She’d been crazy about him once. He’d get her to see him that way again if it was the last thing he did. Even if it meant doing stupid, sappy shit like showing up at her bakery with a handful of flowers.

Like he was right now.

God, how the guys in his unit would laugh to see him, standing on a street corner on a hot August day, holding a brightly colored bouquet he’d bought off a guy on the corner.

“What are you doing?” she mouthed through the glass late Thursday afternoon when he knocked on the locked front door.

“I’m bringing you flowers,” he yelled back. “Open up.”

“Don’t bring me flowers.”

Shrugging, he flashed her a grin. “Too late.”

“I mean it.”

“Like I said, too late. Come on, let me in. They’re thirsty.”

She glared at him. Seeing pedestrians stopping to watch the show, she went a step further and bared her teeth.

Man the woman was hot when she was hot.

“Go away!”

Tsking, he shook his head. Then he looked at the closest woman who’d paused mid-step to see what was going on. “Can you believe she doesn’t want my flowers?”

A teenager and her girlfriend, who’d also stopped nearby, piped in together, “We’ll take them!”

The older woman, an iron-gray haired grandmother, frowned. “What did you do?”

Good question. He wasn’t entirely sure. “I didn’t recognize her after not having seen her for ten years.”

The grandmother’s eyebrow shot up. Pushing Nick out of the way, she marched up to the glass, stuck her index finger out and pointed at Izzie. “Take the flowers you foolish girl.” Rolling her eyes and huffing about youth being wasted on the young, she stalked down the street.

Izzie, still practically growling, unlocked the door, yanked it open and grabbed his arm. “Get in here and stop making a fool of yourself.”

“I wasn’t making a fool of myself,” he pointed out. “You were making a fool of me.”

“You don’t require much help.”

Shaking his head and smiling, he murmured, “What happened to the sweet, friendly, eager-to-please Izzie?”

“She grew up.”

She yanked the bouquet out of his hand, stalking behind the counter and grabbing a glass to put it in. Watching her, he noticed the surreptitious sniff she gave the blooms, and the way she squared her shoulders, as if annoyed at her own weakness.

Nick didn’t follow her, tempted as he was. Instead, he leaned across the glass counter, dropping his elbows onto it. “The flowers are a peace offering.”

“Are we at war?”

“It’s felt that way to me ever since I was stupid enough to not recognize you that night at Santori’s.”

Ignoring him, she finished filling the glass with water, turned off the tap and plopped the flowers in.

“I still can’t believe you’re punishing me over that.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’m not punishing you over anything. I’m just not interested in you, Nick.”

“Yeah, I got it.” Only he didn’t. He was in no way ready to concede that. Something had caused Izzie to put a wall up between them…and he was going to find out what it was. “But there’s no reason we can’t go back to being friends, is there? We were once.”

“No. We weren’t. You were the stud of the known universe and I was the puppy dog with the big, humiliating crush. You can’t seriously think I’d go back to that.”

“I tell ya, Izzie,” he said, hearing the frustration in his voice, “I don’t know for sure what I want from you. I just know I can’t stand that you won’t even look at me.”

She finally did just that. Looked at him, met his direct stare. In those dark brown eyes he saw stormy confusion. It was matched by the quiver of her lush lips and the wild beating of the pulse in her throat.

“You liked me once,” he said softly. “And we did pretty well helping each other out at the neighborhood-prying-session disguised as lunch last Sunday. Can we at least try being friends?”

She opened her mouth to reply. Closed it. Then, sighing as she pushed the vase of flowers to the center of the counter, slowly nodded. “I guess.”

It was a start. Maybe not the start he wanted to make with her…but at least the start of something.

“Do you want some coffee?” She didn’t sound particularly enthusiastic about the invitation.

He glanced at the industrial coffeemaker, scrubbed clean for the night, and shook his head, not wanting to put her to the trouble.

“I have a small coffeemaker in the back.”

“Sounds good.”

Nick followed her down a short hallway between the café and the kitchen, trying to remember that it wasn’t very polite to stare long and hard at the ass of someone who was just a friend. It didn’t work. Because though she wore loose-fitting khakis and an oversized apron, the woman had a figure to die for. Every step pulled the fabric a little tighter across her curves, and the natural sway in her hips made him dizzy.

Friends. That’s it. And not friends with benefits.

“How do you like being back in Chicago?” he asked as he sat at a tall stool beside a butcher block work counter.

Izzie ground fresh beans. At last—a woman who knew how to make coffee. One more thing to like about her, aside from the cute way her ponytail wagged when she moved and the way she smelled of sugar and butter and everything nice. “About as much as I like getting a root canal.”

“That bad? You don’t like being back in the family business?”

She glanced around the kitchen, immaculately clean and stocked with every baking supply ever invented. “My prison smells like anisette.”

“Mine smells like marinara,” he muttered, meaning it.

She nodded, not asking him to elaborate. She obviously knew exactly what he meant. “Not easy to come home, is it?”

He shook his head. “Not easy at all. My parents still haven’t forgiven me for moving into an apartment, not back into my old room. It still has my high-school posters on the walls.”

She snickered. “Mine, too. Though I don’t suppose yours were of ballerinas and Ricky Martin.”

“Uh…definitely not.” A grin tickling his lips, he admitted, “Demi Moore and Lethal Weapon 3.”

Izzie laughed softly. There was a twinkle in those dark brown eyes of hers and a flash of a dimple he remembered in one cheek. At last.

“Are you…”

“What?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “it’s none of my business.”

“What’s none of your business?”

“I guess I was just wondering if you felt…a little…out of place with your family.”

“I feel like I belong with the Santoris about as much as that kid in the Jungle Book belonged with the dancing bear.”

She nodded, as if in complete agreement. “But if I recall correctly, I think he wanted to belong with the dancing bear and couldn’t understand why he didn’t quite fit in.”

Nick said nothing. She’d made his point for him.

Izzie seemed to realize it. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Something else we have in common,” he said.

“Don’t get too excited about it,” she muttered, “I’m still not giving you my phone number.”

“You must know I already have it.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t frown. “Gloria. Dead sister walking.” The coffee had finished brewing, so she poured two big cups. “Cream or sugar?”

“Neither.” Taking the cup from her, he inhaled the steam. “My mother makes lousy coffee. So does your sister, who seems to have decided even the smell of caffeine can make our hooligan nephews bounce off the walls.”

“Decaf’s for quitters,” she muttered.

Startled, Nick barked a laugh. This was no sweet little Izzie, the girl he remembered.

“I lived on coffee in Manhattan,” she admitted. “It was the only way I could maintain my schedule.”

He sniffed appreciatively, allowing the rich aroma to fill his head. When combined with all the other scents permeating this room, it was making him weak with physical hunger.

Or she was. He honestly wasn’t sure which.

“I think I would have killed for something this good even when it was one-hundred-twenty degrees in the desert.”

Izzie sat on one of the other stools across from him, her cup on the counter between them. Watching him intently, with a bit of trepidation, she forecast her curiosity before the words left her mouth. “How did you make it through every day?”

What a good question—and one nobody had asked him yet. Oh, he’d been asked about the action and the things he’d seen. Asked if he’d shot anyone, killed anyone, saved anyone. Asked what he’d done to relieve the boredom, to accomplish his mission.

But nobody had asked him what it was that had held him together every single day. Not until now.

“I’m sorry, that’s probably none of my business.”

“It’s okay. If you want to know the truth, it was this that held me together.” He gestured around the room.

She frowned skeptically.

“I don’t mean the bakery. I mean this lifestyle. Home, family, all the safe, secure stuff I grew up with that I thought would be exactly the same when I got back. Only, it wasn’t.”

Staring at him, Izzie revealed her thoughts in her expressive brown eyes. She understood what he meant—got it, exactly. Nick didn’t look away, liking the connection even though they were separated by several feet of sweet-smelling air. Mentally, though, they were touching. Bonding. Sharing the unique brand of estrangement they had each been feeling from the world they’d grown up in.

She finally shook her head. “Well, obviously you have some things to figure out, man-cub.”

He grinned, remembering what he’d said about the Jungle Book. “Yeah, well, so do you, right? You didn’t get what you bargained for when you came home, did you?”

She shook her head.

“What’d you do in New York, anyway?” he asked, never having gotten the whole story. He knew she’d had a good job but had given it up to come home and help her family.

“I was…in the arts,” she murmured, lifting her cup to her mouth. She blew across the surface of the coffee, sending steam curling up into the air. It colored her cheeks, already flushed a delicate pink from the heat of the yeasty kitchen. “On the stage.”

An actress. The idea stunned him for a second, though it made sense. Izzie had looks and personality and a lot of self-confidence. He suspected she was amazing on stage.

“But I got hurt last winter and haven’t worked since.”

He lowered his cup, waiting.

A tiny frown line appeared between her eyes as she explained. “I tore my ACL in my left knee and had to have surgery. It required a lot of rehab.”

“And you’re on your feet working in a kitchen all day?” he asked, appalled at the idea of how much pain she had to have experienced. He knew guys who’d had those injuries during his high-school sports days. They were not fun.

“I’m better.” She pointed down to the stool on which she sat. “And I work sitting down a lot.”

Nick wanted to know more. Lots of things. Like what kind of life she’d led in New York and whether anyone had shared it. And what her neck tasted like. And what she planned to do once her father was well enough to come back to the bakery. And what she’d eaten today that had left her lips so ruby red. And why she was resisting something happening between them.

And when she was going to be in his bed.

But the phone interrupted before he could ask, much less get any answers. Excusing herself to answer it, she revealed her frustration with the caller with every word exchanged. Nick heard enough to understand what was going on—her part-time delivery person was calling in sick.

“I can’t believe this,” she muttered after she hung up the phone. “All these orders and he bails on me.” Almost growling, she added, “Are the Cubs playing today? It sounded like the little bastard was at the ball park.”

Fierce. He liked it.

“Don’t sweat it, Iz. I’ll help you out.”

Blinking, she replied, “Huh?”

“I’ll help you make the deliveries.” Hopping off the bench, he walked over to a tall cart, laden with cardboard boxes labeled with the names of several local restaurants. “After all,” he said, offering her a boyish smile over his shoulder, “what are friends for?”

FRIENDS WERE FOR going to the movies with. Sharing bad date stories with. Getting through boring reunions with. Crying over breakups with. Dieting with. Drinking with. Clubbing with.

Friends were not for having sex with. Or lusting over. Or inspiring lust simply by the way they handled a few heavy boxes and filled out their soft, broken-in jeans.

Nick Santori was no friend of hers. Because oh, God, she had already broken every “friend” rule in the book and she’d only agreed to his terms a few hours ago.

When they’d talked in the kitchen, he’d been friendly and warm. That boyish smile he’d flashed her when he’d offered to help her with the deliveries had made him seem so charming and endearing. Completely the opposite of the brooding, simmering hunk of male heat she’d watched through covetous eyes at the club last weekend. It was like he was two people in one body.

And she wanted both of them desperately.

She couldn’t believe she’d thought she could handle being merely his friend. Now, having been closed up in a delivery van with him for the past couple of hours, she was definitely having second thoughts.

He was being so damned wonderful. Not just offering to help her, he had refused to let her lift a single box. They’d gone to a dozen shops and restaurants, delivering cakes, pies and pastries to some places for their dinner customers tonight, and muffins and coffee cake to others for their breakfast crowds tomorrow. He’d charmed her customers, and her. He’d even driven, since Izzie hated dealing with the traffic. She’d sat in the passenger seat of the bakery van, reading off the list of stops, trying not to notice how big he was and how small the van felt with him in it.

She also tried not to notice how wonderful he smelled. How the sound of his low laughter rolled over her, more warm and sultry than a summer breeze. How his short hair curled a little behind his ear. How strong his lightly stubbled jaw was and how thick his body was beneath his tight T-shirt. How he warmed her from two feet away.

And how very, very much she wanted him.

Especially after the cannoli. It was the damn cannoli that put the nail in her coffin…and the wetness in her panties.

They had an extra box. Izzie had been so wiped out from working so many hours, both at the bakery Tuesday through Saturday, and at the club Saturday and Sunday nights, that she’d miscounted. She’d boxed up an extra two dozen of the decadent ricotta-and-cream filled treats. Once they’d finished all the deliveries, thanks mostly to Nick’s strong back—oh, heavens, that strong back—she’d noticed the extra box and realized her mistake.

So, when they’d gotten back to the bakery and parked in the small private lot behind it, she’d offered him one. He’d immediately taken her up on it, not even getting out of the van before digging in. And seeing him eat it with such visceral, sensual appreciation, was making her a quivering, shaking mess.

“God, these are amazing. No wonder they sell out every day at Santori’s,” he said as he licked at the creamy center of the tube-shaped pastry.

Izzie shifted in the seat. Licking. It was not a good thing to watch a man do if you wanted to have sex with him but couldn’t.

He nibbled some of the flaky crust.

Nibbling. Also bad. She added it to her mental list of no-nos to watch.

Then he bit in and closed his eyes in rapturous delight. Oh, Lord. Biting—anything that put that look of intense pleasure on his face—was absolutely out of the question.

Thankfully, he finished the thing so quickly—devouring it in three bites—that she didn’t have time to do something foolish, like, say, offering him her tongue to lick and her breast to nibble and her inner thigh to bite.

“You are going to let me have another one, aren’t you?” he asked. Not waiting for an answer, he got out of the driver’s seat and bent over to step into the back of the van. Metal racks were attached to each side of it, with an aisle down the middle. Opening the lone box remaining on one shelf, he held it toward her. “Come on, have one.”

She hadn’t voluntarily eaten a cannoli since tenth grade, the day after she’d split her pants while trying to do a sit-up in gym class. They’d torn with a resounding flatulent sound and she’d almost dropped out of school then and there. “Uh-uh.”

He smiled, his eyes glittering in the near darkness. Dusk had fallen while they were out making the rounds, and it was now after eight o’clock. The book shop next door was also closed, their private parking spots empty, and the small lot was entirely quiet and deserted. Very private.

She really should hop out of the vehicle and go inside. Being out here, in the near-dark, alone with Nick, was not a very good idea. Of course, being inside the closed shop, in the light, alone with Nick, probably wouldn’t be much safer.

“One little taste. How can you tell how good you are at doing it if you never give it a try?”

Nearly choking, she repeated, “How good I am at doing it?”

“You know. Making them.”

Yeah. Sure. That’s what she’d thought he meant.

A small smile continued to play on those incredible lips of his as he watched her, as if he knew what she’d been thinking. And had intentionally put those thoughts into her head.

Get out. Now.

But she didn’t reach for the door handle. Instead, like a kid lured by the ice cream man, she ducked into the back of the van with him. There wasn’t room to stand, but Nick had already sat down on the carpeted floor. One leg was sprawled out in front of him, the other bent and upraised. He was carefully picking his way through the open box of pastries, as if searching for just the right one to satisfy his craving.

Izzie sat down across from him, cross-legged, wondering whether the temperature in the van had just gone up forty degrees or if it was her imagination. Considering it was a breezy summer evening and the front windows were open, she somehow doubted the air had gotten hotter…only she had. In fact, being this close to Nick was setting her on fire.

“You going to let me tempt you with one?” he asked, still looking down at the box, not at her.

They did look good. So good. “I really shouldn’t.”

“Just a taste,” he whispered. Not waiting for her to answer, he lifted one out, then put the box back on the shelf. He scooted forward…close, so close she felt his heat wash over her and his warm, masculine scent fill her lungs. He lifted one of his legs over her crossed ones, until her right knee brushed his hot, jean-covered butt.

She didn’t move. Not one inch.

“Won’t you have one little lick?” he murmured, lifting the cannoli to her lips.

Staring at it in his hands—the flesh-colored cookie, the pale creamy cheese oozing from the end—she suddenly realized just how phallic the thing looked. Her mouth flooded with hunger—she wanted to lick, to taste, to devour.

Not the pastry. Him.

Almost whimpering, she lowered her mouth to it, scraping her tongue along the flaky crust, brushing his finger as she did. He shifted a little in response, as if no longer comfortable sitting the way he had been. The way they were sitting, she quickly realized why.

He was rock hard, his erection thick and long against her leg. She almost drew her legs together, the pressure in her sex demanding relief.

Izzie could hardly think or breathe. Unable to resist, she moved her leg a little, rubbing it against him, and got a low groan in response.

“Taste, Izzie.”

She tasted. Imagining it was him she was sampling, she nibbled at the filling, brushing her lips against it.

She didn’t need to invite Nick to share it. He was already there, kissing the corner of her mouth, his tongue flicking out to clean some of the sweetness off her lips. “Good,” he whispered.

Oh, very good.

She licked again, dipping her tongue inside the cookie shell for a deeper taste. Nick tasted deeper, too. He covered her lips with his, stealing some of the cream right out of her mouth, their tongues tangling over it for a long, delicious moment.

“Get your own,” she whispered with a soft laugh when he pulled away to offer her another lick.

“I’d rather have yours,” he murmured, moving his mouth to her cheek, then lower. He nibbled her jaw, scraping his lips along it until he could nuzzle the sensitive spot just below her ear. “Actually, I’d rather have you.”

His words washed over her, echoing in her head. With his warm breaths on her neck, his mouth on her skin, his hard body radiating heat just inches from her own, she couldn’t remember a single reason why she shouldn’t have him.

“I noticed.” She shifted back far enough to uncross her legs. Without thinking or considering, she draped them over his thighs, scooting close—so close—that that thick ridge in his jeans pressed against the damp seam of hers.

He arched forward reflexively, grinding against her, and Izzie gasped. Moisture flooded her and her sex swelled almost painfully against her clothes. Her clit felt as if it had doubled in size and she bucked into him, needing to come so badly she could almost taste it.

“More?” he asked.

She arched harder. She definitely wanted more.

He lifted the cannoli. She shook her head, then let it fall back. She wanted to be the dessert now. Right or wrong, stupid or not, she wanted Nick Santori too much to resist him again.

When they stepped out of the van, the real world would return. He’d still be the great neighborhood guy she couldn’t publicly date. But for now—oh, for now—she wanted him desperately, with a longing that had built in her for more than a decade. “Have me, Nick,” she whispered, saying yes to the question he hadn’t quite asked.

He made a low sound that might have been unrestrained—want or might have been triumph. Honestly, Izzie didn’t care. Especially when he nibbled her earlobe, then worked his way down her neck. “Mmm, you taste like sugar and almonds.” He kissed his way down to her collarbone, lightly biting her nape, and she shivered.

Never taking his mouth off her, he reached up and pulled her ponytail holder off. Her thick hair fell around his hand and he twined it through his fingers. Cupping her head and supporting her, he pushed her back a little so he could have better access to her neck.

When she felt the cool wetness touch the hollow of her throat, she gasped. The ricotta filling felt good against her heated skin. When Nick licked it off, it felt amazing.

Dropping back to support herself on her elbows, she watched through heavy-lidded eyes as Nick began slipping open the buttons of her sleeveless blouse. After every button was freed and another bit of skin revealed, he dabbed filling on her. Soon there was a trail of dots from her throat, down her chest, in the middle of her cleavage, and all the way down to her belly.

He wasn’t tasting them. Not yet. She twisted and arched up, desperate for him to, but he ignored her silent plea.

Once he tugged the top free of her jeans, it gaped open. Shrugging, she let it fall off her shoulders, then watched him devour her with his eyes. His breaths grew audibly choppy as he saw the way her breasts overflowed her skimpy bra. Bent back as she was, she could barely keep the thing in place, and one nipple was actually peeping freely above the lace.

“Beautiful,” he muttered hoarsely. He lifted the pastry and dabbed some of the filling on her nipple.

This time he didn’t move on. He stopped for a taste.

“Oh, God,” she groaned as Nick bent over and covered her nipple with his mouth, licking and sucking at the cheesy filling. He lapped up every bit, pushing her bra all the way down so he’d have complete access to her breast.

“You are glorious,” he said as he lifted a hand to cup her. His fingers were dark and strong against her pale skin, and she literally overflowed his hand. “You hide a lot behind that apron you usually wear.”

She hid a lot more behind the mask she sometimes wore. The thought flashed through her head, but she thrust it aside. This was not the time to be thinking about her alter-ego…or what Nick might do if he ever found out they were one and the same.

Now was for savoring. Indulging.

Reaching for the clasp of her bra, he unfastened it and pulled it off, catching her other breast as it spilled free. Scooping out a large fingerful of filling, complete with tiny chocolate chips, he smeared it all over the taut tip, then devoured it as completely as he had the other side.

Her legs clenched, heat shooting from her wet nipples down her body, straight between her legs. She jerked up, dying to be freed of her jeans. “I need…”

“I know,” he whispered. He dropped his mouth to hers for a deep kiss that shut her up and zapped her brain. He tasted sweet and hot and decadent.

Izzie worked at Nick’s shirt as they kissed, pulling away so she could tug it up and off him. Then she sagged back, staring in disbelief at the perfection that was his body.

In his clothes, he was an incredibly well-built man.

Out of them he almost defied description.

He was rock hard, not an ounce of excess on him, with a massive chest and thickly muscled shoulders. His huge arms rippled as he moved, highlighting a sizeable tattoo—a Marine Corps logo. Just the perfect amount of dark, curly hair emphasized the breadth of him before narrowing down to his waist and hips, where he was incredibly lean.

“I’m not finished my dessert yet,” he muttered when she reached for his waistband.

He tossed the tiny bit of cannoli away and grabbed another one out of the box. Taking her hand, he pushed her arm over her head until she had to lie flat on the floor. Then he worked his way down her body, kissing, nibbling and licking off all those spots of cream he’d deposited on her earlier.

“It tastes sweeter now,” he said when he dipped his tongue into her belly button and swirled it there. “It just needed one more ingredient to make it absolutely addictive.”

Her. It needed her.

And she needed him.

His hands. His mouth—oh, heavens, his mouth. His amazing body. And that big, hard erection she could feel pressing against her leg as he slid farther down her body.

He didn’t even move his mouth off her as he undid her pants and pushed them down her hips. Izzie lifted up to help him…and unintentionally offered herself to him much more intimately.

He was on her immediately.

“Nick!” She gasped and panted when he covered the front of her tiny panties with his mouth, breathing through the fabric, sending warm tendrils of pleasure right where she needed them most. “Please.”

“I bet this will taste even sweeter,” he whispered as he tugged the satin away.

Izzie barely breathed as he pushed her clothes down and off, until she lay naked beneath him. And she absolutely flew out of her skin when he took the new tube-shaped pastry and smeared one creamy end of it through her curls and across her sex.

“Oh,” she groaned.

He pushed at her inner thighs and Izzie parted her legs, giving him the access he’d silently demanded. When he took a first, slow lick at the filling, thick and heavy in her curls, she came up off the floor.

“Oh, definitely sweeter,” he said. He moved farther down, sliding his tongue over every inch of her, eating every drop of sticky cream as if it was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

Izzie was a quivering mess, shaking, panting, bucking. Desperate for more, she didn’t know whether to beg or remain still for fear he’d get distracted from what he was doing.

He didn’t get distracted. And before she knew what he was up to, she felt the flaky shell of the cookie scraping across her clit. She cried out again, feeling the climax build inside her. When he licked at her again, working her clit with his tongue and his lips—lathing, then sucking—she finally got what she’d been waiting for. Pleasure erupted through her, rocking her hips, sending a pulse of heat through her.

Nick didn’t even pause, beyond muttering a soft “Yes,” in acknowledgement of her orgasm. He just kept going, sliding the cannoli further…following it with his tongue. Until finally he began working the delicacy between her drenched lips.

“You’re not…you can’t…” she gasped.

But he did and he was. He slid the tip of it into her wet crevice—sending a cacophony of sensations rushing through her. The roughness of the delicate shell, the smoothness of the filling, she’d never felt anything like it. It was wicked—erotic. A little outrageous.

And she loved it. “Nick…”

“I’m not quite finished with dessert. Though I’m just about full,” he murmured.

She only wished she were.

She didn’t get too impatient, however, because she was too anxious to see what this supposedly “nice neighborhood guy” would dare next.

He wanted to keep playing, obviously. He slowly sunk the treat deeper, as far as he could, then gently tugged it out. He did it again, leaving Izzie to wonder how long it would take before the shell broke and the oozy cream filled her.

Finally, when she thought she’d die of the wild wantonness of it, he started working it out with his teeth, rather than his fingers. He nibbled off little pieces as it came out of her, whispering sweet words about how good it tasted…how good she tasted. How juicy and creamy she was.

His words were almost as arousing as his touch.

“Gotta make sure I got every drop,” he whispered once the last of the cookie was gone. And he did, plunging his tongue into her and stroking—in and out—until she lost her mind and came again.

She threw her head back, closing her eyes, giving herself over to the rocking of her body, which seemed to go on forever. When it had finally eased up, and she opened her eyes again, it was to find Nick over her.

She lifted her legs, realizing his were bare. His lean hips brushed her inner thighs, and his thick cock lay heavy on her pelvis.

Whimpering, she looked down. “Let me see you.”

“Feel me,” he whispered, burying his face in her neck. He slid up and down, his cock separating the slick lips of her sex, hitting her clit at the perfect angle.

“See and feel,” she insisted, sliding her arm between their bodies to reach for him.

She caught his erection in her hand, shocked at how big and hot it was. He’d already sheathed himself with a condom, but she could feel his pounding pulse through the rubber.

“You’re bigger than that cookie,” she said, nibbling on her lip as she acknowledged just how much Nick Santori had been hiding beneath his clothes.

He groaned and dipped closer, sliding in her a little at a time. “You’re sweeter than that cookie.” He pushed a bit more, easing into her with incredible restraint. “And you are definitely creamy enough to handle me.”

She didn’t doubt it. He’d aroused her half out of her mind and right now, she wanted him plunging to the hilt inside her. Grabbing his hips, she dug her nails into his butt and arched up for him. “Take me, Nick. Fill me up.”

He seemed to forget about restraint because he did exactly what she asked, plunging hard and deep until Izzie howled at how good it felt.

He stretched her, embedded himself in her, then drew out and plunged again. “Oh, my God,” she groaned. “This is amazing.”

Better than amazing. It was absolute perfection. Worth every one of the years she’d waited for it.

Thrusting up, Izzie took what he gave and demanded even more. When she became too frenzied, he slowed the pace, showing so much control she wanted to sob in frustration. But he wouldn’t relent, taunting her with slow, deep strokes and teasing half-ones. He kissed her so often and so deeply she wasn’t sure she’d remember how to breathe when she wasn’t sharing the breath from his lungs.

Finally, though, she heard the tiny groans he couldn’t contain. His hips thrust harder, more frantically, and she wrung as much as she could out of every stroke.

“I can’t…oh, Izzie…”

“Do it,” she ordered, feeling another climax building in her from the friction of their locked bodies. “I’ll come with you.”

That seemed to satisfy him—that he had her permission—and he finally lost his head and gave her the deep, pounding thrusts they both needed. Again. And again. Until he threw his head back and shouted as he reached his climax.

She found hers a second later and wrapped her legs tightly around him to ride it out.

As if knowing the floor was hard against her back, Nick scooped her in his arms and lay down, dragging her on top of him. They were both panting, gasping for air, and he kissed her temple, smoothing her hair away from her sweaty face.

“Izzie? I have to tell you something.” His words were rushed. Choppy.

“Yes?”

Closing his eyes, he dropped his head back onto the floor.

“I’m going to call you Cookie until the day I die.”

**6**

FUNNY. Nick had once thought that having absolutely mind-blowing sex with a woman would make her friendlier. At least more approachable.

No. Uh-uh. Not Izzie Natale. Because within minutes of their incredible lovemaking in the back of the delivery van, she was back to freezing him out, trying to act like nothing had changed between them.

After sex like that, he’d kind of expected to be invited in for a cup of coffee…if not dessert. Oh, man, he was never going to look at a cannoli the same way again.

But she hadn’t invited him in. Hadn’t answered him when he’d asked if she wanted to go get a bite to eat somewhere. And over the next couple of days, hadn’t returned his calls. Hadn’t even met his eye in the past couple of days.

The woman was killing him, she really was.

When he’d finally confronted her on the sidewalk in front of the bakery Friday afternoon, she’d erupted. “It was a one time thing, Nick. It was fabulous, I loved it, but it’s not going to happen again. Because if it does, then you’re going to be more of a pain about wanting me to go get a pizza with you, or go visit the folks, and then the whole neighborhood will be congratulating poor little Izzie for finally landing her man.”

She’d stalked inside without saying another word. She hadn’t needed to. He got the message, loud and clear. She’d loved the sex, she just didn’t want all the stuff that went with having a sexual relationship. Or any relationship whatsoever.

He thought about proposing that they just set up a weekly sex-buddy meeting in the parked van behind her shop, suspecting he could have her on those terms if he wanted her.

He didn’t want her on those terms.

“Hell, admit it, you want her on any terms,” he muttered aloud as he walked out the back door of Santori’s that night. He hadn’t even realized anyone else was there until he saw his brother, Joe, who’d just parked his pickup in one of the empty spots in the alley. Fortunately, Joe hadn’t heard Nick talking to himself and so wasn’t dialing for the rubber-walled wagon.

“Hey, where you off to?” Joe asked as he hopped out and pocketed his keys. “I was going to take you up on that pitcher you owe me.”

“I’m not very good company right now,” he admitted.

Joe, who was the best-natured of all of the Santori kids, threw his arm around Nick’s shoulders. “Then what better time to share a beer with your brother?”

He had a point.

“Okay. But not here,” he said, looking back at the closed door to the kitchen. “I really need someplace quiet.”

Joe’s smile faded and he immediately appeared concerned. “Everything okay? Is there a problem?”

“No problem. Just a case of family overdose.”

“I hear ya. Come on, let’s go across the street.”

Following Joe into a neighborhood bar on the corner, Nick ordered a couple of beers and paid the tab. If Mark had been sitting across from him, Nick knew he’d be getting one-liners aimed at making him say what was on his mind. Lucas would be doing his prosecutor inquisition. Tony would throw his oldest-brother weight around and try to browbeat him into talking. Lottie would jabber so much Nick would say anything to get her to shut up.

Joe just watched. Listened. Waited.

“Thanks again for pointing me toward the job,” Nick finally said, filling the silence. The bar was pretty empty—it was too early for the weekend regulars, who’d be drifting in for a long night of drinking and darts before too long.

“How’s that going?”

“Pretty well. I’ve only worked the past two weekends but the money’s good.”

“You still haven’t told the rest of the family?”

Nick shook his head. “Just Mark.”

Joe nodded. “Probably just as well. I know Pop and Tony are talking nonstop about you coming in on the business.”

Yeah, they had been to him, too. Nick couldn’t prevent a quick frown. Because managing a pizzeria was not the way he saw himself spending the next six months, much less the rest of his life.

“It’s okay, Nick. Nobody can force you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Guilt goes a long way,” he muttered.

“Don’t I know it. But guilt didn’t stop you from enlisting. It didn’t stop me from picking up a hammer and learning construction. Didn’t stop Mark from strapping on a gun or Lottie from…well, from doing whatever it is Lottie does.”

“Like marrying a man who killed someone?” Nick asked dryly, still not having gotten used to the idea that his new brother-in-law, Simon, had killed a woman, even if in self-defense.

“Let’s not go there,” Joe said with a sigh. “She’s happy, and he’s crazy about her.”

True. Lottie and Simon’s recent marriage had contributed to the 95 percent marital success rate in the Santori family.

“The point is, you can live your life the way you want to live it, and nobody will try to stop you.” As if realizing he’d left Nick with one major argument, he added, “Except for Mama’s crying. Which we’re all used to and you can get past. You just need to figure out what you want to do, and go after it.”

Good idea. And lately, Nick had been figuring out what he wanted to do, especially since he’d been working at the club. “An old buddy of mine from the service is putting something together with a couple of the other guys. They’re talking about opening up a protection business.”

“Professional bodyguard?” Joe asked, looking surprised.

“I have the military background for it and I like what I’m doing at the club.”

Joe smiled. “Especially when the people you’re guarding are very easy on the eyes.”

“Like you’d ever look at another woman.”

The twinkle in his brother’s eyes confirmed that. “Hey, I’m not you. You’re the single one. Have you met anybody, uh…interesting?”

Nick felt heat rise up his neck. Because that was a loaded question. He had definitely felt interest in the Crimson Rose. But now that he’d had Izzie—tasted her, consumed her, made love to her—he knew he didn’t want any other woman. But he couldn’t very well explain that to Joe…without hinting about what had happened with Izzie. She’d never forgive him if that little tidbit became common knowledge. “I guess.”

“Their star performer?” Joe sipped his beer. “I hear she’s one-of-a-kind.”

Clearing his throat, Nick sprawled back in the booth. “She is that.”

“Have there been any more problems with her?” Joe sounded only casually interested, but Nick’s guard immediately went up.

“Problems?”

“Threats, freaks trying to grab her?”

Nick sat up straight. “No. What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t Harry even tell you why he hired you?”

He had, but only in the most general terms. Nick didn’t realize Rose had actually been threatened. “What do you know?”

“Just what the guys were whispering about when we were working at the club. That there had been a few incidents that had disturbed Harry and scared the dancers. Especially the featured one.”

Harry Black had said almost nothing about any specific threats. Rose had said even less. Why would they hire him and then tie his hands by not giving him all the information he needed to do his job? He just didn’t understand it. “Maybe whoever was causing the problems got caught and the threat has been eliminated,” he murmured, speculating out loud. “Because I haven’t gotten any kind of specific heads up.”

Joe kept his eyes on his beer, for some reason not looking Nick in the eye. Which made him wonder about his brother’s interest in the stripper.

He immediately discounted any suspicion that Joe was interested in the woman for himself. He was married to the sexiest kindergarten teacher ever born, and he adored her and their baby daughter. Besides, of all the Santoris—who’d been raised to equate cheating with a mortal sin—Joe was the very last one who’d ever stray.

“Well, if I were you, I’d stick close to the featured attraction at Leather and Lace. I think she might be more of a target than she or Harry would like to admit.” Shaking his head, Joe added, “There are some really sick guys out there who like stalking vulnerable women.”

Suddenly feeling on edge, Nick nodded, anxious to get to the club and question Harry Black. He didn’t particularly want to confront Rose—not alone, anyway—but one thing was sure. He had been hired to do a job: protect her. It was about time he stop letting his physical response to the woman interfere with doing that job.

And it was well past time for him to stop letting his feelings for Izzie Natale consume so much of his attention that he didn’t even realize a stalker might be threatening someone he’d been hired to protect.

That had to end. Starting right now.

So it looked like Izzie was finally going to get what she wanted. Him…out of her life.

“HEY, SOMEBODY SENT you flowers.”

Izzie hesitated, her hand on the doorknob of her dressing room. One of the other dancers, a young blonde with a sweet smile and a killer body, approached her. “They were waiting on the stoop at the back entrance when I got here. Had your name on the envelope. I put them in your dressing room.”

Izzie’s first reaction was a tiny little thrill as the image of Nick’s handsome face filled her mind. But it quickly dissipated. Nick had no idea she worked with him every Saturday and Sunday night.

Damn good thing. Because if he found out now, after she’d had such incredible sex with him, he was going be mad. More than mad—irate. Especially because of how insistent she’d been that it was a one-shot deal.

Boy did she wish it didn’t have to be a one-shot deal. She still got shaky and shivery and weak and wet thinking of that amazing interlude in the van. It had been the most intensely sensual experience of her life.

But not to be repeated. Never.

Not as Izzie. Not even as the Crimson Rose. Because now that he’d had her naked in his arms, it was all too possible that he’d recognize her as Rose. Dancing and interacting with him at work was going to be difficult enough. If she let him get close—the way she’d invited him to that night in her dressing room—there was no way she’d be able to keep her secret.

So tell him the truth.

The idea had merit and Izzie knew it. Part of her truly wanted to—it wasn’t easy maintaining a double life with no one to talk to about it. He’d listen—she knew he would. And she even suspected he wouldn’t judge her about what she was doing. Given the things he’d said about feeling so hemmed in by his own family and their expectations, she thought he might even understand. A little.

But telling him—bringing him in to her alternate life—would mean involving him deeper in her real one. Each secret shared would be another rope tied to her body, holding her down, dragging her back into the world she’d fought so hard to escape.

If he knew she was Rose, there would be no reason they couldn’t get more involved, at least at work. That, however—a secret, sordid affair conducted in dressing rooms and closets at Leather and Lace—wouldn’t be enough for him. She knew it down to her very soul. He’d insinuate himself in her daily life, start tangling her in the ropes of a relationship, make her fall for him even harder…so he would be even harder to leave.

No. She could not tell him.

“Rose? Didja hear me?”

Realizing the other dancer was waiting expectantly for her reaction to the flowers, Izzie nodded. “Yes, thanks Leah.”

“Not a problem. It was pick ’em up or trip over ’em,” she said with a cheery smile. Without the stage makeup and the sequins, the young woman looked so fresh-faced and wholesome an average set of parents would have asked her to babysit.

She’d been the first of the dancers to befriend Izzie when she’d first taken the job at Leather and Lace. The others had been slower to warm up, especially Harry’s wife, Delilah, who’d been the featured dancer up until a couple of years ago when she married her boss. Now she served as a sort of warden to the others…and hadn’t liked that Izzie wasn’t interested in her rules and regulations. She especially hadn’t liked that she couldn’t get her husband to order Izzie to listen to her…and that the Crimson Rose had become hugely popular.

The rest of them had all come around, though, especially since they had all started bringing home more money every weekend that she performed.

“How did you get into this, Leah?” she asked.

The girl shrugged. “Typical story. My parents divorced, father split out west somewhere. Mom remarried an asshole who tried to touch me after she’d passed out on their wedding night.”

Izzie instinctively reached out and put her hand on the other woman’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, I survived. Stabbed him in the wrist with a fork and took off. Never looked back.”

“Do you…” she didn’t know how to proceed without seeming judgmental. It just seemed so sad to think of this young woman making this, dancing at Leather and Lace, her only career goal. For Izzie, it was a part-time thrill to stay in shape and save her sanity. Some of the women here, however, saw no other future for themselves.

“What?”

“Do you think you’ll do something else when you get tired of this?”

Leah nodded, her blond curls bouncing around her pretty, heart-shaped face. “I got my GED last year and I’m taking college classes. I’m planning to be a nurse.”

“Good for you.”

Hearing footsteps upstairs, Izzie glanced at her watch. It was only six—a couple of hours before her first number. Usually Nick showed up later than this. But hearing the deep, male voice from upstairs, she immediately stiffened.

“That’s our sex-on-a-stick bodyguard I hear up there.”

“Damn,” Izzie muttered, immediately whirling around. “Stall him if he comes down the stairs, okay?”

“You still playing the ‘nobody can see me’game with him?”

Izzie nodded. “I don’t want him to see me. Please help me.”

The woman offered her a big smile. “You got it…in exchange for one of those flowers your secret admirer sent you.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Izzie said as she pushed open her dressing room door. She grabbed the vase and thrust the bouquet at the young woman. “You can have all of them. Just don’t let him near my door.”

Either Leah was true to her word, or else Nick hadn’t yet ventured downstairs. Whatever the case Izzie had privacy for the next twenty minutes. Long enough to get her hair extensions clipped in place and put her mask on. Only after she’d yanked it into position did she realize she’d forgotten her false eyelashes.

“Damn Harry for not giving me a lock,” she muttered, glancing at the closed door. If she took the mask off to put her lashes on, she risked Nick walking in on her. No, he hadn’t exactly gone out of his way to be alone with her as the Crimson Rose, but she couldn’t count on her luck lasting forever.

Frowning at her reflection, she did a quick evaluation, wondering if she really needed the lashes. Her eyes had disappeared. She looked like the Marquis de Sade.

“Need the lashes,” she muttered.

She’d been putting false lashes on her eyelids for years, she could probably do it…well, not blindfolded, but masked.

“Sure,” she whispered as she bent toward the mirror. Grabbing one lash, she dabbed special glue on it, then carefully reached into the eyehole of her mask and applied it.

“One down,” she said as she blinked rapidly, pretty proud of herself.

The second one was a little trickier, mainly because it was hard to see out of the first heavily lashed eye. But she managed it. And a moment later, when she heard voices in the hall, she was very glad she hadn’t taken the chance and removed the mask.

“Hey, Nick, how’s it shakin’ baby?” a woman’s voice said. Loudly.

Bless you, Leah.

“I need to talk to Rose.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, I need to talk to all of you, and Rose.”

Huh. Still too chicken to see her alone.

She quickly squelched the thought. That man had the most incredible, powerful body she’d ever seen in her life. He was afraid of nothing.

Besides, refusing to see her alone was exactly what she needed him to do. Even if it wasn’t what she wanted him to do.

Tightening the sash on her robe, she reached for the doorknob and opened the door. Nick’s immediately looked over, stiffening when he saw her there.

He so didn’t want to be attracted to her, his expression said it all. Knowing he didn’t want anyone else made Izzie, the baker he’d made such incredible love to a few days ago, amazingly happy.

“I need to talk to you, and all the other girls, in the greenroom for a few minutes,” he said. Without waiting to see if she was coming, he spun around and walked toward it.

Shrugging, Leah followed. So did Izzie. Once they were inside, Izzie realized all the other dancers—nine or ten of them—were already present, including Delilah with her two-foot-tall pile of red hair on top of her head and three inches of makeup on her face.

In varying states of undress, all the other dancers practically licked their lips when Nick walked into the room. She couldn’t blame them. In his tough/bodyguard mode, he looked incredibly hot. Gone was any trace of the sweetheart who’d helped her deliver baked goods. Or the sensual lover who’d given her more orgasms in one lovemaking session than she’d had in entire previous relationships.

In their place was a frowning—scowling almost—man, dressed all in black, looking not only menacing but dangerous. And absolutely delicious.

“I asked you all in here to discuss your security.”

“Let’s discuss your ass,” one of the dancers cracked.

“I’d rather talk about his shoulders.”

“I vote for his co…”

“Ladies,” another voice said as Harry entered the room. Rolling his eyes, he gave Nick an apologetic look. “Please go ahead, Nick.”

Nick got right back on track, hitting them all over the head with the need for tighter security around the place. Though he was talking to everyone, he looked at Izzie so often, she knew she was the one on his mind.

There wasn’t any reason to single her out. Well, not much reason. Yes, she’d had a few persistent customers. One guy had lunged at her on the stage a few weeks back. Another had burst into her dressing room. And there’d been a few parking-lot lurkers who’d been chased away by one of the bouncers, Bernie, who’d been watching out for her since her first night. Long before Nick had come on the scene.

In this job, she’d expect nothing else. But Nick was relentless in his lecturing. He kept on about how they all needed to look out for one another, report anything suspicious. Yadda yadda. Izzie zoned out somewhere between “drive a different route home from work every night” and “have a buddy when you go to the restroom.”

That one did spark an “I’ll be your bathroom buddy, Nick,” from one of the girls, a glare from Delilah and another long-suffering sigh from Harry.

Finally, though, the meeting broke up and the other dancers raced to finish getting ready. Izzie quickly ducked out of the room, hoping Nick wouldn’t see her. She’d gotten about ten steps from her dressing room when she realized he’d followed.

“Rose, wait a minute.”

She froze, but didn’t turn around.

“I’m particularly concerned about you. The ‘who’s behind the mask’ element puts you at higher risk. Some whackjob might decide to try to find out for himself.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Thanks for the warning.” Now go away.

Before she could look away again, she saw a dark frown pull at Nick’s handsome face. “What in the hell?” he muttered, staring at her face.

Fearing he’d recognized her, she quickly lifted her hands to ensure her mask was still in place. It felt okay—but Nick was still staring at her, blinking in confusion.

“What?” she snapped. Remembering at the last minute that she needed to lower her voice to the sultry whisper he’d grown familiar with, she rephrased. “Is something wrong?”

He reached for her. Izzie immediately lurched back, almost tripping over her own feet. If she hadn’t backed herself up against the wall, she would have.

“Careful,” he muttered, still frowning. “It wouldn’t look good on my résumé if somebody I’m supposed to be guarding trips and breaks her neck.”

Right. He needed to guard her.

Not look at her. Not watch her. Not batter at her defenses with every flex of that body, every whiff of his spicy scent that filled her head whenever he was near.

God, this was hard. So much harder than it had been last weekend, when she hadn’t had him. When she didn’t know what he was capable of.

“You have something on your…it’s….”

Shrugging uncomfortably, he reached for her again. This time, she stayed still. At least until he yanked at her eyelashes hard enough to jerk her eyelid off her face. “Ouch!” she yelped, slapping his hand away.

His hand was still stuck to the lashes so when she smacked him, she only ended up hurting herself more. As his hand flew away, he took the lashes with him, ripping them off her lid.

“I thought it was a bug,” he said with an uncomfortable grimace.

She yanked her false eyelashes out of his fingers. “A bug? You thought I had a bug on my face?”

“It’s not like you’d be able to tell if you did with that stupid mask on. Why do you wear it when you’re not on stage, anyway?”

Oh, boy. A question she definitely couldn’t answer.

“You don’t have to keep up this mysterious woman act for the staff, do you? So why not take it off and take a deep breath?” Swiping a frustrated hand through his short, spiky hair, he added, “Or at least put your damn false eyelashes on more securely?”

She almost growled in annoyance. He was the reason she’d had to put the lashes on through the eyehole in the mask. “I want a lock on my dressing room door,” she whispered harshly.

He glanced at the knob. “You don’t have one?”

“No.” Thinking quickly, she added, “And that’s one reason I keep the mask on all the time. I have no place to go for complete privacy. A reporter who did an article on the club a few weeks ago came creeping around down here one day, trying to get a picture of the real me.”

Nick moved in close, towering over her, burning her with his heat. Putting his hands on the wall on either side of her, he trapped her in. “Who is he?”

Izzie nibbled her lip, trying with every ounce of her strength not to throw her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. Or to shove him away so he’d stop looking searchingly at her, seeing her eyes…how could he not recognize her eyes? How could he be this close and not know the smell of her body?

It was good that he didn’t, she knew that. But it was also starting to tick her off.

“Just some reporter,” she murmured.

“Have you had any problems with him since?”

“No, he hasn’t been around since the story came out. Would you relax?”

“You tell me if you see him.” Then, staring hard at her, he slowly pulled back, releasing her from the prison of his arms. An odd look appeared on his face, as if he’d suddenly realized just how close they’d been and wasn’t happy at himself for it. Clearing his throat, he added, “I’m sorry I hurt your eye.”

“It’s all right.” Slipping away from him, she headed again to her door, relieved to have escaped his scrutiny. Good thing he’d let her go, because the longer he stayed so close to her, the more angry she was going to get that he didn’t know her.

Especially because a mask would never prevent her from knowing him.

Huh. Men. So painfully unobservant.

“I hope you’re taking me seriously,” he said, that gruff, no-nonsense tone returning to his voice, his apology obviously done.

“I am, I am.” She practically bit the words out from between her clenched teeth, ready to smack him if he didn’t shut up and let her go get herself back under control. And fix her eyelashes.

“No more running out to your car alone to get something you forgot.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“No more coming back upstairs and mingling close to closing time.”

She seldom did that, anyway. Whirling around, she offered him a sharp salute, and snapped, “Got it, chief.” Then, determined not to listen to another word, spun on her heel and strode into her dressing room, slamming the door shut behind her.

It was only after she’d shut him out that Izzie realized how stupid she’d just been. Nick had annoyed her so much—both because of his overbearing protective bodyguard schtick and his inability to see what was right in front of his face—that she’d completely forgotten her role in this. The role she played as the Crimson Rose.

Because during those last three words, when anger had overtaken common sense, she’d forgotten to speak in her sexy, husky voice.

She’d been pure, 100 percent Izzie.

**7**

Leather and Lace employed a few burly bouncers to watch the doors and to stand in the back of the crowd during the show. Their presence was mainly to inspire intimidation to keep the audience on its best behavior. And they did their job well, especially the tallest one, Bernie, whose beefy build concealed a guy with a deep belly laugh and a good sense of humor.

Nick, however, wasn’t technically one of them. His job involved more than rousting out rowdy drinkers or breaking up any fights. He was there to make sure nobody touched the dancers. Especially Rose. And the bouncers were his backup.

He typically moved around during the performances—sometimes in the audience, sometimes backstage, sometimes downstairs. He kept a low profile, his eyes always scanning the crowd, looking for the first sign of trouble.

Tonight, he was standing close to the dance floor, in a shadowy corner just left of the stage. He couldn’t say why. It wasn’t as if he expected anyone in the front row to leap up and try to grab Rose or one of the others. Yes, it’d happened. But usually not until at least the second set, late in the night, when the patrons had consumed more than a few fifteen dollar shots of top-shelf whiskey. And when they’d forgotten how big the bouncers were or how stupid they were going to feel having to call their wives to get bailed out of jail.

Tonight, Nick was close to the stage because he wanted to watch her.

Something had happened earlier, something that was still driving him crazy. Oh, she drove him crazy in any number of ways, already—mainly because of that blatant sexuality oozing off the woman. But this didn’t have anything to do with her attractiveness, or Nick’s reaction to it.

It was something else. Something he couldn’t define. Ever since he and Rose had exchanged words outside her dressing room, a voice had been whispering in his head that there was something he wasn’t seeing. Some truth he had overlooked.

He had replayed their entire conversation, thinking about every word, wondering what had seemed so off with it. Aside from her being such a smart-ass about the self-protection tips he’d asked her to follow, they hadn’t been confrontational. Hadn’t been unpleasant in any way, other than when he’d accidentally almost ripped her eyelid off.

So why are you so tense?

Good question. He was wound as tight as a ball of rubber bands, his jaw flexing, his hands clenching. His heart wasn’t maintaining its usual pace, it was rushed, as if adrenaline had flooded his body.

When they introduced her, something did flood his body. Heated awareness. Maybe adrenaline, too.

She didn’t spot him when she started, and from here Nick had a perfect view of every move she made. She was using the pole tonight, taking advantage of it to showcase her strength and flexibility. Not to mention inviting every man in the audience to imagine being the one she was writhing against, the one cupped between her incredibly long legs.

He tensed, then thrust away the flash of jealousy. It was none of his business what Rose did—in her professional life or in her personal one.

She’d begun removing her petals now, they fluttered onto the stage, one even wafting so close it was only about a foot away from Nick’s corner position. Something made him step closer, to reach for it. Whether to give it back to her, or to save it as a souvenir, he couldn’t say. Fingering it lightly, he stuck it in his pocket and kept watching.

When this close, he had a very good view of the Crimson Rose…a view of a trim waist made for his hands. Of supple legs he could almost feel wrapped around his hips. Of slender fingers that had tangled easily in his hair. A delicate throat for nibbling. Lush round breasts for cupping. And when she removed the petals covering those breasts, his mouth flooded at the image of sucking on those dark, pebbled nipples.

Every bit of her was familiar…to his eyes, and to the rest of his body. He knew what it would be like to taste her, to touch her, to hear her soft little moans of pleasure.

To hear her….

Her voice. That voice. That body.

“Oh, my God,” he whispered, certain he’d lost his mind but unable to chase the thought away. Because as he watched the performer disappear behind the curtain after her dance, he saw a face behind that mask. A face he saw in his dreams every night.

Izzie’s face.

“It can’t be,” he mumbled, staggering back into the shadow. He hit the wall in the corner and slid down it, bending over so his hands landed on his knees. Sucking in a few deep breaths, he kept his head down, thinking over everything he knew about Izzie Natale. And about the Crimson Rose.

She’d taken dance lessons throughout her childhood, he remembered that. She’d gone to New York to become a performer. On the stage. She hadn’t exactly said she’d been an actress.

My God, had she been a stripper at some high end Manhattan club? And when she’d been forced to return to Chicago after her father’s stroke, had she taken up the same profession here—wearing a mask so she wouldn’t possibly be recognized?

Their bodies were so alike—how could he not have seen it before? Then again, he had never seen Izzie naked before, until two nights ago, so he couldn’t possibly have known that her legs were as long and supple as a dancer’s. That her hips were full enough to make a man hard just at the thought of getting his hands on them. That her breasts were big, high and inviting.

She’d hidden a lot behind the apron. So much that he hadn’t registered that Izzie and Rose were the same height, had the same builds. Or that their hair was close in color—the length of Rose’s obviously caused by some kind of hairpiece or wig.

Now it registered. But it still seemed impossible. Absolutely unbelievable that cute little Izzie, Gloria’s baby sister…the girl who’d crushed the cookies for God’s sake…was the woman driving men all over Chicago insane with lust.

Including him. Especially him.

At that moment, he knew it was true. He’d been reacting to Rose and to Izzie the very same way from the moment he’d seen each of them. With pure, undiluted want based on absolutely nothing but instinct and chemistry.

They were the same. His body had known that immediately. His brain had finally caught up.

Somehow, he managed to stay on the sidelines and finish doing his job throughout the long night until the club closed at 2:00 a.m. He stayed upstairs, sending one of the other guys down every so often to do a sweep outside the dressing rooms. He didn’t trust himself to go down there and confront her yet.

If he did, it might get loud. And neither one of them might be ready to go back to work after they had the blowout fight Nick suspected they were going to have.

It was definitely going to be a blowout, and probably not for the reasons Izzie would suspect. Yeah, it bothered him that his sister-in-law’s kid sister was working as a stripper. But he was no prude, nor was he judgmental. He’d seen her act…she was not only good, she was damn good.

As someone who was—and might again be—Izzie’s lover, he was not happy. Couldn’t deny that. But again, not so much because of other men looking at her, but more because she was working in a very risky field. Putting herself in danger.

The real reason he was fuming was because she’d lied to him. She’d been deceitful, letting him chase after Izzie by day while Rose pursued him by night. The woman had nearly sent him out of his mind—for what? Some twisted game? A power trip?

He didn’t know. He just knew he wanted answers. And when the club finally shut down and everyone began to drift away, he walked downstairs, determined to get them.

Nick knew she hadn’t left yet, he’d been watching her car in the parking lot, which was emptying as everyone departed for the night. She usually left much earlier—since her last number took place around midnight. And it didn’t take her long to get ready since she didn’t bother taking her mask off before getting into her car and roaring away. Obviously for his benefit.

But she was still here. So he could only assume one thing: she was waiting in her dressing room, either hiding in the hopes that he’d leave first. Or preparing herself for his arrival.

Because she had to know he’d figured her out. All she’d have had to do was look out at him in the audience during her second set and see the steam pouring out of his head. And the fire burning out of his eyeballs.

Reaching her closed door, he remembering she’d said it had no lock. He gave her a one-knock warning, then entered without waiting for an invitation. It wasn’t like she had anything to hide…he’d seen her body, both as Izzie and as Rose.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked, staring at him from across the room, where she’d been slipping a jacket on. She was dressed casually, in a loose, comfortable-looking pair of baggy pants and a tank top. If she hadn’t been wearing the mask, she’d have looked just like the girl next door.

Like Izzie.

God, what a blind idiot he was not to have seen it before. The eyes were the same—though “Rose’s” were shadowed by the mask. Those lips couldn’t be denied. The shape of her jaw, the length of her neck. Everything about the Crimson Rose was Izzie under a sexy microscope. Everything about Izzie was the Crimson Rose in nice girl trappings.

“What do you want, Nick?”

“You’re here late,” he murmured, stepping inside and shutting the door behind him.

“Um, yes, I guess so,” she replied.

“You don’t usually stay until closing time.”

She tilted her head back, her chin up, displaying outright bravado. She was going to try to bluff her way through this, since she couldn’t be certain she’d been busted. “One of the other dancers got sick and had to leave. I wasn’t sure if Harry would need me to cover for her.”

He hadn’t. Nick knew that much. If he’d had to watch “Rose” in a third performance on the stage, he would have lost it. He didn’t know that he’d have been able to keep himself from going up there and confronting her right in front of the audience.

She fell silent, just watching him. Waiting. Nick said nothing, not giving himself away yet. He wanted to see what she’d do. How far Izzie would go to maintain her secret.

God, it killed him that she didn’t trust him. He had no illusions about why she’d put that mask on her face in the beginning. Her parents would be upset if they found out. He could even see why she’d kept quiet the first couple of times he’d worked here—before she knew she could trust him.

But now he was her lover. She’d trusted him with her body. She should have trusted him with her secret.

“Well,” she said, “I guess it’s time to go.”

“So soon?” he murmured, leaning back against the closed door, blocking her escape. He crossed his arms and stared. “But this is the first time we’ve been alone in quite a while.”

She licked her lips nervously. Nick almost felt that moist tongue on his own mouth and had to force himself to stay cool.

“It’s late.”

“I know. It’s also nearly deserted. You and I might be the very last ones here,” he said. Watching her closely, he saw the way she gulped as that truth dawned on her. They were practically alone in this big building. No one would hear if she decided to shout for help.

As if Nick would ever hurt her. He’d sooner cut off his own arm. That didn’t mean, however, that he didn’t intend to torment her just as much as he possibly could.

She was nervous, quivering, her whole body in miniscule motion. And he knew why. He could just put her out of her misery and confront her on her deception, but something made him string her along a little more. Maybe it was the way she’d been stringing him along. Maybe it was just because he liked seeing the wild flutter of her pulse in her neck. Plus hearing the choppy, audible breaths she couldn’t contain.

He liked having her at a disadvantage for once. He also knew how to put her at more of one.

“So, Rose,” he said, finally straightening and stepping closer, “about our very first conversation?”

She slid back, trying to increase the space between them again, but couldn’t go far before hitting the folding screen. Nick pressed closer, relentless in his silent, stalking approach. “I’ve been giving it a lot of thought.”

“You have?” she whispered. “I haven’t been, not at all.”

What a liar. “Really? Because I think by the way you watch me, you’ve been thinking about it a lot.” Lifting an arm, he put it on the top of the screen, blocking her with his body. They were close enough for him to feel the brush of her pants.

“I need to go.”

“I need you to stay.” Tracing the soft line of her neck with the tip of one finger, he added, “I’ve changed my mind about your invitation.”

Her mouth opened. “You don’t mean…”

He tipped her mouth closed, sliding his thumb across her bottom lip. That juicy, full lip he had tasted the other night and wanted to lightly bite now. “You’re very attractive, Rose.”

“But…”

“I can’t take my eyes off you.”

Though she sighed at his touch, her soft body also stiffened. Her fists curled. She obviously didn’t know whether to melt or erupt. It was all he could do not to laugh.

“You were so dead-set against it,” she said in that hot whisper. “Why now?”

“Men can change their minds, too. You’re all I’ve been thinking about for weeks.”

The fists rose to her hips. The sultriness disappeared. She looked indignant, verging on angry. “Oh, yeah?”

“Most definitely.” He dropped a hand onto her shoulder, feeling the flexing of her muscles. He kneaded it softly, easing away the angry tension, knowing he was only going to build it back up again. “I want to touch you, everywhere.”

She shook under his hand.

“Want to taste you.” Knowing how to make the top of her head blow off, both with lust and with fury, he leaned close. Moving his mouth to the side of her neck, he placed an openmouthed kiss at her nape, licking lightly at her skin, flavored the tiniest bit with salt from her energetic dancing. “Aww, Rose, do you know what I want to do to you?”

She just whimpered, not saying a word.

“I’d like to smear something luscious and sticky all over you, then lick it from every sweet crevice of your body.”

That did it. Izzie/Rose shook off her half-hungry, half-worried daze and reacted with gut fury. She lifted one of those fists and whammed it toward his face. If Nick hadn’t been prepared for it, he might have been caught in the jaw. As it was, he deflected the blow by grabbing her hand in midair.

He didn’t let go, holding her tightly as she struggled to pull away. “Damn you, Nick Santori,” she spat out, completely forgetting her sultry whisper.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart,” he snapped back, “you afraid to get a little oral?” Sliding an arm around her shoulders, still gripping her first, he added, “Or do you just like to give it rather than get it?”

“Put anything in my mouth and I’ll bite it off.”

“Oooh, rough. I like it.” Tracing the opening in the velvety fabric with his finger, he added, “I couldn’t fit anything in your mouth with that thing on your face. Especially not my cock, as you well know.” He pressed hard against her, pushing her back against the wall, grinding into her. Because while her actions and her continued deceptions drove him crazy with anger, her nearness was driving him crazy with lust.

He was rock hard for her, raging with need.

She whimpered and stopped wriggling for a second, her hips bucking toward his in response—once, then again. She lifted one leg slightly, tilting her pelvis so his bulge hit her in the spot she most needed it to. “Oh, God,” she mumbled, “I get the point, you’ve got a lot to offer.”

She’d whispered that, calming herself down, and Nick almost groaned at her determination.

She still hadn’t quite let herself believe it had already gone too far, that her masquerade was over. Izzie had lost her temper at the thought that he’d play the same sexy, wicked games with another woman that he’d played with her the other night in the van. And she’d reacted with honest—if momentary—fury.

Now, having realized it, she was almost desperate to convince herself she could salvage the situation. She was hoping he hadn’t been talking to Izzie, who knew firsthand what he had to give her since she’d taken him into her body the other night. And that he was instead talking to Rose, who was right now feeling the size of his cock as it pressed against her.

Bending to the side, he grasped her bent leg, gripping her thigh to tug her up for a better fit. She groaned as their bodies came together more intimately. He could feel the heat of her—her moisture—through her thin pants and his own. She was wet and aroused, flushed and ready.

Yet still too damn stubborn to whip off the mask and take him on open, honest terms.

“So you ready to play those kinds of games?” he muttered as he rocked against her, inhaling her little cries of pleasure.

“I don’t like to be manhandled,” she muttered through hoarse breaths. The excited pulse in her throat and the desperate tone in her voice made a lie of that statement. She liked it. A lot.

He bit lightly on her bottom lip. “Yes, you do.”

She started to shake her head, but he kissed her, thrusting his tongue against hers, loving the silky feel of her mouth almost as much as he hated the scrape of the mask against his cheek. That mask was what finally brought him back to his senses. He didn’t want the masked woman, he wanted the real one. The one who trusted him and exhibited honesty. And guts.

He’d had enough. Enough of the lying, enough of the deception. Even enough of tormenting her.

So he dropped her leg. “I think we’re done.”

She sagged back against the wall. Even with the mask he could see the way her eyes widened with shock. And hurt. “What?”

It wasn’t easy to stay back, keep his hands off her, ignore the heat in small room and the overwhelming smell of sexual want filling his head. But he did it. “I changed my mind.”

Turning his back to her, he took one step toward the door. Then he heard her whisper, “You son of a bitch, you do know.”

He put his hand on the knob. Glancing over his shoulder to meet her stare, he frowned and sighed. “Yeah, Izzie. I do.”

Then he walked out.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in the nearly three months that she’d worked at Leather and Lace, Izzie called in sick Sunday night. She told herself she was a coward ten times over. But that didn’t change the way she felt.

She couldn’t face him. Not after what had happened in her dressing room Saturday night.

His anger had been undeniable. His revenge understandable.

But it was his hurt—that glimpse of sadness on his face as he’d looked at her over his shoulder before walking out the door—that had been the real punch in the gut.

He’d been pursuing her relentlessly for weeks and had finally caught her that night in the van. He’d been nothing but honest about what he was going through—with his family, his life, his attraction to her.

And she’d been lying to him from the first moment. Lying about her secret job, lying about her feelings for him. Lying about what she really wanted.

Hell, she’d even been lying to herself about those last two. She’d been denying her feelings for him though they had existed for as long as she could remember. And she’d pretended she wasn’t dying for him physically when the thought consumed her every waking moment.

Even her parents had zoned right in on her mood when she’d gone to visit them Sunday. She’d tried so hard to paste on a smile, especially around her father, who was just now starting to seem like his old self. But her mother had immediately noticed something was wrong and had questioned her about it.

She’d covered…promising everything was fine.

One more lie to add to her list. She was becoming quite adept at it. And frankly, she hated herself for that.

“You deserve to feel this way,” she told herself as she sat in the closed bakery a few evenings later. It was her quiet time again, when the café staff had left for the day but the evening kitchen and delivery help hadn’t arrived. She was sipping a big, fattening cappuccino laden not only with whipped cream but a swirl of caramel. Feeling like absolute scum.

“Iz?” a voice called. A female one.

Turning on her stool, she saw her cousin, Bridget, enter through the employees’ entrance in the back.

“Hey,” Izzie mumbled.

“I’ve been calling.”

“I don’t usually answer the phone after hours.”

Bridget frowned. “I mean your cell phone.”

“Turned off.” Izzie blew on the steaming coffee drink. “There’s more if you want to make yourself one.”

Bridget looked longingly at the mug and fresh whipped cream and got to work. She remained quiet as she did it, but Izzie saw the worried sidelong glances her cousin cast her way.

When Bridget had finished—topping her hot drink with a sprinkle of cinnamon—she took a seat on the opposite side of the counter. “You look like hell. You haven’t been sleeping.”

“Thanks. And you’re right. I haven’t been.”

Bridget sighed. “Me, neither.”

Finally looking seriously at her cousin, she saw the dark circles under her pretty eyes and the droop of her normally smiling mouth. It was an unusual combination. Bridget was not the cheerful, constantly giddy sort, but she was always quietly happy. And her face reflected that.

Not today, though. “What’s wrong?”

“I hate men.”

“I hear ya,” Izzie mumbled, though her heart wasn’t in it. She didn’t hate Nick, not at all. She just hated that look of disappointment on his face. Hated how it made her feel.

Low. Rotten.

Yes, she’d had a reason to keep her identity hidden from most of the world. But once she’d let Nick lay her down in the back of that van and do things to her that would cause a real good little Catholic girl to faint of shock, all masks should have been torn away.

“I don’t understand them.”

Sensing her cousin was talking about one man in particular, Izzie set aside her own emotional misery. “What’s going on?”

“It’s that guy at work I mentioned a few weeks ago. Dean.”

“The new salesman?”

Bridget nodded. “I finally met him for coffee one day, kind of figuring it was our first date. But obviously I totally misread him. He made it clear he was just interested in getting to know a coworker. And he hasn’t asked me out again.”

Izzie frowned, disliking the look of unhappiness on Bridget’s face. “Have you made it clear you’re interested?”

“I went out with him, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but did you make it clear that you were looking at him as more than just a coworker?”

“How was I supposed to do that?”

“I don’t know—flirting, smiling, brushing up against him. All the typical weapons of the female romantic arsenal.”

“I…don’t suppose I did. We talked mostly about business…at least when I wasn’t griping about my landlord.”

“So, he might not even know you’re interested in him that way. Which means, you need to let him know, then figure out if he gave you the brush or retreated out of self-preservation.”

Bridget blinked. “Self-preservation?”

“Some men won’t make a move on a woman unless they’re sure she’s interested. It takes a lot of self-confidence.”

Self-confidence like Nick’s. It had taken a boatload of it for him to keep pursuing her when she’d kept turning him down.

“Is that what you would do? Make it more obvious?”

“Yeah. I would.”

Her cousin mumbled something, then cleared her throat. “You know, I’d think you’re right. But there’s something about Dean that makes me think he’s not quite as nice and shy as he seems.”

Izzie instantly stiffened. “Has he done anything to you?”

“Done? Oh, goodness, no. He’s barely looked at me since the day we went out. But there have been one or two times when I’ve caught him staring at me—with this, oh, God, it sounds so stupid, but I’d swear he looks almost hungrily at me when he thinks I’m not looking.”

“Hungry’s good. If it’s coming from someone you want to want you.” Not just a room full of horny men turned on by a naked dancer. Her audience sometimes annoyed the hell out of her. Sometimes it seemed like dancing naked alone would be better than dancing naked in front of a crowd. Of course, she wouldn’t get paid for that. A definite drawback.

“Not if he constantly hides it. And there’s more, he sometimes just comes across so much harder—tougher—than this nice, quiet, soft-spoken salesman. It’s almost like he’s trying really hard to be on his best behavior.”

Izzie didn’t like the sound of that. Guys who tried that hard to be on their best behavior had to be pretty bad during their not-quite-best behavior. She said as much to her cousin, but Bridget waved away her concerns.

Though they talked a little while longer, Izzie couldn’t keep her mind on anything. Her cousin noticed her distraction and tried to get her to talk about it, but she wasn’t ready to.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Bridget to keep her secret. Or that she feared her cousin would be shocked by it. But the truth was, it didn’t seem right for Bridget to be the one she talked to about this. Not when Nick was the first one who’d realized what she was doing on Saturday and Sunday nights.

She wanted to talk to him.

She wanted him. Period.

She just didn’t know if it was too late to get him. Judging by the way he’d slammed out of her dressing room Saturday night, she greatly feared it was.

IT TOOK EVERY OUNCE of willpower Nick possessed to avoid going into Natale’s Bakery that week. Something inside him insisted that he go up there and confront Izzie now that he felt at least moderately calm. Unlike the way he’d felt Saturday night at the club.

Something else demanded that he stay away, let her figure out what the hell it was she wanted from him and clue him in when she was ready. Maybe he’d accommodate her. Maybe he wouldn’t. It depended entirely upon what she wanted: him in her life, him out of her life? A secret affair, or a public one? A lover…a friend?

There were a lot of different possibilities. He honestly wasn’t sure which he was most hoping for. The only thing he knew he wanted was for Izzie to come clean with him about everything. Then they could figure out the rest.

He assumed it would take a while. Considering she’d called in sick from work Sunday night, he had the feeling she was going to avoid the confrontation for as long as possible. But, unless she quit working at the club, she wasn’t going to be able to avoid him forever.

Quit working at the club. He couldn’t deny that his first reaction had been to want her to.

He didn’t want other men looking at Izzie. He didn’t want other men fantasizing about her. And he most certainly didn’t want anyone getting fixated on her…fixated enough to stalk her, threaten her or hurt her.

Once he’d calmed down, though, he realized he understood exactly why she’d gone to work at Leather and Lace. It was probably for the same reasons he’d gone to work there.

She was every bit as out of her element in this old-new environment as he was. Fitting in about as well as he did.

Fitting in…hell, what he was doing right now was proof he didn’t fit in. It was Thursday night and he was holding a brown paper bag clutched to his side. Walking to his building, his eyes scanned side to side in the hope that he didn’t bump into his parents or another elderly relative who’d rat him out.

Chinese carry-out was probably grounds for his mother to call for an exorcism. Especially since he’d refused yet another doggy bag full of calzones and Pop’s lasagna tonight. If he bit another piece of pasta, he was going to explode like the giant marshmallow man in Ghost Busters.

“Tough,” he muttered, his mouth watering for the Kung Pao Chicken he could smell from the bag. Not to mention the eggrolls, fried rice…he’d bought enough to feed an army.

Nick knew a little something about clandestine missions. Enough to know that when you were on one, you accomplished as much as you could the first time, in the hopes that you could delay going back. And a big bag of food meant leftovers. Enough to last a week or so, meaning no more dangerous, secret excursions to Mr. Wu’s for a while.

Unless, of course, he had unexpected company for dinner. Female company. Like the female standing right outside his apartment door, her hand lifted to knock.

“Izzie?” he mumbled as soon as he stepped off the elevator, wondering not only how she’d gotten into the building, but also how she’d found out where he lived.

She whirled around, her eyes wide and bright. She hadn’t knocked yet, which meant she hadn’t quite prepared herself to face him. He’d caught her off guard.

Nick tried not to wonder what this meant, tried to remain casual. Tried not to notice how curvy and inviting her body looked in her tight tank top and sexy short skirt.

It would be like not noticing an earthquake shaking your house down around you. She was just too beautiful to ignore.

As they continued to stare, he finally murmured, “Hi.”

“Hi.”

They said nothing else for a moment. Long enough for him to notice the smudges of shadow beneath her pretty brown eyes and the paleness in her cheeks. She was practically biting a hole in her bottom lip as she tried to figure out what to say.

He couldn’t help taking pity on her…at least taking pity on that gorgeous lip before she bit a hole right through it. Shifting his bag to his other hip, he walked to the door and lifted his keys to the lock. “You hungry?”

She glanced at the bag. “No pizza?”

“Nope. I’ve got egg foo young, lo mein, couple of different chicken dishes, you name it.”

“Oh, God, feed me,” she exclaimed, following him into the apartment with a smile on her face.

Once inside, she tossed her purse onto his couch, a large one that dominated the small living area of the very small apartment. He didn’t mind—compared to sharing a barracks with twenty other guys, this was pure luxury. He’d picked the place because it was clean and high, with a great view of the college a few blocks away. And he’d barely started furnishing it, figuring he’d get the most important things first.

Big, comfortable reclining leather couch. Big TV for watching football. He could live for a while on that…plus the huge, comfortable bed dominating his bedroom.

A flow of warmth washed through him at the thought of that bed. He’d imagined Izzie in it many times. He’d dreamed of her in it many times.

Now, here she was. So close he could smell her perfume and hear her breaths. Like a fantasy come to life.

“Minimalist, huh?” she asked as she stared pointedly at the couch and the big screen TV.

“I’m working on it.”

He couldn’t believe how normal they sounded. Like two old friends getting together for dinner. Considering the last two times they’d been alone they’d been either fighting or practically ripping each other’s clothes off, he figured that was a pretty good trick.

“I, uh, wanted to…”

“Save it,” he muttered, not wanting to start their discussion yet. “I’m hungry. Let’s eat first.”

Relief washed over her pretty face as she followed him into the kitchen. When she lifted something up onto the counter, he realized she hadn’t come empty handed.

“Peace offering.” She pointed toward a six-pack of beer.

“Are we at war?” he asked, repeating a question she’d once asked him.

“We’ve been doing a lot of battling.”

Yes, they had. And he, for one, was tired of it.

Getting some bowls, plates and silverware, he spread all the food out on his small kitchen table, and they each loaded up, smorgasbord style. “Where…”

“Do you mind the floor?” he asked.

Shrugging, she followed him into the living room, watching as he sat down in front of the sofa, stretching his legs out in front of him, with his plate on his lap. It wasn’t quite as easy for her, since she wore a skirt.

Nick forced himself to focus on his food, not on her long, sexy legs so close to his on the floor. Picking up the TV remote, he flicked the power button, then channeled up to a station playing soft music. It was background noise, filling the silence that grew thicker as they ate…as they drew closer to the conversation they both knew they were about to have.

When they’d finished, he took their plates into the kitchen. She followed, working on putting away the food. Within a few moments, there was nothing left to do—no dinner to eat, no dishes to clean—nothing to do but face each other.

“I don’t want to do this,” he said, surprising them both.

“Do what?”

“Fight with you. Do battle. Whatever you want to call it.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to either. But I need to tell you…I need to get this out.”

Crossing his arms, he leaned back against the kitchen counter and waited. “Okay.”

She closed her eyes, then spoke in a rush. “I’m sorry I was dishonest with you about being the Crimson Rose. At first, I didn’t trust you—didn’t trust anyone. I’m sure you know that my parents wouldn’t be happy about what I’m doing, and I don’t want to do anything to add to my father’s health problems.”

“I understand that.” He did. It made perfect sense for her to go incognito at her risqué job. “But once you and I…

“I know.” She raked a hand through her brown hair, which was loose around her shoulders tonight, rather than up in its usual ponytail. “I should have told you immediately. Instead I panicked and pushed you away.”

“Yeah. I gotta say, I felt pretty damn humiliated when I figured it out. I should have known you.”

“I am a performer. I know about portraying someone else.”

“About that…when did you start in this line of work?”

“Stripping’s not my line of work. Dancing is. I was with the Rockettes until a year ago.”

“You were one of those kick-line chicks?”

She glared at him. “It’s harder than it looks.”

“Right. Tough life dancing with giant nutcrackers and Santa Claus.” He quickly put his hand up. “I’m joking. You must have been damn good to make it.”

“I was,” she said, with complete confidence. “But I got bored with it and went with a modern dance company in Manhattan. Then came the injury. Then came Dad’s stroke. Now I’m here.”

Her life in a nutshell.

“And now what?” he asked, knowing that was the question he really wanted answered. Where was she going from here? Where did she see him fitting into that?

“I don’t know. Right now I’m biding time, trying to figure out what I want.” Her jaw tightening, she continued. “But it’s not the bakery, and it’s not the neighborhood. It’s not Gloria’s life—a repeat of my mother’s. And it’s not my sister Mia’s life as a hard-ass lawyer with tons of drive and no happiness.”

“I understand,” he murmured.

Nodding, she said, “I’m sure you do. If anyone would, it’s you.” The tension easing from her shoulders, Izzie walked across the small kitchen, covering the distance between them in a few short steps. Putting her hand on his chest, she looked up at him, her eyes bright. “Which is why I have to repeat this: I am sorry, Nick. Please say you’ll forgive me.”

He hesitated, then offered her a short nod. Appearing relieved, she began to pull her hand away, but he covered it with his, not letting her go. “Where do we go from here?”

She hesitated, so he pressed her. “We can’t be just friends.”

“We can’t be a couple.”

Their eyes locked, they both said the same four words at exactly the same moment. “We can be lovers.”

Nick chuckled as Izzie smiled. Tightening her fingers in his shirt, she scraped the tips of them along the base of his neck. “Where I’d like to go right now is into your bedroom to see if it’s furnished any better than your living room is.”

Lifting her hand to his mouth, he pressed a warm kiss on the inside of her palm. “Oh, it is, angel. You bet it is.”

**8**

MAKING LOVE TO NICK in the back of the van had been erotic and spontaneous and incredibly hot. It had also been a week ago and in that week, Izzie had begun to wonder whether it had really been as amazing as she remembered.

As soon as Nick led her into his bedroom, turned her to face the mirrored door of his closet, and slowly began to kiss her neck, she knew it had been. He was so slow—so patient—so deliberate. The man had incredible control and he had used it to drive her absolutely wild.

Izzie had flipped the light switch on as soon as they entered the room, determined to see all, savor all, enjoy every minute of this experience. When Nick studied her in the mirror, consuming her with his eyes, she was very glad she had. She liked watching him watch her. Liked having his eyes on her. And she wanted to watch everything he did to her.

“You’ve been driving me absolutely insane since I saw you that night in the restaurant,” he whispered, his lips hovering just above the sensitive skin below her ear.

“You’ve been driving me insane since you landed on top of me on the cookie table.”

He turned her to face him. “Izzie, I’m sorry I didn’t…”

“I was a kid. You needed to wait until I caught up a little,” she said with a smile.

He glanced down at her, his stare lingering on the scooped neck of her shirt and the clingy fabric hugging her breasts. “You caught up a lot.”

She reached up and unfastened the top button of his shirt, then moved to the next. “Oh, more than you know,” she whispered, feeling incredibly free. A sensual woman capable of knocking him back on his heels the way he’d knocked her back last week.

Their first time together had been about him overwhelming her senses. Tonight it was Izzie’s turn.

She was not going to lie back and take the pleasure he wanted to give her, she intended to give with every lustful molecule in her body. He’d offered her an experience she would remember until the day she died. Now she planned to do the same.

Using the one thing she did best.

She quickly scanned the room, thinking ahead. “Where’d that come from?” she asked, pointing to an old-fashioned, straight backed chair in the corner. It, a simple, immaculately clean dresser and an enormous four-poster bed were the only things in the room. The chair didn’t look at all new like the rest.

“My parents insisted on giving me stuff…I had to take something and there’s no room for it in the living room.”

“It won’t fit with that TV that’s more suited for the Jolly Green Giant’s living room,” she said with a low laugh. Licking her lips, she pointed to the chair. “Go sit down.”

One of his eyebrows rose, but he obeyed, watching with interest to see what she was up to. Izzie glanced around the room, looking for a radio, a boombox, something.

No luck. Nick’s bedroom was nearly empty, with just the furniture and a smaller TV on the dresser. There wasn’t a piece of clothing on the floor, or a speck of dust anywhere. It was nearly Spartan…military, she assumed. And it lacked the warmth she knew Nick possessed.

She hoped that someday he allowed that warmth to spill free and become part of his home as well as a part of his life.

“You got me where you wanted me,” he drawled from the chair. He put his hands behind his head, his fingers laced, and leaned back against the wall. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his forearms bulged and flexed. His big, strong legs were sprawled out in front of him and for a second, Izzie was tempted to climb right onto his lap.

She could unzip his jeans, tug them out of the way, release that big erection she could see from here. It would be delicious to slip her panties off, lift her skirt, then slide down onto him to ride him to her heart’s content.

Not yet. First she needed to delight his senses the way he’d delighted hers last week. He’d focused on her sense of touch and smell—she could still inhale and remember that sweet, cheesy filling he’d smeared all over her. And her body tingled at the memory of his lips and tongue removing that filling.

They’d played games with food. She intended to whet his taste buds with something else.

The sight of her body.

Suddenly remembering what he’d done with the TV in the other room, she grabbed the remote control and turned on the bedroom one. Punching in a few numbers—familiar, since she liked listening to the same station at her own apartment—she landed on a channel that played sultry Latina music.

Because luck was a woman, the song was a slower one with a sultry back-beat and a sensuous rhythm. Easy to dance to.

“What are you…”

“Watch me,” she whispered. Watch me and I’ll make you burn.

She began to move, closing her eyes and letting the music roll through her. Since childhood Izzie had had an affinity for music—all types of music. It had always made her want to move. To sway or to spin, to leap or to bend. She just had a dancing gene that demanded release whenever the right beat hit her ears and rolled on down through her body.

This one was perfect for seduction.

Keeping focused on her own instincts—giving herself pleasure by the simple act of moving—she knew Nick would gain pleasure, too. At first she simply danced. Her eyes still closed, she threw her head back and tangled her hand in her hair. Rocking her hips, she gyrated against an imaginary partner, sliding down and up against an invisible thigh, quivering under the touch of a hand that wasn’t there.

She heard Nick groan softly. Licking her lips, she slid her hand down her own body. Her hips still rocking, she touched her stomach, then slid her hand lower, resting her fingertips on her pelvis. Her other hand she moved across her chest, scraping her nipples, already rock hard in anticipation and excitement.

“Izzie…”

“Shh.”

She didn’t look at him, didn’t let him distract her. Instead, she tugged her top free of her waistband. Flicking at the snap and pushing down the zipper of her skirt, she rocked until the thing fell to the floor. She kicked it out of the way, never losing the beat, her body in constant, sensual motion.

Her top came next. She dragged it up—slowly, so slowly—letting the fabric fall back an inch for every two she raised it. She could hear Nick’s ragged breathing over the music. Could hear her own heart pounding in her chest, too. Every move she made was an invitation and a promise.

She pulled the top off, sensual even when untangling her hair from the material. Clad in nothing but a skimpy bra and thong panties, and her high heeled sandals, she bent over and swung her head, letting her hair fly free.

“You’re killing me here,” he whispered.

“So take care of yourself. Get ready for me,” she replied, coming closer—but not too close. “Do what you want to do when you watch me dance.”

“I want to have you when I watch you dance.”

Tsking, she shook her head in disbelief, still swaying like a woman being sexually aroused by the touch of the musical notes on her body. “Pretend you don’t know you’re going to have me, Nick. Let me see what you’d do then.”

She turned around, her back to him, returning her attention to her dance. Bending at the waist, she put her hands on her thighs and did a booty rock that she knew would drive him out of his ever-loving mind.

His low groan told her it had worked. But Izzie ignored it,

Grabbing the end post of Nick’s bed, she used it, hooking one leg around it and bending back. The wood was hard against her swollen sex, but she needed it—got off on it—rubbing up and down in a way she never rode the pole at the club.

“Izzie,” he whispered hoarsely.

She glanced over and almost smiled in triumph. He’d finished unbuttoning his shirt and it hung from his shoulders.

Even better, his jeans were open, his briefs pushed down. And his hand encircled his huge erection.

“Yes. Imagine it’s me touching you,” she told him.

He never took his eyes off her, beginning to stroke, up and down, his movements timed to match her strokes against the bedpost. But when she let go of it, he didn’t stop.

“The bra,” he ordered.

“Just as the customer desires,” she whispered, taunting him with every bit of her sexuality.

She unfastened the bra, dragging out the moment before it fell away to reveal her breasts. This usually marked the end of one of her numbers, but tonight, Izzie was just getting started. She touched herself, showing him the way she wanted to be touched. Crossing her arms—her hips still rocking—she cupped each breast. Capturing her nipples between her fingers, she tweaked and rolled. The pleasure she gave herself—and the way Nick reacted to it—sent pure liquid want rushing to her sex, already dripping with readiness.

Hearing Nick clear his throat, she glanced over and saw he held a twenty dollar bill in his hand. He was enjoying this game. Getting into the fantasy.

“You have something for me, mister?” she asked, almost purring the words as she danced closer, wearing nothing but her skimpy panties and shoes.

“Uh-huh. But you have to work for it.”

She moved again, closer, stepping over one of his legs to straddle it. She lowered herself closer to his thigh, rocking a few inches above it. Her breasts swayed close to his face. “What’d you have in mind?”

He leaned up, his mouth moving toward her breast.

“Uh-uh, no touching,” she said, easing back a little. “I can touch you…you can’t touch me.”

“Those the rules?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not sure how long I’ll be able to obey them.”

“You’ll just have to keep your hands busy elsewhere until I say you can break them.”

He flexed his hand again, lazily working the erection that still jutted out of his unfastened pants. “That means the rules will eventually be broken?”

She bent down again, low, brushing her silky panties over his strong thigh. “If you’re very, very good.” Her mouth watering, she inched closer, so her leg could brush against all that male heat. He instinctively arched toward her, branding her with that ridge of flesh that had given her such intense pleasure last week.

She wanted it. Badly. In every way it was possible for a woman to take it.

“You want a lap dance, mister?” she asked in her heavy, Crimson Rose whisper.

His eyes narrowed. “I didn’t know you gave them.”

“I don’t. But you’re an extra special customer.”

Izzie had never done this particular type of dance, but she figured she could fake it. Frankly, she didn’t think Nick would care if she didn’t get it exactly right.

So she went with her instincts. With both hands on the back of the chair, she swayed over him, brushing her breasts against his cheeks, shivering at the delicious roughness of his skin. She danced above him, writhing just above one leg, then the other, then straddling both. He watched with glittering eyes, groaning with need as she taunted him—coming close, so close—then pulling away.

“Gonna have to break that rule soon, lady,” he growled.

“We’ll see.”

Driving them both closer to the brink of insanity, she dipped lower than she’d ever gone, until the silky wet fabric between her thighs met his arousal and set them both completely on fire. He grabbed her hips, helping her rock up and down on him until they both moaned with the pleasure of it.

“You’re touching,” she said.

He thrust up harder, the hot tip of his erection easing into her, bringing her silky panties along. “I’m going to be touching you a lot more in a minute.”

Oh, she liked playing these wicked, sexy games with Nick. It was unlike anything she’d ever done with anyone before, and Izzie sensed she could be happy playing bedroom games with him and only him for a very long time.

“But you still haven’t paid me.” She licked the side of his neck, biting lightly on his nape. Feeling the scrape of the bill against her skin, she pulled away just enough to watch him slip it into her panties. “Big tipper.”

“You’re worth every penny.”

“I think maybe you should get a little bonus for being such a good customer.”

She needed a little bonus herself. Needed to do something she’d been aching to do since she’d first seen him take off his pants in the back of the van.

Sliding back, she lowered herself to the floor, then moved between his thighs. She reached for his hand, covering it with hers, mimicking his slow, easy movements up and down his erection. Eventually she pushed his hand away, pleasuring him with her fingers and her palm. Encircling him as best she could, she slid down to the base of his shaft, then eased back up. She trailed her fingers across the thick, bulbous head to moisten them with his body’s juices, then repeated the motion.

But it wasn’t quite enough. Izzie inched forward, wetting her lips with her tongue.

“Iz…”

“Let me,” she murmured.

She didn’t wait for permission. Kneeling between his spread thighs, she drew closer, flicking out her tongue for a quick taste of the sac pulled up tight beneath his erection.

He jerked up, thrusting harder into her hand, which still encircled him. Izzie didn’t stop. Parting her fingers to make way for her mouth, she licked her way from the base of his shaft all the way up to its tip. “You taste so good, Nick,” she whispered before flicking her tongue out to catch more of that fluid dripping out of him.

“So do you.” Still sprawled out before her, he tangled his hands in her hair. “But I’m hungry. I want some, too.”

Mmm…mutual oral pleasure. She’d love to savor that experience with Nick. But for right now, she wanted to concentrate on him. So, ignoring his comment, she moved over the thick, pulsing head of his cock and took it into her mouth. As she sucked, he hissed. The deeper she went—taking as much as she could—the louder his groans.

Shifting around for better access, Izzie began to slowly make love to him with her mouth, getting off on hearing him get off. She slid up and down, taking more with every stroke, wanting to swallow him all the way down, though he was, of course, much too big for that. But she gave it her all, focused on his sounds of pleasure, the smell of sex rolling off his body, the feel of his hands delicately stroking her hair and the back of her head.

“Ride me, Izzie,” he whispered, not demanding but pleading. “Come up here and take me.”

Take him. Izzie had never had a man beg her using those words, though she, herself, had spoken them. She found herself liking the sensuous power of it. He didn’t just want her, he needed her. Was desperate for her.

With one last little suck, she pulled her mouth away and looked up at him. He was staring down at her, his dark brown eyes gleaming with want. Reaching for her shoulders, he began to tug her up and repeated his plea. “Take me, Izzie.”

Offering him a half-smile, she rose to her knees. She was nearly naked, but Nick was still half-wearing his clothes. So she reached for his waistband and pulled his pants and briefs down. He lifted up to help her, kicking his shoes off and his clothes with them. His shirt fell off his shoulders with a simple shrug, and now the tables were turned—she was the only one wearing a stitch of clothes.

It was, of course, a tiny stitch. And as she rose to her feet, Nick didn’t take his eyes off it. Reaching for her hips, he tugged her closer until he caught the elastic seam of her panties with his teeth. Nudging them down, he tasted her with two quick, heart-stopping flicks of his tongue. Her clit swelled against his lips. “Please,” she whispered, not knowing what she needed more—for him to lick her into an orgasm, or to tear her panties off and plunge down onto him.

“Since you asked so nicely,” he murmured, returning his mouth to her most sensitive spot. Taking her hips in his hands, he pushed the panties down and nuzzled in deep in her curls.

Feeling a climax rocket through her, Izzie threw her head back and groaned. She was still groaning when Nick tugged her down over him. He glanced at his jeans. “My pocket…”

“We’re safe,” she assured him since she was on the pill. “As long as you’re comfortable with that.”

“Oh, I am so comfortable with that,” he muttered hoarsely. “I cannot wait to feel you wrapped around me, skin to skin.”

Straddling him, her toes on the floor, Izzie rubbed against him, loving the tangle of his chest hair on her rock-hard nipples. Nick dipped his head down to suck one of them, hard and demanding. “Ride me,” he ordered, his mouth still at her breast.

She eased onto him, taking the hot tip into her wet channel a little at a time. He was right—skin to skin was incredible. She could feel every beat of his pulse through his velvety smooth erection.

“Can’t…take much…” he said through choppy breaths.

As if he’d reached his breaking point, he squeezed her hips and thrust up, impaling her hard and deep. “Oh, Nick,” she groaned, shocked at the full intensity of it.

It took her a second to catch her breath, he filled her so deeply. But when she did, she had to move. Had to slide up and then ease back down. She rode with slow strokes, her arms on his shoulders, looking down into his face as he stared up into hers.

Nick lifted one hand and cupped her cheek, drawing her toward him. Covering her lips with his, he kissed her deeply, sliding his tongue in and out of her mouth in strokes matched by the ones deep inside her core.

The kiss went on and on, slowing or growing frenzied in mirror reactions to the movements of their bodies. Izzie rode him, took him as he’d demanded, using muscles she didn’t even remember she had to stretch out their pleasure.

Their position was perfect for pleasing her both inside and out. And within moments, the friction on her clit provided her with another mind-blowing orgasm.

Finally, though, her legs began to weaken. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take. As if he knew, Nick wrapped his arms around her, cupping her backside, and rose from the chair.

The strength of the man defied description.

Still buried deep within her, he continued kissing her as he walked the few steps to the bed. He dropped her on her back, coming down with her, and took over control.

“Yes, Nick,” she gasped, her legs around his lean hips.

He didn’t reply. He was gone now, mentally just gone, at the mercy of his wildly plunging body. Izzie held on for the ride, whispering frantic words of pleasure, telling him how much he pleased her.

Until she, too, was incapable of words. Together they lost themselves to the power of it until Nick shouted and came deep inside her, sending Izzie spiraling over the edge again, too.

BRIDGET HAD BEEN thinking about her cousin’s words nearly all night Thursday. So much so that she barely slept and climbed out of bed long before her alarm went off Friday morning.

If there was one thing Izzie knew, it was men. And if she thought Bridget hadn’t been sending out strong enough signals to Dean, she was probably right.

Izzie would make her interest more obvious.

So that’s what Bridget would do.

That morning, she dressed for work a bit more carefully than usual. Her regular workday attire was typically a pair of pastel capris or a pair of slacks and a blouse. Today, she shimmied into a yellow skirt that cupped her butt like she’d sat in a tub of butter. Pulling a tight white tank top on with it, she glanced in the mirror and was surprised at what she saw.

She didn’t look much like Bridget, the nice, smiling bookkeeper. In fact, she looked sexy. She had curves…nice ones. Her breasts were high and shapely, highlighted by the scooped neck of the tank top. And while she didn’t have especially long legs, they looked pretty good in the skirt.

Feeling almost armored for battle, she donned a lightweight sweater—which she intended to remove as soon as she saw her quarry—and headed to work. She wanted to get there early so she could get used to walking around the office in the minuscule skirt and high-heeled sandals without tripping and making a fool of herself.

Usually, she was the first one at the dealership, anyway. The lot didn’t open to customers until ten o’clock, with most of the sales staff showing up around nine…a half hour or so after her regular starting time. By the time she got to the lot, it was only seven-thirty, an hour early even for her.

The inside was dark, as expected, and as she entered, she reached for the switch to turn on the bank of overhead lights. But before she did it, something caught her eye…a sliver of light coming from beneath the door to the business office. Where she usually worked.

She supposed she could have forgotten to turn the light off last night when she left. But she was still cautious as she approached. This was a pretty safe area, but occasional robberies certainly weren’t unheard of. She wasn’t about to open the door and surprise some junkie looking for a petty cash box.

When she got to within a few feet of the nearly closed door, she heard a voice from inside. She tensed for the briefest second, then recognized the voice and relaxed.

It was Dean. He’d obviously shown up early for work. Though she didn’t hear whoever he was talking to, she figured someone else must have come in early, too.

Too bad. Had he been alone, she might have been able to put her “send stronger signals” plan into action. If, of course, she had the nerve, which was questionable.

Reaching for the knob, she paused when she heard Dean speak again, answering a question she hadn’t heard asked. That was when she realized the conversation was one-sided. He was talking on the phone to someone.

Not wanting to eavesdrop, she stepped away, catching only the snippet of a comment Dean made. Something about a deal going down. Sounded like their star salesman had landed another buyer—one who liked to close deals very early in the morning.

When she heard his voice stop, she figured she’d see if he was done, and knocked once on the door. Feeling a little foolish—since she was, in essence, knocking on her own office door—she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

“Good morning, early-bird,” she said.

He jerked his head up, so surprised he dropped his cell phone right onto the floor near her feet.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” she said. Normally, she’d wait quietly and let him pick up the phone himself. But Izzie’s words kept ringing in her ears. So instead, she carefully bent at the knees, reaching down to pick it up for him. She kept one hand on her skirt, to hold it in place, but Bridget couldn’t deny that it slid up several inches, high on her thighs, despite that.

Still appearing shocked, Dean didn’t say a word. His narrowed eyes were locked on her thighs. His jaw was visibly clenched and he breathed over parted lips.

He looked…hungry. Just as she’d seen him look at her once or twice in the past. More than that, he seemed dangerous. Not nice Dean looking at a pair of woman’s legs, but wickedly sexy Dean looking at a pair of woman’s legs and imagining them wrapped around his waist.

She could do that. She could definitely do that. Whether it was what Izzie would do or not.

It is.

“Here you go,” she said, handing him the cell phone.

He took it from her, their fingers brushing lightly. Standing, he stuffed the phone in his pocket. His lean face looked weary, as if he hadn’t slept well.

“So, was it worth your early trip in?” she asked, knowing she sounded coy. She couldn’t help channeling Izzie a little bit. “Everything…satisfactory?”

His pale blue eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you get whatever deal you’re working on taken care of this morning?”

He nodded slowly. “The deal. Yeah. It’s all good.”

“Good. You might set another sales record this month.”

With a casual manner she had never suspected she could pull off, she tossed her purse onto her desk, which was laden with files, legal paperwork and financial stuff. Holding onto her courage, she slipped her sweater off her shoulders. She had to move close to Dean—very close—to reach the coat rack on the wall. Her arm brushed against his as she lifted the sweater onto one of the hooks.

“Bridget…”

Smiling, she turned and glanced up at him. “Yes?”

He wasn’t looking at her face, his attention was focused lower. On the scooped neck of her tight, spandex tank top. The heat in his stare warmed her all over and she felt her body reacting to it. A lazy river of want flowed through her veins. She clenched her thighs in response to it. But there was no way to disguise the way her breasts grew heavier, her nipples hardening to twin points that poked against her shirt.

He noticed. Most definitely.

Swallowing hard, he growled, “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re trolling for men at a club rather than working with a bunch of used car salesmen and wrench jockeys at an auto shop?” he asked, his tone harsh.

Bridget instinctively stepped back. A little hurt. A little confused. “I just….” Channel Izzie. WWID? Taking a deep breath, she tilted her head back and jutted her chin out. “What business is it of yours what I wear to work?”

He reached for her, grabbing her arm as if he couldn’t help himself. “Put your sweater back on.”

“Make me.”

His whole body tense with frustration, he lifted his other hand and grabbed her other arm. Bridget wasn’t sure what he was going to do—shake her or haul her into his arms and kiss her.

She was most definitely hoping for option two.

She should have been intimidated, maybe even scared given his size. But she already knew he wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. He was attracted to her, she was sure of it now, and he just didn’t know what to do about that attraction since they were coworkers.

“Either take your hands off me or do something with them,” she snapped, still thinking the way her cousin would.

“Damn it, Bridget.”

But before he could do either one, they heard the sound of voices coming from right outside the door. They weren’t, it appeared, the only two who’d arrived to work early.

Dean instantly released her and stepped away. He shook his head, as if to clear it, and eyed her warily. Finally he said, “I really think you should put your sweater on.”

Bridget hid a smile, liking the tiny thrill of power she felt at having this big, handsome man react so strongly to her. Crossing her arms in front of her chest—which pressed her breasts even higher and harder against her top—she shook her head. “I don’t think so, Dean. If you don’t like the way I’m dressed…I suggest you don’t look at me.”

Knowing her bravado wasn’t going to last for much longer, she sashayed past him, out onto the showroom floor to greet the other salesmen who’d arrived. Leaving Dean watching her with eyes that blazed like the sun.

IZZIE HAD SPENT the night in Nick’s arms, but she’d slipped away early—around dawn. Knowing the bakery would open soon, he didn’t protest.

He wanted to, of course, but he kept his mouth shut.

Izzie’s whole reason for being here in Chicago was her devotion to her family’s business. He wouldn’t even think of interfering with that. Because he liked her working at the bakery. Right here close by.

As for her other job, at the club? Well, that, Nick had to admit, might be a tougher proposition. He hadn’t yet been tested, but he didn’t imagine it would be easy watching the woman he was absolutely crazy about take her clothes off for a roomful of other men. Especially since he’d almost certainly be picturing what had happened last night, when she’d taken her clothes off only for him.

It had been the most unbelievable night of his life. And he had to wonder how she’d had the strength to get up and walk this morning considering he’d spent so much of the night between her legs.

Izzie wasn’t the only one who had to go to work. Nick had promised Tony he’d help him handle the delivery of a new wall oven at Santori’s. So after showering, he got dressed and walked the few blocks up to Taylor. He passed right by Natale’s on the way, but, mindful of Izzie’s feelings, he didn’t pop in. It felt strange as hell to walk on by and not say hello to the woman he’d made love to in so many wild, different ways the night before.

But she wanted their relationship to remain entirely between them. Meaning he couldn’t single her out, couldn’t grab her hand in public, couldn’t ask her to do so much as walk across the street with him.

“This is gonna suck,” he muttered aloud as he reached the restaurant. He had no idea how long he’d be able to maintain this secret, nighttime-only relationship with Izzie.

He only hoped she’d change her mind. That she’d realize she didn’t have to give up herself to become part of a relationship with him.

A relationship. Yeah. He wanted one. He was falling for her in a big way, just as he’d suspected he could when he’d seen her looking so bored and aloof on the other side of Santori’s all those weeks ago.

It was pretty ironic, really. He was starting to think he really could have found the perfect woman. He was already falling in love with her. And a union between them would absolutely delight everyone in both their families.

But Izzie didn’t want one.

“Women,” he muttered as he pushed into the restaurant.

His brother Tony, who’d been standing right inside the door, greeted him with a clap on the back. “Can’t live with ’em…but they’re sure as hell better than living alone.”

As usual, his larger-than-life older brother coaxed a smile out of him.

Fridays were usually busy at Santori’s, so the day flew by quickly. And, as usual, the rest of his family started drifting in after their workdays had ended. By eight o’clock, all of his brothers were here with their wives and kids, as was his sister, along with her new husband. Those two were cuddling like the newlyweds they were. Though he’d been skeptical, given what he knew about Simon Lebeaux’s shady past, even Nick had to admit the two of them were obviously crazy about each other.

Besides, if Lebeaux could put up with his mouthy little sister, he had to be one hell of a strong man.

“Come on, take a load off,” Mark said to Nick as he emerged from the kitchen, where he’d been helping his father.

“Yeah, I guess my slave-driver boss will let me knock off now,” he replied, glancing over his shoulder at Tony, who stood in the swinging doorway.

“Not boss…partner,” his brother reminded him with a grin.

Uh, no. Not in Nick’s opinion. But he still hadn’t wanted to have that conversation.

His siblings and their families took up several tables in the restaurant—tables that would probably have been appreciated by the paying customers lining up near the front counter. But Mama would never dream of shooing them out to free up the space. She clucked around, ordering them all to eat, cooing over the grandbabies and beaming when Noelle, Mark’s wife, offered to let her feel the baby kicking in her stomach.

In Nick’s opinion, that was Twilight Zone stuff. But all the women got into it, and Mark looked like he thought it was the coolest thing since Optimus Prime and the Transformers. Nick, however, was freaked by the very idea. The only thing he wanted to feel moving around inside a woman was his own cock. A baby? Forget it.

Unless the woman was Izzie.

The thought was crazy—bothersome, even. But it wouldn’t leave his head.

“Hey, look who’s here,” Gloria called, waving toward the front door. “My baby sister! How you doin’, Iz?”

Nick immediately swung around, seeing Izzie at the counter.

“Ah, Isabella, you haven’t been to see me too much. What’s wrong with you, eh?” Mama said as she bustled over. She cupped Izzie’s face in her hands, pressing a kiss on her forehead, then grabbed her arm and dragged her over.

Smacking Lucas on the shoulder, she said, “Move over and make room for Gloria’s little sister.”

“Yes, ma’am,” his older brother said with a grin. Luke was the next oldest above Nick and Mark and, as a prosecutor, was used to ordering other people around. But, like all of them, he couldn’t refuse a command from their bossy mother.

“How’s everything, Iz?” he asked as he stood and moved his chair out of the way. “You remember Rachel, right?”

Izzie nodded, smiling at Luke’s pretty blond wife, the only fair-haired one of the bunch. A die-hard southerner, she’d somehow made herself fit in so well that Nick couldn’t imagine what the family would be like without her.

Fortunately, the room Mama had forced Luke to make was between his chair and Nick’s. Rosa Santori stole an unused chair from a nearby table and slid it in place, nearly pushing Izzie down onto it. Which had Nick ready to kiss his mother’s hand, even though Izzie looked less than happy.

“I was just picking something up for dinner on the way home from work,” she said, sounding almost dazed at how quickly she’d been shanghaied into a family dinner.

He understood the feeling. His mother was a powerhouse.

“Such a silly girl,” Mama said. “You will eat here, with the family. You’re one of us!” Trying to squeeze past her to get back to the kitchen, Mama said, “Scooch over a bit, eh?” and she pushed on Izzie’s chair until it was so close to Nick’s their thighs touched under the table.

Nick would lay money that his mother had done it on purpose. When he saw the smirk on her face as she left to check on dinner, he knew it was true.

Everyone wanted them to hook up. If only they knew….

“Hey Isabella,” he whispered from the side of his mouth.

She kicked him under the table.

“So, how do you like being back in Chi-town, Izzie?” his brother Joe asked. “Guess it’s pretty tame and unexciting after your life in New York. You must really need a creative outlet.”

There was a surprising twinkle in Joe’s eye. As he and Izzie exchanged a long stare, Nick began to have a suspicion that Joe knew a little more than he’d let on about Izzie’s nighttime life. Remembering the way Joe had steered him toward the job, and had been so adamant about Nick taking care of the “featured dancer” at Leather and Lace, he had to wonder if Joe had seen Izzie there during the renovations.

“It’s okay,” Izzie replied. Smiling, she added, “I’m just busy trying to avoid resuming my cannoli addiction. They’re my absolute weakness.”

Everyone at the table laughed. Except Nick. Because there’d been a sultry purr in her voice and he believed she’d been speaking only to him.

When he felt her hand—concealed by the red-and-white checked tablecloth—drop onto his leg, he was sure of it.

There was something really hot about having a woman you were supposed to just be casually friends with feel you up under a dinner table. Especially when that table was filled with curious family members who would love to see any sign of interest between the only two singles there.

Izzie was careful. So they definitely didn’t see her hand creep up his leg to trace the outline of his dick. That, he assumed, would be taken as a definite sign of interest.

He was going to make the woman pay for her sensual torment. Right now, however, he was enjoying it too much to try slipping his hand down to beat her at her own game.

The conversation soon resumed, Izzie falling into it as if she’d never been away. She traded barbs with his brothers, reminisced with his sister Lottie about their school days.

She fit. She just fit. Like a normal neighborhood girl.

But no normal neighborhood girl he knew would be working Nick’s zipper down, reaching in and pulling him free of his trousers. She definitely wouldn’t be brushing the tips of her wicked fingers across his cock, arousing him until he hardened into her hand.

This was incredibly dangerous. If someone dropped a fork and bent over to get it, they’d get an eyeful.

But Nick didn’t give a damn. Maybe he and Izzie couldn’t be the “normal” couple the neighborhood would like to see. Somehow, though, this was better. Having an erotic secret…and acting on that secret in public where they could be exposed, it was mind-blowing.

It made him hot. It made him desperate.

It made him finish his dinner quickly and declare himself so tired he had to call it a night.

And thankfully, Izzie found an excuse of her own, followed him out the door, and led him to her place for another long night of the wildest sex he’d ever had.

**9**

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING, Rose? All better?” Holding the back door of Leather and Lace open for her early Saturday evening, Harry watched her closely, as if worried she wasn’t up to dancing tonight.

Izzie had to stop for a moment to wonder why. Then she remembered. Crap. She’d called in sick the previous Sunday night. Probably really leaving him in the lurch.

“I’m fine, Harry,” she said as she walked past him into the building, watching him shut and lock the door behind her. Security had improved around here ever since Nick had been hired. “I am so sorry about last Sunday night.”

Harry waved an unconcerned hand. “Hey, don’t worry about it, something wicked had to be going around for three of you to get knocked on your butts.”

“Three of us?”

Harry nodded. “Leah got sick Saturday night.”

“I remember.”

“She came back in Sunday evening, was here for two hours, got sick all over again and had to leave. So did Jackie.”

Jackie was Leah’s dressing roommate. Whatever was going around had obviously nailed both of them.

Izzie was about to open her mouth to confess that she really had not been sick—just cowardly. But before she could do it, the back door was unlocked from the outside and opened again. She knew before she even saw him that Nick had arrived.

She recognized his warm, masculine scent. And her nipples got hard. Oh, yeah, it was definitely Nick.

His gaze immediately went to her, hot and appreciative. She’d had to leave his bed early this morning to go to work at the bakery. But right before she’d gone, he’d whispered how much he looked forward to seeing her tonight in her dressing room…which now, he’d made sure last weekend, had a lock.

She’d shivered all day, thinking of that first night he’d been in there, when he’d seen her naked reflection. Mmm.

“Nick,” Harry said with a nod. He looked back and forth between the two of them. “No more mask, Rose?”

Smiling, she shook her head. “I’ve decided I trust him.”

Nick returned the smile, the two of them sharing a silent intimacy that excluded Harry, though he stood right beside them. Finally, though, Nick broke the stare and addressed their boss. “Everything looking okay so far?”

Harry nodded. “Been kind of a quiet week. Last night was the slowest Friday we’ve had in a while.” Glancing at Izzie, he added, “But I bet the crowd will be roaring back to see you.”

“Are you short-staffed again?” she asked, wondering if Harry would need her to dance an extra set.

He shook his head. “Everybody’s here, sound and healthy.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked, a frown furrowing his brow.

Harry began to explain about the sick dancers, which made Izzie feel guilty again. Especially when he groaned over how hard it had been to tell Delilah, his “retired” wife that she wasn’t in shape to go on in their place. Oy. She wouldn’t have wanted to see the redhead’s expression during that conversation.

Something else she didn’t want to do was have to look Nick in the eye and admit she’d called in sick rather than face him last weekend. She figured he knew that much, but didn’t particularly feel the need to confirm it.

Excusing herself, she headed to her dressing room. The door wasn’t locked, but she immediately noticed the deadbolt, which had not been there the previous weekend.

“You sneaky man,” she whispered with a smile as she dropped her purse and keys on the vanity. She could think of several wicked ways Nick could help her kill time between her numbers.

Of course, being the hard-ass guy he was when on the job, she suspected he might resist her. That was okay. Izzie had found she was pretty good at working around his resistance.

Having stood most of the day at work, she wanted to relax before going onstage. Kicking her shoes off her feet, she pulled her chair out from under the makeup vanity and sat down at it.

She immediately heard a cracking sound, but didn’t register what it was until the chair broke apart beneath her, sending her crashing to the floor. “Son of a bitch,” she snapped as she lay still on the tile. The back of her head had scraped the concrete block wall on the other side as she’d fallen. She rubbed at it, shocked to see a few flecks of fresh blood on her fingertips.

“Izzie? Are you all right? What was that noise?” Nick asked as he burst into the room.

He swung the door open so hard he almost hit her with it. An inch closer and she would have taken a flat piece of oak square in the face.

“Oh, my God.” He immediately dropped into a squat beside her. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s okay,” she insisted, slowly sitting up.

He put his hand under her arm to help her. “What happened?”

“My chair broke,” she admitted, almost embarrassed about it. She’d never fully gotten over that chubby girl terror of breaking a chair in public.

“Is that blood on your fingers?” he asked, his voice so taut it almost snapped.

She lifted it to the back of her head again. “Yeah, I scraped my head on the wall when I fell.”

“You need to go to the hospital.” He rose and tugged her up, too. “Come on, I’ll take you right now.”

“No, Nick, I don’t. I didn’t bang my head, I promise. I just scratched it on the way down.”

He frowned, obviously not believing her.

“Check and see for yourself. I swear, it’s nothing but a scratch.” She turned around, tilting her head back so he could see the spot where the blood had come from.

Nick gently pushed her hair out of the way. Izzie watched him in the mirror, seeing the frantic expression on his handsome face. And the way his jaw clenched as he tenderly examined her.

He was worried about her. Truly afraid for her.

“See?” she asked softly.

“Looks like a scratch,” he admitted.

“Good.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re not hurt anywhere else. God, Izzie, what the hell happened?”

She gestured toward the remains of the chair, in pieces at her feet. “It fell apart as soon as I sat on it.” Glaring at him, she added, “No big butt jokes.”

He rolled his eyes. “As if.” Stepping away, he ran his hands up and down her arms. “You’re sure you’re not hurt anywhere else?”

She was hurt elsewhere. Her hip was killing her from where she’d banged on the floor. But thankfully, she hadn’t landed on her bum knee. “I’m okay.”

Nick shook his head, muttering something, then bent down to examine the pieces of the chair. It was a sturdy rolling one that easily slid around when Izzie needed to reach something on the vanity. But it had fallen apart into several pieces.

“This doesn’t make any damn sense.” His tone was curt, all business now. “How could it just fall apart like that?”

“I have no clue. Maybe it was just defective.”

Nick didn’t even look up. He was poking around in the pile, picking up a couple of screws and staring at them hard.

“Rose? Nick? Is everything okay? Somebody heard a crash.”

Glancing at the door, she saw Harry Black, and, right behind him, one of the bouncers. They both stared wide-eyed from her, down to Nick and the broken chair.

“Are you okay, honey?” Harry asked.

“Can I help you up?” the bouncer, Bernie, her self-appointed watchdog, asked.

“I’m fine. Just a little mishap.”

“She could have been badly hurt,” Nick barked.

“But I wasn’t,” she murmured, trying to calm all three down. If Nick was like a protective lion, Harry was like a fatherly teddy bear. And Bernie was like a big grizzly somebody had poked with a stick. They all looked equally upset.

“It’s okay, I swear. Just an accident. Now, if you don’t mind, Harry, could you find me another chair? I need to get ready to go on.” The older man nodded and backed out of the door, taking Bernie with him.

Glancing at Nick, she added, “You need to get to work, too, making sure everything is safe and secure for me to perform.”

He slowly rose, his eyes locked on hers. “Are you really worried about something, or are you trying to get rid of me?”

Izzie offered him a cocky grin, put her hand on his chest, and pushed him toward the door. “I’m trying to get rid of you. I have to be onstage in an hour, and with you in here oozing all that hot man stuff, I’m going to be tempted to test that lock and seduce you.”

His eyes twinkled. But his frown remained. “You’re not going to seduce me into forgetting you could have been hurt.”

“And you’re not going to bully me into forgetting I have a job to do.”

He reached up and cupped her cheek. Izzie couldn’t help curling into his hand, loving the roughness of his skin against her own. “I would never bully you into doing anything, Izzie.”

They hadn’t yet talked about her job. They’d officially been secret lovers for two wild, passion-filled nights, and she hadn’t had a chance to even ask him if he was going to have some kind of macho problem with her dancing. Now he’d opened the door for the question.

“Are you going to be all right upstairs, watching me?”

He brushed his thumb over her jaw. “I love watching you.”

Nibbling on his finger, she murmured, “I meant, will you be okay watching everyone else watch me?”

His jaw stiffened and his dark eyes flashed. But he didn’t pull away. Instead, he drew closer, tipping her head back so sweetly, so tenderly, she knew he was still worried she could be hurt. “Izzie, I can’t promise anything because I haven’t experienced it yet. But I can tell you this…I know and want the real you…both sides of you. The Rose and the woman you become when you walk out of this place every Sunday night. I’m in this with both of you.”

Without saying anything more, he bent down and covered her mouth with his, kissing her sweetly and tenderly. Then, with one more brush of his hand on her face, he turned and walked out.

AS IT TURNED OUT, Nick did not have to test himself to see how he’d handle watching Izzie strip for other men. Because before she ever went onstage, Nick was forced to deal with a couple of punks who didn’t understand the rules of a place as upscale as this one. One of them had made a move on a waitress, another had lunged at a dancer. Nick and Bernie plucked the guys up and dragged them out the front door, where, high on liquid courage, they’d both tried to put up a fight.

Maybe it was the residual anger he’d felt at seeing the blood on Izzie’s fingertips. Or maybe it was the rage that flooded his head at the thought that it could have been Izzie the prick had grabbed, but as soon as the guy threw the first punch, Nick reacted harshly.

He’d had a few fights in his day, both before his military days and during them. And it was painfully easy to take down a drunk. The fight was over almost immediately after it had begun. Bernie dispatched of the drunk’s friend just as quickly and the two of them nodded to each other in appreciation for the backup.

“Thanks, man,” Bernie said.

“Not a problem.”

Bernie shook the bleary patron. “I think this is the same prick who grabbed Rose a month ago.”

Nick’s jaw went rock-hard. If the man hadn’t already been in Bernie’s firm grip, he might have found a reason to throw another punch. But he was a fair fighter and wouldn’t do something so out of bounds.

Unless the guy got free…then all was fair.

The guy didn’t get free, Bernie had a tight grip and had begun chewing him out for harassing Rose. That incident had obviously been a more serious one than Nick had been led to believe, because Bernie hadn’t forgotten a moment of it.

Because things had gotten physical, Nick decided to cover his own ass, as well as the bouncer’s and the club’s, and called the police. He wanted this thing on record, now, when there were plenty of witnesses who’d seen both the assault on the female workers inside, and the provocation in the parking lot.

It was just his bad luck that Mark heard the call to Leather and Lace and decided to respond. Nick saw his brother get out of his unmarked car and saunter over, smiling widely. “Get in a fight without me?”

“Just doing my job,” Nick replied, trying to figure out a way to get Mark to leave without going inside the club. If he was on duty, it wouldn’t have been an issue—his brother was too good a cop to go inside a strip club while on duty. But he knew Mark’s hours. No way was he working this late on a Saturday. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I heard it on the scanner. Noelle was already in bed—that woman goes to sleep by eight every night now. So I thought I’d head on over and see if you were okay.”

“You know this guy?” one of the officers asked.

“My baby brother,” Mark replied, his dimples flashing.

“By ten minutes,” Nick said, shaking his head.

It took about an hour to clear up matters outside. Nick had stayed near the entrance, far from the stage, but he’d gotten reports from the bouncers about what was going on inside. So he knew when Izzie had performed…and when she was finished.

She’d done her first number and wouldn’t be back on for at least an hour or two. Long enough to get rid of his brother.

“Come on, let me buy you a beer,” Mark said once the last of the police cars pulled away.

“I’m working.”

“Okay, then you buy me a beer.” Not taking no for an answer, he threw his arm across Nick’s shoulder and tugged him into the club. “Come on, I’ve never been in this place.”

“Noelle probably wouldn’t like it.”

“I’m visiting my twin at work. No harm in that, is there?”

“Depends on whether you visited me blindfolded.”

“I’ll keep my back to the stage,” Mark said. “Seriously, we haven’t talked in weeks. I know something’s going on with you.”

His twin was right. They had been…disconnected. Not just because of what had been going on with Nick and Izzie, but also because his brother was about to become a father. Mark had changed. He had different priorities, talked a different language, looked at the world a different way.

Noelle and their baby were his family now. Oh, sure, he loved the rest of the Santoris, but he’d crossed that threshold from son and brother to husband and father.

Nick was the only one of the Santori siblings who had not.

“Let’s sit out here,” Mark said, nodding toward a couple of low, round tables in an outer chamber between the lobby and the main lounge area. They were out of view of the stage.

Nick wasn’t surprised. Mark was a good husband. Like the rest of their brothers.

“All right.” Gesturing to one of the waitresses, he ordered a club soda for himself and a beer for his brother. Returning to the table, he sat down across from his twin. “Can’t be away for too long, though.”

Mark settled back into the leather chair. “Nice.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Good fringe benefits?”

Holding back a smile, Nick just shook his head.

“Hey, I’m married, these days are long gone. Throw me a bone.”

“Throw me one,” Nick replied before thinking better of it. “Tell me what it’s like.”

Mark frowned, obviously confused by the question. “It?”

“Marriage. What’s it like being tied down, committed?”

Those deep dimples that had charmed girls from the time he was two years old flashed in Mark’s cheeks. “It’s the best. Noelle’s everything I ever wanted.”

“Yeah, but how’d you know what you wanted?” Nick muttered as he lifted his drink and downed half of it.

Chuckling, Mark admitted, “I didn’t. I think it was more of a case of meeting her, and knowing that whatever I eventually did figure out I wanted for my life, she’d be part of it. It was always her. Everything else fell into place around her.”

Somehow, that made a lot of sense to Nick. Because even though he’d been thinking of dozens of reasons why he and Izzie couldn’t make it work—the primary one being that she didn’t want it to—he couldn’t help hoping it would. Because, as Mark had said, he suspected she was the one. That whatever else happened in his life, whatever direction he went in, whatever he chose, he’d want her to be a part of it.

Surprisingly, his brother didn’t press him about why he was asking so many questions. Probably not because he didn’t care—or didn’t suspect there was a reason behind them. But because he knew Nick well enough to know that pushing for answers usually only made him clam up tighter.

Nick appreciated the courtesy. And realized yet again just how much he’d missed his twin.

“Hey Nick, we got a live one at the bar,” a woman said.

Glancing over, Nick saw one of the waitresses, who was rolling her eyes. “Serious?”

“Not yet. But he could be if he’s not handled right.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Addressing his brother, he added, “Is there a full moon out tonight? The crazies are out.”

Mark stood. “Yeah, including me. I must be crazy to be out here with you instead of home in bed with my wife.”

Feeling better than he had in the hours since Izzie’s accident with the chair, Nick reached out and grabbed his brother for a quick hug. Mark’s eyes widened. He was the demonstrative one, not Nick. “What’s that for?”

Nick shook his head. “I don’t know. Give it to your wife.”

“I’ve got plenty of my own to give,” Mark said with a grin. “But thanks just the same.”

The rest of the evening went by quickly, with more of the same insanity to deal with. Nick hadn’t been kidding—the crazies were out tonight, and a lot of them had decided to show up at the club. The bouncers had had to forcibly eject more guys in this one evening than he’d seen them eject in the past month.

The only positive thing about keeping so busy was that Nick missed the Crimson Rose’s final performance of the evening, too. He hadn’t even realized she was on until he heard the thunderous applause, whoops and whistles of her audience. But at that point, he’d been outside, doing a sweep of parking lot to make sure none of their uninvited patrons had decided to come back.

Fortunately, they hadn’t. But there were still other issues to deal with, like his conversation with Harry about Izzie’s broken chair. She had called it an accident…and it might have been one. But he wasn’t taking any chances. He and Harry had talked about adding security cameras to the basement area of the club, to hook into the system already covering the upstairs. Izzie’s accident had confirmed the idea for both of them.

Just in case.

Saying goodbye to Harry, he headed downstairs, glancing at his watch. It was after two, the club was closed, everyone drifting out. But he knew she’d have waited. She wouldn’t have left without seeing him. Partly because she’d want to see his reaction to her act. Partly because she knew he’d kill her if she’d walked out to her car alone.

“Iz?” he asked, knocking lightly on her dressing room door.

She opened it immediately. “Hi.” She was nibbling on her bottom lip and her hands were clenched in front of her. Rather than being dressed to go home, she wore just a slinky robe. Thankfully, though, the mask and hairpieces were gone.

“You doing okay?”

She nodded, then looked at him through half-lowered eyelids. “Um, so? What’d you think?”

He reached for her and drew her into his arms. “I didn’t see you dance.”

“What?”

“Sorry, other stuff was going on.”

“I heard there were some problems.”

“Yep.”

She fisted her hands and put them on her hips. The pose did really nice things, like pulling her short pink robe apart at the neck to reveal the lush, upper curves of her breasts.

“You’re telling me you just happened to have to deal with various crises during the exact times I was on stage? And that was simply coincidence?”

She might not believe it, but it was true. At least, he thought it was. He guessed he could have done the parking lot sweep a few minutes earlier or later. He hadn’t evaluated his decision before. But now, looking back…well, maybe something inside him had made sure he didn’t have to see other men looking at the beautiful body of the woman he considered his.

“You’re sure you’re going to be all right with this?” Her chin went up. “I won’t be able to handle it if you go all Cro-Magnon man and try to drag me by the hair back to your cave.”

“You woman. Me man,” he said, slipping his hands down and parting her robe further. He nuzzled into her neck, breathing in her essence, realizing twenty-four hours had been far too long to go without making love to her. “Me got heap big appetite.”

She swatted at his shoulder. But she didn’t back up. “You’re such a dork.”

Nick had never been called that, or anything like it, in his entire life. Ass maybe. Jerk. Cold-hearted pig, on one occasion. But never a dork. And it surprised a laugh out of him.

She delighted him. Simply brought every good feeling that existed inside him out into the open.

“God, I love being with you,” he muttered, unable to help revealing a little bit of what he was feeling.

“I know, I feel the same way.”

She didn’t admit that easily, the words had come haltingly out of her mouth. Which made Nick value them that much more.

He moved his mouth down, sampling her collarbone.

“Did you put that lock on my door yourself?” she whispered as she tilted her head farther, silently begging for more.

He nodded, continue to kiss and lick, lower now, to the curves of her breasts, beautifully bare under the robe.

“Let’s use it.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he murmured.

He didn’t let her go, he simply reached back and flipped the lock, then dipped down lower to lick his way down her to her pert nipple. Flicking it with his tongue, he waited until she was quivering to cover it with his mouth and suckle her.

“Mmm…more.”

Nick stroked her sides, his thumbs meeting near her belly button and scraping lower to tease the top edge of her pretty pink panties. With one last sweet suck on her breast he moved down her, following the path his hands had taken.

Izzie moaned softly, swaying on her feet. Nick kept her steady as he kissed his way down the front of her body. The soft robe brushed his face. So did her soft skin.

“Do you know what I wanted to do to you the first time I came into this room?”

She tangled her hands in his hair as he dropped lower, kneeling on the floor in front of her. “I think I have an idea.”

He pressed his face in her belly, licking at that tender bit of skin right above her pelvic bone, slowly pushing her panties down as he dipped lower.

“Did it involve that nice, big, flat surface in front of the mirror?” she asked.

Smart girl. “Uh-huh.” Gently holding her hips, he flicked at the panties, watching appreciatively as she shimmied out of them. The robe fell, too. Under the bright light bulbs ringing the mirror, he was able to see every glorious inch of her. But he wanted to see more—didn’t want his view blocked even by her pretty brown curls. So he turned her and edged her back until her bottom brushed the edge of the vanity top.

“Wait,” he said, suddenly remembering her accident. Wrapping his hand around the edge of the vanity counter, he tugged at it sharply, testing the shelf’s sturdiness. It remained firmly in place, well secured into the wall.

“Good,” she murmured. Rising on her tiptoes, she slid onto the vanity, parting her legs just the way he wanted her to.

Someone had brought her another chair, and Nick grabbed it, sitting on it directly in front of her. Reaching for her knees, he slowly pushed them apart, watching a pink flush rise through her entire body.

She made no effort to resist. Confident. Sensual. Incredibly seductive. She knew what he wanted and she wanted it, too.

He pushed her legs further, until he could see the glisten of moisture on the sensitive slit between her legs. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” he asked.

It was a rhetorical question. She couldn’t possibly know how beautiful she looked to him, wanton and aroused, opening herself up so he could pleasure them both.

He couldn’t wait any longer. With a low groan of need, Nick dropped his face to that sweet, warm spot. He lapped at her in one slow, long lick, feeling her thighs quiver beside his face.

Izzie tilted up for him, inviting him further, and he sampled her again. “You taste just as good without the cannoli, Cookie,” he mumbled.

She managed a choppy laugh. “Don’t call me Cookie.”

“Can’t help it.” He nibbled his way up to catch her erect clit between his lips. He played with it even as he scraped his fingers across her swollen sex. She was drenched and ready to take whatever he wanted to give her. Wanting that warm, wet flesh wrapped around part of him while he continued to savor her with his mouth, he slipped a finger inside her.

“Mmm,” she groaned. “More. More of everything.”

He complied. Licking harder and sucking deeper, he slid another finger into her, then slowly moved them in and out, timing his strokes to her helpless moans.

With one more swirl of his tongue on her most sensitive spot, Izzie cried out and climaxed. He wanted to be part of that climax, to experience the spasms of her body as she clenched and shook. Standing, he tugged his shirt up and off, then unfastened his belt and pants and pushed them down, out of the way.

When he looked up again, Izzie had slid down to stand before him. He frowned. “I wasn’t nearly done.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Neither was I.” Then, with an Eve-like smile on her face, she turned around, facing away from him, until they were both looking in the mirror. She slowly bent forward, putting her hands flat on the vanity, curving that sweet ass back in pure, unspoken invitation.

His pulse roared. “You’re sure…”

“Oh, I’m very sure,” she promised him. She was still smiling, her eyes still glittered in avarice and hunger. “It’s your turn to take me, Nick.”

Remembering the way he’d begged her to take him the other night at his place, he nodded in lazy agreement. “Oh, honey, you can’t imagine how much I want to take you like this.”

Making love to her face to face—watching her incredible eyes widen with pleasure, and her sweet mouth fall open on every long sigh—was amazing. He knew he’d never tire of doing it.

But the idea of taking her like this—with raw, hot passion—excited him beyond reason. He’d be able to see her expressions in the mirror, be able to plunge deeper than ever before until he imprinted himself somewhere deep inside her. Deep enough that, perhaps, she might never want to let him go.

“Nick,” she begged, “please.” She arched again, those long, dancer’s legs putting her curvy butt directly in line with his cock. She backed into him, as he moved forward to her.

He held her full hips in both hands, bending a little so he could see her sweet entrance and ease his way into it. She hissed and arched, trying to take him deeper, but powerless. His hands held her firmly, he was setting the pace.

And he planned to go slowly, wanting to savor every second of the experience.

“Give it to me,” she begged, watching him with desperation.

He smiled at her in the mirror and thrust forward a tiny bit. Rewarded by her gasp and the flare of her eyes, he pulled out again. This time, she didn’t beg for more, she simply licked her lips and watched, trusting him to make it good.

He didn’t make it good. He made it amazing. By the time he finally sunk all the way into her tight heat, Izzie was whimpering. And by the time he began to lose his mind and thrust wildly, in and out, over and over, she was practically sobbing.

He thought they were alone in the building. But he couldn’t be sure. “Izzie…,” he said, slowing to ease out of her, to calm them both a little, “…wait.”

“Don’t stop.”

“I’m not stopping, sweetheart,” he said. Then he stopped. She whimpered, watching him, then realized he was turning her around. “I have to kiss you, Iz,” he murmured.

She twisted in his arms to face him, twining her arms around his neck and one leg around his waist. Plunging his tongue in her mouth, he tangled it with hers keeping his eyes open so he could stare into her beautiful face. Lifting her back up onto the vanity, he went right back into her, deep and fast, knowing this last stretch would be a quick, pulsing one.

“Sweet heaven, you amaze me,” she whispered against his mouth as he filled her again.

“Amazing. Yeah.”

Those were the only words he could manage. Wanting to be connected with her everywhere, he kissed her again, wrapped his arms tightly around her body and drew her up against him.

Stroking and thrusting, he rocked into her with every bit of himself, her cries of pleasure echoing sweetly in his ears. And when he finally heard those cries turned into desperate gasps as she climaxed, he let himself go, too, erupting inside her until he was completely empty.

“HEY HOT STUFF, you’re looking delicious again today.”

Bridget jerked her head up, blinking the columns of numbers out of her brain as someone stepped into her office Sunday afternoon. She knew it wasn’t Dean…he didn’t speak to her like that, which was good. She wanted him to notice her, wanted him to realize she was interested in him. But she definitely didn’t want a man who’d speak to her so coarsely.

“Oh, hi,” she said, seeing one of the salesmen standing in the doorway. The guy, Ted, was a middle-aged divorcé with a phlegmy chuckle. He also had what she and her friends in middle school used to call Roman hands and Russian fingers.

He was grabby. Touchy. But he’d never gone too far beyond pats on her shoulder. She hoped that wasn’t about to change.

Ted wore his usual ugly striped sports coat over a dingy dress shirt and a red tie. In other words, he looked a mess. Usually, she saw him as a kind of sad guy whose wife had dumped him. He was smarmy and coarse, but had never given her any reason to be wary of him personally. Now, however, goosebumps had prickled her body and tension throbbed in her temple.

She didn’t like the look in his eye.

“You dressing like that just for me, hot stuff?” he asked as he sauntered into the office.

“I think that question would be called sexual harassment,” she said as she stared hard at him, hoping he’d take the warning as a threat and get out now, before he’d gone too far.

When he smiled and pushed the door shut behind him, she had a sinking feeling he’d already gone too far.

Damn. She should have left an hour ago. It was four o’clock, an hour after the dealership closed on Sundays. And she had to assume everyone else had gone home. Ted hadn’t been around since this morning. Judging by the whiff of alcohol she caught wafting off him, she figured he’d gone for a long lunch at a local bar.

Dean, why didn’t you show up? She’d thought for sure he’d be here. He’d worked every weekend since he started. That was the only reason Bridget had come in herself today…to see him!

It had been for nothing. She’d worn another short, sexy skirt that she’d bought at a cute local clothing store last night. That, with the silky sleeveless shell that draped across her curves invitingly would have been enough to get the man’s temperature rising. And he hadn’t even been here to see it.

Instead, Ted was. Ick.

“Girl, you have been hiding your light under a bushel.” He stepped closer. “It’s closing time. Let’s go have some fun.”

“No, thank you,” she said, her tone icy. She stuffed her paperwork into a drawer. Normally, she’d be more tidy. Today, she was in a hurry. She wanted out of here.

“Aww, come on, sweetie, I know there’s no man in your life. You must be lonely. Why don’t you let me keep you company?”

She’d rather keep company with a dead skunk. “No, Ted.”

Hopefully that firm tone would get the message across and he’d get out of her way and let her leave. But as she stood, Ted stepped between her desk and the door, right in her path. “You know you really want to stay.”

“No. I really don’t.”

Trying once again to be like Izzie, she fisted one hand, retrieved her purse, and tried to walk past him.

He grabbed her arm. “Not even a few minutes conversation?”

“Not even that,” she insisted, jerking her arm away.

Her angry tone and the heat in her eyes must have finally gotten through. Because Ted went from stupid drunk trying to score to angry drunk trying to control in one blink of her eyes. Without warning, he put both his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back. Bridget stumbled over her own high-heeled sandals, landing on her butt on the edge of her desk.

“Perfect.” Dropping his hands onto her thighs, he crudely pushed her legs apart and forced his way between them.

“Let me go!”

“Not yet, hot stuff.”

She reached around on the desk behind her, hoping she’d left her scissors or stapler out, but all she managed to grab was a small desk clock. Wrapping her fingers tightly around it, she swung, but only managed a glancing blow to Ted’s shoulder.

His nostrils flared even as his eyes narrowed in anger. “Playing hard to get?”

“Let me go or I’ll scream.”

“Nobody to hear you, pretty thing,” he said, any hint of charm gone from his voice as his true nature emerged.

Before she could say a thing—or think what to say—Bridget heard something that sounded like an angel. But it was no angel.

It was Dean Willis. Roaring.

“Get the hell off her you son of a bitch.”

Suddenly he was. Ted was lifted off her and tossed to the side of the room. Bridget saw him land hard against the wall and crumple to the floor. He yelped in either fear or pain. Or both.

He had reason to be afraid. Dean was already reaching for him, his face red, his body emanating danger. “You’re dead.”

Ted’s bravado when facing her disappeared under this new threat. Before Dean could even grab him, he’d launched himself to his feet and run out the door, leaving the two of them alone. The whole thing—from Ted’s entrance to his speedy departure—had taken place in under three minutes.

Her head was spinning. Breathing hard and shaking a little, she mumbled, “Thank you so much.”

Dean swung around to look at her, that blood rage still evident on his face. His blue eyes were like matching chips of ice. He looked as much like a cute, nice-guy car salesman as she looked like Xena the Warrior Princess.

No. This was not gentle, good-natured Dean. This was a dangerous man in a high fury. And her shivers of fear turned to shivers of excitement.

“What the hell happened?”

Still sitting on the desk, she could only shake her head. “He obviously had been drinking. He came back and caught me alone. It’s the first time he’s ever…I mean, he’s a creep, but I never thought he’d…”

“Maybe if you’d wear clothes that didn’t scream ‘do me’ men wouldn’t try.”

Bridget’s jaw dropped and she stared at him in shock. “What did you say to me?”

“Look at you,” he snapped, stepping closer. He pointed to her legs, still splayed open on the desk.

Bridget tried to jerk them back together, but Dean stepped between them before she could do it. With absolutely no warning, he plunged his hands into her hair and bent to cover her lips with his. He thrust his tongue in her mouth, tasting her, devouring her. His body was hard against hers, his hips between her thighs, and Bridget couldn’t even try to deny the absolute flood of heat that roared through her in response.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, tilting her head to kiss him back just as deeply. And for a long, heady moment, they made crazy, wild love with their mouths.

Then the moment ended. Dean let her go and staggered back a few steps. “Bridget, I’m…”

She put her hand up, palm out, to stop him. Sliding off the desk, she straightened her skirt and said, “Don’t. Okay? Just don’t say anything. I wanted that. Maybe I needed it just so I could wash Ted out of my memory. I didn’t exactly jump up there and part my legs—he pushed me.”

Dean instinctively swung his head to look at the door, that tense rage returning.

“He’s long gone. Thank you for coming in when you did.”

He ran both hands through his hair, his anger finally draining away. “I’ll take care of him, Bridget.”

“Marty will deal with him.” She stepped closer, offering him a tremulous smile. Because now there was no doubt that Dean’s interest in her was one of more than friendship. That kiss—and his body’s hard, instinctive reaction to it—told her he wanted more. Maybe as much as she did. “I guess that makes you my hero, huh?”

Dean stared at her, his eyes softening, the tension easing. Reaching for her, he pulled her into his arms. But this time, he didn’t attempt to kiss her. His embrace was pure, sweet comfort. He held her tightly, running his hand up and down her back. “I’m sorry. Sorry for what he did…sorry for what I said.”

“It’s all right. You were angry.” Tilting her head back, she smiled up at him. “I thought it was kinda sexy.”

For a second—a brief one—she thought he was going to smile back. To laugh, then lower his mouth to hers and kiss her again, gently this time.

But it didn’t happen. Instead, Dean sighed heavily and his mouth drew tight. “I’m also sorry for kissing you. I should never have done that.”

“I’ve been wanting you to…”

He put his hand up to stop her. “Don’t. It was a mistake, Bridget. A big one. And it won’t be repeated.”

She gasped, unable to believe he was rejecting her. Again.

“What is your problem?” she asked, completely indignant.

He just shook his head. “I don’t have a problem. I just can’t…don’t want…hell, Bridget, this just can’t happen.” As if needing to convince himself, as much as her, he reiterated.

“It won’t happen.”

**10**

WHEN NICK MANAGED to get through another evening at Leather and Lace without watching her dance, Izzie got a little nervous. She didn’t want to ask him about it over the next few nights since they were having such an amazing time doing wildly sensual things to one another. But she couldn’t help wondering.

On Sunday night, he’d been too busy to watch her dance. Or so he’d claimed. He’d conveniently had to go put out another fire in the club every time she was scheduled to go on.

Suspicious. She didn’t want to be, but she was.

He’d said he could handle it…but he wasn’t acting like he even wanted to try.

It wasn’t that she didn’t understand. In fact, putting herself in his shoes, she’d have to say she’d probably have a major problem with other women looking at her naked man with covetous eyes, thinking of ways they could have that incredible body and handsome face.

Her man. Her man? Oh, God, had he somehow become her man?

Sitting in her apartment, she realized that yes, at some point in recent weeks, Nick had become her man.

Maybe it had been when he’d made love to her in the back of the van. Or when he’d cared for her after she’d fallen in her dressing room. Maybe it was because of his sexy smile and the intimate way he watched her when he thought no one was looking.

Maybe it was even because of the way she’d felt every single time she’d woken up in his arms.

Those pre-dawn moments. Yeah. They’d probably done it.

Because each time it had happened—whether at his apartment, or hers, she’d had to lie there and watch him sleep. Study the line of his jaw and the curve of his cheek. Wonder how a man could have such a sensuous mouth and still be so damned tough. Note the small scars on his body, and his tattoo, and grieve for the things he must have gone through as a soldier.

Yes. In those moments, her heart had opened up. And she’d let him in just as surely as she’d let him in her body.

There were moments when she allowed herself not to care. To even consider whether they could make this crazy relationship of theirs work. Maybe a masked wedding…the Crimson Rose and the sexy night watchman.

That was so lame.

But it was no more crazy to think about than the idea of an official union between Izzie Natale and Nick Santori of Taylor Street.

“Would that really be so bad?” she whispered. She’d been telling herself it would, but at moments like this, she had a hard time remembering why.

“I need sugar,” she mumbled as she headed for her kitchen, dying for something sweet. She’d been so good at the bakery and tried to resist temptation, so she never brought any of that stuff home. At moments like these, though, she regretted it.

Nick had called a while ago, saying he’d be leaving the pizzeria in an hour and would come by. She glanced at her watch, wondering if she had time to run to the corner market. She was so desperate she’d go for a packet of Ho Hos at this point.

Before she could grab her shoes and dash for something to binge on, her cell phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID and recognizing the New York City number, she immediately began to smile, now knowing another sure-fire way to escape—at least mentally—from her troubles.

“V!” she exclaimed as she answered.

“Girl-friend!” was the reply. “It has been for-evah, where have you been?”

Plopping down on the sofa, Izzie kicked her feet up and leaned back, so happy to hear a voice from her old life, she wondered if fate had sent Vanessa’s call as some kind of mental gift. Vanessa was a good friend from her Rockette days. The striking, long-legged African American woman had been Izzie’s roommate on the road and the two of them had hit it off from their very first hotel stay, when they’d both decided to call for room service French fries at two in the morning, despite the matron’s orders to go to sleep by eleven o’clock.

“I’m still in Chicago.”

“Still doing that bakery thing?” Vanessa asked, sounding completely shocked. “I can’t believe you’ve lasted this long.”

“Join the club. I sometimes forget I haven’t spent the past seven years with my arms in cookie dough up to my elbows.”

“How’s your father?

“Getting better every day, already pestering my mother to let him go back to work.”

“That’s great. And as soon as he does you can quit.”

Yes, she could. Why that idea would send a shot of sadness through her, Izzie didn’t know. It wasn’t as if she liked working at the bakery. Even if she had made friends with all the staff, gotten on a first-name basis with their restaurant clients and the regulars who stopped in every day for breakfast.

Well, maybe she did like it. A little. But certainly not enough to want to stay there permanently.

Vanessa laughed softly. “And then you can come home. You still thinking of choreographing, or teaching?”

She had been, though, not as much lately. But she didn’t tell Vanessa that.

Fortunately, her friend quickly moved on. “You’ve got to come back soon. You are so missing out.” Launching into an explanation of all the things that had been going on—with the Rockettes, and in her personal life, Vanessa soon had Izzie laughing so hard she had to wipe tears from her eyes. The other woman was a wild one, and the ballsiest female she’d ever known.

The stories were entertaining, particularly when told with Vanessa’s flair. But even as she laughed, Izzie couldn’t help wondering whether her friend was truly happy. She sounded a little…empty. Lonely. Bored.

Which made Izzie suddenly remember the way she’d been feeling right before she’d hurt her leg.

Very much the same way.

All the things Vanessa had been describing were things Izzie had been doing the past few years in New York. She missed none of them. Honestly, all she really missed were her friends and her apartment. The lifestyle she’d already begun to outgrow even before she’d been forced to leave it.

Going back to it didn’t sound very palatable.

She shook off that crazy thought—not go back to her life? Insane. Like she had anything better going on here? “So which guy did you shove in the fountain?”

“The French dude. Pierre from Paris. Only, I think his name was probably really Petey from Poughkepsie or something. He wasn’t French any more than my dry wheat toast was French this morning.” Sighing, her friend added, “Why do men suck so bad?”

“Not all of them,” she said before thinking better of it.

Vanessa caught the tone in her voice and leapt on it. “Talk. Who is he? What’s he do? When did you start doing him?”

Having had no one to truly confide in since she’d been here…about her feelings, her relationship with Nick, even a bit about her sexy weekend job, she found herself spilling all of it to Vanessa. She must have talked for a solid five minutes without letting her friend get a word in. Finally realizing that, she whispered, “You still there?”

Vanessa murmured, “Oh, honey. This is serious.”

Yes. It was. Very serious.

“This Nick, I remember you talking about him.”

Izzie was afraid of that. Nick had always been—for her—the dream guy she’d never landed.

Now she’d landed him. She just didn’t know if she was going to get to keep him. Or if he even wanted her to, considering he hadn’t been able to bring himself to watch her dance again at the club.

“He might be a man worth settling down for, Izzie. Giving up your dancing…wait, what the hell did you say is the name of this place you’re dancing at?”

She should have known that would interest her friend more than any potential romance. “It’s called Leather and Lace.”

“Holy shit, girl, you’re strippin’.”

“Yeah. I’m stripping. And I’m having the time of my life.” Well, the stripping wasn’t giving her the time of her life. Nick was. But she’d already talked enough about Nick.

Vanessa demanded all the details on Izzie’s secret life, not sounding the least judgmental, and asking a bunch of questions. “That sounds like fun. You know, I’ve thought about taking a strip-dance exercise class they offer at my health club, but there’s a waiting list.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, honey, I’m not. It is the hottest thing going—there’s a three-month long list to get in this class and everybody I know is putting their name on it. If you come back, you need to teach me how and maybe I’ll retire and we can start a school somewhere. Teach housewives how to shake their booties.”

Izzie laughed softly at that silly idea. Then she thought of the word Vanessa had used. If. “What do you mean, if I come back? Why wouldn’t I come back?”

Vanessa grew very quiet, as if working out what to say. Knowing her friend was street-wise in a way Izzie never had been, she very much wanted to hear it. Anything Vanessa put this much thought into had to be worth hearing.

Finally, her friend murmured, “Why would you come back here when the life you really want is there?”

“You think I want to be a baker for the rest of my life?” Izzie protested, shocked that her friend would even suggest it.

“I don’t know whether you want to be a baker or a stripper. A pizza-delivery gal or a ballerina. All I know is that whatever you end up wanting to do, it’ll be tied up with that man you’ve loved for half your life.”

Izzie’s jaw dropped. She flinched so hard the phone fell onto her lap. Scrambling to get it, she heard Vanessa’s words echoing in her head. Especially because they’d come so quickly—mere minutes—after Izzie had been tearing herself apart to try to figure out just what she felt for Nick.

She really shouldn’t have had to think about it so hard. She knew what she felt for Nick. It was the same thing she’d always felt for him, only deeper now, adult. Sensual. Mature.

Forever.

Vanessa was right. She loved him. Part of her knew she should resent that, since it had been what she’d feared—and why she’d thrown up walls between them when he’d first pursued her. But she already knew she didn’t regret it. How could she regret feeling so emotionally alive for the first time in years?

“You still there?” her friend asked when Izzie finally brought the phone back up to her ear.

“I’m still here.”

Vanessa chuckled. Then, in a very low voice, she added, “I better be in the wedding.”

Then all Izzie heard was the dial tone.

“HEY, LITTLE BROTHER, when are you gonna come talk to the business lawyer with me and Pop?”

Nick stared at Tony, who’d followed him out the front door of Santori’s Friday afternoon. He’d been planning to head up the block to Natale’s. He had a real taste for cannoli. The fresh kind that could only be found in Izzie’s kitchen.

Or in Izzie. But that was another kind of decadent dessert altogether.

“I dunno, Tony, I really haven’t thought about it.”

His brother frowned. “I don’t get it. I thought it was all set. You know how much Pop wants to retire completely.”

“Bullshit.”

Chuckling, his brother nodded in agreement. “Okay. We know he won’t ever get outta that kitchen until they pry his wooden spoon out of his hand for his own funeral. But I know he’s hoping to get you settled.”

Get Nick settled. It sounded so archaic. And constricting.

“If you’re worried about coming in as a financial partner rather than just a working one, I am sure willing to let you buy in with some of that money you said you saved while you were in the service.”

Honestly, that had been one of Nick’s big concerns. He didn’t want anyone covering his way, he liked to pay his fair share. And if he were seriously considering going into business with Tony, he would absolutely insist on those terms. He did have the money, he did have the desire to get involved in a successful business and help it grow.

But that business was not a pizzeria. He knew it in his heart. He just hadn’t figured out how to tell the family that yet. “I haven’t made any decisions.”

Tony met his stare, obviously trying to figure out what was going on in Nick’s head. Nick thought about how best to put into words that he didn’t want the life his family had mapped out for him. But before either of them could say anything, Nick spotted Izzie walking up the street, coming up behind Tony. Considering his big brother was a mountain of a man, she probably hadn’t even seen Nick yet.

The sight of her face brought a stupid smile to his. But he didn’t give a damn. At least, not until his brother turned to look over his shoulder at whatever had made him so happy.

“Whoa-ho,” Tony said, when he looked back at Nick. “Izzie? It’s Izzie? Holy shit, Gloria’s gonna love this.”

“Gloria’s not going to know about this,” Nick muttered. Izzie was not twenty steps away and if she heard what they were talking about, she’d probably bolt. Then ignore him for the next week until he could work his way around her defenses again.

Damn, but the woman was prickly.

“Why not? Cripes, the family’s been wanting you two to hook up forever.”

“That’s the problem. Izzie isn’t the kind of woman who likes to do what’s expected of her.”

Maybe that’s one reason they got along so well. Because Nick felt exactly the same way about his family. He just hadn’t been able to make that clear to them yet.

“Okay, I won’t do anything to jinx it. But I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep it from Gloria.” Tony grinned, shaking his head back and forth. “The woman can get anything out of me with her sexy…”

“Don’t want to hear it,” Nick smoothly interjected. He continued to watch Izzie, realizing the exact moment when she spotted him. A quick grin flashed across her face. But when she saw who was with him, the grin disappeared.

“Hi, Tony. Nick,” she murmured, reaching them. She sounded so cool and calm. As if she hadn’t been in a huge tub of warm bubbles and cold champagne with him twelve hours ago, loving each other until the water got cold and the champagne got flat.

God, what a night. Another amazing one in Izzie’s arms.

He didn’t know what he’d ever do without them.

“How’s it going, little sister?” Tony asked, giving her a one-armed hug. “Sorry I couldn’t make it to lunch at the folks’ house Sunday. Work—it kills me.” He glanced at Nick and wagged his eyebrows. “If only I had a partner to take up the slack.”

Nick managed to suppress a sigh. Then he turned his attention to Izzie. “I was just on my way to the bakery. I’m jonesing for something sweet.”

She chuckled. “I was last night, too. I almost dashed out and got a Ho Ho to tide me over until you…” She quickly snapped her mouth shut, remembering Tony was there.

His oldest brother had never been the king of tact. In fact, his wife affectionately called him Lunkhead. Well, usually affectionately. Right now, however, Tony managed to pull it off. “Well, it was great seeing you, Iz, but I have to get back to work. Nick, you’re gonna swing by the bank after you go up to the bakery and grab us some of Izzie’s fabulous cannolis?”

They had plenty of cannolis left in the restaurant, but, he assumed, it was the best Tony could do on such short notice. “Sure, Tony. You bet.”

They both watched Tony go back into the restaurant, with breezy hellos and good wishes to every customer he passed on the way back to the kitchen. When they were alone on the sidewalk, Izzie continued to stare at the glass restaurant door. Finally, she murmured, “He knows, doesn’t he?”

Nick nodded. “Yeah.”

“How?”

With a helpless shrug, he told her the truth. “He saw the look on my face when I saw you walking toward me just now.”

She finally tore her gaze off the door and directed it toward him. Staring into his eyes, she searched for the meaning of what he’d said.

He didn’t try to hide it. He was in love with Izzie and his eyes affirmed that, even if his mouth didn’t.

He just didn’t know if she’d want to see the truth there.

He understood why she wouldn’t. Putting the reality of their feelings out there meant they had to deal with them. It meant she could accuse him of breaking their “secret lovers” deal and freeze him out of her life again.

It could also mean she’d acknowledge that she was falling for him, too. And that maybe they could make something work between them. Something good. Right.

Permanent.

“I can’t handle this, Nick,” she whispered, appearing stricken. “He’ll tell Gloria.”

“Not intentionally.”

“And she’ll blab to the known universe and the neighborhood will have me married and fat before winter and my parents will be eyeing a perfect little row house for us right up from theirs, getting our future kids on the waiting lists to go to Sacred Heart and St. Raphael’s.”

She sounded pained, as if the very idea of living that life devastated her. He understood why. Because he didn’t want it, either. Any of it. Oh, he wanted Izzie, no doubt about it. But as for how they lived? Well, it wouldn’t be like anything anybody on Taylor Street would understand.

But before he could reassure her, Izzie shook her head and started walking. “I can’t talk about this now. Not here.”

He fell into step beside her. “Tonight.”

“I’m going to my parents tonight. My sister Mia’s coming into town for the weekend and I had to promise to come for dinner—which I can’t do tomorrow or Sunday.”

In a normal relationship, she’d ask him to come with her. In a normal relationship, he’d do it.

They weren’t normal, of course.

“Call me when you’re done and I’ll meet you at your place.”

She hesitated, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. “I need a little time, Nick. Just a little time. Can we…maybe take a break until tomorrow?”

One night. She wasn’t asking for much. But the thought of going without her tonight nearly killed him.

“All right, Izzie.” He caught her arm, holding her elbow before she could stalk away. She looked frantically from side to side, as if to see if anyone was watching, but Nick didn’t release her. “Don’t panic,” he ordered her. “Don’t see trouble where there is none.”

She flashed him a grateful smile, murmured, “I’m mentally kissing you goodbye,” then tugged her arm free and walked away.

He mentally kissed her goodbye, too, until she disappeared into the bakery.

SPENDING FRIDAY NIGHT with her family actually turned out to be a very good experience. Izzie had been half-dreading it, since she’d felt like an alien among all of them since the day she’d gotten home. But something about this gathering was different. Maybe because Mia was home and therefore got a lot of the attention. Or because Gloria’s boys were there—the grandsons always caused everything else to cease to exist for her parents.

Or maybe it was just because Izzie forced herself to relax. Not having to talk a lot meant she didn’t have to watch every word she said. Didn’t have to worry about letting something slip regarding her dancing—which they all assumed she’d given up entirely because of her knee.

Not being so on edge actually allowed her to relax and, to her shock, even enjoy herself.

She was still mulling it over the next day, remembering the smile on her father’s face as he talked about returning to work soon. When he told her he’d been talking to his brother—who was about to retire—about coming to work with him at the bakery, Izzie began to see a silver lining in the cloud of her life. With another member of the family coming in to the business, the pressure would be off Izzie to stay involved. Maybe she could get back to something like a real life of her own.

Whatever she did—staying in Chicago or going back to New York, continuing to strip or giving it up—loving Nick or letting him get away—she knew she did not want to be a baker for much longer.

Nick tried reaching her a couple of times Saturday but she’d missed his calls. Not intentionally—the first time she’d been in the shower and the second she’d been waiting on customers at the bakery. By the time she had a minute to call him back, he’d been the one who hadn’t answered.

Still, not having spoken to him for more than a day—since that tense moment on the street when she’d realized Tony had stumbled onto the truth of their relationship—she was a little nervous. Heading to work at Leather and Lace, she immediately scanned the parking lot for his car, but didn’t see it. She was early—probably two hours earlier than she needed to be, and she knew it was because she was hoping he’d be here.

“Hi, Rose,” someone said as she came in the back door.

“Hi, Bernie. How’s the week been?”

The bouncer shrugged, offering her one of his big, boyish grins. “Knocked a few heads together, wiped up the ground with a drunk or two. You know, the usual.”

Laughing, she began to walk past him.

But he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. He glanced at the big canvas bag she carried, which was filled with some street clothes and supplies. “Can I help you in any way, Rose? Carry that? Get you some dinner?”

She shook her head. “You are so sweet, but no, honestly, I’ve got it.” The guy had been tripping over himself to take care of her since her first night at work. If he’d ever made a move on her, she’d suspect it was because he was interested. But he’d never been anything but a nice—if overprotective—friend.

Still smiling as she walked toward her dressing room, Izzie acknowledged just how comfortable she felt here. The club staff was like a second family already. Bernie and Harry. Leah and Jackie and the other dancers. They were all people she cared about, who seemed to care about her.

She didn’t want to give this up. Which was another reason she didn’t quite know how to deal with Nick’s seeming inability to watch her perform. It was as if ever since he’d become her lover, he no longer liked her doing her job.

That was how it seemed. But she couldn’t be sure. “Maybe he really is just busy,” she mumbled, trying to convince herself.

When she reached her dressing room, she put her new key in the new lock and twisted it. Before going inside, however, Leah stopped her. “Hey, I feel like I’m always picking up your presents!” the grinning girl said. She held up a gold foil wrapped box. “Yum. Have I told you how much I love chocolate?”

Izzie glanced at the box, looked down at her own full hips—at least an inch bigger than they’d been when she moved back from New York—and sighed. “Have I told you how much chocolate sticks to my hips and butt?”

The one plus was that the candies were chocolate-covered cherries. And she wasn’t too crazy about them. If they’d been caramels, she’d probably be much more tempted to grab a fistful. As it was, she easily waved them away. “Take them out of my sight, would you?”

Leah clutched the box to her chest. “Woo-hoo! Remind me to watch for the next jewelry box heading your way.”

Entering her dressing room, Izzie slowly slipped out of her clothes and put her robe on. She took her time—there was lots of it. Over the next hour, she got ready for her night. The chatter of women’s voices from the greenroom couldn’t drown out the sound of lots of footsteps walking in the lounge above her head. Customers were already pouring in, performers already on stage judging by the low bass beat she could almost feel reverberating in her chest.

The whole place felt alive and vibrant. Exactly the way she felt when she was here. The only other time she felt as good was when she was with Nick. What on earth was she going to do if he couldn’t take her working here anymore?

“Don’t think about it,” she reminded herself as she glanced at her watch. She’d been here over an hour and he still hadn’t come in. Which was making her very jittery.

Izzie forced everything else out of her head and finished putting on her makeup. Her audience might not see much of her face, but that didn’t mean she didn’t cover the stage makeup basics. She was puffing anti-shine powder on her cheeks when she heard a knock on her door. “Come in.” Almost holding her breath, she let it out with a pleased sigh when she saw Nick. “Hi.”

“Hi yourself,” he said. He pushed the door shut behind him, bent down and kissed her on the mouth. Quick, hard…hot and sexy. “Been needing that,” he said when he finally straightened.

“Me, too.

“Want more later.”

She grinned. “Me, too.”

“Things are already heating up upstairs, but I wanted to see you before it got too crazy.”

Izzie turned away, slowly lifting the powder puff to her face again. “Do you think it’ll be too busy again for you to be there during my numbers?”

Nick met her eyes in the mirror. “I don’t know,” he muttered. “I can’t promise anything.”

He was still hesitant, she heard it in his voice. Nick was avoiding having to acknowledge how he really felt—was going to feel—about her stripping. Izzie wanted to cry, sensing she knew what that answer would be.

He’d hate it. Sure, he’d been fine with her taking her clothes off when she was a stranger. But now that they were lovers? Well, if he was like every other male of the species, he was going to turn into the caveman he’d once jokingly pretended to be and get all overbearing. He’d want her to quit, he’d be surly and pouty until she did.

There weren’t many men who’d be able to take having their girlfriend strip down to a G-string in front of a bunch of strangers…why should she expect Nick to be any different?

“I’m doing my best, Iz.”

“Okay,” she murmured, blinking rapidly against unexpected moisture in her eyes, welling up not because she didn’t understand, she did. But because she so feared what this was going to mean when it finally came to a head between them.

“Oh, God, somebody get a bucket!”

Hearing the loud shout from the corridor outside her dressing room, Izzie immediately rose to her feet.

“Catch her!”

Nick flinched. “Wait here while I see what’s going on.”

She just rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

Following him out, she immediately saw a small crowd of a half-dozen dancers gathered around someone who was lying on the floor. Nick pushed through them, and immediately bent down. “Leah, what happened? Are you okay?”

“She’s sick,” someone said. “Like, all over the floor sick.”

Poor Leah. She’d been ill last weekend, and now again. Izzie briefly wondered if the poor kid was hiding an unexpected pregnancy or something. Then, as the crowd parted and she saw Leah’s face, she discounted that idea.

The pretty blonde looked like she was in misery. Her face was ghost white, slicked with sweat, and she appeared too weak to even stand on her own. She looked absolutely nothing like the pretty young thing Izzie had run into a little over an hour ago. She had to have been hit with some kind of fast-moving bug.

Nick didn’t waste time asking questions. He bent to lift the dancer, easily cradling her in his arms as if she was a child, and carried her into the greenroom down the hall. “Somebody get her a cold cloth.”

One of the dancers rushed off to do as Nick said, the rest of them crowded around. Izzie couldn’t say whether their avid interest was more on Leah’s behalf, or because of the incredible sight Nick made playing hero. His muscular arms bulged and flexed, but he spoke so softly—gently—to Leah as he gently laid her on the lumpy sofa in the greenroom. He even brushed her hair out of her face.

It was enough to make the hardest of women melt. Even the half-dozen strippers surrounding the sofa.

Izzie, of course, wasn’t surprised. She knew the tenderness the man was capable of. She also knew the way he’d been raised and imagined he’d have done the same thing if his little sister, Lottie, had been the one lying on that floor.

“What happened?” he asked Leah.

Leah groaned. “It just came over me out of nowhere. I haven’t been nauseous or anything, then all of a sudden, boom.”

“Have you eaten shellfish today?” someone asked.

“Or some old lunch meat?” asked another.

Leah shook her head, gratefully accepting a wet clump of paper towels her dressing-roommate, Jackie, had brought her. She pressed it to her forehead and replied, “I had a salad for lunch, then nothing until I binged on Rose’s chocolates.”

Seven heads swung around to stare at Izzie, seven pairs of eyes wide and curious. Maybe even a little accusing.

She opened her mouth to reply, wondering if they thought she’d done something to make Leah ill, but didn’t have to. The sick dancer herself spoke up again. “I found them lying on the stoop when I got to work today, with Rose’s name on them. She never even opened the box, she just gave them to me.”

That seemed to calm everyone down. Everyone except Nick. Because while all the others turned their attention back to Leah, offering to get her some ice or to drive her home, he frowned and stiffened his jaw so much it looked ready to break. “Where are these chocolates?”

“My dressing room.”

He looked up and stared at Jackie. “I’ll get them,” she said, quickly rushing out of the room.

It seemed ridiculous and Izzie didn’t for one second believe Leah had been brought down by some kind of poisoned candy…intended for her. That was strictly CSI stuff and she absolutely did not believe it. Judging by the look on Nick’s face, however, she knew better than to say that. He was going to see for himself no matter what she thought.

“Nick, I just heard one of the girls is sick, what’s going on?” Harry came rushing in the room, out of breath as if he’d just run down the stairs. The expression of worry on the older man’s face had to make all his employees feel better—no one could accuse Harry Black of not appreciating and caring about his dancers. Which probably made him a rarity in this industry…and was probably why few dancers ever quit here for any reason other than to move on to a different career.

Seeing Leah, he hurried over. “Should we call 9-1-1?”

Leah shook her head. “I don’t think so. But I do want to lie here for a little while, if that’s okay.”

“Oh, honey, don’t you even think of getting up,” another voice said. A woman’s. Delilah had heard the news, too, and followed her husband to the green room. She sounded concerned—a rarity for her. “We can cover you tonight and someone can take you home if you want.”

The room was getting crowded. But everybody made way for Jackie when she returned with the box of chocolates. “Here you go, Nick.” Frowning, she put her hand on his arm and nodded toward the corner of the room.

Nick took the box and followed Jackie. They exchanged a few words, and whatever she said to him made his scowl deepen. He kept the box tightly clutched in his hand and Izzie wondered if he was going to crush it.

Harry joined them, murmuring, “What’s wrong?”

Nick’s reply was softly spoken, he obviously didn’t want everyone else to hear. Jackie, having delivered whatever message it was that had gotten Nick even more fired up, called 9-1-1 after all, then went back to help take care of her friend. All the others hovered over Leah. Someone offered to get her a pillow for her feet, someone else offered a bucket for her head. That broke the ice a little and the group laughed.

Izzie didn’t join them. Nick suspected someone had tried to slip her poisoned chocolates. Damned if she was going to stay out of that conversation.

Striding across to the two men, she asked, “Well? Satisfied that I’m not a mad poisoner’s target?”

Nick didn’t look at her at first. Neither did Harry. They were both staring intently at the open box of chocolates on the makeup table. One of the men had flipped over all the remaining individually slotted pieces in the package, so they were bottom-side up. And in the bottom of each, very easily visible, was a small hole.

Something that wouldn’t have happened at the candy factory.

“Oh, hell,” Izzie whispered.

It appeared someone had, indeed, tried to poison her.

And when Nick turned to her and said, “Tell me about the roses,” she realized it might not have been the first time.

**11**

WHEN NICK REALIZED there were holes in the bottom of the candy, he saw red. And it wasn’t the cherry cordial filling.

He needed to know more—especially after what Jackie had told him about some flowers Izzie had passed to Leah last weekend. But he didn’t want to do it here.

“The police are on their way,” he muttered to Harry. Then, without a word, he grabbed Izzie’s elbow and pulled her out of the room, straight to her private dressing room.

She stumbled to keep up and he realized he might be holding her too tight. But he couldn’t let go, couldn’t release his grip. He wasn’t letting her get more than six inches away from him…or letting anyone else getting within six feet of her.

“Nick, calm down,” she muttered.

“I’m calm.” Deadly calm.

“No, you’re not. You’re volcanic,” she said as they walked into her dressing room.

Nick shut and locked the door. The last time he’d locked the door to this room had been at the start of one of the most amazing sexual experiences he’d ever enjoyed. He really wished he was doing it for the same reason now.

He wasn’t. He was locking the door to keep Izzie—the woman he now knew he loved—safe from someone who’d tried to hurt her at least twice now. Maybe even more.

Looking down, he saw the new chair sitting in front of Izzie’s vanity and the steam built again. He leaned over and smacked it with his palm, sending it crashing against the wall. It did not fall apart.

But that didn’t ease his suspicion about the last one.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, her voice calm and even.

Good thing one of them was. “Just making sure our friend didn’t sabotage another chair.”

Izzie’s pretty mouth opened into a perfect O as understanding washed over her. That, more than anything, seemed to finally make this situation sink in. She grabbed the edge of the table and sagged against it. “Someone really is trying to hurt me?”

He stepped close and wrapped his arms around her shoulders and tugged her against him. “I think so, babe.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea. Why do stalkers do any of the crap they do?”

Tilting her head back to look up at him, she murmured, “Stalker? Why would someone wanting to get close to me only to do something as dumb as make me sick?”

He had a few ideas. There were a lot of men out there who liked to play hero. Maybe somebody was setting Izzie up to get sick or take a fall just so he could get near her by being the one who came to her aid. Who knew how some dark, twisted minds worked? “Maybe somebody was hoping you’d pass out on stage and he could say he was a doctor and come to your aid.”

She blew out an impatient breath. “That’s silly.”

“But not impossible,” he insisted. “Those flowers that came last week…Jackie said they were for you, but that you gave them to Leah?”

Narrowing her eyes, she nodded. “You think they have something to do with this?”

That seemed incredibly obvious to Nick. “You get a couple of anonymous gifts, and the person who ends up with them gets sick.”

She quickly figured out where he was going. “Harry said Leah was sick Sunday night….”

“So was Jackie. They share a dressing room and both smelled and touched the flowers when they were putting them in a vase.”

Izzie shook her head, obviously not wanting to believe it. He didn’t blame her. It couldn’t be easy for her to think someone out there had been targeting her.

Because it was absolutely killing him to think it.

“And you think there was something on the roses….”

“Could have been insecticide, roach powder, anything. They both got nauseous and dizzy, and went home with horrible headaches.”

Nick didn’t know a lot about common household pesticide exposure, but he sure knew about its military applications. He’d been trained in dealing with all kinds of chemical attacks and imagined the most basic symptoms would be similar.

Izzie finally slipped out of his arms, her lovely face taut and strained. Her mouth drooped and she shook her head, appearing almost…hurt…that someone would be after her.

But the hurt didn’t last for long. As she stared toward the replacement chair, her frown deepened and her eyes narrowed. He saw the clenching of her jaw and knew she was working herself into a temper.

“The cowardly bastard.” She smacked her hand flat against the tabletop, muttering a few more choice curses. “You find out who did this, Nick.”

He liked the return of that fierceness. Izzie wouldn’t let anything keep her down for long—it was one of the things he loved about her. Which he planned to tell her, just as soon as they got around to having that whole “I love you,” and “I love you, too,” conversation. Which would be soon, if he had his way. Very soon.

“I intend to. We’ll start by questioning everyone to see if anybody noticed your anonymous gift-giver hanging around.”

Though he didn’t say it to her, Nick also intended to carefully watch the staff when he talked to them. It wasn’t impossible that someone who worked right here at Leather and Lace was behind the attacks. An obsessed bartender, a jealous dancer who wanted Izzie’s headliner spot. Maybe even a bouncer wanting to be her hero. Hell, maybe even Harry wanting to stir up a big news story as publicity for the club. He could see the headline now: Hottest mystery dancer in Chicago stalked by unknown assailant.

It was possible. Anything was.

“I’ll watch the crowd tonight and see if anybody acts suspiciously, or if I recognize some of the guys who come every night I’m on.” Glancing at her watch, she added, “I have to hurry up.”

That comment drove everything else out of his mind. Nick shook his head hard. “You’re not going on tonight.

She lifted her mask, turning to the mirror. “Of course I am.”

Nick met her reflected stare. “Like hell.”

“It can be like hell in here if you force me to make it that way,” she shot back. “Because if you say that again, we’re going to be having a major fight.”

Nick couldn’t believe her. She’d just found out someone had likely tried to poison her and she still wanted to perform. “Izzie, you can’t be serious.”

“Oh, you bet I am. We’re already down one girl with Leah being sick and I left Harry in the lurch last weekend.” Her eyes flashing fire, she added, “Besides, no one’s going to force me off the stage.”

Her expression betrayed her sheer determination as much as her words did. And he had to wonder if they had a double meaning.

Because despite everything that had happened this evening, he hadn’t forgotten what they had been talking about before Leah got sick. She’d basically asked him if he was going to watch her dance, and he’d hedged on his answer. He hadn’t missed the shine in her eyes or the disappointment twisting at her mouth. But he hadn’t been able to reassure her, because even Nick didn’t know how he was going to react when that moment came.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“There are four big, burly bouncers upstairs to make sure nothing happens,” she insisted. Piercing him with her stare, she added, “Besides, you’ll be there to protect me. Or won’t you? Maybe there’ll be something more important to deal with.”

Nick now knew for sure she was referring to their earlier conversation. And maybe she had a right to.

But being a little slow to want to watch the woman he loved get naked in front of a bunch of other guys had absolutely nothing to do with his concern for her now. “It’s not about that.”

“Oh, yes, it is.” Izzie stalked around the privacy screen. Given that it offered no privacy whatsoever, considering the mirror, that was a statement in itself.

A frank one…that the walls were going up between them.

“And frankly, I’m tired of asking you about it. You can watch or not, but the Crimson Rose is performing tonight.”

She yanked her robe off, then, watching him watch her, dropped her bra and panties to the floor.

“Damn it,” he muttered, as always unable to take his ravenous eyes off her. She was just so incredibly beautiful. The woman stopped his heart every time he looked at her.

Izzie continued to ignore him, reaching for her G-string and pulling it on. Then she covered her dark, puckered nipples with those two ridiculous pink petals.

“Don’t do this,” he ordered through a thick, tight throat. “Not until we know you’re safe.” When she stepped out from behind the screen and lifted her chin in challenge, he added, “You don’t have to go out there.”

“It’s my job.”

“It’s something you do part-time for kicks and to rub it in your family and the world that you’re not sweet little Isabella Natale anymore,” he said, frustrated beyond belief at her stoic refusal to listen to reason.

She appeared stunned by his accusation. “How can you say that? My family doesn’t even know I’m here.”

“I know and that proves my point. You get your secret kicks out of it without ever having to face the consequences. You’re not being honest to anyone—not even yourself—about why you’re doing this and what you really want.”

She jerked as if he’d slapped her. Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Nick wondered how he’d let this whole conversation spin so badly out of control so rapidly.

“You certainly are a fine one to talk,” she finally said, her tone steely.

“What?”

“You accuse me of that, but you’re doing exactly the same thing, Nick Santori. Stringing your family along with this idea that you’re going to be singing O Sole Mio and slinging pizza dough with Tony and your father. Meanwhile, you hide your nights doing something exciting and dangerous at a place they would never approve of. I call that hypocritical.”

He couldn’t believe she’d turned things around on him like that. “That’s ridiculous.”

“So why haven’t you told Tony you’re not sticking around? Why haven’t you told your father about this ‘protection’ business you’re thinking of going into with your Marine buddies?”

Leave it to a woman to use something he’d told her less than a day ago in a fight against him. “That has nothing to do with whether you go out on stage and flaunt yourself in front of someone who wants to hurt you.” But even as he said it, a small voice in his head whispered that she might be right. At least a little.

Not that he was going to admit that now…not when they still had the issue of her physical safety to work out. So he pushed on. “And I’m not on stage intentionally taking off my clothes to try to turn on a hundred strangers—one of whom might be trying to poison me.”

She’d stiffened at the world flaunt. By the time he’d finished speaking, Izzie’s face was as red as her mask. “Well, that’s it, then, isn’t it? We’ve finally gotten down to it.”

“Izzie….”

She put a hand up to stop him. “I knew it would come to this, and now it has. You need to leave. I’m going on stage tonight. By the time I get back, I hope there will be a new lock on my door, for my own protection.” Her chin quivered, her full lips shook. But she had one last thing to say. “And you most definitely will not have a key to it.”

NICK WASN’T IN the audience. Izzie scanned the crowd for him throughout her performance, wondering if he’d be lurking in the shadows, watching out for her.

He wasn’t.

It was over.

Somehow, she managed to not cry as she gyrated to the music. Managed to not show the hungry-looking men in the audience that her heart was broken.

It shouldn’t feel this broken, after all, she’d known going into this crazy, wild relationship with Nick that it would have to end badly. From day one, they’d wanted each other on opposite terms. He’d wanted the cute kid sister of his brother’s wife, who worked at the bakery every day. She’d wanted the sultry, sexy bodyguard who guarded her naked body every night.

That he’d tried to put his foot down and forbid her from dancing the very first moment he had a convenient excuse emphasized that and more.

As she dipped and swayed and thrust and jumped on the stage, four words kept time with the music. They played over and over, keeping the 4:4 beat.

It can not work.

By the time she was finished dancing, Izzie was as much angry as she was heartbroken. Aside from being her lover, Nick was supposed to be the club’s bodyguard. And yet when she’d been the most vulnerable—exposed—he’d been nowhere to be seen.

She’d have something to say about that the second she saw him. But that moment came almost immediately—he had been watching her back. Literally. He was standing, dark and predatory, in the wings just off stage. He’d been watching for her to come off…out of a direct line of sight to center stage. So he hadn’t watched her dance. And he most certainly hadn’t experienced watching her dance with the rest of a big, male audience.

Nothing had changed.

“I’ll escort you to your dressing room,” he said, his jaw as stiff as his shoulders. “Rose.”

She didn’t even respond as she slipped her robe on over her nearly naked body, then sailed past him toward the stairs. She didn’t need his help, she didn’t need his approval.

Yes, she needed him. But she’d learn to do without him, just like she’d done without him all those long, lonely teenage years when she’d pined for the man.

Of course, never having had him might have aided her then. Now that she had?

Izzie feared she was never going to get over Nick.

“Ahem.” As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Harry stepped out of the greenroom.

“Everything okay?” Nick asked, instantly on alert.

“It’s fine,” the older man said, but he didn’t sound convinced. In fact, his voice was weak, his face a little pale.

Izzie reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Harry, what’s wrong? Is Leah all right?”

He covered her hand with his. “Yes. Jackie called earlier. Leah’s fine.” He glanced over his shoulder into the quiet greenroom. He stepped out of the room and eased the door closed. “But I need to talk to both of you. Will you come with me, please?”

Hearing his urgency and seeing his very obvious concern, Izzie immediately went on alert. Something else had happened…maybe someone else was hurt.

“What is it?” Nick asked in a low voice, obviously realizing the same thing.

The man just shook his head, leading them back up the stairs to his small office which was on the other side of the lobby. They took a private, back hallway—a good thing since Izzie still wore just her long, silky robe. Whatever was bothering Harry, it had to be serious because he hadn’t even offered to wait while she put some clothes on.

Harry’s office was unpretentious and simple. Comfortable. Much like the self-deprecating man who occupied it.

But Harry Black did not look at all comfortable right now. As he gestured them toward the two armchairs across from his desk, his hand shook.

Izzie almost held her breath, watching him sit down behind the desk. Before he said a word, he dropped his head forward and put it in hands. “I can’t even look at you when I say this.”

Izzie had no idea what the man could be talking about, but beside her, Nick sucked in a sharp breath. “You…”

Their employer immediately looked up, shaking his head. “No. Not me.” Moisture appearing in his eyes, he continued. “It was Delilah.”

Izzie suddenly got it. Delilah had been the one after her. She’d poisoned the chocolates—and perhaps the roses.

Nick muttered a foul word, but Harry didn’t leap to the defense of his wife. She deserved their scorn. No, she hadn’t succeeded in hurting Izzie, her target, but she had certainly made Leah miserable.

“Tell us,” Nick said, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms over his chest.

His eyes were narrowed, his expression forbidding. Izzie recognized that tension in his rock-hard body. It was a good thing Delilah Black was not here for a personal confession. A very good thing. Because if Izzie didn’t rip her apart, Nick just might have.

“I thought she wanted to retire,” Harry said. He had a dazed expression, the same one many men wore when trying to understand their wives. Izzie had certainly seen it on her father’s face. “She seemed happy helping me with management.”

“How long ago did she stop?” Izzie asked, feeling a sharp sense of pity for the man. She sensed Harry needed to build up to telling them the worst of it.

“A few years ago when she turned forty. Right after we got married.” Opening his desk drawer, Harry reached in and grabbed a silver flask and a shot glass. He poured himself a drink, raising a brow toward Nick and Izzie to see if they wanted one.

Neither took him up on it. Izzie because she was already feeling queasy at the story Harry was telling them. Nick…well, probably because he was already on a low simmer in the chair next to her. Throwing alcohol on a slow burn could make it erupt.

“And what, she thought if she could get rid of your headliner, you’d suddenly put her back on stage? That makes no sense,” Nick said, disgust dripping from his words.

“Not to you. Not to me,” Harry said with a sigh. “But to her.” Growing slightly pink in the cheeks, he added, “I, uh, think there might have been a little more to it, though. I guess I talk a lot about you Rose…Izzie,” he clarified, calling her by her real name for the first time since he’d hired her. “And I think Dee got a bit jealous, thinking my interest was something other than professional.” Almost blushing to the roots of his balding head now, he quickly added, “That wasn’t at all true. I’m as proud of you as if you were my own daughter…but Dee didn’t get that.”

The man had never even looked at her the wrong way. Izzie didn’t doubt he was being truthful.

“Was she responsible for the roses?”

Harry nodded, taking another deep sip of his drink. “She put some kind of bug powder on them. And before you ask, yes, she did the chair too. I got her to admit to both of those things, as well as putting some kind of syrup—Ipecac—in the chocolates.”

This time Izzie was the one to call the other woman a bitch under her breath. She simply couldn’t help it. Again, Harry didn’t make any effort to defend his wife.

“Why’d she come clean?” Izzie asked.

“I suspected as soon as I saw the box of candy. Dee loves that kind. And she came home with some of that syrup a couple of days ago, saying she wanted it on hand in case one of her nieces or nephews came over and swallowed something poisonous.”

Nick shifted a little, his arms still cross, his body still rigid. “So you confronted her?”

Harry nodded. “And she confessed. When she saw how sick Leah was, she felt awful.”

“Wonder if she’d have felt that way if it had been Izzie lying on the floor,” Nick snapped.

He sounded very protective. Which made Izzie feel all warm and gooshy inside, even though she told herself that was stupid.

“I dunno,” Harry admitted. “Maybe not.”

Gee, it was nice to be liked.

Nick finally sat up and leaned toward the desk. Fixing a firm eye on Harry he said, “Have you called the police?”

The man slowly shook his head. But before Nick could confront him on it, he added, “I went to Leah first and told her everything. She and Jackie decided to press charges, and they made the call to the police themselves.”

Nick relaxed. A little.

“I understand why that needed to happen.” Tears rose in Harry’s gray eyes and oozed a little onto his round cheeks. “But I couldn’t be the one to turn my wife in.”

Izzie reached over and put her hand on Nick’s leg, sensing he was about to make another comment about Delilah. She squeezed his thigh, warning him not to. Harry was suffering enough. He didn’t need to be told he was a fool for loving someone so hateful. “I understand,” she murmured.

“I hope you do. And I hope you’ll understand that I’m going to see her through this. She’ll be facing assault charges.”

“At the very least,” Nick mumbled.

“I know this might make you want to leave, Ro…Izzie. But I wish you wouldn’t.” The man smiled weakly. “You’re family.”

Huh. If poison was the way Delilah treated members of her family, Izzie would hate to see what she did to her enemies.

“I know that, too,” Izzie said, slowly pulling her hand away from Nick’s warm thigh, already missing the contact. Already missing him. “You love her. That’s what people who love each other do…they support one another, even when they make what other people might see as bad or foolish decisions.” Hearing a quiver in her voice as the subject touched much too close to home, Izzie offered Harry a tremulous smile.

Nick she didn’t even look at.

“Thank you for telling me, Harry. I’m going to go get ready for my next number.” Without another word to either of them, Izzie walked out and went back to work.

And Nick didn’t come anywhere near her for the rest of the night.

WHEN BRIDGET WENT back to the dealership on Monday morning, she looked for Ted, wondering if he’d have the nerve to show up.

He didn’t. That was good.

Neither did Dean. That wasn’t good.

Hopefully Ted had been scared off, either by Dean, or by the ramifications of his own stupid actions.

Hopefully Dean had not been scared off and was just stuck in traffic.

Bridget had spent all Sunday night wondering what on earth she was going to say to him—how she was going to climb that wall he’d erected between them after he’d kissed her so passionately in the office. But for nothing. He wasn’t there.

She trudged through her day, going through the same song and dance with Marty about the books. She found problems. He waved them off as unimportant. A typical day in the life.

“I am so gonna quit this job,” she muttered that afternoon.

Soon. Maybe she’d even give her notice today. After all, she’d only stayed to see if something was going to happen between her and Dean Willis. Judging by yesterday, it seemed pretty clear nothing was.

She went so far as to open up a document on her computer to type her resignation letter. She’d give two weeks notice, even though she had no other job lined up. She had enough of a cushion to be unemployed for a while. And if she didn’t come up with another bookkeeping job quickly, she’d lay money that Izzie would hire her on at the bakery, just to pay the rent.

But before she’d typed so much as the date, Bridget heard a commotion—shouts, coming from the sales floor. Her first thought was that Ted had come back and was making a scene. But there were several voices, all yelling at once.

She grabbed her purse and threw it under her desk, then wondered if she should crawl under after it…this could be a robbery. But when the door to the office flew open and she saw a uniformed police officer, she didn’t.

“Is anyone in here with you?” the officer barked.

“N-no. Just me.”

“You need to come with me, ma’am.”

Dazed, Bridget followed the officer, seeing all the other employees being herded together by other policemen. All of them were gathered just inside the front door, and Marty was shouting loud enough to break the glass in the windows.

Everyone was talking—demanding answers. Everyone but Bridget. She didn’t have to. Because the second she saw Dean Willis—dressed in a perfectly fitted dark blue suit—talking to other dark-suited men right outside the front door, she knew what was going on.

He was no car salesman.

“Sir, you’ll have an opportunity to call your attorney soon,” one of the officers said, trying to calm Marty down.

It worked for a brief second, until Dean walked through the door. When Marty saw him with the rest of the investigators, he started ranting and struggling against the officer trying to handcuff him. Another one jumped in to help and between them they got the livid man into custody.

Dean looked her way once. His nice blue eyes were frigid. His smile absent. His tousled blond hair was slicked down and parted on the side—conservative, professional. And his clothes were immaculate, right down to his shiny black wing-tip shoes.

He could have been a picture from an FBI agent’s handbook come to life.

The rest of the day went by in a whirl. She was questioned endlessly—never by Dean, who stayed away from her—but by his fellow agents. Apparently there had been a reason Marty hadn’t wanted Bridget to do a good job with the books. They were never supposed to balance out. Because, if the agents were to be believed, Honest Marty’s Used Cars had been bringing in and cleaning up a whole lot of dirty money for some pretty bad guys.

And she’d fallen right in the middle of it.

By the end of the day, Bridget was utterly exhausted. Ready to collapse, her throat sore from answering so many questions. She hadn’t asked for a lawyer—had cooperated fully, believing that’s what an innocent person should do. And she’d spent the last four hours in the conference room, going over months’ worth of seized bank statements and ledgers with some FBI accountant, watching step by step as they built a case against her boss.

At first, she felt a little sorry for Marty. But not too sorry. Especially when she caught snips of conversation about where the dirty money had come from. In her opinion, anybody who cleaned cash that had been earned off the sale of filthy drugs to kids deserved what he got. She was just sorry the creep had dragged her into the sordidness.

She’d seen Dean only briefly, when she’d been brought to tears by the relentless questions of the accountant. Dean had appeared out of nowhere, appearing behind the other officer’s back, barking, “She’s not a suspect, she’s a witness. Treat her like one.” Then, with one long, even look at Bridget, he’d left again to go back to work with the other investigators.

Finally, when it was nearly dark out, Bridget was told she could go home. She’d be called in to help again—and, likely, to testify—but for now, she was free.

Free. Great. She was free to go home, look back on this horrible day—on these past few horrible weeks—and think about what a damned fool she’d been.

Dean had used her. He’d feigned an interest in her so he could build his money laundering case against Marty. He’d played her like an instrument, obviously seeing the quiet, sweet-faced bookkeeper as an easy mark.

She hated the son of a bitch with a passion she’d never had toward anyone in her life.

That rage carried her down the block as she strode away from the dealership, heading toward her nearby apartment. Usually when she made the walk home, she kept her purse clutched tightly to her side, and constantly scanned for any possible danger. This wasn’t a bad part of town—but as a young woman walking alone, she didn’t take chances. Tonight, however, she practically dared anyone to mess with her. She felt capable of doing real violence.

“Bridget, wait, please!” a voice called.

Though she kept walking, she peered over her shoulder to see who’d called her. She almost tripped over her own feet when she realized it was Dean. “Stay away from me,” she snapped, picking up her pace.

He picked up his, too, chasing her down until he reached her. “Would you stop? I’ve been calling you for two blocks.”

“Not real quick on the uptake, are you?” she said. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“You have to let me explain.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” she said, though she did finally stop and face him. “And you don’t have to explain, I got it, okay? You were working undercover. I was the easy mark. Of course you’d come after me by any means at your disposal.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Like hell.”

“Just…calm down and let me explain. I did not mean to hurt you, and I definitely never meant to get personally involved with you.”

“You mean that wasn’t in the manual?”

“No, it wasn’t. But I was worried, I felt sure early on that you were caught in something you didn’t know about.” He put a hand on her arm. “I was worried about you.”

She shrugged his hand of. “Sure you were. I’m sure your concern was the reason you asked me out. And your fears that I was being used by my boss to help hide money was the only reason you kissed the lips off my face yesterday.”

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply—as if for control—and tried again. “I lost my detachment where you were concerned.”

Those were the first words he’d said that actually made her pause. Because he’d whispered them hoarsely, as if against his will. Like he didn’t want to admit to the weakness.

And she believed him.

Not that it made a damn bit of difference. “Well, that’s too bad for you then,” she said, lifting her chin, amazed that her voice didn’t even quiver. “Because I never want to see you again.” She began walking again.

“Bridget, I know you’re upset now. But I want to make it up to you. Soon, when you’ve…”

“When I’ve what?” she asked, swinging around again. “When I’ve calmed down? Well, keep dreaming, buddy. Because it’s not going to happen. Ever.”

Dean met her stare, but didn’t try to stop her this time when she turned again to start walking. He did, however, have one more thing to say, low, as if making a vow.

“I’m not giving up.”

“Well, too bad for you,” she snapped back, feeling both proud of herself for being so strong…and sad at having lost something she suspected could have been very special.

“Bridget….”

This time, she didn’t turn around. And she didn’t have to wonder what Izzie would do.

Bridget knew what she wanted to do.

So without a pause, she lifted her hand, flipped him the bird over her shoulder, and kept on walking.

**12**

IZZIE DIDN’T SEE or hear from Nick for six long days. The longest of her life.

Since she’d walked out of Harry’s office Sunday night, Nick had apparently taken her orders to leave her alone seriously, because that’s exactly what he’d done. He hadn’t tried calling, hadn’t popped in to the bakery, hadn’t even nonchalantly walked by the shop and pretended not to look in at her.

That’s what she’d done, at Santori’s, but she hadn’t seen the man at all.

“Why didn’t you fight for me?” she whispered as she drove to the other side of town Saturday evening on her way to work. “Why did you listen to me and leave me alone?”

Why did you tell him to?

Good question. And Izzie was already forgetting the answer, though it had seemed so important Sunday.

Yes, she was still upset that he’d suddenly gone from an approving coworker to a disapproving lover when it came to her dancing. But maybe they could have worked it out. Maybe he wouldn’t have reacted so badly to watching her on stage.

Maybe…hell, maybe she loved him enough that she could have quit and never regretted it.

But he hadn’t given her the chance.

In the six days since she’d seen him, Izzie was questioning a lot of the choices she’d made. After accusing Nick of living a lie, too, she’d realized that she was tired of living one all the time. So she’d actually begun to share her secret. Only with her sisters and her cousin so far, but it was a start.

And they’d been remarkably supportive. Even Gloria who had, to Izzie’s utter shock, admitted that she’d love to see her perform. Honestly, it felt as if a weight had been lifted, and she’d decided then and there to start thinking of how to work her daytime life into her nighttime one. Slowly…a little at a time. But she might just have to find a way to do it.

Because if Nick ever did come back after her, she wanted to try to find a way to make all the pieces of both their lives fit.

Performing again…that caused more stress. Izzie couldn’t deny a small amount of trepidation when she arrived at Leather and Lace Saturday night. This was her first time back since last Sunday, the night of Delilah’s confession—and her arrest. She hadn’t talked to Harry since and she was worried about what the older man was going through.

Bernie was waiting at the back door. “Hiya, Rose,” he said without a smile. Obviously the mood around here was still dour.

“Hi. Harry around?”

He shook his head. “He hasn’t been here much.” Shaking his head, he added, “Wish he’d just ditch that witch and get back to work, this club ain’t gonna run itself.”

Izzie didn’t say anything. She honestly didn’t want to think about what she’d do in her boss’s situation. He was a man who loved his wife…warts and all. Should he be faulted for that? Maybe. But it wasn’t her place to judge.

The dressing rooms and greenroom were pretty quiet for a Saturday night, any chatter between the dancers was going on quietly. Just as well. Izzie didn’t feel very social. There was only one person she wanted to see…only, she didn’t know what on earth she’d say to him when she did.

I miss you. I love you. Please love me as I am and let’s work it out.

All of the above.

He never appeared. She didn’t see him downstairs, and he certainly didn’t come to her dressing room. Izzie went through the motions getting ready, tense and anxious…but for nothing.

By the time she was ready to go on, she was seriously wondering if she’d made a mistake in coming in at all. Her heart was not in it. Not tonight. “The show must go on,” she reminded herself as she walked upstairs and took her place backstage.

She’d like to think she gave her audience her all, but as she began removing her rose petals in time to the music, she knew her heart wasn’t in it. Her heart was in little pieces, scattered around Nick Santori’s feet. Wherever he may be.

Usually, Izzie ignored the audience as she performed—it was part of her “mysterious appeal” as Harry had described it right after she’d started working here. And he’d been right.

Tonight, however, something caught her attention. Rather, someone. Normally, all were still when she performed—including the waitresses. But now, someone was walking from the back of the room straight down the center aisle toward the stage.

It was a man. A dark-haired, dark-eyed man.

A familiar dark-haired, dark-eyed man.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, stumbling a little.

Because it was Nick. A Nick like she’d never seen before.

Though he wore his typical on-the-job tough-guy uniform of black pants and tight black T-shirt, he was carrying a bouquet of roses. A huge bouquet of them. He was also smiling, his eyes locked on her, apparently not caring that she was dancing nearly naked on stage in front of a bunch of strange men.

And for the first time in her entire dancing career, Izzie did something entirely unprofessional. She committed the cardinal sin. She stopped right in the middle of her number.

“Nick,” she whispered.

He had reached the edge of the low stage, which was about as high as his mid-thigh and was staring up at her. The look in his eyes…oh, God, that look. He was smiling broadly, adoring her with his gaze.

He not only looked approving, he looked absolutely enraptured. “Hi, Izzie,” he said, his voice low, intimate, just for the two of them.

The music slowly faded away into silence. The audience began to murmur. One man yelled something like “Down in front,” but he was shouted down by several others who obviously wanted to see what would happen next.

She’d like to know that herself.

“Hi,” she whispered. “Uh…what are you doing?”

His smile widened. “Watching you.”

“I noticed.”

“You’re wonderful.”

She nibbled her bottom lip. “Thank you.”

“I could watch you dance every night and be a happy man.”

“Who couldn’t?” someone from a nearby table called.

Nick never even glanced over, not distracted. Instead, he lifted the bouquet and offered it to her. Izzie took it, bringing the flowers up to her masked face and sniffing the heady fragrance permeating the red blooms. “They’re beautiful.”

“I figured roses were your flower.”

“Good call.” Laughing a little, she asked, “Is there some reason you gave them to me here? And right now?”

He nodded. “I wanted you to know how proud I am of you and how much I love seeing you dance. No matter who else is here.”

He’d said it. He’d put it into words. Exactly what she needed to hear. “Oh, Nick, really?”

He nodded. “Really. I have more to say. But not here.” He glanced over his shoulder at all the men leering at them. “Some things were not meant to do in front of an audience.” Then he looked back up at her. “And the next thing I want to say to you can’t be said when you’re wearing that mask on your face.”

She shivered, anticipation rolling through her. Oh, how she hoped she knew what it was he wanted to say to her. That it involved talk of a future. And a lot of uses of the word love.

“I’ll meet you downstairs in two-and-a-half minutes,” he said. “I’ve timed your song…that’s how much you have left.”

“You’re on,” she said with a broad smile as she clutched the flowers close to her body and slowly backed away from the edge of the stage. She put the flowers down right in front of the curtain, where she could easily retrieve them.

Nick turned around and walked back the way he’d come. From where Izzie stood, she could see every man in the place turn to watch him go. Most were regulars who had to have recognized him. And probably all of them wanted to know exactly what he’d said to her…and what he meant to her.

That was easy to explain. Everything.

Nodding toward the crew member on the side of the stage, Izzie waited for her song to resume. Now she danced joyfully, the way she hadn’t in a very long time. And she smiled during every moment of it.

As soon as the last notes of the music played, Izzie grabbed her flowers and darted toward the wings, pausing only long enough to stick her arms in her robe before tearing toward the staircase. She took the cement stairs two at a time, almost stumbling. But even if she had, it would have been okay. Because Nick was waiting at the bottom of them, staring up at her.

He would have caught her. She knew that, from now on, he would be there to catch her.

“Come on,” he murmured, taking her hand. He twined her fingers in his, then lifted them to his mouth to press a soft kiss on them. “Let’s talk privately.”

She followed him, easing against his body, her curves fitting perfectly in his angles, as if they were two pieces of a puzzle. When they reached her dressing room, Nick opened the door and held it for her, then followed her inside.

“Thank you again for the roses,” she murmured as she put them on the makeup-strewn counter. They’d already begun filling the room with their heady perfume and she inhaled of it deeply.

“You’re welcome.” He immediately added, “You were right.”

“About?”

“Everything,” he admitted evenly, making no effort to hedge or share blame for what had happened between them. Even though Izzie knew she bore some of the responsibility.

“We both…”

“No, Iz, let me finish, please. You were right to accuse me of living the same double life I’d accused you of. You had legitimate reasons, with your father’s health and your, uh…”

“Being a stripper?”

He grinned. “Yeah. That.”

“I told Gloria and Mia.”

His eyes widened. “Really? How’d they react?”

“Better than I expected.” Much better. But she’d fill him in on that later. “It’s a first step, anyway.”

“I know. I made that same step. I told my father and Tony that I wasn’t interested in the business. And what I am interested in doing.”

“Being a bodyguard?”

For the first time since he’d walked up to her during her dance, Nick looked a little hesitant. He glanced to the side, and scrunched his brow. “Well…not exactly.”

Immediately on alert, Izzie crossed her arms. “What did you do? Tell me you’re not going to be a cop like your brother!”

He shook his head, as if appalled at the idea. “Not a chance. As it turns out, Harry’s going to need to take a step back from this place to deal with Delilah’s legal situation.”

Not a surprise.

“And he asked me if I’d manage it.”

Izzie couldn’t prevent a shocked gasp. “What?”

“There’s more.”

Still stunned at the very concept, she waited, mouth agape.

“He needs an infusion of cash…I think he anticipates a lot of legal bills. I have money I’ve been socking away during all the years I bunked with Uncle Sam. So I’ve just become a part owner of this club.”

That was so unexpected, Izzie couldn’t help sinking down to her chair in absolute shock. “You’re serious?”

“Very serious.”

“You’re going to work here.”

“Uh-huh. You okay with that? Working with your husband?”

“Oh, I’ll love….” His words sunk in, banging around in her head. “What did you say?”

He smiled. “I thought diamonds would go well with roses.”

Izzie remained still, in a stunned silence, as Nick reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring. A gold one. With a big fat diamond on top of it. “I’m going to slide this on your finger, but not until you take that mask off your face.”

Dazed, she reached up and unfastened the clasps of her mask, one on each side of her head. The slow-motion feeling of the moment continued as she drew the red velvet away, letting it fall to the floor at her feet.

He reached for her hand, drawing her up to stand in front of him. “I love you, Izzie Natale. I love you, Crimson Rose. And I want you both in my life from this day on,” he said, his voice serious and unwavering. His expression was every bit as serious—as proud and determined as she’d ever seen him—as if he placed more value on this moment than he had on any other.

She certainly did. Because this could be the moment when her life changed forever. When, as silly as it sounded, all her secret dreams—the ones she hadn’t even acknowledged to herself—might actually start coming true.

“Whether we stay here, or go to New York, whether you work at the bakery or take off your clothes for a living…I’ll follow you. I’ll lead you. I’ll stand beside you.” He reached up and cupped her cheek, brushing his fingertips over her skin in a caress so tender it brought tears to her eyes.

“Be with me. Always.”

Now the teardrops gushed. Izzie seldom cried, but, at this moment, it was absolutely the only reaction she could manage. “I will, Nick. I love you so much. I’ve loved you for so long, I can’t remember what it felt like to not be in love with you.”

Reaching for him, she twined her arms around his neck and drew him toward her. She rose on tiptoe, touching her lips to his in a gentle kiss that gradually deepened. Their tongues sliding together in delicate intimacy, their bodies melted together. They shared breaths and promises not yet made but never to be broken, making a bond in that deep, unending, heady kiss that would last forever.

It was the most beautiful kiss of Izzie’s life. Because she was kissing a man she’d loved forever…and his amazing mouth had just given the same words to her.

When they finally paused, Nick smiled down at her. “Are you really going to wear my ring?”

She stuck out her hand. “Starting now. Lasting forever.”

Once he’d slid it on, she stared at the beautiful, glittering stone and gasped at the beauty of it. “Oh, thank you for waiting for me,” she whispered to him.

“Thanks for pulling me on top of you on that table of cookies to let me know how much you wanted me.”

Izzie glared at her new fiancée. “I did not pull you on top of me.”

“I’d have to say you pulled, Cookie.”

Reaching for the sash to her bathrobe and slowly unfastening it, she smiled a wicked, sultry smile. “Nick? You want to see what’s beneath this robe?”

His eyes glittered in hunger and need. “Oh, you know I do.”

He reached for her, but Izzie put her hand over his, stopping him. “Then I have one piece of advice for you. Don’t call me Cookie.”

**Epilogue**

Three Months Later

THOUGH THE COLD WINTER air outside buffeted the city with an early blast of winter, inside Leather and Lace, everything remained hot. As usual.

The club was packed this Saturday night, every table full, mostly with men, but a few daring women were in the audience, too. Leather and Lace had started earning a reputation as a “couples-friendly” club and more pairs were coming in. Laughing and partying as they entered…quite often whispering and cuddling seductively as they left.

Nick had thought that a fine idea…until tonight when he’d looked up and had seen his brothers Joe and Luke walk in, their wives on their arms. That had given him a momentary heart attack, but once he’d sat and had a drink with the quartet, he’d realized something: Rachel and Meg were excited beyond belief, not at all judgmental and certainly not jealous that their future sister-in-law was about to strip in front of a bunch of men…including their husbands.

He hadn’t understood it at first, until his brothers had confessed that their wives—as well as Tony’s wife, Gloria, and Nick’s sister, Lottie—were all taking the pole-dancing classes Izzie was now teaching at a Chicago dance studio. Mark’s pregnant wife was on a waiting list for a future class.

He had to grin every time he thought about it. Now that she’d stopped working at the bakery, Izzie had found herself a full-time job teaching the housewives and professional women of Chicago how to stay healthy while learning to be ultra-sexy.

“I can’t wait to see her. I mean, she’s done her routine for us at the gym, but to see her here, in front of an audience…oh, sugar, just you watch and see what I’m going to be doing in a couple of months.” Rachel leaned close to Luke, curling her arm around his, and whispered something that made his brother cough into his fist.

Okay. This appeared to be a good thing. And obviously Izzie was aware they were coming, so he didn’t have to go track down his fiancée—and star performer—and give her a heads-up.

Leaving his family to their drinks, he ran another sweep of the room, touching base with Bernie and the other bouncers. He’d had to hire another bartender to work on weekends and both guys were rushing around pouring shots of high-end liquor and now, making frou-frou drinks for their female patrons.

Harry would be proud, if he’d been here to see it. But the man had come in less and less, leaving the management to Nick.

“Hey, boss, somebody to see you,” one of the bouncers said.

Glancing up, Nick saw four men approaching the bar. Even if he hadn’t known them, their postures and bearing would have told them they were brothers in a way that only those who’d been there would understand.

“Semper fi, man.” He nodded to the first, recognizing the black hair and even stare of an old friend…a good man to have at your back when the situation turned rough. Reaching for the extended hand, Nick shook it, saying, “Been a long time, Joel.”

The man nodded. He’d gotten out four years ago, just before Nick had been deployed to Iraq. “I figured I’d come in and see why this was so much better than coming to work with me.”

As Nick greeted the rest, another of the men, also an old Marines friend, glanced toward the stage where one of the girls was doing her thing. “I think I’m catching the vision,” he mumbled.

“What can I say?” Nick shrugged. “I’ve settled down, become respectable.” His mouth widening in a grin, he added, “And the little woman didn’t want me doing anything as risky as working security with you guys.”

Joel’s big shoulders moved as he chuckled. He had a pretty good sense of humor considering he was one tough son of a bitch.

Nick gestured to one of the hostesses, asking her to get his friends a good table. But before they walked away, he murmured, “Seriously, thanks for offering to let me in. But I’m pretty happy with what I’m doing.”

Joel nodded. “Got it. Still, if you ever change your mind…” He reached into the pocket of his black leather jacket and pulled out a crisp, white business card.

Nick read it. Then he looked back at his friend, offering him a short nod. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Reaching out with his elbow bent and arm up, Nick grasped the other man’s hand again in a brothers-of-the-field handshake, then watched the group head to their table.

He could have been one of them. Hell, he and Joel even looked like they were in the same line of work since they were both dressed in black from head to toe. Old habits sure died hard.

But he didn’t regret it. He hadn’t been lying when he said he liked what he was doing. A lot. Maybe not forever, but for now, working with Izzie doing something nobody had ever expected either of them to do was suiting him just fine.

“What time you got, Bernie?” he asked the bouncer, who stood nearby, on constant, vigilant guard.

“Eight-twenty,” the other man said.

Hmm…about forty minutes before the Crimson Rose’s first performance of the night.

Forty minutes. That might be enough time to tell the woman again how crazy he was about her. And how very glad he was that she’d stayed in Chicago with him.

When he got downstairs, walked into her dressing room, and caught her standing behind her screen wearing nothing but her G-string, however, he reconsidered that idea.

Forty minutes wasn’t going to be enough. Not nearly.

“Hey, lover.” She smiled at him in the mirror.

He smiled back. “Hey, Cookie.”

Never taking his eyes off her beautiful face, Nick reached behind him and closed the door, flipping the lock to keep the world out. And to shut them in the wild and sultry one he thrived on with the woman he loved more than life.

**Swept Away**

by Dawn Atkins

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**Prologue**

CANDY CALDER TOOK a deep breath and blurted the news that upset her as much as it would disappoint her friends. “I can’t make the Malibu trip.”

“What? No!” Ellie Rockwell set down Candy’s order of café de Sade—the double-mocha espresso she’d created for Candy—so hard it slopped onto the polished oak bar.

“You’re kidding,” Sara Montgomery added in her soft Southern accent, her latte stalled mid-sip.

“I have to buckle down at work,” Candy said—as much to remind herself as to explain to her friends. “My reputation is at stake.”

“What’s wrong with your reputation?” Ellie asked. “You work hard and you play hard. That’s perfect for a software marketing genius.”

“I’m hardly a genius, Ellie, but thanks.”

Ellie shoved her pitch-black hair behind one ear and leaned forward, ready to fix this. Everyone who entered Dark Gothic Roast, the coffee bar that matched Ellie’s glam-goth style, got a blend of java, advice and whatever help Ellie could manage.

“This was your idea,” Sara said. “You said we needed a girl-getaway.” Her words made Candy grin. It hadn’t been easy to convince Sara she could afford a week away from her uncle’s title company where she served as his right arm, left arm and both legs.

“I know, but it can’t be helped. I got a bad test result.” Candy made a face.

“What kind of test?” Ellie said. “Pap smear? Mammogram? Get a second opinion before you panic, hon. They make mistakes—”

“A personality test, Ellie. SyncUp employees had to beta-test the Personality Quotient 2. I should have come out ‘works hard, plays hard,’ but the PQ2 says I’m ‘all play, all the time.’ When your brother sees that, my goose is cooked in the department.” Ellie’s brother Matt had just been appointed marketing vice president for SyncUp and was suddenly Candy’s boss.

“Matt knows you. And when you hear my news, you’ll change your mind. Listen, I got—”

“I’ll still pay my share,” Candy interrupted. Ellie had scored a screaming deal on a beach house through a customer who was a property manager.

“You have to come,” Ellie pressed, “because I got—”

“You’ll be fine without me, El. You’ll still have Sara and the festival.” The week-long event was in celebration of the second-season launch of Ellie’s favorite TV show, Sin on the Beach, which was the only reason Ellie would agree to leave her precious coffee bar in the hands of her assistant for so long.

“This is my last chance to impress Matt before he appoints the team leaders next week.” The department re-org was supposed to be hush-hush, but Candy had learned about it through Matt’s secretary, who was a friend. Matt would be assigning his staff to one of five product teams and choosing a leader for each. She intended to be one of them.

“That makes the trip perfect. Matt’s going to be—”

Candy grabbed Ellie’s arm. “Speak of the devil. Don’t look now.” Over Ellie’s shoulder, Candy watched Matt Rockwell stroll in, managing to look hot in boring khaki Dockers and a hopelessly wrinkled oxford shirt. His aviator glasses weren’t quite retro and his chestnut hair was too shaggy to be stylish, but the overall effect was just-rolled-out-of-bed sexy and it made her tight between the thighs.

The man’s rumpled kissability was partly the cause of the Thong Incident nine months ago at Matt’s first happy hour at SyncUp. Because of that, the man who now held her career in his hands had an all-wrong opinion of her.

She cringed for the thousandth time.

Matt caught sight of her, reddened, paused as if he wanted to make a break for it, then soldiered on.

When he was close enough, Candy said, “Hey, Matt.” Her own cheeks were idiotically on fire.

“How are you, Candy?” He nodded soberly.

“Fine. Just fine. You?”

“Fine.” He cleared his throat, looked at her, breathed.

She breathed back, feeling her friends’ eyes boring in.

“See you up there.” Matt poked a thumb toward the ceiling, meaning the sixteenth floor, where the SyncUp office was. He looked at Ellie, then motioned down the counter, meaning he’d give his order to her assistant, so she could keep talking.

“He is so still into you,” Ellie whispered to Candy.

“He is so still mortified by me. And he has a girlfriend, remember?” He’d hooked up with Jane—a coolly sophisticated attorney Ellie dubbed the Ice Princess—shortly after the Incident. He’d probably run to the woman’s arms screaming “sanctuary.”

“Nuh-uh. She broke up with him last week. Which brings me to my point, if you’ll only let me—”

“Really?” Candy’s heart did a stupid hip-hop. “I mean…so? Managers get copies of the PQ2 for sure. When Matt sees my scores, I’m dead. I have to counteract that.”

“Do it in Malibu. That’s my point. Matt will be there. He got the use-it-or-lose-it speech on his unused vacation, so I nabbed him a condo for next week, too. Just down from our beach house, as a matter of fact.”

“Matt will be there? You nabbed him a…? Just down from…oh.” Her heart was still doing that weird frog-jump behind her ribs. “But how will that solve my PQ2 problem?” Transfixed by the idea of Matt on vacation with her at the beach, she couldn’t quite grasp Ellie’s point.

“Bring work with you. Show Matt how dedicated you are.” She gave Candy her patented Ellie’s-on-the-case wink. “Who knows what might happen after that?”

“No way, Ellie. That ship sailed on a sea of margaritas.” Candy wished she’d never let Ellie in on her thing for Matt. Now she simply would not let it go. The only good news was Ellie had sworn not to say a word to her brother about it.

Out of the corner of her eye, Candy saw Matt accept his coffee—Columbian and always black. Without even trying she’d memorized stupid details about the man.

“Tell her she can’t cancel, Sara,” Ellie said. “Who will help me pry your fingers off your laptop and get you onto a surfboard?” Back in the day Sara had been a beach babe.

“Come on. I’m not that bad,” Sara said.

Ellie and Candy spoke in unison. “Oh, yes you are.”

Sara groaned.

Meanwhile, Candy caught sight of Matt heading for the door. At the last second, he glanced back, straight at her, as though he’d felt her stare.

She wiggled her fingers like a moony girl, disgusted with herself. Matt nodded, a funny expression on his face. Was he picturing her in her thong? The thought made her face flame so hot she bet she could stop traffic.

She returned her attention to her friends, fighting for focus. Now where was she? Oh, yeah. “You think I can work at the beach?” A working vacation was so not her. And at the beach of all places. That would be downright torture.

“Work hard, play hard. That’s your philosophy, right?” Ellie said. “Prove it. Do both.”

Could she? She wanted to believe she could. When she’d joked in the break room about how wrong her PQ2 results were, she’d been mortified to notice that no one laughed along. They agreed with the test! And that hurt. It reminded her how her high-achieving family treated her—like a lost soul, a child whom no one took seriously. She hated that. She was determined this promotion would make her family see her through new eyes.

“You’ll be away from the office, alone together. Just you and Matt and all that…work.” Ellie waggled her brows.

Despite Ellie’s ulterior motive, the idea had merit. Away from SyncUp, she and Matt could connect. Professionally, of course. She was better face-to-face anyway. And she had that proposal she’d been working up that she could show him.

She looked into her friends’ hopeful faces. How could she let them down? Ellie needed me-time and Sara needed a break from indentured servitude. Someone had to make sure they got it. And what did Candy need?

Matt’s respect. And maybe more confidence in her own abilities. Maybe this was just the way to get it.

“Okay,” she said finally. “I’m back in.”

“Whew!” Sara lifted her latte in a toast. “Here’s to a week of fun, sun and men in Speedos.”

“And work,” Candy added. “Fun, sun, men in Speedos and work.” The word was a sour note in the song of the moment, but at least she’d be with her friends.

“I have a good feeling about this trip,” Ellie said. “I think it will change our lives.”

Candy had a feeling, too. A funny, nervous one that had to do with seeing Matt in swim trunks. She made a mental note to keep her feet on the ground and her underwear covered.

**1**

“HOW DID YOU EVER TALK me into this?” Candy asked Ellie as they crossed the last few yards to Matt’s beach house. “Mixing work and play is like chasing a tequila shot with a piña colada—guaranteed puke-fest.”

“Trust me,” Ellie said. “It’ll be fine.”

“And this thing weighs a ton.” She shifted the antique laptop she’d borrowed from the SyncUp IT department to her other shoulder and wiggled her toes in her sandals to relieve the irritation of grinding sand. The beach was meant for bare feet, not shoes, for God’s sake.

“You should have swiped Sara’s computer so she’d have no excuse not to be in a bikini this minute,” Ellie said.

“I can’t believe she sneaked that little printer into her bag.”

“Fighting your nature is not easy,” Ellie said.

“No kidding.” That was as clear to Candy as the Malibu sky overhead, where no cloud troubled the bright blue expanse. Her whole body ached to toss this computer onto the nearest porch, grab a tiki drink and frolic in the foam.

“This will work,” Ellie said again, squeezing Candy’s upper arm. “I know it will.”

Candy blinked against the sunlight glancing off the sparkling water. It was all so tempting—the gently swooshing waves, the kids shrieking as they dashed into the water, the spectacular hunks jogging by—tan and muscular and ready to play.

But this was no time for Candy’s inner girl-gone-wild to lift her pale face to the sun. She had a mission, dammit, and her future at SyncUp hung in the balance.

On the other hand, she’d worn her yellow bikini beneath the white capris and white blouse she’d knotted at her waist, and her straw beach bag held a towel, sunscreen and flip-flops—just in case she squeezed in some beach time. She was prepared to seize whatever pleasure she could out of this trip.

She fished her cell phone out of the tight pocket of her capris to be sure it was on loud ring. Sara was due to fake a work call after they reached Matt’s place.

A big dog wearing a red bandanna galloped up and snuffled Candy’s hand, then back-stepped away, inviting her to toss something—her phone?

“Wish I could, Bucko,” she said, “but I need it.”

With a little yelp, the dog galloped off in search of someone who understood what the beach was for. Candy sighed. Maybe later she’d catch up with the cheerful guy. For now, she stood at the bottom of Matt’s stairs.

“Ready to dazzle my brother with your work ethic?” Ellie asked.

Candy rubbed the top of her nose. “Yep. All raw from the grindstone.”

“Showtime, then.” Ellie started upward.

Candy grabbed her arm. “No ad-libbing, now. No hints, no winks, no nudges. Matt and I will never be a notch on your matchmaker’s belt.”

“Whatever you say.” Ellie’s cheerful concession was too easy, Candy knew, vowing to watch her friend closely.

Ellie bounded up the stairs and Candy followed, her heart pounding as loudly in her ears as Ellie’s knock.

When Matt opened the door, Candy’s heart took a header into her stomach. The way it had before that mortifying kiss gone wrong, when she’d landed on her back—legs in the air, tiger thong on display, dignity out the window.

“Hello,” Matt said to Ellie, then caught sight of her. “And Candy?” His eyes grabbed her, a piercing blue, even through his glasses. When Matt looked at her, he really looked. As though she were a tangled computer code he must decipher or die.

Read me, baby, she wanted to say. Read me all night long.

His intense focus appealed to her. Also, his calm restraint, beneath which he was probably hotter than hot. Like the mild-mannered alter ego of the all-powerful man of steel.

Steel…hmm. The thought of his steeliest part made her insides melt like a frozen daiquiri in the sun.

Stop that. Work, not play.

“In the flesh,” she said. Flesh? Did you have to say flesh? She rushed on. “When Ellie told me you’d be here, I was relieved someone would understand how to work on vacation.” She patted the laptop. Something tinkled and dropped inside the bag. Nothing vital, she hoped.

“You’re working? On vacation?” The emphasis on you’re wounded her, but Matt blinked. He didn’t seem to have intended to insult her. She knew him to be a straightforward guy who stuck to the facts. He wasn’t into the nuances of diplomacy.

“I practically had to drag her here,” Ellie said. “She wanted to cancel because of her project.”

“What project?” He gave Candy another shot of his blue zingers.

“I’m working on something for Ledger Lite.” The accounting software was one of SyncUp’s bread-and-butter products. Version 2.0 was set for beta testing and she’d had a great idea she hoped would impress him. “Would you consider taking a look at what I’ve got?”

His eyes dipped to her breasts, then up, as if she’d invited him to peek at her attributes. Heat rushed through her, but she rattled breathlessly onward. “I wouldn’t bother you, but it’s crucial before the beta launches, so I thought why not?”

Clunk. Woof!

She turned to see that the beach dog had dropped a red Frisbee at her feet and now quivered with excitement, expecting her to throw it.

“Your dog?” Matt asked with a wry half-smile.

“No, but we’ve met.” The dog recognized her as a kindred spirit, no doubt. She bent for the Frisbee, but “Flight of the Bumblebee” played from her pocket, so she held up a finger to signify business before pleasure and dug for her cell.

The dog moaned in an agony of disappointment.

Her pocket was so tight that when she got the phone out, it slipped to the porch. The retriever grabbed it and bounded away.

Crap. Candy set the computer on the porch, kicked off her sandals and dashed after the dog. Matt had already headed off. So much for her professional impression.

Seconds later, they were playing keep-away with the nimble canine, feinting and lunging and missing, until Candy finally jumped onto its furry middle and held the dog still so Matt could pry the phone from its jaws.

After Candy let him go, the dog jumped up and down, eager for another toss of the expensive chew toy.

Matt helped Candy up. The warmth of his hand zinged through her, the way it had when he’d boosted her to her feet after the thong flash. He wiped the phone with the bottom of his oxford shirt, giving her a drool-worthy glimpse of a muscular belly. Hmm. Earnest, gallant and buff.

He handed her the cleaned-up phone. “Great tackle.”

“Great teamwork,” she said, pressing home her point about her work skills.

The dog whined piteously for attention.

“Easy, boy.” Matt patted him, then crouched to read the tag dangling from the middle of the dog’s bandanna. “Looks like your name is Radar, huh?” He scrubbed the top of the dog’s head with his knuckles.

Candy lowered herself to pet the dog, too, meeting Matt’s eyes over its back. She felt trapped in his gaze even after Radar lost interest in them and galloped off.

Matt leaned closer, fingers outstretched. She had the crazy thought that he wanted to kiss her again, which couldn’t be true. But electricity blew through her all the same, making her feel swoony and weak.

Mid-reach, Matt’s fingers stilled. “You have some, uh, sand.” He brushed his own cheek to show her where.

“Oh. Right.” She smoothed away the grains. That night, she’d mistaken Matt’s swipe at a dab of prickly-pear margarita for a smooch attempt. No wonder she’d gotten confused, what with all the heat crackling between them. Except maybe that had been the big black speaker on the stand beside them, which Matt dislodged when Candy moved in to make the kiss easier.

He caught the speaker, but missed Candy, who toppled off her platform sandals into thong-baring infamy.

“You got it,” Matt said now, smiling. She imagined tugging off his glasses, then stripping to the skin to go at it like sex-starved beach trash.

Bad, bad Candy. She sighed, smiled and stood to call Sara back, praying dog drool hadn’t gummed her phone’s works.

Sara answered immediately. “What happened?”

“My phone got away from me,” she said, shooting a smile at Matt. “Sorry.”

“Okay, so…I’m your colleague calling with the stats you needed. Seventy-five percent, three point two, two to one ratio…blah, blah, et cetera, et cetera.”

With Matt staring at her it was tough to fake a business tone, but Candy did her best. “Thanks much. I’ll grab that e-mail ASAP. Great.” She clicked off and slid the phone into her pocket. “Some numbers I need. Can I download e-mail inside your place? Maybe show you my ideas while I’m at it?”

“I guess. Sure.” He looked baffled by the suggestion, but he headed toward the porch, where Ellie beamed down at them. You look so cute together.

“We’re going to work now,” Candy said, telling Ellie with her eyes it was time to scoot.

“Sure. I’ll just check Matt’s supplies and then you can get to it.”

“My sister, the mother hen,” Matt said, sounding affectionately exasperated. He winked at Candy and it went right through her like sexy lightning. Oh, she was weak.

“I have food,” he called to Ellie, following her inside, where she flung open cupboards and yanked open the fridge, clucking like the hen Matt had compared her to.

“HoHos, Cheetos, Dr. Pepper and beer? You call that food?”

“Sounds good to me,” Candy said with a shrug. More than once she and Matt had vied for the last sack of Cheetos or package of HoHos in the SyncUp snack machines. They shared junk food preferences if nothing else.

“Did you remember sunscreen?” Ellie asked, hands on hips. When Matt shrugged, she sighed. “I’ll pick up some. Along with some healthy food.”

“I can feed myself, Ellie.” He paused. “There’s no point arguing, is there?”

“Not really, no.”

“Do what you must then.” He sighed, but he was smiling. Obviously, Matt had plenty of experience with his sister’s nurturing ways. Candy liked the rapport between them.

Setting her ancient laptop beside Matt’s razor-thin model already open to e-mail, Candy noticed the neat spread of folders beside it, proving that Matt was a master at working vacations. He was already at it and they’d all barely arrived.

“But what about entertaining yourself?” Ellie said. “You’re not going to sit here all week at the computer. You work too hard. Both of you. Especially you, Candy.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire. But Candy loved Ellie for overacting on her behalf.

Ellie snatched a flyer from behind a magnet on the refrigerator and carried it to where Candy and Matt stood at the table. “Look at all these Sin on the Beach festival events.” She handed Matt the flyer and lowered her voice. “No moping now. There are other fish in the sea.” She was obviously referring to the breakup with Ice Princess Jane.

“I’ll be fine, Ellie,” Matt said. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Then I guess my work here is done.” Ellie gave a pointed look at Candy, then hip-swayed to the door. Because Matt had moved to the kitchen, Candy was able to shoot her a quick thumbs-up as she left.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he called from the open refrigerator. “A beer?”

“Water is fine, since I’m working and all.” Was that overkill? Maybe. She sighed.

She couldn’t help thinking how great it would be to just kick back in this cozy bungalow with a beer and Matt and those blue-sky eyes of his. But that was the old Candy. The new one had a vital task to achieve.

She shifted her laptop and it knocked one of Matt’s files to the floor, fanning paper across the white tiles.

The first doc she retrieved was a PQ2 report with Matt’s name on a label at the top. Also attached to it was a pink Post-It note in the bold script of their CEO, Scott Bayer. See me re: changes!

Matt arrived with her glass of water and his beer.

She handed him the report form. “You took the PQ2?”

“Scott required all the managers to take it.”

“What changes is he talking about? In the test?”

Matt gave a humorless laugh. “No. In the managers. He wants us to address the weaknesses the test revealed.”

“What weaknesses could you possibly have?” she teased.

“Exactly.” He grinned his great half smile. “According to the PQ2, I’m low on sociability.” He sat next to her. “Do I strike you as antisocial, Candy?” He looked at her so directly her heart tightened in her chest. “Be honest.”

“You don’t chit-chat. You’re pretty direct. I’d say you’re more nonsocial than actually antisocial.”

“Nonsocial. Yeah. I like that. I guess I don’t get the function of small talk. Make your point and move on. Why waste time?”

“But informal talk eases tension, makes people feel comfortable—safe to take risks. A little back-and-forth about the weekend, the Suns game or the nephew’s bar mitzvah greases the wheel of ideas, gets people psyched to tackle tough issues.”

He paused, pondering her words, she could tell. She’d never dug up a rationale for what seemed so obvious to her.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Matt mused. “The proximate issue is that Scott expects me to score some clients at the convention. It’s next month, so I’ve got to get better at backslapping and schmoozing right away.”

“Sounds like fun.”

He smiled. “To you, sure.” He gave her that look that made her wiring crackle. “But I’m not you.”

No, wait. The crackling was coming from her borrowed laptop, which was grinding to life with agonizing slowness and enough noise that Candy expected some of Ellie’s espresso to drip out.

“For what it’s worth, the PQ2 got me wrong, too,” Candy said.

“How so?”

“It made me seem like I don’t take work seriously.”

“You? No! How could that be?” His eyes twinkled at her. “Maybe because of the time you brought in all those cans of Silly String and made a mess in the lab?”

“Everyone was getting cranky. We needed a break. And it cleaned up easy.”

“Or how about when you spiked the Halloween punch?”

“Come on. It was a party. I warned Valerie first.”

“She was pregnant, right?” He nodded. “Your costume was…interesting.”

She’d dressed as a zombie hooker, which would have been fine, except she’d only convinced a few people to dress up, so she sort of stood out.

“Happy workers are productive workers, Matt. There are studies that show the benefits of morale building and—”

“As I recall, three people went home too drunk to work, someone tossed their pumpkin cookies into a trash can and everyone else but Val slept away the afternoon over their keyboards.”

He was smiling, but light glanced off his lenses and she couldn’t tell if he was amused or making fun of her. The Halloween party had been early in Matt’s time at SyncUp. If she’d known that six months later he’d be her boss, she might have been more careful about how she behaved around him.

“As I recall, you laughed a lot. Plus, you won the one-on-one wastepaper basketball tournament the next month.”

“Your idea, too, correct?”

“We’d put in two sixty-hour weeks on the Payroll Plus revision. We needed a break.” She’d come up with the idea of a modified basketball game using office chairs with trash cans on file cabinets for baskets and wadded printouts as the balls.

“That was fun,” he mused.

“And afterward, we were refreshed for more work. Work hard, play hard, that’s my philosophy.” She hoped he’d buy that. It sounded like a bluff. That’s how her family would see it, considering her history. She’d been erratic in college, uncertain in the work world and switched jobs a lot. Her parents, on the other hand, had built a business from scratch and her brothers had beelined from law school to successful law practices without an eye-blink of doubt. The four of them thought her a flake and the idea seared her with hot shame.

“I see.” Matt seemed to be fighting a grin.

“The point is the PQ2 got me wrong.” She spoke too fiercely. “It mischaracterized you, too, remember?”

He didn’t respond and she was afraid she’d sounded too defensive.

“Anyway, I want to show you what I’m thinking on Ledger Lite.” She put her finger on the touch pad, except at that instant the machine ominously ceased grinding. The screen was white—half built.

“Damn!” She banged the side of the laptop. “The tech guys said this unit was a workhorse.”

“Let me take a look.” Matt turned the computer toward him, swamping her with the scent of lime and warm man. He clicked keys, then rebooted with three nimble-looking, knowing-seeming fingers.

She couldn’t help imagining what they might do to her private touch pad. She shifted away from him, bumping the computer cord. There was a crackle and the screen went dead black.

“Ah. May be a short in the transformer,” Matt said. He unplugged the cord assembly and carried it to the kitchen.

Now what? She hadn’t printed out anything since the spreadsheets were huge and the artwork mock-up looked better on screen. If her computer was dead, so was her plan.

IT WASN’T AS THOUGH HE could actually fix the damn cord, but Matt needed to escape Candy Calder. She smelled as sweet as her name and inhaling near her made it impossible to hold a thought that didn’t have sex in it.

He pawed through the drawers looking for a Phillips screwdriver, but had to settle for a paring knife, which he twisted into the tiny bolts on the transformer box.

This predicament had Ellie’s fingerprints all over it. She must have figured that Candy would cheer him up after Jane.

The odd thing was that the breakup hadn’t been as hard on him as he’d expected. Maybe he was numb or still in shock, but he’d felt mostly relief, which didn’t seem like the proper response to the end of a nine-month relationship.

Either way, he had no business hanging with Candy Calder and her mischievous eyes the same violet as the SyncUp logo. Or those puffy lips of hers. He’d watched her wrap them around a margarita glass that night after his first week at SyncUp and wanted—no, craved—a taste. Then he’d fumbled the kiss and knocked her on her ass.

The woman threw him, made him act herky-jerky and stupid. And now she’d dragged an old computer here to show him her work? What was her angle? It couldn’t be the same as Ellie’s. No way would Candy allow Ellie to plot a hookup. After that goofed kiss, Candy thought him an oaf. Probably had had a good laugh with her SyncUp friends. And everyone at SyncUp loved Candy. The whole place rang with her laughter.

The husky honey of her voice warmed him straight through, made it hard to think about anything but her.

The PQ2 had nailed her and her playfulness, all right. It had nailed him, too, for that matter. He was nonsocial, as she’d said. He valued alone time, hated mindless chatter and worked hard. Maybe too hard, but he loved what he did, dammit, and what was wrong with spending time with what he loved?

Something was. Even Jane had gotten on his case. Supposedly that’s why she’d broken up with him. What had she called him? A workaholic with no capacity for relaxation. Then she’d gotten nasty. You wouldn’t know fun if it threw you a surprise party.

That was a case of the pot calling the kettle black, if he’d ever heard one. A commitment to their careers was something they shared. Hell, Jane routinely put in sixty-hour weeks at her law firm. He had no problem with that. They’d fit their relationship around their schedules just fine.

Fun had its place, but hard work and dedication were what had earned him the VP spot at a hot software firm. And now, to keep it, he’d have to learn to…chitchat. God.

He was an engineer first, a marketer second and nowhere in there an ass-kissing backslapper.

Ironic that he’d been discussing his problem with Candy, who was the most social person he knew.

The last screw emerged from the transformer box, so he tried separating the two halves. No use. There seemed to be an adhesive. He was prying it open with the knife blade when Candy approached.

“You getting it off?” she asked softly, inches away.

Her closeness and her words made him stab himself in the thumb. “Damn.” Blood oozed, so he pressed his index finger against the spot.

“You cut yourself?” Candy yanked his wrist up into the air.

“What are you doing?” he asked as calmly as he could with her breasts right…there, sticking out at him. So alert.

“Elevating the injury above your heart, of course.” She was so short she had to tilt her head up to talk to him. Her big eyes invited him to dive in and drown.

“It’s fine,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She lowered his arm and leaned in to study the little nick, her perfumed hair tickling his chin, her fingers warm on his skin.

“Not even bleeding, see,” he said, backing away from the same heat he’d felt on Oaf Night. “Your computer’s dead, Candy.”

“How can I show you my work then?” She seemed truly upset. What was her game? “I know! Can I borrow your computer? Pick up what I’ve got on e-mail and get someone at the office to grab my desktop files?” She was moving closer to him again, digging in, making him dizzy. He wished to God it was loss of blood making it so hard to think, not the Candy Effect.

“Except then how can you work?” she said, frowning. “If I take your laptop?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said, fighting for balance. “This is supposed to be my vacation. I should probably get out more, be more social…or whatever.” What the hell was he saying?

She studied him, her head tilted, figuring something out. He could practically hear the gears whirring. “I can help you, you know,” she said slowly, her honeyed voice melting his insides. “We can help each other.”

“We can?” How did her lips stay so red without lipstick? He remembered her muscular legs waving in the air that night. And she’d worn striped panties that disappeared completely between the cheeks of her—

“You loan me your computer and let me show you my ideas and I’ll teach you how to schmooze. How’s that?”

“I loan you my…? You show me…? I don’t see how…really…that’s possible.” He had no business spending time with a woman who could say the word schmooze and make him forget his own name.

“Come on. It’ll be fun, Matt.”

Matt. Yeah, that was his name. Now he remembered. He shook his head, attempting to clear it.

Woof!

Through the screen door, Matt saw the golden retriever they’d wrestled for Candy’s cell phone.

“Radar votes yes,” Candy said.

“Then how can I say no?” He was taking his cues from a dog now? Looking into Candy’s violet eyes, he had the feeling this wasn’t the last crazy thing he would do this week.

Not even close.

**2**

THIS COULD WORK, Candy thought, except for the fact that it meant spending more time with Matt than she’d intended. She’d have to keep her libido under control—say padlocked in a deep freeze at the bottom of the ocean?

Her sexual response to him got stronger with each moment they spent together. It was like standing in a candy store when you were on a diet—just plain torture.

She’d never been that big on sexual denial, either, and it would be tough enough to test her work-hard-play-hard philosophy as it was.

She was only human.

On the other hand, this plan was a chance to prove her worth to SyncUp and to correct Matt’s bad impression of her at the same time. He clearly had one, judging from his attitude about her Halloween party stunts. No doubt he’d heard about Jared, too.

After the Thong Incident, she’d concluded she had a thing for analytical types and gone out with a SyncUp engineer. Jared was cute and smart and funny, but there’d been no sparks. She’d kissed him good-night to be nice and the grateful bozo turned it into The Story of O around the company.

Rumor had it they’d done it on the roof. Yes, they’d been up there, but only to look at the altimeter Jared had built as part of a science education package he was coding.

With a reputation at SyncUp as a sex fiend, Candy had to nix any hints of that around Matt.

Radar whined for her to come play. He was as annoying as her sex drive around Matt. She could not be tempted by either one. Business first, pleasure second. And only if there was time.

She moved to Matt’s computer, ready to log in and gather what she could by e-mail. She would contact Freeda, the department’s secretary, about retrieving her desktop files.

Matt joined her at the table, standing over her. “So, uh, how do you see the other part working?”

She looked up from the keyboard. “What other part?”

“The social stuff? What do you propose?”

“You want to start there?” She could see he was concerned. “All right. Let’s make a plan.”

“A plan?”

“To turn you into Mr. Networking. Backslap Boy. Fun Guy. Whatever you want to call the new, more social you.” She grabbed her notepad and headed for the sofa, pausing to pick up the magenta festival flyer. “Let’s look at what’s here we can work with, huh?” She motioned him into the living room and dropped onto the blue canvas sofa.

He sat close enough to swamp her with lime and spice.

“So what interests you?” she asked, making a bullet point on the paper.

When he didn’t answer right away, she looked at him and found him staring at her mouth. “Uh…what? What interests me?” He cleared his throat, then shifted on the sofa.

“Yes. What do you do for fun?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I read. E-mail loops. Blogs. Internet stuff. Some programming I’m working on for fun. I shoot some hoops.”

He’d thrown in the basketball to sound like a regular guy, she’d bet, instead of a work-obsessed nerd. He wasn’t a nerd. He was too handsome, too aware of other people. He was just serious, quiet and private. Locked in his own head. She found that strangely soothing. Maybe as a contrast with her own restless energy. It might be nice to share solitude with someone. Until she got bored. It would be like meditation. She’d tried it, but could only bear a few seconds of letting her thoughts float away before she had to go after them with a butterfly net and a notepad.

“In short, you work,” she said. “What you read are trade journals and e-zines, right? Your Internet loops and blogs are with marketing and software groups. Am I right?”

He shrugged. “Focus got me where I am, Candy. That’s what Scott’s forgetting with this whole changes-must-be-made bit. That’s my strength and I won’t undermine that.”

“We’ll just tweak your style a bit.” She made a twisting gesture. “You’ll barely feel a pinch.”

When he grinned, she realized it was a triumph to earn a smile from such a serious guy. This close, she noticed a sexy chip in one of his incisors—a hint there was a bad boy in there somewhere. She’d love to talk him out to play.

Another time. On another planet. In an alternate universe.

“I know what I’m doing,” she said, hoping she did. “Before you were a driven software engineer and marketing strategist, where did you get your kicks?”

He stared up at the ceiling. “Let’s see. In high school I was in a band—but what high school kid wasn’t?”

“What instrument?”

“Bass guitar.”

“How cool. I always had a thing for sexy bass players. Silent…moody…deep.”

He shook his head. “Did you ever consider we might be silent because we had nothing to say?”

“Don’t destroy my fantasy.” She covered her ears with her hands, pleased when he chuckled. “What kind of music did you play?”

“Ska, rhythm & blues. Top 40 hits for parties. We weren’t together that long.”

“Long enough to get laid, though?”

“There was that.” He winced with pretend guilt. She could see him with a guitar at his hips, moving to the music, flashing that chipped tooth at the girls who caught his eye. Desire shivered through her.

To hide her reaction, she held out the flyer so they could both see it. “Doesn’t look like they’ve got a battle of the bands going, so what other hobbies have you got?”

“Photography. I took a couple of classes.”

“Photography? Oh. Hang on…Yes! Here. The Hot Shot Photo Scavenger Hunt tomorrow night. It’s sponsored by a cell-phone company. Does your cell take pictures?”

“Sure.” He leaned toward her to dig into his back pocket for his phone, and for that fleeting moment, she was hyperaware of his body, his muscles, how he smelled, how easy it would be to lie back on the couch and take him with her.

Finally, he sat back, ending the sensory assault, flipped open the phone and handed it to her.

“This is the same model I have,” she said, managing to sound normal. She clicked into the photos he’d stored, curious about what he’d saved. “You saved pictures of computers?”

“I was checking out monitors,” he said.

She kept clicking and found shots of digital cameras…shelves in a computer store…sales displays. “Where are your friends? Your mom? Ellie, for God’s sake?”

“I have pictures of them. Just not on my phone.” He reached for the phone, but she held it away.

“I’m not finished looking.” He kept reaching while she playfully held back. His arm brushed her breasts, giving her a tingling rush.

He pulled away immediately. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault.” Matt had taken the blame for the Thong Incident, too, which had clearly been a two-person catastrophe.

She focused on the phone photos, fighting the waves she still felt. Then she hit the jackpot—a shot of Matt wearing Mickey Mouse ears. His dark hair curled messily from beneath the brim and he managed to look grave and sweet at the same time.

“This is so cute,” she said, showing it to him.

“God. Ellie,” Matt said. “One of her customers had just been to Disneyland. You know how Ellie gets.”

“I’m glad she took this. It’s proof you can loosen up.”

“So you think I’m uptight?” He seemed amused by the idea.

“Not uptight. Just restrained. Controlled.” Everything she wasn’t, but needed to learn how to be. Or at least how to appear to be when it counted.

Part of her rebelled at that. Take me as I am, dammit. Can’t you see I can be silly and brilliant?

But she knew that wasn’t easy to accept. She remembered when she’d told her family she’d left the ad agency to work for SyncUp. They looked at each other the same way. Not again.

They’d been polite and encouraging, but there was no mistaking their weariness. When will she grow up, figure it out, settle down?

They just didn’t get her. She had a plan and this promotion was key. She was building contacts, networking, getting experience. In five years or so, she would open up her own agency, maybe with a partner.

“You okay?” Matt had noticed her preoccupation.

“Sure. I’m fine.” She smiled, sorry she’d gotten distracted.

“So, you think all I have to do is slap Mickey Mouse ears on my head and people will buy SyncUp products from me?”

“Whatever works, Matt,” she said, smiling. “Actually, though, now that we’re talking about it, a camera is a great networking tool. Bring a camera to an event and everyone’s your friend. You have a good digital, I assume?”

“Not with me. I bought the new Canon EOS 350D, eight megapixel, an upgrade from the 300D. It’s got—”

“Forget the specs, Matt. Will it fit in your pocket?”

“I have a case for it.”

“The idea is to keep it with you at all times. When you’re at the convention, take photos and you have an excuse to exchange business cards so you can e-mail the snaps. Instant leads.”

He gazed at her, a smile tracing his lips. “You’re good.”

The words would have been a sexual come-on from any other guy. From Matt they were straight praise. She was chagrined to notice they aroused her anyway. She was tuned into him, hyperaware, probably from the long-ago crush, which seemed to be getting worse.

She stayed on task. “So, tomorrow night we’ll do this photo hunt.”

“What are we supposed to take pictures of?” He tugged the flyer closer. “Exactly what are ‘hot shots’?”

There were no specifics listed. “Sexy stuff, I’d guess. It’s the Sin on the Beach festival. Remember? Sights you’d see in a Girls Gone Wild commercial or, say, spring break in Florida. Anything goes.”

He seemed to chew that over, work it out like an equation to be solved for X. “So I’m supposed to talk women into taking off their clothes for me?”

“You’ll have no trouble.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Not at all. You’re a hot guy.” She shrugged.

“You think I’m hot?” He honed in on her.

“Absolutely.”

He shook his head, as if he thought she was being polite.

“I’m serious. You’re built. You’re good-looking.” She surveyed him. Sunlight flashed off his glasses. “You should ditch these, though.” She tugged them from his face, being playful, but was startled at how close his electric-blue eyes suddenly were. The moment was abruptly intimate, like being naked with someone for the first time, and she could hardly breathe.

“You have great eyes,” she said, lowering his glasses to her lap to hide the fact her fingers had started to shake.

“How am I supposed to see?”

“Get contacts.”

“Too much hassle. Little plastic floppy things.” He rubbed his fingers together, then shook them, as if to rid himself of the clingy objects. “I don’t know how you stand them.”

“How did you know I wear them?”

“They swim over your irises.”

“Oh. Well, then.” He’d watched her closely enough to catch that detail? Awareness tingled through her. “They’re a lot easier to use these days. You can wear them for a month, even at night. You really should try them.”

He just looked at her.

“Will you do it? Try contacts?”

“Maybe.” But he wouldn’t without a nudge, she could tell. Men just didn’t jump on stuff like that.

“Why don’t we get you some while we’re here? They’ll enhance your sociability.”

“You think?” His eyebrows dipped and his forehead crinkled, considering the idea.

“Sure. Glasses are barriers, creating distance between you and the other person. Without them you seem closer, warmer, more available.”

“Is that how you see me now? Closer? More available?”

Oh, yeah. She managed a simple nod. If he hadn’t made the question sound like a scientific inquiry, she would have attacked him right here on the couch.

They were alone, breathing in synch, inches apart, with Matt looking at her in the serious, steady way that always got to her. Attraction swelled like the waves surging onto the beach a few yards beyond his door.

She crossed her thighs against the ache she felt and strove for good sense. “While we’re at it, we should do something about your look.”

“My look?”

“You’re a hot software designer, Matt. You need an edge. A haircut, for one thing. And definitely new clothes.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” He looked down at his blue oxford shirt and khaki shorts. “They’re clean. They match.”

“For one thing, this is not beachwear.” She let her eyes travel down his body. “You need a tank top.” She eyed his arms, envisioning bared shoulders, fanned deltoids. “A Hawaiian shirt, maybe—” she kept looking down “—and some board shorts.” She realized she was staring at his zipper, so she jerked up her eyes and met his curious gaze.

Embarrassed, she babbled on. “New business clothes, too. What you wear is too traditional. We can do it at the mall here. It’ll be kind of a makeover.”

“A makeover? You mean one of those Queer Eye-Straight Guy deals? No way am I shoving up my sleeves or layering.” He held up his hands in a stop gesture.

“Nothing major. We’ll just give you some verve.”

“Verve? That’s way too gay.”

“Forget verve, then. Think of it as a software update. Matt, version 2.0.”

“I don’t know…”

“Sure you do. A new image is half the battle with Scott. We update your look, teach you to network and—poof—you’re the fabulous marketing VP Scott wants.”

“That’s pretty superficial, don’t you think?”

“Everything’s perception, Matt. We both know that. Shaping opinions, creating an image is part of our craft.”

“So, we’re marketing me to Scott?”

“Exactly.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It is. You said it yourself. I’m good.” Which is why you want me as a team leader. Hell, before the trip was over, he might just offer her the job. “So, are you with me?”

“I guess so.” He hesitated, then tried to smile. “You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“I promise you won’t be sorry,” she said softly, vowing to do her very best for him, to help him without pushing him too far out of his comfort range.

She slid his glasses back in place, grateful for the barrier between them, aware they were both holding their breath. She noticed the beauty mark high on his right cheek, the crinkles that fanned out from both eyes, hinting at the humor behind his seriousness.

“I’ll pull up the mall’s Web site and see about morning appointments. Sound good?”

“I guess I’m just grateful you’re not suggesting I get my teeth bonded.”

“You mean fix that chip? Oh, never. That’s proof you’ve got some bad boy in you.”

“Oh, I’m bad, all right. I write code without off-site backup and drink milk straight from the carton.”

She laughed. “I didn’t realize how funny you are.”

“You bring it out in me.” He hesitated, as if he’d said more than he’d intended. “In everyone, I mean.”

“Thanks,” she said, warmed by his words, by this admission that she’d affected him in a good way. Again she was imbued with the determination to help him, to do this right, to prove herself in this new way.

“So, back to the festival,” she said, staring down at the flyer, shy about her surge of pride. Aware, also, of Matt’s close gaze, the way he studied her. It was unnerving and reassuring at the same time.

“So, what else can we do? You say you played basketball, so let’s see what sports are going on. Ah, here we go. Beach volleyball. Starting in—” she looked at her watch “—half an hour. Let’s do that. We’ll meet some people, which will be good practice for you. After that, we can come back here and I’ll show you my stuff.”

“Beg your pardon?” His eyes dropped to her bikini, which peeked from the sides of her blouse.

“My marketing stuff, Matt.”

He turned bright red. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re human.” She pushed at his arm in a friendly way, but her fingers stayed a moment too long. Having such a polite guy unable to keep from staring at her chest was dead sexy.

“I’m not usually so rude. Around you…I don’t know. You’re so…lively.”

“Lively?” Was that code for her being blatantly sexual? A party girl, in other words? That thought was a cold stab. “I’m more than you think I am,” she said lightly, not wanting to reveal her hurt. She usually didn’t take such quick offense, but the whole PQ2 thing and the promotion pressure had thrown off her confidence.

“That’s true of most of us, isn’t it?”

“Sure. I guess.” Everyone got pigeonholed to some degree, but not everyone got padlocked in as she’d been by her family. And not everyone could lose credibility at work over their reputation, either. She’d had enough of false impressions and she needed her time with Matt to fix this for good.

“Do you want to change?” Matt asked.

“What’s wrong with how I am?” Had he seen her PQ2 already?

“I mean for the volleyball game?” He nodded at her outfit.

“Oh. Change my clothes. Sorry.” She laughed, feeling foolish. Lighten up. “We haven’t got time really. I’ll just get more comfortable.” She took off her blouse, since it would constrict her arms, then crouched into a block to test her pants. “Too tight,” she concluded and undid the zipper to step out of her capris.

Afterward, Matt seemed to have to drag his gaze up to her face. She’d just changed in front of him, after all. “Better?” he asked, swallowing over what must have been a dry throat.

“Sure,” she said, flattered that he seemed to have to struggle to stop staring at her. The bottom of her bikini wasn’t cut particularly high and the top barely showed the curve of her breasts, but Matt seemed utterly stunned.

“You’ll want to lose the shirt,” she said, nodding at him.

He took it off and tossed it to the couch.

Now it was her turn to stare. Definitely buff, with an attractive line of dark hair that began low on his chest and pointed toward glory.

“Candy? You okay?”

“Yeah. Just checking.” She pretended to consider his biceps. “You’ve got a faint tan line, but your olive skin means you’ll only need a kiss of sun.”

“You’re worried about my tan?”

“A spray-on touch-up wouldn’t hurt.”

“What?”

She grinned. “Kidding! Nothing extreme. Maybe just a chemical peel? Kidding,” she added before he could object.

“I have the feeling I’m going to regret this,” he said, but his eyes twinkled. “I look okay for the game?” He stood back so she could check him out.

Naked to the waist, he was awe-inspiring. Even wearing boring khaki shorts. “Lose the belt,” was all she said.

He whipped the leather smoothly from the loops, his eyes on her the entire time, and her body went electric. Don’t stop, she wanted to say. Take it all off.

“Shoes, too,” she breathed, kicking off her own sandals.

He did likewise and there they stood, inches apart, with next to no clothes between them. Her bikini seemed like tiny paper-thin triangles and Matt’s shorts a mere patch of khaki. They were so close to naked heaven.

Was he aroused? She dared a glance at his zipper, where she thought she detected a bulge. Oh. Her own sex ached madly.

This was wrong. She forced herself to move, bending to grab her clothes, then Matt’s shirt. She shoved them all, plus their shoes, into her straw bag.

“I’ll get my, uh, sunglasses,” Matt said, bolting away from her toward the hall. Thank God.

Candy hightailed it outside, where she felt better. She dug her toes into the warm sand, inhaled the salt smell, took in that white glow the air at the beach always had. Seagulls cried and spun overhead. Down the shore, children shrieked happily.

The breeze lifted her hair and she tilted her face to the sun for a moment of pleasure. She had work to do, of course, and an attraction to ignore, but she was at the beach and it was glorious.

She turned to find Matt watching her from his porch. Even in the old-school sunglasses, he looked hot. With a good cut, contacts and well-tailored clothes, women would fall all over themselves to get to him.

As he headed toward her, she wondered who would be next. Someone big on career like Ice Princess Jane, no doubt. Someone chic and cool, Blackberry at her fingertips, pricey merlots in her temp-controlled wine closet. Thinking of Ms. Next-in-Line cooled Candy’s hots for Matt, which was a very good thing.

When he reached her, she fished out sunscreen, put some on her hands and held out the tube to him.

While she applied the cream to her arms, he rubbed some briskly between his broad palms, then smeared it over his face and shoulders, leaving white streaks everywhere.

“You have to rub it in,” she said and smoothed the liquid into his nose and across his cheekbones, blocking her awareness of how close she was and how nice his skin felt.

“Turn around,” she said, thinking that would help. She was a glutton for punishment, she realized, surveying the muscular expanse of his back. With a sigh, she started in on the firm surface of Matt’s shoulders and upper back, enjoying the slide of his muscles, lingering longer than strictly necessary, her mind sluggish with pleasure.

Why can’t we sleep together again?

He’s your boss. You want him to promote you.

Oh, yeah. That. She was showing him how smart and balanced and hard-working she was. How dedicated and responsible. How—

“You about done there?” he asked, turning.

“Uh, sure. Just being thorough.”

“Shall I do you?” he asked, low and slow.

Not that he meant anything by the suggestive words, but they gave her thoughts. “That’d be great.” She handed him the tube, turning her back.

His fingers pressed into her skin as he rubbed slowly and carefully, even under her shoulder straps. He was so very thorough. As he kept working, she couldn’t help but think that one little tug and her top would drop and he’d have more to rub than he’d bargained for. Her knees turned to water.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I think you got it,” she said, turning to grab the tube from his hand.

He looked startled, still holding his hand out.

“We’ll be late,” she said, hurrying toward the water, hoping it would be chilly enough to shock her out of her sensual lethargy.

Matt caught up and they walked the edge of the surf, letting the waves brush their toes, then retreat in foamy whispers.

The water was full of swimmers and bodysurfers. Young boys on Boogie boards tumbled like acrobats into the surf, heedless of pain or danger.

The shore was crowded with sunbathers under colorful umbrellas, lying on towels, surrounded by ice chests and beach toys, tossing balls or Frisbees.

“I love the beach,” she said, determined to enjoy every moment of it she could.

“Me, too,” Matt said. “I’m glad Ellie got me out here.”

“She said you had to use up vacation time.”

“I did. I tend to get too focused.”

“It’s easy when you love your work,” she said, but she’d never had extra vacation to use up. She’d had to take a two-day advance to make a Tahoe trip with friends to a ski lodge.

“Actually, Candy, I’m glad you came over. I might have parked myself in front of my laptop and missed all this.” He gestured out at the sparkling line between sky and sea.

“I’m glad I could be what you need,” Candy said, the words far too intimate. Her traitorous heart fluttered in her chest.

You’re what I need, too.

For my career, she reminded herself firmly. They were helping each other. This was all about SyncUp and their working relationship. The nearly naked volleyball game, the makeover to come, the hours sitting thigh-to-thigh at Matt’s computer showing him her stuff.

Oh, dear.

She’d handle it like they did it in AA: One twinge at a time.

**3**

THE VOLLEYBALL tournament sign-up was at a table on the beachside terrace of a bar called WHIM SIM, short for What Happens in Malibu, Stays in Malibu.

“You lookin’ to get on a team?” asked a hot guy, motioning them over. “Cuz we need a couple players.”

“Absolutely,” she said.

“I’m Carter.” He grinned, extended his hand to Candy and gave her an appreciative once-over. He was very tanned and his hair was a sun-bleached blond that would cost a fortune in a salon, but Candy bet he’d earned it with real ray time.

“I’m Candy and this is Matt.”

“Cool.” Carter shook Matt’s hand.

“These guys are in?” a gorgeous blonde in a red bikini, as tanned as Carter, asked. When he nodded, she beamed. “Perfect. We need two players. I’m Jaycee.” She was talking to Matt and she flipped her long hair over one shoulder in an obviously practiced move.

Candy figured this was a good social moment to start Matt’s lessons, so she asked Jaycee and Carter how they knew each other. Jaycee, it turned out, managed a health club in Santa Monica where Carter was a trainer. Candy explained that she and Matt worked together at SyncUp.

“You market software, huh?” Jaycee asked Matt, clearly flirting with him. “When I see ‘auto run,’ that’s what I want to do. What kind of software do you sell?”

“We’re most known for our integrated suite of applications for word processing, numerical analysis and data management.”

“Sounds interesting.” Jaycee’s eyes glazed over.

“What Matt means is we help businesses manage their books, handle payroll, do project planning and scheduling. Like that.”

“I get it. We have a payroll program, for sure. Don’t know if it’s yours, but the time cards take forever. No offense.”

“Really?” Candy asked, her marketer’s ears perking. “What would make it easier for you?”

“Fewer screens. God. It’s tab, type, tab, type, tab until you want to scream.”

“So, if the software could plug in routine entries for you, that would help?”

“Oh, yeah. That would be great.”

“That’s our job. To solve customer problems like that. Actually, Matt could get lots more technical if he wanted to. He started out as a computer engineer.”

“Really?” Jaycee blinked up at him. “So you wear two hats? One day you’re all thinky and into numbers and the next you’re, like, creative and fresh?” Blink. Blink. She was pretending to be dumber than she clearly was.

“I don’t write code these days. I manage our marketing division.” There was a beat, then Matt seemed to grasp the need to keep talking. “However, my engineering background does help me interpret for both the programmers and the marketing staff.”

“So you’re, like, the translator. Sprechen Sie computer?”

“In a sense, yes.” He smiled.

“That’s very cool,” Jaycee said. “So what are you cooking up at the moment?”

“We have a variety of projects in R & D and beta.” He glanced at Candy, who urged him on with her eyes. “Uh, one you might be interested in is a personality test to help employers ensure applicants are suited to the job.”

“Another test to fail.” Carter groaned in pretend misery. Candy pegged him as one of those lighthearted, physical guys who were tireless in bed and eager to please their partners. Under other circumstances, he’d be the perfect companion for a week at Malibu. Too bad she was otherwise occupied.

“Yeah, but those test questions are so obvious,” Jaycee said. “‘Would you rather rob a liquor store or play poker with your mother?’”

“Actually,” Matt said, “the test has been certified to have construct and concurrent validity, as well as—”

Candy cleared her throat.

Matt glanced at her, then paused. “Uh, basically the test measures what it claims to measure.” He’d caught on, she was pleased to see. Can the jargon.

“Right,” Candy said. “Plus, employers consider other factors when they hire.”

“Like charm and good looks?” Carter said, winking at Candy.

“As long as you’re qualified for the job,” she teased back.

“Oh, I’m qualified.” He held her gaze for a telling moment. “You two here for the festival?” He was assessing their romantic status, she could tell.

“Partly,” she said. “We’re doing that photo scavenger hunt, for one thing, since Matt’s also a photographer.” She figured that could lead to more conversation.

“That’s so cool,” Jaycee said. “Do you do head shots? Because I need some for my modeling composite.”

“Not really. I just play around.”

“You do? You play around? I like that.”

“It’s only a hobby.” Matt seemed oblivious to Jaycee’s flirtation.

“But he has a great eye,” Candy said.

“Even better.”

Lord, could the girl be more obvious? Candy felt a pang of irritation, but pushed on. “Why don’t you take a snapshot of our team, Matt?”

“With the phone? Ah. Sure. Good idea.” He cut her a glance that told her he knew where she was heading—get contact info.

Jaycee called over the other two players, then planted herself in the center of the picture. She was so damned bouncy. Like an overage high school cheerleader. Candy wasn’t sure why that annoyed her, except that she seemed to be deliberately jiggling her breasts under Matt’s nose.

Matt snapped the shot, then keyed e-mail addresses into his phone, finishing just as their team was called to play.

“You’re a good student,” she murmured to him as they headed onto the court.

“Because I have a great teacher.” He held her gaze for an extra beat, giving her that melting feeling again. Between the sun and Matt, she’d be a puddle in the sand before long.

Checking out their opposing team, Candy felt intimidated. They looked so athletic. She was reasonably coordinated, but still…She glanced at Matt who smiled, calm and reassuring.

As the game went on, Matt kept his eye on her, backing her play when the sun blinded her or she was out of position when a ball came over. He even saved her shot when Radar lunged onto the court and nearly knocked her down. Matt was a strong and graceful player…who distracted the hell out of her, standing there—tall, bare-chested and gorgeous. He had to do a million pushups when he wasn’t at his keyboard. Not to mention sit-ups.

She was so busy watching the way he crouched—arms extended, hands fisted together, muscles rippling—that it took her a heartbeat to notice he’d set the ball to her.

At the last second, she managed an inelegant one-armed swing and was amazed when the ball made it over the net. It surprised the other team, too, and they missed it.

Candy had earned a point by ogling Matt.

Carter slapped her on the back. “Excellent,” he said, lingering near her. She noticed Matt watching the moment, pensive, slightly frowning.

The two sides traded the lead over and over, until it was game point and Candy’s serve. Yikes. She moved into position, dizzy and freaked, her nerves tight as guitar strings. All eyes were on her. This one counted. She shot a look at Matt.

“It’s just another serve,” he murmured. “Show them what you’re made of.”

She would. She’d show the players. And she’d show Matt. Her ideas, that is, as soon as she got the chance. She’d show her family, too. She’d show everyone. Pumped with adrenaline and determination, she swung the ball into the air, hauled off and slugged it—straight over everyone’s heads and yards out of bounds down the beach.

“Outside!” the ref called.

No kidding. Her second try went sideways and out, losing the serve for her team. Radar fetched the ball, dropping it at her feet. She tossed it over the net to the other team.

“No big thing,” Matt said to her, waiting until she looked at him. “Really, Candy. It’s nothing.”

She felt terrible, though, and determined to make up for her failure. When her team got the serve again, the return ball came over at a tough angle. No way would she let this go without a fight, so she dived for the sand, scraping palms and knees, but managing to set the ball high.

From the ground, she watched Matt spike the ball hard.

The other team didn’t have a chance.

They’d won. Her team cheered, the ref whistled for the teams to change sides, and Matt held out his hand to help her to her feet.

She smiled and reached up, enjoying the pressure of his broad palm, his firm grip, the power in his arms. Bouncing to her feet, she rocked into him.

His arms went instinctively around her, reminding her of the moment when he’d tried to steady her before she fell anyway.

“Great dive,” he said softly.

“Great spike. We make a good team.”

They stood that way, eyes locked, breathing unevenly, braced in each other’s arms. The seconds stretched and sagged, as sweet and slow as pulled taffy. She could feel Matt’s heart beat against her hands. There was something they had to do, but she couldn’t…quite…remember…what…it was.

“Hello?” Jaycee called from the other side of the net. “We’re over here. New game?”

“Oh. Right.” Matt jolted forward.

“You okay? Need some water?” Jaycee asked him when he reached her, extending her water bottle.

“I’m fine.”

Jaycee bounced back to her position and Candy leaned toward Matt. “She wants to have your baby.”

“What are you talking about?” He looked at Jaycee. “You’re exaggerating.”

“You should go for it.”

“No. I’m not…No.” He colored, embarrassed or flattered or both. A jealous prickle moved along Candy’s nerves. Which was crazy. If her help juiced Matt’s love life, then so much the better, right?

The game started and, again, the teams traded the lead, passing game point over and over again. Matt and Candy played together well and she managed a few good shots. In the end, they were once again victorious, which meant they took the match 2-0.

Carter, as team captain, handed out the winner’s booty—a wad of drink tickets and a voucher for points in a competition that was part of the festival, along with a WHIM SIM T-shirt. “We’re going inside to spend these,” he said to Candy, holding up his drink coupons. “You coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” she said.

“See you inside then.” Carter turned to go.

“You like that guy?” Matt asked nodding at him.

“What’s not to like?”

“He’s kind of muscle-bound, don’t you think? Definitely not your intellectual equal.”

“Maybe that’s not where I want him to be equal,” she said, watching Carter enter the bar. This was the Sin on the Beach festival. It would be almost criminal not to have some fun. Carter had a happy-to-please boyish way about him. An all-around good-time playmate. She became aware of Matt’s stare. “What?”

“Nothing. Just watching you watch him.” Was that sarcasm? Maybe he felt a little jealous, too. Hmm.

“Shall we hit the bar?” she said. “We can make it another sociability lesson—see how many people you can meet.”

“You’re the boss,” he said, brushing the sand from his legs, then his chest and arms. She imagined those hands on her, brushing sand from all those pesky places….

Stop that now. “Put this on,” she said, handing him the WHIM SIM T-shirt. Enough with the bare chest already. She put on her blouse and tied it at her waist.

The T-shirt was tight on Matt and hugged every muscle and dip on his torso, making it no help at all.

She pulled her gaze away and headed for the bar. They’d have one drink and then she’d show Matt her work. That meant no booze for her. She’d stick with club soda. Mentally patting herself on the back for her good sense, she pushed open the rough-wood door to find utter drunken chaos.

The place was packed and noisy with pounding rock and drunken laughter, which swelled and subsided like ocean waves. Three women wearing bikinis danced on the massive mahogany bar. Guys on stools bellowed and whistled at them.

Down the way, a bartender in the staff uniform of a blue Hawaiian shirt passed a lighter over three liqueur shots, which burst into wavering flames. Blue martinis, the bar’s signature drink, were half price, so blue liquor gleamed from martini glasses at nearly every table.

“Wow,” Matt said, turning to her. He’d changed from dark glasses to regular ones before they walked in and she noticed that his eyes matched the bar’s martinis. “It’s pretty wild in here.”

“It’s summer at the beach. Time to bust out. For these people anyway.” She tried not to sound sad. She itched to join the fun.

“Come on.” Matt guided her to the bar and found a place inches from the tipsy dancers grinding away above them. He glanced up, then down. “Interesting,” he said politely. “What would you like to drink?” He surveyed the menu overhead where specials were written in pink and green neon.

“Club soda with lime,” she said grimly.

“How about we try the Tsunami for Two?”

She read the ingredients—crème de cacao, blue curaçao, rum, vodka and a bunch of juices to mask the booze. Guaranteed to make you karaoke drunk. She could even see a karaoke setup on the stage at the far side of the bar. “I don’t think so. Too intense. We’re working later.” She felt like a complete deadbeat saying such a thing in a place like this.

“Come on. When in Rome, huh? We can ‘work’ tomorrow.” He made quote marks around work. He thought she was joking.

That sent a surge of irritation through her. “It’s your funeral.” She would stick with her plan no matter what.

Before long, they sat at a round table barely big enough to hold the gigantic froufrou drink Matt had ordered. It was in a ceramic boat shaped like a hollowed-out tree trunk filled with blue liquid with whipped-cream whitecaps.

Matt looked down at the sea of booze. “Whose idea was this, anyway?”

“The Romans?” She gulped half her club soda, which was refreshing after so much exercise in the sun.

Matt sipped from the long, red straw at his end. “It’s sweet,” he said. “Thirst-quenching. Try it.”

She leaned in for a sip of her straw. Fruit masked enough booze to turn a straight man into a stripper. “I think I’ll stick with soda. You should pace yourself. Drink some water…”

Matt was studying her face. “Looks like you got some—” He reached out.

“Whipped cream?” She rubbed her nose to get it off.

“No, no. Sun. You’ve got a bit of a burn on your nose.”

She laughed. “I guess after that night with the prickly-pear margaritas, I expect whenever we drink together I’ll end up with something on my face.” And my legs in the air.

“I’m not usually such a gorilla,” he said, grimacing.

“And I’m not clumsy. Usually.”

“I know you’re not.” His words had an undertone of heat that made goose bumps rise all over her body.

“So we both got the wrong impression that night,” she said.

“Evidently.” He looked relieved, too, and some of her embarrassment over the Tiger-Thong Incident faded.

She scooped a bit of whipped cream from their drink boat and licked it off her finger. “Mmm.”

She heard Matt suck in his breath and her gaze shot to him. Licking was a suggestive thing to do. She stopped with the tip of her tongue at the middle of her upper lip. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was…nice.” He sighed, still watching her.

“So, how badly am I burned?” she asked him.

“Not too badly here.” He touched the tip of her nose with a cool finger. “Check your shoulders.”

She pushed her blouse down her arms and craned to see. “Maybe I should get SPF 60,” she said, but when she looked at Matt he wore the strangest expression.

“Anything over 45 is a waste,” he said faintly. “Most sunscreens only block UVB rays. The real damage is done by UVA rays, except avobenzone isn’t yet available in the U.S., so—” He stopped. “Too much information, huh?”

“No, it’s good to know. Do you think I’ll blister?” She tilted a shoulder at him.

He touched her skin, sending a tingle through her that had nothing to do with her sunburn. “Doesn’t look like it. No.” He dropped his fingers to the table.

In the dim light, he looked a little dangerous in the black T-shirt that fit him like a second skin with his bad boy chip and his intense gaze. Also, his inner calm and confidence. She’d bet he was an attentive lover, who took his time. With every…little…body part…Mmm.

Not what she should be thinking about right now. She had a job to do. Time to get to it. “So, networking…” she said. “We should get on that.”

Matt blew out a breath. “Okay. Where do we start?”

“The idea is to expand your circle of contacts, meet as many people as you can. The more you meet, the more likely you’ll find people who want our products.”

“I get the theory. It’s the logistics that stump me.”

“The secret is open-ended questions. Talk less, listen more. Any answer you get should lead to another question. People love to be listened to. As you talk, you’ll discover what you have in common and develop rapport. Naturally, you work around to business topics, product needs and stuff like that.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It is. Once you get the hang of it. I’ll demonstrate.”

She started up a conversation with the couple at the next table about the blue martinis they were drinking, ending with an invitation to visit SyncUp, since the pair turned out to be communications majors at UCLA.

When it was over, Matt grinned at her. “You’re amazing. Another minute and they’d have asked you to be a bridesmaid in their wedding.”

She laughed, warmed by his praise.

“How did you learn this, anyway?” he asked.

“Some of it’s instinct, but I practice. Also, I’ve been going on client visits with one of our customer liaisons, picking up customer interests and ideas.”

“I didn’t know you did that.”

“There’s lots you don’t know about me,” she said, advancing her cause, she hoped.

“I imagine so,” he said softly, studying her. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but she had a feeling it was more personal than professional.

“Anyway, now it’s your turn to try. If we were at a convention, I’d challenge you to collect twenty business cards.”

“I doubt many of these people carry cards,” Matt said, watching two girls in bikinis walk by.

“So collect phone numbers.”

“Won’t the women think I’m coming on to them?”

“Not if you give off a business vibe. Or you could just talk to the men.”

“So they can think I’m coming on to them?”

She laughed. “No man with functional gaydar would think you’re playing for the other team.”

“It’s because I don’t layer, isn’t it?” He pretended to be sad, shaking his head in false gloom.

“Definitely,” she joked, not willing to dwell on the details of his masculinity. “We’ll fix that tomorrow.”

“Uh-oh,” Matt said.

“Relax. I promise it will be as painless as possible.”

“I’m in your hands.”

Don’t I wish. A sigh escaped her and Matt’s eyes locked on.

“What the hell is that?”

They both jolted at the interruption. Jaycee was pointing at the booze boat, then crouched beside Matt so her breasts bulged up at him like grapefruit fighting for air.

“It’s a Tsunami for Two.” Matt held out his straw and Jaycee sipped, leaning forward to emphasize her cleavage. Gentleman that he was, Matt kept his gaze trained on her face.

“Yum,” she said, smacking her lips. An old Cars tune rocked through the bar. “Want to dance?” she asked him.

“I can’t dance,” Matt said, shrugging.

“After that, you can.” She nodded at the Tsunami.

“Candy and I are talking business.”

Jaycee looked askance.

“It can wait,” Candy said. “Go on, Matt.” If he got busy with Jaycee, that would be a surefire end to Candy’s fixation.

“Maybe later,” he said to Jaycee.

She shrugged—your loss—then bounded back to her table, not wounded at all.

“You could have gone,” Candy said in case Matt was trying to be chivalrous. “I’d be fine on my own.”

“I’m sure you would be,” he said, “but we’re working, right? Isn’t that what you wanted?” He held her gaze, then seemed to catch himself and ducked down to take a long pull on his straw. “This tastes better and better.”

“Maybe you should give it a rest. Want some?” She tilted her club soda at him.

“I’m fine,” he said, waving her away, drinking deeply from the booze boat. “I feel more like slapping backs with every swallow. How many phone numbers should I get, coach?”

“We should make it interesting. Maybe a competition? See which of us can meet the most people?”

“You’re too good. You’ll win hands down.”

“I’ll give myself a handicap…say I get two for every one you get. How’s that?”

“Sounds fair. What are the stakes?”

“Let me think about that for a while.” She should come up with something they’d both want.

A roar rose as a woman was passed over the top of a group of guys, then lowered to the floor.

“It’s kind of crazy in here,” Matt said. “Maybe we should find another place.”

“You have to seize the moment. You never know where a contact will come from.” She watched five guys drop shots into beer mugs and guzzle them. Matt may have a point.

“Hey, lady. You, me, there!” Carter pointed at her, then him, then the dance floor.

She looked at Matt.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ve got this to finish.” He motioned at the Tsunami.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” she said, but Carter had led her too far away to be heard over the noise.

On the crowded dance floor, Carter rested his hands lightly on her hips for the slowish song. She looked over at Matt, who was sucking down his drink way too fast.

“So, what are you doing after this?” Carter asked.

“Huh?” She looked at him. “After this?”

“Yeah. After this.” He was clearly interested in spending more time with her, but with Matt around, she didn’t dare risk anything that might reinforce her party-girl image.

“Working,” she said sadly.

He looked at her questioningly.

“Really,” she said on a sigh. She glanced toward Matt just as a curvy brunette in a teensy bikini was leading him to the floor. That was a surprise.

When they were close enough, Matt leaned toward Candy. “I’ll be getting her number,” he said, sounding a bit boozy. The Tsunami seemed to have reached land.

He turned to his partner, who promptly wiggled down his body, freak style, then up again. Matt’s eyes went wide and he froze.

Candy almost burst out laughing. The girl turned her back, bent forward and rubbed her bottom in a deliberate circle against his crotch.

Matt looked at Candy over the woman’s bent body and shrugged, hands up.

“When in Rome!” she called to him. She could rescue him, but first she’d see how he handled this on his own.

**4**

W HAT THE HELL AM I supposed to do now? Matt wondered, as his partner rolled her ass around and around against his groin.

He would never have stepped onto the dance floor if Steroid Steve didn’t have his hands all over Candy. He didn’t want to look like a total loser sucking down a froufrou drink while she rocked the dance floor.

Now this girl was having mock sex with him in front of God and the entire bar. He didn’t even know her name, let alone her number. Thank God he was too shocked to be erect.

She didn’t seem to care what he did, moving around as though this was a dance with actual steps, though her feet stayed in place. Her hips and ass and breasts were doing all the work.

She was stylin’, moving her arms just so, her attention focused inward, oblivious to him. He was only a prop for her gyrations. Now she faced him, her leg between his, and slid down his body, as if he were a chrome pole.

Meanwhile, Candy, who could make him hard as stone by running her tongue across her lips, was laughing at him. She thought a strange woman humping him was hilarious.

Actually, it was pretty funny.

In a few seconds, Candy danced Carter over and arranged a partner trade. The muscle-bound Carter appeared happy to grind away with Matt’s partner, who didn’t mind the switch either, it seemed. Whatever spun your hard drive, he guessed.

Speaking of which, Candy was now inches away from him, swaying her tight body to the music. She grinned up at him. “You should have seen your face. You looked paralyzed.”

“I thought she’d start on my zipper any second.”

“Would that have been so bad?” she asked, teasing him, her eyes brimming with laughter. “What happens in Malibu, stays in Malibu, remember?”

A much slower song began, so, of course, he had to put his arms around her. She rested her palms lightly on his shoulders, keeping her lower body a discreet distance away.

He was glad, since he was mortifyingly erect. Around Candy, he felt sixteen and defenseless against his parts.

The crowd shifted abruptly and someone knocked Candy into him. Now she would feel his…yep. Her face told him she’d noticed his hard-on.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Don’t apologize,” she said shakily. “You had a woman rubbing on you. Of course you’re going to—”

“It wasn’t her,” he said, holding her gaze, letting her see the truth, something he’d never have done if he’d been thinking straight. But Candy and the Tsunami for Two had addled his brain.

“Oh.” Candy took that in, exhaled, and seemed to melt even closer to him. They stayed that way, bodies pressed together, pretending the crowd had forced them into such close contact.

He rested his hands on the curves of her swaying hips, pressing lightly with his fingers, keeping his groin against hers. The laundry-list of liquors in that zippy blue boat he’d just guzzled rushed along his bloodstream, relaxing him into this cheat. Dancing was a legitimate reason to hold her close. And she felt so good to him.

Maybe it wasn’t booze, just testosterone—the flood brought on by Candy—that washed away all his good sense.

They looked at each other, bodies tight together, her breasts pressed into his chest, pelvis-to-groin, moving in effortless rhythm.

“How are you doing?” Candy asked.

“Better now,” he said. Holding you. He wanted to slide his hands down to her ass, grip her hard and kiss her mindless.

“You look dazed,” she said, smiling.

He was dazed. By her and how much he wanted her. That seemed lame, so he said, “I guess I am. This place is not my scene.” Around them drunks bellowed, hooted and poured beer on each other. Women were dancing on the bar. A few danced on tables, one girl in just a bra and panties. “I’m glad I’ve got an experienced guide.”

Her eyes went dark, as if he’d insulted her. “As your guide, I suggest you pace yourself on that Tsunami.”

“Too late. I polished it off.” And he was feeling it, too.

“What am I going to do with you?” She shook her head, as if he were a kid who’d overdone it with the birthday cake.

He was a charity case to her, he realized. The networking lessons and tomorrow’s makeover were her attempt to rescue him from terminal dorkdom. That sucked.

To distract himself from that gloomy idea, he danced closer to the crowd forming near the stage. A sign above a table announced a karaoke contest and people seemed to be signing up.

“Those poor idiots,” Matt said. He wouldn’t be caught dead singing in public, not even drunk.

“You know, I always thought SyncUp should create karaoke software,” Candy said. “What’s missing is good background videos so it feels like a real performance, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.” He considered the idea, studying the stage, wondering about rear projection and stock footage, possible markets, development costs….

He was so preoccupied that he didn’t notice Candy had moved away until she was back. Grinning.

Uh-oh. Dread filled him. “You didn’t do what I think you did, did you?”

“I signed us up for a duet!” She beamed triumphantly.

“Yeah, but I was the silent bass player, remember?”

“You’ll be fine. I’ll carry us. We’re doing ‘You’re the One That I Want.’ From Grease? I was in the musical in high school.”

“So, I’m supposed to be John Travolta? God.”

“You’ll do great.”

He should back out, he knew, but he didn’t want to disappoint her. She’d made him feel as though he could dance. She could probably make him feel as though he could sing, too. Candy made him want to let go, let whatever happened, happen.

Well, Candy and that massive tiki drink.

The first few performers weren’t bad. A couple of ’faced frat boys sang “Shout.” A trio of girls sang a Bangles song. And a guy with a huge cowboy hat wobbled through a sad country tune.

When it was their turn, Matt’s gut twisted with anxiety, but he led Candy to the stage, forcing a smile. He found that if he closed one eye, he could just about read the lyrics from the prompter.

The song kicked off and Candy carried him, just as she’d promised, her voice clear and crisp and perfectly in tune. She danced around him in a way that seemed choreographed. For his part, he managed a well-timed dip here and there.

She sang the chorus—the title of the song—right at him, her eyes bright, her face glowing, her body warm in his arms.

He was overheated, buzzed from the booze, and all he wanted to do was stay on this stupid stage singing away, just to hold her a while longer.

He sang the chorus and realized he meant the words. And for a beat of time, he saw in her eyes that she meant them, too.

The song ended and the crowd applauded wildly, whistling and bellowing and pounding the tables. He helped Candy off the stage, shaken by what he’d felt. They watched the rest of the performers, arms at each other’s waists, glancing at each other from time to time, not speaking. She seemed as startled as he.

After the last singer, they were called up with the other contestants so the crowd could choose the winner by drunken applause.

He wasn’t surprised when the audience went nuts for them. It was all Candy, he knew, and they walked away with the grand prize, a trophy shaped like a microphone, ten free dinners-for-two at a Santa Monica restaurant and a voucher for five hundred festival points. Whatever that was.

Once they were off stage, Candy threw her arms around his neck. “We did it, Matt! We won!”

“It was all you.” The title of the song said it all. His desire for her thundered through him, overpowering what was left of his inhibitions and he decided to kiss her. He leaned over and—

Candy jerked back, surprised. She looked left, then patted the speaker on a stand beside them. “Just making sure I wasn’t about to knock it over.”

She was easing the tension with a joke, he could tell, so he went along. “That was my fault. I knocked you down.” He cringed at the memory of his oafish move.

“No, sir. You tried to keep me from falling. It was my fault. I thought you wanted to kiss me, so I reached up.”

“I was trying to kiss you.”

“But there was margarita on my chin.”

“An excuse.”

“Too bad it didn’t work out.” Her breathing was uneven and her eyes flew across his face, unsure whether to run or stay.

“I always regretted I didn’t get to show you my moves,” he joked, but his throat was dry and he was sweating buckets.

“You have moves?” Her words were breathless.

Without another thought, he lowered his mouth to hers.

A quiver passed through her body, then she held very still. He went for her tongue and she made a soft sound and let go, her body sagging so that he had to hold her up.

The crowd roared around him, his blood pulsed in his ears and all he wanted was Candy’s sweet mouth.

It was crazy, he knew, but at the moment, good sense was just so much white noise in his head. They wobbled together, almost tipping over. He didn’t care. He’d take the speaker out this time if he had to. He wasn’t letting go of Candy until they were done.

MATT’S KISS WENT FROM playful to hot like that. Candy felt as though she’d leaned in for a sip from a water fountain and gotten a blast from a fire hose. She could barely stand and couldn’t breathe at all.

She held the karaoke trophy in one hand and wrapped the other around Matt’s neck, holding on tight, fighting to keep from falling, wanting more of Matt’s mouth, his tongue, feeling his erection against her body, his fingers on her bottom.

She heard moans, too. Low, desperate sounds they were both making, a sweet duet of heat and need.

She wanted to crawl clear inside the man.

Matt was drunk, not himself, to be kissing her this wildly in public. So what was her excuse?

It was how much he wanted her. His fierce kiss made her woozy and weak. Her sex was so tight she thought it might snap—she hoped it would to ease the agony she felt.

In the background, music pounded and people yelled and laughed and carried on, wild for a good time. She and Matt were smack-dab in the spirit of things, surfing this wave of heedless pleasure….

Until a cold trickle of good sense drizzled into her awareness. Making out in a bar was pure party girl, a page from her PQ2 report. Her job—hell, her future—was on the line.

She’d learned that lesson, hadn’t she? Sex at work was a bad idea. Look at what happened to her reputation after she kissed poor Jared. She had to put the brakes on. Now.

She managed to pry her lips away and grab Matt’s shoulders. “You…don’t…want…this,” she said between gasps.

“Oh, yes, I do,” he said, pulling her back by her ass.

“You’re drunk, Matt.”

“Not that drunk.” He hiccupped. “What stays in Malibu, happens in Malibu…Er, whatever happens, stays…You know what I mean.”

“If you can’t even say it, you can hardly do it.” She backed away, giving herself space. “At least not with me. Try Jaycee, Matt.” She searched the bar for the bouncy blonde.

“I don’t want Jaycee. I want you.” His eyes grabbed her and held on. The words from their song vibrated in her head. Insane and stupid and pointless.

“Let’s get some air,” she said, pushing out of his arms, starting toward the door.

Matt grabbed her by the waist to guide her through the crowd, which had become denser by the minute.

As soon as they got outside, Matt pulled her to him. “I need your mouth.” Having this no-nonsense engineer so hot for her was such a rush, but she knew it was wrong.

“What you need is to sleep it off,” she said, breaking away. She’d never before said no to something she wanted this badly. “Let’s walk,” she said shakily, needing a distraction. She shoved the trophy into her bag and kicked off her sandals.

Matt gave in, took her hand and led her toward the ebbing tide. A light breeze lifted her hair and cooled her body.

The sea looked like polished silver beneath the pale orange and pink of the blooming sunset, which gave the air an otherworldly glow. A few sailboats rode the breeze along the horizon.

“I feel sooo good tonight,” Matt said, leaning back to look up at the sky. He staggered a little and she laughed.

“And you’ll feel sooo bad tomorrow.”

“It was worth it. I never let loose like this.” Then he muttered, as if to himself, “Jane was right about me.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Did Ellie tell you about Jane?”

“In passing, yes.” She didn’t want Matt to know Ellie told her every detail she knew.

“Well, Jane claims I don’t know how to relax.”

“Really?”

He nodded, wearing a half-assed grin. “Her exact words were, ‘You wouldn’t know fun if it threw you a surprise party.’”

“Ouch. That’s harsh.”

“Espe-shly coming from someone who works jus’as hard.” He was slurring and now he squinted, as if to compensate for double vision. “She’s a lawyer. Sixty-hour weeks eeeeasy. We had that in common. We’re both career oriented and goal driven.”

“You sound like a corporation,” she said.

“Yeah. True.” He nodded a couple of times. “Thatz what made us a good match. Bu’ I was wrong.” He sighed and shook his head. “She broke up with me.”

He’s still in love with her. Candy felt a jolt of disappointment. But this was helpful, she knew. Matt still loved Jane. Like garlic to werewolves, this would ward off Candy’s own lust, keep her from imagining things that could never be.

Things she didn’t even want, for Pete’s sake.

“Being here with you is good for me,” Matt said now, throwing an arm around her shoulder. “You’re showing me how to be…what did you say? ‘Fun Guy.’ Yeah. I could get into that. I’ve been missing out…a lot.” He tried to turn her toward him, to embrace her, she was sure.

She scooted away.

He was so tough to resist. His eyes were soft, but still hot, moving over her body, wanting her, no longer able to politely look away from her breasts, her hips, her mouth.

She had to stay in charge. “I bet when Jane sees Fun Guy, she’ll want you back, Matt.”

“She won’t believe iz me, tha’z for sure.” He chuckled. They walked a little farther. “So, whadowe do now?” he asked her. “Back to my place? For a drink?”

Bad, bad idea. “I was supposed to show you my ideas on Ledger Lite, but you’re in no shape for that. How about we start early in the morning? Before we go to the mall? I’ll borrow your computer so I can get organized tonight.”

“If you say so,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe you wanna work.”

They made it to his place and he invited her in again, his eyes offering more than the Cheetos and HoHos he was trying to tempt her with.

“Just the computer,” she said, standing firm outside his door.

“Okay. You’re one tough cookie,” he said, giving up and going to get his computer. He put the case’s strap over her shoulder. “There you go.”

“Is seven-thirty too early to come back?” she asked.

“I’m up at six.” He tilted his head at her. “Do you know how remarkable you are?” He was looking her over as if she were dessert. The booze had melted away all traces of politeness.

“That’s the Tsunami talking, Matt, but thanks.”

“See you in the morning, then.”

When he leaned out to kiss her, she chastely gave him her cheek, but she greedily inhaled the warm, human smell of him—salt and man and lime. Matt.

She headed to her place, computer snug at her side. She was proud of herself. She’d fought off the ache to get naked with Matt and stuck to her mission.

It was only 7:00. She had plenty of time to key in her notes, consolidate e-mails and leave a voice mail for Freeda, who worked 7:00 to 3:00 and could nab Candy’s hard-drive files for her in the morning before she went to Matt’s.

If only her family could see her now. Though the proof would be the promotion. That would be tangible evidence of her success. The promotion would redeem her, prove her maturity, make her respectable in their eyes. She was making definite progress. Tomorrow, Matt would see what a good team leader she would make. This was working out just fine, despite the Tsunami-inspired make-out.

At the beach house, Candy was delighted to find Sara and Ellie stretched out on the foldout couch Candy would sleep on. Both were sucking on BombPops, the red, white and blue Popsicles she remembered from her childhood, and laughing at TV.

“Hey, Candy, what have you been up to?” Ellie asked.

“Working with Matt.” She grinned, proud that it was true.

“No way. All this time?”

“Every minute.” The hardest work of all had been walking away. She sank into a chair beside the bed, happy to be with her friends, vowing not to confess her close call.

“Your nose is burned,” Sara said. “And what’s that sticking out of your bag?”

Candy held up the trophy. “We won this in a karaoke contest. Matt and I sang a duet. It was work, believe it or not. Before that we won our game in this volleyball tournament. Also work, because—”

“Hold it right there,” Ellie said, raising her hand in a stop sign. “You got my brother to sing? In front of a crowd?”

She shrugged.

Ellie squealed and tapped her Popsicle against Sara’s. “I told you they would hook up.”

“We didn’t hook up.” Though they’d come damn close. “We made this deal about work. My computer croaked, so he’s loaning me his. In exchange, I’m helping him with his social skills, which he has to improve because of his PQ2 scores.”

“Matt gave up his laptop?” Ellie said. “That’s amazing. He’s, like, hooked by umbilical to it.”

“Exactly. It’s part of helping him be more social. He was very impressed with my networking skills.”

“Your networking skills?” Sara grinned.

“So, you made a deal to teach Matt how to party?” Ellie said. “That is so you.” She saluted Candy with her BombPop.

“It’s not that way.” Except she saw how it might seem so. “Anyway, I’m going over there tomorrow morning to work.” She had to change the subject. “So what have you two been up to?”

She spotted Sara’s computer on the counter, still on. “You didn’t work after we talked?”

“Just a little,” Sara said.

“She took a break long enough to meet a hot guy, though,” Ellie said, “until Uncle Spence called and ruined it.”

“Sara, if I can work on vacation, you can try not to.”

“I am trying,” Sara said with a heavy sigh.

The girls talked on about the guy Sara had met—he owned a surf shop and Ellie thought Sara needed lessons—and then Ellie had news about an audition for extras for Sin on the Beach.

“And here’s the best part,” Sara said. “The director is a guy she knew from when she was a kid.”

“No!”

“He was our next-door neighbor when I was twelve. Bill Romero—eighteen and sooo hot. I wrote about him in my diary, fantasized about my first kiss with him—my first, well, everything. I only spoke to him once and that was to ask if he was really going to film school in New York. He was and that was that. He left and my heart shattered into a million pieces.”

“And that’s what sent you to the dark side?” Candy asked. “You started in with the vampires and the undead?”

“Oh, stop.”

“So, do you have an in with the show? Because of Bill?”

“He didn’t recognize me. Of course, back then I wore overalls all the time and my hair was flyaway and mousy brown.”

“So now he can fall for the grown-up Ellie,” Candy said.

“Hardly,” Ellie said.

In the silence, Candy noticed the boom-chica-boom soundtrack coming from the TV. “What are you two watching?”

“Summer Sluts, I think it’s called,” Ellie said. “We’re getting Sara in the mood for her surf guy. With these, too.” She lifted the ice pop. “We’re picking up oral techniques.” Ellie gave her Popsicle an exaggerated lick.

“How does she do that?” Sara asked, watching one of the video sluts bend backward off the side of the bed.

“Her spine’s made of whatever Gumby is,” Ellie declared.

“They make it look easy,” Sara said with a sigh.

“They make it look fake,” Candy said. There was no emotion, no energy, no heat. Nothing like the incredible melting desire she’d felt in Matt’s arms.

“Hey…” Sara said. Candy glanced over to find Sara staring at her. “What’s up with you? You’re all pink and glowing.”

“It’s just the sunburn.” Candy was no poker player, so she deflected the conversation. “What time’s the audition, El?”

“Gak! The crack of dawn. Seven o’clock. Can you believe that? I’ll sleep through, no doubt. When I’m not at the coffee bar, I’m never up before noon.”

“I’ll get you up, no problem,” Sara said.

“Courtesy of an Uncle Spence call?” Candy asked.

Sara shrugged. She obviously hadn’t made much headway in her plan to run free of her demanding uncle.

“I doubt I’ll make the cut,” Ellie said. “Goth is not a beach-babe look.”

“Oh, but we can fix that, can’t we, Sara?” Candy climbed onto the bed and looked Ellie over. “Maybe soften your contrasts. Let’s see…” She fingered Ellie’s black curls. “We could straighten your hair…give it sun streaks.”

“Are you crazy?” Ellie grabbed both sides of her hair.

“Only temporarily, of course,” Candy said, winking at Sara. “We wouldn’t want the Queen of the Damned to look too cheerful.”

“There’s Walgreens up the way for the color and straightener,” Sara said. “And we can use my makeup. Pastel shadow to bring out your eyes. Bronzer so you’re not so pale.”

“Then all you need is the right bikini,” Candy said, getting into the makeover idea. Matt tomorrow and Ellie tonight.

“How about my black one?” Sara said. “It’s cut high.”

“Perfect. Absolutely sinful.”

“This is too much fuss over me,” Ellie said.

“It’s about time,” Candy said. “This vacation is about breaking out of old patterns. You’re always doing things for us. Let us return the favor.”

“Exactly,” Sara said, wiping a cherry drip from a flyer on the coffee table. It was the same puce as the one at Matt’s place. “And look at this. There’s a contest as part of the festival.” She held the flyer so they could read. “You get points for events. The grand prize is a month-long time-share at a beach condo here for ten years.”

“So that’s what the vouchers were for,” Candy said. “Matt and I got five hundred points for the karaoke win and another two hundred for the volleyball game.”

“I think there was something about getting festival points for auditioning,” Ellie mused. “Double if you get a part.”

“That’s great,” Sara said. “It says you can work as a team. Candy, you and Matt gave us a head start with your wins. The finalists submit an essay about why they deserve the condo.”

“Candy can write that,” Ellie said.

“Three good friends who need to escape from their lives for one week each year? Hell, it’ll write itself.” Candy grinned.

“We should divvy up events to maximize points,” Sara said.

“Great idea. I can make this part of my deal with Matt. We’re already doing the photo shoot.”

“I’ll build a spreadsheet so we can be strategic.” Sara wore her efficiency-mode expression.

“Not if this means more work for you,” Candy said.

“This isn’t work. This is fun.” Sara beamed. “If we win, we’ll have a fabulous condo together every summer.”

The girls high-fived each other.

“Let’s hit the drugstore for Ellie’s hair stuff,” Sara said, jumping up.

This would be a blast, Candy thought, starting to get up. Then she caught sight of Matt’s computer. She’d sworn to get organized for tomorrow. She would choose long-term gain over short-term fun. “You two go ahead. I have to work.”

Her friends gawked at her.

“I’m going to his place early. I’ve got to prepare.” She spoke sternly. After a long, shocked silence, her friends accepted her decision and left without her.

At least they hadn’t laughed.

She almost went after them and bought beach toys and water blasters for good measure, but she pictured her brothers rolling their eyes. We knew you couldn’t work on vacation.

Oh, yes she could, dammit. She turned on Matt’s computer, but as it fired to life, she felt herself go dead. Bone weary. Fighting her urges all day had worn her out. She needed something to perk herself up. Coffee? Better would be a hard run along the beach and a few primal screams into the Malibu twilight.

Stripping to her bikini, she grabbed a towel, left a note for her friends, and set off running.

**5**

AS SOON AS CANDY left, Matt realized he was well and truly smashed. He’d been so pumped with adrenaline and testosterone around her that he hadn’t truly felt the booze. He’d be sorry in the morning. She was right about that.

He tossed off his shirt and threw himself across his bed to watch the ceiling fan swirl. Then he noticed the fan wasn’t on. It was the ceiling that was spinning.

He jammed his foot to the floor to still the wonky kaleidoscope overhead. He felt as though he’d been tossed on his head by a real tsunami.

It was not just the liquor. It was Candy, too. He kept thinking about how her body felt in his arms, how soft her lips were, how sweet she’d tasted.

He knew he should regret kissing her, but he only wanted more. He knew the address of Ellie’s beach house. What if he moseyed over there?

Bad idea. Even drunk, he knew that. They worked together. He was her boss. And if Ellie was there to see him arrive, he’d never live it down.

He couldn’t believe he’d consider such a desperate act, even drunk. On the other hand, Candy was something else. She made him think of the summer fireflies of his childhood that he’d chased with a jar to get a closer look at their magic.

Who could resist her?

Abruptly, he remembered that beach bum who’d danced with her. Carter had practically eaten her up with his eyes. Maybe that’s not where I want him to be equal, she’d said.

Maybe she was with him right now. She wasn’t the kind of girl who called it a night at 7:00.

The thought burned through him and he jumped out of bed, needing to occupy himself. He could get started on the new org chart, sketch out possible teams. He’d brought personnel thumbnails for that purpose.

Nah. His mind was too scattered. He’d go online, catch up on e-mail. He’d walked all the way to the kitchen before he remembered that Candy had his computer. Damn.

He channel surfed for a while, restless, legs jumping, skin itchy. An hour passed somehow and he found himself staring out the window at the ocean, swaying a little.

Hell, why not swim off the booze? A brisk dip would clear his head and tame his libido at the same time. He threw on his trunks, tucked his key in the mesh pocket and headed out.

The moonlit water was cool, but not brutal, and he took long, hard strokes parallel to the shore, swimming until his breath came in hard gasps. He rested in a dog paddle and checked out the horizon, squinting, since he was without his glasses. The moon created a streak of silver across the black, rolling water.

He noticed rhythmic splashes to his left and saw someone in a yellow bikini swimming straight out to sea.

Candy? She had that color suit—he’d stared at her in it all day—and the swimmer was plowing single-mindedly through the water, the way Candy took on the world.

He swam close enough to see that, sure enough, it was her. How far would she go? She was smart, but headstrong. She might exhaust herself before she realized it and not make it back. At that thought, everything in him gathered tight. If something happened to her…

He was about to go after her when she reversed course and swam his way, the water flashing silver with each stroke.

He found the reef and stood, waiting for her. When she was close enough, he called her name, which made her jerk her head out of the water and blink at him.

“Matt?” She flailed her arms, shifting into an upright dog paddle. “What are you doing here?”

“Swimming off the booze.”

A gentle wave rolled by, lifting first her, then him, sliding them closer.

“Is it working?” she asked, smiling at him.

“I hope so. What brought you out here?”

“I was restless,” she said, stepping onto the reef, closer to him, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she caught her breath. Her hair was sleek, her makeup gone, but she looked incredible to him.

He wanted her so much it stunned him. It was as though his desire had conjured her out of the sea, made it okay for them to be together, to do what they both felt like doing.

All the reasons why he couldn’t have her slid away on the waves. Every nerve was on fire for her, every muscle strained to touch her. It was as if he’d been sleepwalking through his life and now he was awake. Wide awake. For her.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her mouth, salty from the sea.

Her body shook against him, her lips trembled and she broke away. “You’re still drunk, Matt.” She searched his face.

“Not so much now.” He pressed his mouth to her neck, felt her pulse wild against his lips. He returned to her mouth, heat and need flowing through him.

Candy stilled against him, filled, he was sure, with the doubts he’d let float away on the sea.

If she was serious about stopping, he’d respect that, but first he’d do his best to persuade her this was the right thing to do. Everything in him said it was.

Well, almost everything.

After a few seconds, he felt her let go, as if a cord had snapped inside, freeing her. She wrapped her legs and arms around him and kissed him back, offering her tongue, which he took, reveling in her moaning response.

The moment felt as primal as the waves that swelled and subsided around them, rocking them together with slow, inexorable power, pulling them into primal, instinctive acts, the way the moon tugged the tide.

Except Matt wanted civilization at the moment. “Let’s find a bed before we drown.”

Candy burst out laughing. He loved the husky sound and the way she put her whole body into it.

He lifted her up and she tucked her head under his chin, then he carried her to shore and across the sand, enjoying the weight of her against him, the way she clasped her fingers trustingly behind his neck. Desire beat time in his body, suspending all thought except how he would soon be inside her.

It seemed simultaneously to take forever and no time at all before he was unlocking his door. He moved with care over the slick entry tiles, relieved when his toes hit the carpet. He padded down the hall, paused to grab towels from the bathroom, then carried Candy to his bed.

The spread was soft, thank God, because he wasn’t taking time to peel it back. He ran the towel over her body, then his, sopping up some of the seawater, then kissed her face, her neck, unhooked her top and tossed it to the floor.

There were her round breasts, their tips knotted from the cold. He cupped their firm curves, perfect handfuls, butter-soft except for the nipples, which were smooth beads against his palm.

She leaned back, making her nipples poke out, tight and eager, welcoming his tongue, his lips, his teeth for a taste, a suck, a gentle bite.

He ran his tongue around one nipple, then the other, tasting salt and skin, feeling the tiny bumps swell and subside under his pushing tongue.

She stiffened, then collapsed into quick, helpless jerks of her hips. Her hips. Yeah. That reminded him of the rest of her, which he wanted naked, too, so he dragged her bikini bottoms down. His fingers scraped sand. He brushed the grit from her tender flesh, then studied her belly. Her pulse was a series of quivering blips under her pale skin. There was a light pink line above her pubic curls from the sun they’d gotten today.

He slid out of his trunks and Candy grasped his cock, her hand warm, making his vision fade.

She explored him with slow fingers, making him harder with each sure stroke, making him push against her palm.

He ran his hands along the curve of her hip and between her thighs, which she parted so he could stroke the swollen lips of her sex, then her clitoris, slowly bearing down until a shiver of pleasure rippled through her body and she moaned, her hand stopping on his cock, she was so caught up in what he was doing to her.

They weren’t speaking, only giving groans and gasps and cries of approval. This was so good. No way would he regret this.

He eased one finger into her wet velvet space.

She gasped, surprised, then bit her lip as if the pleasure were so great it almost hurt.

He moved on top of her and captured the lip she’d bit to lick it better, to taste her sweet mouth again, while his fingers explored her slick sex, pushing in slowly, then pulling out again.

She made breathy mewling sounds, lying very still, as if concentrating on his every move. Now and then she tried to stroke him, but seemed too absorbed in what he was doing.

He was happy to be making her so happy.

“You’d better…we’d better…what about a condom?” She sounded desperate.

The barrier would slow him down and he wanted to make this last. Were there any in his toiletry kit? A few from the early days with Jane, he was sure.

“When we need one, I’ll get it. I’m happy here for now. You?”

“Mmm, hmm.” She nodded, lips parted, breathing through her mouth. She relaxed into the bed, lying open to his fingers. Moonlight bathed her parts—her breasts, belly, hip bones, curls, her taut thighs. He memorized her—her shape, her breath, the way her tongue swept her lips and her face—reveling in how she seemed to be sinking into the moment with him.

He kissed the impossibly soft skin of her neck, ran his tongue over her pulse, stroked the button of her sex, which swelled, eager for more. His thumb in place, he slid two fingers in and out of her in a rhythm he mimicked with his mouth and wanted to begin with his cock.

Her hips rocked faster, she tightened around his fingers. “Oh, oh, oh. I’m going to—”

“Come. Yeah. Come for me.”

She sped up, getting closer and closer until…

There.

She froze against the bed, then yelped, her eyes rolling back as she bucked against his finger. He felt so grateful to be with her, to feel her fire and energy and desire, to give her what she wanted.

He realized he’d sensed her needs without words. This was a surprise, this automatic understanding. It was as if they’d been together many times before.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed, rolling over and onto him. “That was—” She finished her sentence with a very wet, very violent kiss.

Abruptly, she rose to her knees and pressed his arms to the bed, looking as though she intended to wrestle him into submission.

“Uncle,” he said. “Aunt and cousin, too, if that helps.”

She smiled the smile of a hellcat bent on getting her due. Then she hesitated. “The condom…” She bit her lip. “I’m on the pill. I get tested. You?”

“I’m…healthy,” he said, not sure how he’d even make it to the bathroom with this incredible woman above him.

“Good. Bareback it is.” She guided his cock into her body, slowly seating herself at the base of his shaft, settling in with a moan of pleasure. She arched her body, head back, enjoying this, it seemed.

He certainly was. Her tight, hot sex was pure heaven. He grabbed her hips, pulling her down harder.

She looked at him, her hair falling forward, color in her cheeks, her eyes shining in the dimness. She was so beautiful.

“This just gets better, huh?” she breathed.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, thrusting up into her. “Better and better.” This had to be the best position. Except for looking down at her body. Or lying on his side, facing her. Or all the other positions they hadn’t tried. Yet.

“Mmm.” She sucked in her breath, then did a slow roll on his shaft, bending him, intensifying the rush of blood pulsing through his member. He was buried to the hilt in her. He moved in and out, rocking to press her clit with his shaft, loving the way she moaned each time.

He reached for her breasts and she bent forward so he could cup their weight and lick each nipple in turn.

She did a rolling twist with her hips that made him moan in sweet agony. He kissed her mouth, tugged at her tongue, held her breasts and lightly teased the nipples, giving her, he hoped, some of the hot rush that poured through him.

She rose to a full sit and he pressed his finger to her clit. Her head snapped forward. “Oh, yes. Do that.” She smiled the smile of a woman galloping toward a pleasure she knew was waiting just for her. He loved that look. He wanted to see it over and over.

He pushed her clit as he pumped upward, hard.

She gasped, then tensed, as if electrified by sensation, and he knew she was coming.

He let her spasms pull him into his own release. Closing his eyes, he pulsed into her, in time with her squeezing muscles. They were together in this crackle of electricity, riding its surging pulse together.

He usually made sure his lovers came first, but this mutual pleasure had happened as easily as breathing. And so much more fun.

She flopped against his chest with a great gasp of an exhale. “Oh. Wow. That was…”

“Great,” he said into her hair, which smelled of spice and flowers, her sweet sweat and the salty metal of the sea. “God, you smell great. I can’t—” sniff “—get—” sniff “—enough.”

He hadn’t felt this way before, had he?

Maybe with Heather. Back in college. Listening to Candy catch her breath, he couldn’t help thinking of his first real love. Heather had had the same wild energy as Candy. She’d had a thing for thrill rides, the more frightening the better. She’d loved sex, too, said it felt like the click-click-click to the top of the first coaster drop. She loved the anticipation, loved shrieking into the dive.

The breakup had been unexpected and painful, even though she’d warned him—laughing—that she had emotional ADD. I never stick long. He’d thought it would be different with him. It hadn’t been.

He’d been shocked by how bad he felt and for how long and had stayed clear of women like Heather ever since.

Until Candy. He felt the uneasy rumble inside, like the distant thunder of a storm on its way. Don’t ruin this, he told himself. Stop thinking. Easy enough to do with the liquor still numbing his brain. Yeah, he was still drunk.

But for now he was content to breathe in Candy. God, she smelled good.

MATT WAS TAKING big, greedy sniffs of her hair and Candy smiled at how sweet that was. She felt stunned and so grateful. She’d had her share of quality sex, but this had been something else. Effortlessly great.

She’d suspected that Matt would be hot, but not so…oh…what was the word? Aware? In tune? It was as if he inhabited her body, knew exactly where she needed the most attention and for how long, when to go faster, harder and when to hold stock-still.

And all without a word. She liked the talkers—the men who took the time to pin down what she wanted and who guided her, too, in what they preferred—but Matt was in a class by himself.

What would she call him? A body reader. Yeah. She released a huge breath, sated from two close-together orgasms, enjoying the thud of Matt’s heart beneath her, the way he held her gently but securely, how their mingled sweat made them slick as seals, the way he smelled of lime and spice and sea and sex.

She’d loved how he’d swept her into his arms and carried her to the house like some dashing rogue from an old historical novel, intent on her willing ravishment.

She felt his muscles go limp and he let out a soft snore. So cute. He’d fallen asleep.

Or passed out?

Oops. That. Matt had been in a Tsunami-for-Two haze and she’d let him sweep her into his bed. Stone-cold sober, she’d behaved like the party girl she’d sworn not to be.

While Matt snored softly beneath her, she lay alone with the hard reality that she’d slept with her boss. Despair swelled in her chest. The sexy sweat suddenly felt clammy, the sweet postcoital intimacy a guilty crime. She had to get away, escape from her mistake.

She slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Matt, who in his sleep made a patting gesture, as if to reassure her. He lay there, naked.

She sighed, covering him with the side of the bedspread to prevent temptation, then tucking it under his chin so he wouldn’t become chilled in the night.

Could he possibly be too drunk to remember this?

No way.

Now what? In a weak moment, she’d given in and now there would be hell to pay. She put on her bikini and tiptoed out of the house, heading home. The playful moon seemed to taunt her. If she’d had a shoe, she’d have thrown it.

**6**

CANDY AWOKE TO THE SOUND of Sara whispering into the phone as she thumped down the stairs that ended a few yards from Candy’s foldout bed.

“I faxed it, Uncle Spence,” she said. “I’m telling you.”

Candy squinted at the wall clock. Quarter to six. Uncle Spence was an early riser.

“No,” Sara continued into the phone. “Yes…Like I said…Just check with Amy. I’m sure she has it.” Reaching the bottom step, Sara caught sight of Candy and cringed in apology.

Candy mouthed, “It’s okay.”

Sara moved into the kitchen and began making coffee, the cell phone propped beneath her ear.

Candy flopped back onto the pillow, memories of last night flooding in like an early tide, gunky with seaweed. Would what happened in Malibu stay in Malibu?

Hardly. It would ride all the way to L.A. with them and up sixteen floors to the SyncUp office and ruin everything. Her and Matt’s working relationship. Her chance for promotion. The tentative improvement in Matt’s impression of her. Everything.

For a moment, she wanted to curl in a ball and burst into tears. Instead she sat up. This was a mere setback. A pothole in her career path she would patch up and march over.

First, she’d go over to Matt’s as she’d planned and act normal, treat last night like a drunken boo-boo. Never mind that she hadn’t had a drop of liquor. They would laugh about it and move on. Proceed with Plan A.

She’d show Matt her work, do his makeover, teach him more about networking, then talk about the festival events she’d promised the girls she and Matt would do.

What other choice did she have?

Matt would probably be relieved. He’d be hungover and blaming himself, even though Candy knew it was her fault. Matt had been in unfamiliar territory—Drunkand-Crazy Land, which was Candy’s weekend hangout.

She made up the sofa, the sheets sticking out a bit, like her own doubts, then headed for the kitchen for coffee. En route, she paused to turn on Matt’s computer.

She would get her notes together, call Freeda for her files, then head over to Matt’s at 7:30, as agreed. Matt said he was up by 6:00, plus the hangover would wake him early. Soon, they’d be back on track—the sex a fading faux pas.

The sex. She sighed. She could still feel Matt inside her.

Sara handed her a mug of coffee. “Sorry I woke you.”

“If you’d stop answering, Uncle Spence would stop calling.”

“It’s not that easy. He catches me just often enough to keep at it. I’m like a slot machine. What do they call that in behavior modification theory? A variable schedule of reinforcement?”

“This is your vacation.”

“Look at you, already firing up the laptop.” Sara nodded at where the computer shone at her, waiting. “You’re scaring me, darlin’. Don’t go to the dark side—all work and no play. That way lies madness.”

“I have a plan, don’t worry.” Candy added cream and sweetener, then sipped the Kona coffee from Dark Gothic Roast that was Sara’s favorite. Ellie had brought a freshly ground bag of their favorite flavor for each of them.

“I had a plan, too, and see where I am—getting wakeup calls from my uncle.” Sara sighed, sipped her coffee, then looked at Candy. “So, you went out after your swim, right?”

“Right.”

Sara leaned in, staring at Candy’s neck. “Is that what I think it is?” Her eyes went wide. “It is. It’s a hickey. What happened?”

“Shh.” She put her finger to her lips. “Not a word to Ellie. Matt got drunk and we kind of made out.”

“Made out? Uh-uh. You slept with him!” She half whispered, half squealed the words.

“It was a mistake. And I’m pretending it didn’t happen. And you have to, too. Ellie will never let me hear the end of it.”

“You are pure inspiration to me,” Sara said, her low voice full of laughter.

“I shouldn’t be. This is so…shortsighted. Irresponsible. Immature. Childish, really.”

“Is this about your brothers again? Big brothers always baby their little sisters.”

“It’s not just that. My brothers were partners in their firms by the time they were my age. I’m like a joke to them.”

“We all get locked in our sibling positions. No matter what we accomplish. I’m sure the president has to call if he’ll be late to dinner at his mom’s.”

“The point is that sleeping with Matt was the last thing I should have done in my situation.” She shook her head, painfully pissed at herself.

“You’ll recover. You are the most determined woman I know. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“Thanks for the support, Sara. Now allow me to help you.” She held down the off button on Sara’s cell. “Voice mail is your friend.” She handed the dead phone over.

She grimaced. “I’m trying. Truly.”

Candy glanced over at Sara’s laptop. “Should I hide that thing so you can’t work on it?”

“Not yet. I’m weaning myself. Really.”

“Today, you’re going to ask for surfing lessons, right? It’s your duty to the team.”

“We do need the points.” Sara brightened, as if turning it into a duty meant she could safely do it.

“How about this? You try to enjoy yourself today, Sara, and I’ll try not to.”

Sara gave a rueful laugh, then glanced at the clock. “It’s six. I need to roust Ellie for her audition. I’m doing her makeup. Wish me luck.”

“How did her hair turn out?”

“I think gorgeous. She’s not so sure.”

“Change is not for wimps or sissies.”

“Amen to that.” Sara saluted her with her mug.

Candy showered and dressed, careful to mask her love bite with plenty of foundation. Twenty minutes later, she was working at the computer, while Ellie moaned about the audition and Sara chased her around the condo with an eye-shadow palette.

Freeda was at work when Candy called and easily sent her the files she needed. Candy double-checked her PowerPoint presentation, got everything in order and made a few notes. It took hardly any time, which made her feel better about blowing off work the evening before with Matt.

What she’d prepared would really show him why she’d make a great team leader. Candy could name three shoo-ins and a most-likely for four of the team leader spots. She had her heart set on the fifth one. She had the advantage of more marketing experience than anyone else Matt could possibly consider. Her secret weapons were fresh ideas, creativity and the dedication she was showing Matt this week.

Finished, she shut down the computer, put it in the bag, then mixed up a glass of her patented hangover cure to take to Matt. She was good.

She set off, the gently crisp air adding to her high spirits. Only a few surfers were in the water and a handful of people ran along the beach. Radar, her kindred spirit, was nowhere to be found. Maybe her work ethic had chased him away.

She knocked at Matt’s door. No answer.

Could he still be asleep? Or was he in the shower? She went to the back of his place and peered in his bedroom window.

He was in bed, lying on his stomach. He’d kicked off most of the bedspread so that his bare ass and one leg were in full view. Her heart practically stopped at the sight.

His dark hair was dramatic against the white spread. His butt muscles dipped and swelled. She noticed a beauty mark high on the left cheek—the mate to the one on his face.

She was staring like a Peeping Tom, but it felt more like visiting a museum, studying a gorgeous statue: Man at Rest.

And she’d had him in action mere hours ago. The memory made her ache in delicate places.

She released a sigh and rested her forehead on the screen, making it rattle against the window.

Matt lifted his head at the sound, then pressed his temples, as if in pain. Sitting up, he saw her. His lips moved—saying her name, she’d bet. He tugged the spread around his waist and staggered to the window, which he opened. “Why did you leave?” He blinked at her through the screen, looking adorably sleepy.

“I was restless. And I had work to do.”

He squinted at his watch, but that seemed to hurt, too. “It’s only seven-thirty.”

“Sorry I woke you, but you said you were up by six. Should I come back later?”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he said, trying to smile, but only managing a wince.

“Dr. Candy to the rescue.” She lifted the glass. “My patented hangover cure.”

“I’ll meet you at the door.” He turned and plodded away, the bedspread slipping deliciously low on his behind, so that his beauty mark seemed to wink at her. Mmm.

He let her in, then looked her over dreamily. “How are you, Candy?”

She fought the melting feeling and held out the glass. “Better than you, I bet.”

“You look great,” he said, his eyes roving her face, then her body, then back up to stop at her neck. “Did I do that?” He touched the hickey.

“I tried to cover it up,” she said.

“Don’t. It’s cute.” He looked almost proud.

“Here.” She put the glass in his hand. “It’s got OJ, an egg, protein powder and a dash of vodka. Wait, though. You need B vitamins.” She put the computer down and fished out two capsules from the pillbox in her purse.

“Take these, drink it all down, then take a cool shower so your capillaries won’t swell. That causes more pain. The final touch is a scalp massage.”

“You’re taking care of me.” He grinned goofily.

“Trying to. Now drink.”

Obediently, he took the vitamins and emptied the glass. “Not bad,” he said, smacking his lips.

“Now the shower.”

“How about you come with?” he asked, low and slow. His wrap hung low and she glanced down to see an unmistakable bulge.

She forced herself to stay on task. “I already showered.”

“You can never be too clean.” He reached for her.

She sidestepped. “Matt. We have to forget last night.”

“Not possible.”

“It has to be. You were drunk. I was…stupid. We work together.”

“We’re on vacation. What happens in Malibu, stays in Malibu?”

His argument was tempting, but no. “Last night was—”

“Great,” he said.

“It was crazy,” she corrected, fighting the urge to go with what he was saying, keep it up, stay in the fog of desire. “It was the time, the place, the booze. We were two warm bodies acting on natural urges. Under normal circumstances, we’d never be together, right? We’re like apples and oranges, oil and water….”

“Gasoline and a match.” His voice had a rough, sexy edge.

“Yeah. That.” She felt herself weaken, watched his fingers at his waist, thought about how nimble they were. If he would just drop that bedspread, they could get down to business.

No. Control yourself. “Come on,” she said as if he were being ridiculous. “The two of us? I mean, you’re not my type.” That sounded harsh and hurt flickered in his face, so she fixed it. “And I’m not yours, either. Right?”

“Right,” he said stiffly, tightening his fist in the wadded sheet. “Of course. I’ll get dressed.” He turned to go, looking so defeated her heart ached.

Except in bed, she wanted to call after him. In bed, you’re more my type than anyone. Ever. But this was best.

While he showered, she’d make him breakfast and fire up the computer. After that, they’d hit the mall for his makeover. She had a plan and she was sticking with it. Never mind that Matt was naked and wet and soapy…and did his shower have a pulsing nozzle?

While the computer booted, Candy made a pot of Columbian, Matt’s favorite blend. Ellie had bought bagels, cream cheese and lox, so Candy toasted the bagels. The lox had omega-3, which would aid Matt’s brain’s recovery from the alcohol.

Back at the computer, she opened up her files, then located the Web site for the Malibu Country Mart and wrote down the numbers of the hair salon and optician. By the time Matt emerged, she was setting loaded plates beside two steaming mugs of fresh coffee.

“Better?” she asked him.

“A little, I guess.” He looked pale and moved like a recovering accident victim.

“The food should help.” She handed him his coffee, which he sipped tentatively. He looked so good in ordinary Dockers and a short-sleeved plaid shirt that she was ready to shove him against a wall and climb all over him.

Instead, she settled onto a stool beside him to watch him eat while nibbling on her own bagel.

“This is working,” he said after a few bites. “Thanks.”

It was working on her, too. Watching his mouth and fingers move as he ate, remembering where they’d been on her body, made her lose her appetite completely.

She went to wait for him at the computer.

He joined her, sitting on the chair she’d placed close to hers so they could both see the screen. When their thighs touched, she sucked in a breath so sharply she sounded like she’d been stabbed.

“You okay?” he asked, concerned.

“Of course. Sure.” Her reaction embarrassed her.

“So, that last part…of the hangover cure?” He grinned.

Hell, she’d forgotten about the scalp massage. “Sure. Face this way.”

He turned his chair and she scooted so that their legs were interlaced and they were mere inches apart, his breath, smelling of coffee and toothpaste, warm on her skin. She couldn’t stare into his eyes—intense even through the glasses—so she told him to close his eyes. When he did, she slid her fingers into his wet hair and began to squeeze his scalp. “This will stimulate circulation and soothe the nerve endings. You’d be surprised how many there are in your scalp.”

She worked her fingers slowly across his skull, starting at his crown, then working her way to his forehead. With his eyes closed, she was free to study his face, which was smooth and handsome and newly tanned from the volleyball game. That made the laugh lines beside his lips and the crinkles around his eyes more vivid.

“Man, that’s good. It’s like you released rubber bands from my skull.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” She spied that beauty mark on his cheek and thought about the matching one on his behind. Oh, Matt. Now that she’d slept with him, the temptation was even stronger.

“You sure know your way around a hangover,” Matt said.

That stung. “I’m hardly an expert. I talk to people. I’ve read tips.”

Matt opened his eyes. “That was a compliment, Candy. I meant to say you are a knowledgeable person.”

“If I were that good, I’d have insisted you drink less Tsunami and more club soda.”

“I knew what I was doing, Candy.” He grabbed her gaze. “Every minute.”

“Oh.” The heat in his words shot through her. “Close your eyes,” she demanded.

He did and she focused on her task, moving to his neck to work her fingers along the cords of muscles, digging where muscle met ligament and ligament met bone.

Matt moaned the way he had last night and she went tight all over.

“That’s enough of this,” she said, patting his shoulder. It was all she could bear.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Thanks. All that’s left is the steel wool between my ears.”

“That’ll take more time.”

“I’m never drinking again,” he said, then held up his hands. “I know, I know. Everyone says that.”

“Just stay clear of Tsunamis, huh?”

“Good advice.”

“Shall we?” She indicated the computer screen before them, her anticipation helping her ignore Matt’s nearness, his smell, the way the sun snagged in his hair and made it gleam.

“So what have you got for me?” Matt said, blinking against the brightness of the screen, poor thing.

In answer, she clicked the lead slide, Ledger Lite Personal, with the artwork she’d had a friend in graphics mock up for her. A second click revealed the tagline: The powerful business solution now perfect for personal use.

“The idea is to pare Ledger Lite to the basic ledger and planning sheets, down-price it and market it for consumers and small business.”

“Interesting,” Matt said. “Small business, you say?”

“Yep. Like I told you, I’ve been talking to Gina in customer relations and she says people using Payroll Plus are asking for a simpler, cheaper version of LL.”

“You have hard data to that effect?”

“Gina has a list of clients who’d happily test it and be our word-of-mouth network hubs.”

“Who’s already in the market?”

“We’ll blow the competitors right out of the water, Matt. They’re at higher price points, their programs are unwieldy, the menus counterintuitive. Nothing like the simplicity we’ve got built in with LL.”

“The packaging you’re showing is pricey.”

“We could scale it back. This is just a mock-up.”

“Our strategy is market expansion for Ledger Lite. A new niche would dilute that.”

“But it’s not new. That’s what’s cool. We’re already a preferred provider with Payroll Plus. We have seventy-five percent penetration with small business. So, no need to buy lists or cold-market at all.”

“You’ve got the numbers on that?”

“I was talking to Bud in R & D, yeah.”

He nodded slowly. “This would require a new interface. Lots of code hours.”

“Not if we adapted programming from a consumer product.”

“It would be a scratch effort. And our programmers are swamped with the fall releases.”

Candy’s heart was pounding in her ears. He seemed impressed, yet he shot down each answer with a new question.

“You seem skeptical. I can get more data, if that’s all.”

“That would help, because this would mean a big shift.” He hesitated. “It’s a good idea, Candy.”

“What’s missing?”

“The numbers, of course. It’s something to consider.” He smiled at her. Nice try, kid. She felt a mix of plunging disappointment and sharp fury. Why was he treating her this way?

“I have to ask…if Dave or Jim Daltry or Susan came to you with this idea, would you react differently?” Those three were definite team leaders.

“Of course not.” He looked startled. “We’ll consider it, like I said. Get the numbers for me and down the line we’ll—”

“Ledger Lite goes into beta in two weeks. It can’t be down the line. Can’t we talk with the programmers, see if they can fit it in?”

He studied her. “Scott would have to decide that. I’d need something to pitch to him.”

“A full marketing plan? No problem. I’ll do that tomorrow.”

“Candy, that’s crazy. This is your vacation. It can wait.”

“Not if we want to make beta.”

“You’re serious?”

“Of course.” She watched as Matt gradually realized she’d meant what she’d said. It was hard not to wonder if he’d be as slow to accept the word of the key staff she’d mentioned.

“Get me a full marketing plan and we’ll see.”

“Great. Terrific.” She had a chance. All she had to do was beef up her proposal. She’d work between festival events and nail it. Maybe it was better that he’d had questions and concerns. She’d prove she could accept criticism, modify her work, be resilient—all important management skills, all things that would make her a great team leader.

“So, are we done here?” Matt said, stifling a yawn. “Sorry. Caffeine’s wearing off.” He smiled, his eyes watery. The poor man was still hung over.

“For now, yeah.” They’d gotten past the sex thing and were back to Plan A, so it was all good. “On to the mall now.”

Matt groaned. “Can we get coffee there?”

“Absolutely.”

In a half hour, they were strolling through the Malibu Country Mart, a friendly collection of boutiques boasting loads of greenery, flowers and arches, a rest area with a sandy playground and a view of the beach.

“I need a fill-up.” Matt held the door to a Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf café for her.

“You’re buying from one of Ellie’s competitors?”

“People go to Dark Gothic Roast for Ellie as much as the coffee. No one can compete with that.”

“True.” She liked how well Matt knew his sister and how obvious his affection for her was.

At the oak counter, Candy studied the menu.

“I think you’ll want the macchiato with an extra shot of espresso,” Matt said. “It’s the closest to café de Sade.”

She jerked her gaze to his. “You know my coffee?”

“And you take it with sweetener, cream and cinnamon.”

“Ah. You’re remembering the time I sprinkled your shoes.”

Another awkward Dark Gothic Roast meeting. She’d been relieved she hadn’t added scalding coffee to the cinnamon topping she’d applied to Matt’s wing tips.

“I just know what you like.”

In bed. The message was clear. “Oh.” Heat rose between them and she knew they were both remembering their erotic encounter.

“Can I help you?” the clerk asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Matt said, jerked out of the moment. “She’ll have the machiatto with a shot of espresso.”

“And he’ll have Columbian regular,” Candy said. When the clerk left, she turned to him. “Black, right? I know what you like, too.”

“Oh, yeah. You do.” More heat, more trembling.

Somehow, they made it to a table, and she vowed to keep her mind on their professional relationship, not their recent intimacy.

“Nice job on the PowerPoint,” Matt said, clearly trying to shift the topic. Did he sound surprised?

She realized she should clear up another misconception he probably had about her. “That reminds me, while we’re overcoming bad impressions, I want to explain about that report I was late with—the next morning? After I fell?”

“The report that was missing pages and riddled with typos? I don’t remember that one.”

She cringed inside. “Exactly. You see what happened was—”

“It’s water under the bridge. You don’t have to explain.”

“I need to explain. The reason I was late was I had to help my neighbor look for her lost dog. She was sobbing in the parking lot, so what could I do?”

“Express sympathy and get to work on time?” But he smiled, teasing her. “You could never do that.” He leaned closer and she realized she’d moved in, too, her head at a flirty angle. They were behaving like lovers in public, hinting at secret moments they’d shared. Sex had changed their rapport, which wasn’t good, no matter how lovely it felt.

She sat back and folded her arms across her chest. “Anyway, helping her made me late and I’d forgotten that I hadn’t finalized the report. It was not like me. I meet deadlines and am committed to quality and—”

“Did you find the dog?”

“The dog? Oh. Yes. Covered in mud. You should have seen my backseat, but we found her.”

“So it was worth it.”

“Except that it left you with a bad taste in your mouth about me.”

“I think you tasted quite nice that night. Sweet and salty from the margarita. Spicy, too. Your own taste.”

His words set her entire body on fire. How was she supposed to talk about work when this could happen so easily?

“The point is that I’m responsible and dependable and—”

“Your work speaks for itself, Candy. If this is about me being your boss, I wish you’d forget it. You’re fine with me. I know your strengths.”

And her weaknesses? Would they keep him from choosing her as a team leader? She was dying to ask, but that seemed inappropriate and too pushy.

The clerk called out their orders, then Candy took hers to the condiment station. When she returned to the table, Matt said, “I don’t get why you ruin perfectly good coffee with all that junk.” He nodded at her cup, which she was still stirring.

“Because plain coffee is boring. I like to change it up.”

“Why change something that’s already great?”

“To make it better?”

“I guess we see things differently,” he said, which was a perfect reminder. They’d had a one-of-a-kind sexual head-on that would have never happened in the real world where their romantic interests were as different as their taste in coffee.

“So, on this makeover…” Matt said, obviously changing the subject. “You’re not going for blue hair or anything, right?”

“Hmm. Not sure.” She looked at him through a picture frame of her thumbs and index fingers. “Blue would clash with your eyes. Maybe magenta.” She sipped more coffee.

“Lord. I’m putting myself in your hands, you know.”

“Yeah. You said that.”

Her fingers trembled, so she put down her cup. They both took shaky breaths. Matt seemed to force a smile.

“I’m glad we straightened things out,” Candy said. “About the report and about that night.”

“You see I’m not the complete dork I was that night?”

“I was the one with my thong on display.”

“Ah, the thong…” He smiled wistfully. “I loved the thong. Tiger-striped, too. Are those things as uncomfortable as they look?”

“You get used to it,” she said, feeling herself blush.

“I speak for all men when I say thank you for making the effort.” He tapped his cup against hers.

“So you enjoyed my humiliation?”

“Not the humiliation part. The thong part, yeah.”

They both chuckled, the sound blending like music in the small shop, then fading, though they held each other’s gaze.

“How’s the hangover doing?” she asked.

“Better,” he said, as if he’d forgotten. “You were right.”

“I’m right a lot,” she said.

“I have no doubt. I had fun yesterday, hangover notwithstanding.” His eyes were soft and his smile spread. “I don’t even regret the karaoke.”

“Why would you? We were great together.” She heard “You’re the One that I Want” again in her head. “How about the dancing? Did you like that?”

“With you, sure.”

“I mean the girl grinding on you.”

“That was weird. I felt like a pole in a strip club.”

“Surely it was nicer than that.”

“It depends on who’s doing the rubbing.”

“I guess.” Every time he made a remark like that she got a zing. It was wearing her out. She remembered she hadn’t told him about the girls’ plan for the festival competition.

“Listen, Matt, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Definitely not magenta,” he said.

“No. It’s about the festival.” She told him about the competition, the prize, Sara’s spreadsheet and the points he’d already helped them win.

“So I take it I’m your teammate?” he asked.

“I promised them we’d do some of the events, yes.”

“Nothing too humiliating, I hope.”

“Depends on how you feel about Jell-O wrestling.”

“With you, I’d consider it.” He winked, making her tremble like the gelatin dessert they were discussing.

“Red Jell-O stains, so forget that.”

“Damn,” he said, snapping his fingers in pretend dismay.

“But how about a limbo contest? It’s early—before the Hot Shot Scavenger Hunt.”

“Limbo? Backbends to music? Doesn’t sound like me.”

“Sure it does. It sounds exactly like Fun Guy. Plus it’ll be networking practice.”

Matt sighed. “You could talk me into anything, Candy. Like I said before, I’m in your hands.”

And that was both delightful and scary. She could end up with the promotion she craved or in deep professional weeds, depending on how she handled herself.

**7**

THE NEXT THING MATT knew, Candy was hustling him past the shops toward his appointment with an optician, babbling about how contacts would let him see the world in a whole new way, and wouldn’t that be fabulous?

For a moment, he longed to be back at the beach house quietly catching up on work, not jangled and tugged and hassled by his chirpy colleague. He’d almost ditched the hangover, but Candy made his head hurt all over again.

“While you’re getting fitted for lenses, I’ll pick out clothes you can try on. Multitasking. Sound good?”

“Sure.” She was so damned eager to fix him up, he could hardly say no.

“Your hair appointment’s in an hour. In between, we’ll collect some business cards.”

“Business cards?”

“Networking practice. We’re competing for business cards, remember?”

“Uh, sure. I guess. Sounds…hectic.” He was having enough trouble with losing his glasses and whatever hair style she would cook up. No dye. Or bleach. He’d say no to that.

“That’s how I like to work, Matt. Efficient, organized, on top of things, never waste a minute.” She snapped her fingers three times.

“Unless a neighbor’s got a missing dog.”

“That was an unusual case.” She frowned at him.

“I’m joking, okay?” What was with her? She kept trying to hide her personality, pointing out how non-Candy she could be. It was as though she were interviewing for her job. That was a downside to becoming a manager. People stopped behaving normally around you. He hated that. In fact, he intended to talk about it at the first meeting of his new teams.

That made his gut clutch. He should be planning the teams now instead of dawdling at a mall. He had to consider skills, knowledge, work style, potential and, thanks to the PQ2, personality. Everyone had pros and cons and some people worked better with others.

Candy was one of his problem placements. She was creative and a high producer, typo-laden report notwithstanding. He wished he could clone her for all five teams.

He’d love to set her up to float, but that wouldn’t work. To ensure mutual responsibility, the teams had to be self-sufficient. Only outside consultants worked that way. If only Candy were one. She’d perform rings around the guy Scott hired when they were overloaded or stumped.

Matt had to figure out where to put her. And where everyone else would work best. The personnel aspects of the VP job were his weak point. It was related to his lack of people skills, he guessed. What had Candy said he was? Nonsocial. Yeah. He smiled.

Hell, Candy could put the teams together in a heartbeat. She knew everyone down to shoe sizes. He’d love to get her opinion, but that was impossible. Inappropriate with someone he supervised.

Even worse now that they’d slept together. Candy had had to shake him from his sexual haze, reminding him that a perfect storm of booze, vacation and opportunity had brought them together.

You’re not my type. She’d had to remind him. She was right, but it hurt to hear. He should be grateful she’d been so eager to forget what had happened. For all her wild ways, she was a practical person. He still felt uneasy, though. What he’d done was so out of character, even taking the Tsunami into account, he hardly recognized himself. After Candy was finished with him today, he’d look like a stranger, too.

At the eyeglass place, Candy signed him in and breezed off to select a new wardrobe, intent on her role as his female Henry Higgins, transforming him into Fun Guy.

When Candy returned, the optician was watching him practice putting the blasted lenses into his eyes. He’d flipped the right lens across the room, then onto his shoe. The left one was now tucked so far back under his eyelid it might require surgery to remove. No way would he go through this hassle every morning.

“Let me see how you look,” Candy said.

“Hang on.” He dug deep enough to bruise his eyeball, captured the plastic disk and centered it over his pupil. He blinked and Candy’s face swam into focus, almost making it worth the trouble.

“Oh, you look great,” Candy breathed. “Doesn’t he?”

“He has nice eyes,” the optician—Carol—said. “Very blue. They remind me of Greg Kinnear’s.”

“Exactly,” Candy said. “Or maybe Patrick Dempsey’s?”

“Oooh,” she said. “From Grey’s Anatomy? Him, too.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Matt cleared his throat, embarrassed to have two women carrying on about his eyes.

A clerk bagged up his paraphernalia—cases, cleaning fluids, spare lenses—and rang up the charges and he had to blink repeatedly to see clearly enough to determine whether he had a credit card or his driver’s license in his hand.

Once outside the shop, Candy danced backward in front of him as they walked. “Isn’t it great to be free of glasses?”

He blinked and squinted, fighting the lenses, which slid across his eyes like a car on ice. “I guess.”

“It feels funny at first, I know. That’s why you’re blinking so much. Soon you’ll be used to them.”

“I hope so.”

“It’s so worth it. No dents on your nose. Full peripheral vision. No steamed-up glasses when you make pasta. You can see to swim and in the shower and in bed at night. No bumping glasses when you kiss.” She stopped abruptly. “I mean…Anyway…I can really see your eyes now,” she said.

“So you feel closer to me?”

“Matt,” she said, warning him away from that kind of talk. He liked the way color flared in her cheeks, visible even under the pink from yesterday’s sun. “We’ve got thirty minutes before your haircut, so let’s go for some business cards.”

They agreed to meet at the hair salon and he watched her walk away, sandals clacking, butt tight, hips rocking in that irresistible way she had…. Damn.

Thirty minutes and six business cards later, Matt entered the hair salon, which smelled so strongly of hairspray his eyes watered. Personally, he preferred an old-fashioned barber shop.

He was relieved to see he wasn’t the only male customer in the place. One guy was in a recliner at the sinks getting his hair washed and another was getting aluminum-foil squares painted into his hair. What? No way would he allow that to be done to him.

Candy waved him over, grinning and eager, and he realized he’d get cornrows and a lip piercing if she wanted it. What a chump he was.

“Here he is, Raul,” Candy said, when he reached her. “Raul, this is Matt. Matt, this is Raul and we are so lucky he could squeeze us in.”

“Sit.” Raul patted the back of the chair. “Let’s see what I have to work with.” Once Matt was in place, Raul ran his fingers through Matt’s hair, then fiddled with the ends, making shocked noises. “Look at that…So damaged…You’re using a harsh shampoo…And no conditioner. Men!”

He blew out a breath, then spoke to Candy. “Why they think it’s macho to neglect their hair, I’ll never understand.”

He braced his fingertips at the top of Matt’s head and wiggled them around, frowning like a doctor with a difficult diagnosis. “Light curl…lots of body…thick…” He fingered a strand, then dropped it, a scientist evaluating an experiment.

“Is that good?” Matt ventured.

Raul jerked his eyes to the mirror, as if startled that his victim was alive. “For some things.” He put his finger to his chin and stared at Matt’s reflection. “I’m thinking texturing, short in the back, tapered for style. Razor the ends. Oh, and a definite weave. Golden ash, I think.”

“A weave?” Matt said. Was that like braids?

Raul flipped open a notebook that held tiny whisk brooms of hair in a million shades. He held one next to Matt’s face. “Maybe honey blond?” He seemed to be talking to Candy now. “It’ll bring out his eyes. He has the best eyes. Brad Pitt without the smoky green.”

“The optician said Greg Kinnear,” Candy said. “But I was thinking Patrick Dempsey.”

“Not quite. Keifer Sutherland maybe? Anyway, gorgeous. So, honey blond it is.” He whipped away the hair and shut the notebook.

“Hold it,” Matt said, figuring out where this was going. “You’re not dying my hair blond.”

“It’s just highlights, Matt,” Candy said. “Your hair will look sun-kissed. That’s how they do it.” She pointed at the foiled-up guy who was now under a dryer. A dryer?

“No. No way. Just a cut. You can do the razor thing, but no sun-kissing anything.”

Raul and Candy looked at each other.

“I think he means it,” Candy said with a sigh.

“Shame.” Raul shook his head, acting like a surgeon forced to settle for a bypass, when he’d wanted a full transplant, but he went after Matt with several kinds of scissors and some electric clippers, talking with Candy about movies and celebrity adoptions the whole time. They acted as if they’d known each other for years instead of minutes. That was Candy all the way.

One good thing about the contact lenses was that he could see her clearly in the mirror. He’d always had to remove his glasses for haircuts. She sat on the stool to his right, skirt riding high, swinging her leg, her sandal heel dangling.

He found himself lulled by Raul’s snips and tugs and the music of Candy’s voice, her light laughter, her chatter. After the cutting, Raul rubbed in some gel, then some foam, then a spray and finally pointed Matt’s chair at the mirror. “There,” he said. “Is it magic or is it magic?”

It wasn’t too bad. Short on the sides and back, the longer top part stuck up a little from the goo, which made it too shiny for his taste, but he could live with the cut. Matt was relieved. It could have been so much worse.

“It’s magic, Raul,” Candy said, answering for him. “Isn’t it?” she asked the woman in the next chair.

“Gorgeous,” the woman said. “Especially with his eyes. I think definitely Greg Kinnear.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Candy said, tilting her head to study him more closely.

Mortified, he cleared his throat. “What’s the maintenance on this?” He’d sounded like he was discussing an oil change.

“Sculpting wax and a bit of root lift. Ten minutes maybe?”

“Wax? Root lift?”

Raul sighed. “Oh, be that way.” He scrubbed Matt’s hair the way Matt usually did when he got out of the shower. “You can do that if you want to waste my work.”

“Great.” He released a breath, but at the counter he let Raul convince him to buy some wax just in case. One hefty check later, he let Candy lead him to a menswear boutique.

The saleswoman, whom Candy knew by name, took them to a booth beside a rack loaded with clothes that he was dismayed to learn were all for him. Something about mixing and matching…

The saleswoman and Candy fluttered around him as he put on and took off suits, blazers, pants, dress shirts, summer shirts, shorts and swim trunks until his skin felt raw.

Candy was a whirl of energy and opinion. Yes to this, no to this, maybe on this, her features screwed up as she analyzed each item for fit, color and style.

Whenever he stepped out of the changing booth, Candy ran her fingers along the shoulder seams, messed with his sleeves and cuffs, checked the break at the tops of his shoes. Her busy fingers were on him everywhere, making him sweat, making him think about last night. Needless to say, he wrote a lot of code in his head to keep from stacking wood.

After a wearying hour of this, he’d just stripped down to his boxers, when Candy spun into the booth. “One more—oh! Sorry. You’re almost—” Her eyes darted to his boxers, which, of course, bulged.

“Oh.” Her eyes zoomed to his, heat sizzling there. “Do you need…underwear? They have some nice silk boxers…out…there.” She waved aimlessly behind her.

“I’m equipped,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “Fully.”

“I’m worn out with all this,” he said, weary of the scrape of fabric, the constant struggle to control himself around her, to keep his arms from holding her, his mouth from taking hers.

“Oh, me, too,” she said, her shoulders sagging. “You’ve got a good start anyway. Maybe wear the Hawaiian shirt and board shorts out?”

“Okay,” he said. He changed into the items she suggested.

When he stepped out of the dressing room, her eyes lit up and she gave a delighted gasp. “You look great. Come and see.” She led him to the three-way mirror.

Not bad, he realized, studying his reflection. He still recognized himself, but he looked…sharper.

“Matt, version 2.0,” she said.

He smiled, glad it wasn’t so bad. He could have looked gay or vain or foolish, but he looked…decent. He’d been right to trust her.

“You’re going to need non-prescription sunglasses,” she said. “Hang on.” She went to the rack by the register and came back with a pair she slid onto his nose, her fingers gentle at his temples, then stepped back to survey the effect.

“Wow,” she breathed. “Women will go nuts for you and I’m not kidding.”

How about you? Are you nuts for me? He couldn’t help wanting to know that, could he?

“Not that you weren’t attractive before, but now you’re…enhanced.” Her eyes roved over him, holding him so intently he felt like her fingers had actually touched him.

“Thanks, Candy. For doing this.”

“My pleasure.”

The last thing he wanted to think about at the moment was her pleasure. He knew exactly how she sounded, what she looked like, the way she stilled, then cried out.

Ouch.

“Are you hungry?” she asked softly.

“Starving,” he answered, but neither of them seemed to be talking about food.

**8**

YOU SET YOURSELF UP, girl, Candy realized as they drove back from the mall, heading for the deli to appease their hunger. Like a couple of sandwiches from the chichi deli could relieve the ache inside her, the way she craved Matt’s touch.

He’d been tough to resist before, but after the makeover, now that he looked like Fun Guy, he’d become one of those perfect sundaes where you licked the bowl afterward, with no regrets at all about blowing your diet because it was so worth it.

Now, she was depending on her weakest part—self control—to keep the lid on her feelings for the man.

All that time touching him while he tried on clothes had left her feeling raw and exposed, vulnerable to any glance or movement. When he tapped his finger on the steering wheel, she got a charge.

They would eat their sandwiches on the beach before the festival events began. That had been her stupid idea. It had sounded good at the time, but now she realized it meant more hours together non-stop. After they ate, it would be time for the limbo contest and then the photo hunt. The prospect exhausted her.

She racked her brain for some aspect of Matt that turned her off, some nerdy flaw, but she couldn’t think of a single one. At the moment, Matt was a total hottie.

It’s just the makeover effect, she told herself. Merely a superficial change. Matt was still the same distant, work-obsessed intellectual he’d been yesterday, locked in his head, glued to his keyboard. Hell, the man had to be forced to go on vacation. She’d had to drag him outside to notice the beauty of the beach, the sea, the moment. She did not relate at all.

She sighed and stared out the window.

Matt seemed lost in thought, too, staring ahead as he drove. The silence felt thick, but she didn’t know if it was from sexual tension or mutual weariness, or both. She wasn’t sure what Matt was feeling. When he’d said he’d had enough in the boutique, she’d thought it was because of all the touching they’d done, the close looks, the intimacy of seeing him nearly nude again. But maybe he’d just been sick of changing clothes. Worse, she didn’t know which she wanted it to be.

At least the scenery was distracting. The ocean gleamed in the gathering sunset. It would be nice to watch the waves as they ate. She should appreciate whatever beach time she could net from this complicated vacation.

At the deli, while Matt picked out a bottle of wine, she visited with the clerk about the sandwich selections, finally settling on Black Forest ham with Dofino cheese on herbed focaccia fresh from the oven. The clerk seemed flattered by all her questions and offered the special honey-horseradish mustard sauce the employees usually kept for themselves, which she thought was sweet of him.

When Matt got out his wallet to pay, a couple of business cards fell to the floor. Candy picked them up. “Did you score these from the mall?”

“Yeah. I only got six though.” He shrugged.

“That’s excellent. Really.”

“What about you?”

“I got twelve, but I got lucky. I ran into a bunch of sales guys at the juice bar. They live to hand out cards.”

“Candy, if they’d been monks sworn to silence, you’d have them reciting poetry to you. Writing it on the spot.”

She smiled, warmed by his compliment. “Anyway, with my handicap, that puts us neck-and-neck.”

“Speaking of neck…” He brushed hers with his fingertips. “It’s showing.” He meant the love bite he’d given her.

She shivered, thinking of how she’d gotten it, and put her finger there. It felt warm to the touch. “I’ll use more makeup next time.”

“Don’t. I like seeing it. It reminds me….”

“Me, too,” she said, her heart lifting at his words. Which was not helpful at all. It would be so much better if he showed more regret. If they both did. If they could forget it altogether. Paying up, they then drove to the beach house.

Before long, they found a great spot from which to watch the receding tide and settled on a rock outcropping to unpack their meal and pour wine into plastic goblets.

The lowering sun was painting the sky orange and pink, the ocean silver and bronze. A handful of surfers skimmed the sunset waves. It was a gift to be here, to enjoy this easy beauty. Candy breathed deeply of the sea air, letting it dissolve her tension, her aching desire for Matt.

“Isn’t this a miracle?” she said. “Being here?”

“It is,” he said, smiling warmly.

He made her feel…watched over. Protected. She’d never felt this way with a guy. Because she’d never settled on one? Or had she never chosen guys who gave off this vibe? She realized she liked it—this sense of connection, the security of being a couple.

It was completely false, though, to feel this way, however fleetingly, with Matt. They were actors in front of a blue screen on which exotic scenery had been projected. She was here because of work—they both were. This wasn’t a romance and she didn’t dare forget it.

She took a bite of her sandwich to distract herself. “Mmm, good sandwiches, huh?” She loved the combination of herb-infused bread, smoky sweet ham and creamy cheese. The dressing brought it all together with a little zing.

“Great choice, Candy. I would have just said two Number Ones and been content. You had the guy dragging out the best ham and the secret sauce.”

“The sauce is great, huh? It blends the flavors and adds a surprise.” Exactly how their sex had been—a blending and a surprise. Stop that.

She forced herself to make a point. “This is a good lesson, really. People love to share what they know, what they have—their secret sauce, really—if you show you’re interested.”

“Yeah, but you have a gift, Candy.”

“What about you? You got six cards in a half hour.”

“The sixth was a cheat. I asked a guy for directions to the salon and his cards were on a display rack at his elbow.”

Candy laughed. “But you asked for directions! That’s so brave. Men never ask for directions.”

“Good point. Maybe this makeover is turning me into a girlie man.” His eyes danced with mischief.

“No chance of that,” she said softly, then quickly changed the subject. “So what worked with the business cards?”

“What you said about listening more than talking, I guess. I didn’t feel like I had to entertain anyone. I met a couple of interesting people—one guy owns a worm farm and another builds bomb-safe doors for nuclear plants.”

“How fascinating.”

“Neither one needed software, so I don’t know that I accomplished anything.”

“So what? Side trips are the best part of life.”

“Spoken like a person willing to blow an important meeting to chase a dog.”

“I explained what happened, Matt,” she said, stung by the zinger, just as she’d been when he’d called her an expert with hangovers and wild bar parties. Matt still didn’t respect her enough. “It was a unique circumstance and—”

“Hey, that was a joke. I’m just getting the hang of Fun Guy and you’re turning into Serious Girl on me?” He touched her cheek, coaxing her into a smile.

“Sorry. I’m…I guess I’m tired.” She knew she couldn’t demand Matt’s respect; she had to earn it, but she still felt discouraged.

“Tell you what,” Matt said, “here’s what I want if I win our competition—come with me to the conference. Be my secret networking weapon. How’s that?”

He was appeasing her, she knew, easing her hurt feelings, but she decided to make the most of it. “I’d be happy to go, whether you win or not. For you and SyncUp, I’m there.” She ticked her plastic wine glass against his, then lifted it for a drink.

“Deal,” he said.

“Great choice in wine, by the way.”

“It was the best value at that price point.”

“God, Matt. Couldn’t you pretend you chose it for its smoky blackberry nose and clean finish?”

“Sorry.” He winced in pretend regret.

“Have you always been that way? Cut to the chase, travel in straight lines, no chitchat, get the best value?”

“I guess so. Maybe it was because my mom depended on me after our dad left.”

“That makes sense. Ellie told me a little about what happened.” Ellie and Matt’s mother came to L.A. to become an actress, but never quite made it. Flamboyant and emotionally fragile, she was wrecked when her husband left her.

“Ellie was young—six? How old were you?”

“Ten,” Matt said.

“That must have been hard.”

“Not so bad really. You do what you have to do when you’re in the middle of things. Looking back, it seems sad, but at the time I liked the responsibility. I was proud my family could count on me. I liked being dependable. Then and now.”

“But what about what you want? What feeds your soul?”

“Excuse me?” He shot her a questioning look. “You going woo-woo on me here?”

“It’s an important question—whether you do what you do out of obligation or joy—don’t you think?”

“You’ve had too much of this.” He pretended to take her wine away. “Why can’t it be both? I get satisfaction from my work. And I’m glad people count on me. It’s who I am.”

“Sure, but if your family situation had been different? If you hadn’t been forced to grow up so fast, maybe you wouldn’t have ended up so serious and focused.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He smiled. “To you it is, I guess. I take it you had a carefree childhood?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “I’m the youngest and I have two older brothers. Robert, the younger, is ten years older than me and Philip, twelve.”

“So you were the baby? I bet they spoiled you.”

“Of course.” Her mouth twisted with that admission. “Maybe that’s why it took me so long to get my act together in college.”

“What do you mean?”

“I changed my major a bunch. First, I wanted to be a psychologist, then I studied art history, then creative writing, then I quit and worked for a while—for a direct-mail marketing firm, then an ad agency. I really liked advertising, so I finished up with a marketing degree. Finally.”

“You figured it out.” He was being kind.

“At twenty-four? Come on. Plus, after that I floated freelance for a while, switched jobs a bunch. My brothers just shake their heads. They were partners in their law firms by the time they were my age. Philip’s in corporate law and Robert’s a litigator.”

“Lots of people get degrees and still don’t know what they want,” Matt said. “And twenty-four is young.”

“But I wasted time and money. My parents’ money.”

“Was it a sacrifice for them?”

“You mean financially? Not really, I guess. They’re in good shape with money. They built their signage company from nothing to a factory with fifty employees. See? High achievers all around. Except for me. I’m the misfit.”

“I’m sure they don’t see you that way.”

“They don’t get me at all.” She shook her head, weary of that status, then smiled at him. “Our childhoods were so different. Which do you think was better?” she mused. “Being too indulged or too burdened?”

“It’s more a matter of fit, really, I think. If the way you’re wired and the environment you grow up in match, things go smoothly. If not, there’s friction.”

She stared at him. She’d never thought about it that way before. “So my problem is I got the wrong family?”

He laughed. “I doubt it’s ever that simple. In my case, the fit turned out to be right. I’m wired to be responsible and that’s what my family needed. Of course Ellie took over supporting our mother after I went to college. She’s wired that way, too.”

He looked out across the ocean, swinging his plastic cup from his fingertips, the movement mesmerizing.

“Did you always know what you wanted to be when you grew up?” she asked. “Were you born with a punch card in your fist?”

“Pretty much.” He gave a soundless laugh. “I built my first computer from components at fourteen. That made computer engineering an obvious major.”

“So how’d you get to SyncUp?”

“It fit my career path. I’ve chosen each job to broaden my experience and get more responsibility. I jumped at the spot at SyncUp. It’s a great company and a tremendous opportunity. Scott’s got vision.”

“Yeah. I like Scott.”

“What about SyncUp? Do you like working there?” He seemed to dig at her when he asked that, as if he expected her to say no.

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You stir up so much mischief, I thought you might be bored.”

Bored? The word gave her a skittering feeling, as though the bottom had dropped from her stomach. Sure, her mind wandered during meetings and follow-up details irritated her. Once she’d figured something out, she wanted to move on. But did it show as boredom? Really? Is that what Matt thought?

She had to turn that around, make it show her aptitude for a promotion. “I like a challenge, Matt,” she said. “I believe in meeting expectations and going the extra mile. Take stretch goals, for example. I believe in them. If you want to grow, you have to reach out of your comfort zone.”

He held up his hand. “Whoa. This is starting to sound like a performance review. I’m asking as a friend, not as your boss.”

“Oh. Sure. As a friend.” Or a lover? They’d been lovers, after all. Which gave her a delicious thrill. It was so wild, so amazing. She’d slept with Matt Rockwell. It was hard to believe and, in a secret part of herself, she celebrated it.

The rest of her knew it was a mistake she had to forget.

As dusk gathered around them, though, she became more aware of details about Matt—the way he breathed and moved, the way his tan deepened as the light faded. He picked up a piece of driftwood and flung it into the sunset-silvered water and she liked the tensing of his muscles, his follow-through and the way he watched for the stick to land, then smiled.

Dusk seemed like a curtain drawing around them, making her want to tuck into the cave of his body, tip up her chin for a kiss. Let the darkening sky blanket them, cozy and intimate, after a long day spent in each other’s company.

She realized she rarely spent entire days with a guy. They did movies, clubs, maybe a hike up Squaw Peak or a long mountain-bike ride. Sex, of course, sometimes with breakfast the next morning. But never more than a few hours at a time.

For hanging out, she preferred her friends—Ellie and Sara, when she could pry them away from work, and a couple of girlfriends from college. But she could see now that a steady guy, a regular relationship, had its rewards.

“You know, I’ve hardly thought of work at all,” Matt said, his tone as wistful as her thoughts.

“That’s good, isn’t it? It’s your vacation, after all.”

“I suppose. I do have a crucial project next week that I should spend some time on while I’m here.”

“Really? Can I help?”

His eyes shuttered away from her. “It’s management stuff.”

It was probably the teams. “I’d be happy to be a sounding board. I’m a good listener.”

“Thanks, but I’d better handle it on my own.”

“Do you like being a manager?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, I did until the PQ2 came along.” He laughed, then sipped his wine. “The people stuff intimidates me, but I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“You’re helping me with that,” he said, looking at her.

“I’m glad.” She held his gaze. And you can help me, she thought. Make me a team leader. It would be so easy to say it here at the shore, buzzed from wine, enjoying each other’s company, sharing their histories, peeking at each other’s inner selves. Matt liked her, would want to help her. Why not just come right out with it?

She opened her mouth to do it, except Matt’s expression suddenly turned earnest. “Candy, listen, I need to apologize again for doing what I did last night. It was very irresponsible of me to act on an attraction—no matter how strong—to a colleague, especially someone I supervise.”

His paternal tone irked her. As if he were the adult and she were the child. “I was there, too, remember? It takes two.”

“But the burden is greater for me because of my status.”

“What? Are you talking about sexual harassment? Please. Like I said, I was there, too.”

“And you behaved very professionally this morning, suggesting we forget what happened. Thank you.”

At least he’d given her that much credit.

“If what I did changed our work relationship—led to favoritism on my part or resentment on yours—I couldn’t live with myself.”

“Don’t worry. It hasn’t changed anything,” she said. Except she felt an icy chill. She’d been ready to ask for the promotion, leaning on their new intimacy. What had she been thinking? She wanted the job on her own merits, not because Matt was hot for her or owed her a favor.

This was bad. Or maybe it was a natural mistake. She didn’t know. She felt as if they’d thrown personal and professional into a blender and hit pulverize.

She was confused and disoriented, as if they’d crossed an irreversible line, changed their relationship forever.

She could not allow that. They had to move on, change the subject, get past this awkwardness.

“So, what’s the proper attire for limbo?” Matt said, giving her a wry grin. He obviously wanted to change the subject, too.

“Good question. I need to change bikinis for something with more give.”

“More give?” He swallowed hard, looking at her body, then away.

“Absolutely. And you should take off your shirt so it won’t snag on the bar.”

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” Matt said, standing to remove his shirt.

She couldn’t help staring at him, bare-chested and newly tanned. She wished she’d noticed more about his body when they’d been in bed together.

“Candy?”

She realized she was staring. “You’re looking good,” she said, pretending to evaluate him. “Your tan’s nicely even.” She ran her fingers along the faint sleeve line, raising goose bumps on his skin.

“Feels good,” he rasped.

She lifted her finger, trying to ignore the simmering heat in his eyes, fighting her own reaction. “Do you feel more social?” she stammered. “More relaxed?”

“Do I seem that way to you?”

“Definitely.”

“I don’t feel that relaxed. And the longer we stand here, the worse it gets.” His gaze settled on her mouth. He wanted to kiss her, she could tell, and, worse, she wanted him to. He dragged his eyes up to meet hers.

“Say something quick,” he said, clearly wanting her to distract him.

“Time to limbo?” she said weakly.

He shook his head, as if that wasn’t a good enough distraction.

She stepped back. “The point is, you look like Fun Guy. Scott will so approve of Fun Guy.”

“Yeah?” He stepped closer.

“And Jane!” she blurted, realizing that was the way to go. “Jane will love Fun Guy.”

“Jane?” He looked puzzled for a second. “She’d be surprised, for sure.”

“So ask her out when you get back.”

“There’s no point to that.”

“She broke up with you because you weren’t any fun, but now you are. She’ll give you another chance, I’m sure.”

“What if I don’t want that?”

“Sure you do. Talk to her. You gave up too soon.”

He didn’t say anything, just held her gaze. He had too much pride, probably, to admit he wanted Jane back.

Whatever. The idea that Matt was taken felt like a life raft to her. She never messed with taken guys.

Of course it was ridiculous that she needed more of a reason to stay clear than that Matt was her boss and sleeping with him might kill her promotion, but a little insurance never hurt, right?

IT WAS A LIE, MATT knew—not telling Candy he no longer wanted to be with Jane. But it could solve his problem.

He’d no sooner apologized to Candy for the sex, babbling on about his higher duty as a manager, than he’d been ready to haul her back to his place for more, like some randy caveman.

What the hell was wrong with him? He’d never read the SyncUp policy on fraternization, but he knew for certain that a manager sleeping with someone he supervised was a bad idea.

Moreover, Matt needed everyone’s respect while he was organizing his department and he certainly didn’t want to give Scott a reason to doubt his choice of Matt for VP.

Whatever it took to keep clear of her: If the idea of Jane made Candy step back, then he had a shred of hope he could control himself. No decent guy went after a new woman when he wanted to reconcile with his ex, right?

Around Candy, he felt pretty damn indecent. Now he was walking her to her beach house for a bikini with more give. He hoped to hell that didn’t mean more bare skin.

Too late, he realized his sister was likely to be inside. Ellie would definitely pick up the energy between them.

In self-defense, he put his shirt back on, just as Candy opened the door to music and the roar of a blender. Ellie was in the kitchen making drinks, while another woman hunched over a laptop, a cell phone at her ear. She waved at them, talking into the phone.

“Hey, guys,” Ellie called from the kitchen, then bent down to peer at them from beneath the cabinets. “Omigod!” She hurried out to stare at him, hands to her cheeks in pretend shock. “What happened to you?”

Ellie herself had gone through some kind of transformation. She’d changed her hair and makeup so that she looked softer, more like the Ellie she’d been before she got into her Queen of the Damned phase.

“What have you done with my brother, Candy?” she demanded.

“Meet Fun Guy,” Candy said with a sweep of her arm.

Ellie walked all around him. “I can’t believe how different you look! No glasses. New hair. New clothes.”

“Thanks,” Matt said. “I like your new look, too.”

She grabbed her hair self-consciously. “It was for the audition. It feels…funny.”

“It looks great,” Candy added.

“How did you get Matt to do this? I’ve been nagging him to lose the glasses for years. What did you say? What did you do? Never mind. Too personal. I don’t want to know.”

“Oh, stop,” Matt said. “She updated my look so Scott will see me as more, I don’t know, social? Hip?” He shrugged.

“Whatever,” Ellie said. “I’ve never seen you in a shirt this loud.” She gave Candy a salaam. “I bow before you, O Queen of Makeovers.”

“It’s nothing,” Candy said.

“Oh, yes it is. Doesn’t he look great, Sara?” Ellie asked. “I’m going to get us all something to toast with.” She headed for the kitchen.

“You look very nice, Matt.” The woman had put down her phone and joined them. She smiled, telling him she knew how over-the-top Ellie could be. “I’m Sara.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Matt said, shaking Sara’s hand. “I believe I’ve seen you at the coffee shop?”

She nodded.

“With a phone glued to her ear,” Candy said. “Sara’s always working.”

“I’m with Anderson Title. On the tenth floor.”

“Except on this trip she’s supposed to be relaxing.”

“Now stop right there,” Sara said. “Not only did I sign up for the surfing competition, I asked Drew for lessons.”

“You didn’t! You did? Oh, that’s great.” Candy lunged forward to hug her friend, who did look a bit buttoned-down to be a surfer.

“And you and Drew…?” Candy asked breathlessly.

“Let’s just say we’ll be doing the photo scavenger hunt together.” Sara went pink and Matt wanted to escape. He hadn’t been trapped in a girl-talk session since Ellie was in high school.

“This is great,” Candy said. “Isn’t this great, Ellie?”

“That’s why we’re celebrating.”

Ellie handed a margarita to Sara, then extended one to Candy, who shook her head. “We need our wits about us to do well in the limbo contest.”

Plus, he needed every inhibition he could muster to override his attraction to Candy. He’d already seen the effect alcohol had on him.

“We’re also celebrating because Ellie got the part!” Sara said. “She’s an extra on Sin on the Beach.”

“That’s fabulous!” Candy hugged Ellie.

“Plus,” Sara said, leaning in, “she connected with Bill Romero again and they’re getting together tonight. For the scavenger hunt…and later.”

Matt’s ears perked. “Bill Romero? Is that the guy who used to live next door? The one you spied on all the time?”

Ellie slugged his arm. “I was only twelve and I was smitten. Now I can actually get words out.” She abruptly looked twelve again, with a light in her eyes he’d never seen when she spoke about a guy. He felt a surge of happiness and hope. Maybe Ellie would let this guy in, allow someone to take care of her for a change. With all his heart, he hoped for her happiness.

“So, we’ve all got partners for the festival contests,” Candy said. “Now we’ve got a serious chance to win.”

So they were partners, huh? He wondered if Candy would tell her friends what had really happened between them. Before he’d gotten to know her, he’d have been positive she’d dish every detail, but now he’d seen her quiet, thoughtful side.

The more time he spent with her, the more he liked her. Which wasn’t particularly helpful.

“Let me show y’all where we stand on the competition,” Sara said, returning to her laptop. “With Ellie on the TV show and with what Candy and Matt earned already, we’ve got a good start. Ellie came up with a name for us. Team Java Mamas. Isn’t it perfect? Considering Dark Gothic Roast and all.”

“I love it,” Candy said. They all looked over Sara’s shoulder at the screen, where she clicked into a spreadsheet listing events, potential points and points earned.

“You’re serious about this,” Matt said, trying not to bury his nose in Candy’s hair.

“Oh, Sara’s serious about everything,” Ellie said.

“You all will enjoy this when we win, so no bitching,” Sara said. “Assuming we do well enough to make the finals, we’ll need a killer essay.”

“And Candy’s our ace in the hole on that,” Ellie said. “Isn’t Candy amazing, Matt?” Ellie dug in with her gaze. “Do you know how lucky you are to have her?” She paused. “At SyncUp, I mean.”

“I do. Yes.” He glanced at her.

“I’m just part of the team,” Candy said, flushing. Her vulnerability touched him. For someone so socially confident, she was surprisingly insecure about her work. He wanted to help her with that if he could, without getting too personal.

“What about the freak-dancing contest?” Ellie asked, pointing at the screen. “Matt, what do you think?”

“No way.” He stepped back, hands up in protest.

“Come on. What did Candy call you? Fun Guy? Fun Guy would love it. I mean, you’re doing the limbo? I wouldn’t have believed anyone could talk you into that.” She gave Candy a knowing look.

“I have to draw the line somewhere,” he said, but Ellie had a point. Only Candy could have convinced him to sing karaoke, get contacts, do backbends in swim trunks—and whatever other goofy thing she had yet to talk him into.

Candy went off to change, leaving him with Ellie and Sara, who lapsed into a discussion of Ellie’s new look, talking about bronzers and foundations and primer coats until he felt like they were debating building construction instead of cosmetics.

“What do you think, Matt? Should I keep up this illusion, this pretense, this false me?” Ellie asked him.

“You’re asking a guy who just had a makeover,” he said, then got serious. “You have to be comfortable with yourself, El. You have to like how you—”

Candy appeared, stopping him cold. She wore a white bikini held together by loose strings here and there.

“Yeah, Matt?” Ellie prompted. “I have to like how I…what?”

“How you look,” he finished faintly, unable to take his eyes off Candy, who looked like an edible angel. A couple of tugs with his teeth and she’d be bare.

“Wow,” he said, his voice a rasp over a suddenly dry throat. “That looks, um, like it has more give.” He frowned, as if that were a serious consideration.

“More give?” Ellie asked.

“For better bending,” Candy said.

Bending? God. “We’d better get moving,” he said, hustling her toward the door before they endured more harassment.

“Have fun, you two,” Ellie said. “How low can you go?”

He didn’t want to think about it.

**9**

THE FESTIVAL AREA had gotten insanely crowded, Matt noted, with the fleeting hope that the limbo contest had reached capacity. Candy was indomitable, however, and managed to work her way to the sign-up just before they closed it off.

Hooray.

The limbo uprights were tiki torches painted to resemble bamboo, with bar rests that could be set as low as six inches from the ground. Who could possibly bend that low? Maybe Candy who was as limber as she was graceful.

Matt sighed and lined up with Candy and the other contestants. He kept catching guys checking her out. It was annoying, but he understood. Candy drew the eye. She had a great shape, of course, which the white bikini emphasized, and her dark hair gleamed in the torchlight, but there was more to it. She gave off electricity; she stood out.

He kept picturing her naked. Other guys were doing the same thing, but only he knew exactly what she looked like.

Stop.

Luckily, “Limbo Rock” blared from nearby speakers, signaling the start of the contest. The bar was high enough that most people, including him, moved easily under it. Candy went before him, lightning quick. He managed the next round, but not without effort. Several guys dropped to the sand.

The third round, he watched Candy pass under the bar, following the swell of her thigh muscles to the place where her legs met, the spot he’d touched, the space he’d entered.

Ouch. He was about to stack wood in public.

“How low can you go?” the announcer said.

That low, evidently. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. She confused and overwhelmed him. He preferred his feelings to be simple and rational.

The way they’d been with Jane. She didn’t slip constantly into his awareness, invade every thought, torture every nerve. With Jane, he knew what to expect. Candy would be impossible to predict. Or ignore.

“Matt? Hello?” Candy was calling him. “Your turn?”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” He bent back, inched under the bar, caught sight of Candy’s face and lost all strength in his legs. He hit the sand, kicking up dust.

“You had it. What happened to you?” she said, giving him a hand up.

You. You happened to me. “I don’t know,” he said.

He felt a little better about blowing it when most of the men and half the women were eliminated that round. Before long, Candy was among the dozen contenders left.

Then it got hard. The contestants had to go under the bar backward. It looked like agony. Player after player tumbled to the sand.

When it was Candy’s turn, she inched toward the bar, her features pinched in concentration, hair swinging, her muscles tight, thighs quivering from the strain. She made that round and the next, too, her determination as palpable as the sweat that gleamed on her skin. As with the karaoke contest, the crowd loved her.

In the end she managed third place, beaten by two contortionists who defied gravity.

“You were amazing,” he said, giving her a quick hug. “Let’s go.”

“Not so fast. There’s a couples-only contest. With belly shots.”

“Belly shots?” he said, his heart sinking.

She pointed at the demonstration, where a woman bent back while her partner placed a shot of tequila on her belly. She moved under the bar, he met her on the other side, picked up the shot glass with his teeth and drank it, no hands.

“We’re winning it,” Candy said, leveling her gaze at him. “So no backing out.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” he said, happy they were the last couple in the line for this particular torture. One after another the pairs tried and failed—tipping over the shot glass, bumping the bar or falling flat.

Then it was their turn.

“We’re going to make it, Matt. Don’t worry,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not,” he said, setting the shot glass on her trembling stomach before hurrying around to wait for her to inch her way under the bar toward him.

Her muscles clenched and released as she moved, glistening in the tiki light. The glass jiggled and a few drops of tequila trickled across her stomach. The audience moaned.

Her toes gripped the sand, her body vibrated from the strain, then she steadied herself.

Somehow, inch by inch, she made it beyond the bar. Now he did his part. He lowered his mouth to the shaking shot glass, picking up the scent of her skin, her light sweat and the tang of tequila. He lifted the edge with his teeth, tipped back the ounce of booze and gulped it down.

A cheer went up. Candy bounced up and he caught her against him. “We won! We won!” she shrieked, dancing and jumping like the tiki flames. The announcer handed Candy the trophy, and she held it up, her eyes shining with joy.

Matt wanted to help her celebrate, so he crouched before her and tapped his shoulders. “Climb up.”

She put her legs around his neck, her thighs tight against his ears. He held her securely and stood tall.

She shrieked in pleasure. The crowd bellowed its approval. Alcohol-induced hilarity, no doubt. They’d hardly won the Olympics, but Candy was a wonder and even the drunken festival revelers had picked up on it.

“This is so great,” she said, talking down to him, the trophy in one hand, her other hand under his jaw, holding on.

“Yeah,” he said, looking up at her.

“Hello!”

He looked down to see Jaycee calling to him.

“Congratulations, you two,” she said, glancing up at Candy, then directly at him.

“Thanks,” Candy called down.

“So, anyway, I’m just going to come right out and ask. I know you two work together, but are you together-together?” She twined two fingers.

They both answered at once.

“Not at all,” Candy said.

“Yes, we are,” he said.

Hands on hips, Jaycee looked from one to the other, waiting for a clarification.

“For this week, we’re together,” he said.

“Oh. Well.” She looked disappointed, then shrugged. “Whatever. I guess I’ll see you around.” She walked away, paused to look back, as if to say something else, then shook her head and moved on.

He understood her confusion. Why had he lied? Because he didn’t want Jaycee and it was a painless way to let her down? That made sense, right?

Except there was more to it, he knew. Way more.

Candy thumped his chest with her heels. “Put me down,” she said. She wanted an explanation and he hoped to God she’d buy the one he gave her.

CANDY HOPED TO HELL Matt could fix this. He had to save her from herself. When he’d told Jaycee they were together, she’d felt pure joy.

Joy! The absolute wrong reaction. She had to force it down, like sitting on the lid of a jam-packed suitcase. She had no business wanting Matt to want her.

Now, her heart banged her ribs as hard as her heels thudded Matt’s chest.

Matt crouched down and helped her off his shoulders. She hated to leave, actually. She’d loved being up there with Matt’s hands warm and tight on her thighs, holding her safe.

“Why did you tell her that?” she asked him, her heart thudding in her ears.

“I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.”

“You could beta test Fun Guy with her. Wasn’t she your type?” she asked. How could she not be? Jaycee was every guy’s type.

“Right,” he said, sounding relieved. “She’s not my type.” His eyes darted away.

“Or is it because of Jane? Sure. That makes sense.” Matt was an honorable guy. He wouldn’t two-time his girlfriend. Even if she wasn’t his girlfriend at the moment.

Because if it wasn’t, if Matt had turned down Jaycee because he wanted Candy, then the joy she’d locked away would burst right out of her.

“This trip’s complicated enough already,” Matt said, managing a smile. “Don’t you think?”

“Excellent point,” she said, relieved Matt had eased the tension. She noticed carnival rides—their neon trim decorating the sky—in the distance, where the crowd thickened. “Let’s check out the carnival before the scavenger hunt, huh?” That would be a fun distraction.

“Sounds good.”

She put the limbo trophy inside her straw bag, Matt put his shirt back on, and they started off.

“Hey there…” A blond guy spoke invitingly to Candy as he passed. He turned, walking backward to continue looking at her.

She smiled her thanks-but-no-thanks smile.

Matt stopped walking and turned to her. “If you want to hook up with him, feel free. I can amuse myself.”

“Forget it, Matt.” She laughed.

“This is your vacation. You should do your thing.”

His words hit like a slap. “You think that’s my thing—picking up guys?”

“No. I just meant enjoy yourself, do what you want.”

“I always do,” she said, sounding more stiff than she meant to. It hurt that Matt saw her as a party girl.

On the other hand, why wouldn’t he? She’d jumped into bed with him practically at the first chance she got.

“Stop.” He surprised her by cupping her face and looking straight into her eyes. “I was clumsy. I just mean I don’t want to monopolize your time. If you meet someone, I’ll back off. That’s all I’m saying.”

Her anger melted away. “I’m having a great time with you.” The words came out too intimate and too intense.

“Me, too,” he said, matching her tone. “A great time.” He held her gaze. “Too great, probably.”

“Probably.” Her heart throbbed in her chest and some joy leaked out. Why did he have to be so damned sincere?

She loved being with him, the way he looked after her, smiled at every funny remark, found her so delightful. This was not good. Not good at all.

She hurried forward, so Matt had to lope to catch up with her in the crowded midway. People were clumped around booths related to Sin on the Beach. A photo booth had life-size cardboard stand-ups of the stars, faces cut out, so couples could peek through and be photographed as if they were making love. Long lines snaked around tables where the actors autographed publicity photos and tell-alls.

Candy and Matt pushed past all that to a more open section of the carnival.

“Hey there, young lovers!”

Candy turned to locate the source of the amplified voice.

“Yes! You! White bikini, blue palm-tree shirt. I’m talking to you.” A man wearing a lime-green turban and an eye-popping Hawaiian shirt was waving them over. His twinkling eyes and handlebar moustache made him look like a tall Wizard of Oz.

“Please, you two beautiful people, step this way.” Above him, a painted sign said, “Magellan the All Knowing.”

“I don’t know about this,” Matt muttered to her.

“Let’s see what he’s got to say.” She tugged Matt’s arm, pulling him closer to the small stage.

“Folks, help me encourage this lovely couple,” Magellan called to the passing crowd. “Don’t let them escape their future. I must unravel their mystery.”

A dozen people gathered around the platform and watched Matt help Candy up the steps to stand beside the guy.

“Welcome, welcome,” Magellan said. “Give them a hand.”

The crowd obediently applauded. There was a desultory whistle.

“And your first name?” Magellan held the mic close to Candy.

“Candy,” she said.

“Exactly what I was going to say!” He winked at the crowd, then turned to Matt. “And you, sir? Your name is…hmm. It’s…”

“Matt.”

“Ah. You’re too quick for me.” The crowd laughed at his pretense that he’d been about to guess their names.

“And are you enjoying the festival, Matt and Candy?”

“Until now,” Matt joked.

“Not to worry,” Magellan said with a big laugh. “You’ll be able to live this down…eventually.”

The crowd laughed.

“So, ready to play our game? It’s called Truth or…Bare. A variation of Truth or Dare in honor of this sexy festival we’re part of.”

“That depends on what we have to do,” Candy said.

“Exactly,” Matt added.

“You can trust me,” he said. Something in his tone told her he was more than a carnie clowning for the crowd. And his eyes held a surprising depth.

“We’re listening,” Candy said.

“Good. Excellent.” He rubbed his hands together. “Here’s how it goes. I’m going to call on my spirit guides to reveal a secret about each of you. If I’m wrong, you earn fifty festival points and free tickets for the carnival rides.” He pulled a strip of tickets from a pocket and waved it for the crowd’s benefit.

“And if you’re right?” Matt asked.

“Then it gets interesting. If I’m correct, you remove an item of clothing. A major item. No jewelry or shoes. That’s why we call it Truth or Bare.”

The crowd roared its appreciation.

“So, are you in?” he asked, looking from Matt to Candy.

No way would Candy drop her bikini for a crowd, but she was curious about what Magellan might guess. Matt looked as though he wanted to bolt from the stage. That made her smile. She liked seeing him off-guard. “Why not?” she said.

“Candy,” he said under his breath.

“Relax, Fun Guy. It’ll be fine.” She turned to Magellan. “We’re in,” she said, holding out her hand.

“You’re very brave.” Somberly, Magellan shook her hand.

“Hang on,” Matt said. He whipped off his shirt and put it around Candy’s shoulders. “Now we’re in.”

The crowd booed.

“That’s all well and good, my man. Quite heroic of you. However, if I guess correctly about you, you’ll be in the altogether.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Matt said, crossing his arms over his bare chest. Oooh, he looked good. Candy sighed.

“Suit yourself,” Magellan said. “Or un-suit yourself, as the case may be. What do we think about that, ladies?” He directed the microphone at the crowd, where women shrieked their approval of the possibility of Matt losing his swimsuit.

“You okay with this?” Matt asked her.

“If you are,” she said, impressed by his boldness. Should Magellan stumble onto a real secret, he could deny it, of course. She was sure that not even a double Tsunami for Two could convince Matt to strip in public.

“Now, if I could have a moment of silence while I contact my spirit guides,” Magellan said. The crowd dutifully quieted and the fortune teller made a big show of closing his eyes, placing his fingers to his temples, then putting his palms together at his heart level. Instantly, mystical music swelled around them. He’d tapped a remote, no doubt, or had an assistant backstage.

After a few seconds, Magellan opened his eyes, gave them each a Buddha-worthy smile, put a hand on each of their shoulders and lowered his head again. The music swelled and Candy felt a curious warmth pass through her body, head to toe. Had to be the power of suggestion.

After a bit, Magellan’s head jerked up and the music stopped dead. He leveled his gaze at each of them in turn.

“First, I am prompted to point out that nothing at this festival can compete with what you two have in mind for each other.” He grinned, then turned to the audience, which had grown substantially. “Am I right?”

The crowd hooted its pleasure.

Matt went red under his tan. Candy managed a smile. The guy knew how to work a crowd.

“Now, for my official reading.” Magellan turned to her, meeting her gaze full on. “Here’s what my guides tell me.” He paused. “You, Candy, want something from Matt that you’re afraid to ask for.”

She thought immediately about the promotion, but it could be a million things. The secret to fortune telling was making ambiguous guesses.

“You don’t really want that, by the way,” Magellan added quietly, an odd light in his eye. She felt caught short. “So, am I right?” he said more loudly so the crowd could hear. “Will it be Truth?” Long pause. “Or Bare?”

The crowd roared.

No way could she admit the truth. Matt would want to know what it was. She had no choice but to lie. “Sorry. You are incorrect,” she said.

“Really?” Magellan seemed to read her fib. “Sometimes I’m wrong,” he said, making a big show of giving her a strip of tickets and, from another pocket, a voucher for points. He slanted Candy a last glance, inviting her to confess, then shrugged and turned to Matt. “Let’s see now, Matt.” He paused. “You, Matt, have let Candy believe a falsehood for her own good.” He leaned closer to Matt and whispered, “The truth will set you free, my friend.”

He spoke into the microphone. “So…am I correct? Will you trade in your swimsuit for your birthday suit, Matt?”

There was a moment of silence. Matt swallowed, looking painfully uncomfortable. “Sorry, but you’re wrong,” Matt said in a way that made Candy think he was lying, too. Come on, she scolded herself. No way was Magellan psychic. He was working the crowd, making likely guesses.

“Looks like the spirits are failing me today,” Magellan said. He shook his fist heavenward in mock anger, then hung his head in pretend sorrow.

The audience clapped and shouted while he handed over Matt’s winnings.

Magellan shook their hands, then spoke into the microphone. “I predict a private game of Truth or Bare in your future.” He winked. “Your very near future. Good luck to you both.”

The crowd roared at the sexual implication of his words, but Candy had the feeling that Magellan wished them luck with more than the sex he was assuming they’d have.

Matt helped her off the platform and they walked into the crowd, which moved onward. “That was mortifying,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “You want your shirt?” She started to shrug it off.

“Keep it,” he said, eyeing her body. “It’s safer that way.”

“For you maybe.” She looked at his bare chest, wanting it against her, electricity zinging through her. Matt’s eyes crackled with a matching reaction. Neither of them was safe and they both knew it. Magellan was right. Nothing out here could compare with the pleasure they’d enjoy together.

She watched him, holding her breath.

“Maybe we should call it a night,” he said, as if he’d sensed the danger, too. “Just forget the festival for now.”

“We can’t. I promised Ellie and Sara we’d do the scavenger hunt. We’re strong enough to handle this, aren’t we?”

“I guess we’re going to find out,” he said with a sigh, taking her by the arm and moving forward.

**10**

CANDY SPOTTED THE Hot Shot Scavenger Hunt right away. The stage held three movie screens and was flanked by two huge inflated cell phones marked with the brand name of the sponsoring mobile-phone company.

The emcee announced that the list of Hot Shot photos would appear on the screen and also be available via text message in five minutes. All entry shots had to be sent to the contest’s cell number before midnight. From the teams whose entries met the requirements, the winner would be selected based on the quality of the photos, their originality and how fast they were turned in.

Candy and Matt located Ellie and Sara standing with two men—Bill and Drew, she assumed. Just as they’d finished introducing themselves to each other, a shout rose from the crowd. They looked up to see a list of bulleted items on all three screens.

Candy scanned the list: a guy in pink boxer briefs, a woman in a plain white bra, three women in descending cup sizes—double points if they were topless—naked female backsides with and without tan lines, a male butt cheek with a beauty or birth mark, innie and outie navels, a sexy tattoo, a woman’s thong with something provocative written on it, a Day-Glo condom and more. Twenty items in all. It was dizzying.

“This is worse than I thought,” Matt said, looking at her. “Pink briefs?”

“Okay, quick. Innie or outie?” Ellie asked the group, undaunted by the challenge. In seconds, Drew’s and Sara’s navels had been photographed—he was innie, she was outie—and Candy and her friends had divvied up the rest of the shots.

Matt waited, nervous as hell, Candy could see.

“We got the easy stuff, don’t sweat it,” she told him. The scavenger hunt crowd had dissipated in search of photographic victims, so Candy dragged Matt over to a group of easygoing-looking guys she hoped to convince to be their Three Moons Over Malibu shot.

The guys were happy to oblige. Matt looked stunned while she captured the picture.

Next, she led him to five women drinking from novelty glasses—a clue they were in get-drunk-go-crazy mode. In no time at all, Candy had three of them lined up in cup order—D, C, A.

“Now, when I say flash, lift your tops,” she said.

Matt looked away politely when the girls did as she’d asked, and Candy took their picture.

Afterward, they gave her a cell number so she could send them the photo.

“I can’t believe how easily you talk people out of their clothes,” Matt said, sounding honestly awed.

“What can I say? It’s a gift.”

She sent the shots to Ellie’s and Sara’s phones, saw what they’d snapped, then grinned at Matt. “We’re on target. The rest of our shots are easy. We’ll grab glow-in-the-dark condoms at Walgreens, you’ve got the ass with a beauty mark and I’ve got the sexy thong. Come on.” She took his arm.

“Hold it. I have a beauty mark on my—?”

“Left butt cheek, yes. Didn’t you know? It matches this one.” She tapped the spot on his right cheek.

He touched it, brushing her finger.

“The one on your backside stands out because you’re pale back there. Maybe consider nude sunbathing. Or a tanning bed.”

He lifted his eyebrows. She loved to shock him.

“Come on,” she said, tugging at him.

“Wait a sec.” He stopped dead. “I’m not dropping my pants in public for you to photograph.”

“No problem. We have to go to my place for the thong anyway.”

“Candy, do you realize they’re going to show these photos up there?” He nodded toward the huge screens on stage.

“It’ll be fine. Just your butt and only my underwear. No identifying features. It’s modeling. Come on.”

“I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this,” he said, moving into a trot to keep up with her.

“It’s for a good cause.”

“Good thing you’re not offering swampland. It seems I’m buying whatever you’re selling.”

Once they’d nabbed and photographed a packet of neon condoms and sent the shot to the girls, Candy unlocked the door to the beach house and led Matt inside.

She flipped on the lights, then faced him, cell phone ready. “Okay, show me what you got, big boy.” She was trying for a jokey tone, but her voice shook.

“You said the left cheek?” When she nodded, he turned away, slid his thumb into his trunks and shoved them down, revealing the muscled swell of his gorgeous ass. He looked over his shoulder. “How’s that?”

“Perfect.” It was like some hot Calvin Klein ad and she felt such a rush of arousal she could hardly click the picture. In fact, the first one blurred.

“One more,” she said, holding her breath and stilling her shaking long enough to snap the shot.

She showed it to him. “Like I said. I’m the only one who can tell it’s you.”

“You can tell?” he said gruffly.

“How could I forget how you look naked?” she breathed, swaying closer.

No, no, no. Stick to the goal—get the shots, then go.

“Hold this while I get my thong.” She handed him the phone, then went to paw through her suitcase for the novelty underwear, which she waved at Matt. “I’ll put this on and be right back.”

“I’ll wait,” he said slowly, one hand fisting at his side, the other holding the camera.

The moment that had started out so matter-of-fact was now a rising tide of heat that lifted Candy off her feet. She could see in Matt’s eyes he felt the same.

They were all alone in the house and nearly naked. SyncUp seemed far away. Everything in her was demanding she do something about this before she burst into flames on the spot.

She rushed to the bathroom, slammed the door and leaned on it, her heart in her throat, fighting for air and some trace of good sense, which seemed to have fled the scene.

She had the terrible thought that the near future Magellan had predicted for them was right here, right now.

THIS WAS TOO SURREAL for words. Candy was in the bathroom donning the tiniest strip of fabric known to man so that Matt could take her picture in it. How had he gotten here?

Already, he’d allowed her to photograph his bare ass to be flashed on a huge screen for thousands of strangers.

And he wasn’t sorry. Or not very sorry. Yet.

He wasn’t drunk this time. He’d had wine and sucked a shot of tequila from Candy’s belly, but that had been hours ago. Just in case, he tried standing on one leg and touching his nose. He was sober, all right. No, his problem wasn’t alcohol. It was the wild enzymes that flooded the human brain when it was aroused, ready to fight or flee or ask a girl to marry him.

All because of Candy, that willful whirlwind who had strangers cheerfully whipping off their underwear at her whim.

No wonder he’d ended up here. She was the most charming woman he’d ever met, a ball of energy and fun he wanted to hold on to for dear life.

There was something going on here. Something he didn’t want to miss. He felt himself focus, felt his energy concentrate to a pinpoint of attention. This was his way, he knew, his tendency to push hard toward a goal, not to be deterred until he had what he wanted.

And what he wanted right now was Candy.

Forget SyncUp, forget his good sense, forget his career, his duty. Forget everything but this moment.

Something important was happening to him or at least that’s how it seemed. Before he could close in on whether or not he was delusional, the door opened and there stood Candy.

She seemed to glow, rim-lit somehow. He realized that when he was with her, the world seemed more vivid. He noticed things he usually ignored—the shifting colors of sunset, the grind of sand under his soles, the way the heat of the sun crawled like goose bumps across his shoulders, the blur and shimmer of seaside light and the way her husky laugh lit him up inside.

She wore the white bikini top and, below, a tiny triangle of black cloth with a red X over Marks the Spot in lacy script.

X marks the spot. Yeah. The spot he’d touched last night. He’d held his thumb there and made her moan with pleasure. He wanted to do that again. He wanted to surprise her, please her, make her scream.

Lust surged through him in a wave that threatened to drown him if he didn’t go along for the ride.

“You ready?” she asked, walking closer.

“Oh, yeah,” he breathed. “I’m ready.”

“Your phone?” She smiled tentatively at him, then looked around, spotting her cell phone on the table. “You can use mine.” She handed it to him. “Did you forget why we’re here?” She bit her lip, uncertain.

“Not at all.” He took the phone, but kept watching her, fighting for control, giving restraint one last chance.

“Where do you want me?” she said, her voice shaky.

“Anywhere you want to be.”

She positioned herself with her legs wide, her hands on her hips, most of her body bared to his gaze. “How about here?”

He looked at her through the viewer.

“Can you read the words on the thong? They need to be clear. Maybe take it at eye level?”

“I don’t think you know what you’re asking.” He dropped to his knees, inches away, eye level with the X. His cock jutted outward in his trunks. If she looked down, she’d see.

He realized he wanted her to know what she did to him.

He took the shot, caught up in being so close to her. Her stomach quivered and he picked up her light musk, heady and arousing. He was a strip of cloth away from heaven.

And he was suddenly sick of hell. He’d had it with fighting the flames. Time to put out the fire.

“Enough.” He shut the phone and tossed it to the couch. “Forget the contest and the deal.” He grabbed Candy’s hips and looked up into her face.

Her eyes widened in alarm, but they gleamed too, with the same desire that burned through him.

There were no words now, only actions. He pressed his tongue against her through the fabric.

She quivered against him, sinking down. “What are you doing?”

Making you mine flew through his mind.

“But you can’t…You…oh. Don’t…Oh, yes…”

He nuzzled her, then blew a breath, before moving his tongue up and down over the panties, wet now from his saliva and the juices he could taste, sweet and salty at once.

“We agreeed.” She moaned, grabbing his hair, struggling for balance.

He’d stop if she truly wanted him to. But then she leaned into his mouth and nudged her sex against his lips, asking for more.

Which he was happy to give. He gripped her hips, held her closer, pressed harder with his tongue. She moaned and her thighs trembled against his cheeks.

He wanted the thong gone, so he tugged it down and ran his tongue over her swollen clit hiding beneath soft curls.

She squealed. “Oh, that is so…oh…oh…don’t…ever…stooop.”

He reached behind her and cupped her bottom, angling her so his tongue could reach her opening. He pressed down the way she’d liked his fingers pushing in last night. He was so hard he was blind to anything but this moment, her body, her musk, her sounds. He wanted inside, too, but first this.

He ran his tongue down her length and reached inside.

“Oh, oh, oh.” She rocked against him and he felt the pulse of her need against his tongue. She was swollen, ready to fly with just a bit more—a slide of his tongue, a burst of hot breath. He gave her both.

She stilled and said his name as if he were everything to her. And for this moment, he wanted to be. He pushed his tongue into her as far as he could. She rocked wildly and cried out, caught on the wave of her release. He held her, stayed with her, felt the rhythmic flutter of her spasms.

When she was done, he kissed her hair, then rose to his feet. Holding her with one arm, he used his other hand to rid himself of his trunks.

Reading what he wanted, Candy gave a little jump, then wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck.

He carried her to the closest wall, braced her, opened her and entered her slickness with one hard stroke.

“You feel so good,” she said on a moan.

He thrust up, loving the way she gripped him with her sex and her arms. He cupped her bottom, supporting her as best he could, burying himself deep, never wanting to leave the tight warm space she’d opened to him.

His heart seemed to be pounding a hole in his ribs. He’d become a mindless creature, backing her into a wall to have her. Not civilized, not sensible, completely out of control.

He didn’t care. He had to claim her, make her his.

Their eyes met. Hers glittered with the same frantic need he felt and her breath rasped, as if she fought for air. They were in this together, this crazy place where they were like that tsunami of liquor in each other’s bloodstream—gushing, rushing, sweeping away everything in its path.

His climax approached. He tightened, then paused, letting the feeling build, waiting to see where Candy was.

“Don’t stop…I’m…there,” she said, locking her knees around him. When he thrust again, she said his name and he smiled into her hair.

They shuddered and shook together. Spilling into her, he let go of a tension he hadn’t realized he’d carried. For a blinding second, he felt free, light as air, and he realized he wanted to laugh out loud.

He lifted her away from the wall. She let her arms flop over his back and panted near his ear.

“Where’s your bed?” he murmured to her.

“The foldout,” she gasped. “But let’s borrow one upstairs.”

He turned for the stairs.

“Wait,” she said. “Bend down.”

He did and she scooped up the phone. “I’ve got to send the shots to Ellie and Sara.”

He was amazed she could manage any task at all, but while he carried her to the first bedroom and yanked down the spread, she thumbed away at the phone.

He laid her down on the bed.

“There,” she said on a sigh, extending her arm to the side and letting the phone drop. “I hope we win.”

“Who cares? All I want is you.” He took off her bikini top, cupped her breast and ran his tongue around each nipple while she squirmed under him.

After a few more seconds, she gripped his face and with what seemed like a tremendous effort, lifted him away from her breasts. “What are we doing, Matt?” she moaned.

“I can’t fight this anymore.” He kissed her sweet mouth, hiding from his conscience in the rush of rightness he felt whenever he embraced her.

“I know. I feel the same way, but this is wrong. We have to figure out how it can be right.” She seemed close to tears.

He forced himself to calm down, to think. “Okay. We know the danger. We can’t let this change anything at work. Can you do that, do you think?”

Her eyes flew across his face and he could see her mind working frantically, assessing, deciding. “I think so. This is vacation, right?”

“And I’m not myself, remember? I’m Fun Guy?” It sounded ridiculous, but he’d say anything to keep her naked. “What happens in Malibu…” So lame.

But she didn’t call him on it. In fact, she smiled. “And our deal stays the same. You’ll consider my marketing plan on its merits? Keep this, what we’re doing, separate?”

“Sure. Of course.” He saw the doubt in her eyes. “Let’s add this to the deal. You’re teaching me to be more social.”

“Come on. I’m giving you sex lessons?” She tilted her head, grinning. Good. She was accepting this. Her body softened.

“Please,” she said in a low, teasing voice. “That tongue thing…whew…you’ve earned your PhD.”

“Everyone needs a refresher.” He kissed her deep, letting his tongue explore the soft insides of her mouth. “Be gentle with me.”

She laughed, a throaty chuckle that turned his insides liquid. This woman knew fun in every fiber of her being. He could learn from her. He kissed her neck and ran his fingers across her nipple until she shivered and moaned.

“So, we’re getting it out of our systems?” She seemed to struggle to get out the words, to work out the rationale.

“Completely.”

“And when we get back, everything’s the same.”

“Absolutely.” He knew he’d say yes to anything right now. They’d made it sound simple, but he wasn’t so sure. “This is a unique situation, a phenomenon.”

“What? Like the aurora borealis?”

“Exactly. Like a comet visible only once in a lifetime.”

She laughed. “If you start on the seven wonders of the world, I’m leaving.”

“Whatever gets you in.” He’d made it sound like a joke, but that was truly how he felt.

“I’m in,” she said softly, then slowly rose to straddle him. “And now I want you there. In. Me.”

“Just what I was thinking.” He found his way into her body and it was everything he wanted at the moment. Their being together was like some natural wonder—a startling comet that zipped by so fast you wondered if you’d seen it at all.

**11**

THE NEXT MORNING, CANDY woke early to the sound of Matt breathing in her ear. She smiled, enjoying the warm heaviness of his body overlapping hers. She pressed her nose against his forearm and inhaled deeply of the cozy smell of his skin.

After deciding on their fling, they’d returned to his place and made love over and over. She thought about how Matt had tirelessly tracked her pleasure each time. At midnight, they’d stopped for sustenance—an entire box of HoHos and a quart of Dr. Pepper—then engaged in a pillow fight that collapsed into soft, slow lovemaking. She felt so good with him, so close to him. This had to be okay.

A vacation fling was the perfect solution, wasn’t it?

She fought the part of her that felt weak and defeated, that knew she’d succumbed to her spoiled ways, chosen short-term fun over long-term investment, done what made her feel good, not what was good for her.

Except when she looked over at Matt, she experienced such a rush of happiness she had to believe this was right. She believed in living life fully, seizing experiences, right? This was too intense to pass up.

Matt would still look at her Ledger Lite plan, after all, and she would still teach him networking. And wasn’t this better than returning to SyncUp with lust still throbbing between them?

But what if they didn’t get past it? What if they still wanted each other desperately? What if this changed everything? Her stomach burned at the thought.

They had to finish it here. Had to. She tried to calm herself down with a reality check. Once Matt got back to SyncUp, Fun Guy would disappear. The old Matt had been resistible enough. And, workaholic that he was, Matt would naturally turn his intense focus away from her and back to the job. The flame would be out like a windblown pilot light.

She knew how to prove she was still in control of herself. Today, she would work. They had no festival-event obligations, so she’d go back to the beach house and flesh out the Ledger Lite marketing plan, then invite Matt over to see it. Work, then play. Perfect. Sensible. Proof that the new, more mature Candy was still the boss.

She wiggled out from under Matt without waking him, leaving him a note that promised a call when she was ready for him to see what she’d done.

At the beach house, she tiptoed onto the porch only to find Sara carefully sliding her key in the lock, hair tousled, shoes in hand, wearing an oversize T-shirt, clearly trying to sneak in soundlessly.

Candy motioned her away from the door. “Looks like you had an interesting night,” she whispered, nodding at Sara’s clothes. At the scavenger hunt, Sara had had on the red halter dress Candy had loaned her. “Wasn’t Drew wearing that last night?”

“Yes. It’s his.” Sara blushed, then fumbled in her bag for Candy’s dress, which she held out. “Thanks so much. I’ll have it cleaned for you.”

“No, you won’t. If it helped you end up like that—” she nodded at the shirt, which hit Sara mid-thigh “—it’s worth every crease.” Candy shoved the dress into her bag.

“So what happened?” she whispered.

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

“And I’ve got coffee.”

They whirled to find Ellie in the open doorway holding out two steaming mugs of coffee. “It’s my blend, girls. Come inside and tell me everything. I’ve got warm ruglah, too.”

Candy and Sara took the coffee and followed Ellie into the kitchen, where the cinnamon smell of the pastry mingled with the rich Guatemalan-Columbian blend Ellie favored.

They wiggled onto bar stools and began talking, practically at once. First, they discussed the outcome of the Hot Shot contest. They’d been beaten by a team that Sara had caught faking a birthmark. They agreed to watch out for those guys.

They moved on to how the wet T-shirt photo had resulted in Sara’s putting on Drew’s shirt and wading into the ocean. Sara turned three shades of peach explaining how they got distracted in the water. At length.

Afterward, Candy hugged her. “I’m so proud of you, girl.”

“This isn’t like me at all,” Sara said.

“That’s the point of being here—to be different,” Candy said.

“Speaking of being different,” Ellie said. “It’s your turn. Tell us again about how you and Matt will never be a notch on my matchmaker’s belt.”

“It’s actually quite sensible,” Candy started, breaking out in a sweat, hoping her friends would see the sense of the plan. “We just added sex to our, um, work deal. It’s a vacation affair that won’t change anything. In fact, right now I’m going to work up a marketing plan I promised to show him later.”

“Hold it.” Ellie stared at her. “You and my brother made mad hot love last night and this morning you’re working?” She looked at Sara. “Is she channeling you now?”

“It fits, don’t you see?” Candy continued. “What better way to prove to Matt that I can work as hard as I play?”

Ellie and Sara looked at each other, not buying it one bit.

She had to change the subject. “We told you our stories, El. What about you and Bill? How did you two make out?”

“Exactly,” she said. “We did make out. On the Ferris wheel. It was so…sexy and…romantic…and…I don’t know…”

“That’s all you did? Make out?”

Ellie blushed, something Candy had never seen before—maybe Ellie’s goth makeup hid the color. “Uh-huh…that’s all.” She picked up a spoon and stirred her coffee for a moment. “And who knows what will happen tonight, after the shoot? We’re getting together.”

Candy had never seen Ellie so breathless.

“We want the full scoop later, don’t we, Sara?”

“You’d better hurry up, El. You’re lagging the team,” Sara said. “We’ve both, um, gotten laid.” That expression was so not the ever-polite Sara that Candy laughed out loud. She looked from the sex-fresh Sara to the beaming Ellie. “I love seeing you two like this.” Despite whatever mess she’d gotten into with Matt, being here when her friends spread their sexual wings made the trip worth everything.

Ellie went to get dressed for Sin on the Beach, Sara readied for her surf lesson with Drew—distracted momentarily by a call from her uncle—and Candy got busy on Matt’s computer.

She sketched a draft plan, then called the office to fill in the blanks. She got the research department to send her the data showing that Ledger Lite’s market had maxed out, got verification that their payroll software customers would be a prime market, and found a programmer who thought he could adapt the interface from a math-education product to Ledger Lite Personal.

She even had Freeda e-mail her a copy of the strategic plan so she could see where her product would fit. She found the document endless, complex and dull. Who wrote this shit?

The managers, she realized. As a team leader, she’d be part of creating this damn thing every year. That would not be her favorite part of the job, for sure.

Who could enjoy it? She’d get used to it, though. The managers probably sucked it up and did it. She’d just figure out a way to make it fun.

That was what she brought to the table.

A few minor irritations were nothing compared with the rewards of the promotion. She couldn’t wait to announce it at the family Thanksgiving dinner—when they went around the table and said what they were most grateful for.

After that, no more paternal glances over her head or brotherly sighs behind her back. They’d see she was making progress, sticking with something, not floating aimlessly from job to job. For that moment of glory, she could handle a few meetings and some boring reports.

When she logged into e-mail, she got a reminder beep from her calendar and saw that the women’s business association’s luncheon was tomorrow. It was their awards celebration. Now that was a crowd that would love Ledger Lite Personal.

Which gave her a perfect idea—she’d go to the luncheon and bring Matt for a networking lesson. That would impress him with her networking savvy and her devotion to SyncUp. She stretched her arms up and rubbed her neck and back, tired from sitting so long.

A woof made her look toward the screen door. Matt stood with Radar. “Enough work,” Matt said, coming inside, leaving Radar on the porch.

“Not quite,” she said. “I have a great idea. There’s a business luncheon tomorrow and I want you to come with me and do some networking.”

“We’re on vacation, Candy.” He came to stand behind her and nuzzle her neck. Goose bumps shot down her arm. The dog whined outside. “I had ten messages on my cell from work. Guess what I’m doing about that?”

She turned to him for his answer.

“Not a thing.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“I don’t care.” He leaned down to kiss her. “Forget work. Forget luncheons. I want you in bed.”

His urgency sent hot fire zooming through her. “First, promise you’ll come to the lunch tomorrow.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” He ran his thumbs across her nipples through her top, making her shiver.

“Do you want to see what I’ve got so far?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, but he wasn’t talking about Ledger Lite’s marketing plan. He kissed down her neck, running his tongue across a tendon in a way that melted her to butter. “Show me what you’ve got.” He lifted her out of her chair.

She loved it and wanted to dissolve into his arms, but she had to stick to her plan. Somehow. “I had a thought about building Paycheck Plus sales, too,” she said, knowing she’d never get him to look at the computer.

“Hmmm?” He seemed to struggle to focus.

“We need to boost word-of-mouth with a wow moment.”

“Okay…” He stopped kissing her, but his mouth was dangerously close.

“The software is so great, so easy to use, that users take it for granted,” she said, gaining enthusiasm as she spoke. “It needs a whiz-bang hook for users to buzz about.”

“Sure,” he said, running his hands down her arms, reaching around to grasp her bottom.

“That’s the incredible thing. It has a whiz-bang hook. Gina told me about a tickler alarm that no one uses because it’s buried in the manual.”

“Yeah?” He stopped moving his fingers.

“When they find it, people love it. It’s a little complex, but if we set up a podcast for key contacts and show them the steps, they’ll talk it up for us.” Noticing his dreamy expression, she stopped. “Are you even listening?”

“Sure. I’m listening…and watching your lips…and kissing you.” He kissed her, slow and steady. “And thinking about making love to you. Multitasking.” He pulled her close and pressed himself against her, stoking the heat building inside her.

“You’re catching on,” she breathed, kissing him back. She’d accomplished enough to take a break, right? “So what do you think of my idea about the podcast?”

“It’s great. All your ideas are great,” he murmured.

“I have another one,” she said, breaking away long enough to lock the door for privacy, though Ellie and Sara would be out for hours. The dog, meanwhile, had given up on them.

Returning to where Matt stood, Candy sat on the sofa and pulled him close, running her palm along his erection through his trunks.

Matt took a rough breath.

She slid his suit down to his ankles and grasped his cock.

“Like I said,” Matt breathed, “I like all your ideas.”

She gave him a long, slow lick before closing her lips around the head of his cock, taking him deep into her mouth.

“Ah, Candy.” The reverent whisper turned her on. He was warm and tasted of salt and man and she loved the way he put his hands to her face as she worked over him.

She relaxed her throat and sucked him deeper until he groaned in pleasurable agony.

He stroked her hair, while she sucked and tugged, cupping his balls in one hand, using her other to grip his shaft low and tight.

In a few moments, he stilled, ready to come. She gave a last pull, her lips tight, her fingers squeezing low, inviting him to spurt into her mouth.

She swallowed his warm fluid, then looked up at him.

His face was so full of feeling, she was startled. It was more than pleasure. It was connection, closeness, a new intimacy that she realized she felt, too.

Matt helped her up and into his arms and he kissed her softly, holding her close, telling her with his arms and lips how much she meant to him.

Together, they unfolded the couch to reveal the bed, then stripped each other until they lay face-to-face. Matt ran a hand down the side of her body, then found where she ached and stroked her until she was moaning and sliding against his fingers.

He entered her then and her body stretched to take him in, eager for each thrust and slide. Together they climbed toward the peak, each stroke bringing them closer and closer. She never wanted this to be over.

Her orgasm pushed through her in a hot, hard wave. Matt surged into her, her name on his lips. She collapsed against him, feeling his heart pound against her chest.

This was so nice. Heaven.

But even heaven got old, right?

After they recovered, Matt suggested they go for a swim.

“I’ll get my suit,” she said, pushing out of the bed to bend over her suitcase.

Matt stood behind her, looking on. “Wear the white one,” he said, cupping her backside possessively, running his tongue along her ear. “It looks good against your skin. And those strings make you easy to get to.” He ran his fingers down her slit, making her feel faint.

Somehow, they both managed to put their suits on and head out. They found Radar on the beach, as if he was waiting for them, and played with him for a while, enjoying the breeze, the waves, the seagulls’ calls, the warm sun.

Then they swam, beyond nearly everyone. Candy felt so strong, she thought she could swim to the next beach town. They stopped at the reef where they’d stood that first night. Matt dived down.

She felt a tug on both sides of her suit bottom, then it was gone, and Matt rose with it in his teeth.

“Matt!” She looked around, hoping no one could see.

He took it out of his mouth. “You’re safe. I checked.” Then he found her with his fingers. “Mmm. How’s that?”

“Lovely,” she said, practically losing feeling in her legs.

“No shrieking, now, or a lifeguard might try to save you.”

“I don’t want to be saved,” she said. “Ever.” Pleasure built in waves like the ocean that passed by them, lifting, then setting them down again together.

When her climax hit, Candy put her mouth on Matt’s shoulder to muffle her cry and clung to him, wrapping her legs around his body, so happy to be with him like this.

“That was nice,” he said, kissing her, cuddling her close. “How about some sun?” They returned to shore and found a sheltered area too rocky for swimmers, where they spread their big, blue-striped towels between protective boulders.

Matt fished the sunscreen from her bag and massaged the warm liquid into her back and legs.

When it was her turn, she worked the cream into his back and, when he turned over, his chest and thighs, aware that his erection was mere inches from her fingers.

So tempting.

Checking to be sure no one could see them, she slid her fingers into his trunks and stroked him.

He turned lowered eyes her way. “You’ll get us arrested,” he said lazily.

“Not if you’re quiet,” she said.

“I’ll do my best.” His face tightened with the pleasure of what she was doing to him.

She rubbed him in earnest, leaning over him to hide her movements. His eyes glittered with pleasure and he watched her as she slid her fingers up and down, over and over, feeling him tighten and tense. When he reached climax, she shifted the towel to catch his release.

“That was great,” he said, pulling her onto his body.

“Can you believe we’re doing this?” She rested her chin on a fist on his chest, watching his face. The sun warmed her back, the rhythmic crash of the waves soothed her. Distant shouts and laughter were delicious punctuation to the moment.

“It seems like a dream.” He ran his fingers through her hair.

“I know. Unreal.”

“I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“You mean had sex on the beach?” She grinned.

“That either,” he said. “I’ve never been so caught up with anyone.”

Not with Jane? But she wouldn’t ask, didn’t want to remember the other woman in his life or what she might think about their vacation fling.

“How about you?” Matt asked. “Have there been any serious guys in your life?” He ran his fingers along her cheek.

“Serious ones? Never.” She joked away the question, but she could feel Matt wanted a real answer.

“You know what I mean. Boyfriends.”

“On a short-term basis, sure. Nothing too major.” She thought about the one time she’d been hurt. “Except there was one guy in college. Brad. We had a thing for a couple of years. We ended up friends though.”

“What happened?”

“We were on and off a lot, and eventually…You know how it goes.”

“No, I don’t. How did it go?”

“He wanted to get married and I…didn’t.” Not exactly. It had been late in their senior year and they’d agreed to take another break from each other. Three weeks later, Brad was engaged to a business major he’d had classes with.

Candy had been surprisingly hurt. She hadn’t wanted marriage, but if she’d known he did, she’d have at least moved in with him. They were alike—both with wild streaks—and they’d had a lot of fun together. In the end, she’d swallowed her pride and actually asked him, Why not me?

Brad had been mystified, almost laughed. You don’t want that, he’d said. Marriage isn’t you.

He was more or less right, but it hurt that he hadn’t considered her marriage material, had simply written her off. It made her feel limited by her reputation, trapped by it.

Years later, she’d decided the problem was that she was spoiled. She wanted it all—even if it didn’t suit her.

“That happens,” Matt said, reading something in her face. Did she look hurt? God she hoped she was over that. “For it to work, you have to want the same thing, have compatible goals. Once you get past the heat and settle into a routine, I mean.”

“Why would you want to get past the heat?” she said. “And who wants routine? Talk about killing the joy.”

“There’s joy in the familiar,” he said. “What’s life, if not the day-to-day moments?”

“But that’s boring. You have to shake things up, keep each other guessing.”

“I’m not surprised you’d say that. You remind me of a girlfriend I had.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. She liked to shake things up, too. As a matter of fact, she was into roller coasters.”

“I can relate.”

“You would have liked her,” he mused.

“What happened?”

“She shook things up.” He gave a wry smile. “She warned me, though. She called it emotional ADD. Of course, I thought I could fix her. I couldn’t.”

“You were young.”

“Yeah.” He gave a soft laugh. “So, you think you’ll ever settle down?” He asked as though it would be a long shot, which gave her that locked-in feeling, that sense she was trapped by what other people thought about her.

“Sure. Why not? When the time is right.”

“And the guy. He’d have to be the right guy—someone into Silly String and karaoke and the limbo. Someone who’ll keep you guessing.”

“You got it,” she said, knowing that proved how wrong they were for each other, not that it mattered. That wasn’t even on the table. She rolled off him and braced herself with her elbows.

He did the same, so they were lying side by side, looking out to sea.

“Speaking of shaking things up,” he said slowly, staring at something in the sky. He pointed toward a bright spot of color. “I know what we’re doing next.”

She realized it was a parasail. Two people dangled there, miles high, dots with legs against the blue sky, the boat far, far below. Candy’s heart lurched and she felt the swirling vertigo she got whenever she found herself on a balcony.

“You want us to parasail?” she asked, her mouth dry.

“Have you done it before? I never have.”

“No, no. I haven’t. Um, not yet.” She swallowed over a suddenly tight throat, not wanting to admit her fear.

“Then it’s perfect. Something new we can do together.” He got to his feet and reached for her hand. He seemed excited he’d found a way to shake things up.

He had no idea.

She pushed past the quiver in her stomach, the constriction in her chest, how dizzy she felt and said, “I can’t wait.”

Maybe it wouldn’t be as scary as it looked.

MATT PAID THE SPEEDBOAT owner for a tandem parasail ride and before long they were putting on yellow life jackets while the boat zoomed out into the ocean. He grinned at Candy, delighted he’d found some thrill she’d not yet had. Then he noticed her fingers were shaking as she clicked the clasps.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I just can’t get this.” She fumbled the bottom latch, so he clicked it into place for her. Her smile was tentative and her face pale.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling sick?”

“I guess lunch didn’t sit well in my stomach.”

“Do you want to cancel? We can come back tomorrow.”

“No. We’re here. It’ll be great. Once we get…up there.” She forced a look that was as determined as her voice was weak.

Before he could pursue the contradiction, one of the crew called them to climb into the side-by-side harnesses that reminded him of a toddler’s playground swing.

Matt put his hand around Candy’s on her upright line, surprised to find she had the rope in a death grip. Her body was trembling, too. “Are you cold?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Just excited.”

No, he realized abruptly. She was scared. How had he not noticed? “Candy, if you’re nervous, we can quit right now.”

“No! I’m a little jumpy about heights is all. I’ll be fine once we get moving.” She swallowed hard and forced a shaky smile. “This is an adventure.”

“We’ll do something else that doesn’t upset you.” He leaned forward to call to the crew.

“Don’t you dare!” Candy said fiercely. She leveled her gaze at him. “I want to try this. We’re going up. It’s an adventure.”

The guy asked if they were ready.

Candy shot him a thumbs-up and before Matt could intervene, the crewman released the winch and let out the tether. Slowly, Matt and Candy rose, up and away from the boat. It was an incredible sensation. He felt weightless and free, but he kept his gaze glued to Candy, whose eyes were shut tight.

His heart lurched. He should have stopped this. Forget her pride. No way would he allow her to be terrorized on his whim.

He was about to signal the crew to pull them in when she opened her eyes and smiled cautiously. “This is…nice.” She looked gingerly around, then glanced down. That made her gasp and squeeze her eyes shut again.

“Candy, let’s quit. You got up here. You proved yourself. You can say you’ve parasailed.”

“No,” she said, eyes tight, pale as milk beneath the pink of her sunburn. “Baby steps is how they fix phobias. I’m working through it. I just won’t look down. Right away, anyway.”

The woman was being her own therapist. “You’re amazing, you know that.”

“I’m just me,” she said, steadying her gaze on him. The wind blew her hair away from her sweet face. She looked scared and brave, vulnerable and fierce all at once and emotion built inside him.

He watched her build up her courage, keeping her eyes open for a few more seconds each time. Before long, she let out a huge yell of triumph. “Yeah! I did it!” She released her rope long enough to squeeze his hand. “This is great. Thanks, Matt.” She smiled, her eyes bright, her voice warm with gratitude.

Looking at her like this, radiant with courage and triumph, Matt’s heart flipped over in his chest.

“What?” she asked him. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he said, but that wasn’t true. Something was up, all right. Two-hundred feet in the air, he’d fallen for Candy.

Which was insane. And impossible. Even if they didn’t work together, which was trouble enough, Matt had no interest in the emotional roller coaster that Candy would consider normal. He liked things calm and stable. She liked to shake things up. They were apples and oranges, oil and water, as she’d said. And all the lighter fluid in the world wouldn’t change that.

Still, as he watched Candy laugh, head thrown back, reveling in the moment, love billowed inside him, taut and broad as the parasail that held them aloft, as if it planned to keep him in the air forever.

He knew then that it was too late for good sense, for willpower, for turning back. He was in love with Candy and now he had to figure out what to do about it.

**12**

CANDY LOOKED OUT across the sky, careful not to look down, thrilled to be floating on air, surrounded by blue, blue sky. She’d not only conquered her fear, but found a new thrill—parasailing. It was fantastic…electrifying…She felt so alive. And so grateful to Matt for giving her this gift.

“I love this,” she said, looking right at him. And I love you.

Uh-oh. Bad idea. Just an overflow of her delight, right? Except Matt looked at her so warmly, it was as though she’d actually said the words and he’d said them back to her.

That was scary. She felt dizzy and faint, the way she’d expected to feel floating so far above the water, but didn’t. Not anymore. She’d gotten used to it. Could she get used to these feelings for Matt?

She became suddenly aware that they’d stopped moving forward and had begun to drop in altitude. “What’s happening?” she said. “Are we going down?”

“It has to end sometime,” he said softly and she knew he wasn’t talking just about the parasail ride.

“Too bad.”

“Nothing lasts forever.”

“If it did, we’d be bored or burned out.”

“Probably.” He sighed.

“We’ll make the most of every minute,” she said, determined to do just that.

The parasail crew seemed to sense their need to hang on to the experience, because they gave them an extra bit of time to dangle their feet in the water before they hauled them onto the boat, ending the trip.

They smiled at each other and tried to act as if nothing had changed. But it had, all right, and Candy could tell the end of their affair would not be as easy or simple as they’d made it sound last night.

“A BUSINESS LUNCH? And you’re taking Matt?” Sara stared at Candy, as she tugged the drugstore panty hose under the single cocktail dress she’d brought on the trip. She’d borrowed a linen blazer from Sara to give the outfit some business flair.

“It’s perfect. Matt gets another networking lesson, I talk up Ledger Lite Personal with possible clients and impress him even more with my professionalism.” Plus, it would be a taste of being in the work world again, a chance to test their ability to keep work and play separate.

After the parasailing, they’d managed to get back more or less to how they’d been—making love for hours, laughing and talking as if nothing had changed.

Still, Candy knew she was in a fog. The mere thought of Matt started her heart banging in her chest. The luncheon, she hoped, would put things in perspective.

She pulled on the blazer and checked herself in the mirror. Perfect. On the surface, she looked serious and sober and all business. Inside, she was squishy and soft and woozy with tenderness for Matt. She hoped her outside would rub off on her inside and not the reverse.

Ellie floated down the stairs, dressed in her new, softer clothes. Since she’d slept with Bill, she’d become positively dreamy. “What’s happening?” she asked when she reached her friends.

“Candy’s going to a business luncheon with Matt,” Sara answered. “Welcome to the bizarro world. Candy’s working all the time and all I can think of is playing with Drew.”

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Ellie said wistfully. “Everything worked out. You and Drew. Me and Bill. Candy and Matt.” She sighed.

“It is great,” Sara breathed. “Drew and I really connected. He truly understands me.”

“I feel that way, too, with Bill,” Ellie said.

Candy smiled at her dazed and confused friends. She hoped they wouldn’t get hurt. It’s not that she was cynical, just practical. She had to stay clear-eyed about her own situation as well. “It’s not like that with me and Matt.” She tugged the blazer hem, straightening out the creases.

“Oh, no. Not at all,” Ellie said, wearing her know-it-all grin. “With you and Matt, it’s strictly business.”

“I’m serious, Ellie. Really. Besides, as soon as Jane sees the new Matt, she’ll want him back. I know it.”

“But that’s over. He doesn’t want her anymore,” Ellie said. “That’s obvious.”

“He might not say it out loud…I’m sure he doesn’t want to get his hopes up.” Matt was too polite to talk about Jane with her. Candy tried not to feel too guilty about them being together.

“I don’t think either of you knows yourself as well as you think you do.” Ellie adjusted Candy’s blazer collar, which was inside out.

Candy hadn’t noticed. Her vision did seem a bit foggy today. “The point is that we can’t continue this when we get back. Think of it. How could Matt name me a team leader if we were sleeping together? Think how bad that would look.”

“Things work out,” Ellie said. “A friend of mine slept with her business partner for years before they told their employees and it was no big deal. Everyone knew and no one cared.”

“At SyncUp, people would care. Trust me.” Her reputation was already shaky enough there. An affair with her boss would look really, really bad. Not to mention how it would reflect on Matt.

“One of you could leave. Matt’s moved around before. And don’t you want your own agency anyway?”

“In five years, sure.” She knew several PR and ad people who had spun off from in-house work with big firms to become consultants, with their former employers as their biggest accounts. “When I have enough experience. I’m not leaving SyncUp yet. That would be way too flaky.”

“Starting your own agency is not flaky,” Sara said. “You’d be your own boss, depending on yourself for your income. You’d love that, Candy. I think you’d shine.”

“I know what I want. I have a plan.”

“Just keep an open mind, that’s all we’re saying,” Ellie said. “Now, come on…group hug!” Ellie muscled them together for an embrace, which Candy enjoyed, letting the close feeling soak in. She needed support for the afternoon ahead.

Maybe the team-leader issue would come up in a natural way, assuming they managed to stay in business mode, and they could talk about Candy becoming one.

“I’ve got to go,” she said, breaking away reluctantly.

“Wait,” Sara said. “Let’s see where we stand on points before you leave.” Sara fetched the chart she’d printed out and held it out for them to look at. “Our biggest competition is that team from Santa Monica, those cheaters. We have to outwit them somehow.”

They went over upcoming events, including several at the Sin on the Beach party that night that she and Matt had agreed to participate in. When they were finished, Candy grabbed her purse and turned back to her friends. “Do I look businesslike enough?”

“Oh, definitely,” Sara said.

“You look like a woman in love,” Ellie said.

Candy opened her mouth to object, but Sara held up a hand. “She’s not going to let it go, Candy. Just accept it.”

“I guess so.” Candy slid to the mirror in the entryway just to check. She looked…funny. Her face had too much color, even for the sunburn she’d accumulated, and her eyes were too bright. She looked like she had a fever.

Or like a woman in love.

“Hi, there.” Matt stood on the other side of the screen door and her heart surged at the sight of him.

“Hi,” she said.

“You look incredible,” he said softly.

“Thank you,” she said, so happy to have his eyes on her in that intense way Matt had.

“You ready to go?”

She nodded. “See you guys!” she called to her friends.

“Hold it!” Ellie said. “We have to see how Matt looks.”

“God,” Matt said, rolling his eyes. “Is there any point in refusing?”

“You know Ellie.”

“I do.” He sighed.

“Ready for the catwalk?” she asked.

“With you by my side, I can handle it.” He grinned and extended his arm for her to grab. They were comrades in the coming ordeal and she loved that feeling. No matter what happened, they would be friends from here on. No more awkward tension about the Thong Incident, no more blushing and stammering when they ran into each other at Dark Gothic Roast.

They were friends now. Surely that made it worthwhile.

“Do a turn,” Ellie commanded Matt.

“Lord,” he said, looking sheepish under the scrutiny of three sets of female eyes. He took a slow turn in the summer weight Joseph Abboud suit that emphasized his height and build.

“What do you think?” Candy said, running her finger along the lapel. “I was going for a look that’s traditional, but still trendy. We bought him a blazer, too, so he can mix it up.”

“Aren’t we about to be late?” Matt asked, shooting his cuff to check his watch.

“The shirt is gorgeous,” Ellie said. “And I love the tie.”

“I know,” Candy said. The shirt was a dense cotton in antique white, the tie a high-end gray-blue stripe, restrained and elegant.

“And the haircut…” Ellie sighed. “Looks fabulous.” She fingered his hair. “You could use some gel, I think.”

“Forget the gel,” Matt said, moving away. “Enough with the fashion show. Let’s go.” He took Candy by the elbow and led her out the door. She wiggled her fingers good-bye at her friends. “Wish us luck,” she said. She had a feeling she’d need it.

An hour’s drive later, they found the luncheon ballroom festive with flowers in honor of the theme—Planting the Seeds of Women’s Leadership. Each seat held a small terra-cotta pot with a packet of seeds.

After they’d filled out name tags, Matt started toward the ballroom, no doubt to find a seat.

“Hang on. This is prime networking time.” She caught his arm. “Let’s talk strategy.”

“There’s a strategy?”

“Absolutely. Don’t forget our card-gathering contest. Before we settle on a table, we circulate and collect cards. You go that way, I’ll go the other and we’ll meet in the middle. Then we’ll sit with the strongest leads—where a longer conversation might net sales.”

“Ah. I see. There is a strategy.” He smiled at her, then surveyed the crowd of mostly women. “Looks like I’m seriously outnumbered.”

“Use that to your advantage,” she said, pressing his arm for emphasis. “You look very hot.”

“You’re suggesting I work it?” He raised a brow.

“If it makes a sale for SyncUp.”

“I didn’t realize you were so mercenary, Calder.” He looked her over. “A hot mercenary, at least. Since you agreed to go to the convention with me, what’s the winner of our little contest earn, anyway?”

“We should decide that, huh? Hmm. How about we do what Magellan suggested—have our own game of Truth or Bare? The winner asks a question the loser must answer.” She would ask about the marketing teams. Perfect. Her heart raced.

Matt leaned down to talk near her ear. “Forget the Truth. Let’s just go for Bare. That way we both win.”

She trembled in response, aware that no matter how business-focused she managed to be, Matt could fell her with a word. The smell of him made her knees buckle and his kiss melted her bones altogether.

“Go get cards,” she said, gently pushing him away from her. She moved in the opposite direction and paused at a group of women, determined to do her job.

Every time she looked up, though, Matt caught her eye, and it gave her such a rush. It was as if the ballroom smeared into the background so that all she saw was him. She ached to be alone with him again. They had something better to do than any one of the three-hundred people in this huge ballroom. It was their sweet secret.

Before long, they’d managed to work their way back to each other. Matt smiled at her as if to say, at last.

“How’d you do?” she asked him.

He fanned business cards like a poker hand, showing them to her in a way no one else would notice.

“Excellent,” she said, then turned to introduce him to the women she’d been chatting with. “I’ve been talking about Ledger Lite Personal, Matt. Sylvia thinks it would be a great idea.”

Matt turned to Sylvia. “I’m glad to hear that…” Candy was pleased to see him use the techniques she’d taught him while he talked with the woman about her needs as a real-estate broker.

All of a sudden, Candy was being yanked into the perfumed arms of a woman who was hugging her. “Candy Calder, am I glad to see you.”

She pulled back and recognized Claudia Stern, a woman who owned a mail-order infant-wear company. Candy had met her at a luncheon months ago. “You still with that computer firm, are you?” The woman hardly paused when Candy nodded. “Because I was wondering if you could squeeze in some freelance work. A bunch of us start-ups want to pool our cash and buy some ads and such. We’re all knees and elbows and where-whichever about it, and I bragged I knew people and here you are—people!”

“I wish I could help, Claudia, but SyncUp keeps me pretty busy. I’m not doing any freelance work.”

“Well, damn. That’s a drag. Could you refer us to someone? Could you do that for us?”

“I’d be happy to. I’m sure I can suggest someone.” They exchanged cards and Claudia pointed Candy’s SyncUp card at her. “You call me now. I’m counting on you! We all are!”

“Did that woman just try to poach you from us?” Matt asked.

“I’m happy where I am,” she said, then hesitated, realizing this was the perfect lead-in. “But now that you mention it, I did want to talk to you about ways I could be most useful to SyncUp. I’m ready for a new challenge and I was thinking that—”

“Matt? Is that you?”

They both turned to find a tall, sleek blonde smiling in surprised delight at Matt.

“Jane?” Matt said. “What are you doing here?”

This was Matt’s Jane? She reminded Candy of the young Kathleen Turner. In a tailored pin-striped suit, pink silk blouse and subtle jewelry, with her hair in a soft braided twist, she was the picture of classic elegance.

“More importantly, Matt, what are you doing here? This is a women’s luncheon,” Jane said, in the same whiskey voice Turner was known for. The woman was direct and sexy as hell.

Matt turned to Candy, then to Jane, flummoxed about what to say, she could tell. “Jane Roston, I’d like you to meet a colleague of mine, Candy Calder, who brought me here.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jane said, but her gaze returned immediately to Matt. “You look great, Matt. All tanned. Great suit. Good haircut and…contacts? Are you wearing lenses?”

“Candy helped me update my look.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrows went up and she looked Candy over, trying to figure out what was what.

“For work, of course,” Candy said quickly. If Jane knew about the vacation fling, it might wreck the reconciliation, which Candy was counting on. That and the return of Serious Matt when they got back to L.A. The idea of getting this out of their system before the vacation ended had begun to seem impossible.

“Scott wants me to get better at networking and Candy’s great at it, so she thought this luncheon would be a good place to work on my skills.” He gave a short laugh.

“I see. That makes sense, I guess.” She looked him over, a little puzzled. “So where’d the tan come from?”

“That. Oh. I’m at the beach. It was use it or lose it on my vacation days, so Ellie got me a place in Malibu.”

“Me, too,” Candy jumped in, then realized how that sounded. “Ellie’s a friend and she and I and another friend are in a beach house, too. Except I’m working, too. And by coincidence, so was Matt, so it was natural for us to get together. To work. Together.” Shut up, Candy. Shut up.

“Sure,” Jane said slowly. “I guess.”

Candy’s stomach churned. Silence swelled while they all avoided each other’s eyes. Her supposedly expert social skills seemed to have evaporated completely.

“What about you?” Matt asked Jane, finally saving them. “Why are you here?”

“Me? Oh. Our firm’s being honored.” She spoke slowly, as if still distracted by what was going on between Candy and Matt. “We did pro bono incorporations for some businesses and the partners needed a female to accept the plaque. I drew the short straw.” She seemed to catch herself. “Not that this isn’t a wonderful organization or anything, just that I’m swamped.” She laughed, shaking her head, eyes wide, as if her work was stacked a mile high, but she loved it.

“As always, eh?” Matt smiled. “Jane’s very dedicated.”

“And what about you?” she said, pretending to be wounded. “You’re at a business lunch in the middle of your vacation!”

This was a hot button for the couple, so Candy wanted to help. “But I had to drag Matt here. He’s been in party mode for the entire trip.”

“Party mode? Matt?” Jane tilted her head, quirking an eyebrow at him. “How have you been partying exactly?”

“Oh, with this and that,” Matt said, clearing his throat, glancing at Candy.

“What hasn’t he done? Karaoke…a limbo contest…beach volleyball…parasailing. I’ve been trying to get him to work with me on a project, but the man won’t stop playing.”

“Karaoke?” Jane’s eyes widened. “You sang in public? I can’t imagine.” She laughed and leaned into him.

“Neither could I, but there was alcohol involved.”

“That explains it. So what did you sing?”

“Something from Grease.”

“You’re the One that I Want.” Candy remembered how fun it had been to sing with him, almost magical, and how the kiss had made it seem they’d meant every word of that song.

“A musical? I can’t imagine,” Jane said. “I’d give anything to have seen that. Just the thought makes me smile.”

Matt laughed and Jane joined in, their bodies turned close.

“I’m sorry now I never asked you to take that ballroom dance class.” She gave him a look of warm affection. “Tell you what. You can make it up to me by coming with me to a bar association dinner I have to attend. New-officer installation. I’ll even rent your tux.”

“I don’t know, Jane.” Matt looked completely flustered.

“I know it’s tedious, but you’d be helping me out and you can tell me all about your fun vacation. Come on. You’ll wow everyone.” She looked him over appreciatively, then turned to Candy. “Good job on the new look.”

“Thanks. Since Matt’s a new VP, I thought he needed some…some…”

“Verve,” Matt filled in for her.

“Verve?” Jane said. “My my, Matt. You have changed.” She softened suddenly. “Anyway, you look wonderful. I love the contacts. I always said you had great eyes. Doesn’t he have great eyes?” she asked Candy.

“Like Greg Kinnear,” Candy said. “Or Kiefer Sutherland or…I mean…because his eyes are a strong feature, they needed emphasis.” Her words went soft at the end. This conversation made her really uncomfortable.

“So here we are together at the same luncheon,” Jane said, giving Matt a meaningful look. “It’s a small world, huh?”

“Evidently,” Matt said.

“Very small,” Jane said, holding his gaze.

Candy had to get out of here and fast. She was definitely feeling like a third wheel on this bicycle. “I’ll let you two catch up,” she said. “Looks like they’re seating people.” She started away toward the tables.

“We can all sit together,” Matt called to her.

“No, no. I’m fine.” She grinned inanely, her heart a ball of agony in her chest. They looked so good standing there together. Jane was tall enough to look Matt eye-to-eye, whereas Candy was way too short for him.

Of course that wasn’t what mattered in a couple—whether or not their heights matched. What mattered was what they had in common, which, for Matt and Jane, was just about everything, she’d bet. Candy could picture them Sunday mornings, laptops side-by-side, catching up on e-mail on their pillow-lush canopy bed in some fabulous suburban Mc Mansion.

Not that she had anything against big houses or fancy beds. Her brothers and parents were well-off and she wanted that, too. She was being childishly jealous, mostly of the familiarity between Matt and Jane—the shared jokes, the old teases, the long history, the affection.

She wanted that. A history with someone. Spending all this time with Matt had showed her that. She vowed right now to find some fun-loving guy who wanted to settle in with her in a way that was comfortable, but still lively. Stable, but full of surprises. Someone she could count on, someone strong enough to handle the occasional shakeup. Yeah.

She took a seat at a faraway table full of chatting women, but she couldn’t help glancing at Matt and Jane, engrossed in conversation, laughing together, leaning in to each other.

This was excellent in the long run. Really. An extra bonus. Her makeover had been so successful that Matt’s ex-girlfriend wanted him back. Candy was good. Just as Matt had said.

She swallowed down her envy, ignored the hollow feeling inside and introduced herself to the woman next to her. She would talk about Ledger Lite Personal, dammit. She could work as hard as she played. Even when her heart was a fist-sized lump rattling in her empty, aching chest. No way would she lock herself into a stall in the ladies’ room and bawl her eyes out.

MATT HELD JANE’S CHAIR for her, but he kept his eye on Candy, who seemed to be doing fine. She’d said something to make the woman next to her laugh. Two other women were leaning across the table to get in on the fun, too. She was okay.

Candy could handle herself. She’d smoothed over his fumbling remarks when they ran into Jane, making what they were doing sound perfectly reasonable, then left him with Jane. She probably saw it as a good deed.

She’d left emotionally, too. Slipped away, quick as a darting fish he couldn’t quite catch, no matter how close it seemed or how tight his fingers gripped it. A shiver and it zipped out of reach.

“You can sit now, Matt,” Jane said, smiling back at him where he stood watching Candy.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” he said, then sat beside her.

Jane had accepted the idea of him and Candy working together on vacation. Hell, she’d asked him to dinner right in front of Candy.

In fact, Candy, no doubt, believed they were getting back together this very moment. If he wanted to end the affair with her, this would do the trick. He remembered what Magellan had said, that he’d let Candy believe a falsehood for her own good. Here was his chance to make the lie stick.

Except what had Mr. All Knowing added? The truth shall set you free. Maybe so. He certainly had no interest in lying. Not to Candy. Not to Jane. And not to himself.

Their table mates were all talking and Jane bent close, speaking intimately to him. “I like the new you, Matt. A lot.”

“So I guess I no longer need fun to throw me a surprise party?”

Jane grimaced. “That was out of line, I know. If it makes you feel better, my therapist suggested I apologize. I am sorry, Matt. I blamed you for my own frustration, my own ennui. I made you the symbol of my being stuck.”

He fought the urge to roll his eyes at the psychobabble. “You had a point, though. I have been working too hard. This vacation has opened my eyes.”

“That’s good. Very good.” She studied him. “Sometimes a breather is all people need. A fresh perspective.” She held his gaze, offering him another chance.

They could go back to how they’d been—carefully planned weekend excursions, evenings that didn’t interfere with work. Sex in its place. Sex with Jane had been perfectly fine.

But it hadn’t been wild or unpredictable or overwhelming. It hadn’t left him breathless and aching, as with Candy.

It also wouldn’t leave him heartbroken, angry and devastated, which, he’d bet, was how things would end with Candy.

Jane shared his values. She fit his formula. She would be a fine life companion, a comfortable habit.

But love was more than a routine you got into. Candy was right about that. She’d made him want more.

The debate was irrelevant, really. If Jane had been the most scintillating woman in the world—his soul mate, if that was possible—it wouldn’t have changed a thing.

He was in love with Candy. Whether she offered a comfortable routine or an uncontrollable roller coaster, she was the woman he loved. There was no room for anyone else.

He’d lost his heart to a woman he couldn’t possibly have.

There was nothing to be done about that now, except he had to clear the air with Jane. A straight line to the truth was best. “You were right to break up with me, Jane. I think we’re too much alike to be good for each other.”

Her face stilled. She was startled by his words, but she managed a gracious smile. “But that’s a positive indicator, don’t you think? Being alike?”

“Not if you end up in a rut together.”

She studied him. “We had some inertia to deal with, but…”

“Maybe we both needed to get shaken up a bit.”

“You don’t want to try again then?” Anger and hurt were sharp undertones to her flat question.

He shook his head, then put his hand over hers. “You’re a wonderful person, Jane, and I wish you the very best. You deserve a guy who’ll ballroom dance with you, not one you have to drag from his computer for a movie.”

Jane’s lip trembled and her eyes filled. He would hug her, but he knew she would hate that. Jane had a lot of dignity. He sat with her, holding her hand, waiting to see what she needed to do—yell at him, insult him, even throw water in his face.

But abruptly, she seemed to get control. Her eyes cleared, her shoulders dropped and she managed a quick smile. “You’re not one to soften the blow, are you? No easing into it for Matt Rockwell.” She shook her head, as if she was laughing at herself. “Actually, I always liked that about you.”

She took her hand from him, adjusted her napkin, drank some water and, when she looked back at him, she was completely composed. “You’re right, of course,” she said steadily. “I knew we were never on fire for each other. And I want that. I do.”

“You deserve that.”

Her smile twisted. “It’s no fun to be alone. Seeing you here, I thought maybe we had enough to make it work. But we would be…settling. That’s true.” Her lip wobbled again and she reached for her water.

To give her space, Matt looked away. His gaze snagged on Candy and held.

When he looked back at Jane, she’d followed his line of sight. “You’re worried about her? She’s chattering away just fine. We have a paralegal like that. Never stops talking.” She made her hand into a yakking puppet. “Terminally bubbly.”

Anger spiked at her easy dismissal of Candy. Too many people mistook her surface liveliness for superficiality. “People underestimate Candy. She’s smart and funny—and wise, too. You have to give her time to show you.”

Jane took in a sharp breath. Her face changed, went still and cold, as if sheeted in ice. “Ah. I see.” She fiddled angrily with a tablespoon, making it clunk again and again against the linen cloth. “I don’t get it, but I see. So, she makes you happy? Is that it? Keeps you out of a rut?” Her voice cracked.

“She and I work together, Jane. It’s impossible.” And it wasn’t only work. Candy would exhaust, annoy and eventually infuriate him. Sooner rather than later. And once Fun Guy packed up his vacation duffel, the old Matt would bore the hell out of Candy. They were a dead end for certain.

“Whatever,” Jane said dismissively. She grabbed a roll and buttered it, fiercely at first. Her movements slowed, she set down her butter knife with a click and looked at him. “It doesn’t matter, I know. You and I are done. If you find someone else, good for you.” She looked over at Candy, again, as if the possibility of Matt and Candy puzzled her.

“Candy and I work together. We couldn’t ever—”

“Whatever!” She cut one hand in a stop-arguing gesture, then sighed. “If it weren’t for these damnable social events, I wouldn’t mind being alone at all.”

“I understand.” He was impressed with her ability to rise above her emotions, to analyze and conquer them so smoothly. “Listen, Jane. About the bar dinner. I’d be honored to accompany you. And I’ll pay for the tux myself.”

“If I don’t snag a date, I might take you up on that. I’ve got feelers out, though, so no worries. I don’t waste time.” She grabbed his hand. “You’re a good person, Matt. In my nobler moments, I want the best for you, too.”

They smiled at each other. He realized they’d broken up for good with no fuss at all. He felt relieved and he was sure Jane did, too.

What did it say about him that he could be involved with a woman for nearly a year without any more angst than a mild argument? Come to think of it, he’d always avoided strong feelings. His relationship with Heather had been an anomaly.

Was it because of how devastated his mother had been when their father left? She’d always been highly strung and vulnerable, but after that she seemed to crumble. Matt had had to be strong for her and Ellie.

Those terrible first months he’d handled the tasks that befuddled his mother—the wonky thermostat, the failing Pathfinder, the bills that piled up. She’d slept so much that Matt cooked meals, got groceries, cared for Ellie—quizzed her on spelling words, made sure she brushed her teeth and bathed. He’d read her bedtime stories and reassured her when she stood outside their mother’s locked door, needing a mother’s comfort.

It was then that he’d strengthened the habit of controlling his emotions, of keeping his head down to focus on the task at hand. He’d valued what made sense and avoided what didn’t—like the human heart.

His mother never really returned to normal, although she managed to make ends meet with a bookkeeping job, which meant he’d remained watchful and careful, slow to get involved, always holding back.

It wasn’t just the trauma of his father’s departure, though. It was how he was. It had felt right to be that way. As he’d told Candy, that was how he was wired.

But now he’d met Candy and his barriers were dissolving, his natural need for distance melting away. This alarmed him, but he was a realist and couldn’t ignore it.

Should he talk to Candy? Take this chance? But how could he? The situation seemed impossible. Even if he wasn’t her boss, they were as different as he and Jane were alike.

What should he do? He felt twisted into knots, his head ready to burst, his lungs so tight every breath burned. He felt as though he’d been slammed by a huge wave, tossed into a cloud of sand and sea until he didn’t know which direction to swim for air. If this was love, maybe he was better off without it.

**13**

KNOWING IT WOULD BE a mistake, Candy stole a glance at the table where Matt and Jane sat. Sure enough, Jane was leaning in to speak in Matt’s ear. His arm was across the back of her chair and he seemed completely at ease with her.

An old, old song started up in Candy’s head. Smile, though your heart is breaking. The lyrics promised that if you did that—smiled through heartbreak—the sun would shine through.

Yeah, right. She felt like a big old rain cloud about to unload fat drops all over the linen cloth.

This was why she never got serious with anyone. This terrible hole in her heart. This bottomless ache. She’d been smart enough to avoid it for twenty-nine years. Maybe being so indulged as a child meant she’d had no practice in disappointment, but she’d stayed clear of it anyway. She didn’t need to touch the red coil to know the stove would burn her.

This was good, what had happened. Matt and Jane were back together—they even had a date. And all thanks to Candy. She’d done the right thing. She should be proud.

Except she felt utterly bereft. It was so like her to get hooked on someone she couldn’t have—and didn’t really want. She wanted it all, spoiled child that she was. As with Brad, she wanted him to ask her to marry him, even though she’d have said no. She was doing it again, dammit.

Just when she feared she’d embarrass herself by bursting into tears in the middle of the conversation, the dessert mousse arrived and the program commenced, giving her time to regroup, listen and soothe herself with chocolate.

No point bitching about the pain. Suck it up and move on. Jane’s appearance was fate’s tap on the shoulder. Hey, you. Remember who you are and why you’re here.

She did. She remembered. And she would push forward. She’d go back to her place, finalize the marketing plan and when Matt praised her, she’d bring up the promotion. It was time. She’d fulfilled her side of their deal—given Matt a makeover, taught him networking, even repaired his love life.

Talk about a bonus! She always went the extra mile. Wasn’t that what team leaders did?

Right.

The good news was that now that Matt and Jane had reconciled, Candy had no more worries about how she and Matt would end this. It was over and done.

Her plan in place, Candy found the program interminable. There seemed to be an honoree at every table. By the time the stack of plaques was down to a few, she’d eaten two untouched desserts and had three decaf refills.

Jane was as classy in her acceptance remarks as she’d seemed when Candy met her. Candy kept her eyes trained away from where Matt sat—no doubt watching Jane—afraid if she caught his adoring expression, she’d burst into jealous tears.

Eventually the last polite applause filled the room. Finally released, Candy barreled for the doors instead of pausing to reinforce her rapport with potential clients as she would normally do in networking mode. She’d grabbed plenty of cards before disaster struck. She managed to catch Matt’s eye and pointed toward the parking lot, so he’d meet her at the car.

Grateful to be outside, she sucked in smoggy air and fought the tumult inside. Get a grip. He was never yours. They’d had an affair. Don’t cling. Let go. She only wished she’d known their final lovemaking had been the last, so she could have memorized every touch. It was like wolfing down the last Cheeto before you realized the bag was empty. You wanted to savor the final lovely morsel.

The good news, though, was that she was anxious to get back to work. She’d learned that much about herself. She could work when it mattered. She was not just a party girl.

She watched Matt wend his way to their car, his expression anxious. When he reached her, he asked, “Are you ill? I saw you run out.”

“Just anxious to go,” she said with a fake smile, ducking into the car to avoid him.

Matt sat in the driver’s seat. “There was room at the table,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean for you to leave.”

“It was much better, Matt, and you know it. Jane liked the new you, which is great. Isn’t it?” He seemed too quiet.

“Nothing changed between Jane and me,” he said after a pause. He sounded weary and troubled. Maybe out of guilt?

“Give it time,” she said, glancing at him. “You got a start at it. I probably cramped your style.”

“It’s not like that, Candy. It won’t ever be.” He hesitated, as though he had something more to say, then looked out the windshield.

“Let’s head back,” she said, nodding forward. “I want to finish my marketing plan so I can show it to you.”

She felt him staring at her. “We need to talk.”

“There’s nothing to say, Matt. I get it.”

“No, you don’t. That’s the point. We—”

“Let’s just go!” she said with clenched teeth, wringing the burgundy napkin that in her haste she’d taken with her. She’d twisted it so tightly it hurt her fingers. Unshed tears made her nose burn.

“We need to talk about us, about what we’re going to do.”

His cell phone rang, interrupting him. He fumbled for it, reading the display. “Scott,” he muttered.

“Take it,” she said, grateful for the reprieve.

“Hi, Scott. What’s up?” Matt said tightly. “Yeah? Where are we on the reorg? Uh…” He paused, glanced at her, then out the side window. He couldn’t talk to Scott freely with her in the car. “Not too far.” He cleared his throat. “I’m on vacation, remember? Use it or lose it?” he said in a falsely hearty voice. He paused, listening, then spoke again, his tone serious.

“I’ll get on that…um, plan…when I get back…. Sunday? Not Sunday. Sunday’s a day of rest.” He laughed. “Be careful what you wish for, Scott. I’m addressing my PQ2 weaknesses, which means I’m taking it easier. I won’t be in the office 24-7 anymore.”

He winked at Candy, telling her he’d learned from her. “Unintended consequences, I guess.” He looked at her again, his expression full of gratitude and affection. Then she saw an idea dawn on him. He held up a finger to her.

“Scott, one thing. What do you think about a consumer version of Ledger Lite? We’d market it to our Paycheck Plus customers?” He listened, then turned to nod at her, indicating Scott’s interest.

“It’s Candy Calder’s idea,” he said quickly. “I was talking to her and—” He stopped cold. “Uh—before I left. We ran into each other…” He swallowed hard, panicked and jerked his gaze out front again. It must have dawned on him he didn’t dare let Scott know they were together on vacation.

“So, she’s, uh, putting together a plan…. Sure, sure…I’ll tell her—when I get back, of course. At the next meeting.” His face was bright red and he sounded guilty as hell.

Matt put away his phone and rubbed the back of his neck. “That was weird. I almost blew it. Sorry I lied.”

“You had to, Matt. If Scott knew we were together, it would be utterly weird.” And there was no way Matt could comfortably keep the secret back at SyncUp. If he gave her the promotion, everyone would think she slept her way there. “I appreciate you talking up my idea to Scott. It means a lot.” Again, her throat closed.

“It’s the least I could do. After all you’ve done for me.” He stopped. “You know I mean the lessons, not the…not us together. And I would have told him anyway. It’s a great idea.”

“I know that,” she said softly, realizing how the sex had muddied everything between them. Matt was having trouble figuring out his own motivations. “I was glad to hear you say you wouldn’t be working so hard from now on.”

“You helped me figure that out,” he said, turning to her. “There’s something else I need to say. And it’s not about work. Being with you has meant so much to me. You mean so much to me.”

“You mean a lot to me, too, Matt. But that’s beside the point. You have Jane. We have work.”

“Jane and I are done, Candy. Period.”

“We had a deal. We have to stick with it.”

“We need to talk about us.”

“There is no us, Matt!” She didn’t mean to raise her voice, but he’d just thrown away her garlic—Jane—and her heart was racing with pointless hope. “You could hardly manage a lie to Scott about me. We have to quit while we’re ahead.”

He studied her. “Is that what you want?”

“It’s what we both want.” When she tried to smile, her lips trembled like a muscle held too long.

They sat in silence for a few beats, both staring out the windshield. “Okay. If that’s it, then,” Matt said finally, starting the car with tense, almost-angry movements.

After they’d driven for a while in awkward silence, she thought of something to get them on track. “So how many cards did you get, by the way?” she asked softly.

“I don’t know. You count.” He fished out his wallet and handed it to her.

She counted them. “Twelve! That’s excellent.” It was so hard to sound cheerful when she was so miserable. “I got twenty, so, at two-to-one, you beat me by four cards. Congratulations. You won.” Her smile felt glued onto her cardboard face. “So you can ask me any question you like. That’s your prize.”

“I don’t know, Candy,” he said, sounding discouraged.

“Think about it. Drop me off at my place, I’ll grab the computer and meet you at yours to show you my marketing plan. You can ask me the question when I get there.”

They didn’t talk the rest of the way and she was glad. She ached as if she’d been everyone’s target in a dodgeball game where they used rocks instead of balls.

She would push past this, though. She had to. This was what she’d worked for. She couldn’t give up when she was so close.

UNLOCKING HIS BEACH house, Matt caught his reflection in the glass of the storm door. He hardly recognized the GQ guy staring back at him with the fancy haircut and pricey shades. Fun Guy. Who’d just been shot down by the woman he loved.

She was right. Being together at SyncUp would be difficult, to say the least. She wanted it to be over. She was sticking with their deal. Maybe that’s what he should do.

Accept her decision, let it go. He loved her, but he’d get over it. Maybe she loved him, too, but not enough to try to work it out. Should he push her? Why? Why make her spell out all the reasons why he was wrong for her? All that BS about oil and water and oranges? Why put himself through that misery?

He stood on his porch and looked out at the ocean.

He noticed a parachute, bright against the blue sky, skimming by. A parasailor. He remembered Candy up in the air, the way she’d been terrified, but pushed past it. Don’t you dare, she’d said, eyes flashing, when he wanted to call it off. I want to try this.

He had to try, too—go for it the way Candy had. Push through the fear, take the risk—no matter what she said to him. If she loved him, they would figure out how to be together. He saluted that faraway parasailor, then stepped off the porch, headed for Candy, come what may.

CANDY SHOVED MATT’S computer in its case and started out, not even stopping to change clothes. She’d kicked off her shoes and removed her pantyhose to cross the beach in comfort at least. She didn’t dare stop moving or her feelings would hit and she’d dissolve into a heap of heartbreak.

This was more than a vacation fling with Matt. She had feelings for him that weren’t going away as ordered. She was trapped and the misery would hit as soon as she held still long enough to feel it.

It reminded her of stubbing her toe and the seconds of nothing before the pain struck, when she had time to brace for it, guessing how bad it would be this time.

When she looked toward Matt’s place, she noticed he was headed her way, taking long, purposeful strides, his expression fixed with determination.

About what? About her? About them? Against all reason, hope made her heart sing and she started to run toward him.

Seeing her, Matt also ran, then stopped when they were close. He was breathing hard and she was, too.

“I’ve got my question.” He paused. “Forget SyncUp, forget our deal and tell me the truth—how do you feel about me?”

“How do I feel…?” She swallowed hard, not sure what she should say, fighting dizziness, struggling to be sensible.

“Let me make it simpler. I’m in love with you, Candy.”

“You are? In love? With me?” Her heart was doing a fluttering hip-hop. She needed to sit down. Fast.

Sensing her faintness, he caught her by her elbows. “I am. So, what about you? Do you feel the same?”

“Do I?” Her mind was as fuzzy as a radio off its station. “I mean, yes, I do…I love you.” She said it with wonder, surprised to hear the words come out of her mouth.

At the same time, she knew in her soul they were true.

“That’s good, then,” he said. “We feel the same.” He leaned in to kiss her, but she held back.

“No, that’s bad. What about SyncUp?”

“We’ll work it out…somehow.” His words faded and she knew he’d gone fuzzy, too, unwilling to address the impossibility of a future between them. “For now, let’s just be here. Together.”

“Okay,” she answered automatically. This solution erased the agony she’d anticipated with so much dread. Matt was a smart guy. If he thought they could figure it out, maybe they could. She let her doubts melt away. She let her love for Matt take charge, pushing away SyncUp, even her promotion. They would discuss that soon enough. That would be part of working things out.

She knew this was wrong thinking on her part, but right now she was glad to escape the pain, to have more time in Matt’s arms. They hurried to his place. She set his computer on the table and they stumbled to his bed, pulling off each other’s clothes, laughing, breathless and amazed.

Could she really have this? Be in love with Matt? Despite their differences, despite work—

Stop! She wouldn’t think about that. It would ruin the moment and right now Matt was looking at her naked body that way again, like no other man, as though every inch of her was worth a lifetime of study, as though being able to touch her was a gift beyond measure.

She wanted this. So much.

“I can’t believe I have you in my bed,” Matt said, his eyes a hot blue that promised his love and all the support she could ever want.

“Believe it. I’m here.” At the same time she felt a tension inside, a held breath, the sense there was trouble ahead, that this wasn’t quite real.

Matt kissed her then, deeply, his tongue searching her mouth, while one hand slid down her body to her thighs and stroked her neediest place.

She parted her legs, inviting him inside, welcoming the rush of pleasure they’d felt together before.

Matt pushed into her, holding her gaze, and the moment was different, more serious. This was for keeps. “When I’m inside you, I never want to leave.”

“Then don’t,” she said, crossing her heels over his back, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

He kissed her hungrily, as if she were the source of his strength. They held each other so tight their bodies seemed melded together. Only their hips parted long enough to make short strokes. They were so in tune with each other that the tiniest movement from Matt sent spirals of pleasure through her. She could tell she had the same effect on him. Sex had never been so powerful or so intimate for her.

She felt her orgasm gather and sensed his doing the same.

“I don’t want to come yet,” she said.

“There’s plenty more after this,” he breathed, quickening his pace, moving in a way she couldn’t resist. “Just let go.”

Her climax began, then seemed to move to Matt, as if they shared the sensation, and he sent it back to her even stronger than before. Waves of pleasure poured through her, so strong she had tears in her eyes. Matt’s face was full of emotion, too.

Slowly, the intensity lessened and she became aware of the beat of Matt’s heart, in time with hers, heard the matched rhythm of their breathing. She never imagined feeling this close to another person. She knew that, no matter what happened, this was worth it.

She closed her eyes and held on to Matt.

They made love for what seemed like a long time and yet only moments. Rolling over after one more amazing orgasm, Candy caught sight of Matt’s travel clock. “God! It’s six, Matt. We have to get dressed for the beach party.”

“I’ve got a party right here. Come as you are.” He nuzzled her neck, finding her with his fingers.

She pushed his hand away with a reluctant groan. “I promised Ellie and Sara we’d do the events.” She struggled out of bed and bent to drag on her clothes. “I’ve got to go shower and change at my place.”

“You’re serious about this?” Matt said, watching her.

“One of us has to be.” She leaned down to kiss his sweet mouth. “And now that you’re Fun Guy, I guess it’s me.”

“I know,” he said, flopping back against the pillow, hands under his head, elbows out. “I don’t think I’ll ever be the same.” He looked deliciously strong, tanned and relaxed, the sheet bunched at his waist, sexier than ever. Of course she was seeing him through the eyes of love.

Grabbing up Sara’s blazer, she noticed Matt’s computer, where she’d practically thrown it on the table. She had to show him the marketing plan, talk about the teams, but when?

Maybe tomorrow? Or the next day? Before they left Malibu anyway. When they were ready to deal with the logistics of continuing an affair back at SyncUp. Because they had to continue this.

She and Matt were in love. She couldn’t quite believe it. Or sort it out or figure out how it would work. For now, just knowing was enough. It had to be.

MATT GOT READY while Candy went to her place to change. After his shower, he scrubbed some of that ridiculous gel into his hair and put on the Hawaiian shirt Candy liked. He had to change shorts twice to get the right match. Now he was getting vain?

This was all pretty crazy. He’d promised Candy they would work it out, but he wasn’t sure how. A vague tension anchored itself in his gut, but he wasn’t going to deal with it yet. He wanted to float a while longer on the cloud he’d been on since Candy and he had wrestled her phone away from Radar.

He headed out to get her, enjoying the breeze, the sleek gray sheen of the ocean laid out before him, the waves rolling like the shivering pelt of a huge slow-moving beast.

The neon of the carnival rides glowed against the sunset sky. Down the beach, there were bonfires and he could hear the gathering noise of a crowd. Music, too. He and Candy could dance.

He wanted to dance? Unbelievable. But he realized if Candy wanted him to, he’d freak dance in front of God and everyone. He was in love. The way he’d been with Heather, all those years ago, except now he was mature enough to handle the roller coaster.

At least he hoped he was.

His gut tightened again.

Until he caught sight of Candy heading his way. The sight of her erased all his doubts. She’d changed how he saw everything.

She wore a strapless dress that exposed her shoulders and the tops of her breasts. When she was close enough he noticed a diamond on a chain resting in the hollow of her throat. He wanted to kiss her there, in that tender place. And everywhere else, too.

She threw her arms around him and he picked her up and spun her around, kissing her as he set her back down on the sand.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, looking up at him, her eyes full of love. “Sara had to know why I looked feverish, so I explained that I’m crazy in love.”

“So I make you feverish? All hot…and achy? You do that to me, too.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “I told her we were working everything out at SyncUp. Do you think we can?” She bit her pretty lip.

“Of course.” He kissed away the bite mark, feeling the familiar wash of heat and need whenever he touched her. She melted into his arms again.

“You sure about this party?”

“I promised,” she said on a groan.

“How about a quickie?” He nuzzled her neck, loving the way she softened against him, so willing, as eager for more as he was. “There’s always time for a quickie.”

“Later, Matt.” She sighed. “It’ll have to be later.”

Every time they made love, his feelings grew stronger. Surely, that would be enough to get them through the troubles to come. Whenever he tried to think past this vacation, his brain shorted out. Wait and see was all he could come up with.

Weird. He wasn’t a guy who waited for things to fall into place. He knew you made your own luck, but, for some reason, he was content to ride this out. A bad sign, but looking into Candy’s sweet face, he refused to figure out exactly what this meant.

Inside the fence that marked off the Sin on the Beach party, he waited while Candy signed them up for some mortifying activity or other.

“Matt!”

He spun in time for Ellie to throw her arms around him. “Sara told me what happened. I’m so happy for you.” She kissed his cheek. “I knew this would work out.”

“So this was one of your setups? To get me and Candy together?” Not that he minded a bit now.

“I always knew you’d be good together.”

“You never said anything to me.”

“Would it have done any good?” She put her hands on her hips.

“No. But, I gotta say, I’m going to let you nose into my business more often if this is what results.”

Ellie laughed, her eyes shiny with triumph. “I’m glad to hear it. Candy wasn’t easy to convince, either. I had to twist her arm big-time. That Q-E-2 thingie—the personality test? Her results had her flipped out, but I convinced her that if she brought work here she could prove to you what a good team leader she’d make!”

“Team leader? What?” He stared at Ellie. “What do you know about the teams?”

“Just what Candy told me. That you have to appoint leaders to a bunch of teams and she wants to be one. Didn’t you talk about that?” She hesitated. “Sara said you’d worked it all out, so I just assumed—”

“No one’s supposed to know about the teams.”

“Uh-oh. Yeah, that was a secret. I forgot. Someone told her anyway. Pretend I didn’t say anything. She’ll talk with you, I know. The point is she’ll be great at it, right?”

“This is not good, Ellie.” His head spun. Candy wanted to be a product manager? That explained her obsession with showing him Ledger Lite and going on about new challenges and her ideas. No wonder she sounded as though she were interviewing for a job half the time. She was.

The music swelled, irritatingly loud, and bonfire smoke burned his eyes, thanks to the contacts he wasn’t used to yet.

“It’ll be fine. Just talk to her.” Ellie searched his face, worried, then seemed to notice someone approaching from behind him. “Here she comes. Don’t let me ruin this, Matt.”

He turned and saw that Candy held a margarita in each hand and wore a big grin.

This would be bad.

“You need to go, El,” he said firmly. “I need to talk to Candy alone.”

“Can I explain it to her at least?” She answered her own question. “No. You’re right. But don’t be blunt, for God’s sake. For once use some diplomacy.”

“I’ll handle it,” he said, making a shooing motion.

She turned and left before Candy reached him.

Candy held out a margarita. “Where’s Ellie going?”

Matt shrugged off the question. “Let’s find a quiet place.” He put his arm around her shoulder, his gut aching.

“You bad boy. At a party…?” She glanced at her watch. “We do have a few minutes before the first event. There’s a spot.” She pointed at a cove where the embers of a fading campfire glowed red.

She thought he was after that quickie. If only. Dread filled him, cold and gray, but delaying the truth wouldn’t help either of them.

When they reached the spot, Matt smoothed sand from a rock that would hold them both. They sat together and he placed his untouched margarita on the sand at their feet.

She sipped hers, then looked up at him. Her smile faltered. “What’s wrong, Matt?”

There was no easy way to approach this, so he just said it. “Ellie mentioned that you want to be a product team leader.”

“I…um…She told you?”

“She thought you and I had already discussed it. Something Sara said about us working things out. How did you hear about the teams anyway?”

“I overheard Daisy on the phone and—”

“Talked her into giving you the scoop?” He smiled, knowing how persuasive Candy could be. “So, this whole working vacation deal was about the promotion?”

“In a way.” Candy grimaced, seeming embarrassed. “I knew you had a bad impression of me, so this was a chance to show you what I can do.”

“I know what you can do, Candy. That’s never been an issue. My problem is figuring out which team to put you on—where you and the team would benefit the most.”

“You’re putting me on a team, not in charge of one?”

He nodded. “The team leader job is mostly coordination and facilitation. Meetings, planning sessions. Stuff you’d hate.”

“Do you like meetings and planning?” she asked sharply.

“No, but—”

“But you do them because you have to. So can I. The point is that you don’t see me as a leader. Why not?” She was angry now, he could tell, and hurt.

“You’d be bored in a week, Candy. You wouldn’t be using your strengths.”

“And what are those?”

“Creativity, divergent thinking, innovation.”

“I have other strengths. Leadership, for one thing. And I can do planning. My marketing plan references the strategic plan, for example, and if you’ll look at it—”

“I’m sorry, Candy. I’ll push your Ledger Lite idea with Scott, and I know you’ll make a great contribution to whatever team I put you on, but—”

“You won’t even consider me?” She looked utterly bereft. She blinked fast, fighting tears.

God, he’d made her cry. What a jerk. He had to fix this. “Maybe you have a preference for what team you want to work on? I can’t promise, of course. That would be favoritism and we have to avoid that.”

She stared at him, swallowed hard, made her hands into fists. She was shaking, too.

All he wanted to do was give her what she wanted somehow. “Would you prefer the financial products team? That’s where Ledger Lite is. It’s dialed in, though. Not much need for creativity, so I’m not sure you’d like that…”

He babbled on about the other teams, giving her details he shouldn’t be sharing with an employee—anything to help her feel better about the situation.

“You never considered me. I can’t believe it. And nothing I can show you will change that?”

“I know your talents, Candy. You didn’t need to scheme with Ellie to show me.”

“It wasn’t a scheme. It was a demonstration.” Now she was getting angry. “It’s because of my reputation, isn’t it? Because everyone thinks I play around too much.”

“Of course not.” He stopped, realizing there was some truth to her point. “It is true that if you were to become a team leader, we’d have to deal with staff perceptions about you, but that’s not the point. The point is—”

“And what are those perceptions? That I’m a party girl? That I’m not serious about work?”

“That’s not the issue.”

“The issue is that you don’t respect me, Matt.”

“Of course I respect you. I respect you too much to put you in a position where you can’t shine. Why would you even want that?”

“Because I want to get ahead, dammit. I want to move to the next level. But you respect me too much to do that for me, right?” Her words dripped with sarcasm.

“I can’t, Candy. It’s not right for you or for SyncUp. I want to make you happy, believe me, I do. I love you.”

“Then give me the job. That’s what will make me happy. If you love—” She stopped herself, as if shocked at what she’d been about to say and what he’d actually suggested—giving her the job because he cared about her.

“That’s exactly why you can’t give it to me, isn’t it? We’re sleeping together. You can’t promote me even if you wanted to. And you don’t even want to.” Her voice caught.

“Candy,” he said softly, not liking her train of thought at all. “I can’t give you a job that’s not right for you. Our sleeping together has nothing to do with that.”

She stared at him, her eyes full of accusation, her face full of anguish. “You’re wrong, Matt,” she said softly. “It has everything to do with it.”

She stared at him and he felt the ground shift beneath his feet. They’d agreed not to think through the implications of their affair or of falling in love, but that had been foolish, he saw now. He hadn’t been himself. He’d been lost in the fog of being Fun Guy. And that, he saw clearly for the first time, had been a big mistake. Somehow, he had to fix it for Candy. He had no right to drag her down because he’d been an irresponsible ass.

**14**

THEIR SLEEPING TOGETHER changed everything, Candy saw now. She felt as though she’d been yanked awake, blinking into the dark, her heart pounding, as hard reality replaced her soft and silly dreams.

She’d practically said it right out: If you love me, give me the job. How sick was that? Maybe at an unconscious level she had believed that having sex with Matt—getting closer to him, anyway—would ensure her promotion, or at least allow him to see her in a more positive light.

Even if she’d never had that awful idea, even if she had earned the promotion, how could Matt promote a lover, no matter how talented? It just wouldn’t look right.

But that was a moot point, since he didn’t consider her capable of the job. All her efforts to fix her reputation with him had failed.

This was all wrong, all terrible. She dug her nails into her palms to keep from crying. She didn’t know which bad angle to examine first.

“Don’t catastrophize, Candy. Our being together makes things complicated, but we can figure it out.” She could see he was flailing for a solution, but his eyes told her he knew it was hopeless, too.

“How? Just because we want to keep the personal separate from the professional doesn’t mean we can.”

He looked at her, letting her words sink in.

“How could we behave normally at SyncUp? How could you evaluate my performance? You’d be too strict or too lenient, and I’d wonder which and why. And what would people think? They would find out, you know. It’s inevitable. And I hate the idea of them gossiping about how we got together and why and what it means.”

“We’ll handle it,” he said stubbornly, but she could see he was as troubled as she was. “Day by day.”

“And when we break up? How will that be?”

“You expect us to break up?” Matt asked.

“People do. What makes us special? What do we have in common really? Sex and our taste in junk food. You said yourself, you need common goals and a routine to stay together. We’d drive each other crazy, disappoint each other over and over. Of course we’d break up.” She stopped, feeling hysterical, crazed. So hurt and disappointed and scared she didn’t know what to do.

“You’re giving up before we’ve even started,” he said. “Look, you’re hurt about the team leader thing. Okay…” He swallowed hard, breathing raggedly. “What if I assigned acting managers. I could put together teams on a temporary basis. You could try it out and if it didn’t work, no harm done. I’d make the permanent appointments and no one would be the wiser. I think I could sell that to Scott—”

“Stop it, Matt.” She hated that he was trying to appease her this way. “You can’t give me the job to soothe my feelings. You wouldn’t do this for anyone else and you know it. Let’s cut to the chase. Isn’t that what you prefer? Our relationship is a mistake. It wrecks everything.” She jumped to her feet.

He stood, too. “What are you saying?”

“That it’s over. We’re done. We should have stuck with the original deal. This is all wrong. I have to go. Tell Ellie and Sara I’m sorry, but I can’t stay for the party.” Her heart felt as if it might explode. She turned and began to run.

“Candy!” Matt called, but he didn’t follow her and she was glad. Being with him had been a mistake. She’d been weak and stupid and now everything was so much worse.

She’d never had a chance at the promotion. That made her feel physically ill. Worse, she’d have to go back to SyncUp and work with Matt.

There were good reasons for those no-sex-in-the-workplace rules, all right. Every time she saw him, the pain would hit again. The pain and the disappointment.

How could she even stay at SyncUp, knowing Matt didn’t take her seriously? Would the word get out that she’d been turned down? Would word get out about their affair? Would it show in their faces? How could she ever hold her head up again?

On top of all that, she was breaking up with the man she loved. This was pure agony. She had to escape somehow, stop the pain or delay it until she was in better shape or something.

“Hey, you’re going the wrong way, lady.” Carter called to her from a few yards away, Radar at his heels. “The party’s in that direction.” He pointed behind her.

“I’m not up for a party right now,” she said. “I’m feeling too blue.” The understatement of the century.

“Blue, huh? Then what you need is a martini to match your mood at WHIM SIM. Better yet, a bunch of us are playing darts for shots. You can be on my team.”

“Darts, huh?” She liked darts. She liked Carter, too. He was the kind of fun-loving guy she always went for, back when she’d been content to be who she was, not struggling to get all serious and work-obsessed.

Radar whined up at her, but he sounded more anxious than eager for her to join them.

“Do you get festival points?” At least she could earn something for the competition to help her friends.

“Yeah, I guess. I think I saw that posted.”

“Then let’s go,” she said. “We’re wasting time and blue booze.”

“Girl after my own heart.” Carter slung a friendly arm around her shoulder and led her toward the bar. She tried to smile, but it hurt. She was grateful for the distraction, for the escape of noise and liquor and laughter.

“Come on, boy,” she called to Radar, but he stayed where he was, watching her, tail low, as if he were worried about her.

“Forget it then,” she said, a stabbing feeling low inside her. She was worried about herself, too.

This was better, though, she tried to tell herself. For a while there, she’d forgotten who she was. She was at the beach on vacation, dammit. She was a party girl. If she’d stuck with that, she wouldn’t be fighting tears this minute.

This was a lesson, dammit, and she would learn it.

MATT STOOD ROOTED to the spot, his insides churning, his mind frozen, until Candy was out of sight. She was right and wrong, but it would take him a bit to sort out which was which. He shouldn’t have offered her the job to make her feel better. She was right about that. That was bad for her and SyncUp and no way for a vice president to behave.

She was right that being together would change things at work. He was no good at secrets, how he felt about her would show. Ellie said he was transparent as glass.

Would staff respect him less? And what about Candy? Already, employees thought her wild. Would being with him help or hurt her reputation?

The affair had been irresponsible. He should have known better. He had an obligation to be discreet. He should be fired. He would have to resign. Not right away, of course, because he wouldn’t strand Scott and he’d make sure Candy was in good shape first. She’d been so hurt about the team-leader issue.

He was suddenly exhausted by the whole thing. What was he doing standing here, his heart burning with loss? He was an idiot, dressed like some surfer dude, blinking to see through these stupid contacts. He needed peace and quiet, time online and his damn glasses back. If he’d stuck with who he was, none of this would have happened.

At his place, the quiet didn’t help the way he’d expected it to. He missed Candy as if something had been cut out of him. He stayed clear of the bedroom where the sheets were tangled from all their lovemaking, but he could still smell her perfume everywhere.

He fought the urge to chase her down, kiss away their doubts, make love until it all made sense again.

What about when we break up? She’d said it as though it were inevitable, just part of the package. It angered him that she could be so casual about something that was so big to him.

That was the point, wasn’t it? To Candy it was casual, not life-altering.

She was Heather all over again. Crazy fun, then the crash that hurt like hell. Maturity would not lessen his pain. How had he even thought that?

He’d been an idiot. He knew better. Stick to your strengths, don’t take chances. If you had too much fun, there was hell to pay—like that Tsunami for Two he’d paid for with a hangover. He was paying again, all right. This time, the lesson would stick.

CANDY WOKE THE NEXT morning to a fuzzy brain and the sound of someone snoring. She turned her head and saw two big, sand-streaked feet sticking up from beneath the sheet.

Whoops. She whipped back the covers and found Carter asleep on his belly, stark naked, his head at the foot of her foldout bed.

Omigod. Had she? She looked down at herself, relieved she still wore her dress. She would have remembered sex, of course, regardless of how much alcohol she’d drunk. They’d had winner shots of tequila after they’d won the darts contest and she’d downed a blue martini to further numb her sadness.

As a result, her head was killing her, but she had no regrets. She’d been pure party girl—danced on the bar, on a table, even on Carter’s shoulders while he loped down the beach to burn off the booze. She’d laughed a lot. Whenever she reminded herself she was having a good time, anyway.

She peeked again at her snoring bedmate. What a golden male specimen he was. Normally, she’d wake him and screw his brains out.

But not today. Today, the idea was so wrong it made her feel queasy. She covered him up.

It’ll be fine, she told herself. There would be plenty of Carters around when she was ready again. But Matts? Where would she find another Matt? Despair made her sink into the mattress. She wasn’t sure she even wanted to get out of bed.

She heard steps on the stairs and looked up to see Sara descending in a beaded minidress—obviously from the night before. Her friend looked as miserable as Candy felt. Her eyes were red, her hair tangled.

When she caught sight of Candy in bed, she pointed at the feet and mouthed, “Matt?”

Candy shook her head, fingers to her lips, then motioned Sara toward the kitchen, where she would join her to talk. She didn’t want to wake Carter—couldn’t take his eager energy at the moment. What do we do now? Huh? Huh? He was the human version of Radar, always ready to play. And she was pretty sure sex would be his top-of-mind idea.

She climbed out of bed, sweaty and sandy, her dress a wrinkled mess and followed Sara to the kitchen, where she would make her hangover mix, though she knew it would take more than protein powder and B vitamins to ease her pain.

“What happened, Sara?”

“Never mind me. Who’s that?” She pointed toward the bed.

“That’s Carter. We hung out last night after…Matt and I broke up.” The words hurt to say. “We won a bunch of points playing darts, though.” Candy reached into her bodice for the voucher slip, which she handed to Sara.

“Forget the points,” Sara said, tossing the paper on the counter. “Can you and Matt straighten things out?”

Tears welled in Candy’s eyes and she could only shake her head.

“Oh, hon. I’m so sorry.” Sara hugged her.

“It was impossible from the start and we both knew it.” Candy tried to collect herself. “Listen, can I borrow your laptop?” She’d saved all her files on her key drive, so she could do some work, despite everything.

Sara hesitated. “I guess so. Sure. I’ll leave it here.” She turned, looking confused. “Look, I’ve gotta go…” She motioned toward the stairs, then headed off.

“Wait. What’s wrong?” she whispered, but Sara waved her away. Something was upsetting her. Candy would find out once she’d taken her hangover cure.

Footsteps on the stairs made her look up to see Ellie barreling down to her. “Hey, girl! What happened to you two?”

Candy put her finger to her lips and motioned at the bed.

Carter let out a loud snore, not bothered by the noise.

Ellie tiptoed into the kitchen. “Sorry,” she said. “What’s up? Hangover?” She nodded at the cure ingredients Candy was combining.

“Yeah.”

“Poor Matt.” Ellie nodded affectionately toward Carter’s feet.

“That’s not Matt, Ellie.” She turned to her friend. “Matt and I broke up.”

“No!” Ellie looked horrified. “Was it because I told Matt about the teams? I’m so sorry. I know better than getting into other people’s lives too much. I—”

“No. It was not you, Ellie. Matt wouldn’t even consider me for the team-leader spot. He doesn’t respect me.”

“Sure he does,” Ellie said. “This is just a misunderstanding. Let me talk to him. I’ll straighten this out.”

“No, you won’t. It’s our problem. We should never have gotten involved. It was a mistake to bring work out here. It didn’t change a thing.”

“I’m so sorry, Candy,” Ellie said. “It was my idea.”

“You were just trying to help me, Ellie. At least now I know where I stand.” She drank the mix she’d made.

“Do you want me to stick around today? Hang with you?”

“No. Go enjoy yourself. Enjoy Bill. I’ve got work to do.”

“Work? Don’t get crazy with all that now.”

“I’m not. I’ll be fine. I’m sorry I crapped out on the party events. At least I got the darts points.”

“We’ll be fine, don’t worry,” Ellie said.

“Maybe I’ll try to draft the essay about why we deserve the time-share.”

“How can you do that? Your heart is broken.” Ellie’s face was so full of empathy, Candy feared she might cry. “You’ll never want to come to Malibu again.”

Very possible, but she pushed past that thought. “Of course I will. To be with you and Sara? We’ll have fun no matter what our love lives are like, right?”

Ellie smiled. “That’s true.”

“So, there you go,” she said, her heart aching in her chest. “The essay will be something fun to concentrate on.”

“I hope so,” Ellie said.

A moan from the bed drew their attention and Carter emerged, pulling the sheet around his body. She introduced him to Ellie and offered him some hangover cure.

She’d just walked Carter to the door and told him good-bye, when Sara came downstairs lugging her suitcase. It turned out she and Drew had quarreled—was last night bust-up night or what?—and she was ready to run home and bail out Uncle Spence with some crisis or other. Candy and Ellie managed to talk her into staying for the surf competition, at least.

Eventually, Candy was on her own again. She was headed for Sara’s computer when there was a bang at the door.

She opened it to find Radar looking eagerly up at her, ready to play. “Sorry, guy. Better find Carter.”

The dog didn’t move.

“Don’t you give up? I have to work.” In fact, she looked forward to it. She intended to finish what she’d started, even if she left SyncUp because of the Matt fiasco. The one good thing about this trip was that she’d realized she was more capable than she’d thought she was.

For all her sorrow, this cheered her a little.

“Can’t you tell I’m a new girl?” she asked the dog.

But Radar just whined. He’d played with her before and that was all he needed to know.

The truth hit her like a Frisbee in the forehead. People’s perceptions of you had to do with them, too, not just you. To Radar, Candy was a playmate. At SyncUp, people saw her as a jokester. That wouldn’t change, even if she did show more maturity and self-discipline. They wouldn’t notice the subtle improvements she’d made in herself.

What about her family?

She pictured the Thanksgiving scene she’d envisioned—the beautiful table, gleaming crystal, festive china, the dense aromas swirling in the air—roast turkey, pumpkin spice, sage dressing. Her father carving the bird. Everyone laughing, drinking wine and making the usual jokes about the time their father burned the bird or when Candy made a rubber-band shooter out of the wishbone.

She would ding her glass with her fork, to start the gratitude circle, the fine crystal ringing so crisply her ears would sting. “I’d like to start,” she would say, “since I have something special to be thankful for this year.”

“What? You didn’t bounce a check all year? You bought shares in Jose Cuervo?”

She’d fight down the laughter. “Nothing like that. I got a promotion. I’m the head of a product team. A manager.”

There would be a happy outcry and congratulations, but it would be the equivalent of “That’s nice, dear.”

They’d go back to talking about big legal deals, politics at the firm, the plans to expand her parents’ factory. And they’d smile at her as though she were their darling little girl.

Still.

That’s who she was to them. Over time, they’d accept the changes in her, but it would be incremental. One promotion wouldn’t alter a lifetime of experiences and expectations.

No, her family wouldn’t be nearly as impressed as she wanted them to be.

The person she needed to impress was herself. The question was how she saw herself and her abilities.

She was proud of herself. She was good at what she did. She was creative and innovative and good with people and a hell of a lot of fun.

Matt had said she’d be bored as a product manager. He might be right. She would hate the meetings, for sure. And cracking the whip? Forget it. He was correct that she’d have trouble getting staff to take her seriously because of all the joking around she did—maybe she didn’t want them to.

She liked who she was. She didn’t need to be a manager to be successful. But she wanted something more, some advancement. What about owning her own agency? The idea had come up a couple of times on the trip. Sara and Ellie had talked about it. Claudia and her business group had tried to hire her. She’d planned to do that eventually. Why not now? Or soon, anyway?

She might even get SyncUp as a client. She knew Scott hired outside consultants from time to time. Hell, she’d be better than the last guy they used. If Matt had meant what he’d said about wanting her for all his teams. Of course he did. The man was as honest as sunrise.

Her head began to throb, but in a good way this time. She’d wasted time trying to be someone she wasn’t. She was a girl who mixed work and play. And there was nothing wrong with that. The relief made her whole body feel shot through with light.

And she owed it, in part, to Matt. Painful as it was, he’d helped her see her strengths. He knew her.

For all their differences, he got her. She felt appreciated, accepted, valued by him for all she was, not all she thought she should be.

That was important and her eyes filled with tears of gratitude. She would thank him. But first she would sketch out some ideas for her new agency. What would she call it?

Candy Can? Calder Creative? Yeah, that sounded very good.

The idea made her smile and filled her with fire. She’d have something to report at Thanksgiving, after all. Even if all she got was a pat on her head for it, she’d know the truth. Candy Calder was going places.

**15**

MATT SAT AT HIS computer staring at his favorite tech e-zine, not caring one whit about malevolent bots or the latest on data farming.

He’d written out a possible team chart, but he kept worrying about where Candy would fit best and what if she quit?

He balled up the chart and tossed it across the room into his upside-down ball cap. Two points! Candy would make up rules for this, turn it into an office event.

She made everything fun. They needed her at SyncUp, for morale reasons if nothing else. If this thing between them chased her away, he’d never forgive himself.

He heard a sound on his porch and went to the door. There was Radar with that Frisbee of his. The dog nosed his way inside and galloped from room to room, carrying the Frisbee, searching for something. Or someone. When he returned, his doggie face held an obvious question: Where’s Candy?

“She’s not here, pal, but I’ll play.” He reached for the Frisbee, but the dog backed off, disappointed, then turned and trotted away.

He knew exactly how the dog felt. Candy opened all the windows and doors and let the sun in. She’d helped him see what he’d been missing.

He needed her in his life, dammit. If she would have him. He’d have to figure out how to make things right for her at SyncUp. He could quit, like he’d thought earlier. SyncUp was a great company and he’d made VP, but he’d moved before. To keep Candy in his life, he’d do anything.

Anything.

That realization made something shift inside him. He’d changed. He’d always done what was sensible, conservative, expected. What had Candy asked him: Did he act out of obligation or joy? He’d never thought about it before. He considered joy a luxury, beginning as a kid when he’d had to take care of his mother and sister. That was years ago and his family was fine. He had no further obligation to them.

He could do what gave him joy. And being with Candy did that. In spades. What a gift it was to have one person mean everything to him. One person whose laughter made his heart light, his life sweet.

One woman he wanted to help and be helped by. She got him out of his head, shook him out of the dull grind of every day that he found so comforting, but which also closed him away from new ideas and experiences. Adventures.

He needed Candy in his life.

And he could only hope that Candy needed him, too. There was only one way to find out.

A SMALL THUD AGAINST the screen door made Candy look up. Her neck ached and her bottom was numb from sitting at the computer so long. She’d been sketching out a business plan for Calder Creative and hadn’t noticed the time going by. Nothing was more enthralling than planning your future, it seemed. It would take months to enact the change, she knew, but each moment that passed made her more sure this was the right thing to do.

She couldn’t wait to talk to Matt about it. She hoped he’d be interested in hiring her as a consultant.

More importantly, she hoped he’d still want to be with her. Once she’d figured out what she wanted for her career, once she’d separated the promotion disappointment from her feelings for Matt, she realized she wanted to be with him. She wanted to be a couple, to give their feelings a chance to grow.

She thought they could help each other. He would be her safe haven and she would make sure he didn’t miss life’s little side trips.

At the door, she found Radar nudging the screen to get her attention. When he saw her, he wagged his whole body.

“You think it’s time for a break, huh?” She smiled. She had been sitting still too long and she was at the beach, after all.

On the porch, her cell phone rang. She had it in her pocket, expecting a call back from SyncUp over a question she’d had. She dug it out of her capris, but, just like the first day, it slid from her fingers to the porch.

Radar nabbed it and ran off.

“Wait!” she said, then ran after him toward the water, where she noticed a man stood, bare-chested, waves foaming at his feet, a phone at his ear.

It was Matt. He wore his new swim trunks and his old glasses. Radar galloped up to him, her phone in his mouth, as if Matt had asked him to fetch it.

Candy’s heart lifted and she laughed and joined them. “Radar grabbed my phone again,” she said.

“I see that.” He looked down at the dog, who was backing away, teasing them into another game of keep-away.

“It’s me calling.” He pointed at his phone, then closed it and shoved it into the flapped pocket of his trunks. “I wanted to know if you could come out and play with me.” He smiled his wry half-smile.

“I’d love to,” she said, her heart filling up and spilling over.

“I mean for the rest of our lives,” he said, his voice husky with emotion. His eyes shone at her, blue and clear as the Malibu sky, the glasses no barrier at all.

She felt tears spring to her eyes. “I’d love to try that.” More than anything she’d ever wanted in her life.

“I’m glad. I have so much to say. I don’t know where to begin.”

“How about with getting my phone before Radar chews it up?” She lunged for the dog, who feinted joyfully to the left.

They were soon playing the phone game again with Radar, laughing and lunging, missing and falling until finally, Candy tackled Radar and Matt pried away the phone.

They both lay on the sand.

Radar raced away, as if he’d achieved his goal.

Maybe he had.

They sat up and Matt brushed sand from her cheek.

“I’m always a mess around you,” she said.

“You’re always perfect around me. Whether you’ve got margarita on your chin, sand on your cheek or whipped cream on your nose. Whether you’re grinning at me or giving me hell. You’re just what I need. Playful and smart and stubborn and fierce. However you are, that’s fine with me.”

“You’re what I need, too, Matt. I like that you’re steady, that you make me feel secure and safe. I like how you focus and how serious you are.”

“I can be boring, I’ll warn you.”

“We’ll work on that,” she teased. “Shake things up a little. Within reason.”

“I can deal with that.”

“I love that you get me. In some ways better than I get myself. You were right that being a team leader isn’t for me.”

“Really? You agree?”

“I was hurt at first. The promotion seemed like proof that I was a success, that you respected me.”

“I do respect you. You’re amazing. You could do anything you set your mind to, but—”

“But if it makes me miserable, what’s the point? That’s what I need from you—to be my reality check.”

“And I need you to get me out of my rut, make me look up.”

“And see the parasail? Yeah. I think we can be good for each other.” She was so happy she thought her heart might burst.

“We have to deal with SyncUp.” Matt took on his cut-to-the-chase look. “Being your boss would be tricky, so the best thing will be for me to resign. As soon as it’s feasible.”

“You can’t resign. You just made VP.” She was so touched. The man was ready to toss his carefully constructed career plan out of love for her. “I’m going to quit.”

“You can’t quit. SyncUp needs you, Candy.”

“It can have me. As a consultant. How’s that? I think I want to start my own agency. It’s been in the back of my mind for down the line, but why not now? Or in the next year anyway. I have the skills and the drive. It’s the right next step, I think. I’ve already worked up some ideas.”

“Are you sure?” He studied her. “Because I’d love to have you as a consultant. That way you could work with all the teams. Depending on our budget, of course.”

She smiled. “Sure. I’d like your thoughts on my rates, too. I’ve got some ideas drafted. Come and see.” She started to get up, but Matt caught her hand and tugged her onto his lap. “You and your working vacation. Could you hold off a bit? I’m going to have to teach you how to relax.”

She laughed and wrapped her arms around him and tilted her face for a kiss. Her cheek bumped his glasses, so she pulled them off. “These are a pain.” She studied them, then looked at him. “So the makeover was a bust?”

“Not entirely. I like my glasses. And forget hair gel. But some of the changes were good. I sang karaoke, did the limbo, drank too much blue liqueur and, hell, was freak danced upon. That was all good. I needed that.”

“So you’re Matt, version 1.5, instead of 2.0?”

“Exactly,” he said, standing and reaching to lift her into his arms.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Mmm. I need a few more networking tips, don’t you think?” He started toward his beach house, carrying her tight against his chest.

Radar woofed, running up to them.

“Check with us later, pal,” Matt said. “We’ve got some catching up to do.”

Candy smiled down at the eager retriever. “We need a dog, don’t you think? To remind us to come out and play?”

“I think all we need is each other.”

She realized he was right. They’d been made over by love, seeing each other with new eyes, learning from each other and teaching each other, too.

Right now, she couldn’t wait to get naked and let the lessons begin.

**Shiver and Spice**

by Kelley St. John

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**Introduction**

SPICY COOKING, hot weather and sizzling sex—three of the most notable staples of life in Louisiana. Add a little voodoo, vampires and ghosts, and you’ve got enough to keep life interesting for several generations of Vicknairs.

Every member of this unique family can cook a mean gumbo, stay cool in thick humidity and sure enough knows how to burn up the sheets. And while they may not have had firsthand experience with voodoo and vampires—yet—they make up for it in spades with ghosts.

Currently, six Vicknair cousins are doing their part to follow family tradition, guiding lost spirits who need a little help finding the light. Obtaining their spectral assignments from grandmother Adeline, the family matriarch, even in death, the cousins generally don’t have much trouble fulfilling a spirit’s requirement for crossing. However, every now and then, things tend to go awry. A medium might fall in love with a spirit, the way Monique Vicknair did, or a medium’s assignment may help a ghost to save a friend from a killer, which recently happened to Gage Vicknair. But what happened to Monique and Gage isn’t anything compared to what has happened to their brother, Dax.

Dax Vicknair fell in love with a spirit that was helping another to cross over. Unlike Monique’s husband, who was on his way to the light when Dax’s feisty sister sidetracked him, Celeste did cross over, the whole way. And now Dax is stuck over here, helping other ghosts, while the one he wants is an eternity away. Based on this assessment, Dax has determined that life, quite simply, sucks.

But everything isn’t always as it seems, especially when the powers that be, and Grandma Adeline, have anything to say about it.

**Prologue**

CELESTE BEAUCHAMP was in the middle again. Where was this place, this dark room that had become her existence? And which way should she go to get out?

She stood in the center and surveyed her surroundings. A door on her left led to a pathway that she’d traveled before and that she wanted to travel again. A pathway to him. But that door was closed. Another door on her right was open, as it usually was, but she couldn’t remember where it led. And in the center, straight ahead of her, the entire wall looked smooth and complete, but Celeste knew that the middle held a doorway too.

That door was only visible when the light came.

She held up her hand and surveyed it, glowing faintly. Her hair also shimmered, as did the rest of her body. With that center door closed tight, she provided the only source of light in this place.

Was she dead? Yes, she supposed she was, because a dream wouldn’t be this vivid. But if she were dead, then why didn’t she head on to her final destination?

Faint voices, calling her name, caused her to step toward the path to her right. Open and ready, that path would be easy to access. She’d gone there before; she remembered that much. But she never stayed there very long. She always came back here, to this middle place, because this was the way to him.

A soft pop sounded, and a pinprick of light, like a star pushing its way through a stormy cloud, pierced the middle wall and caused Celeste to turn back. It grew a bit, then a little more, until the opening was the size of a dime. Compared to the darkness around it, the radiance was exquisite, and Celeste suddenly longed to touch it. She stepped toward it, then the voices to her right screamed, and she stopped.

Rapid footsteps suddenly echoed in the confines of the room, and then a little girl bolted out of thin air and ran toward the light. Most certainly a ghost, she glowed faintly at first, but then her dress—no, her entire body—absorbed the light, until Celeste had to shield her eyes from the child’s brilliance. Two pigtails of straight brown hair were capped in hot-pink bows that matched the trim on her yellow dress.

“That’s it!” She clapped her hands together until the light grew into a door-size opening that illuminated the entire span of the room. “I’m going on in. Tell Prissy, my sister, to follow me. She’s coming. Tell her where I am, okay?”

“Prissy?” Celeste asked, but the girl was too focused on the light to hear.

“Granny’s in there. She’s waiting for me. Granny, I’m coming! Oh wow, I smell cookies. Chocolate oatmeal, my favorite!” She took another step, then merged with the gleaming light.

“Wait!” Celeste shouted at the same moment that the wall absorbed the light and the girl.

She stepped forward and placed her palm where the light had been. Cold, smooth stone met her touch. She’d seen the lighted doorway before, right after the accident, but she hadn’t entered it that time either. That time, another young ghost had stopped her from passing through. The girl, Chloe, needed help crossing over, and Celeste hadn’t wanted to leave her behind, so she’d ignored the beckoning light and helped Chloe find her way.

That was the only time that the pathway to the left had opened, and Celeste had met Dax.

Dax. As long as she was here, in this strange middle place, she could remember him, think of him, want him. She could see the hazel eyes that had touched her soul, the sexy mouth that seemed always on the verge of a smile, those dark brown waves that framed a face full of sincerity, of kindness, and a touch of mischievousness that had made Celeste’s entire body tingle.

They hadn’t spoken of it before, that amazing chemistry that zinged between them, because they’d both expected her to cross over with Chloe. Plus, he was in the land of the living…and she…wasn’t.

But she didn’t cross with Chloe, and she still wasn’t sure why not. Instead of entering the light, she’d gone down that path toward the voices, but that was all she recalled. And on several occasions, she’d returned here, to this middle room, in the hopes of seeing Dax again, or of finally entering the light.

Neither had happened.

Before, she didn’t try to start a relationship with Dax, didn’t even tell him how she felt. Why start something that they couldn’t finish? But now she realized that that may have been her last chance to really be with a man, to be with Dax. And she’d blown it.

She wanted another shot.

Celeste hadn’t had a lot of experience with men when she was living, only one relationship, and that had basically been two inexperienced teens fumbling their way through the motions. She’d always looked forward to the day when she would experience the kind of intimacy that she’d heard about, where “the earth moved.” She’d certainly never had that, but she sure thought about it a lot when she was in this place. And every time she thought about it, she thought about it with one man…Dax.

She wanted to forget those voices to the right, forget that light in the middle, and head left—to Dax. She stared at the crack in the wall that identified the closed door to his world, where he could show her everything she’d never known about the desire between a man and a woman. She wanted to have that, to taste that pleasure, if only once. Was that too much to ask before she headed to the light?

“I want him,” she whispered.

A loud creaking penetrated the silence, and the blocked entry to her left eased open. An elderly woman, her silver hair glowing around her shoulders, leaned out from the darkness and crooked an elegant finger toward Celeste.

“Come, chère. You can’t stay as long as before. You’re weaker now.” She peered down that other path, the one with the voices, and shook her head. “Why didn’t you go to them more, chère? You’re weak because you didn’t go.”

Celeste looked down that darkened hall. Why would she have stayed down that path? It didn’t have what she wanted. That path didn’t lead to Dax.

“I wish you were stronger, chère, but there’s nothing I can do about that now.” She paused, frowned. “Still, I can let you through, but you must take care. You have to pay attention to your weakened state.”

“You can take me to Dax?” Celeste asked, hurriedly moving toward the woman with the jet-black eyes and silver-white hair.

“Not me. Prissy needs your help. She’s scared. And the powers that be are allowing you to help her, the way you helped Chloe, so she isn’t afraid. She’ll take you to Dax.”

“How long?” Celeste asked, eager to see him but wanting to know the limitations. “How long can I stay?”

“It all depends, chère. You’ll grow weaker the longer you’re on that side, and with each interaction with one who’s living, you’ll grow weaker still. You could have been so much stronger. You’ve been here two months, but you didn’t rest enough. You should have let them help you get stronger, instead of fighting them and staying here, in the middle.” She glanced down that path with the voices again, then she quirked her mouth to the side. “My guess, chère, is twelve hours at best, but more likely six. It all depends on how much strength your trip takes from your spirit, and how much you interact with the living.”

“Interact,” Celeste repeated, then she remembered the main rule for mediums and spirits. “But we can’t touch.”

“A medium may not touch a spirit,” the other woman said at a whisper, as though she feared someone was listening. “But there is no rule saying you cannot touch, chère.”

Celeste swallowed as the impact of the woman’s statement sank in. “I can touch him.”

“Come, chère. Prissy needs you, and my grandson needs you too.”

“Your grandson?”

“Dax. He needs you.”

And that was enough for Celeste to follow, no further questions asked.

**1**

DAX VICKNAIR carried another heavy box out of the plantation and placed it against the others already lining the majority of his brother-in-law’s truck. Ryan Chappelle, the brother-in-law in question, merely shook his head and grinned.

“How much more does she have in—” He stopped speaking and hustled toward the porch, where Monique was attempting to carry a box twice her size down the stairs.

“Woman, you’re going to be the death of me,” Ryan groaned, taking the heavy box.

“You already died once,” Dax reminded him, smirking, then turned to Monique. “You better go easy on him this time, sis. He’s not ready for the light again yet.”

Monique gladly let go of her end of the box and let her husband take over. She wiped her damp forehead with her palm, pushing thick blond curls away from her face. “He doesn’t want me going easy on him, regarding anything,” she said. “Isn’t that right, dear? He likes things hard, and so do I.”

Ryan’s smile said way more than any words could have managed, and Dax didn’t really want to hear about it anyway.

“Too much information,” Dax grumbled, heading back in for another load. He paused momentarily when an echo of laughter invaded his thoughts, a little girl’s laughter. He’d heard it a few times today and knew what it meant: a ghost was on the way. Probably before the day ended, he’d have a young spirit to help. Another one to help, but no one on the other side was willing to help him.

He frowned. Sure, he was mad at the powers that be for not seeming to care that he’d lost his heart to a ghost that was gone, but the little girl who’d be visiting him soon wasn’t to blame. He’d have to suck it up and put on a smile, for her sake. She’d already died young; she didn’t need to be faced with a pissed-off medium, too. So Dax would cheer up before she got here. Right now, however, he was going to wallow in being jealous of all the love currently surrounding him, courtesy of Monique and Ryan.

Truthfully, he wasn’t bothered that his sister was so blissfully happy in marriage, or even that she was moving out of the plantation and into a home in Ormond, near her beauty salon and Ryan’s new roofing job; he was bothered because he wanted a little bliss, too.

Then again, his foul mood didn’t seem to dampen spirits around here. Monique and Ryan were in full newlywed mode, only a month since they tied the knot in Vegas, and Gage, Dax’s older brother, had recently become engaged and was also perpetually smiling lately with his fiancée, Kayla, by his side. In short, they were all way too happy for someone who was currently in a don’t-piss-me-off mood. Misery truly loves company, and so far, Dax hadn’t found anyone else as…

“Listen, if you two are done with Dax, I could use his help, and I’m talking about his brain, not his brawn,” Nanette said from the front door. Her arms were crossed against her chest, one foot tapped the threshold impatiently and dark brows drew together in a scowl. Clothed in a black blouse and black skinny pants, she resembled a prison guard waiting for him to enter his cell.

Dax grinned. Leave it to Nan to bring the atmosphere back down to his level. Nanette was always in semi-bitch mode. She tried to act like that was just the way she was, but Dax knew better. She was scared to death that the Vicknair family was about to lose their beloved plantation and perhaps therefore lose their ability to help the spirits, something she deemed part of the “Vicknair legacy.” The home had taken a big hit from Hurricane Katrina, and the parish president, Charles Roussel, had been trying to put it on the top line of the demolition list ever since the storm. So far, they’d fought him every time, and won, every time.

Right now, however, the problem wasn’t with Charles Roussel and the locals. Oh, no—in an effort to bypass Roussel’s authority entirely, Nanette had decided to try to get the Vicknair plantation added to the National Register of Historic Places.

There were tons of steps involved, but Nanette thought the potential results would be worth the effort. Dax did too; he just wasn’t sure what kind of chance they stood.

Truthfully, he agreed with Nan that the two of them seemed to care more about saving the house than the other Vicknair cousins. Maybe it was because she was the oldest and he was the youngest male; she felt responsible for maintaining the Vicknair legacy, and he was the last with the Vicknair name. Or maybe it was because they were the only two cousins currently residing in the plantation. Even though Nanette had told all of them that she believed they’d have a better chance of saving the place if they were all living there, the others hadn’t thought it necessary and had moved on to their independence.

Jenee, the only cousin younger than Dax, actually cited the plantation as her permanent residence, but she rarely stayed there anymore. Helping to renovate the Seven Sisters Shelter in Chalmette, she tended to stay there full-time and only came back to the plantation for their traditional Saturday workdays. So basically, while the remainder of the cousins went about living their lives as usual, Nan and Dax were left to save their family home. Everyone else put in a hard day’s work once a week, but as far as pulling a rabbit out of the hat with the National Historic Register, that was up to Dax and Nanette.

If they did make the cut, Roussel couldn’t touch them with a ten-foot pole, which, naturally, was the goal. Problem was, Nanette had also learned that the home would stand a much better chance of making the list if it had been inhabited during the Civil War.

So far, neither Nanette, nor anyone who lived in St. Charles parish, had any proof whatsoever that the Vicknair plantation had been inhabited during the Civil War. In fact, all indications pointed to the entire family leaving to fight in the war. There weren’t even references to women and children at the place in the papers on file at the parish courthouse.

But Nanette wouldn’t believe that the Vicknairs had all left—who would have tended to the visiting spirits if they had? Not that she could tell the folks in charge that that was the reason for her doubt—and she expected Dax, known for his fascination for figuring things out, to help her prove it.

Dax had always had a knack for putting pieces of a puzzle together. When he was younger, he’d used that skill at crossword puzzles and Sudoku. Now that he was older, his primary challenges involved figuring out which prescriptions worked best for the young patients on his pediatric-pharmaceuticals route. But regardless of his puzzle-solving talents, he hadn’t figured out the answer regarding the Vicknair plantation and where the family had gone during the Civil War…yet.

“I haven’t found a thing on the Internet about Vicknairs living here then. And we’ve already checked everything at the courthouse,” he said, following her through the swinging door that led to the kitchen. “The Vicknairs all headed out to support their country. Well, the Southern half of it, anyway. We’re going to have to look somewhere else to find the answers.”

“I know, but I have no idea where to look. There’s got to be something we’re missing,” she said, grabbing a tall green thermos from beneath the sink. Twisting the cap off, she took the full coffeepot and poured the entire contents in.

Dax frowned. “Going somewhere?” They typically searched for information together.

“I’ve got parent–teacher conferences tonight. Starting in an hour. No telling how long they’ll take, since we’ve got more ninth-graders this year than ever before, and since the majority of them feel that my first assigned essay is beyond the realm of ninth-grade history.”

“What essay?”

“I’m asking them to write about their family lineage,” she said. “Their Acadian ancestry in particular, if that’s their history.”

“In case you’re wondering, I’m betting none of your students know anything about our ancestors living in this place during the Civil War.”

“That’s not the reason I—” She rolled her eyes. “Oh, all right, our current dilemma did make me wish we had better records of our family history, and I decided to help them learn their own histories too.” She shrugged. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“Poor kids.” He dropped into a chair at the table. “And do you need the entire pot of coffee?”

She huffed out a breath, but grabbed a ceramic mug from the dish rack and poured one cup of coffee from her thermos. “Because you’re helping me, I’ll sacrifice a cup. And because you’ve been a literal pain in the ass lately.” She hesitated, then added, “Listen, I know it was tough when she crossed, but brooding isn’t going to help. Finding out whether this house had anybody in it during the Civil War, however, just might.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. How exactly is that helping me, again?”

“We both know the Vicknairs wouldn’t have left this place empty. And you know that you can figure out who was here. I haven’t seen a puzzle yet that you couldn’t solve.”

He nodded. “Right, but what has that got to do with helping me with my current situation?”

“You know, for someone so smart, sometimes it takes you a while to catch on.” She took a sip from the thermos, then put the lid back on. “I’m keeping you busy, and when you’re busy, you don’t think about it.”

“About her, you mean,” he corrected. “I don’t think about her. And you’re wrong. I still think about her.” He took a deep breath, exhaled.

“But?”

Dax shook his head. “Hell, you’re right, to a point. Working on this house stuff is keeping my mind off of my situation, somewhat.” He looked up at Nan, leaning against the counter with her thermos now tucked under one arm. “But my mind’s never completely off of it, Celeste.”

She frowned. “You mean Nanette.”

“Right.”

“At least you called me somebody that I know you like.” She laughed, but Dax didn’t. How was he supposed to live the rest of his life without seeing Celeste again? And hell, he never even told her how he felt.

“Dax?”

“Yeah.”

“I really do appreciate you helping me with this.”

“I know you do, and I appreciate your reason for trying to keep me busy. But I still think this shouldn’t be a two-person show. This is their heritage too, you know.” Dax knew he and Nanette were the two best suited for finding the information they needed; he simply felt like complaining about the other cousins. It was a much-needed break from brooding.

“Monique and Ryan are getting set up in their new house, and Ryan’s starting his new roofing job, so they’re busy. Tristan is working at the firehouse. Between her college classes and trying to raise money for the Seven Sisters Shelter, Jenee doesn’t have time to help. And…”

“And?”

“And they aren’t really your problem. You’ve got to get over it—get over her—on your own. Get your mind on something else. Sure, working on finding our house’s history will help, but why don’t you go out, too. Before this summer, you were out with someone different all the time. You haven’t even been on a date since she left, have you?”

“Your point?”

“Half the women in the parish would jump at the chance to go out with you, and you’re sitting around in an eternal stag mode, pining over a woman you can never have. I think it’s about time you got out of that self-induced funk.”

“I sure hope you’re kinder to your students.” He took a big sip of coffee and enjoyed the strong taste of chicory on his tongue.

“Nope, I pretty much lay it all on the line.” She smiled, and Dax couldn’t help but reciprocate. Nanette had one of those killer grins that just made him feel better, even if he really wasn’t in the mood to feel all that much better now.

He took another sip of coffee and could already feel the strong surge of caffeine giving him a jolt.

“You know, you could go out tonight, and then search for more information later,” she said. “There are a couple of teachers at the high school who have asked if you’re still avail—”

Dax held up a hand. He didn’t want to be fixed up, especially not with Nanette’s coworkers. It’d be way too easy for her to get the sordid details, and he wasn’t about to be high-school teacher lounge fodder. More than that, he could have a date every night of the week, with a different female every night, and could damn well get lucky each and every time…and it wouldn’t help. That was another reason for his current state of frustration. He needed a good all-night bout of hot and heated, wild and wicked, no-holds-barred sex, but he didn’t want it with anyone except Celeste. And he’d never even touched her.

But he’d sure dreamed about touching her, and doing a lot of other things to her, too. How was he supposed to move on to breathing females, when he had it so bad for a ghost? And a crossed-over one at that?

“Just so you know,” he said, “I’ve got a spirit coming, so I probably don’t need to go out tonight, and I’m not sure how much time I’ll have to search for Civil War Vicknairs.”

There, maybe that’d get Nanette off his back about dating, or lack thereof.

As he suspected, word of a ghost coming got her attention. She placed her thermos on the counter. “You’ve got a spirit on the way? Boy or girl?”

Even though they’d never officially decided to specialize in certain spirits, each Vicknair cousin always seemed to get the same type of ghostly visitors. Dax, for example, typically helped children to cross over. Now was no exception. The soft giggles he’d heard all day confirmed that a little girl was on her way. “Girl.”

“I haven’t had an assignment in three months,” Nan said, her disappointment evident.

“Maybe Grandma Adeline is giving you a break until the school year is further along. The beginning is always the most difficult for you, isn’t it? When you’re starting to learn the new students and all?” he said. Nanette tended to worry more than the other cousins when she went too long without being asked to help a ghost cross over. Dax suspected that she actually judged her self-worth by the number of ghosts she helped to cross. Oddly enough, she was happier when she got a visit from a ghost in trouble. It wasn’t that she liked knowing the ghost was having a hard time; it was simply that she liked helping. That was just the way she was, and was probably the reason she’d gone into teaching in the first place.

“Maybe,” she said, still frowning.

“Anyway, I’ve got a little girl coming, so I’ll search the Net for more information until she gets here, but once she does, I’ll need to spend my time with her.”

“Of course.” Nanette picked her thermos back up, glancing at the clock. “Ghosts always come first, and maybe I’ll get another one soon.”

Dax nodded, knowing that Nanette would be thrilled to cut parent–teacher conferences short in order to help a spirit. But if she hadn’t heard thunder today, her sign that spirits were on the way, it probably wasn’t going to happen anytime soon.

He held up his mug as she started to pass, and she topped off his coffee. Then the giggling got louder, and he closed his eyes to hear the little girl.

“Your ghost?” Nanette asked.

“Yeah.”

“You should go see if you have a letter yet,” she said, referring to the lavender-tinted notes their grandmother sent from the other side to inform them of their medium assignments. The envelopes were always left in the same place, on the silver tea service in the sitting room, and would tell Dax the identity, and the requirement for crossing, of the child whose giggle had overpowered his thoughts.

“Go on,” Nanette instructed. “Don’t worry about searching for information now. If you get more time later, then you can try to find something.”

The laughter got louder, and he stood. “I think you’re right.” Finishing off his cup of coffee, he placed his mug in the sink. “I may already have a letter.”

Nanette crossed the kitchen and hugged him, and his face was suddenly smothered in her thick black hair. “Tell me all about her when I get back,” she said, then turned and exited through the back door.

Dax watched her climb into her old red Camaro, and smiled. The Vicknairs may not have a lot of money to spare, with every dime going into keeping the house from falling in, but even if they didn’t drive the newest cars around, they sure enough drove the coolest. Or in Nan’s case, the fastest.

He watched her head out, leaving a cloud of dust in her wake, then examined the sky. It was growing darker as late afternoon turned to evening, and he hoped that his ghost would show soon. He’d always had a soft spot for kids, whether they were breathing or not.

Dax exited the kitchen, then made his way up the stairs to the rose-tinted sitting room. The tea service was void of an envelope, but he’d barely crossed the room when a pale purple letter materialized in its center.

“Perfect timing,” he said, stepping forward to verify the fact that the name on the outside, written in his grandmother’s swirling script, was his.

Dax.

Adeline Vicknair’s favorite scent, magnolia, wafted from the stationery. Sitting down on the red velvet settee, Dax picked up the envelope, and the giggles in his head immediately ceased. He opened it and withdrew the usual three sheets of paper composing a medium’s assignment. The top one, on pale purple stationery with a scalloped border, was his grandmother’s letter.

Dax read the information at the top of the page.

Name of Deceased—Priscilla “Prissy” Fontenot.

Reason for Death—Car accident.

The bottom of the page identified what the young spirit had to do to cross over.

Requirement for Passage—Making sure her father is okay and telling her parents goodbye.

Dax nodded at the familiar requirement. Often, particularly in the case of an accident, a ghost would want to let the person who felt responsible for their death know that they weren’t hurting on the other side, that they were, in fact, in a better place and that they would see each other again. What’s more, a ghost could view those they were close to on this side from the other realm. That fact always seemed to ease the minds of the loved ones who remained here.

Dax frowned. Ghosts could see individuals that they were close to on this side. Could Celeste see him? Did she ever try? And would he be able to sense her watching? Surely he would sense something if she were, wouldn’t he? But he hadn’t felt her at all, not since the day she left.

Frustrated with that realization, he dropped the purple page on the couch, then moved to the second sheet. As usual, it listed rules for dealing with the spirits. Naturally, he knew them all, but since he was required to read the pages in their entirety before his assignment officially began, he read them again. They were pretty basic. Take care of the spirit’s needs in a timely manner, don’t abuse the bonding that occurs between medium and spirit, and don’t touch a spirit.

He dropped the sheet of rules on top of the first page and moved to the final page, the official document directing his grandmother to assign Prissy Fontenot to one of her grandchildren. His assignment, like the rules, was straightforward and to the point. Basically, he had one day to make sure the young spirit took care of her business on this side and headed toward the light.

One day. Not much time for visiting, but the spirits seemed to know best when it came to ghostly requirements for crossing. Maybe the little girl would get too attached if she spent longer with her parents before crossing, and then find it harder to go to the light. Or maybe someone was waiting for her on the other side, and she needed to get there quickly. There were all types of reasons that the powers that be could have given Priscilla—Prissy—Fontenot such a short time to fulfill her requirement for crossing. But at least the requirement was an easy one, and one Dax could help her with in a prompt manner.

If she only had to see that her father was okay and say goodbye to her parents before she crossed, Dax could tell her how to visit them. They wouldn’t be able to see her, of course, but they’d still feel her presence. Once she saw they were all right, she would immediately cross over.

He refolded the pages and tucked them back in the envelope. How long before the little girl showed?

“We’re here,” a small voice whispered from behind him.

Dax’s first thought was…we? Then he turned and saw a tiny girl, smiling softly, with a beautiful golden-haired beauty holding her hand.

Celeste.

Her hair was as long as he remembered, the blond spirals touching her waist. Last time he’d seen her, she’d been wearing a yellow tank top and jeans, but now she wore a loose white gown that barely clung to her shoulders and was so sheer, he could almost—almost—see if she was a real blonde.

A whirlwind of questions cluttered Dax’s mind. How was she here? And why? Hadn’t she crossed already? And why was her clothing different? Because she’d crossed over entirely? Or was it something else?

Was she even here? Or was his mind merely seeing what he wanted—desperately wanted—to see.

She smiled, and Dax knew this was no fantasy. She was here. His ghost had returned.

“Celeste.”

**2**

DURING EACH of her trips to that middle room, Celeste had dreamed of seeing Dax again, had planned what she’d say, what she’d do. Now that he was right in front of her, her throat was dry, her knees were weak, and her entire body burned to get closer, closer to the only man who’d truly touched her heart, so much that even on the other side, she hadn’t been willing to let his memory go.

And she could touch him.

Celeste ached to reach for him, to run her fingers down the strong features of his face, brush her mouth across his and get to know him in the most intimate of ways, but she still didn’t know if he felt for her what she felt for him. And she suspected that Dax had no idea that the no-touching rule didn’t apply to spirits.

The tiny girl beside her squeezed Celeste’s hand and reminded her of the main reason she couldn’t act on impulse right now. She couldn’t even attempt to confront whatever existed between the two of them until they took care of Prissy.

“Celeste?” Dax’s hazel eyes were as mesmerizing as she remembered, dark brown lashes further emphasizing the golden flecks around their center. Those eyes drew her in, held her captive. He looked so good, so real, so alive. And there was something deeper in those eyes, an intensity that she believed she recognized and understood. Desire. The way he was looking at her…was exactly the way she was feeling toward him. As though he couldn’t wait to get as close as possible, and to do all of the things they hadn’t done before.

She forced herself to swallow, then nodded.

“You—haven’t crossed,” he said, his head shaking slightly as he made the statement, as though it wasn’t possible that she was standing in his grandmother’s sitting room, in the very place where she’d met him before, with another little girl by her side.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Why didn’t you?” he asked, stepping toward her, and one corner of his mouth quirked up in that semi-smile she remembered. She licked her lips and imagined teasing that sexy smile with her tongue. There were so many things she wanted to try, wanted to do.

“I’ve wanted you—wanted to see you—again.” His head shook again, still apparently trying to determine how she’d returned. “Where have you been?”

She wished she could give him an answer. “I don’t know.”

Evidently tired of listening to the adults and ready to get to her own mission, Prissy tugged at Celeste’s arm. “Is that him? Are you Dax? The one who’ll take me to Daddy? I need to make sure he’s okay, and I want to tell him and Mama goodbye.”

Celeste tried to focus on the little girl and not on Dax, but Adeline Vicknair’s words kept whispering in her thoughts.

“Twelve hours at best, but more likely six.”

She didn’t have time to waste, but they had to help Prissy get to her parents. What if that took all the time she had? And what if she never could get back again? She wanted to talk to Dax, really get to know him, learn as much as possible about him before she crossed. And she wanted to make love with him.

“You’ll help me?” Prissy asked, and Celeste put her own fears at bay. Hopefully, she’d still have at least a bit of time left after they helped the little girl. Maybe not enough to experience everything she wanted to, but she wasn’t going to worry about that now. She had another chance to be with Dax, and she was grateful for whatever time they got. As soon as they took care of Prissy, she’d spend every minute, every second, with him.

“Yes, I’ll help you,” Dax said to Prissy, then he gave Celeste a soft smile. “I can’t believe you’re here. I thought—well, I didn’t think I’d see you again. There’s so much I want to say, but—” he looked at Prissy and smiled at the eager expression on her face “—I need to get you to your folks first, don’t I?”

She nodded, and Dax crouched down to eye level with her. Then he looked up toward Celeste. “You’re here? I mean, you aren’t leaving anytime soon?”

“Six to twelve hours,” she said honestly.

His smile slipped, but then he nodded. “I’ll take what I can get.” Then he turned his attention back to Prissy. “I will help you see your parents again, okay?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Okay.”

Celeste noted how at ease Dax was with the little ghost. He obviously knew that crouching to her level would make her more comfortable; he was the type of guy who would remember those kind of little things, the type of guy who paid attention to details. Celeste wondered if that trait carried over to other aspects of his life. Was he always that in tune with what people needed? Would he be that in tune to what his lover needed?

She swallowed. Yes, he would.

She could hardly wait.

Prissy, oblivious to the sensual tension filling the room, rattled, “My sister, Cassie, she went over already, you know, to see Granny. But I just want to see Mama and Daddy one more time, and maybe hug them, if I can. Can I?”

“Yes,” Dax said, his voice thick with emotion—for the little ghost, or for Celeste? Or both?

“Ms. Adeline said you can help me get back to them. I was scared to come down the dark path at first, but then Ms. Adeline found Celeste, and she kept me from being afraid.”

“I’m glad she did,” he said, then those hazel eyes focused on Celeste once more. “Very glad.” There was no denying that his words were spoken more to Celeste than to Prissy, and the desire in his tone was unmistakable.

“Do you know them? My daddy and mama? My daddy’s name is Stanton, and my mama’s name is Rebecca.” Prissy’s pigtails bobbed with every word.

She wore clothing similar to what her twin had been wearing, except where hot-pink bows had adorned Cassie’s head, bright yellow ones topped off Prissy’s brown hair. And where Cassie’s dress had been yellow trimmed in pink, Prissy’s was hot pink trimmed in yellow. Celeste imagined the twins together, in their matching dresses and identical angelic faces, and was sure that, in their parents’ minds, they were unique treasures.

Celeste wondered where they had been going when they died. They were dressed up, maybe for church?

She glanced down at the glowing white satin gown that covered her body. Last time she came to Dax, she’d had on the jeans and tank that she’d been wearing when the bus crashed. Why had she changed? And how?

Prissy continued talking, but Celeste wasn’t listening; she was surveying the way the young girl’s body glowed. A bright, almost golden-yellow light illuminated Prissy’s entire body; in contrast, Celeste’s body was cloaked in a pale, creamy luminance.

Was the difference because she was an adult, and Prissy a child? Or was there more to it?

Prissy’s sobs quickly yanked her away from her thoughts. “I miss them.”

Celeste’s heart ached for the little girl’s parents, specifically for her father, who Adeline had said was driving the car when it crashed.

“Can you see them now?” Dax leaned toward the girl, but didn’t reach out to touch her, Celeste noticed. She wondered if that was why she’d been called to help Prissy, and Chloe, with crossing. Right now, as Dax spoke to the little girl, her hand gripped Celeste’s, as though she was fearful to let go. It had to be scary for these young children to try to complete these tasks on their own. Even with a medium to help, they’d need someone who could hold their tiny hand, someone…like Celeste. She returned Prissy’s squeeze and smiled down at the little girl.

Prissy nodded at Dax. “I saw them as soon as we got here,” she said. “Right after Celeste and I left Ms. Adeline and then came here, I could see them. And I need to talk to them.”

“Where are they?” Dax asked, still at Prissy’s eye level.

“At the hospital,” she said, her black eyes glittering. “Ms. Adeline said to tell you it’s the one where your brother works. That’s where Daddy is.”

Dax nodded. “Where Gage works. That’s Ochsner, in New Orleans. Tell me something, Prissy. Can you still see them, right now? Because if you can see your parents now, you can go to them at the hospital. All you have to do is think about wanting to be with them, and you’ll go directly to that room. You can stay beside them and try to comfort them.”

“But they won’t know I’m there,” she said. “Not unless you come too, so you can tell them.”

“Some people don’t realize when a spirit is near, but most do, particularly if it’s someone they care about and love, the way your parents love you.”

“But I need you to come, so I’m sure that they know I’m there. I want them to know,” she said, her small face set with fierce determination.

“I’m going to leave right now to go to the hospital,” he assured. “But Ochsner is a good hour’s drive from here, so it’ll take me a little time to get there. If you want to come with me in my car, you can, or you can go on ahead and stay with them, until I get there. When I’m there, I’ll help you communicate with them.”

“Then I can talk to them, you mean?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

“Okay. Then I’d like to go to them now, please,” she said, and tilted her head toward Celeste. “You’ll come too, won’t you?”

“Of course I will. I won’t leave you,” Celeste said calmly, though her emotions were in turmoil. An hour’s drive. Another hour of her time with Dax.

Prissy turned back to Dax. “So we’ll see you in an hour, right?”

“I’ll see you in an hour.” He stood and looked pointedly at Celeste. “Six to twelve hours, right?”

“That’s what Adeline said.”

His smile faltered slightly. “Okay. Then we’ll make the most of them.”

“Yes.” She swallowed. “Dax, after we help Prissy…”

He waited. When she didn’t continue, he prompted, “After we help Prissy…”

“I need you—”

“Come on, I see them!” Prissy excitedly pulled on Celeste’s hand. The two of them instantly left the plantation, and Dax, and arrived at the hospital room.

Prissy ran to the man in the bed, and the woman sitting at his side, while Celeste’s head reeled from the rapid change in scenery. Her body suddenly felt as if she’d run a marathon. She moved to the opposite side of the room, found a chair and sat down. She was exhausted, already tired and drained from her brief time here, and she hadn’t even touched Dax yet.

She had an hour before he would arrive at the hospital, and she needed to rest while Prissy spent time with her parents. Otherwise, she might not have the strength to even talk to Dax again, much less anything else.

Dax. She’d been prepared to tell him that she needed him to help her, too, to show her how everything could be between a man and a woman, when they truly bonded, truly joined souls. Prissy’s exclamation had halted her midsentence. But really, she didn’t need any more words. Those three said it all.

I need you.

**3**

“CELESTE. CELESTE, wake up.” Dax’s voice echoed in her thoughts, and she opened her eyes to see him looking down at her. His hands were on the armrests of the hospital chair and he leaned above her, so close, but not nearly close enough.

“Is she okay? I just thought she was tired,” Prissy said, moving from her spot beside her father’s bed to stand by Celeste’s chair.

“You’re all right?” he asked Celeste, tilting his head as he looked into her eyes.

“Yes,” she said. “I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“Who’s Celeste?” Prissy’s mother asked Dax. She looked past him to what must have appeared to her eyes to be an empty chair.

“Someone else is here?” Prissy’s father asked from the bed.

Dax’s dark brows furrowed. “I’ll be right back.” Then he moved away from Prissy and Celeste and briefly explained to the little girl’s parents about the spirit that had accompanied their daughter to this side.

Prissy scooted closer to Celeste and excitedly chatted nonstop while he was speaking. “Dax said he’d never seen a ghost sleep before. He tried to wake you up when he first got here, but you were so sound asleep that he decided to let you rest while he talked to my mama and daddy, because he said you must be tired. Guess what, they can feel me when I touch them. Did you know that? Isn’t that amazing? And now they know that I’m okay, and that Cassie’s okay.” She tilted her head. “You are just tired, right? You’re not sick or anything, are you? You’ve been asleep a long time.”

“No,” Celeste said. “I’m not sick.” Could ghosts even get sick? She didn’t know. If asked before now, she’d have said they couldn’t, but she’d also have wagered that ghosts didn’t sleep. And she’d been asleep…a long time? “How long? Prissy, how long did I sleep?” she asked, unable to control the tinge of panic in her tone.

How much time had she lost?

“I don’t know,” Prissy looked up at Dax, who’d returned to stand beside her. “She wants to know how long she slept.”

“Just long enough for me to drive here and talk with Prissy’s folks. An hour and a half, I’d say. Celeste, are you okay?”

She nodded. She did feel better now, though she was disappointed that some of her precious time on this side had been wasted. Celeste glanced out the hospital window to see that it was now dark, definitely evening. When they’d arrived here, there had been some daylight outside; she was sure of it. “What time is it now, Dax? How much time do we have before I have to leave?”

“It’s just past eight. You and Prissy got to the plantation around six,” he said. “So, based on what you told me, midnight at the earliest, or six in the morning at the latest.”

“I hope it’s the latest,” she said and was rewarded with one of his sexy grins.

“Trust me, I do too.”

She straightened in the chair, and he backed away, giving her room to stand, being careful not to touch her while she did.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” he repeated.

“Yes, much better now.” She was telling the truth. That nap had given her more energy, and she was grateful for that, even if it did use up some of her time. Besides, Dax had been en route to the hospital, so that was the perfect opportunity to rest.

“You’ll grow weaker the longer you’re on that side, and with each interaction with one who’s living, you’ll grow weaker still. It all depends on how much strength your trip takes from your spirit, and how much you interact with the living.”

Was Celeste weak from the initial trip to this side, or was she weak from interacting with Dax? She prayed it was the trip. Because they’d barely interacted at all…yet.

“Are you leaving?” Prissy asked.

Dax nodded. “Yes, but you can stay with your folks until it’s time for you to cross.”

“Prissy’s staying with us a while?” her father asked. His face was bruised from the accident, and a line of stitches creased his right brow, but he still managed a smile at the thought of having one of his daughters with him a little longer, even if only in spirit.

“Prissy was given a day to visit with you, and at the end of that time, she’ll cross. But until then, she can stay with both of you here,” Dax said.

“Thank you. Thank you for letting us know that she and Cassie are okay, and will be okay until we see them again,” her mother said, her voice quivering as she spoke.

Prissy moved back by the bed and kissed her father’s cheek. He moved his hand to the very spot she’d touched. “I feel her.” Then the little girl turned to her mother and hugged her. The woman closed her eyes and whispered, “I do too.”

“We’ll leave you alone now.” Dax moved toward the door and Celeste followed.

They’d barely shut the door when he said, “Come on, I don’t want to waste any of our time.” He turned and started down the hallway, darting his attention from room to room, until finally, at the end of the hallway, he found what he was evidently looking for, an unoccupied hospital room. “In here.”

Celeste followed him inside, then watched him lock the door. Turning, he thoroughly inspected her, starting with her face, then down her glowing body.

“You’re really here.”

She could see the questions, the confusion, clearly in his eyes. He had no idea how she’d returned, or whether she’d be able to come back again, and unfortunately, neither did she. But Celeste didn’t want to waste time trying to figure it out. She didn’t want to return to the middle with regrets over not telling him what she so desperately wanted him to know. “Dax, I—”

“Wait.” He still leaned against the door, as if he suspected that somehow someone would come in and ruin this moment, this perfect moment, with the two of them together, and completely alone. Celeste felt the same way. She was finally with him, and it seemed, indeed was, too good to be true. Eventually, she’d be pulled away again. The impulse to simply grab him, kiss him, be with him, was so strong…but the impulse to tell him everything she was feeling, everything she’d felt for him since she’d left last time, was equally strong.

His voice was deep and urgent as he spoke. “I know you said you should be here for hours, but I don’t want to bank on anything. There’s something I’ve wanted to tell you, something I should have said the last time, before you left in the summer.”

Celeste knew it wasn’t possible, but she could swear that she felt her heart racing as he spoke.

“Celeste, I haven’t stopped thinking of you. I’ve wanted to kick myself for not taking advantage of the days we had together. That week with you and Chloe, well, it meant more to me than any other assignment I’ve had, not only because we helped Chloe cross over, but because I spent those days with you, getting to know you, being around you, watching you with Chloe…and feeling you with me.” Dax swallowed, and his jaw tensed before he spoke again. “The last two months, since you left, I’ve been a real ass to be around.” He gave her that crooked grin. “Just ask my cousins. Hell, I thought you were gone, crossed over, completely. And I didn’t think you could come back after you crossed.”

“I don’t think I could have come back, if I had crossed over. But I didn’t.”

“Why not?” he asked, then smiled again, and again, she sensed her pulse racing. “And just so you know, I’m asking so we can try to keep it from happening. I don’t want you to cross Celeste. We haven’t had enough time together, not nearly enough.”

She looked down to verify that she was, indeed, still glowing, still a spirit instead of living, breathing flesh and bones. To her dismay, the glow was definitely still there, and even a little brighter than before, more pale yellow than creamy white. She frowned.

“What is it?” Dax asked. “Tell me.”

“For a moment, I thought that maybe—maybe I was alive again.” She looked back up and was touched by the heartfelt emotion in those hazel eyes. “But that isn’t possible, is it?”

“If it is, I’ll find a way to make it happen. I swear it. And trust me, I’m a firm believer, especially now, that you can’t rule out anything about the other side.” He stepped away from the door and moved closer to Celeste, so close that she could feel his breath against her lips.

“How can I keep you here, or how can I help you come back again? Just tell me, before you have to go. I don’t want to lose you again.”

“Dax,” she whispered. “I—I don’t know why I didn’t cross. Part of me feels like it’s because my spirit simply wasn’t ready to head to the light, but another part thinks that…”

“What?” he asked, so close now that she could see his pulse throbbing solidly at his throat.

She licked her lips and thought of how that pulse would feel against her mouth. “Part of me feels like I didn’t cross because I couldn’t leave you.”

The pulse at his throat grew quicker still, and Celeste couldn’t hold back anymore. She longed for him to move even closer, for that sexy mouth to touch hers, and then for his body to touch her, truly touch her, from head to toe, so that no part of her wasn’t completely engulfed by Dax. She burned to feel even more, to have him inside of her, filling her, making her complete just once before she had to cross again.

“Dax, I know you can’t touch me,” she whispered, “but those rules don’t apply to me. And I’ve been aching for this.” Her hand trembled as she tenderly brought her fingertips to his cheek.

Heat, powerful scorching heat seared through her body the moment she touched him, warming her, filling her, exciting her. She eased her hand along his face and reveled in the coarse stubble against the pads of her fingertips. Each and every sensation fueled her desire. She didn’t know what was happening, didn’t understand how merely touching him caused her to gasp, made her chest clench tight, and created an intense spiraling need deep within her core…but it did. And she didn’t want to stop.

“Celeste.” His voice was a low, guttural growl. Whatever was happening wasn’t one-sided, and the knowledge that she was having the same effect on him added even more fuel to the flame.

“I want you,” she said, moving her hands to the buttons on his shirt. She fumbled with the first one, and then the second, while Dax’s hands fisted at his sides.

“I want—I need to touch you, Celeste,” he said, and she saw his hands open, then reach toward her.

She swallowed, shook her head. “No, Dax, please. Don’t. Don’t do anything that could cause them to make me leave. I can touch you. Just let me touch you, just once.” Her hands continued to move down the buttons on his shirt, while his clenched into tight fists again.

“Hell, Celeste, I want you too.”

She pulled the two sides of his shirt apart and slid her palms against his solid chest, then she leaned toward him, rested her head against his warmth and watched the way her glowing hair shimmered beside his muscled flesh. His heart pounded fiercely, and she took pleasure in the steady vibration that emphasized the life still bristling within him. She wanted to feel that way again, wanted to feel alive again, and she believed she knew how to make that happen. “I want to make love to you, Dax, before I go.” She turned her head and kissed the pulse in his neck, and felt the hardness of his erection against her stomach.

Her skin was on fire, her body burning, needing and determined…but something else was joining in the flurry of emotions she was experiencing, and Celeste recognized it with a sudden pang of fear. “No,” she whispered as her energy started to drain, and her body began glowing brighter.

The door to the room shook, and a female voice called from the other side, “Hello? Is someone in there? We need this room.” Then the woman cleared her throat and yelled, “Can you bring me the keys?”

Dax’s curse was softly spoken against her hair. “Damn. We’ve got to go somewhere else, Celeste.”

“I—” She struggled to form the words, but it was getting harder and harder to concentrate, and harder to move away from Dax, and from the heat he generated within her. “I can’t.”

He looked down at her, and the desire in his eyes quickly converted to concern. “Celeste. What’s happening?”

She glanced at her hands against his chest, and they were painfully bright now, almost as bright as Cassie had been right before she stepped into the light. And she was so very tired. “Need to rest,” she said, and felt the truth of the statement. If she didn’t rest, she feared that she might have no choice but to head toward the light; she might not have the strength to fight it. But if she rested, she lost more time with Dax.

Celeste felt her spirit begin to fade. But it wasn’t time yet. Six hours at least; that’s what Adeline had guessed, but it hadn’t nearly been six hours yet.

“Don’t leave, Celeste. Fight it,” he said. “Stay with me.”

“Need to rest a while,” she whispered, but the words were slurred as her spirit pulled at her to leave the room.

The lock to the door turned, and Dax quickly asked, “Where? Where are you going?”

“Plantation.” It was the only place she could think of to go, and the only word she managed to say before she suddenly found herself on the velvet settee in Adeline’s sitting room. There she closed her eyes and prayed for enough energy to do…everything she wanted before her time ran out completely.

THE DOOR TO the hospital room opened, and a scowling nurse barreled in. “Excuse me, but did you not hear me knocking?” she snapped. “We need this room.”

“Right, I’m leaving,” Dax said, pushing by her and catching a glimpse of a gurney, evidently the patient they were wheeling in, as he darted past. Celeste was on her way to the plantation to rest, if the powers that be didn’t yank her all the way back. “She’d better be there,” he said to the ceiling, knowing that the guys above were undoubtedly listening. He spent every waking moment never knowing when he’d get called to help a spirit, never knowing when he’d get called to help them, and right now he needed a little reciprocation. He wanted the powers that be to help Celeste stay on this side, at the bare minimum for the six hours she’d been promised.

He could still feel her touch on his face, against his chest. The way her fingers had trembled, and the way she’d rubbed her body against his as she laid her head on his chest. He wanted to feel all of her against him, and he’d better get a chance to feel it before the day ended. “I mean it,” he added, sprinting down the hallway and toward the parking deck. “She’d better be there.”

He rounded a corner and ran slap into his older brother.

“Hey man, where’s the fire?” Gage Vicknair grabbed him by the shoulders and halted his progress. He had a stethoscope slung around his neck, a hospital badge clamped to the pocket of his navy scrubs and a look of exhaustion on his face. “One of the interns said she thought she saw my brother up here, but she didn’t say he was running a race. What’s happening?”

“Can’t talk,” Dax said breathlessly. “I’ve gotta get home.” Then he thought about the little ghost visiting with her parents in the hospital room nearby. “Listen. My current assignment, a little ghost named Prissy Fontenot, is here at the hospital in her father’s room.”

“She’s visiting him before she crosses?”

Dax nodded, eager to leave and get to Celeste, but also wanting to make sure that Prissy’s needs were taken care of. “I’m sure she’ll be fine staying with them until she has to cross over, but would you mind checking in and just making sure that everything, well, seems okay with them? They can sense her, so they should know when she crosses. And if they do need me for anything, call me and let me know.”

“Yeah, I can watch her, but why aren’t you staying with them?” Gage asked.

“It’s Celeste. She’s back. She came back with Prissy, but we don’t have long.”

“The ghost from the summer?” Gage looked confused. “I thought she crossed over.”

“I thought so too, but she’s back, for a little while. And I’ve got to go. No time to explain now.” He darted on down the hall, but heard his brother calling after him.

“Did you tell Celeste that she’s made you a royal pain in the ass to be around since she left?”

Dax didn’t bother stopping to let him know that he had, in fact, told her that, but he still had plenty more to tell her. And plenty more to do with her before she crossed, if they could.

“Those rules don’t apply to me. And I’ve been aching for this.”

She could touch him. That fact alone shocked the hell out of him, but the way her body trembled when she touched him, the way her silver-gray eyes deepened to charcoal—that evidence of how touching him affected her—that had made him harder than he’d ever been in his life.

Dax wanted in her, to be a part of her before she had to leave again.

What if she never came back?

No. He couldn’t worry about that now. He climbed into his car, cranked it and glanced at the digital clock on the dash: 9:28.

He’d be home in an hour, earlier if he sped, which he would. Seconds were priceless now, and he resented each and every one he wasn’t with Celeste. The fact that she’d already had to rest twice told him that they probably wouldn’t get anywhere near twelve hours together on this side. Midnight was probably as good as it’d get; that was only two and a half hours away, and the majority of one of those hours would be spent driving, trying to get to her.

Then again, after she rested before, she’d felt better, and was able to touch him.

But why was she so tired, anyway? Why would a ghost be tired? Something wasn’t right, something that Dax couldn’t put his finger on.

He hurriedly left the parking deck, his Beemer catching a wheel as he jerked the car onto Jefferson Highway. He punched the accelerator and the car jumped to life. Dax was extremely thankful his company hadn’t skimped on his corporate car. Right now he needed speed, and—as his speedometer neared a hundred—he had it at his fingertips.

Now, as long as he didn’t meet any cops between the hospital and the plantation, he’d be there soon. And he and Celeste could pick up where they’d left off in that hospital room…

**4**

THE SOUND of a slamming door roused Celeste from her sleep. She opened her eyes prepared to be surrounded by the cold darkness of the middle room. But she wasn’t in darkness, she wasn’t cold and she wasn’t in the middle room.

Instantly, she remembered where she was, and why. She was in Adeline Vicknair’s sitting room, its hues of rose and pink a welcome change from what she’d been anticipating. And she was here because she’d been given another chance to see Dax. She looked toward the tall grandfather clock centered between the room’s two heavily draped windows. Fifteen minutes past ten. Less than two hours until midnight. Would she get longer than Adeline’s estimate?

Would she get less?

Would she get a chance to be with Dax, really be with him, before she had to leave?

Pounding footsteps echoed outside the door of the sitting room, and Celeste held her breath, hoping that the person so eagerly charging up the stairs was…

“Dax.”

His brown waves were tousled, his hazel eyes were intense and eager, and his breathing was heavy, loud enough for her to hear him exhale when he saw her. “You’re here.”

“I told you I would be,” she said, though she’d also wondered whether the powers that be would allow her to stay, after she’d become so exhausted at the hospital. She watched him enter the room, muscles flexing under his shirt, legs moving purposefully toward her, sexy mouth promising to please, and she was very, very grateful to whoever had decided to let her stay on this side a little longer.

He stopped next to the settee and looked down at her, then toward the clock. “We don’t have long, Celeste.”

“I know.” She stood and took a tiny step, closing the gap between them. “And I don’t know whether I’ll have another chance to be with you, Dax. I don’t know if I’ll make it back, once I leave again.”

“I’ll find a way,” he promised.

She smiled. “I’m sure if you can, you will, but just in case this is my last time here, I want to know…” She brushed back the brown waves at his temple, then slid her fingers through his hair.

The sizzling bolt of electricity that rocketed through her was even stronger than last time, even more potent.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, those eyes gazing into hers while she attempted to control the maddening, exhilarating rush from touching him.

She examined the golden flecks in the middle of the brown and green. She wanted to remember the uniqueness of them, the uniqueness of him, beyond the middle realm.

“Tell me, Celeste. Whatever you want to know, whatever you want to do,” he urged.

Her mouth was dry and her center burned for something that she’d never had. She licked her lips, and forced her throat to work. “I’ve been with a man before—” she smiled softly “—or rather, I’ve been with a boy.”

Those gorgeous eyes widened, but he didn’t speak.

She cleared her throat. “I’ve never been with anyone who knew—really knew—how to please a woman.” Celeste moistened her lips again. “I want to experience that before I cross, Dax. And I want it to be with someone I care about, someone who makes me feel things I’ve never felt before, the way I feel when I merely touch you.”

“I wanted you this summer,” he said, his voice raspy with desire. “And I’ve wanted only you since you left.”

She pushed her fingers through his hair, relishing the feel of the coarse strands tickling her palm. Then she moved her hands to the top of his shirt and unbuttoned the top two buttons. Then, too eager to wait until the rest were undone, she slid them inside, running her palms across the broadness of his chest, then finding his flat nipples and circling them with her fingertips.

“I want to touch you,” he said. “So bad it hurts.”

With her lips a mere fraction from his, she smiled, and continued circling his nipples with her fingers. Odd, how exciting it was to feel them harden beneath her command. “I know you do, and I know that this would be easier if you could, since you obviously know more about where to touch, and where to be touched, than I do.” She gently pushed against his chest, guiding him back until he sat down on the settee. “So I suppose you’ll have to tell me what to do.” She did her best to sound confident, assured and ready to do…anything he instructed.

“Tell you what to do,” he repeated, and she noticed that he shoved his hands between the cushions on the settee, apparently not trusting himself to control them.

“Yes,” she said, and her voice was deeper, richer with her desire. But she was also feeling something equally as potent; her body growing weak. Consumed with passion, but weak with exhaustion. She prayed that passion would win out this time, at least long enough to…

She lowered herself in front of him, moving her body between his legs. The hard bulge that distended his jeans was undeniable, and she wanted to feel that part of him, with her hands, then with her mouth, and then inside of her. “Tell me what to do,” she said again, then she looked at him, and lost all fear. “Tell me,” she repeated.

He leaned forward, brought his face closer to hers. “Kiss me, Celeste.”

She looked at that sexy mouth, thought of how many times she’d dreamed of kissing him, of tasting him, of exactly how it’d be to tease that sexy smirk with her tongue. Then she eased closer and made her dreams a reality.

The first touch of her mouth on his caused her entire body to shudder with need, a need to continue, to delve deeper for more. She swept her tongue against his lower lip and moaned her contentment when his mouth opened for her perusal. Easing her tongue inside, she couldn’t control the urge to slowly slide her entire body against his as she tasted him. She yanked his shirt out of his jeans, hurriedly undid the remaining buttons and pushed the sides apart. Then she pressed her breasts against his chest, felt the rumbling beat of his heart against them, and was even more excited. She moved her tongue farther inside, stroking his, while her hips moved in direct correlation. Her need grew exponentially.

Dax’s tongue mated with hers, then moved hungrily within her lips. He stroked the top of her mouth, slid over her teeth, then sucked her tongue. Her body began shivering, shaking. She’d never kissed anyone like this. She’d never been kissed like this.

The bulge between his legs grew even harder as she rubbed against it. She wanted him. And she didn’t want to wait.

A low, deep growl rumbled from his throat and vibrated erotically against her tongue and mouth. That growl sent her desire higher still, knowing that Dax was on the edge as well, and she felt the burning inside getting stronger, hotter, pulling her deeper…pulling her…away.

No! her mind screamed when she realized what was happening. No!

“CELESTE!” Dax knew what had happened, but he couldn’t believe that the powers that be would do that to him, to them. “Damn!”

She’d vanished, in the same way he’d seen ghosts fade away before, but none of their disappearances had ripped his heart out in their wake. One moment she’d been here, touching him, kissing him, driving him near mad with desire, and then—gone. And he was left hard, aching and ready. Ready for something that would possibly never happen. Had that been their last chance? Had she crossed over completely this time? And how would he know?

Just the thought of her hands on him, of her mouth on his, had his cock pressing solidly against his jeans. “Damn.” He wanted her, and there was more to it than the physical need that had him hurting; he wanted Celeste, the woman who’d touched his heart in the summer when she stayed behind to help Chloe, and the one who, when she returned, had helped another young ghost before allowing her own needs to be sated. And she did have needs—intense needs.

“I’ve been with a boy, but I’ve never been with a man.”

Well, she was sure as hell with a man tonight, but not nearly as intimately as Dax would have liked. Would they be given another chance?

Hell, both of them had helped Prissy first, in spite of the fact that they’d been two months without seeing each other, and without knowing if they’d ever see each other again, and the powers that be evidently hadn’t taken that into consideration before they’d pulled her away—again.

The front door of the plantation slammed, and he jerked toward the sound. He couldn’t control a swift surge of adrenaline at the possibility that Celeste had returned. But if she had come back, she wouldn’t be using the door. “Who is it?”

“Dax?” Nanette called, then he listened to her footsteps as she headed up the stairs.

He buttoned his shirt, not bothering to tuck it in, since his hard-on was going to take some time to give up the ghost. Literally. “In here.”

“Well, is she here?” Nan asked, entering the sitting room and looking around as though expecting to see someone with him.

“Who?” How would she know about Celeste?

“Your little ghost,” she said, crossing the room and dropping into Adeline Vicknair’s bentwood rocker. “Wait, I’m not sitting on her, right?”

“No,” he said, still not quite believing how close he’d been to finally making love to Celeste only seconds ago. “She’s with her parents, and for the record, Celeste isn’t here either, though she was.”

Nan’s green eyes widened. “Celeste? She came back? How? When? She crossed, didn’t she?”

“No, she didn’t, and she came back with my ghost.” He swallowed thickly. “And now she’s gone again. Only I have no idea where she went. She was here until a few seconds ago, when the powers that be decided, without any forewarning whatsoever, that it was time for them to take her back.”

She frowned. “Oh, Dax, I’m sorry. I know how much you wanted to be with her again.” Nan tucked her legs beneath her. “So, she hasn’t crossed?”

“She hadn’t crossed,” he clarified. “I have no idea if she crossed tonight or not.”

“Surely not,” she said, as though completely certain of the fact.

“What makes you say that?” Granted, he wanted to hear that Celeste was still hovering between the two sides, because obviously that meant he might get to see her again. But how could Nanette be so sure?

“Well, if she didn’t cross before, with Chloe—that was the little girl she stayed behind for, right?”

“Right.”

“Then why would she cross now? I mean, it must be something else that’s keeping her in the middle. Something other than helping another spirit through.”

“Part of me feels like I didn’t cross because I couldn’t leave you.”

Dax really wanted to believe that was it, that she could control her destiny merely by wanting to be with him, but something told him there was more to it than that. And in order to help her stay on this side longer, maybe even permanently, he had to figure out what it was.

“How did she seem?” Nanette asked. “I mean, is she the same way Ryan was, where he chose to stay in the middle because he didn’t want to cross? If memory serves, he rather liked it in the middle.” She giggled. “Leave it to Monique to convince him that he’d rather satisfy one woman for life than tons of them in their dreams.”

Dax blinked, and thought about what she’d said. “Ryan did control whether he crossed or not, didn’t he?”

“That’s what he said.”

“I’m going to take a ride to Monique and Ryan’s new place. I need to talk to my new brother-in-law.” Dax stood from the settee.

Nan nodded, understanding dawning. “You think he can tell you how to keep her on this side.”

“Well, if anyone can, it’s him, and if there’s any way possible, I am going to get her back.”

Dax could feel his blood stir. Ryan had stayed. He’d been a ghost in the middle for over a year when he was assigned to Monique. Now he was living and breathing…and married to Dax’s sister. Surely Ryan would know what was happening with Celeste, and how Dax could get her back to stay.

“He might not have all of the answers, but he’d sure have more than the two of us,” she agreed. “He’s lived in the middle, after all. When are you going to see him?”

“Right now.”

“Well, tell me what you find out in the morning. I’ve got to get some sleep if I’m going to tackle all those ninth-graders first period. And they probably won’t be all that thrilled to see me after I gave them that history assignment.” She grinned. “Hey, I don’t suppose you had a chance to look up any more information about our history tonight, did you?”

Dax shook his head. “Afraid not. From the time you left until just a few moments ago, I was fairly busy helping one ghost find the light…and trying to keep another one from even going near it.”

“No problem,” she said. “There’s always tomorrow.”

“You do realize that I work tomorrow, too,” he said, “and that I’m somewhat preoccupied with getting Celeste back.”

“Shoot, you’re a pro at multitasking—keeping up your work, helping with the house, getting ghosts to the other side. And if there’s a way, I’m betting you’ll get Celeste back too. Face it, you always get the job done, no matter what the job is.” Nan uncurled her legs from the chair and stood. “Why would this time be any different?”

She was right. Why shouldn’t he be able to pull it all off this time? Only, this time he was talking about the ghost who’d controlled his entire being with her kiss.

“And Dax,” she said as she started to walk away.

“Yeah?”

“Let me know when you get Celeste back.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let everyone know.”

He left the house with Nanette’s final words echoing in his thoughts. Nan hadn’t said if you get Celeste back; she’d said when. And that was exactly how Dax felt. He’d lost her twice, but, on the reverse side of that, she’d made it to him twice too. If she could make it twice, she could make it again.

Third time, he prayed, was the charm. And hopefully, Ryan would offer a little insight about how to make it happen.

**5**

THE DRIVE FROM the plantation to Ormond, where Ryan and Monique’s house was located, typically took about thirty minutes. Dax made it in twenty. He pulled onto their street and immediately noticed that the small house they were renting was lit up like an airport runway, with Ryan’s truck piled high with furniture and backed up to the front door.

Dax parked the car and climbed out, immediately noticing that Tristan was here; his Jeep was parked outside. Obviously, Monique had recruited the oldest male cousin of the bunch to help unload, since her brothers were both preoccupied with hospital duty and helping spirits. Dax could only imagine the cussing Tristan was doing at being the only Vicknair here.

As if on cue, Tristan’s tall frame exited the open front door of the house and he swore a stream of expletives that would make a sailor blush. “Did you leave anything at the plantation?” he asked sarcastically.

“Oh, stop complaining,” Monique said, dusting her palms together as she followed him out. “This is the last load, and I’ve cut your hair for free since I opened my shop. You owe me.”

“Shit, I’d rather pay for the cut.” Tristan tested the weight of a tall dresser by lifting one end. “Tell your husband to get out here and help me with this one,” he said, then apparently noticed Dax. “Scratch that, Dax is here. Come on over here. It’s about time you showed up.”

Monique brushed a big blond curl out of her eyes. “Hey, did you come to help?” she asked, then frowned. “You look terrible. What’s up? Something wrong?”

“Yeah,” Dax said. “Something is definitely wrong.” A major understatement. He’d lost the woman he loved—twice.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Celeste. She came back, and then she left again.” Dax helped Tristan maneuver the dresser off.

“Celeste? She came back?” Monique sounded as surprised as Dax had been when he’d first seen Celeste and Prissy in the sitting room. “Your ghost?”

His ghost. That was a nice way to think of her, but it was kind of hard to call Celeste “his” when he didn’t know if he’d ever see her again. “Yeah, she came back today with my assigned spirit, and then she left.”

“Left? As in, back to the other side?” Tristan asked.

“As in,” Dax said, nodding. “And I’ve got to figure out how to get her back.”

Tristan put his end of the dresser on the ground with a thud. “Come again?”

“I’m going to figure out how to bring her back, and I need Ryan to help me make that happen.”

“That’s my brother,” Monique said, beaming. “Just because she’s a ghost doesn’t mean it can’t work out.”

Tristan shook his head. “Hell, the whole family’s going nuts. First you go and marry a spirit, and now he’s thinking he can bring back one who’s crossed.”

“I don’t know if she’s crossed or not,” Dax explained. “My gut tells me she’s stuck somewhere in the middle.”

“You do realize it’d be a whole lot easier to find you a girl that’s still breathing, don’t you?” Tristan said, giving Dax one of his trademark skeptical looks that made most folks think twice about whatever they were contemplating.

Lucky for Dax, he was immune to it. “Hey, if I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.” Typically, Tristan wouldn’t have let that go without another smart-ass remark, but evidently, he could tell by Dax’s tone that he wasn’t in the mood to be messed with tonight, especially not when it came to Celeste.

“Like I said,” Tristan repeated, “this family’s losing it.”

Monique moved to one end of the dresser. “I’ll help Tristan with this. Why don’t you head on into the kitchen. Ryan just carried some chairs in there, so you’ll have a place to sit and talk. He’s due a break anyway, he’s been unloading trucks all day. And you don’t need to worry about helping us, we’re almost done. You concentrate on getting Celeste back.”

Tristan’s jaw fell. “You’ve gotta be kidding. You’re going to let him show up now, at the end of the day, and during the last load, and get by without helping? Shit, I’m just your cousin, he’s your brother. I’d say he pulls rank on helping you move.”

“I’m sorry, Tristan,” Monique said sweetly. “Are your muscles hurting? I guess I assumed firemen were strong enough to take the heat.”

“Hell,” Tristan said, but he chuckled, and lifted his end.

“Now go talk to Ryan. Maybe he can help you figure out how to get her back,” Monique instructed, ever the bossy sister. “Ryan! Dax is here, and he wants to talk to you. I’m sending him around.” Moving slowly toward the house and grunting a little with each step, she glanced at Dax and ordered, “Walk around the side of the house,” while Tristan backed through the front door and cussed when his knuckles scraped against the frame.

Following Monique’s command, as if anybody in their right mind would tell her no, Dax rounded the house then climbed the steps leading to the kitchen, where Ryan was lifting a boxful of appliances onto the counter. His gray T-shirt had a sweat-dampened V from the neck to the chest, and his hair was even darker than usual, in wet waves from exertion.

“Come on in.” He turned toward a red-and-white cooler shoved to one corner of the kitchen floor and withdrew two Cokes, then handed one to Dax. “Here. Monique said she didn’t want us drinking beer while we’re moving her furniture,” he said with a shrug. “So, in the interest of maintaining marital bliss, this is the best I can do.”

“Coke is fine,” Dax said, taking the icy can from Ryan.

“Have a seat. I guess the two of us are supposed to take a break and chat, while Tristan busts his balls hauling furniture.” He said the last words a little louder than the rest.

“I heard that,” Tristan grumbled from the hall, and Monique laughed loudly.

Dax popped the top on the can, then took a much-needed dose of carbonated caffeine. He hadn’t had a thing to eat or drink since that cup of coffee he’d had with Nan, not that he’d even thought of taking care of those types of physical needs while Celeste had been here. Taking care of sexual needs, on the other hand…

“So you need to talk to me?” Ryan asked, sitting at the table, then taking a long drink from his soda. “Damn, I’d really rather have a beer.”

“Ryan?” Monique called sweetly, her voice echoing down the hallway from the front of the house.

“Yeah?”

“Honey, did you enjoy yourself last night?”

A long pause caused a noticeable silence.

“Did you?” she called again.

“Hell, yeah,” Ryan finally answered.

“Well, if you want to enjoy tonight, you’ll stop complaining about there being no beer in the house.”

Another long pause, then Ryan shrugged, and smiled. “Deal.”

“Good then, that’s settled,” she said rather triumphantly, either because she was getting her way now, or because she’d also be getting her way later.

Still grinning, Ryan asked, “Okay, what’d you want to ask me?”

“I want to know how you controlled where you went when you were in the middle. Or rather, when you visited someone who was living.”

Ryan placed his drink on the table and leaned back in his chair. “How I controlled it?”

“Yeah. How did you go back and forth, from the middle to this side? What did you do to make it happen?”

Ryan’s head shook slightly as he answered. “I didn’t do anything. I thought about where I wanted to go, or who I wanted to see, and I went. That’s all there was to it.”

“You’re saying you just had to think about it?” Dax asked, baffled. Why had Ryan been able to act like any other ghost when Celeste couldn’t?

“I had total control over it.” Ryan folded his arms at his chest. “Why are you asking?”

“It’s Celeste. She came back today, and we were together for a little while, not nearly long enough, and then she was pulled away again.” Dax didn’t bother explaining who Celeste was; Ryan knew her from his time in the middle. In fact, when Ryan had been hovering between the other side and the living, Monique had tried to play matchmaker between the two spirits, but Ryan had already fallen for Monique. However, they were friends, which meant Ryan understood her, and not only that, he understood her current situation, living in the middle.

“I thought Celeste crossed over with Chloe,” Ryan said.

“I thought so too, but she didn’t, and she came back today to help another little girl cross, and…”

“And?” Ryan asked.

“And to be with me.”

Ryan nodded, not needing further information. He obviously remembered what it was like to be caught between this side and the light, and he’d know more than anyone how hard it was when the one you loved wasn’t dwelling on the same side of the spectrum. “I don’t know why she wouldn’t be able to come and go at will. It doesn’t make sense.”

“You never knew of ghosts who would get—stuck—in either place, or something like that?”

“I’m sorry, man, but no,” he said. “Are you saying that she didn’t seem to have any control over when she left you today? She couldn’t have maybe thought of another place, or someone else, and gone to them? Maybe a family member or something? I mean, that would happen to me—if I got something on my mind, I’d simply go there, wherever it was.”

“She didn’t have any control over it. I’m sure of that,” Dax said. “And trust me, she wasn’t thinking about any other place, or any other person, at the time.” She’d been thinking of him, only him, and the fact that they were finally together, the same way he’d been thinking of her.

Ryan took another sip of his drink, then closed his eyes and leaned his head back. After a couple of seconds, he sat forward and looked at Dax. “She hasn’t been given to anyone else as an assignment, has she? I mean, a medium to help her cross?”

“None of the Vicknair mediums,” Dax said. “We’re certainly not the only folks helping ghosts find their way through, but I think she’d have mentioned it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Plus, more than likely she’d come to one of you, since she’s been to the Vicknair place twice already, don’t you think?”

Dax nodded.

“Okay. So she can’t control when she comes to this side. Did she say where she goes when she isn’t with you?”

“She said she didn’t know.”

Ryan frowned, shook his head. “Hell, man, I don’t know either. I mean, my experience was totally different. I saw the light but didn’t want to go through, and then, later on, the powers that be wouldn’t let me. In my case, it was because I needed to learn how to love.”

“And thank goodness you figured out how,” Monique chimed in from the doorway.

Ryan smiled, but Dax didn’t.

“So you don’t know what I can do to help her get back through?” he asked, feeling defeated.

His brother-in-law’s grin disappeared, and he looked solemnly toward Dax. “I wish I did, but if she can’t move freely within the middle, then I don’t know what to tell you. That’s nothing like what I went through, and, truthfully, I can’t figure out why she hasn’t crossed over.”

“If she hasn’t,” Dax said. What was to say that she hadn’t crossed tonight, after the two of them had shared that phenomenal kiss?

“Oh, Dax.” Monique entered the kitchen with Tristan close at her heels. She wrapped an arm around him consolingly.

Dax shrugged to shake off her arm. He didn’t want consolation; he wanted answers. “What about sleeping?” he asked. “Have you ever known of ghosts who got tired when they came to this side?”

“Tired?” Ryan repeated. “Ghosts don’t get tired, Dax. Why would they?”

“She did. And I don’t mean a little sleepy either, I mean exhausted, nearly-ready-to-pass-out tired. I saw her like that today, twice.”

“A ghost? Tired?” Tristan repeated from the doorway. “I’ve never seen it.”

“Me, neither,” said Monique.

“Well, trust me, she was,” Dax said.

“That’s not—well, it’s not normal,” Tristan said. “Seriously, why would they need sleep?”

“I don’t know,” Dax admitted. “But there were other things about her that were different too,” he thought aloud.

“Like what?” Monique moved to sit in Ryan’s lap, while Tristan grabbed a Coke from the cooler and joined them at the table.

“Yeah, what else?” Tristan asked. “Maybe we can help you figure out what’s going on.”

“Her clothes. Last time she was here, she was always in the same thing, a yellow tank top and jeans. I assumed that’s what she was wearing when she died.”

“But that wasn’t what she wore this time?” Monique asked.

“No. She wore a white gown.”

“Like a wedding gown?” Tristan asked, surprise evident in his tone.

“No, not like a wedding gown,” Dax said, growing irritated but still wanting answers. “A nightgown, a long, satin nightgown.” A very sexy nightgown that barely balanced on her shoulders and looked as though if he could only ease it down the smoothness of her arms, it would puddle to the ground.

Dax’s imagination was way too vivid, and the image of Celeste, standing beautifully nude before him, was crystal clear. Would the real thing be better than the fantasy? Oh, yeah, he knew it would. But would he ever see her that way? Would he ever see her again at all?

“You changed clothes in the middle,” Monique said to Ryan, and he nodded.

“Yeah, I did.”

“How?” Dax asked, realizing he needed to pay attention to any insight Ryan could offer.

“The same way I moved from one place to another. I thought about what I wanted to wear, and my clothing changed.”

“Just like that?” Dax asked.

Ryan nodded. “Pretty much. Really, there wasn’t anything to it. I thought about it, and I changed.”

“I remember you went from jeans and a T-shirt to a tuxedo right in front of me,” Monique said, and her husband smiled.

“Yeah, I remember that night.”

Dax shook his head. None of this was adding up. “But you changed clothes based on where you were going, what you were doing or who you were seeing, right? I mean, you picked clothing to go with whatever you had going on, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Ryan agreed.

“Celeste came with Prissy and went with her to the hospital, and then she spent time with me back at the house. And the whole time she wore that same gown. Don’t you think that if she could control what she was wearing, she’d have picked something different than a nightgown? And it wasn’t because she died in it, because she obviously died in that jeans and tank top that she wore last time.”

“Maybe it was because she knew she was going to be sleeping while she was here,” Tristan said with a smirk, then held up his palms when Dax glared at him. “Hey, I worked all day and hauled furniture all night, forgive me if I’m leaning toward sarcasm.”

Monique twisted in Ryan’s lap. “Honey, do you remember anything from being in the middle that would help Dax figure out what’s causing her to be so different from all our other spirits?”

Again, Ryan shook his head. “If I did, I’d tell you.”

“Anything else out of the ordinary with her?” she asked. “Something that might help us figure out why she’s stuck in the middle? Other than the sleeping and the clothing, was there anything else different from other ghosts? Did she glow like our regular spirits?”

Dax started to nod, but then he thought about Celeste and Prissy, standing side by side in the sitting room. The little girl’s body had been cloaked in a brilliant, golden glow, so bright that Dax had nearly had to squint to look at her. But Celeste’s appearance hadn’t been nearly as bright.

“No,” he said. “No, she didn’t. Her body was illuminated, but it wasn’t as vivid as the younger spirit’s. But—”

“But?” Monique prompted.

“But when she got tired, and then again, right before she left, her body glowed brighter, not quite as bright as my usual spirits, but it was more gold than white.”

Ryan cleared his throat. “I don’t know about the other things that are different, but that one does have a reasonable answer, based on what I remember about the middle.”

“What is it?” Dax asked.

“When I saw other spirits getting closer to the light, they always glowed brighter. I assumed that the closer a spirit was to crossing, the brighter their essence became.”

Dax closed his eyes and pictured Celeste, getting brighter and brighter, right until she left. That did make sense, and he knew why he hadn’t thought of it on his own. Subconsciously, he hadn’t wanted to face the fact that touching him, kissing him, might have made it harder for her to fight the pull of the light. What if being with him today had forced her to cross? “Damn.”

“Hey, man, I’m not saying she crossed over. I’m merely saying that when ghosts glow brighter, that usually means that they’re closer to the other side. She could still be in the middle. I fought crossing, remember? And if she wants to be with you the way I wanted to be with Monique, she’s fighting it too.”

Dax swallowed, nodded. Celeste would fight it; he had no doubt. But she’d been weak today. “Thanks,” he said, standing. He needed to go back to the plantation and think, try to put the pieces together and figure out where Celeste was, and how to help her get where she needed to be—on this side, with him.

“I’m not sure why you’re thanking us. I don’t think we were all that much help.” Tristan finished off his soda then tossed the can in the trash.

“Talking through things always helps,” Dax said, knowing that they had, in fact, given him more to think about. Celeste was getting pulled toward the light, and he didn’t want to give the other side the advantage by making her weaker. But he did want her here, and to feel her body, her mouth, her everything against him again. “I’m going home.”

Then he remembered the boxes in Ryan’s truck. “Hell, I’m being a louse. I’ll help you finish unloading first.”

Tristan smirked. “We’re finished, and I was blowing off steam anyway. It wasn’t that much stuff, and I didn’t mind helping. I just like to complain.”

“Now, that’s the truth,” Monique said. “I haven’t given you a haircut yet that you didn’t find something wrong with.”

“Watch it,” Tristan warned, “or I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

“As if you could find someone else to cut it for free.” Climbing out of Ryan’s lap, she took Dax’s arm and led him down the hall to the front of the house. When the two of them were out of earshot of Ryan and Tristan, she lowered her voice and asked, “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. Just got to figure out what’s going on, somehow,” he said.

“I wish we could be more help. If Ryan thinks of anything else that might help you figure out what’s happening with her, I’ll call you, okay?” She looked past Dax to the back of Ryan’s truck, the tailgate opened to lie flush against the porch. “I’m really glad that was the last load. We’ve been hauling and unloading all day. And now I get to start unpacking it all.”

Dax surveyed the boxes and furniture stacked in the foyer, in the dining room and down the hall. “I didn’t realize you had this much stuff, sis.”

“I didn’t, but there’s tons of furniture in the attic at the plantation, and Nanette told me I might as well take some of it. I didn’t even realize she’d been going up there and covering it all in plastic to protect it from the storms. Or she did until we got the roof fixed.”

“Nanette cares a lot about saving the old stuff, the furniture and the house,” he said.

“As if you don’t care just as much. I don’t know what the rest of us would do without you two urging us on. And I’m glad you haven’t moved out of the plantation—I’d have felt a bit guilty leaving if I thought Nan was going to be living there and trying to keep that big place up alone.”

“I love that place,” Dax said honestly. Truthfully, he’d never considered living anywhere else. Even when he went to LSU in Baton Rouge, he’d commuted, because he didn’t want to be that far from the house that meant so much to him. Nanette was right; the plantation was their legacy, and he planned to help her keep it that way, both by restoring it with the rest of the family and by finding proof that it was inhabited during the Civil War.

“Whoa, where’d your mind go?” she asked.

“Thinking about the house.”

“Well, you should check out all the neat things up in the attic sometime. Most of it is still in plastic, but it’s in great shape, particularly for stuff so old.” She smiled. “I’m kind of excited about having furniture that belonged to our ancestors in mine and Ryan’s house. It’s nice to be able to give things a second chance to live, you know?”

“Yeah, it is,” Dax agreed, but he wasn’t referring to old furniture. And he still had to figure out how to give Celeste her second chance.

**6**

CELESTE HAD NEVER had such a difficult time getting back to the middle. She stumbled, fell down, then used a wall for leverage to stand up again. She had to keep moving, had to get away from the cries behind her, and back to Dax. She’d found her way through with Prissy, with Adeline Vicknair’s help. She’d simply get back to the middle and ask Adeline to let her through again, and this time she’d beg the older woman to let her stay—at least long enough to make love with Dax just once, if she couldn’t be with him forever.

With every ounce of her strength, she edged forward. She knew that the center room was near; a faint glow illuminated the pathway ahead, and she had no doubt that the glimmering was from its light. Was another spirit going through now? Or was a child there needing help? Both times when Celeste had helped children, she’d been able to see Dax. Maybe that’s why the light was there; another child was waiting and needing her help—needing their help.

She finally reached the opening to the middle room, but was dismayed to see no other spirit in its center. She was completely alone, yet the light was steadily growing brighter, the same way it had when Cassie passed through. As always, Celeste felt drawn to its warmth, drawn to its unique allure. She was so cold, and she knew that merely getting nearer to that potent beam would warm her all over.

She wanted to be warm again.

Celeste didn’t want to pass through, she had to get back to Dax, but she did want to get warm. She stepped toward the light, leaned her head back and let the powerful glow wash over her from head to toe. It felt so good, so perfect. She took another step forward and knew before she looked that the opening had expanded. The blissful heat claimed the entire room now, warming her from the inside out, and her pains started to fade. She could feel her exhaustion lifting, and nothing but freedom from her burdens waiting on the other side.

No more exhaustion, no more pain.

Another step forward…

Cries. Wails. Her name. All of those sounds echoed from the hallway to her right, the path she’d just come down. Why couldn’t she remember what was at the end of that path?

“Celeste!” they yelled. “Please! No!”

She swallowed, backed away from the powerfully tempting radiance, and immediately her exhaustion returned. The light had grown to nearly the size of a door, but now it started shrinking away, like golden water down a drain.

Celeste fell to the floor. She knew those voices wanted her to go to them, but she didn’t want to. And now that the light had disappeared again, she wasn’t tempted to go in that direction either. She turned to her left, saw the edge of the path that led to Dax and crawled toward it. “Please,” she whispered, then licked her parched lips. “Adeline, please, let me through.”

Nothing happened.

Sobs tore from her chest, echoed against the roof of the dismal room and then came back to haunt her. “Please,” she pleaded, her body collapsing against the cold floor. She was not going back down the other path until she saw him. She wouldn’t. “Let—me—in!”

“Oh, darling, what have I done? You’ve barely rested, chère.”

Celeste knew the owner of the voice. Adeline Vicknair had, once again, opened the pathway to Dax. Merely seeing the older woman, and knowing she had the power to send her back to Dax, gave Celeste a surge of much-needed strength.

She sat up, then pushed to her feet. “I’ve got to see him again, Adeline. I’ve got to get back to him.”

“Chère, you only left a few hours ago. If I let you back through, you won’t be able to stay any time at all. You’re simply too weak, child. You need to rest, and then, maybe, you can try again.”

“I’m going now, and you’re going to help me,” Celeste said, with conviction. “I won’t rest until I do.”

“But you see, dear, you have a choice to make. Either that way—” she pointed to the middle, where the light had been blazing merely seconds ago “—or that one.” Adeline indicated the path to the right, where the voices still called Celeste’s name. “Dax’s path can’t be your final destination. It isn’t an option, and every time you go to him, you risk losing the ability to choose. I know you want to see him, and I’m trying to help you.”

“Then do. Let me through, Adeline. Help me,” she whispered.

Adeline’s mouth flattened, then she closed her eyes as though deciding what to do.

“Please,” Celeste urged.

“On one condition.”

“Anything.”

The older woman stepped back and pushed the door wide, then she lowered her voice to a hushed whisper. “Promise me, chère, that you won’t tempt fate. Promise me that you won’t push yourself until you’re too tired to fight the light’s pull. If that happens, you will lose your ability to choose.”

“I promise,” Celeste said, though she wasn’t completely certain she could keep that vow. How would she know when she’d stayed too long? She was tired the last time she was taken from him, but she didn’t enter the light. Surely she could keep it from happening again. She simply had to resist, be strong—strong for Dax. He was definitely worth the fight.

Besides, she wasn’t concerned with having choices right now; in her mind there was only one choice to make, and she was making it.

FOR DAX sleep was both an enemy and a friend. An enemy, because it took time away from his quest to get Celeste back, but a friend, because every time he closed his eyes, he found her in his dreams. And although he knew that that was what was happening now, that the dream had taken over, he didn’t care. Instead, he focused on making it as real as possible, so much that he could almost—almost—feel her presence nearby the bed. But ultimately he couldn’t deny that this was a dream; in reality, he’d never seen Celeste nude. But he saw her that way now.

Dax had known she would be beautiful beneath the white gown, but beautiful was too weak a word for what he was envisioning now.

She was exquisite.

Long, golden curls tumbled freely past her shoulders, teasing the tips of her breasts. She stood before him, her skin satin smooth and glowing faintly, as he took his time appreciating her beauty, imprinting her image on his thoughts to hold on to for eternity.

He never wanted to forget this moment. He never wanted to forget her. “Move your hair,” he said. “Please, I want to see you, Celeste, all of you.”

With a soft, seductive smile, she pushed her long curls behind her shoulders, and his jaw clenched tight. Her breasts were fuller than he’d anticipated, high and taut and beautifully exposed, the tips hard points that he longed to lick, taste, suck. Her waist was slim and gently flared outward to curved hips and well-toned legs. Between those legs, soft, blond curls covered her most tender flesh, and Dax grew painfully hard merely looking at her and imagining touching her there, kissing her there, coming inside of her there.

“I need you, Celeste.” His words were rough, strained and commanding. “I’ve waited for this for too long, and I don’t want to wait any longer.” He watched her step closer to his bed. “How long do we have?”

Her touch on his wrist caught him by surprise. He hadn’t realized she was that close, and he hadn’t seen her reach for him, but she was definitely touching him now, the searing sensation that he’d experienced earlier, the first time she’d touched him, heating his body like a brushfire, causing him to groan in near pain, in near ecstasy.

He tried to reach for her, but his arm didn’t move. “Celeste?” His brain told him this wasn’t really happening; it couldn’t be. She was still gone, still somewhere in the middle, in a place he couldn’t go, but this dream seemed so real that he didn’t want it to end, not before he had her, if only in his mind.

He refused to open his eyes, refused to let reality in, but still her image was fading. Something was taking the vision away, and he suspected he knew what that something was, or rather who. Hell, he didn’t like following their rules, but he did, every time. And now that he needed something, needed Celeste, the powers that be weren’t even willing to give him a damn fantasy?

No! Dammit, don’t take this too!

Her searing touch moved to his other wrist, and he felt his arm being pulled above his head. Heat, once again, spread over him, and he could feel sweat beading from his pores. More than mere warmth, the lust, the pent-up desire, sizzled throughout his flesh, and Dax could no longer keep from verifying what he now suspected.

This wasn’t a dream.

He opened his eyes and saw the woman currently binding his wrist to the bedpost, long spirals of hair cascading around her shoulders the same way that they had in his dream. She wasn’t nude anymore, proof enough that he wasn’t dreaming. Instead, she wore the long, white gown, and her face was intent on what she was doing, securing him to the bed. His arms were stretched in a V and fastened to each of the bedposts. She was here, with him, and she’d tied his hands in preparation for…everything. “I’m not dreaming.”

“No, you aren’t,” she said, knotting one of his silk neckties around his wrist as she spoke. She finished, then turned toward him. “You were dreaming of me,” she said with a smile, and her silver-gray eyes glittered as she spoke.

“I’ve dreamed of you every night for the past two months,” he said. “But this time, it was so real, even before you touched me.”

“Dax, I—I know I won’t have long this time. I was supposed to rest before I came, but I couldn’t stay away. I needed more.”

He knew exactly what she meant. “I know. I need more too. I need you, Celeste.”

She swallowed. “I want to touch you again, and to kiss you again, but—”

“But?” he asked, and he prayed that she wasn’t going to say that she wouldn’t touch him this time. He needed her touch, ached for it, didn’t know if he’d keep breathing without it. His skin still tingled from where she’d bound his wrists, and he wanted to burn like that everywhere. And he suspected that the same exhilarating near-orgasmic feeling that he experienced every time she touched him was reciprocated. He could tell by the way her skin instantly flushed when she touched him, by the way her eyes grew darker, more intense, filled with need.

“But I know now that every time I touch you, I’ll grow weaker, and while I don’t plan to let that stop me, I want you to know that if I’m pulled away again, that’s why.”

He focused on her words, and wrapped his brain around the biggest problem they were facing. “So that is what makes you leave,” he stated. “Touching me.”

“Growing weak makes me leave, and interacting with someone who is living makes me weak.” She smiled almost playfully. “But I want to interact with you, Dax, as closely as I possibly can.”

He smiled as well, but continued to try to figure out how they could make the most of their time together. He wanted her, there was no denying that, and he really didn’t want to wait to make it happen. But if touching him made her leave quicker…“Hell, this is going to be tough, but I want you here, for as long as you can stay.” He took a deep breath, thought about her hands caressing him, igniting him, burning. “How do you feel now?”

She brought her mouth close to his. “Excited.”

He laughed. “You’re not going to make this easy.”

“Make what easy?” she asked, and he could swear she was inhaling his scent as she spoke. But that wasn’t possible. Or it shouldn’t be. Ghosts shouldn’t inhale anything, but then again, ghosts shouldn’t sleep, either.

“My proposition. That we talk for a while first, before you touch me, and before you grow weaker.”

“That’s probably still considered interacting with someone who’s living, don’t you think?” she asked, and her eyes grew darker still as she tenderly put her tongue against his lower lip, then slid it inside.

Dax couldn’t stop her. And hell, he didn’t want to. He opened his mouth and accepted the sweet taste of her, sizzling and even more intense than the touches on his wrists. There was a living flame within her, hotter than anything he’d ever experienced with a breathing woman, and he couldn’t get enough. His tongue joined hers and they stroked against each other as she moved on top of him, the satin fabric of her gown and his thin sheet the only obstacles between her body and his.

Her gown. Memories of his conversation with Ryan invaded the moment, bringing with it the realization that he needed to try to control the sexual intensity of this, or she’d disappear again, and he’d have wasted a chance to find out how to hold on to this, hold on to her, for longer than a mere visit.

It took every ounce of willpower to break away from her kiss. “Celeste. Please.”

“Anything,” she whispered. “Just tell me what to do. I want to learn.”

Have mercy, she was going to be the death of him. “Trust me, you’re doing fine,” he said, then pulled against his restraints to move his head up on the pillow. She hadn’t bound him overly tight, and he suspected that if he pulled hard enough, both hands would be free. But hell, that’d really get him in hot water with the powers that be, wouldn’t it? And they had let her come back, even if only briefly, so he didn’t want to do anything to piss them off.

“Then what is it?” she asked, and Dax noticed the concern in her eyes. “Dax, I know I’ll get pulled away again, and I have no idea when that will happen. I don’t want to waste time.”

“Neither do I, believe me. But I also don’t want to lose you again without trying to figure out how to get you back. I know there’s got to be a way, and I’m thinking you can help me figure it out if we talk for a minute.” He smiled at her, and eased his body to the side so he couldn’t feel her through the sheet. He needed to make this last, and weakening her wasn’t the way to make that happen. “Let’s talk a little first.”

The pain in her eyes touched his heart. “Dax, if I cross without ever making love to you, I’ll never forgive myself for not taking advantage of this chance.”

He wanted to ask her so many questions—why she couldn’t control the time she came to him or the time she left, why she grew tired when no other ghost he’d ever known needed sleep, why she was wearing that nightgown again, if indeed she could change her clothes at will. And if she couldn’t change, then why couldn’t she, when Ryan had been able to? So many questions, but looking into her eyes, he realized—none of them mattered. What if they started talking, as he’d suggested, and then she was pulled away before they touched again? Could he forgive himself if he caused her to cross, completely, and never experienced making love with her?

“I don’t want to talk either,” he said honestly. “I want you, Celeste.”

She smiled and stood from the bed. Then she looked at him, and her gray eyes turned charcoal with desire. “In your dream, what was I wearing?”

“Nothing.”

She moved one finger to her shoulder and pushed the shiny fabric down, then she shifted slightly, and the other side also spilled down her arm, so the fabric rested at her elbows, and her breasts were bare.

His dream had been amazingly accurate. Full and lush and tipped with rose-tinted peaks, they were perfect. As in his dream, he ached to caress them with his mouth, and to learn the sweet sounds she’d make when he did. He wanted to learn what excited her, what aroused her, what ignited that slow burn within her until it exploded…around him.

She shifted her hips slightly and dropped her arms to her sides, and the fabric continued on its path to the floor.

Dax’s erection pushed high against the sheet, and he forced himself to breathe. She was naked, boldly, beautifully naked, and exceptional, from the tiny navel that centered her slim waist, to the curved hips, a little more than in his dream, and damn if he didn’t like the extra too. Her legs, as he’d imagined, were toned and well sculpted, perfect for nuzzling when they finally made love, and he would nuzzle them, kiss them, caress them, on his path to her core, hidden from his view with shimmering golden curls. He wanted to part those curls and taste her, feel the most heated part of her against his tongue, feel her pulse against his mouth as she came.

She turned toward the bed and he watched her attention move to the tented portion of the sheet, and the damp spot where he was already preparing to enter her. “You said it has been a long time,” she whispered, then her hands grasped the sheet, and she slowly slid it down his body, eyeing each revealed inch of his flesh. “How long has it been?”

Her eyes were nearly black as she looked up at him from the foot of the bed. In the back of his mind, he knew that something wasn’t right about that either. Her eyes had been lighter earlier, then darker, and now darker still. But he didn’t have time to analyze it, because she dropped the sheet to the floor, then climbed up on the bed, and took his breath away. Her hair fell wildly across his legs as she brought her face near his erection and asked again, “How long has it been, Dax?”

“I haven’t been with a woman since I met you,” he said, giving her the truth. “No one else would do.”

Her hands circled his penis, and then she brought her mouth to the tip and licked the first drops away.

The heat of Celeste’s mouth was even more potent, as though he were being flicked with hot coal…and he didn’t ever want it to stop. He’d never had any sexual encounter remotely like this, where he honestly felt as if his body couldn’t take it, but he prayed that it could.

“I’ve never done this before, Dax, and yet, I can sense exactly how this makes you feel, exactly where you want me to touch, exactly what you want me to do. It’s—it’s making me burn inside.”

Dax grit his teeth and nodded, unable to speak. He didn’t want to lose control, not yet, but the heat was so intense that he knew he wouldn’t make it much longer. He wrapped his hands tighter within their restraints and forced himself to leave them where they were. He couldn’t touch her, but he wanted to, to reach down and take that exquisite mouth and pull it to his, then slide her hips up his body and learn if she was as hot there.

She was trembling all over, her body shaking as she placed hot, wet kisses down his penis, massaging him with fiery circles of her tongue, until she reached the base. Then, emitting a low moan of contentment, she took that same technique to his testicles, and Dax’s heartbeat soared, thundering in his chest, roaring in his ears. His pulse hammered through him, his need for release beckoning him to let go.

Celeste licked him solidly again, from base to tip, then she ran her tongue around the end and took him inside, deep inside, and another of her intense moans vibrated against his heated flesh as she worked her way up and down, up and down, moaning and clamping that hot mouth tighter against him, until Dax’s body tensed fiercely, a tingling rush poured through him, and he growled through an orgasm that tore from his very soul.

He sucked in a breath, exhilarated by what she’d done for him, and miserable because he feared what it would cost her. She wanted to experience making love, but now that she’d put so much of her energy into pleasing him…

“Celeste!” he yelled as she looked up at him, her black eyes filled with pleasure at what she’d done, and no regrets, none at all. “Celeste!” he repeated, then he watched in complete agony as the woman he wanted more than any other—disappeared.

**7**

DAX WAS COVERED in sweat, both from the orgasm that had thoroughly shaken his world and from anger at losing Celeste again without fulfilling her needs, or learning how to get her back. “Dammit!”

He yanked his hands free from the restraints, then climbed from the bed and hurriedly dressed, grabbing the first clothing he could find, worn jeans and a black tank undershirt. The digital clock beside the bed proclaimed it two-thirty in the morning, but Dax didn’t care what time it was; he needed answers, and he wasn’t going to find them while he slept. More than that, he needed help, and he believed he knew where to go to get it.

Obviously, no one on this side was able to provide him with the help he needed. If anyone could have, it’d have been Ryan. But there was one person on the other side who had never let him down, and that person surely had the ability to help him now.

Even though he was only four when she passed on, he remembered one thing he could always count on from the feisty Vicknair matriarch. No matter how hard Adeline Vicknair tried, she simply couldn’t tell him no. Maybe it was because he was her youngest grandson. Maybe it was because he’d been as headstrong and trying back then as he was now. Or maybe it was just that all his older siblings, cousins, parents, aunts and uncles had spoiled him rotten. But for whatever reason, not once could he remember the woman turning him down, for anything.

Dax was counting on her not to break that record.

His bedroom was on the second floor of the plantation, so it was a short walk to the sitting room, its traditional rose-tinted lighting spilling from beneath the doorway across the hardwood in the hall.

One of the plantation’s oddities that the Vicknairs had grown accustomed to over the years, Adeline’s fringed antique lamp never burned out, not when the light was switched off, nor when the power in the entire parish was out due to storms, or even when the bulb was removed. As a matter of fact, even when Katrina took its toll, this room remained lit.

Tonight was no exception.

He pushed through the double doors and entered the undeniably feminine room, where big bold roses covered the wallpaper and shades of pink and burgundy covered nearly everything else, and he stormed toward the coffee table where the silver tea service sat, shining as it reflected the lamplight.

“I want answers, and I can’t get them without your help,” Dax said, dropping onto the settee and then leaning toward the silver platter. He stared at the open space between the ornate pitcher and two gleaming silver cups, the spot where Adeline sent all of their assignments. He’d never asked for anything beyond what she’d provided, or rather, he’d never asked for anything beyond what they’d provided. Never. He’d always taken his assignments as they came, used the information to help spirits cross, and never even considered asking for anything more.

But that was before Celeste. Before tonight.

“If I cross without ever making love to you, I’ll never forgive myself for not taking advantage of this chance.”

If the powers that be had sent her to the other side before she’d known what it felt like to be completely and thoroughly satisfied by a man, to be completely and thoroughly satisfied by him, he’d be damned before he’d ever help them again.

“I am not leaving this room until you give me something to work with here,” he said. “I swear it, and you know damn well I mean it.”

Two heavy heartbeats passed, then two more, before a thick sheet of lavender paper, the size of a postcard, appeared in the center of the silver tray with his name scrawled across the outside in his grandmother’s script, but not nearly as neat as usual.

Good, he had her attention.

He snatched it up and turned it over, eager to see what she’d say. Her message was scribbled even more hastily than his name had been on the other side, and true to her nature, she didn’t waste time getting to the point.

There is no need for cursing, young man. You may be twenty-three, but I’m still your grandmother, and believe it or not, I do have friends in very high places! Good God, and to think I actually believed Celeste was the more stubborn of you two.

Dax’s tension eased a bit. So she thought Celeste was stubborn too. He’d have to agree about that, particularly after he’d attempted to get her to slow down and talk to him, and she’d outright refused to do anything less than what she wanted. Luckily for him, it happened to be pleasing him more than any other woman ever had.

Yes, his grandmother was right. Celeste was stubborn. Wild and sweet and tempting and adorable and sexy…and stubborn. Well, fine. Dax had a feeling it’d take two hardheaded and determined souls to get her back on this side, and obviously, between the two of them, they fit the bill.

He read the rest of his grandmother’s note, written in sharp, slanted penmanship, as though she was in a hurry, or really pissed, or both. Dax wasn’t overly concerned. She was helping him, and that was what he wanted. Plus, she was his grandmother, and she’d love him no matter how much he ticked her off.

Okay, first of all—she hasn’t crossed, not yet anyway. Although if you keep exhausting her, she will, and there won’t be a thing I can do about it. You can’t continue to tempt fate, Dax.

Second, she needs to rest, and I’m making her stay here longer this time. Yes, I’ll let her back through, when I think she can make the trip, but don’t expect to see her for at least a few days. And in the meantime, use the brains God gave you to figure out how to get her back. I am not allowed to tell you, Dax, so you’re going to have to figure this one out on your own. But you are the puzzle solver of the bunch; use your talents to put the pieces together.

Third, and this is important, the only clue I can give you. What you need, and what Nanette needs too for that matter, is in the attic. That’s all I can say.

One more thing, and I thought you knew already, but…the no-touching rule. It only applies to your hands, chère. It ONLY applies to your hands.

Dax gawked at the words on the page, absorbing all of the information before—

The note disappeared, and he struggled to mentally repeat the information she’d provided, so he wouldn’t forget. Celeste hadn’t crossed and she’d return, but he couldn’t let her get exhausted or he’d lose her; they’d have to be more careful next time. He’d have to control the beyond-natural sexual urges they had for each other and force her to slow down, force himself to slow down too. He wanted her, but he was determined that next time he wouldn’t be the only one to have an orgasm.

And he could touch her? Not with his hands, but hell, there were plenty of other body parts he could use, in plenty of interesting ways. If he’d only known earlier, he would most certainly have given her what she needed.

No use wasting time thinking about what he would have done now. Next time, he’d do it all, repeatedly, but he’d have to find a way to spread their lovemaking out, to take their time and not let her drain her energy so quickly. A challenge for sure, but a challenge he was definitely up to. Keeping her here longer was worth it.

And speaking of a challenge, Adeline’s note had given him a place to look for answers. The attic.

Dax left the sitting room and took the stairs two at a time to the third floor and the attic access. The string to open the attic door was typically wrapped around the door’s tiny knob in the ceiling, well above nine feet high, but tonight it was hanging down and waiting for Dax’s arrival.

He pulled on the string and the folding ladder came barreling straight at him like an arrow heading for a target. Dax jumped out of the way just in time to keep the thing from colliding with his head.

Looking down the hallway, he waited for Nanette to come check out the racket. Surely something as loud as that ladder pounding against the floor would wake her, but after a minute passed and there was still no sign of his oldest cousin, he climbed on up. Obviously, she was a sound sleeper. He swallowed, immediately thinking of Celeste sleeping in the hospital chair in Mr. Fontenot’s room. Dax had tried to wake her when he first arrived, but he couldn’t even make her stir. For a moment, he’d considered the possibility that she was dead, then had realized how foolish that was. She was dead. But she was also exhausted. And he still couldn’t fathom how that was possible. But hopefully, he’d figure it out soon, with the help of something in this attic.

The light from the hallway below illuminated a small portion of the room, but Dax knew the only light within the massive attic was a single pull-string bulb. He waved his hands in front of him as he moved so he could find the string. It took several kicked boxes and even more knocks into furniture, but he finally found it, with his face. He moved his hand to the thin nylon, pulled it, and saw that in spite of Monique’s haul, the place was still at least three-fourths full of furniture, boxes and plain old stuff.

“What I need is in the attic,” he repeated from his grandmother’s note. “Couldn’t you give me something a little more vague?” he asked sarcastically.

A loud, roaring clap of thunder rattled the side of the house, and Dax knew this thunder didn’t come from a storm. It hadn’t rained in days, nor was it supposed to.

“Fine,” he said, grinning in spite of his predicament. “I appreciate your help, Grandma Adeline, but really, don’t you think it might be a bit difficult for me to figure out what it is I’m looking for?”

Another booming clap of thunder, louder than the first, provided his answer.

Dax scrubbed a hand down his face, remembered the golden-haired beauty that was worth whatever it took to bring her back for good and uncovered the closest piece of furniture, a tall highboy dresser. He opened each of the drawers, slid his hand inside to check for contents and found none.

What was he looking for, anyway?

“One down. A thousand to go.”

He moved to a box nearby, rummaged through its contents and found a variety of antique kitchenware. Old-fashioned sifters, potato mashers and even aluminum Jell-O molds were stuffed inside. He moved to another box filled with crocheted doilies of various shapes and sizes, which brought back an early memory of his grandmother, crocheting in the Bentwood rocker in her sitting room. He dropped the doilies back in the box, then sat on the dusty floor and surveyed the eternity of furniture and boxes surrounding him. Wasn’t that just his luck? He was the descendant of packrats, and finding whatever he was looking for in two centuries’ worth of their accumulation could very well take him longer than he had, longer than Celeste had.

Kitchen gadgets and doilies. Dax couldn’t imagine how any of those items were supposed to help him get Celeste back. Narrowing his search was necessary, but he had to determine how. Boxes were scattered sporadically throughout the room, some sitting solo, others stacked up four high. It’d take longer to go through them than the furniture, particularly if every box was packed with dreegailles, the Cajuns’ popular term for junk.

Then again, one man’s junk was another man’s treasure. And his treasure, the answer to bringing Celeste back, was somewhere in this attic. He decided the best plan of action was to actually have a plan. There were way more boxes than pieces of furniture, so he decided to tackle the job according to ratio. He guessed three boxes for every one piece of furniture, so since he was already two boxes down, he grabbed another, and prepared for a long night.

After thirty minutes, he’d been through nine boxes mostly filled with ancient knickknacks and three pieces of empty furniture. So far, he’d discovered nothing that looked remotely useful. In fact, he hadn’t found the first thing that even suggested his ancestors had ghosts visiting the plantation at all, which wasn’t that odd, since the family did its best to protect their secret. But his grandmother had indicated that what he needed was here, and since what he needed would certainly have something to do with ghosts, he knew he simply hadn’t found it yet. Whatever it was.

Closing up a box filled with antique dolls, he scanned the remaining pieces of furniture to decide which one to tackle next. One plastic-covered piece was taller than the rest, and seemed to sit away from the others. Maybe that was why it seemed to capture Dax’s attention.

In any case, he stood slowly, his back slightly stiff from sitting on the floor, and then crossed the room. His skin bristled as he neared the tall piece. This was it; whether Adeline Vicknair was somehow leading him in this direction, or he simply sensed that he’d found what he was looking for, Dax had no doubt. Whatever was hidden under the heavy gray plastic was going to help him bring Celeste back.

Grabbing one side of the tarp, he pulled it to the floor and viewed an antique oak chifforobe. A tall door formed the right side of the well-sculpted piece, and five drawers formed the left. He opened the top drawer and found it packed with papers and cards. He held the top one up to the light and saw a greeting card, so faded and yellowed from the test of time that the image on the front wasn’t discernible, but when Dax opened it, the writing inside was intact.

Humbly and forever yours, John-Paul.

“John-Paul,” Dax repeated. John-Paul Vicknair. He could see the name, not only on the card in front of him, but also on a paper he’d recently viewed. One of the Vicknair ancestry logs at the parish courthouse, he believed. Nanette had copied the handwritten parish records from the Civil War years in the hopes of finding someone living in the house at the time, and naturally she’d asked Dax to help her. John-Paul Vicknair had been one of the names from back then, from 1861 to 1865, which meant that the card Dax was holding was well over a hundred years old. He lifted several more cards and letters from the drawer, and found that all of them were either to or from John-Paul Vicknair, and that the other correspondent was his wife, Clara.

“Mon dieu, you scared me to death!” Nanette exclaimed, entering the attic.

He squinted at her in the dimness of the room. She squinted back, her eyes puffy and her black hair tousled from sleep. “I’m looking for something,” he said.

“Looking for what?” The warped planks of the wooden floor creaked loudly as she crossed the room to peer over his shoulder. “And this better be good. I thought a monster-size rat was roaming around up here, right above my bedroom. And do you know it’s three in the morning? I have a herd of ninth-graders that would love to take advantage of a tired Ms. Vicknair tomorrow morning, and I don’t like giving them the one-up on anything.”

Opening the second drawer, Dax found more letters and cards. The third drawer yielded the same thing, as did the fourth and fifth. All were from John-Paul Vicknair to Clara, or vice versa, and all of them were apparently written during the mid-to-late 1800s, including those Civil War years that he and Nanette had been searching.

“I got a note from Grandma Adeline tonight,” he said, still scanning the cards and letters as best he could in the limited light.

“A note? You mean another assignment?”

“No, a note, telling me that the information that you need is in the attic.”

“The information I need?” she questioned.

“These cards and letters,” Dax said, waving at the mound of them crammed in the drawers. “Some of them are from the Civil War. I know that may not prove anything, but you never know.” He frowned. Maybe he’d been drawn to the chifforobe because it held what Nanette needed. Maybe what he was supposed to find was somewhere different entirely.

He turned and scanned the room again, while Nanette eagerly started thumbing through the letters.

“You think what we need for the National Register is in here? Proof that the house was inhabited during the Civil War? Seriously?” she asked, suddenly much more alert.

“I think that’s what she was talking about, as far as you’re concerned.”

“What do you mean, as far as I’m concerned?” Nan asked, holding up a letter to the light.

“She said that the information I want is up here too.”

“You mean about Celeste?” Nanette asked, surveying the letter in her hand.

Dax nodded, but she was too preoccupied with trying to read the letter to notice.

“I can’t see anything up here,” she complained.

“Yeah, I know.” He spotted a couple of empty boxes and pointed to them. “Grab those, and we’ll gather the letters and take them downstairs where the light is better.”

He began scooping up the letters from the top drawer, waited for her to open the first box, then gingerly placed them inside. The paper was old, and in some cases already torn from age, or from their Vicknair ancestors rereading each other’s correspondence. He moved to the other drawers and did the same, until both boxes were full. Then he rubbed his fingertips along the bottom of each drawer to verify he hadn’t missed any letters. No way did he want to miss one that might help Celeste get back.

Looking at the boxes, both filled to the brim, he realized that while he may have found what they were looking for, identifying it was going to take time. And time was something he didn’t have to spare.

“Want to take them to the kitchen?” Nan asked. “So we can spread them out on the table?”

“Sure. You’re actually going to stay up with me?” he asked, knowing that she never voluntarily gave up sleep before a workday. She’d been telling the truth earlier; ninth-graders would make mincemeat of a tired teacher.

“I may read a few of them with you. Gotta admit, I’m curious to know what’s in these letters.” She grabbed one of the boxes as Dax lifted the other. “So you think there’s something in here that will help you figure out how Celeste can stay longer?”

“I know that there’s something in this attic that will help, and I’m thinking it may also be in these letters.”

“Did you learn anything from Ryan?”

“Yeah,” he said, motioning for her to start on ahead of him. “I learned that Celeste’s situation is nothing at all like his was. He controlled when he came, where he went, how long he stayed, everything. She has no control, none at all. And there are other things that are different about her too, not just different from Ryan’s situation, but different from every ghost I’ve seen.”

He followed her out of the attic and used their time navigating the ladder and then the two flights of stairs leading to the kitchen to once more run over all of the differences he’d noticed—Celeste’s exhaustion, her lack of control over when she came and went, the fact that she didn’t glow as brightly as other spirits and her eyes weren’t black.

Dax decided not to enlighten Nan that Celeste also had the ability to touch him, and to do way more than that. She’d brought him to orgasm with her mouth, in her mouth. He hardened again, merely at the memory.

He placed his box on the table and immediately sat down behind it, so there was no way Nan could notice the bulge pressing against his jeans. She had no need to know those details, and Dax certainly had no desire to share them with his cousin.

He cleared his throat. “Ryan suspects that she glows brighter when she gets closer to the other side.”

She placed her box across from his. “But every time our ghosts visit, they’re already glowing, and the brightness doesn’t increase as they get closer to crossing, or it hasn’t with any of mine. What about yours?”

“No, never.”

“And their eyes are always jet black, right from the moment I get them,” she said.

“Mine too. That’s what I don’t understand about Celeste. Something’s different, and unless I figure it out in time, I’m afraid she’ll cross completely, and I won’t be able to stop it.”

“And you think these letters hold the answer for what’s going on with her?” she asked, lifting a handful from her box.

“Hell, I hope so.” He gave her a tired smile. “So, you up to reading, oh, a couple of hundred letters?”

She sighed, then put the letters back on top of the stack. “You know, I thought that I’d help you get started on them,” she said, peeking at the clock on the microwave. “But I’ve got to get up in two hours. As much as I want to find proof that people were in this house back then, I do have a class to teach in the morning. And you have to work too, don’t you?”

He did. In fact, tomorrow he had to cover his biggest route, visiting doctors in the majority of southeastern Louisiana. Typically, he loved his job. He made decent money, though currently most of it went toward repairs on the plantation, and he got a company-paid car—a BMW, no less—but it did involve a lot of driving and long hours, and generally required he get a full night’s sleep before a day of work. “Yeah, I do. But I think I’ll go ahead and start on some of these first, then I’ll sleep. Unlike your teaching job, I don’t really have a time I have to get started.”

However, the later he started, the later he’d have to work, and in the back of his mind, he was hoping to see Celeste tomorrow night. Then again, his grandmother’s note had said she’d need more than a day of rest before she could return again. Maybe he should work an extra-long day, in case she showed up later in the week, and he decided to take a day off.

Nanette yawned. “Tell you what. You look some of them over tonight and then mark the spot you get to. I’ll pick up tomorrow afternoon. With the parent–teacher conferences out of the way, I should be home right after school’s out, so that should give me plenty of time to see what we’ve got.”

“Deal. And I can’t help but think that what we need is in here,” he said, indicating the boxes filled with letters.

“I hope so, because it’d be really good to put Charles Roussel in his place. I’ve been dreaming of the day when I can tell him that he has no control over whether the Vicknair plantation stays or goes.” She smiled, apparently envisioning the scene with the cocky parish president. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe Grandma Adeline has given us a way to save the house.”

“Maybe she has.” And maybe, just maybe, she’d given him a way to get back the woman he loved. One thing was for sure: if he got her back, he wasn’t going to waste a minute. He prayed their next time together wouldn’t be their last, but if it was, then he wanted to make sure he gave her every pleasure a woman could get from a man, and that each and every pleasure was as potent, as overwhelming, as what she’d so selflessly given him tonight—powerful enough for her to remember for eternity.

**8**

TWO HOURS LATER, Dax was on his second pot of coffee and still poring over the box of letters when Nanette entered the kitchen.

“You didn’t sleep,” she said, stating the obvious as she filled a mug with coffee, then walked over and topped off his cup.

“Nope.” Dax peered into the remaining box of letters on the floor beside him; he’d been reading them as quickly as he could and still was only halfway done. It’d taken time to view them, because in most cases they’d been in their original envelopes, and both the envelope and the papers within were weathered and fragile. On top of that, the writing was fairly faint, though it could have just seemed that way because Dax’s eyes were so tired.

Nanette sat across from him and surveyed the two piles of paper taking over the majority of the kitchen table. “Okay. Tell me what you found.”

“These aren’t dated and don’t have any references to historical events that would date them, per se.” He pointed to the larger stack on his right. Then he indicated the eight letters and envelopes on his left, the ones that she’d be most interested in. “But these—these are a different story entirely. It seems our great-great-great-great-grandfather—and I’m assuming I’ve got the number of greats right—not only fought in the Civil War, but also took the time to write his wife and tell her about it.”

Nanette’s green eyes practically gleamed. “And his wife was…”

“Right here,” Dax said, glad that he was able to give her what she wanted, even if he hadn’t found anything to help him with Celeste. “She stayed at home, at the plantation.”

“No way! We can prove it? With those?” She reached for the small stack and pulled them toward her, protectively. “Dax, that’s incredible!”

“Yeah, and I’m betting there are more in here that I haven’t even gotten to yet, but these eight are all dated between April and May 1862, during the battles at Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip, where the North was trying to get control of New Orleans and that portion of the Mississippi River. Pretty interesting stuff, really.”

Dax had also found it interesting that John-Paul Vicknair had managed to write his wife daily throughout the ongoing battle, a sign, in Dax’s mind, that all Vicknair men were singularly focused when it came to the women they loved. He’d bet John-Paul had been as determined to write that letter every day as Dax was determined to have Celeste with him, every day.

Nanette read the first letter, nodding as she scanned the page, then flipped it over. Then she read the second, and the third, and so on, while Dax worked on finishing yet another cup of coffee. It’d been a long night, and he did have to go to work soon. He knew that he’d never finish all those letters before he had to go. But he’d made a good dent, and he’d found what Nanette was looking for, so the effort hadn’t been totally wasted, even if he’d yet to find anything that hinted as to why Celeste couldn’t get back to him.

“So she stayed here while everyone else was fighting. He talks about his younger brothers, and his father, all joining in the Confederate efforts,” Nan said. “And he thanks her for staying here, and for helping the spirits to cross.”

“I know. That’s exactly what we need, isn’t it?” Dax asked. “Now you can attach those letters to the nomination form and send it on in.”

Nanette nodded, but she was frowning, Dax noticed, and when she looked up, her green eyes were glistening, on the verge of tears.

“What is it?”

“We can’t use these,” she said solemnly. “I know you’ve worked hard to find them, and I’m really feeling terrible about going back to bed knowing that you stayed up all night going through them. But we can’t use them.” She leaned over the table to look in the box. “But there are more here, right? I’ll keep going through them this afternoon. Maybe there’s something in there that we can use.”

Dax was dumbfounded. He had dates, battles, the name of their ancestor who was fighting and the name of his wife at home. What more did she need? “Why can’t we use them?”

“Because he talks about the ghosts in every one of them,” she said. “If we send these as verification of—” she looked at the name on the letter “—Clara Vicknair living here during the Civil War, the committee will read the contents, and they’ll learn that she was helping ghosts cross over. Whether they believe it or not, the next thing you know, everybody and their grandmother will be traipsing out here to see the haunted Vicknair place.” She shook her head. “We can’t do it, not with these. But maybe there’s something in there that doesn’t talk about the ghosts? Something that can be dated to the Civil War too?”

Dax could feel his frustration peaking. “Ever thought that maybe Grandma Adeline intended for us to use these? I mean, she’s the one who said what you were looking for was in the attic. Maybe it’s time to bring our ghosts out of the closet, so to speak. Would it be so bad if people knew? Especially if it helped us get on that register? That is the goal, right? And obviously, Grandma Adeline thought she was sending us in the right direction to achieve that goal.”

“I can’t believe that. She protected the family secret, like everyone before her. If what we need is really in these letters, then we haven’t found it yet.”

“Fine,” Dax said, standing and taking his cup to the sink. “But I can’t read any more letters now. I’ve got to get ready for work, and then I’ve got a full day visiting doctors.”

Her chair squeaked as she twisted to look at him. “Did you find anything to help you with your problem? Anything about what’s happening with Celeste?”

“Not yet.” He stared out the kitchen window at the cane fields and wished Celeste was here to see the beauty of the sugarcane. Next week, the cutting would begin as they went through grinding season. Then the massive eight-foot stalks would be chopped to the ground, and the stubs burned to prepare the field for replanting. It was an incredible, exhilarating process, and he wanted to share that with Celeste. He wanted to share lots of things with Celeste…if he could get her back. Unfortunately, not one line in any of the letters he’d read throughout the night gave him any indication how to make that happen.

“Well, we haven’t finished all of the letters yet,” Nanette said, evidently deciding on optimism as her method of handling their new dilemma. “I’ll start on them after school, and I’ll follow your lead here and make a pile of the ones that may help us for you to go through. Jenee will be here this afternoon too, so she can help.”

“That sounds good,” he said.

“You are going to sleep for a few hours before you try to drive all day, right?” she asked, shifting into her protective oldest-cousin role.

“Yeah, I’ll catch a few hours before I start.” He knew he was too tired to drive, and he could sleep four hours and still be on the road by ten. He’d let Nanette and Jenee tackle the rest of the letters this afternoon. Maybe they’d find something and have it waiting for him when he returned. If he was lucky. “Let me be lucky,” he said softly as the cane reeds blurred together in the field. He squinted, thinking that he really was exhausted if his eyes couldn’t even focus. But then, the air sounded different too, as if he could hear the reeds moving against each other in a soft, sweet cadence.

Dax leaned his head closer to the window to listen, then he unlatched it and pushed it open, trying to see if he could hear the song again. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The cane, moving. It sounds like—” he heard it again, crystal clear “—someone singing, maybe?” Then, as the sound intensified, Dax made out a few of the words. “Something about the leaves in the fall, fluttering to the ground.”

Nanette moved from the table to stand beside him. “I don’t hear anything. Are you sure it’s the cane, or are you hearing a spirit?”

Dax closed his eyes and definitely heard a song, and a little girl singing it. “You’re right. It’s a little girl.” He opened his eyes. “I’ve got another ghost coming.” He typically heard ghosts for a day or so before their arrival, which meant that by tomorrow or the day after, he’d likely have another little girl spirit that would need his help crossing. And maybe, just maybe, she wouldn’t come alone.

**9**

ON THURSDAY, three days after he’d found the letters in the attic and had first heard the little ghost singing, Dax steered his car along the darkened curves of River Road in an effort to get to the plantation, and to the assignment that he felt certain was waiting for him in the sitting room. Although he’d been anxious for the spirit to arrive, since he assumed her coming meant he might see Celeste again, he hadn’t minded that it took her a few days to find her way to the Vicknair plantation. In the past three days, he’d crammed in a visit to each and every doctor’s office on his route, even though that had meant sixteen-hour workdays, in order to justify taking some time off if Celeste reappeared.

And he truly believed if there was any way she could make it back through with his new assignment, she would, particularly if Grandma Adeline was willing to help.

He turned the Beemer into the driveway and the little girl’s song grew so loud within his head that he had to concentrate to navigate the gravel road ahead. He’d left the house while it was still dark this morning, and it was dark again now, but he’d accomplished his task, clearing his schedule to allow several days to help the young spirit, and to, hopefully, spend time with Celeste.

The big, bold branches of the magnolia trees lining the driveway swayed slightly with the breeze from the levee, and the song in Dax’s mind seemed to mimic their movement, chiming in about the colorful leaves of autumn. Her voice, a lyrical tinkling, echoed from the trees, and Dax wondered how the young spirit had died.

He’d expected to see her sooner. It didn’t usually take this long between the time he heard the spirits and they arrived needing help. However, on occasions when a child was on his or her deathbed, he had heard the songs, or laughter, or tears of the final days. He assumed that to be the case now, and he prayed the young girl hadn’t suffered as she died.

Where the driveway circled around a majestic oak, he noticed that in the past few days, the big tree had lost the majority of its leaves. Though still towering and formidable, it looked different with the missing foliage, no longer the picture of life, but of barrenness, of the way it felt to be alone.

The way Dax felt without Celeste.

“Let her come back with this ghost.”

Moonlight spilled freely through the bare branches of the tree and cast snakelike shadows on the ground. The powers that be often sent signs before a spirit’s visit, a hint of what was to come with a medium’s assignment. He hoped the eerie vision produced by the massive oak wasn’t a sign that this assignment wouldn’t go the way he wanted.

He grabbed his briefcase and had barely made it out of the car when he heard Nanette’s voice, calling from the porch.

“It just got here,” she said.

“What?” The wind peppered him with leaves as he walked toward her.

“Your assignment. I was in the sitting room rereading some of the letters from the attic when it showed up on the tea service a few minutes ago. I tried calling your cell but didn’t get an answer.”

“I was probably already on River Road,” he said. “Not much of a reception by the levee.”

“Well, it worked out good then, didn’t it? You were almost home.” She took his bag when he reached the top of the porch. “Here, I’ll put that up so you can go get your assignment. You hear your ghost?”

“Yeah, she’s been singing all day,” he sighed, pressing his fingertips against his temple; the song was even louder now than before.

“And? Have you heard Celeste too?”

“No, but I didn’t hear her last time either. She just showed up with Prissy.”

“Maybe she’ll show up again,” Nanette said hopefully. “And maybe she’ll bring us more information on where to find the answers for saving the house.”

“You still don’t want to use the letters?” He entered the foyer, then started up the stairs toward the second floor with her following in his wake.

“No,” she said, her dismay evident in the single word.

“What if Grandma Adeline expected you to? You have to believe that she meant for you to use them, particularly with the battles noted, the dates, the names. It’s everything we need.”

“Yep, everything we need, and then some.” She laughed softly. “I’m considering it, but right now, I’m leaning toward adding those letters to every other secret we keep in this house.”

Dax shook his head. “Your call, but I really think that she told us about them because she meant for us to use them.”

“She also said that the attic held what you were looking for too, though, didn’t she?” Nan reminded him. “And you haven’t found anything that helps you with Celeste, have you?”

“Haven’t had much of a chance to look, since I’ve been trying to do a week’s worth of sales calls in three days.”

“Well, I haven’t found anything that would help you either,” she admitted. “And I have kept an eye out as I read the letters.”

“Thanks.” He entered the sitting room, where, sure enough, a lavender-tinted envelope graced the center of the ornate tea service. “Guess it’s time to see if I get one ghost, or two.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Nanette scooped up a box of letters from a side chair in the sitting room, then turned to go. “Let me know about your new ghost, and let me know if Celeste shows too.”

“I will.” Wincing at the little girl’s song, now escalating to a near fever pitch, Dax sat on the red settee and reached for the letter, eager to get started on his assignment and to, hopefully, see Celeste again.

The door snapped shut with Nanette’s departure, and Dax opened the envelope. The little girl’s song immediately ceased, and he sensed that overwhelming peaceful presence, the sign that a ghost knew he was going to take care of her needs.

As usual, the letter smelled of magnolias and reminded him of Adeline Vicknair, the way her scent had always cloaked him when she hugged him, and how she used to sit on the front porch of the plantation when the big trees lining the driveway were covered in her favorite blooms.

He withdrew the three sheets of paper composing his assignment and quickly read the top one, his grandmother’s letter on her trademark scalloped stationery.

Dax scanned the information and learned that the young girl’s name was Angelle Millet and that the reason for death was cancer. That explained Dax hearing her for several days. More than likely, she had been on the brink of death, and her spirit was already trying to soar, even before the body had stopped breathing.

Requirement for Passage—Attending her funeral, checking on her parents, and viewing her elementary school’s fall program being performed in her honor.

Dax nodded and smiled. No wonder she had been singing about the season; she was practicing the songs for the show.

He quickly scanned the sheet of rules and read the final sheet, the official document directing his grandmother to assign Angelle to one of her grandchildren.

He picked up the pages and returned them to the envelope, placed it back on the tea service and watched it disappear. Then he turned, scanned the room and waited for Angelle to appear with a golden-haired beauty by her side.

“Hi,” a crystal-clear voice said from behind him.

Dax shifted in the seat and saw a beautiful little girl, her dark skin accented by the traditional spirit glow, and her eyes alight with excitement. She looked to be around ten years old, with full cheeks, a wide smile and several long braids tipped in vibrant-colored bows.

“Look, I’ve got my weight back,” she said, grinning. “And my hair!” She ran a hand down one of the braids and smiled. “Mama said I’d have long hair again, when I went to heaven. She was right, even if I haven’t crossed the whole way yet. And Ms. Adeline said I’ll get to see Mama again, and Daddy, and the kids at school. I’ll even get to watch the play, right?”

“Yes, you will,” Dax said, glad he could grant her request and trying his best to hide his own sadness at seeing her here, in this room, alone.

She nodded. “They promised me that, no matter what, they’d go to the fall program. We knew I wasn’t going to make it until then—the doctors said so—but I wanted them to go. My friends are going to sing my song.”

“Your song?” he asked.

“Yep.” She bobbed her head. “I wrote it while I was in the hospital watching the leaves fall outside my window. It’s a pretty song, I think.”

Dax smiled. “Yes, it is.”

“You’ve heard it?” she asked, her surprise evident. “How?”

“I’ve heard you singing it for the past few days,” he said, “while I waited for you to come see me. And you’re right, it’s a very pretty song.”

“So, what do I do? I can see Mama and Daddy getting ready to tell me goodbye.” She shifted her weight to one foot and peered past Dax, and he knew she was checking on her folks.

“Think of them, and of how much you want to see them, and you’ll go straight to them,” he explained.

“And I can stay with them for the next few days, right? Until my school program on Saturday, so I can watch all of my friends sing my song, right?”

“Yes, you can,” he said. “And if you need me, for anything at all, just think of me, and I’ll know your thoughts. If you need me to come to you, then all you need to do is think of that, and I’ll get there.”

“You’ll come hear me sing too, won’t you? It’s at Norco Elementary. Do you know where that is?”

“Yes, I do,” Dax said. “It isn’t that far from here.”

“So you’ll come? The program is Saturday night, two days away. You’ll get to hear my song again if you come.”

“Well, then, I wouldn’t miss it.”

Angelle smiled broadly. “Oh, I almost forgot. Ms. Adeline said to tell you that—” She squished her nose as she apparently fought to remember something. “I knew I’d forget the name.”

“Was it Celeste?” Dax asked. Please.

“Yes, that’s it! Celeste. Ms. Adeline said to tell you that she was sorry, Celeste couldn’t come back right now, but that she may be able to come for my program to hear me sing.” She smiled brightly.

Dax sat down on the settee and swallowed thickly. She couldn’t make it through. Why not? What kept her over there? And away from him? “Did she say why Celeste couldn’t come now?”

The little girl shook her head, and her long braids swayed with the motion. “No, but I think she was just too tired. She looked very tired.”

Leaning forward, Dax stared into her glimmering black eyes. “You saw her? You saw Celeste?”

Angelle nodded. “Yes, she was there, in the middle part, before I met Ms. Adeline. She’s got beautiful long hair, doesn’t she? And it’s so blond that it nearly looks like gold. I really like the way it curls.”

“Did she say anything to you?” he asked. “Celeste? Did she know you were coming here, and did she say anything to you? Or say anything at all that you could tell me?” Something that would help him know how to help her?

“I only remember her saying one thing, but I didn’t know what it meant.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘I need him,’ and that was it. Just that she needed somebody. But Ms. Adeline told her that she was still too weak, and she needed to get stronger.”

“Did she say how long? How long until she’d be strong enough?” Dax asked.

“She said it’d be a few more days this time, and that made Celeste sad. I felt sorry for her because she really wanted to come with me. Maybe I could have helped her see whoever she needed to see, huh? Do you know who it is?”

Dax felt sick. “Yes, I think I do.”

“Oh, look, there’s my little sister with Mama and Daddy,” she said, turning her attention back to what was happening at her home. “I’m going to them now. Thank you for helping me, and I’ll see you at the show, right?”

“Yes, I’ll see you at the show.”

Dax watched her take a step toward the direction of her parents, then disappear. Then he let his head rest against the back of the settee in frustration while he looked at the ceiling and pondered why Celeste was so weak, and why no one, especially Adeline Vicknair, was able to help her through.

He swung out his arm and backhanded the tea service across the room. The pitcher clanged loudly as it pinged across the hardwood floor, as did the cups and the tray.

Placing his hands against his forehead, he scrubbed them down his face and embraced the aching throb overpowering his temples. It hurt like hell, and right now, it suited him fine.

He sat there in the stillness with his head cradled in his hands and realized that life really did suck. Then he heard a soft thunk on the table, then another, and another, and he moved his hands away and opened his eyes.

The tea service was back in place, the tray in the center of the table, pitcher perched on one side and two dainty silver cups on the other, as though nothing had happened at all. But something had happened.

He’d had enough.

He glared at the tray and contemplated tossing it again, but it would just find its way to the table once more. Even his anger couldn’t be sated in this damn room. “If you can’t send her back now, then at least help me figure out what’s happening to her, and how to help her stay.”

Then, while he stared, a small lavender card, similar to the one Adeline Vicknair had sent three nights ago, materialized in the center of the gleaming tray with his name written boldly across the top. Dax leaned forward, picked it up, flipped it over and read the single line of text, written in his grandmother’s definitive swirling script.

Patience, chère. I’m doing the best I can.

**10**

CELESTE PRACTICALLY jogged down the darkened path toward the middle. She hadn’t felt this energetic, this lively, this excited in a very long time, mainly because she knew that Adeline Vicknair would let her pass back through. Celeste had no doubt she was strong enough now. She didn’t know what had happened when she’d heeded the call of those voices, but whatever it was, it had strengthened her, and for that she was grateful. Plus, the crying had stopped, and she was grateful for that as well.

The only sound echoing from this passage now was her footsteps slapping against the cool stone as she ran. No sobbing. No screams. No pleading voices calling for her to come back. And the old saying was true—silence was golden—because their silence meant Celeste didn’t need to go back to them, not right now. Right now, she could go where she wanted, and where she wanted to go was…to Dax.

She entered the middle room to find Adeline Vicknair, glowing brightly, her long silver hair floating around her head.

The older woman clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth disapprovingly as Celeste entered, but her dark eyes sparkled. She wasn’t fooling Celeste; she was glad that she had returned, and she was almost as excited about letting her see Dax again as Celeste was excited to see him.

Celeste thought of him, the way he’d looked right before she’d been pulled away. His muscled body gloriously naked before her as he lay on the bed, the most tempting male she’d ever seen. Broad shoulders, even broader because of his arms tied to the post. His chest, heaving with thick, ragged breaths as she crawled on top of him and kissed that part of him that was so hard, so ready and so deliciously responsive.

She’d never thought she would have the nerve to do that to a man. No, that wasn’t true. She’d dreamed of doing that to a man, if she ever found a man she wanted that much. But she’d had a fear, not of actually doing it, but of not doing it well.

She thought of Dax’s powerful growl through his release.

Oh, yes, she’d done it well. And she’d do it again.

She was going back through to him today; one way or another, she’d make Adeline let her through. She had to. It’d been, what, two days? Three? She wasn’t certain, having lost track of time when she’d rested down that other path, but she didn’t care how long had passed. What mattered now was how long she could stay this time.

“You’re stronger,” Adeline said.

Celeste nodded. “Much stronger.”

It’d nearly killed her when she’d found her way to the middle, saw the little girl—Angelle—on her way to see Dax, and wasn’t allowed to go with her. She’d still felt weak, but she’d thought if she could just get to Dax, she’d feel better. But Adeline hadn’t budged. Today, though, she would. Celeste would make sure of it.

“And your clothes,” Adeline said, nodding. “I like the change.”

Celeste looked down at the long, sage-green tunic. It was lightweight and sheer, with a feminine lettuce edging along the hem, and it was paired with a pair of winter-white capris that stopped at her calves. She was barefoot, like before, but her toes were painted a sparkling pink. Why had she changed from the white gown? How had she? She hadn’t done it intentionally.

“Oh, chère, I’m sorry. I assumed you’d already noticed the new apparel. Evidently you were doing much better.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because they put you in regular clothes,” the woman said matter-of-factly.

“Who put—” Celeste stopped when a pinprick of light forced its way through the middle wall, then grew wider and wider. “No. I’m not going.”

“Oh, come over here, chère,” Adeline instructed, wrapping an arm around Celeste, then pulling her to one side. “It isn’t for you this time. Hurry. Several are coming.”

The light grew brighter and brighter, bigger and bigger, until it claimed the majority of the wall and Celeste had to shield her eyes, and then a large mob of people appeared. Adults and children alike bustled through. They chatted and laughed as they passed, apparently oblivious to the two women standing against the wall.

The light grew even larger, even brighter, then absorbed them all, before going away. The scene reminded Celeste of the day when she’d been in the bus accident that brought her here the first time, with Chloe and all of the other children and counselors that were on their way to camp. Back then, Celeste had felt a pull toward the light, but she’d fought against its lure in order to stay and help Chloe, who hadn’t wanted to go in until she saw her parents once more. Of all the times Celeste had seen the light, that time its draw had been the strongest.

She realized now that during every previous instance when she’d seen it, she’d felt some type of pull toward it, a desire to step closer and sink into it. But she didn’t feel that this time, and she wondered why.

“Plane crash,” Adeline said. “Red-eye flight. Most of them were sleeping and didn’t feel a thing. One minute, they were asleep, and the next they were here, but it was their time, and they didn’t have any unfinished business. If any of them had, I’d have needed to get some of the grandkids to help.”

“Did Dax help Angelle?” Celeste asked.

“He’s in the process of helping her.” Adeline smiled. “Well, I say that he’s helping her. The truth is, that little girl merely needed to be pointed in the right direction and told how to see her parents, and then she could take care of herself. Not a very tough case for my youngest grandson, but I typically send all of the children his way. He’s so good with kids, like you.”

“I wanted to be an elementary-school teacher,” Celeste said.

“I know, chère. You’d be a good one, too.” She tilted her head as though picturing Celeste in front of a blackboard. “I could see my Dax ending up with a teacher. The two of you would be a good match, but you already know that, don’t you?”

“I want to see him,” Celeste insisted. “I’m strong enough now, aren’t I?”

“Yes, chère, you are, but last time the two of you tested your fate. You stayed too long, or exerted yourself too much—” she held up a hand “—and no, I don’t know exactly how you became so exhausted so quickly, nor do I need to know. I’m just stating that if you want to stay longer on that side, with Dax, you’ll need to practice some form of moderation in your activities.”

Celeste grinned. “I promise—let me through now.” She paused, then added, “Please.” She waited, and when Adeline didn’t move toward Dax’s door, she said more firmly, “I’m not leaving this room until I see him, and I’m not going into the light. Not yet.”

“I’ve never met another living soul so determined,” Adeline said. “Well, I take that back. He’s determined too, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is.” Celeste stepped past Adeline and watched the doorway to the left, Dax’s path, slowly open. “I can go now?”

“I won’t stop you, chère. And don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled that you care so much about my Dax, and that he cares so much about you, but I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Dax would never hurt me,” Celeste said, hugging Adeline before starting down the darkened path.

“I’m not worried about him hurting you, dear,” Adeline said, her voice growing faint as Celeste moved farther away. “I’m worried about you hurting yourself.”

DAX ROLLED OVER, slammed a fist into his pillow and stared at the red numbers on the digital clock beside the bed: 3:27.

At least he’d slept for a few hours. That’s more than he could say about last night, when he was so mad at the powers that be that he’d fumed and cussed all night long, not that it had helped.

Celeste hadn’t come.

But exhaustion had prevailed tonight, and he’d slept a whopping four hours. Not bad for a guy this pissed, or this much in need of sex. In spite of the staggering orgasm she’d given him four days ago, Dax’s body still burned for something more. He wanted to touch her, now that he knew he could. To run his mouth over every tantalizing indention, every curve, every nuance composing the woman who’d thoroughly captivated his heart, his soul. He wanted to taste her, the way she’d tasted him, and he wanted to feel her sweet heat surround him, to push himself deep inside and find out if they were even hotter joined together than they were when they touched.

“Damn.” He growled the word with as much ferocity as he could manage and hoped that the powers that be were listening. There was no way Celeste wasn’t strong enough to make it over again. She’d come back the very same day last time. Now she’d been gone four agonizingly long days, and he was tired of waiting.

“Is it that bad?”

He jerked around to face the owner of the voice who was standing near his bed. “Mon dieu, you made it through.”

Celeste was glowing, shimmering, from the top of her blond head to the toes of her bare feet. Dax took her all in, the silvery-gray eyes that seemed to zero in on his chest before glancing down to where the sheet now pooled at his waist, the smile that set his pulse on fire, the curvy hips and legs that were showcased beautifully by fitted short pants…

She stood there and allowed him to examine her thoroughly, and to verify that he wasn’t dreaming, then she smiled a little brighter. “I have new clothes.” She waved a hand down her body. “No idea where they came from, but I like them.”

“I like them too,” he said, even though he couldn’t care less about what she was wearing. She was here; that was what mattered. He wanted to take her and throw her on the bed, kiss her all over, then make love to her until she forgot that this was temporary.

Temporary. Did it have to be? And shouldn’t he finally find out more about that before they moved on to hot and heated? The last two times he’d lost his senses and let lust rule, instead of asking the pertinent questions.

He’d regretted that ever since, not how much they’d wanted each other or how she’d satisfied him, but that he let her go without finding out how, and if, he could get her back on this side for good.

He swallowed and tried to ignore the fact that the sheet was now pitched in a tent from his hard-on. He needed answers, in case she was pulled away again. “Celeste.”

“Yes?” she asked, licking her lips.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t want to lose you again without finding out a few things. So, before we do—anything—I need to know. Where have you been? How did you get through? And how long can you stay?”

“I don’t know where I’ve been,” she said, stepping toward the bed. “I got through because of Adeline.” She moved her hands to the hem of her long blouse, then crossed her arms in front of her as she brought it above her head, and let the green fabric fall to the floor. Like before, when she’d worn the silky white gown, she wasn’t wearing a bra, and her nipples, like before, were tight little points, rosy pink and perfect for kissing, nuzzling, suckling…

“Celeste. Please, I need to know.”

She put her hands to her waist, ran her fingertips inside the flat waistband of her pants, then slid them to the floor and stepped out of them. Last time, she’d worn nothing beneath her gown, but this time, a thin scrap of lacy white panties made Dax even harder.

“How long can you stay this time?” he repeated.

“She said it was up to me. If I can control my tiredness, keep myself from becoming completely exhausted, I should be able to stay longer than before.” She stepped closer to the bed. “I’m going to try to do that this time. I know it’ll be hard, because I’ve honestly thought of nothing else but being with you, in every possible way. But if I feel myself getting tired—”

“Then we’ll stop, and you’ll rest,” he completed. “We have to, Celeste. I need to try to figure out what’s happening to you when you’re gone, and I have a better chance of doing that if we work together and you tell me everything you remember about when you’re gone.”

“But I want you, Dax. I want you so much it hurts.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“So if I start feeling tired, I’ll tell you, but right now, I’m not tired—at all. And since I’m not, we can talk about any questions you may have later, can’t we? I want you, Dax.” She eyed the tent in the bed. “And you want me too.”

“Yeah, but—” He glanced at his hands, then smiled.

“But what?”

Dax climbed from the bed and then motioned for her to get on top of the covers. “This time, I’m in control.”

It was her turn to glance at his hands. “Can you, without touching?”

One corner of his mouth crooked up. For the past four days, he’d thought of nothing but how many ways he could, without touching. “Hell, yeah.”

She crawled up on the bed, her heart-shaped bottom facing him as she moved toward the pillow, then turned around and licked her lips. “How can you?”

“You see, there’s a loophole in that no-touching rule that I never realized until after you left last time.”

“What loophole?” she asked.

Dax moved to the foot of the bed while she stared brazenly at his erection. He’d gone to sleep nude, and he was glad for it. Her skin was flushed and excited, tinged with a hint of pink, visible even in the midst of her shimmering glow.

He slowly moved up the side of the bed, careful not to touch her, not to let her know everything he was thinking, everything he’d be doing to her soon. Then he reached across her and braced both his hands on the headboard, his forearms within inches of her golden hair, tumbling wildly down her body. He’d feel that hair against him soon.

He grasped the headboard tightly, then brought his face to hers. “The part about me being able to touch, with everything but my hands.” Then he lowered his body to press against her hot flesh and to his complete delight, the friction was just as sweet as before.

“Do you feel that, Celeste?”

She nodded, her eyes dilating with pleasure.

He moved his mouth to her forehead, kissed her lightly, and felt her skin scorch his lips. “Tell me,” he said. “Tell me everything, what you feel, what you sense, what you want. I want to know.” His words feathered across her temple as he nuzzled her hair out of the way and nibbled his way to her ear.

He licked the lobe, blew warm air on the dampened spot and demanded again, “Tell me, Celeste.”

“I—” She turned her head so that her mouth rested against his. “I feel hot, burning all over.”

He put his tongue against the corner of her mouth, then swept it slowly along her lower lip, while she gasped. Then he eased it inside and was rewarded with her hips bucking up to rub against his erection.

She broke the kiss and, panting wildly, said, “Please, Dax. I—I want this, all of this, but I don’t know how much I can take. Please. I want to feel you inside of me.”

Strengthening his grip on the headboard, he rose above her and peered into her eyes. They were still silver, still glittering with desire, and there was no sign of charcoal, or darker gray, or—heaven forbid—black. He wasn’t about to rush his first time with her if he wasn’t in danger of losing her.

“You can take a little more,” he said, and her eyes widened. “Can’t you?” he asked, and he moved his head down toward her breasts, but he didn’t kiss them, not yet. First he moved his face beneath them, then bowed his head and rubbed the stiff peaks with his unshaven face.

Again, her hips bucked wildly, this time pushing against his abdomen, and he could feel her damp heat, hot and ready.

He moved his head, forcefully grazing her nipples with his stubble, and he knew every sensitive nerve ending was being teased by each pass.

He looked up at her, saw her eyes were still silvery-gray, then took his tongue to the base of her breast and slowly licked his way to the tip. Her back arched off the bed as she pushed the tight point into his mouth, and he hungrily accepted her offer, sucking it between his lips, then pulling it between his teeth.

A sharp, piercing moan escaped her, and he felt her juices begin to flow between her legs.

“Need—you,” she said on a gasp. “Please.”

He looked back at her eyes, and though the change wasn’t drastic, they were darker now, and as much as he wanted to make this last, he didn’t want to push her too far. He couldn’t lose her after one time, but he wasn’t going to leave her this hot, this feverishly ready, either.

Pressing against the headboard, he lifted his body from hers, and she shook her head. “No, don’t stop. Not now.”

“I won’t,” he promised, shifting his weight so he could release his hands, bracing them on the bed on both sides of her, then lowering his mouth to her thigh. “Raise your hips, Celeste.”

She did as he asked, pressing her heels against the bed and lifting her center.

Her scent teased him, and he nearly lost his fight to keep his hands away. He gripped the comforter in his fists, then lowered his head to her hip and ran his tongue beneath the tiny strap of her panties.

While she watched and moaned, he pulled her panties off with his teeth, moving down one side, then the other, and kissing, nipping and sucking as he worked. By the time he had them at her ankles, her entire body was writhing, and her center was glistening wet and completely open…for him.

Dax took one more glance at her eyes, gray now, with no hint of silver anymore. But they weren’t black yet, and he prayed they’d stay that way, at least until she came. He wanted to take this slow, but slow wasn’t an option anymore.

“Now spread your legs, chère.” She did, and Dax moved his face to her most feminine spot and licked.

Heat, fiery, blazing, sizzling heat met his tongue, made his lips burn, and he delved deeper.

Celeste arched her back, lifted her hips and pressed against his mouth, while Dax ran his tongue up her quivering folds to her sensitive nub, accessible and exposed and perfect. He kissed it, then he flicked his tongue over it while her hips rose higher and she moaned his name.

“Please, please, I’m…almost…”

He moved his tongue faster, then felt her body tense as she strained to find release and fell just short of her climax. He wasn’t going to make her wait any longer; she was getting way too close to the edge, way too close to being taken from him again, and he didn’t want to lose her yet.

He pressed his mouth against her hot clitoris and sucked it between his lips, then she screamed, vigorously riding his mouth with hard, quick convulsions, her sweet juices soaking her pulsing center. Dax slid his mouth toward her opening and licked the delicious treat.

While she shuddered through the last ripples, he continued to lick her, kiss her, adore her. Then, when her body finally stilled, he rose above her and saw her eyes, dark charcoal and glazed with fulfilled desire.

“That was wonderful,” she whispered while he moved beside her, careful to keep his body against hers but his hands away from temptation.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It was.”

She closed her eyes, then slowly opened them again, and Dax could see the exhaustion claiming her spirit.

He frowned, and started to tell her, but she knew.

She gave him a soft smile, then reached out and touched his mouth with her finger. “I know. I need to rest now, or I’ll be taken again.” She nodded. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to leave you too soon this time. I’ll rest, but when I wake up…”

“When you wake up,” he said, his mouth moving against her finger as he spoke, “we’re going to talk.”

She blinked, then gave him a sultry smile. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“After we talk, I want to know.”

“Know what?” he asked.

“I want to know if there’s any way possible that it could be even hotter when you’re deep inside.” She slid her finger from his mouth, then moved her hand to her womanhood. “I want to feel that heat…deep in here.”

“Then promise me something, chère.”

“Name it,” she said, grinning as she echoed his words.

“You’ll get plenty of rest now, because after you wake up, and we talk, you’re going to need it.”

**11**

THE SOUND OF Dax’s stomach growling woke Celeste from a blissful sleep. She giggled as she rolled over, opened her eyes and viewed the beautifully naked man beside her on the bed. At one point during the night, he’d retrieved a silk necktie from the closet and asked her to tie his hands to one of the bedposts. They were still there, stretched above his head in a position that could in no way be considered comfortable. Safe, yes. Comfortable, no. But he’d said that he didn’t trust himself to keep his hands off her unless they were otherwise engaged.

The thought that she had that much power over him sent an arrow of desire straight to her core.

“You know, I could get used to waking up and finding a guy all naked and tied up and waiting for me,” she said, leaning above him and watching the way her glowing hair tickled his chest and his nipples promptly responded. “Even if his stomach does sound rather monster-like.”

He smirked. “I’m sure you could, and I’ve done my damnedest not to wake you, even though it’s well past lunchtime.”

Lunchtime? She turned toward the windows and realized that when he’d gotten up to get the necktie, he’d also untied the heavy drapes and let them completely cloak the room in darkness. “How long have we slept?”

“Oh, at least ten hours, but I’m going to have to leave this bed now, or I must admit rather embarrassingly, if I stay here much longer, I may wet the bed.” He indicated his impressive erection. “I’m afraid it’s not entirely due to arousal this time.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She scrambled up the mattress to loosen the necktie at the post. Evidently, her knot-tying skills were improving if he wasn’t able to slide his hands free. She grinned.

“Hey, it’s not that funny,” he chided, sliding his arms free, then wincing when his shoulders cracked and popped as he moved them gingerly back in place.

She covered her grin with her hand. “I’m so sorry,” she repeated. “I could have slept over there—” she indicated the reading chair that occupied a far corner of the room “—and then you wouldn’t have had to worry about accidentally touching me, or anything.”

“As if I’d let you sleep anywhere but beside me while you’re here.” He gave her a reprimanding look. “Don’t even think about it, chère.” Then he climbed naked from the bed and grinned at her. “Besides, I’m not complaining. I wouldn’t trade watching you sleep or feeling you against me for anything, but right now, duty does call.”

He walked toward the bathroom while Celeste stared at his magnificent behind. Then he paused at the door and glanced back at her in a caught-ya-looking move.

“Hey, what can I say? I like what I see,” she said.

“Me too,” he said. “In fact, I like one thing very much, your eyes are silver again.”

She scooted across the bed and rose on her knees to see her reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Sure enough, her eyes were silver, not black like the other ghosts she’d seen. Funny, she’d never thought to look at them before, but apparently Dax had, and he’d noticed the distinction between her and the other spirits. “What does that mean, that they’re silver?”

“It means you’ve rested well,” he said. “They turn darker when you start to get tired, and then, when they turn black…”

“I go back?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever seen another ghost with silver eyes?”

“Nope, and neither has any of the other Vicknairs. Nan and I have started a list of differences, in fact, while we’ve been analyzing some letters from the attic.”

“Letters?” she asked, still staring at her image in that mirror and still not quite adjusting to the difference. She didn’t look like herself with these odd-colored eyes.

“I got a note from Grandma Adeline telling me that what Nanette and I needed was in the attic. We’ve been looking for proof that the house was inhabited during the Civil War. That’ll give us a better chance of saving our home.”

“Saving it? From what?”

“It’s a long story, but basically, ever since Katrina hit, the parish president has the power to remove all hazardous structures, and for some reason, he doesn’t want to give us the time we need to get this place fixed back up. Nan and I are trying to get it put on the National Historic Register to tie his hands. But while we were looking for that, I’ve also been trying to find answers about why you’re stuck in the middle the way you are. Grandma Adeline said that what Nan and I were looking for was in the attic. Granted, I’ve been helping her try to get information about the house, but I really thought she was referring to your situation, and I also really thought that those letters would help.”

“And they haven’t?”

“No. Well, not yet, anyway. Then again, there’s no reason for me to worry about getting information from those old papers while I’ve got you here. Surely we can figure this out together, and we’ll start with the list Nanette and I have made of differences between you and other ghosts.”

“Okay,” she said, holding her hair back and then tilting her head one way, and then the other, to get a better look at the odd-colored eyes. “What could it mean, that they’re different?” When she was living, her eyes had been green, the same bright green as both of her parents’, and her older sister’s, Nelsa. She frowned, and realized that she’d never see their green eyes again. Then she wondered…why wouldn’t she? Prissy had been allowed to see her parents again, and now Angelle was doing the same thing. Why hadn’t she been given another chance?

She climbed off the bed and moved toward the mirror, bringing her face close to the reflection so she could properly survey the strange hue. The gray eyes weren’t unappealing or anything like that; they were unique, like the silver marbles she and Nelsa had played with as children. But they weren’t her eyes, and that realization made her stomach queasy. “What does it mean?” she repeated.

He’d already entered the bathroom, but he’d evidently heard her question. “Well, that’s easy. It means you’re special,” he called.

“Special,” she repeated. Funny, she didn’t feel special; she felt confused.

Dax exited and winked at her as he crossed the room, and his stomach, once again, roared. He grinned, picked up a pair of jeans from the top of the dresser and slipped them on. “I’d love to start up again,” he said, zipping them as he spoke, “but now that you’re rested, I’m going to have to eat first. Do you know it’s past three in the afternoon? And besides, I do want us to try to talk a bit as well, and put our heads together to figure out exactly why you’re so special.”

“There’s something different about me, isn’t there?” she asked.

“Everything about you is different, Celeste. Unique and exceptional and distinctive…and addictive. And quite honestly, I’m hooked already. Hell, I don’t want to let you leave again. Ever.” He grabbed a white T-shirt from the top drawer of the dresser and pulled it over his head, then waited for her. “Wanna come down to the kitchen with me? Then maybe we can go for a walk outside and talk—try to figure some of this out.”

“And find a way for me to stay, you mean?”

“That’s the plan.”

“And then, after we talk,” she said, picking her shirt up from the floor, “we can make love.” She slipped the gauzy fabric over her head and then grinned.

He stepped toward her, then waited while she shimmied into her panties and pants. Then he gave her that crooked, sexy smile that she loved. “That’s definitely in the plan.”

“So, do you think I know something, or have seen something, that can help you figure out why my eyes are silver, and why I’m stuck in the middle?”

He opened the door and let her pass through first. “I don’t know if you can help me or not, but I know we need to try. He paused at the doorway, then stuffed his hands in his pockets and moved closer. “Hey, my hands are safe.”

“So they are.” She laughed, then lifted on her toes and arched against him, bringing her mouth to his and accepting another of those hot, passionate kisses that made her forget her limited time here, forget her exhaustion, forget everything but Dax.

She let her body lean completely against his, and he chuckled softly. “You realize you’re doing amazing things for my ego, if merely a kiss leaves you that weak-kneed.”

“Well, believe me, Dax Vicknair, it does.” She didn’t elaborate that she really felt the need to sit down, or to go back to sleep. And they’d slept longer than she’d ever slept in her life.

Why was she so tired?

“Come on, let’s go to the kitchen.”

He led the way down the hall, then down the stairs to the kitchen. Celeste followed, trying to focus on something besides the fact that her legs didn’t want to cooperate. She noted the warped wooden steps along the way. Some bowed slightly; others dipped inward. They creaked and groaned against Dax’s weight, and Celeste wondered if the stairs were all that safe.

He paused at the foyer, turned and saw her examining the rickety staircase. “Don’t worry. We haven’t had anyone fall through them yet.”

“I was wondering.”

“I know. They’re a hazard, but if you take a look around, the whole house is. When we go outside, I’ll show you the front porch, and the fact that all of the columns are slightly leaning in various directions, and that one side of the house actually seems to have been pushed in a bit from Katrina. All of the rooms on this floor are closed off,” he said, indicating the plastic sheeting that covered the entrances to three rooms off the foyer, “except for the kitchen. And that’s because we like to eat too much to shut it down for any length of time.” He shrugged. “I guess Charles Roussel, the parish president, does have a case for wanting to knock this old house to the ground, but we’re getting there. The new roof is done, and we’ll just take the rest of it one step at a time. Shoot, this place has been around too long, and meant too much to our family and the spirits, to let it go without a fight. Plus, I met you here.”

His words touched her soul, and she leaned toward him and brushed her lips to his. “I’d love to stay here, with you, forever.”

“Can’t think of a thing I’d like better either,” he said, those hazel eyes staring into hers, which reminded Celeste that the eyes he was seeing weren’t even remotely like hers.

She swallowed, and decided to think about something else for now. Turning away from him, she indicated the plastic-covered doorways branching off the foyer. “What are you doing to all of the rooms down here?” she asked.

“We just finished cleaning them up enough to pass the inspection from the local historical society. They were worried about post-hurricane contamination since the bottom floor of the house flooded during Katrina, but we passed the test. Eventually, we’ll open the rooms back up and restore them completely. They need new floors and some paint. And furniture would probably be a nice touch,” he said with a laugh. “We can probably take care of that with a few trips to the attic, I learned this week. But for now, we’ve kept the demolition crew at bay, and that’s what counts. Thankfully, they’re completely slated with work in Jefferson Parish for now and haven’t planned to check our status again until next year, which is good, since we’re tapped out on funds for the time being.” He sighed, then started down a hallway that led to the back of the house and the kitchen.

She followed him though the swinging door leading to the kitchen and watched him rummage through the cabinets. Like the remainder of the house, the mahogany cabinets had seen better days; they were scuffed and scratched, with many of the doors missing hardware, as in the handle to the cabinet Dax was opening.

“Are these the letters you found?” she asked, indicating a small stack in the center of the kitchen table.

“Those are just a few of them, but they’re the ones that indicated specific times and dates when one of our ancestors was living in the house during the Civil War.”

“Which is what you need, right?”

He smirked. “That’s the way I see it, but Nanette’s still deciding whether she wants to share them. See, every letter there refers to the spirits, and she can’t decide whether she wants folks to know our little secret.” He placed a long loaf of French bread on the counter and cut it in half with a serrated knife, then moved toward the refrigerator and withdrew several plastic bags of deli meat. “Anyway, enough about Nan and her dilemma. It’s the list there, on the yellow notepad, that I want you to look at.” He tossed the meat next to the bread, then removed bottles of mayonnaise, mustard and relish from the side door of the fridge.

She grabbed the edge of the pad and slid it toward her, but couldn’t take her attention off Dax, and his ease in the kitchen. She’d heard Cajun men could really cook, in the kitchen and in the bedroom. She already knew about Dax’s talents in the latter, and undoubtedly, he could fend for himself in the kitchen too. He was merely fixing a sandwich now, but she could envision him by the stove, a big pot of something spicy simmering in front of him.

He surveyed all of the items on the counter, nodded as though deciding he had everything he needed, then started making a sandwich that, in Celeste’s opinion, would feed a small family. “Read that list and tell me if you can think of anything else. Hey, read it out loud. That’ll help me see if Nan and I missed anything.”

She cleared her throat, then began, “‘Silver eyes. They darken as she gets tired, and turn completely black, like other spirits’ eyes, before she is pulled back to the middle.’” Celeste looked at him and asked, “What color are they now?”

He turned away from the counter, tilted his head and said, “Pale silver, almost transparent. You must have rested well.”

She nodded. She had slept well with him by her side, but she had also felt tired before they came down to the kitchen. However, right now, sitting here and scanning the list, she didn’t feel the least bit fatigued, and that was good. She really wanted to stretch her time out with Dax. “I did sleep well.” Then she continued down the list. “‘No control over when she comes or leaves,’” she read, and added, “True.” Then she read the next item, a single word and a question mark. “‘Clothing?’”

“Yeah. I wasn’t sure about that, but Ryan said he had the ability to change his clothing at will. Basically, he thought about what he wanted to wear, and his attire changed. But when I first saw you in the summer, you were wearing a yellow tank top and jeans the whole time. I assumed that’s what you were wearing when you…” He paused, and she knew why. He didn’t want to admit that she’d died.

“That was what I wore the day of the wreck,” she said, helping him out of the uncomfortable sentence. “And you’re also right about my clothing. I don’t know how it changes, or why. That white gown that I had on the last time I visited you wasn’t anything I had when I was living. And these—” she waved her hand down her side to indicate the sage tunic and capris “—I didn’t own anything like this either. Not that I don’t like it, or anything like that, but this isn’t typically the kind of thing I’d have picked out to wear. In fact, it really looks like something more along the lines of what Nelsa would wear.”

“Nelsa?” he asked, and momentarily took his attention off the sandwich he was creating.

“My older sister,” she said, smiling as she thought of Nelsa. At twenty-five, she was four years older than Celeste and truthfully closer than just a sister; she was Celeste’s best friend. “Nelsa has always had a real flair for picking fashionable clothes,” she said. “Me, though, I was more of a tank-top-and-jeans kind of girl. The outfit you saw me in during the summer was basically what you’d always see me in, but this is pure Nelsa.” She looked at the gauzy, feminine shirt again. “I always wanted to dress more like her, tried to, actually, but never could really get a handle on her style. I guess it’s that younger sister thing, always looking up to her and all. She was the levelheaded one, the girlie-girl and the one with the cool taste in clothing. I was more of a tomboy, a little—or maybe a lot—more reckless, and I had a tendency to bend, or outright break, the rules.” She smiled. “Do you think I’m in clothes like Nelsa’s because I always admired her style when I was living?”

He paused, seemed to consider it, then asked, “What about the gown? Was that something she’d have picked out?”

Celeste laughed. “No, that’s the type of thing my mother would have picked out. She always got that sweet, virginal-bride kind of sleepwear when it came to buying gifts for me and Nelsa. I guess in her eyes, she was trying to keep us young and innocent.” She shook her head. “Okay. Maybe I wore that as a tribute to Mom, and this as a tribute to Nelsa?”

“But you said you can’t change your clothes at will, right?”

She closed her eyes, thought of her favorite green tank top and worn jeans, then opened them. She still had on the tunic. “No, I can’t.”

His brows drew together as he seemed to try to process this new bit of knowledge. “Write that down by clothing,” he said. “That your clothing seems to be a reflection of the people you were closest to. Maybe that means something, even if you don’t have the ability to change it.” Then he turned his attention back to the sandwich, spreading mayonnaise across one side of the bread and mustard along the other, while Celeste added the new information, and thought about her family, particularly Nelsa.

“I miss her,” she whispered. “Nelsa always kept me in line, or tried to. If I’d have listened to her this summer—” Her lip quivered, throat tightened.

“What?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t have been on that bus, and I’d probably still be breathing. The counseling position was actually for teachers who were already working in the school system, you know, not for brand-new college graduates who were merely eager to get started. I saw the opportunity to travel to those camps and work with kids, and I went ahead and put that I was employed as a kindergarten teacher.” She shrugged. “I lied because I didn’t want to wait until the fall to start working with children. I mean, I did my internship in the spring, during my last semester, and I loved it. Why would I want to stay away from kids for the whole summer?”

“Didn’t the people running the camp check your employment claim?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Yeah,” she said with a guilty grin. “But I was employed by the school they checked. I’d already accepted a teaching position there, beginning this fall, so they answered that I was employed by the school. Luckily, the fact that I hadn’t done anything but my intern duty there never came up.” She sighed. “If I hadn’t lied on that application, and if I hadn’t been on that bus, I’d be teaching now.” A tear pushed forward, and trickled down her cheek, and she brushed it away.

Dax dropped the knife, and it clanged on the plate as he crossed the room and kneeled beside her. “I’m going to get you back, somehow, and you will get to teach. Ryan came back to this side, and if he can do it, then you can too. We’ve just got to figure out why your situation is so different than his was, and what we have to do to make it happen. But I swear, I won’t give up until we do.” Then his brows furrowed, and he stared at her cheek. “Celeste?”

“What?” she whispered, then wiped another tear away.

“Ghosts don’t cry.”

She blinked, and another swell of tears spilled free. “Well, I do.” Then she sniffed, and managed a smile. “Want me to add that to the list?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

She wrote it at the end, then she peered past him to the sandwich he’d barely started making. “Go on and finish that. You need to eat.”

He exhaled thickly, then nodded and returned to the counter. “We will figure it out,” he said, more to himself than to her, but Celeste nodded, and returned her attention to the list.

“The next thing is another question,” she said. “And I don’t understand it.”

“What does it say?”

“‘Can she see me?’” Celeste read, then looked toward him. “What does that mean?”

“When you’re in the middle, can you see me, on this side? Because ghosts can typically see those they care about when they’re on the other side. I’ve never met a spirit that didn’t say something about watching the ones they love.”

She shook her head. “Well, you’ve met one now. I can’t see you, and I can’t see my family either. I can’t see anyone when I’m in the middle.”

“What about here? When you’re on this side with me, can you think about your family and see them? Because that’s the way it works, you’d see them, and go to them, if you wanted to visit them again.”

She’d thought of that earlier, and had tried to picture them. “No, I can’t. I can’t see them at all.” She fought another impulse to cry, and wrote that down as well, finishing the list. “That’s the last thing you had,” she said, watching him spread a layer of olive paste on top of the mustard, then stack pastrami, salami and provolone cheese on top of it. He topped that off with the other half of the French bread, then brought it to the table.

“Can you think of anything else to add?” he asked, leaving the plate to go grab a napkin.

“No, I can’t,” she said, eyeing the massive sandwich. There was something about it…

He sat down and noticed where her attention had fallen. “I feel awkward eating in front of you when you can’t, but if I don’t eat, I’m not going to be good for anything later.”

Celeste grinned, knowing what he meant by “good for anything.” He might as well have said “good for everything,” because that’s what she knew he’d give her when they were together intimately again. Everything.

“I’m not hungry,” she said. “I promise.” She was telling the truth; she wasn’t hungry, really, but she did miss the ability to eat.

“I can’t do this,” he said. “You are hungry. I can see it on your face.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I promise I’m not, but I think I’ve tried that kind of sandwich before, and if I remember right, I liked it very much.”

“It’s a muffuletta. Surely you’ve had one.”

She recognized the name at once, though she’d heard it only that one time, that one day. “I had one in New Orleans, before the group boarded the bus heading to the camp.” She paused, then smiled at the memory. They’d had a lot of fun that morning, Celeste and the other counselors with the young campers. A lot of fun, until the bus crashed.

She saw realization dawn on his gorgeous features, the brown depths of his eyes showing intense compassion.

“You’re talking about the day of the crash,” he said softly. “That day?”

She nodded. “That was the first time I tried a muffuletta, and I really liked it.” Then she forced a smile and decided she wanted to change the subject, not necessarily because it bothered her, but because it bothered him. “Did you know the brown in your eyes shows more when you’re worried? But when you’re excited, they’re practically all green.” She grinned, even though he was obviously still thinking about the day of that wreck. She lowered her voice. “And when you come, the gold takes over, those tiny flecks practically glow when you completely let go.”

Mission accomplished. That took his mind off the first time she’d eaten a muffuletta, the last time she’d breathed. In fact, his hazel eyes shifted from dominantly chocolate brown to deep emerald green, and those gold flecks were present on both irises. Celeste loved his eyes, loved everything about him, in fact—his dark brown waves that seemed to always tease his forehead, and his mouth—have mercy, he had such a sensual mouth.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, taking a bite of the sandwich. “As if I didn’t know.”

“I’ll show you…later. For now, why don’t we talk about this list and see if we can’t figure something out while you eat your sandwich.”

He took another bite, and Celeste stood and moved to the refrigerator, then withdrew a Coke. She brought the can to the table, popped the top, then placed it in front of him.

“Thanks.”

“My father never remembered to get something to drink when he ate, either.” She returned to her seat and smiled, remembering her father. “You’d have liked him, and he’d have really liked you. He always tried to act like the big, burly tough guy in a house dominated by females, but once you got to know him, you’d have seen that he was more of a teddy bear than a grizzly.” She laughed softly. “Yeah, you’d have liked him.”

“He’s passed on?” Dax asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and wondering why she’d referred to her father in the past tense. He wasn’t the one who was dead. “I guess I’m just assuming that you’ll never meet him, you know, since that’d be kind of difficult to explain.”

His brows dropped a notch, and he took another man-size bite of sandwich. Finally, he swallowed and frowned. “I would like to meet him. I think he’d like to know that his daughter is still hanging out here, and maybe he’d even have an idea why.”

She chewed her lip, shook her head. “That’d just upset him, and I really don’t want to hurt him anymore. He, Mama and Nelsa were so happy the last time I saw them. They saw me off when I left for the camp. My parents didn’t even realize that I wasn’t technically supposed to go. Nelsa knew, but even though she wasn’t keen on me bending the rules, she knew how much I wanted to be with those kids, so she kept my secret.” Suddenly, she remembered…

“You know, there’s something else that I should probably add to this list.”

“What’s that?”

She wrote it down first, then read aloud, “Had the ability to cross, at first, but chose not to.”

He chewed his bite of sandwich and swallowed thickly, then asked, “What do you mean? This summer?”

She nodded. “I saw the light and felt it pulling me toward it. It was as big and bright as I’ve ever seen, and the other people around me, people from the same crash, were going on through. I even heard them laughing and chatting after they entered. They had no fear whatsoever and really seemed happy to get to the other side.”

“But you didn’t go.”

She shook her head. “There was that beautiful little girl standing over to the side and scared. She was trembling all over. The other kids weren’t scared at all, they were actually fine with heading on into the light, and I heard grandparents, and other family members, I suppose, calling them on in. But she was fighting it, and didn’t want to go. And I didn’t want to leave her. She kept saying that her folks were going to take her to the beach, and she really wanted to see it before she left them, and she wanted to see them again, too.”

“Chloe,” Dax said, obviously remembering the little girl’s request before she crossed over, to visit with her parents again, and to see the beach before she crossed. Her request had been granted, and Dax had consequently spent a week with her and her parents at the beach so they could communicate with Chloe before she crossed. Celeste had stayed with them that week too, to keep Chloe company, and she’d also fallen in love with Dax.

“Before I decided to stay with Chloe, I know I could have gone into the light, but I chose not to. I chose to stay with her. And then I met you, and I’ve been fighting the light’s pull ever since.” She smiled. “Now I don’t go through because I don’t want to leave you.”

Dax leaned forward, apparently putting these new pieces into the puzzle he was trying so desperately to figure out. “But when Chloe went back to the light, you left, too. That’s when I thought you must have crossed over. Where did you go?”

“I saw the light, and I watched her cross, but again, I wasn’t ready to go. I knew if I crossed, I’d lose all chance of seeing you again.”

“But you went somewhere, right? Where?”

“I don’t know. There’s another path that branches off from the middle. It’s dark, and a little scary to go down, but that’s where I have to go to rest. That’s all I know. And during those two months when I was away from you, I didn’t rest enough, or I’d be stronger now. I only went down that path a few times, and I never stayed very long. I guess I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to find you again if I did. I don’t know, since I can’t remember what happens when I’m there. But during most of those two months, I stayed in the middle and tried to get back to you. Do you think—” She wasn’t sure how to finish the question.

“What?” he asked.

“Do you think if I wouldn’t have been going to that camp, wouldn’t have been in that wreck, that I’d have never met you? I mean, in real life? What if the only way for us to be together was for me to die?”

Dax shook his head as he spoke. “No, I can’t believe that. I think—I believe—that if two people are meant to be together, if they are truly soul mates, then they’ll find each other, someway, somehow. And I can’t believe that this is the way we were meant to find each other.”

“Gotta admit, it’d be a unique story to tell people about the day we met,” she said, then laughed, and was glad to see his gorgeous smile at that comment.

“Yeah, I think we’d beat all other first-date stories, hands down, though I’m not so certain many people outside of my family would believe it.”

“I think you’re right, though. I’d have found you, met you, somehow. Our paths would have crossed. I was so excited about where my life was headed, I’d gotten the job I wanted, and then I was going to follow through with the rest of my plan.”

“The rest of your plan?”

She nodded. “Fall in love and settle down. That was all that was missing, and if I’d have met you, I could have taken care of that as well.”

He’d only eaten half of his sandwich, but he stood, took the plate to the counter and wrapped the remainder in aluminum foil, then put it in the fridge. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk and chat. I want to hear more about your family, and anything else that might give me a clue about how to help you stay longer.”

“I thought you were starving. Don’t you normally eat all of your sandwich?”

“I normally eat two that size,” he said, smiling. “But I’ve had enough right now. I don’t want to waste any of our day together. In all honesty, we really don’t know how long we’ve got. I mean, we can try to stretch this out as long as possible, make certain not to exhaust you and cause you to have to leave before you absolutely have to go, but until I can figure out how to keep you here, I’d rather spend my time getting to know you better.” He held out a hand toward her, then frowned and stuffed it in the pocket of his jeans. “Damn rule.”

“It’s okay,” Celeste said, standing and placing her fingertips against his cheek. “I can touch you, and as we learned last night, you’re pretty good at touching me without your hands, aren’t you?”

He leaned toward her, nuzzled her neck with his mouth, then slid those hot lips against her ear. “Hell, yeah.”

She laughed and held out her arm. “Look what you did.” A waterfall of gooseflesh trickled down her arm.

“Okay, that definitely belongs on the list. I know I’ve never seen a spirit with goose bumps.”

“Maybe you just haven’t touched them the right way.”

“I haven’t touched any of my ghosts in any way,” he said.

His comment reminded Celeste that he still had a ghost that he was helping, unless Angelle had already crossed. “Before I forget, has Angelle’s school play happened yet? I told her I’d attend if I could, and since I’m here, if it hasn’t happened, I’d love to go. I’d always thought that it’d be fun to help my students put on something like that, and she was such a cute little girl, and so excited about her classmates singing her song.”

Dax glanced at the kitchen clock. “Actually, her play is tonight, and thankfully, it doesn’t start until eight.”

She turned to see the time. “It’s four-thirty now.”

“Exactly, which gives us time to visit a little longer, and to do—other things—before the show.”

“Other things?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, his suggestive tone holding a promise that she couldn’t wait for him to deliver. “Come on,” he continued. “I want to show you the levee, and the outside of the house, and I want to find out as much about you as I can before you have to leave again. There’s got to be something I can do to keep you here, or at least get you back.”

Her throat tightened at the reality of her limited time here. Maybe Dax was right; maybe by learning more about her, he could figure out what went wrong when she died, and whether there was any way she could get another chance at living, or at least another chance at staying with him.

He led her through a small mudroom that branched off the kitchen. Several wall hooks held rain gear, as well as a few gardening tools, and two deep, oversize sinks occupied one wall. A faded snapshot of a woman pruning a large shrub had been matted and framed and hung on the wall directly above the sink. Celeste recognized the striking woman immediately, even though she was much younger in the photo than when Celeste saw her yesterday. “Adeline.”

He paused, looked at the picture and smiled. “Yeah, she always loved tending to her flowers, particularly her poinsettias.” He pointed to the shrub. “I haven’t seen any around quite as large as the ones we have here. I’ll show you.”

Celeste leaned toward the photo again to examine the shrub. A poinsettia? Since the picture was black and white, she couldn’t tell whether the flowers were red, but they didn’t appear to be darker than the others. “Are you sure?”

He stopped at the door. “About what?”

“That that’s a poinsettia. I’ve never seen one that big, and I don’t see any flowers on it.”

“That’s because poinsettias don’t have flowers,” he answered with a grin. “The modified leaves at the end that most people think are flowers are actually called bracts.” He shrugged modestly. “They were my grandmother’s favorite flower, and she wanted the grandchildren to keep them a part of this plantation almost as much as she wanted us to keep the ghosts around. She liked the smell of magnolias, but you couldn’t keep her away from her poinsettias when she was gardening. Come on and see, then you’ll understand.”

Celeste followed him outside, and immediately noticed what he was talking about. Huge shrubs spanned the entire side of the plantation and were covered in red-tinged blooms—or bracts.

“They’re just starting to turn now, but in a couple of weeks, this will be a sea of red, and cover the entire perimeter of the house.”

“They’re incredible,” Celeste said, taking in the beauty of the shrubs, towering nearly to the second floor of the home. “How tall are they?”

“They’re only supposed to get to a maximum of ten feet or so, but I think ours are hitting twelve now.” He tilted his head and looked down at her. “You’ve never seen poinsettias growing outside?”

“I didn’t even know they’d grow outside of a pot,” she said honestly. “And I don’t think they’d grow at my parents’ house.”

He grinned. “Sure they would. They love the climate here.”

“But I don’t think they would there.” Her reply was drowned out by an older-model red Camaro that pulled up the driveway and then parked. A striking woman with shiny jet-black hair climbed out. She wore a black sleeveless mock turtleneck and black pants, and she looked like…a Vicknair. It wasn’t so much that her features reminded Celeste of Dax, but there was something about her eyes, and the way she studied Dax before she even spoke, that told Celeste this lady knew that this house, and Dax, had secrets.

“Who’s with you?” she asked, moving toward Dax and Celeste.

Dax grinned. “What makes you think someone’s with me?” He didn’t even look at Celeste when he spoke, so she remained silent. She wasn’t sure whether he wanted this lady to know she was here, Vicknair or not.

“For starters, you haven’t been out of your room all day, and that’s not like you, even on a Saturday, so I assumed you had company. Then there’s the fact that I haven’t seen you with a genuine smile in months, but you’ve got one now. And of course, there’s the other…”

“The other?”

“You’ve had sex and—” she tilted her head and lifted one brow “—I think you’ve currently got sex on the mind now. Yep, I’d say that’s a given.”

Dax shuddered. “How you do that is beyond me. And it’s not right.”

The woman smiled triumphantly, and she was even prettier when she smiled. “So, you must be Celeste,” she said, basically speaking toward the poinsettia shrub and not missing the mark by much; Celeste was only a foot to the left of where she was talking. “I’m Nanette Vicknair, the oldest cousin around, and evidently, one of the few who hasn’t found the means, or the desire, to become intimate with our guests.”

“Nice to meet you,” Celeste said, giggling. While Nanette was trying her best to sound as though she was issuing Dax a reprimand, the absolute glee in those sparkling green eyes betrayed her.

“She says it’s nice to meet you,” Dax relayed. “And by the way, she’s onto you. You can’t fool anyone into thinking you’re not glad that she’s here, and that she’s with me.”

Nanette shrugged guiltily. “You’re right. I’m glad you came back, Celeste. He’s been an absolute pill to be around since you left. And hey, I am getting more accustomed to ghosts in the family every day.”

Celeste’s chest clenched. Ghosts in the family. She wasn’t in the family and didn’t know whether it would even be possible. But wouldn’t that be nice…

She looked at Dax, and he looked at her.

Nanette cleared her throat—loudly. “So, what are you two doing out here?”

“I was showing her the poinsettias,” Dax said. “And then we’re going to take a walk on the levee.”

“Out of curiosity, have the two of you had a chance to discuss our list, or maybe check out the letters for more clues about what’s happening with you, Celeste? I’m sure Dax has told you that your situation is far from the usual of what we deal with around here.”

“We just finished discussing the list, and adding a few things to it,” Dax replied.

“And?” Nanette asked.

“And we know that something’s different, but we still can’t figure out what that is.”

“Well, I’ll keep thinking about it too,” she promised. “Don’t worry, Celeste. If Monique found a way to get Ryan here, Dax will do the same for you. He’s amazing at figuring things out, and believe me, he won’t stop until he’s got all the answers.” She paused. “And speaking of figuring out answers, I’m going to go through all of those letters again, see if we missed any that might have mentioned the Civil War without mentioning our unique guests.” She took a step toward the house. “You two enjoy the levee.”

“We will,” Dax said, and the slight quirk of his mouth told Celeste that he planned to enjoy more than its views.

“You know, it’s getting darker earlier now,” Nan continued. “So you shouldn’t waste time. You’ll want to see the barges on the Mississippi and the wildflowers that are still blooming near the cane.” She looked at the bounty of red-tinted leaves behind Celeste. “But then again, there’s nothing across the road that’s prettier than the poinsettias. In all of Grandma Adeline’s wedding pictures, these big shrubs provided a vivid red backdrop. She said she had a Christmas wedding just so she could show off the flowers.”

“Technically, they’re not flowers…”

“Oh, hush,” Nan said, interrupting Dax before he could get started. “I know they aren’t flowers, but they look like flowers to me, and they’re even prettier.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, saluting her as she started walking away.

“All right, smart-ass, that’s enough.” She climbed the steps to the mudroom. “And by the way, I am glad you’re here, Celeste. It’s nice to see Dax smile again. And if you do get the chance to come back, we’d love to have you.”

The door slammed as Nanette entered the house, and Celeste shivered.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

She smiled. “No. I don’t think I can get cold now.”

“Then what is it?”

“I guess I’m a little scared,” she said honestly. The fear wasn’t so much about what was going to happen, but from not knowing, and apparently having no control over, whatever would happen. “Do you know what’s funny?”

“What?” he asked, moving closer to her with his hands firmly stuffed in his jean pockets.

“I told Nelsa that when I got married one day, I would want a Christmas wedding. The bridesmaids would wear red, and they’d carry poinsettias. I didn’t even know they could grow this big, or I’d have wanted to get married in a place where they could surround me, like this one.” She squinted as she viewed the bushes and tried to imagine those red-tinged leaves turning even more boldly crimson and covering the old house like a floral blanket. It would be incredible to see, and a breathtaking location for a Christmas wedding, the kind of wedding Celeste had always wanted.

And now she didn’t merely see a Christmas wedding, with poinsettias and red dresses, but she also saw the image of her groom, waiting to give her everything she ever desired…Dax.

**12**

DAX TOOK in the beauty of Celeste’s shimmering hair billowing behind her as she looked out over the mighty Mississippi, its dark water churning steadily and splashing softly against the levee’s edge. It was an incredible image, the woman he loved standing in the midst of the place he loved.

Even with its shaky foundation, the Vicknair plantation stood prominently on one side of them, and the waters of the Mississippi bordered the other side. In the distance, large, flat barges noisily trudged their way down the river, and a late-afternoon breeze filled the air. The sky was gradually shifting to the typical shades of a Louisiana late afternoon and early evening, dark blue, deep purple and rose.

And in the center of it all was Celeste.

“This is amazing,” she whispered. The cane reed swayed behind her and the wind gently whistled through it. “It’s breathtaking.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

She smiled, stretched out her arms and let the breeze ripple against her loose blouse. The fabric pressed against the gentle curves of her breasts and emphasized her peaked nipples.

Dax’s groin tightened.

Then she looked down at the ground beneath her feet and wiggled her toes.

He glanced back at the house, at the long gravel driveway, then at River Road, separating the Vicknair property from the levee. “I didn’t think about you not wearing shoes.” He squatted beside her to look at her dainty feet.

“They don’t hurt,” she said, still gazing at the scene around her. “It’s so beautiful here. I want to remember this forever, Dax.”

He didn’t look up. Instead he continued looking at her feet, thankful he could hide how the piercing reality of her statement had devastated him. She wanted to remember this forever because she assumed that she wouldn’t be able to see the beauty of his world on a regular basis. He simply wouldn’t believe that there wasn’t some way that he could make it happen. He just had to put the pieces together.

“Oh, Dax, look at the sun now,” she said breathily.

Still kneeling beside her, he turned his head to see the sun had dipped a little lower, its color converting from golden yellow to rich orange, an amazing contrast to the blues, purples and pinks of the surrounding sky. She was right; it was beautiful. But he couldn’t stop thinking about her time for this visit, undoubtedly running out, and the fact that he still didn’t know how to bring her back.

She lowered to her knees beside him and smiled. “Evidently whoever decided on my new clothing didn’t think I needed shoes. Hey, stop feeling bad. I’m not hurt.”

“I should have offered to carry you.”

“Kind of hard to do that without using your hands, don’t you think?”

“Hell.” Again, the reality of their situation was driven home to Dax. “Someday, I’ll carry you.”

“That a promise?” Her eyes—currently a bit darker than they’d been in the kitchen—glittered, and her long curls tumbled wildly around her shoulders. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair. One day, he would.

“Yeah, it’s a promise.” He didn’t know how, but one way or another, he was going to hold her, carry her, love her…permanently.

“But what about today? What do you plan to do for me today, Dax Vicknair? Because, since you did forget to carry me across the road and all, even though I was fine on my own, I think you owe me something.” Her finger touched his chin, tilted it slightly, then her mouth moved closer. She slanted her lips over his, then hummed her contentment when he opened his mouth and their tongues met.

Dax hungrily accepted her kiss, hot and potent and tantalizing, while he gripped the earth with his hands. If he didn’t, he’d grab her and hold her and never let her go. And who knew what the powers that be would do if he blatantly ignored the rule? They could take her away forever, and Dax wasn’t about to take that chance.

She broke the kiss, licked her lips, then glanced at the folded blanket he’d grabbed from his car and dropped on the ground nearby. Knowing they would be making love at some point during this walk, he’d wanted to make it as comfortable as possible for her, but after learning that she hadn’t felt any pain on her bare feet, maybe she wouldn’t need the cushion after all.

“If you don’t need that—” he started.

She pressed a finger to his mouth. “I don’t, but it was sweet of you to bring it, and I want to use it.” Her touch, as always, sizzled against his dampened lips, and he sucked the tip into his mouth.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” she asked.

He kissed her finger. “What?”

“How hot it is, with us. It’s not normal, is it? The heat that I feel when I touch you, and when you touch me?”

He grinned. “Well, it certainly isn’t anything I’ve ever experienced before.”

“Me, neither,” she said, then added, “I wonder, if I were breathing, would it be this hot?”

“What do you think?” he asked, and moved his face closer to hers, so close that he whispered his next words against her lips. “Do you think there’s any way it wouldn’t be hot between us?”

She gave him a siren smile. “No way at all. But I can think of something that we haven’t done yet that might make it even hotter.”

He swallowed and wondered…

Celeste evidently guessed his thoughts. “I’ll be careful,” she said. “If I feel myself getting pulled away, I’ll tell you.”

“I’m not ready to let you leave me, and if it takes that much out of you that if things do get hotter, then we may not have any control over that pull.”

“You’re not saying no, though,” she said, not really asking a question. “I want you inside of me, Dax, no matter what. And if I feel like I’m slipping away, we’ll slow things down.”

He grinned. “So in the heat of the moment, if you say slow down, I’ll just—stop. Just like that.”

“You can, can’t you?” she asked.

“I can try,” he said. “But trust me, it won’t be easy.”

“Well, maybe you won’t have to stop at all. I have rested and I am definitely ready to expend a little energy.”

“A little?”

“Okay, a lot.” She stood and unfolded the blanket, held it up to catch the wind, then let it fall to the ground behind some shrubs that still had a few leaves. Then she kneeled on top of it and motioned for him to join her.

Dax slid his body against hers and brought his lips to her throat, nuzzling her hair out of the way as he brushed soft kisses along her neck and beneath her ear. She rubbed against him, her body growing hotter with every movement, and Dax leaned away from her, then looked at her eyes.

Smoky gray. The light shimmering around her was a little brighter too, more of a pale yellow than the creamy glow that had surrounded her for the majority of this visit.

She was getting weaker.

He licked his lips, swallowed, and wondered whether there was any way possible to do this, to do everything, without forfeiting all of her time.

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t even think of stopping now, Dax. I need you. Please, I’ll tell you if we need to stop.”

“You’ll tell me,” he repeated.

She nodded, then grabbed the edge of his T-shirt and slid it up and over his head, her hands scalding his flesh with the movement. The heat of her, the heat of the two of them together, had Dax’s mind and body soaring. He needed to be inside of her, needed to be one with her, but he also needed to keep her here. “Celeste.”

She didn’t respond, but instead moved down his body, quickly removing his shoes and socks and then turning her attention to his jeans. Her hands were frantic and shaky as she unfastened them. “Don’t say it,” she said. “Let me have you, Dax. Let me be with you and know what it’s like, please.”

Hell, he didn’t want to deny her anything she wanted or needed, and obviously, right now, she needed him. But what if that need took her away?

“You want me too,” she said, removing his jeans. Then she placed her hand against his heart, and the heat, once again, penetrated his entire body as she slid her palm down his abdomen and stroked his erection. “Don’t you?”

“Yes, but…”

She shook her head, those long spirals gently swaying with the action, then she removed the gauzy blouse. “No buts, Dax. I can do this, and I’ll tell you when I start getting too weak. But I want to be with you, and I’ll never forgive myself if I leave again without knowing how it feels to have you inside.” Then she stood and shimmied out of her pants and panties.

With her hair flowing behind her, she stood above him, boldly and beautifully nude. “I want you, Dax.” Her words were true, Dax had no doubt of that, but they also held a hint of apprehension.

She was nervous, whether about making love, or about the possibility of her being pulled away during their lovemaking, he didn’t know. But both of those things were on his mind as well. He knew they’d fit beautifully together, and that their lovemaking would be off the charts; hell, her kisses alone made his entire body burn. But if he lost her…

She lowered to the blanket beside him and then pressed a soft kiss fully against his mouth, then she pushed into him, so that he slowly lowered his back to the ground and let her have control, obviously what she wanted.

Dax fisted his hands in the blanket and used his mouth, his thighs, his body to move against her as she climbed on top of him. Her eyes, dark gray, peered into his, and he bit back the impulse to tell her to slow down. She needed this, and she didn’t want him to make her stop. He’d simply have to watch her and try to protect her if she started getting too close to the other side, if those eyes started turning black.

Straddling him, she leaned over, that beautiful blond curtain of hair forming a glowing golden waterfall that tumbled past her breasts and teased his chest. Her soft, wet heat against his flesh caused his erection to harden to the point of pain.

He clenched his jaw and fought for control. She needed to take this at her pace, and if he rushed her, and then caused her to leave again, he’d never forgive himself. Slower was better, this time. “Celeste?”

“Yes?” She ran her fingernails down his sides, then back up again to cross his nipples, while Dax hissed in a breath.

“I’m not usually this—eager—but I want you so much, Celeste, and I’m not going to last long at all.” He winced, and decided to go for the whole truth, since she’d figure it out soon enough. “Hell, I’m probably going to come the minute you touch me. But that might not be a bad thing this time, since it might help you to stay.”

She leaned forward, braced her palms on his chest and giggled. “I wonder how many guys have used that excuse for explaining why they don’t last very long,” she teased, then cleared her throat, lowered her voice to imitate a male and joked, “Honey, I could last all day, but I’m going to do this quickly, so you won’t be pulled to the other side.”

Her blatant humor surprised him, and delighted him. Without meaning to, he’d taken some of her nervousness away, and her eyes—thank goodness—had lightened a little with her laughter.

“For the record,” he said. “I can last, but this first time…”

She leaned down and, still smiling, claimed his mouth. This kiss started playfully, with her nipping his mouth and grinning, giggling lightly as she explored his lips, but Dax felt her growing hotter as she deepened the kiss, using her tongue to explore his mouth and accepting his thorough exploration of hers as well.

Her body moved against him in perfect harmony with her tongue. She moaned, and that seductive sound teased every other part of his body as well. His hands clenched with the desire to touch her, and his erection ached to push deep inside of her.

But he wasn’t in control now. In order to have some minor ability to stop this if it got out of hand, he had to give Celeste the lead. How far they went, and how fast or slow, was all up to her.

As if sensing his mounting tension, she broke the kiss and leaned above him, her breasts flushed and excited, and her hair glowing, illuminating the remainder of her body even more. “What do you want, Dax?”

“I want everything.” That was nothing shy of the truth.

Her mouth curved into a smile. “Okay. What do you want first?”

He eyed her rose-tipped nipples. “I’ll start with those.”

She leaned over him, offering him a pebbled nipple.

Dax wasted no time drawing it within his lips, running his tongue around the tip, then sucking it between his teeth. Her back arched immediately in response, and he felt her grow even hotter and even wetter against his erection.

Her hips began to move, undulating in anticipation of what they would be doing soon, and Dax knew she was creating that sweet friction between his flesh and her core that would drive her closer to climax. He turned his attention to her other breast, licking it, nibbling it, and then sucking it between his teeth. This time there was no denying that she was almost there. Her intimate flesh was drenched now.

“Dax,” she gasped, “I need—” she moved up and down his body, teasing his hard length “—you.” Then she eased the tip into her heat and clenched her teeth while she held him there, at the brink of ecstasy.

He forced himself to look at her eyes, but they were closed. How dark were they now? “Celeste,” he said, but she was too into the sensation to hear him. “Celeste,” he repeated.

She looked at him, and those eyes were dark charcoal. “I—” She eased down a bit, and her face tensed.

Dax froze. He didn’t want to hurt her. He glanced down his abdomen and saw that he was barely inside of her at all. “Celeste, we can stop.” He had no idea if she’d tensed because of pain, or because of fear, but either way, no matter how much it killed him to do it, he could stop, for her.

She gave him a slight smile. “It’s been a long time,” she said. “I’m sorry I’m so tight.”

“No, don’t be sorry.” He could feel the sweat beading on his forehead and upper lip. How long could he sit here and look at her above him, with merely the tip of his cock inside of her moist heat. She was getting hotter now, and he could feel her easing open, getting ready for him.

“Celeste, maybe we shouldn’t do this now. I don’t want to hurt you, and I don’t want to be the reason for you crossing over, either.”

“I need you. I need to know how it feels to have you be a part of me, Dax, even if I only get to experience it once. I don’t want to stop, but—” She eased down a little farther, and to Dax’s horror, tears trickled from her eyes.

She wanted him, in spite of the pain. But he had no doubt that she shouldn’t try to force this. Her eyes were darkening now, probably due to her determination to make this work, and to make love, at least once, before she crossed.

He couldn’t deny her what she wanted, and he believed he knew how to help her through the pain. “Celeste?”

“I can do this,” she said, then she pushed down on him, and winced. “I want to do this. I want you, Dax. I do. I’m just not used to it. And, honestly, you’re really big.”

He couldn’t fight the smile at that remark. “I wasn’t going to tell you I didn’t want to do this,” he said. “I want to, as much as you do, but you’re not ready.”

“Yes, I am,” she argued, and before she decided to press her tightness farther down, and force him to lose all control, he shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean. I know you’re ready emotionally, but you aren’t ready physically, and I think I can help.”

She pressed both palms against his chest, then slowly moved back up his cock. “How?”

Dax shifted his hips to remove his length from her. “Let me help you come, Celeste. That’s what you need to take me inside.” He licked his lips. “Let me taste you, chère, and help you come.”

She sat up and tilted her head as though trying to figure out exactly how to situate themselves on the blanket to let him do what he wanted.

“Turn around,” he said.

Her dark eyes grew big, but she did as he asked. And then, to his complete shock and delight, she announced, “If we’re doing it like this, then I want to taste you, too.” She shifted forward, bringing her mouth to the tip of his penis and placing her sweet center exactly where he wanted it, close enough to taste. She was already wet, and Dax had no doubt he could make her drenched and more than able to let him in, deep inside. He just prayed that she could stay on this side, stay with him, after he took her where she wanted to go.

She licked the base of his cock, then kissed the length of him, swirling her tongue around the tip before taking him in, and while she did, Dax kissed her intimate center, then licked, nibbled and kissed his way to the sensitive nub that he knew would give her what she needed. He concentrated on each sound she made, the moans that told him where she was the most receptive of his touch, and the sharp gasps that said she was ready to soar. Those, as he’d learned last night, were produced each and every time he flicked his tongue over her clitoris, so he did it again and again, then reveled in the tightening of her entire body, and then the pulsing convulsions and sweet juices produced by her orgasm.

She’d long since forgotten tasting him, her senses apparently completely absorbed in what he was doing to her, which was just as well. This time, he wanted to come…right here. He licked the very spot, and then was welcomed with another gasping climax.

Another kiss to her center, and then he asked, “Do you think you’re ready to take me now, Celeste?”

He didn’t have to ask twice. This time, when she moved down on him, to Dax’s delight, she eased him all the way in, her center slick and hot and right. Then she looked at him, and her eyes had moved beyond charcoal into a carbon color that was way too close to the black he was dreading. “Celeste, we need to—”

She braced her hands on his chest and lost herself in the rhythm, moving up and down his length with exquisite friction, her gasps and moans escalating with every push, every pull, every clenching of her intimate walls. “No,” she said. “I can’t stop. I want to feel it—when it happens—and when you fill me up completely. Let me—have it all. I want you inside of me, coming inside of me. Let me feel it. Let me have—you.”

Her words pushed away his reserve, and the spiraling tension built higher and higher, hotter and hotter, until Celeste tossed her hair back, thrust her breasts out and yelled his name.

The sight of her, the woman he’d wanted more than any other, losing complete control—with him—and giving him everything she had, everything he’d wanted for so long, sent Dax over the edge. “I love you, Celeste,” he said, desperate to tell her now, desperate to make sure she knew. “I—love you.” His orgasm rocketed through him, and through her, and then the illumination of her spirit blinded him, and her black eyes bore into his soul. She screamed his name once more…and was gone.

**13**

CELESTE COLLAPSED on the cold stone floor and closed her eyes. She was drained, emotionally and physically. He’d made love to her and it’d been the best thing she’d ever experienced, so wonderful, so magical, that she hadn’t been willing to let him stop, even though she could feel her spirit being pulled away. She’d wanted to be with him so much, just once, that she’d given everything she had. And now she had nothing left. No way to fight the pull of that light.

Or could she?

She lifted her head from the floor and glanced at the doorway to Dax’s world, closed solid, and she knew better than to expect Adeline to open it for her anytime soon. Besides, even if it were wide open now, Celeste didn’t think she had even enough energy to crawl through, much less walk. And what about the light?

She looked toward that middle wall and half expected the big, golden door to open and swallow her up, but amazingly, it remained closed…for now. She shut her eyes again and hoped it stayed that way, long enough for her to rest and to get back out of here, back to Dax.

How long would she have to rest this time before she could make it back through? Or would she ever be able to go back again?

Tears trickled down her cheeks, but she didn’t bother wiping them away. She was too tired for even that. She was so cold. Her body shivered, and the coolness of the floor against her tear-dampened cheek seemed to intensify as she lay there, wallowing in her misery. She’d had Dax, and she’d lost him.

“I love you, too,” she whispered, but she knew he couldn’t hear her.

Would he ever?

Celeste heard laughter, then sensed a hint of warmth in the room. She opened her eyes to see Angelle, giggling as she watched the pinprick of light on the middle wall grow.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “It’s nearly time!”

Like before, the light grew bigger and bigger, until Celeste’s cold spirit was bathed in blissful warmth. It felt so good that she couldn’t stay away, and she inched closer to it.

“I thought I’d see you at my program, but Dax said you were gone. He looked really sad,” the little girl said. “Hey, are you hurt? Do you need help going in?”

Celeste blinked. Did she need help? Yes, she did, though not the kind of help the sweet girl was offering. She wasn’t ready to go into that light, not yet, no matter how good it felt. And Angelle had seen Dax at her program. Celeste was supposed to have gone to the play with Dax, or she had planned to, but she hadn’t been able to resist the temptation of truly being with Dax in order to stay longer.

More tears fell, and she let them.

“I’ll help you.” Angelle walked toward Celeste, then moved behind her and wrapped her arms tightly around Celeste’s chest. “I’ll get you there,” the little girl said, slowly pulling Celeste backward toward the evergrowing light.

Celeste tried to drag her feet and slow Angelle’s surprising progress, but she was so weak, and the little girl was suddenly very strong. “No, Angelle,” she whispered. “Don’t—want—to go.”

Angelle loosened her hold, but they were already so near to the light that Celeste could feel the pull of its warmth, and another draw, one that was so forceful that she was having a very difficult time fighting its allure.

But she would. For Dax.

“I can’t go in yet,” she whispered, then she turned to see Angelle’s face, and gasped.

Several children’s faces had formed within the light, and they all smiled and reached for Angelle.

“You should come with me,” Angelle said. “They say it’s amazing there. We’re going to go play. Isn’t that awesome?”

“How—how do you know them?” Celeste’s voice was so weak that she could barely hear herself speak, but Angelle heard.

“From the hospital. We all knew we were coming here one day, and we promised to help each other when it was time to go. Now they’re here to take me inside. Don’t you want to come?”

Celeste shook her head. “No, sweetie. Not yet.”

Angelle eased Celeste back to the floor. “You sure you’re going to be okay here? I really do think you’re supposed to come with me, you know.”

“I’ll be okay.” Celeste assumed that was the truth. She really didn’t know whether she’d be okay or not. Would she languish here in this room forever because she was fighting that light?

“Okay.” Angelle squatted next to Celeste and hugged her. “Thank you for everything. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I’d have liked you for a teacher. You’d have been a really good one.”

Celeste’s eyes watered, and she nodded, not knowing what to say.

Angelle stood, and Celeste watched several of the children in the light reach out and touch her arms, then pull her inside. “Bye!” she yelled, then her glowing body joined the light, and all of their faces disappeared.

But the light didn’t go away, and Celeste soon saw why. Another hand reached out and moved toward her face, and she was too weak to even back away. If it pulled her in, she’d have to go. She simply had no more strength to resist.

“Not yet,” she whispered. “Please, not yet.”

The glowing hand came closer and slowly pushed her hair away from her face, then one finger tenderly brushed a tear away, then another. The palm moved to her forehead, then gently smoothed down the length of Celeste’s hair.

She knew that touch, could almost picture the man who’d always caressed her hair that way.

“Granddaddy?”

The hand moved to Celeste’s cheek, and brushed more tears away. Celeste had no doubt that her grandfather, the kindhearted man who had died when she was fourteen, was now taking care of her once more. Stroking her hair. Drying her tears.

“Not yet, Granddaddy. Please. I want to be with him. I can’t leave, not yet.”

Pausing for a moment, the hand touched Celeste’s cheek once more, then disappeared. The light disappeared with it, leaving the middle room—and Celeste—in complete darkness.

She heard the voices down the path to the right. They were screaming something, but she was too spent to determine what the words were.

Was it her name?

Maybe, maybe not. She couldn’t concentrate enough to be sure.

Was it possible to actually end it all in the middle? To stay right here, freezing cold and unable to move, unable to speak, and then simply stop existing? Because that’s what she felt like right now, like if she stopped thinking, stopped listening, that she would merely fade away. No more voices. No more light.

And no more Dax.

She couldn’t let that happen, Celeste realized as her eyes grew so heavy that she couldn’t keep them open. She fought that, too. How would she have a chance at going back down Dax’s path if she couldn’t even keep her eyes open to see the way?

The shivering intensified and reminded her of that type of uncontrollable shaking that occurred when individuals were in shock, or intense pain. She’d seen a lot of people go through that on the day of the bus wreck. Was that what was causing her to tremble from head to toe, her teeth audibly chattering and the chilling sound echoing off the walls of this room? Or was she simply cold? Or tired?

Or fading from existence?

Don’t! she mentally screamed, trying to force her eyes to remain open. But in spite of all her efforts, her spirit lost all ability to fight the inevitable, and her lids slid closed.

**14**

DAX WIPED his forearm across his sweaty brow and stared at the piles of brown and gold magnolia leaves lining the driveway. He could have waited until Saturday, when all of the cousins would come to the plantation for their weekly workday, to rake the mountains of leaves. No doubt the job wouldn’t have been so difficult with a few more hands, but then his muscles wouldn’t be aching, his back wouldn’t be hurting and his body wouldn’t be covered in hard-earned sweat.

Right now, he wanted to ache, hurt and sweat. He wanted his body to feel, the same type of misery that his soul was feeling.

For the past three weeks, since the day Celeste had disappeared, he’d worked sixteen-hour days six days a week, in an effort to keep himself so busy he wouldn’t remember how badly he hurt.

It hadn’t helped. He’d only had more time behind the wheel to think about the precious few hours he’d spent with Celeste, and to think about how barren his life would be without her.

What if they’d permanently exhausted her spirit from that last visit? Had she crossed over completely because she didn’t have the strength to fight it anymore?

He dropped the rake, took off his gloves and flung them away, then saw Nanette’s car heading up the driveway. She slowed as she neared, rolled down her window and cleared her throat.

“It’s Wednesday,” she said.

“Right.” He really wasn’t in the mood for small talk, or even a sarcastic “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Okay. So, it’s the middle of the week, and you don’t look as though you’ve been to work today.” She glanced behind her. “And judging from those piles of leaves, you’ve been raking all afternoon.”

When Dax didn’t comment, or ask her point, she continued, “Well, I’m glad you finally decided to take a day off. You’ve been working yourself to death ever since—well, for the past few weeks.”

“Working myself to death?” he questioned, scoffing at her odd choice of words, particularly when their family dealt with the dead on a regular basis. “Not quite. And I didn’t willingly take a day off. My regional rep ordered me to take the rest of this week and all of next week off to relax. Seems he was tired of explaining why I was showing up twice as often as normal.”

She smirked. “Well, good for your regional rep. But if you’re supposed to be relaxing, you’ve got a funny way of going about it. Why didn’t you wait until we could help you with all of that?”

“Didn’t want to.” He could have said more, but of the things he didn’t want to do right now, talking about Celeste topped the list.

“Fine. Well, I’m going in to start dinner. I had a heck of a day at school, by the way, in case you’re interested. It started with one of the sophomores accidentally stepping on the gas instead of the brake when he was trying to park his car, and sending the thing into the building near my classroom.”

Dax’s eyes widened. “He okay?”

She laughed. “He’s fine. Shook up, but okay. So don’t worry, he shouldn’t be visiting you anytime soon.”

“That’s good.” Dax was glad the boy was all right, but he did hope that he got another ghostly visit soon. He figured it would better his chances of seeing Celeste.

“Leave the piles, and we’ll bag them later,” she said, then drove off.

Dax decided to take her up on that offer. He’d been raking the majority of the afternoon, and he was ready to head inside and cool down. True, it was November now, but in Louisiana, while some months might be cooler, they all fell pretty much under the same classification—hot.

He picked up his discarded gloves and slapped them against his jeans to remove the excess dirt, then he grabbed the rake and started heading toward the work shed behind the house. Rounding the corner of the porch, he stopped walking to take in the scene. Red. Everywhere. His grandmother’s prized poinsettias blazed crimson and towered against the side of the house in a brilliant hedge that would be worthy of a Southern Living cover photo.

Grandma Adeline would be proud. And Celeste would be awed.

“I told Nelsa that when I got married one day, I wanted a Christmas wedding. The bridesmaids would wear red, and they’d carry poinsettias. I didn’t even know they could grow this big, or I’d have wanted to get married in a place where they could surround me, like this one.”

With Celeste’s words echoing in his thoughts, Dax turned away from the poinsettias and continued to the shed. He deposited the gloves and rake, then used the rear entrance of the house. He didn’t want to walk past those poinsettias again.

Nanette stood near the stove and spooned rice into two deep bowls, then covered it with gumbo out of a huge black iron pot. Her smile beamed as she turned. “You cooked, and it smells fabulous.”

Dax nodded. He’d done plenty today to keep himself busy. Cooking the gumbo had only been one small part of it. He’d also started sanding the floor in the front room that used to be a formal parlor. Right now, it was merely another empty room in need of repair. Good thing the place had plenty of them; he’d find an ample supply of work to keep his mind off Celeste. Then again, that hadn’t worked today, had it?

Nanette moved the bowls to the table, then got some drinks from the fridge. “Come on, I’m starving.”

“I need a quick shower first, then I’ll head back down.”

“Well, hurry, before the gumbo gets cold.”

He nodded, left the kitchen and started toward his room, but he didn’t really care if the gumbo was cold. He had no appetite, for gumbo or anything else…except Celeste. His hunger for her was palpable, and quite possibly would never be satisfied.

With that still on his mind, he entered the shower. As each hot droplet of water covered his skin, he remembered Celeste’s trembling hands, her warm mouth, her sweet kisses. It’d been three weeks, and he hadn’t gone one minute of that time without thinking of her. Right now, in fact, he could see her so clearly, the way she’d looked when they’d made love. Those golden curls tumbling wildly around her as her body moved over his, her mouth caressing his neck, nuzzling him as her sweet, hot center accepted every inch of him.

He could almost hear her softly moaning, then those moans turning into sharp gasps as she thrust her hips and brought him deep, deep within her. And he could feel the tensing of her flesh around him, holding him so tight as her climax grew imminent.

Dax bowed his head and closed his eyes as the hot water pelted him. Then he circled his cock with his hand in an effort to reproduce what was happening in his mind. There, she was riding him, fiercely determined to claim every inch of him and to bring him to the same kind of powerful orgasm that was building within her.

In reality, Dax was finally succumbing to his baser needs. Three weeks was way too long to go without a release, and one minute was way too long to go without Celeste.

He thought of her again, of the way those dark eyes closed slightly as she came, and the way her mouth parted in sweet, delicious abandon…and his body tensed, his erection pushed forward as though trying to get inside of the woman in his mind, and his hips jerked in orgasm.

By the time he returned to the kitchen, Nan was rinsing her bowl in the sink. “Obviously, your idea of a quick shower and mine aren’t the same. I assumed you decided to rest for a while so I put your gumbo in the fridge, but I can heat it up if you want.”

“No, thanks,” he said. Unfortunately, even after his climax, he was still only hungry for one thing. Celeste. Her touch. Her smile.

Her kiss.

He sat at the table and reached for the stack of letters in the center. More than anything else he’d done today, he’d read and reread the letters from the attic. He was convinced that he’d missed something. His grandmother had said that he and Nanette would find what they needed in the attic. While Dax knew that the letters would help Nanette with her quest for historical-landmark status if she ever decided to share them with the world, he hadn’t found anything that would help him get Celeste back.

“Still hoping to find something?” she asked, drying her hands on a towel, then sitting next to him at the table. She peered over his shoulder at the letter in his hand and frowned. “I still don’t want to show them to anyone. Maybe we won’t have to.”

“Maybe not,” Dax said. “I do think this is what she intended for you to use, whether you choose to or not. But she said what you and I needed was in the attic. I know she was talking about these letters.”

“Maybe she wasn’t talking about you getting Celeste back. Maybe all she was talking about was the historical landmark status, and she said both of our names because we’re the ones who’ve been doing the most to try to find proof.”

Dax didn’t buy that. His grandmother had said that what Nan and Dax wanted was in the attic. She knew what Nan wanted, to prove the house was inhabited back then, and Adeline Vicknair undoubtedly knew what Dax wanted too.

“No. She included me because of Celeste. I know it. I’ve just got to figure out how to use these letters to help me learn where she is, and why she can’t remember what happens when she’s there.”

They continued to scan the letters. He nearly knew them all by heart now, and there was nothing in them that referred to spirits stuck in the middle. Every ghost his great-great-great-great-grandmother mentioned was simply another assignment needing a little help to find the light.

“Have you been back up to the attic?” she asked.

Dax shook his head. “No, why?”

“Maybe you’re right. The letters are what I need if I decide to turn them over to the historical society—which I won’t,” she said. “But maybe there’s something else in the attic intended for you. I mean, you pretty much stopped searching when you found the letters, didn’t you? Maybe there’s another clue up there that would help you find Celeste. Or whatever you need may have been in the stuff that Monique and Ryan took.”

“No, I thought of that. They’d already cleaned out what they wanted before I got the note from Grandma Adeline. She knew what was up there, and she knew that what I needed was there.”

“Okay, so it’s still there. Don’t you think if it were in these letters, we’d have found it?”

Dax looked at her green eyes, alive with excitement.

She stood, grabbing his arm. “Come on. If you’re not going to eat anyway, there’s no reason for us to sit around in the kitchen when we could be looking for whatever you’re supposed to find in the attic. Plus, now I’m curious. Let’s go check it out.”

He dropped the letter he was perusing on top of the stack. “I know it’s a long shot, but you could be right. I did stop looking when I found these.”

“Exactly.” Suddenly quite energetic for a woman who’d been teaching ninth-graders all day, she led the way to the third floor, taking the steps two at a time.

When they reached the attic access, she moved to the side. “You’ll have to pull the string. I can’t reach it.” She pointed to the thin rope hanging from the panel in the ceiling.

He grabbed it and pulled. Same as the last time, Dax barely made it out of the way of the unfolding ladder before it slammed him in the face. He caught the lower portion just before it hit the hardwood. Several dents and crevices already marred the floor from where previous Vicknairs hadn’t been so careful.

“Ladies first.” He waved Nanette up the ladder.

“Well, I’ll be, we do have a gentleman in the family after all.” She started up, with Dax close behind.

“Hell, I’m just letting you go first because it’s dark up there,” he said, then laughed when she shoved a foot toward his head.

“Smart-ass.”

They emerged into the dusty room, and Nan quickly located the pull-string to turn on the room’s single bulb.

“I thought you covered that back up before we left the other day,” she said, pointing to the chifforobe, which was the only piece of furniture in the room that wasn’t covered by a sheet or plastic.

“I did.” Dax moved toward the large piece of furniture.

“Did it slide off?” she asked, and then located the sheet, folded in a perfect square. “I—guess not.”

“Didn’t I put it back on?” he asked, but he knew that he had.

“Even if you didn’t, you tossed all of the sheets aside when you were looking through the furniture. I remember. And that sheet wasn’t tossed, it’s been folded. Neatly.” She paused, leaned down and touched the corner of the white cloth. “As neat as Grandma Adeline always folded things, I’d say.”

Feeling a slight kick of adrenaline at the hint that there was still something to find, Dax pulled the top drawer open and slid his hand inside. It was completely empty. “There’s something else here,” he said, knowing their grandmother was trying to help him. “We’ve just got to find it.”

Nanette opened the long door that composed one side of the piece and started rummaging through several old quilts and blankets. “I agree. She wants us to find something else, but what?”

All of the drawers had previously been stuffed with cards and letters, but Dax had removed them. Even so, he pulled open the next drawer and slid his hand inside, but again came up empty.

“Find anything?” he asked as Nanette removed the last of the quilts and placed it on the floor beside her. She ran her hands along the wooden bottom and up the sides.

“I thought perhaps there was some sort of hiding place in here. I don’t know, like maybe a secret panel or something,” she said. “But I can’t find anything.”

Dax looked down at her, still in the dress pants she’d worn to school, crouched on the dirty floor, running her hands across dusty old wood trying to find a secret panel. Her black hair had something grayish on one side, and he’d bet that it was probably a cobweb.

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. Here Nan was, the girl in the family who always tried to portray herself as the oldest, the toughest and the biggest hard-ass when it came to dealing with spirits and sticking to the rules, but every now and then, Nanette’s softer side made an appearance, and right now was one of those times.

“What are you laughing at?” she asked, raising one curved black brow as she spoke.

“You, looking for a secret panel. You expecting to find a lion and a witch in there?”

She laughed loudly. “You never know.”

“And then there’s that cobweb in your hair. I only wish I had a camera.”

She ran her hands through her hair, captured the web, then flicked it from her fingers. “Disgusting.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” He leaned down and touched her shoulder. “But I really appreciate you helping me, Nan.”

She smiled. “No problem.”

Then a loud thunk echoed from the chifforobe, and both of them jerked toward the sound.

“You hear that?” she asked.

“Yeah, where’d it come from?”

She leaned back into the elongated area that had held the quilts and blankets. “I think, maybe, in here?” She ran her hands around the interior again, but shook her head as she apparently found nothing different.

Dax had surveyed all of the drawers except the bottom one. He pulled on it, and it stuck. He yanked on the drawer again, and this time it came free.

Nanette leaned over him, and her shadow made it impossible for him to see inside, so he slid his hand against the bottom to make sure he hadn’t missed anything before. He didn’t anticipate finding anything, though, since he distinctly remembered doing the same thing when he’d originally found the letters.

However, as he reached toward the back of the deep drawer, he realized that it felt different; the back wasn’t wooden like the rest of the drawer’s interior. No, this was some kind of fabric covering, and Dax was surprised he hadn’t noticed it before.

“Hold on, I’ve got something,” he said, moving his hand over the fabric until he found its edge. He realized that this wasn’t merely cloth covering the back of the drawer; it was something lying flush against it. He maneuvered his fingers into the tiny crack between the fabric edge and the wooden side, and then pulled it to remove…a book.

Nan backed up to let the limited light hit the object, and the two of them stared at the tattered book in Dax’s hands. The outer covering was a rose-colored cloth, and in the center, embroidered in swirling script and oddly similar to their grandmother’s handwriting, were three words.

Until You Return.

Dax opened the book, tilted it to catch the light and read aloud, “‘May 1, 1863. My darling John-Paul, keeping the Vicknair secrets about the beloved spirits is a duty I willingly chose upon becoming your wife. However, I never knew that I would also have to keep your visits a secret. For two years I dreamed of being with you again as a wife needs to be with her husband, and for the past two weeks I have been, nearly every night. This house has been so lonely with you at war, and my soul is waning from the many soldier spirits I am called to help find the light. Being with you that way again makes it bearable. I only wish we knew how you get through, and how we could lengthen your stays. I miss you so when you’re gone, John-Paul.’”

“John-Paul,” Nanette repeated. “That’s her husband, and in 1863, he’d have still been fighting in the war.”

“But he was visiting her. Or rather, his spirit was visiting,” Dax said, his blood pumping fiercely. “This is it, Nan.” He squinted to see the writing, faint on the weathered page, and moved it toward the light. “Damn, I can barely see the rest of this.”

“Come on, let’s take it downstairs to a better light.” Nan crossed the room and quickly descended the ladder, and Dax followed.

“In here,” he said when they neared the second-floor sitting room.

The two of them entered the room, but instead of finding the place vacant, they found Ryan and Monique, huddled together on the settee, staring at the tea service.

“Ryan’s waiting on his first ghost!” Monique exclaimed. “He came home from work and said that he’d been hearing hammers and saws all day long, but not the ones that were surrounding him at his roofing job. That’s when it hit me. Now that we’re married, he’ll start getting ghosts too.” She squeezed her husband and smiled broadly. “And I wanted to be with him when he gets the first one.”

“Hammers and saws?” Nan asked.

“I’m assuming he may get spirits who are injured in construction accidents, or something like that, don’t you think? That would make sense, wouldn’t it?” Monique asked.

“I guess it would,” Nan said.

“Who’d have thought—a few months ago, I was the ghost needing help, and now I’m going to be the one on the other end?” Ryan kissed Monique softly.

“Hey, what have you got?” Monique asked, leaning forward to steal a peek at the book in Dax’s hand.

“Maybe a way to get Celeste back,” Nanette said.

And at Monique’s shocked expression, Dax added, “I’ll tell you about it later, sis. Right now, I have to read this. Good luck with your first assignment, Ryan.”

“Thanks.”

Nanette and Dax turned and started down the stairs.

“Ryan’s a medium now,” she whispered. “I hadn’t even realized…”

“That our spouses will become mediums by marriage?” Dax questioned. “Neither did I. I mean, I never thought about it, but our parents were all mediums. And obviously—” he held up the book “—Clara Vicknair was a medium by marriage.”

“I know. I just hadn’t thought about it in terms of my future husband being a medium, but it does make sense.” When they reached the foyer, she went straight to the front door and opened it. “The porch. It’ll be quiet out here, and the lighting outside will help us see the writing better.”

Dax followed her, then dropped into a rocker and flipped the book open, while Nanette scooted another rocker near enough to see.

They scanned the next few pages and learned that John-Paul had visited Clara yet again two days later, then again three days after that. Through all of the daily entries, Clara discussed the war, and particularly the raid she’d heard about, a raid on Vicksburg.

“How sad,” Nanette whispered.

“What?”

“That so many lives were lost then. Read this one.” She pointed to the opposite page from the one Dax was scanning, and he turned his attention to the curling script.

“‘My darling John-Paul, I had twelve more ghosts from the Vicksburg raid, some Confederate, some Union, and all of them needing help through. Most wanted to see their newborn babes before they crossed. Oh, to conceive from our visits now, but I know that isn’t possible. Even so, when you come back, I’ll give you a child, a baby, with hair dark and wavy like yours, and definitely with your vivid green eyes, and perhaps my smile.’”

“Twelve soldiers in one day,” Nanette said, emotion filling her tone. “Bless their hearts, and bless her heart for helping them.”

Dax nodded, and flipped through the pages, passing several days where the entries were virtually the same—Clara helping several ghosts, and John-Paul visiting as often as he could to be with his wife. But she continually mentioned that her husband never knew when he was coming, or how long he could stay.

Just like Celeste.

“Do you think they ever figured out how he visited? Or—was he dead?” he asked, then said, “But that wouldn’t be possible, would it? I mean, the Vicknair line didn’t stop with him, so they had to have had a child together.”

“Not necessarily,” Nan corrected. “There were several Vicknair brothers who fought for the Confederates, though he was probably the only one whose wife stayed here during the war. All of the records I found said that most women returned to their parents’ homes when their husbands left for the war. I’m guessing Clara stayed behind to help the spirits, or she’d have done the same. Anyway, one of the others could have had children.”

“Didn’t you bring home that information from the parish courthouse? Or copies of it?”

Nan jumped up from her rocker. “Yeah, it’s in my room.” She darted inside the house, while Dax flipped through more of Clara’s diary and hoped to find a hint as to whether John-Paul was alive or dead, and whether he’d ever made it back to her in his physical form.

A single line in all capital letters, the text written jerkily, as though Clara had been upset at the time, caught Dax’s attention.

MY DARLING, DON’T COME BACK.

Dax read aloud, “‘My darling John-Paul, another soldier came today. As my duty, I helped him see his young wife and find the light, but this soldier knew things, things about you. Your visits weaken you, my darling, and this soldier knew that your body is already weak, wounded at Vicksburg. He said your body is in a hospital, and that you’re dying, John-Paul. You’re dying! Oh, darling, don’t you see? Your visits are only achievable because your spirit is wavering, deciding whether to yield to the light or to stay. Please, John-Paul, please do not allow your spirit to return. Wait, my darling. Heal, and then return to me, alive and well. Let your spirit rest, and join your body once more. Then return to me, forever. Return to me, whole. I would not have merely a part of you, my dearest John-Paul. I need all of you.’”

Dax turned the page, but there weren’t any additional entries.

The front door opened and Nanette bounded through, holding a sheet of paper. “Dax, they thought he was dead. They even reported him dead at one point, had him listed in the fatalities from the Vicksburg raid, but he wasn’t dead. He was injured. Dying. And then he returned home. He came back to her.”

“But she nearly lost him, because he grew weaker every time he visited her in spirit. His spirit was trying to determine whether to live or die, and she almost lost him, because his spirit wanted to be with her again, before he crossed over.” Dax handed the diary to Nan. “Celeste isn’t dead, Nanette. She’s dying.”

**15**

DAX PRESSED HIS FOOT on the accelerator and the Beemer instantly responded, shooting forward on Highway 90 in a direct path to Houma. He withdrew his cell phone and pressed the Send key to redial Chloe’s parents. He’d left three messages but hadn’t heard from them yet. They’d know what happened to Celeste. He’d have asked them before now if he’d only realized that Celeste wasn’t dead. She’d been in the same accident that took their daughter’s life; surely they could tell him what had happened to her.

Thank goodness he knew them well enough to ask, after spending that week with them at the beach this summer in order to help Chloe communicate with them before she crossed. That week was one of the best of his life, not only because he’d helped Chloe see the beach for the first time with her parents, but because Celeste had been there too.

Maybe when she’d made the decision to stay behind and help Chloe cross, she had in fact kept her body from surrendering its spirit completely. He’d never even considered that possibility, didn’t know it was an option. But now he knew, and he had to find out where she was, how she was and how he could get to her.

Celeste was hurt, but how badly hurt, Dax didn’t know. What he did know—thanks to Clara Vicknair’s diary—was that every time she visited him, she weakened her physical body and therefore lessened her chances to stay on this side. What if that last visit had caused her to cross completely?

He thanked God that there was hardly any traffic. Holding his cell phone to his ear, he didn’t hear anything. No ringing, no voice message, nothing. He glanced at the call screen, and saw he had no service. He tossed it to the passenger’s seat.

“Come on!” Gripping the steering wheel tighter, he wished Houma were closer than an hour and a half from the Vicknair plantation. Then again, thanks to driving like a madman, he’d be there soon. However, even when he got to the city where the bus had crashed, would he be able to find her? Would she be in a hospital in Houma, or would they have taken her to one of the New Orleans hospitals? Or would she have been transported somewhere else? That was entirely possible. She could have been transferred to the nearest facility that was best equipped to handle her injuries.

Her injuries. She had been hurt badly enough to keep her in the middle realm for four months.

Four months.

And he was solely responsible for making her worse.

“Say I didn’t hurt her,” he said, and tried to decide which hospital to go to first. There were two in Houma, the Leonard J. Chabert Medical Center and the Terrebonne General Medical Center. If he didn’t get in touch with Chloe’s folks before he hit the city limits, he’d simply drive to one, then the other, and see if Celeste was at either of them.

He had a few Houma doctors on his pharmaceutical route; he’d visited them just last week. What if he’d been on one floor of the hospital, and she was on another? And how many times had he visited these hospitals over the past four months? Was she there all that time? Could he have seen her? Helped her?

That bus wreck had occurred on the Fourth of July. So long ago.

His cell phone rang, and he quickly picked it up. “Hello?”

“Did you find her yet?” Nanette asked.

“No. I’m not even sure where she is. I haven’t been able to get in touch with Chloe’s family, but I’m about a mile from one of the hospitals in Houma, and I’m going to see if she’s there.”

“I checked the Internet to see if I could find any information about the accident, thinking that maybe some of the news articles might have said where they took the people who were injured.”

“And?” Dax reached the entrance to Terrebonne General Medical Center and pulled in.

“Nothing. The newspaper articles list the number of fatalities and casualties, but no names or specifics. Sorry, Dax.”

“That’s okay. I appreciate you trying. Listen, I’m at the first hospital. I’m going to see if she’s here.” He parked the car, got out and sprinted toward the entrance.

“Call me and let me know when you find her. I’m going to keep searching the Net.”

“Okay.” He disconnected and entered the hospital lobby.

An elderly woman in a pink hospital smock sat behind the information desk and smiled at him when he neared.

“Can I help you locate a patient?” she asked.

“Yes. Celeste Beauchamp.”

“Beauchamp,” she repeated softly as her arthritic fingers clicked the keys of the computer in front of her. Then she shook her head and frowned. “I’m so sorry. There’s no patient here by that name. Could she be listed under a different name, perhaps?”

“No, thanks.” Frustrated, he turned and headed out. As he got into his car, his cell phone started up again. Nanette was impatient. He punched the Send key. “She wasn’t there.”

“Excuse me?” the man said on the other end. “Is this Dax Vicknair?”

“Yes, yes, it is,” Dax said, easily recognizing Chloe’s father’s voice. “Mr. Reynolds?”

“I’m afraid I just got your message. Is—well, is anything wrong? I had to wonder if this has anything to do with Chloe. We’ve sensed her lately, both of us have, but we thought it was because of her birthday last week. She’d have been seven, you know. We think she came to see us then, or was watching us, or however it works. But everything’s okay with her, isn’t it? I mean, she crossed fine, like you said, didn’t she?”

“Yes.” He shouldn’t have left such a vague message, Dax now realized. He sure didn’t want to cause the Reynolds family to worry about their daughter, but he simply hadn’t been thinking about anything but Celeste when he called. “I haven’t heard from Chloe since she crossed over, but I know that she crossed fine,” he reassured. Celeste had told him that she’d personally seen Chloe enter the light, so he had no doubt that their daughter was safe and sound on the other side, unlike Celeste, hovering in the middle. “And I don’t doubt that you’re sensing her presence,” he added. “Spirits do tend to keep an eye on their loved ones on this side, until they see you again over there.”

Chloe’s father sighed heavily. “Well, that’s a relief.” His voice grew faint as he turned away from the phone. “She’s okay, dear.”

“Sorry to have alarmed you,” Dax said, “but I believe you can help me with another spirit, or individual, I should say. A woman who was on the bus with Chloe that day. Her name was—is—Celeste Beauchamp.”

“The counselor for the camp?”

“Yes,” Dax said quickly, thankful that Mr. Reynolds readily recognized her name. That was a good sign, wasn’t it? “The counselor. Do you know what happened to her? Or where she is now?”

“I know that she didn’t stay here long. I mean, in Louisiana. She was in one of the local hospitals for a while, but then, when there wasn’t any change, her family wanted to take her back home. We get updates on her condition, though, through the church bulletin, she’s on the prayer list. Hold on, and I’ll get it.”

“Wait!” Dax said, but Reynolds had already put the phone down. Celeste’s parents wanted to take her back home? Where was home?

Dax felt like kicking himself—he’d never even considered that she wasn’t from Houma. That was where the campers were from, but Celeste wasn’t a camper; she was a counselor. Why hadn’t he ever asked her where she lived?

He recalled her telling him that the first time she’d tried a muffuletta was the day of the bus crash. He should have put it together then—she hadn’t had the traditional New Orleans sandwich before because she wasn’t from Louisiana. And there were her comments about poinsettias not being able to grow outside her parents’ house…

Why hadn’t he put it together?

“Okay, I’ve got it now,” Mr. Reynolds said. “Celeste Beauchamp is still listed on our prayer list. She’s been on it since the summer. Let’s see…she’s at Parkridge Medical Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Room 302.”

Chattanooga. Near the Smoky Mountains, definitely not a place where poinsettias would survive outside. “Can you tell me about her condition?” Dax asked, scrawling the name of the hospital and room number on a notepad and struggling to keep his voice calm in spite of the way his mind was currently reeling. How was she? And how quickly could he get to her?

“I assume she’s still in a coma,” Mr. Reynolds said bluntly. “From what we heard, the doctors couldn’t find any reason for her not to wake up, and a few times we got reports that she seemed to be getting better, but evidently, she didn’t come completely out of it, or she slipped back into it, or however it works. Last week, though, at church, they announced that her condition had worsened. I’m not sure how, they just asked for more prayers.”

Her condition had worsened. Because of Dax.

“Room 302, you said?” Dax asked, starting his car. He needed to get to Chattanooga as quickly as possible.

“Yeah. Parkridge Medical Center,” Mr. Reynolds repeated. “You going to see her? Are you supposed to help her cross?”

“No,” Dax said. “I’m not supposed to help her cross—” or he sure hoped he wasn’t “—but I am going to see her.”

“Well, I hope everything goes okay,” he said. “Let us know how she’s doing.”

“I will,” Dax promised, then said goodbye and hung up the phone. Without taking time to second-guess his decision, he pulled out of the hospital parking lot and started toward New Orleans International. If he pushed it, he could be there in forty minutes. Celeste’s life was at stake. Her condition was worsening. What did that mean? And who was with her? Surely she wasn’t alone. Her family would be there, right? Her mother, father and sister. They’d be with her, trying to coax her out of the coma.

He dialed information for the airport numbers. He’d get on the first flight out, to Chattanooga, and to Celeste.

Within fifteen minutes, he’d booked his ticket and had his car soaring in a beeline for the New Orleans airport. He had just enough time to get to the airport, park his car and run to the plane. Security would normally slow him down, but without any luggage or carry-on items, he could make it. He had to get to her before she went to the other side.

Failure wasn’t an option.

**16**

“PLEASE MAKE SURE your seat is in the upright position and that your seat belt is securely fastened as we prepare for our descent.” The flight attendant’s voice echoed through the cabin.

Dax placed a hand against the cool glass of the window and stared out at the city. Even in the darkness, he could see the dark shadows of mountains surrounding Chattanooga and the grayish clouds that cloaked them all. Smoky Mountains they were called; now he saw why.

A loud click through the PA was followed by the attendant’s voice again. “Local time is 6:30 p.m., and the current temperature is twenty-eight degrees.”

Twenty-eight degrees. Louisiana had been in the mid-seventies. No wonder Celeste had said she didn’t think poinsettias would grow outside. If he’d paid attention, he might have realized that she came from a state with mountains, and cold weather, and probably snow. Definitely not a place where ten-foot poinsettias blanketed the side of a house.

But she’d loved those poinsettias; she’d loved the plantation. If Dax got there in time, and she woke up in the land of the living instead of crossing over, would she want to go back there, with him? And would she want to do more than merely visit?

Would she stay forever?

He thought of those dark eyes, and the way they’d looked when he’d told her he loved her. She didn’t get a chance to respond, but Dax had known she would’ve told him that she felt the same. He could see Celeste beside him, the way Ryan was beside Monique earlier, waiting to receive her first spirit assignment as Celeste Vicknair. She’d get child spirits, like he did, Dax knew. She was good with children. He could see her teaching at one of the local schools, like Nanette, but with younger children. Kindergarten, or first grade. She’d teach the living, and help the ones who’d lost their lives to find their way to their new homes. And the kids would love her, and Dax would love her…always.

If he could keep her on this side.

He exited the plane and darted through the airport, following the signs to the taxis. Then he barreled outside and got in line with a dozen other people who were bundled from head to toe in hats, scarves, gloves, wool coats and boots. They looked at Dax, in his LSU short-sleeved T-shirt and worn jeans, as though he’d lost his mind. And as his body shuddered in the cold, he realized that they were probably right; he’d lost his mind and his heart over Celeste Beauchamp.

“Son, are you okay?” an older man in front of him asked. “Do you—well, do you not own a coat?”

Dax could literally feel the adrenaline pumping through him, the excitement of being this close to Celeste. He’d be with her soon. He was shaking all over—his body’s natural response to the sudden jolt in temperature and his lack of proper clothing—but part of that shivering was due to the sheer shock of realizing that she wasn’t dead, and from hoping that he’d have a chance to keep her from being that way.

“I didn’t pack my coat,” he said honestly, his teeth chattering slightly as he spoke. “I didn’t pack anything. The woman I love was in an accident, and I’m trying to get to her. She’s at Parkridge Medical Center.”

“Goodness, why didn’t you say so?” a woman said at the front of the line. There were no cabs at the curb yet, but one was pulling up, and she hurriedly waved him forward. The driver got out and walked toward her, but she shook her head. “Take him.” She pointed to Dax. “It’s an emergency. He needs to get to Parkridge Medical.”

All of the people in front of Dax nodded their heads approvingly and even patted his back as he moved past them toward the waiting cab. “Good luck, son,” the old man called, and the remainder of the group echoed his sentiment as Dax climbed in.

“Thanks,” he said, his heart filled with emotion, not only for the woman he loved, but for the people so willing to help him get to her.

“Parkridge Medical Center?” the driver asked.

“Yes. Can you tell me how far that is from here? How long will it take us to get there?”

“Fifteen minutes,” he said, then he turned up the heat in the car. “You’re going to freeze here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Fifteen minutes until he was with Celeste. Dax leaned his head back against the seat, closed his eyes and thanked the powers that be for giving him this chance.

And that’s when he heard it. Faint, but distinct nonetheless. A laugh, no, a giggle. The giggle of a young child. A boy. It’d been a while since he’d had a boy spirit for an assignment; the majority of the children he’d helped lately were girls, but this was most definitely a boy, and while Dax listened, that giggle became louder, as though the child was getting closer…

“No.”

“Something wrong?” the cabbie asked from the front seat, his brown eyes surveying Dax from the mirror. “You’re not the carsick type, are you? Because we’re nearly there.”

“No. I—I just need to make a call. I forgot something, or rather, I forgot about something, at home.” He withdrew his cell phone from his pocket and quickly dialed the plantation.

Nanette answered on the first ring. “Dax? Are you there? Have you seen her?”

He’d called her from the airport and let her know about Celeste. “Yeah, I’m in Chattanooga, but I’m not at the hospital yet, and I need you to check on something for me.”

The cabbie relayed, “Five more minutes.”

“We’re five minutes from the hospital now, but I’ve got a problem.”

“What is it?”

Dax didn’t want to blurt out that he had a ghost on the way, not in front of the cabdriver who seemed to have taken an acute interest in their conversation. Dax could see the guy’s lifted brows in the mirror. “I need you to go to the sitting room and check the tea service for me. I think I may have—left something there.”

The cabbie’s brows furrowed, but he didn’t comment. Nanette, however, did.

“No—you’ve got an assignment?”

“On the way,” Dax said. “I don’t think it’ll be there yet, but it’s coming.”

Nan’s breathing quickened on the other end, and he could hear the sound of her footsteps, as though she was running up the stairs. “Hang on. I’m checking.”

“I usually have a day, but this one seems pretty near, like I might not have so long this time.”

“I’m in here now, Dax. Nothing on the tea service yet. What are you going to do? You know you have to come home if you get an assignment. There’s no telling what the powers that be will do if you don’t. They don’t like to wait.”

“I know.” Dax had once been on the other side of the state on a pharmaceutical route when an assignment was delivered, and by the time he made it home, the voices in his head had been so loud, children squealing and screaming and yelling and laughing, that he nearly couldn’t drive. And this time he was three states away. “But I’m not leaving until I see her, Nanette, no matter what.”

“Attaboy,” the driver said, stopping the cab in front of the entrance to Parkridge Medical Center.

Dax reached for his wallet, but the guy shook his head. “This one’s on me. You go get the girl.”

“I agree with him,” Nanette said, evidently hearing the cabbie. “You do what you’ve got to do there. Take care of Celeste, and I’ll watch for your assignment on the tea service. When it comes, I’ll call you and let you know.”

Dax smiled. It wasn’t like Nanette to forgo rules, particularly when they had to do with the spirits, but whether she admitted it or not, she had a soft spot for love, and she knew Dax’s love was in this hospital. “Thanks, Nan.”

“Just let me know how things go there, and I’ll do the same from here. Good luck, Dax.” She hung up.

Dax sprinted through the hospital lobby to the elevators and punched the button. Within seconds, he stepped off at the third floor. A nurses’ station was directly in front of the elevator, and Dax took advantage of one of the nurses looking his way. “Room 302?”

She pointed to one of the hallways that branched away from the station. “Second room on your right.”

Dax hurried to the room, opened the door without knocking—and saw her. She was on the bed, her eyes closed and her long blond curls draped over the pillow. The top of her blouse, the same sage green blouse she’d been wearing when she came to him, was visible above the sheet.

A young woman sat beside the bed and held Celeste’s hand. She looked up at him, and though her eyes were bloodshot and tired, her face was vaguely similar to Celeste’s. Her hair was more sandy than blond, and in a style that Dax would classify as stylishly modern.

“Nelsa?”

She blinked, then nodded. “Do I know you?” she asked. “Or—does she?” She looked at her sister, then leaned over her and kissed her cheek.

“Yes,” he said, stepping toward the bed. He wanted to run to Celeste, to hold her, to beg her to wake up and be with him on this side. But how could he tell Nelsa that he was Celeste’s lover when he hadn’t even been to the hospital since she’d been hurt?

Dax’s head reeled. What to say to make this woman, hovering protectively over her sister, let him get near?

“Excuse me?”

Dax turned toward the woman’s voice behind him and saw an older couple with cups of coffee cradled in their hands and confused looks on their faces. The woman looked as if she hadn’t slept in weeks, or more probably, months. Her eyes were puffy and swollen, and her skin was void of color; she looked as though she’d been through hell. Then again, she’d been through the closest thing to it, the scare of losing a child. The man beside her wasn’t overly tall, but he was stoutly built and had a disapproving scowl on his face. “Who are you?” he asked. “And what are you doing here?”

Celeste’s parents.

No doubt a stranger showing up in their daughter’s room would make them suspicious, but Dax wasn’t a stranger, yet he didn’t know how to tell them that.

“I’m a—friend of Celeste’s,” he started, then shook his head. “No, it’s more than that,” he said, not willing to lie to Celeste’s family. “I love her.”

The woman dropped her coffee, and it splattered against her feet on the floor.

“Son, what are you saying? We—we don’t even know you,” Celeste’s father said, then he turned to his wife. “Marian, are you all right?”

“It’s him,” she whispered, her trembling hand moving to her heart. “You’re Dax, aren’t you?”

The man’s look of irritation swiftly converted to one of shock, and Nelsa stood beside the bed. “Are you? Are you Dax?”

Dax was thrown. How could they know him? But he nodded. “I am.”

“She’s been calling for you,” Nelsa explained. “In fact, your name is the only name she’s said the whole time. All these months. Dax. We—we didn’t know where you were, didn’t know who you were, and we tried to find you but didn’t know where to look.”

She’d been calling his name? Dax’s pulse beat wildly. If she’d been calling his name on this side, that meant that—what?—her spirit had been back here and trying to merge? That she remembered him on this side as well? Or was he just grasping at straws? Would her spirit come back to her body, the way John-Paul’s had? Or had Dax ruined her chance for that when he’d kept her with him for so long?

“Where have you been?” her mother asked. “If you love her, where have you been?” She took a shaky breath. “I—we—didn’t even know about you, had no idea. And I’d have thought if you knew her, and you loved her, you would have come shortly after the accident. But you didn’t come.” She shook her head. “Why not?”

“I’ve been in Louisiana, where I live. I didn’t know that she was here. I just found out today, and I came as soon as I heard.” He had to concentrate on his words now, because the little boy’s giggles were returning, and they were louder, much louder.

The machine beside the bed began to beep, and they all turned toward it.

“No.” Nelsa grabbed the call button and pressed it rapidly. “It’s dropping again!”

The little boy’s laughter throbbed in Dax’s mind, and he had no doubt his spirit was nearly ready to come to the plantation, if he wasn’t already there. “What’s dropping?” he asked, stepping toward the bed, and Celeste.

“Her heart rate. Just like it did those other three times. And the doctor said she wouldn’t make it if she went through one of those episodes again,” Nelsa said. She turned to Dax. “She’s been wanting you, and now you’re here, but she’s leaving us!”

“No, Celeste,” Marian Beauchamp pleaded, moving quickly to the bed and grabbing Celeste’s other hand. “Stay with us, honey. Please!”

Dax’s ghost was nearly there, the laughter so loud, so intense, that he barely heard Nelsa, even though she was screaming too. And then he realized what she’d said. Those other three times. Celeste’s heart rate had faltered before, and Dax knew when—when she came to him, to help his spirits cross. And now he had another spirit coming, and she was fading.

“No!” Dax yelled, but his voice merely joined the other panicked ones in the room…and the laughter in his head grew so overwhelming that he gripped the bedrail to stay upright. He knew what was happening, and he didn’t know how to stop it. Celeste was trying to get back to him, with the little-boy ghost. But if her spirit succeeded, her body would fail. He’d lose her for good, because she was trying to see him again. “No!”

**17**

CELESTE’S MOUTH was dry, her head throbbed and every ounce of her being violently protested any movement, but she wasn’t going to stop. She couldn’t.

Because she was so, so close.

The thick darkness surrounding her grew less dense with every step, and she could almost see some form of light in the distance. She braced herself against the wall, her fingers gripping its coolness as she inched her way forward. Another step, rest, concentrate. Two more steps, stop, rest, concentrate. She could get back there. Stopping was not an option. This was the only way to Dax, and she wasn’t going to let her exhaustion keep her from getting to him again.

She could hear voices from both sides. Voices behind her, from that pathway where she’d heard them before, were once again calling her name. Someone screamed, and someone cried.

“Celeste!” they yelled. “Please, Celeste!”

“No,” she whispered. There wasn’t any way she would give up now. She could see the opening that led to that room in the middle, and it wasn’t dark now. In fact, it was a faint yellow. And she heard voices from the middle too, but those voices were different. One was a woman. Adeline, perhaps? Or was it someone else?

Celeste paused to rest again, tuned out the voices behind her and focused on what the woman was saying.

“Chère, it’s going to be okay,” Adeline said, her voice a little higher than usual, as though she were talking to a child. “Don’t worry, Ike, my Dax will take care of you.”

Dax. Someone—Ike—was going to see Dax, and Adeline was about to send him through.

“W-wait,” Celeste said, but her voice was so weak that it barely formed a whisper.

Did Adeline hear her?

“Sure, chère, you can tell your mama and daddy bye. I know they’d like that, and that they’ll want to know that you’ll be okay. Dax will help you do that, and you’ll like him, but if you don’t mind, I’d like for you to visit with me for a little while before you go. My Dax is taking care of something right now, and he knows you want to see him, but he needs to see a—a friend of his before he goes back home. I can show you some really nice things while we’re waiting for him.”

Thunder roared in the distance, and Celeste heard Adeline again, her voice a bit worried as she spoke to the boy. “I won’t keep you too long, chère, and of course, if you want to go on through, you can. I can’t stop you, you know.”

“What can you show me?” the little boy asked as Celeste licked her lips and tried again.

“Wait, please,” she said hoarsely.

The two people in the room ahead of her continued to talk, and she wanted to cry. No, she wanted to scream.

But she couldn’t.

Celeste braced her hands against the wall and forced another step, then another. Nearly there. Just a few more. She wasn’t going to lose this chance.

“I can show you what the other side of the clouds looks like,” Adeline said. “Or we can go hide in the middle of them and watch the planes go by. Would you like that?”

“Cool!” Ike yelled.

“Wait!” Celeste’s attempt to scream was so weak it sounded more like a whisper, but thank goodness, the little boy heard her.

“Who’s that?” he asked, moving toward Celeste as she entered the middle room, then slumped against the wall.

“Oh, no,” Adeline whispered. “Celeste, dear,” she said, then she frowned and looked behind her as a loud boom of thunder roared through the room. “I thought you’d gone to rest. You need to go back, chère. That’s the way to Dax.”

The thunder boomed even louder, and the middle wall opened, the light filling its center and warming Celeste’s cold spirit.

“I thought I was going to Dax.” The boy pouted.

“You are, Ike, but remember, I’m going to show you a few things around here first. Dax needs to take care of some things, and he’s working on that now.”

Celeste blinked, and fought the way the light pulled her toward it. The entire middle wall was open and glowing and beckoning her now, but Dax wasn’t there. “I want to go with you,” she whispered to the boy. “To see Dax.” Then she looked at Adeline. “Let us through.”

“You can’t go that way again,” Adeline said, frowning as she shook her head. “Oh, chère, please. You have to trust me this time. The way behind you is the only way for you to go now.” She lowered her voice. “It’s the right way, chère. Please, trust me, I can’t tell you more.”

Again, booming thunder roared around them, and the light got so warm that Celeste squinted at its radiance.

“This is it, Celeste,” Adeline said. “You have a choice, but Dax’s way isn’t part of your decision anymore. That path is closed to you now, you’re too weak for it. And you’re not going to be strong enough to go down it again, chère.”

Celeste looked at the light, and then turned toward the dark path behind her, where those voices were still calling her name. She listened to them, the same voices she’d heard time and time again. Every other time, they’d merely blended in an incomprehensible mix of screams and sobs, with none of them really standing out as unique. But now…

She swallowed, leaned toward the sound. Then she turned back to Adeline. “That’s Dax’s voice, isn’t it? Dax is there? Back there?”

“I’m going to keep Ike company for a while so that Dax can take care of a few things before he visits. That’s all I’m allowed to say, chère.”

“Dax.” Celeste started toward the darkened path, but the light pulled her back, caused her to stumble. She held up a hand and saw that her glow was almost blinding now, and her feet refused to cooperate; they wouldn’t move down the path. Instead, she was inching her way backward, toward that vivid, powerful light.

She didn’t want to go. But she was too tired to fight it.

“Help me,” she whispered, reaching out to Dax’s voice.

**18**

“MAMA, LOOK! It’s lower than before!” Horrified, Nelsa pointed to the monitor beside the bed. “We have to get someone!” She ran out of the room with her mother close at her heels.

“Hold on, baby,” Marian pleaded before she left. “We’re getting the doctors. Don’t you dare leave us!”

Her husband moved to one side of the bed and grabbed his daughter’s hand, and Dax, still fighting the little boy’s laughter in his head, gripped the bedrail in a determined effort to fight the pull of the little spirit. No way would he leave her now, and he prayed she wasn’t going to leave him…for good.

“She’s wanted you. Let her know you’re here,” Mr. Beauchamp demanded. “She hasn’t come to us. Maybe she’ll come to you.”

Dax gazed down at the woman he loved, and listened to the beats of her heart growing fainter. He blinked past the pounding in his head and said the words he’d only spoken once before.

“Celeste, I love you. Please, come back to me, chère. I’m here. Don’t—” He didn’t look up at Mr. Beauchamp to see his reaction, but simply forged on with what he believed she needed to hear. “Don’t try to get to me the other way, chère. I’m here. On this side. Don’t you dare cross without me.”

“No!” her father cried, and Dax heard the beeps growing further apart, at the same time that the little boy’s laughter got even stronger.

They were losing her because she was trying to go to him, trying to go the other way, to the Vicknair plantation. And if she did…

“Celeste!” Dax yelled fiercely. “Don’t leave me, chère, please. I don’t want to live without you.”

“Dear God!” Her father shook his head in denial. “No! Somebody help! Dammit, where is her doctor?”

Dax’s tears fell upon Celeste’s cheeks. “Don’t leave me.”

“In here!” Nelsa ran into the room with her mother and two nurses close behind.

“She’s crashing. Get Dr. Pavere,” one nurse directed, while the other relayed the information through the intercom by the bed. They quickly took over, with one of them examining the machines hooked to Celeste and the other one checking her pulse. Then a tall, bald man with glasses and a stethoscope rushed in.

“We need the room cleared,” he said briskly, stepping around one of the nurses to get to Celeste.

The nurse turned toward all of them, hovering helplessly around the bed. “I’m sorry. We need you to step into the hall.”

Nelsa wrapped an arm around her crying mother and ushered her out, while her father followed, but Dax stood-stock still, unable to leave her now that he’d found her.

“No,” he said. “She can’t die now.”

Amazingly, at that very moment, the little boy’s laughter grew softer, so faint, in fact, that Dax barely heard it at all.

“I’m sorry,” the nurse said, placing her hand on Dax’s arm and effectively turning him around toward the door. “You have to wait in the hall.”

“No! Celeste, this way! I’m here, chère!” He turned, pushed past the nurse and forced his way to the bed. Then he did something he’d never done before; he brought his hands to her face, and touched the woman he loved, tenderly stroking his own tears from her cheeks. “Don’t leave me, chère.”

“I’m sorry, but you have to leave,” the nurse repeated sternly as she reached for Dax and attempted to pull him away.

Dax glared at the woman. “I can’t leave her now. I won’t.”

“Dax.”

The voice was barely audible, but Dax heard it, recognized it. He turned sharply and saw the doctor staring disbelievingly at the woman in the bed, her eyes opened and peering…at Dax.

“Do—it again,” she said softly.

“Oh, my God,” the nurse beside Dax exclaimed.

His tears fell again, but these were tears of joy. She was back. Here. With him. And the beating of her heart, growing stronger with every second, said she’d stay here this time.

“Do what again, chère?”

She licked her lips, then whispered, “Touch.”

His laughter rolled out, and he leaned over her, cradled her face within his hands and smiled.

“Go get her family,” the doctor instructed the nurses. “They’ll want to see this.” He shook his head. “Ms. Beauchamp, I’ve seen a few miracles in my time—it comes with the territory,” he added with a grin. “But this is one for the record books.” He looked at Dax. “And it reminds me of the power of love. I’m going to let you have your reunion now, but I’ll need to come back later for a few tests, not that I think we’re going to find anything wrong, since we were just basically waiting for you to wake up, my dear, but still…”

Celeste nodded slowly, her own tears falling now.

Her parents and sister ran in and embraced Celeste. “It’s a miracle!” Nelsa said, crying and laughing and touching Celeste in disbelief.

Her father, however, looked directly at Dax. “Thank you, son.”

Celeste stared up at him. “Yes, thank you.”

Dax was shocked by her eyes, which were the most vivid moss green. “They’re incredible,” he whispered.

Celeste smiled. “Thanks.” Then she turned to her family on the other side of the bed and saw their baffled expressions, but rather than explaining why Dax was surprised by the color of her eyes, Celeste gave them something else to process. “I love him.”

Three sets of eyes, also moss green, all widened and focused on Dax, who grinned as though he’d just been guaranteed happiness for life. And he had.

Her mother stroked her fingertips down Celeste’s cheeks, then she looked tearfully at Dax. “You brought our daughter back to us. I don’t know how we can ever repay you.”

“Say you’ll give us your blessing,” Dax said. “And we’ll call it even.”

“Our blessing?” her father asked.

“Yes, sir, because, if she says yes, I plan to marry your daughter.”

Celeste beamed, and Nelsa nodded approvingly. “Oh, you’re going to fit into this family perfectly,” she said. “We’re kind of big on romance and happily ever after. Dad asked Mom to marry him after their second date.”

“Technically, it was the third, if you count that trip to the fair,” Marian clarified, smiling at the memory. “And we’ve always wanted our daughters to have that kind of love.” She looked at Celeste. “I suppose you’d like for us to move back out to the hall for a spell so you and Dax can talk about something in private.”

Still smiling, Celeste nodded.

“Let’s go, David,” she said to her husband, then kissed Celeste’s cheek.

“Just so you know, if she says yes, then you’ve got our approval,” David Beauchamp said. He turned toward the bed, and though Dax didn’t see it, he felt certain that Celeste indicated what her answer would be because the man nodded before leaving with his family.

Dax waited for the door to close, then lowered one of the bed rails and sat beside Celeste. “Celeste Beauchamp,” he said, his heart thudding loudly, “Will you marry me?”

“Oh, Dax, yes.”

Then he kissed her gently, while his hands tenderly caressed her face, then eased over her body, touching her the way he’d only touched her in his dreams.

The heart monitor began to beat fiercely, her heart rate increasing in rapid proportions as they lengthened the kiss and she moaned her contentment.

“Um, oh!”

Dax broke the kiss and turned toward the nurse in the doorway.

“I’m s-sorry,” she stuttered, “but her heart rate was going up so quickly that I thought something might be wrong.” She giggled. “But I see now that nothing’s wrong at all.” She turned and left.

Celeste grinned. “How about a Christmas wedding?”

Christmas was just four weeks away, and Dax loved the idea wholeheartedly. He finally had Celeste, the woman he wanted more than life, and he didn’t want to waste any time in sharing his name, sharing his life, sharing his heritage. “A Christmas wedding would be perfect,” he said.

Her brows furrowed slightly, and she sighed regretfully. “You need to go help Ike now.”

“Ike?”

“A little-boy spirit, coming to see you. He said he’d wait, but he wants to see his parents,” she explained. “And he actually pushed me down the pathway to get me here,” she said with a smile. “Well, he and your grandmother.”

“They pushed you?”

She nodded. “The light was strong, and they knew I needed help.”

“I’ll make sure to thank Ike then. And I will go help him cross, but then I’ll come back to take you home.”

“Home,” she repeated. “To the plantation?”

“If that’s what you want.” He added, “You know that if you marry a Vicknair, you’ll also be expected to help spirits.”

Those beautiful moss green eyes were alive with excitement. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

**19**

CELESTE HAD BEEN in that hospital bed for four months, an extremely long time indeed. However, those four months seemed like nothing compared to the four weeks the two of them had to wait for their wedding.

Typical for Louisiana, the week of Christmas was marked with unseasonably warm weather, perfect for an outdoor event. Celeste’s mother had been doubtful when they told her they were going to be married outdoors on Christmas Eve at the Vicknair plantation, but after arriving in the bayou, Marian Beauchamp had quickly learned that December in Louisiana was like April in Tennessee.

The plantation was more breathtaking than Dax had ever seen, definitely the best that it’d been since the hurricane took its toll. Tiny white lights circled the eight porch columns and almost completely disguised the fact that they were still slightly leaning from Katrina’s damage. The same type of lights were also mingled through the poinsettia hedges to cast a red glow against the sides of the house.

Nanette had borrowed several huge white tents, traditionally used during the Mardi Gras festivities in February, from the high school, and guests were currently enjoying champagne beneath their curved roofs, also lit with tiny white lights. The mingling conversations had the same basic theme—the bride was radiant, the ceremony was beautiful and the Vicknair plantation was the perfect setting for such an incredible festivity. Everyone was impressed to see how far the cousins had come toward restoring the place to its original magnificence—except for the parish president, Charles Roussel, of course.

Although Dax tried to persuade Nanette to include John-Paul and Clara Vicknair’s letters with the nomination packet she sent to the state historic preservation officer, she’d refused, saying that if they absolutely had to bring the letters into the equation to save the house, then they would. But for now, they’d see what happened with the State Review Board, and they’d move on with the originally planned house renovations, which meant that, in a few weeks, they’d be starting on the structural problems. But Dax didn’t want to think about all the work ahead of them right now; this was his wedding day, after all.

“Okay, let’s get one of the bride and her family before it gets too dark,” the photographer instructed, and Celeste, her parents and Nelsa posed in front of the bounty of twinkling red poinsettias beside the house.

“Beautiful,” the photographer said and Dax agreed.

“Yes, she is, isn’t she?” He slowly neared his bride, then kissed her softly.

Every touch from Celeste made his insides sizzle with heat…and with need. It’d been her idea to wait until their wedding night to make love again, and Dax had been hard since he woke up this morning merely from thinking about finally having her.

Four weeks had never seemed so long.

As if knowing where his thoughts had headed, she leaned toward him and whispered in his ear, “I can’t wait to get out of this dress.”

“What a coincidence. I can’t wait to get you out of that dress.”

She smiled seductively, and Dax grew even harder.

“I’m having a difficult time here, chère. Keep teasing me like that, and we might have to leave this party early, head into the house and—”

“I know where I want our first time to be—our first time as husband and wife, that is. And it isn’t the plantation.”

“Care to enlighten me? Because it better not be far from here. I’m not kidding about how badly I need you, Celeste.” He nuzzled her ear, then lowered his voice to a raspy whisper. “I need to feel your naked body against me, to press against your wetness, then slide inside…”

Her gasp was audible, the pulse at her throat quickened and she arched her body against his.

Dax smiled. He’d wanted to see if she was as eager as he was, and she almost seemed more.

She turned her head to look directly at him, and Dax was momentarily spellbound by the green of her eyes. He was still getting used to the vibrant color.

“Celeste, I have a wedding present for you,” Nanette said as she neared the two of them.

“I’ve already got everything I need right here.” She rose on her toes and nibbled on Dax’s ear. “And I’ll have everything I want real soon, won’t I?” she whispered to him.

“I won’t argue with you,” Nan said, not hearing the whispered addition, “but I do have something that I want to tell you about.”

“What is it?” Celeste asked, sliding her arm around Dax and massaging his behind.

Enjoying this game, he moved his hand to the small of her back, then dipped it inside her gown to finger the top of her thong.

She giggled softly, but Nanette didn’t appear to notice, and plunged on. “I learned at my school’s staff meeting this week that Norco Elementary had one of their kindergarten teachers leave at the Christmas break. She’s not coming back for the remainder of the year, and they really need to hire someone who can begin as soon as school starts back in January.”

“Norco Elementary?” Celeste asked. “Wasn’t that the school that Angelle attended? I think I remember her saying that name.”

Nan nodded. “It isn’t far from here. I thought you might be interested, so I spoke with the principal.”

“And?” Dax asked.

“She wants to talk to you whenever it’s convenient.”

Celeste wrapped her arms around Nanette and squeezed her. “Oh, Nanette, thank you so much. That’s the best wedding present! If I could get a job here, so close to the plantation…well, that’d be a dream come true.” She looked at Dax. “Another dream come true.”

“Well, I didn’t get you the job, but I would say that you’ve got more than a foot in the door. The principal there is a friend of mine, and I think he’ll pay special attention to my recommendation.”

Celeste’s eyes were glistening with tears when she turned to Dax. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

He nodded, truly enjoying seeing her so happy.

“No way,” Nanette mumbled, looking beyond them toward the plantation house.

“What?” Dax asked.

“Roussel. He walked into the house. I guarantee you he’s taking advantage of your wedding to snoop around.” She slapped her hands together. “Well, we’ll just see about that.” She stomped off as Dax chuckled.

“The parish president hasn’t exactly earned any brownie points with Nan.”

“So I see.” Celeste watched Nan grab handfuls of her red bridesmaid skirt to get it out of the way as she barreled up the front steps in hot pursuit of her sworn enemy.

“Don’t tell her I told you this, but I think she actually enjoys sparring with him. So, I’d say she’s still having a good time at our wedding, Charles Roussel or not. In fact, I believe all of my family is having a good time.”

His parents, living in a retirement community in Florida now, had driven in for the wedding, and they were currently visiting with his aunts and uncles who had also come back to the plantation for the big event. None of them had seen the place since Katrina, and while they were dismayed at the hit their beloved home had taken—and the fact that their children hadn’t called them for help—they’d been impressed that the six cousins currently serving medium duty had pulled together to make things right and were very pleased with all that they had accomplished so far.

Naturally, they’d all pulled out their wallets and offered to foot the bill for repairs, but Nanette had informed them that it was only a matter of time until the historical society came through with funding. Dax knew that the actual amount of time until the money came—if the money came—was unpredictable. But he also knew that Nanette didn’t want to ask for help. Truthfully, he didn’t either. They would save the house, and they wouldn’t take from their parents’ retirement money to do it, not unless it was absolutely necessary. Right now, it wasn’t necessary.

Dax scanned the yard and saw Gage and Kayla speaking with the caterers, probably scheduling them for their wedding on Valentine’s Day. Then he saw Jenee chatting with Monique and Ryan. They waved at him, and he grinned, knowing they were all thrilled that he’d managed to find the woman of his dreams.

He continued scanning the areas under the tents, and then the backyard, but didn’t see the other Vicknair cousin.

“Where’s Tristan? He didn’t get called to a fire, did he?”

“Isn’t that him?” Celeste asked, pointing toward the farthest corner of the back tent, where Tristan’s tall frame leaned casually against one of the poles securing the tent, and a striking blonde held his attention. She was standing so close to him that Dax almost didn’t recognize her, and he wouldn’t have, if the woman hadn’t turned her head and smiled.

“Chantelle,” Dax said.

“They look pretty—intense,” Celeste said.

Dax agreed. The two were definitely in a heated conversation about something…perhaps about each other? “She’s the sister of a ghost Gage helped a couple of months ago. Or, I guess I should say a ghost we all helped a couple of months ago, since helping Lillian Bedeau cross was undeniably a joint effort. I wondered back then if Chantelle and Tristan didn’t have something between them. They seemed to connect, in a weird kind of way, you know? But the timing wasn’t right, of course, with everything she was going through with her sister and all. And they did tend to fight a lot.”

“I’ve seen people like that,” Celeste said. “They’re either fighting, or making up, and they put everything they’ve got into both.” She laughed. “Some people enjoy relationships like that.”

“Not me,” Dax said.

“Really, Mr. Vicknair? Well, what kind of relationship do you like? I mean, since I just married you and all, it seems I should probably know.”

He moved his mouth back to her ear, kissed that sweet lobe, then whispered, “I like the kind where I know exactly what a woman wants, because she holds nothing back. I want to know what she’s thinking, what she’s feeling, what she’s needing, in every way. And then I want to fulfill those needs, those wants, those desires. I want to be her best friend, her confidant, but I also want to be the lover who fulfills her every fantasy, her every dream. So when she thinks of having a man, she can think of no other…but me.”

“Dax.”

He sucked her lobe, then kissed it and blew warm air against her ear. “What do you want, Celeste? You said you knew where you wanted our first time as husband and wife to be. Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you. Repeatedly.”

“The levee.”

He smiled against her ear. “Come with me.”

They exchanged greetings with guests along their way to the porch, where Dax grabbed two thick quilts from the rockers, draped them over his arm, then helped Celeste gather the train of her gown to descend the stairs. Then they circled the large oak that centered the driveway. Cars were parked around the big tree and lined the entire driveway, and Dax guided his bride to the outer edge of them, along the magnolias that bordered the side.

“We’re leaving the party early, aren’t we? We are the guests of honor, you know,” she reminded him with a slight giggle.

“There are plenty of Vicknairs here to keep folks entertained, and tons of champagne,” he said, not concerned at all with his guests, and totally concerned with giving his new wife what she wanted.

Once they were away from the lights of the house, Dax noted the full moon and the nice warm breeze blowing from the other side of the levee, where the Mississippi churned. He grinned. There wasn’t supposed to be a full moon tonight and he wondered…was this one visible to everyone, or was it placed here, for them, by the powers that be? The breeze was warm enough to keep them comfortable as they made love, and the moon was bright enough that he’d be able to see Celeste’s eyes when she came.

“It’s perfect, isn’t it?” she said from beside him, and he saw that she was staring at the picture before them with awe as well. “Did they do this for us?” She indicated the sky.

“I believe so. And it is close to perfect, but it isn’t perfect yet.”

“How’s that?”

He handed her the quilts and, looking at him questioningly, she held them against her chest. Then he scooped her into his arms. “I told you I’d carry you one day, Mrs. Vicknair.”

Laughing, she gathered the flowing length of her dress and piled it on top of the quilts, while Dax carried her down the remaining length of the driveway, then across River Road and up the levee.

He stood her beside him, then laid the quilts on the ground, while Celeste stared out at the water.

“Oh, Dax, look.”

Moonlight reflected off of the water and provided a sparkling backdrop for their first time together as husband and wife.

“I want you.” She unzipped her dress, let it fall to the ground and stood before him in a lacy white thong, white thigh-high stockings and heels. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her nipples were taut and undeniably aroused.

Dax pulled her against him, pressing her sweet center against the bulge in his pants. “Believe me, chère, I want you too.”

Her hands trembled as she removed his tuxedo jacket, then unbuttoned his shirt. Then she paused. “Dax?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind.”

She smiled. “No, definitely not. But I’m wondering…”

“What, Celeste?” He waited, and when she didn’t say anything, he brought his knuckle beneath her chin and tipped her head so she looked at him directly. “Tell me, chère.”

“Did you—well, did you bring protection?”

He nodded. “I did.”

Then she smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes, and Dax thought he knew why.

“But…” he started.

“But?”

“But if you’d rather not use it, I can’t think of anything better than having nothing at all between us when we make love.”

Even in the moonlight, Dax could see the green of her eyes intensify. “You mean, just this time? Our first time? Or do you mean…”

“What do you want, Celeste?” he asked, believing he knew, but wanting to hear her say it.

She smiled broadly. “I think a boy first, but a girl would be fine too. And if it’s a boy, I’d like to name him Ike.”

Dax’s laugh rolled freely. “Ike it is.” He skimmed his hands down her hips and slid her panties down her legs.

“Yes,” she whispered as his fingers slid between her folds to find her hot, wet and ready. “And, if—it’s a girl,” she continued, though her words were rasping and hoarse, “Adeline.”

She spread her legs to give him better access, while her hands moved to undo his pants, then found his erection and stroked him tenderly. “You know,” she panted, “it may take lots of practice to get little Ike or Adeline. I wouldn’t want you to get discouraged and give up.”

“Oh, don’t worry, chère. Vicknairs never give up.”

**The Naked Truth**

by Shannon Hollis

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**1**

“SO WHAT’S IT going to be? Sexy secrets? The best lies lovers tell? Or should we find someone with a confession to make?”

Eve Best looked into the faces of the production team for Just Between Us, the afternoon cable show she hosted on CATL-TV. The show that had just been profiled in Vanity Fair. The show that was rocketing up the ratings and making the dreams of everyone in this room come true.

Every Monday at five, they got together in this conference room to hammer out the roster for the following week, with the exception of Fridays, when she invited a panel to take questions in a town-hall meeting format, or she simply did it herself. But for four twenty-two-minute segments, Monday through Thursday at three o’clock, they had to come up with the best in sexy, cutting-edge topics and guests. The funny thing was, no matter how many shows they did, they never seemed to run out of material.

They were, after all, talking about human behavior, in all its wonderful forms and mutations.

Lainie Kaye, the junior of their two segment producers, waved a sheaf of clippings. “If we go for a guest, I got a commitment from Dawn Penney. She’s the actress, remember, who turned a part in that awful horror movie about the beach resort into a career character. Now she writes that column for the Register, ‘Perfect Dates.’ Sex and the City, Atlanta style.”

Eve made some notes in her planner. “Get her. See if she can do Thursday.”

Cole Crawford, their executive producer, looked up from the binder that went everywhere with him. Eve had asked him once if he slept with it under his pillow, and had been immediately sorry. Since his wife had up and left him, the topic of sleeping with anything or anyone was a sore one. Cole had made his kids and his career his whole life—to the benefit of the show and the detriment of any hope of a love life for the poor guy.

“Wednesday would be better,” he said. “Hump day and all. Get people past the middle of the week, right?”

Eve shook her head. Technically he had the last word on programming, but this was her show. And the more popular it got, the more clout she had and the more it was likely she’d get the programming she thought audiences would respond to best.

Not a bad place to be, considering Cole was one of the few who remembered she’d started out as junior weathergirl back in the day.

“Thursday,” she repeated firmly. “When Thursday hits, people start thinking about plans for the weekend. It’s the perfect time to hear about the perfect date.” She sat back, satisfied, as Cole nodded and gave in. Lainie left the room at a jog, as if Dawn Penney would give away the space they needed on her calendar if she didn’t get to the phone this second.

“Okay, three down, one to go,” Eve said. “What are the possibilities for Wednesday?”

Nicole Reavis, their primary segment producer, had her own sheaf of clippings. “I had an idea the other night about male-female communication,” she said. “What if we get someone like Dr. Deborah Tannen, the linguistics expert? She could talk about the differences in communication styles, and how what we say isn’t always what the other person understands.”

“I’m liking this,” Eve said. Cole leaned forward. A good sign. “Go on.”

“We could focus on subtext,” Nicole said. “You know, what I’m saying isn’t really what I’m talking about, and how that gets us into trouble in relationships.”

“Trying to read the other party,” Cole said. “How to find out if they mean what they say. Maybe even negotiation tactics and how that works in relationships.”

He would know. But Eve kept that to herself.

“Let’s do it. Nicole, get one of the coordinators to find the guest—someone local, if you can—and you and I will work on the script. And how about we carry over the theme to the Friday town-hall meeting? I bet everyone in the audience has a miscommunication story. We’ll pull three or four out to give advice from a male and female point of view.”

“Consider it done.” Nicole scribbled frantically in her notebook.

Just then, Zach Haas, the youngest crew member but the most experienced cameraman, poked his head into the room. “Sorry to interrupt, guys. Cole, those camera tests are ready whenever you need them.”

“Thanks, Zach,” Cole replied, and the twenty something kid disappeared.

“So are we finished?” Eve looked around the table. “Yes? Good job, everyone. See y’all tomorrow.”

As the noise level rose with people pushing in chairs and collecting their stacks, Eve’s assistant pushed through the rush for the door. “Eve—”

“Hey, Dylan.”

Dylan Moore was six feet tall and thin as a licorice whip. With the ink still fresh on his communications degree and dirt from the family farm in south Georgia scrubbed off his toes, he was determined to have a career in television and didn’t care how humbly he started. Eve was sure to lose him to Cole one of these days. She’d resigned herself to that. But in the meantime, he was the one who kept her functioning from minute to minute. He’d probably learned project management by default from all those years of being the eldest of all the sibs in the picture on his desk.

“He’s here,” Dylan said in a low voice, tugging on her elbow to draw her away from the door and, presumably, the foyer where guests at the station waited.

“Who?”

But she already knew. Had been dreading his arrival from the moment Cole had told her about him the previous week.

“Him. The exec from CWB.” Dylan glanced at the door, but the room had emptied. At the confirmation of her fears, Eve felt a trickle of dread settle in her stomach. “Mitchell Hayes. The guy who wants to eat you up and have the rest of us on a plate for dessert.”

UNDER THE CUSTOM-TAILORED suit, Mitchell Hayes tried to roll the tension out of his shoulders. Every muscle seemed locked in place, which made it tough to look relaxed and confident.

In this business, appearances were everything—it was bad enough in New York, but that rule had probably been invented right here in Atlanta. This afternoon, it was vital that he look confident without being arrogant. Not to mention friendly and trustworthy and sincere without looking like a suck-up.

“If we can get Just Between Us, we’ll have the female demographic locked up,” Nelson Berg, his boss at CWB, had said two days ago. “You get this Eve Best to sign with the network and you’ll be golden.”

“And if it doesn’t work out?”

Nelson had given him a long look and tented his fingers over his stomach in a way that meant bad news was coming. “We asked you to sign Jah-Redd Jones and NBC got him. We needed—not just wanted, mind, needed—Alastair McCall’s Animal Mind-Hunter. And what happened there?”

“OLN had a mole in the station,” Mitch had protested. “McCall was signed up before I even got on the plane.”

“Well, they don’t have a mole at CATL-TV,” Nelson had snapped, “but it’s only a matter of time. Eve Best is ripe for the picking, and this money she and her friends have won in the lottery is a ratings gold mine. You get down there, romance the socks off her and her staff and get them signed up.”

“Or?” Mitch had said before his brain had a chance to catch up with his mouth.

“Or I’m going to have to replace you.” Nelson’s face had been kind, but the words were brutal. “Not much point in keeping a scout who can’t bring home the bacon, is there?”

No, there wasn’t.

On trips such as these Mitch often wondered why he did this. Why he put up with Nelson’s crap. Nobody on the guy’s staff had a life—they were so busy bringing home the bacon they didn’t have homes to go to. Apartments, yes. Places to keep their stuff, sure. But homes? Nope.

Something moved behind the soundproof glass wall that backed the receptionist’s desk, and the card-secured door clicked open. An African-American guy who could have made a career in college basketball stepped out.

“Mr. Hayes, I’m Dylan Moore, Eve Best’s personal assistant.” Mitch shook his hand. “Right this way.”

Mitch followed him into the rabbit warren of corridors, taping booths and offices that made up TV stations all over the country. This one boasted three studios—one for news, one for network linkups and a huge one for the exclusive use of Just Between Us.

As he passed behind the backdrop that somehow managed to convey a sense of home along with big-city glitz (who was their set designer?) he had to smile. Because of course the studio was all about appearances, too. Behind the set, where the camera never went, the walls were naked board and batten, with schedules and notes stapled all over them. Tie wraps secured wrist-sized bundles of electrical wiring and cables to the studs, along with Ethernet and T1 lines.

It looked so like the studios at CWB that he felt right at home. Or at least, as much as a guy could feel at home when he was living in a pressure cooker.

At the top of a set of stairs, he passed a conference room, where, from the debris, it looked as if a production meeting had just ended. Moore paused at the door of an office next to it, and Mitch resisted the urge to stretch his neck muscles one more time and straighten his tie.

He nodded at Moore and walked into Eve Best’s office with a smile and an outstretched hand.

One of their affiliates in Atlanta had sent him a box full of DVDs of the last three months of the show. But even watching forty hours of Eve Best hadn’t prepared him for the reality.

She pushed her chair back and came around the desk to meet him—and his entire body went on alert. It was as if his pheromones met hers in the space between them, and exploded in a chemical reaction. The small screen simply didn’t do justice to the curves and the healthy glow of her skin. Her baby-doll top was cut just low enough to show a tempting swell of cleavage but not enough to be in bad taste. He’d expected that triangular, girl-next-door smile that knocked viewers off their chairs, but it didn’t happen. Instead, he got the full effect of those wide, long-lashed green eyes.

And they weren’t particularly glad to see him.

“Eve, this is Mitchell Hayes from CWB,” Moore said from the door. “Mr. Hayes, Eve Best.”

“Thank you, Dylan.” Her voice, which was husky and playful when she spoke to her guests, was merely husky now. Subdued or not, it stroked some pleasure point deep inside Mitch’s chest. In fact, the whole package seemed to be custom-made to stroke every pleasure point he had—and when had been the last time he’d experienced that?

What had Nelson said? He was here to romance the socks off this woman and get her to say yes.

To the contract.

He needed to focus on his goal, and soon, or he’d be in the deepest trouble of his career.

“Please sit down, Mr. Hayes.”

Belatedly, he realized he needed to say something to take control of this interview and stop drinking her in like a teenage boy staring at the head cheerleader.

“Thanks for seeing me, Ms. Best,” he said. “I know your schedule is probably packed.”

“You’re right there. The only place I could fit you in was at the end of the day, and even at that I need to keep it short. I appreciate you’ve come a long way to have this conversation, but I’m going to a benefit this evening. I’m afraid I’ll need to leave in about half an hour.”

What an amazing voice. What charisma. No wonder the viewers were flocking to Just Between Us. He could watch this woman all day. “That will be plenty of time.” Once again, he tried to convince his body to relax. But his body was far more interested in hers than it was in getting her commitment to the network.

And then she smiled. It wasn’t an I’m-glad-to-see-you smile, or a come-on-over smile. It was an I’m-going-to-break-this-to-you-in-the-nicest-possible-way smile and his concentration went straight to hell anyway.

“It doesn’t take long to say no, does it?” she agreed sweetly.

Get it together. Your job depends on the next half hour. “I’m hoping I can convince you otherwise, Ms. Best. Communications and Wireless Broadcasting is prepared to make you a very generous offer in hopes that you’ll sign on with us, a national network, and bring your talents to our wider viewership.”

“Please call me Eve. Everyone does.”

He smiled. For a fraction of a second, her gaze dropped to his mouth, and a tiny spurt of gratification deep inside him celebrated it. “And I’m Mitch.”

“How long have you been with CWB, Mitch?”

His rational brain recognized that she was dodging a reply. His irrational brain was happy to make small talk as long as she wanted to, if he could keep listening to that voice.

“Coming up on five years. I started out in production, but then realized I was better at the business side. I was always tripping over cables and walking in front of the wrong cameras.”

There was that smile again. A little warmer, this time. “Do you like being a scout?”

“Yes.” I used to. Now I’m not so sure. “I like bringing people who deserve it to the attention of people who will love them. Like you, for instance.” Neatly, he brought the conversation back around to the reason he was there. “If you’ll bring your show to our network, we’re prepared to offer you six million for the first year, eight for the second and ten for the third if you’ll agree to sign with us.”

A slow blink was her only reaction. For a woman whose openness and frankness were her trademark, she evidently knew how to be as cagey as a poker player. “That’s very generous.”

“You won’t find a better deal, even with the big guns like NBC or SBN. Have they approached you?”

“If they had, I’d hardly say so, would I?”

Of course not. CWB had its spies, and they’d have been careful to brief him beforehand. But that didn’t mean the bigger networks wouldn’t be hot on his heels once they heard CWB was courting Eve. Television fed on itself, after all.

“Maybe not, but you know how it is. Everyone knows everyone, and word gets around.”

“Well, the word around here is no.” With a glance at the clock, she rose. Mitch got to his feet as she again came around the desk and held out a hand. “Thank you for taking the time to come and make the offer, Mitch. It’s very flattering, but the answer is still no.”

He took her hand, and two things registered. First, that her fingers were slender and warm in his. And second, that she was taller than he’d thought. He stood six foot three in his socks, and with the strappy heels she wore, the top of her head came almost to his eye level.

Then a third thing registered. She smelled delicious. A combination of vanilla and spice and the clean scent of warm skin. Involuntarily, he drew in a breath, and she looked into his eyes.

“Mitch?”

His brain went blank. He murmured some vague words of thanks for her time and then beat feet out of there, finding himself in the driver’s seat of his rental car before he knew quite how he’d gotten there.

And a good thing, too.

Because if he’d stayed one second more, he’d have pushed Eve Best up against the wall of her office and breathed that scent from the side of her neck. Then he’d have kissed her senseless.

He could only imagine what that would have done to his chances for getting her to say yes to him.

He shook his head as if to clear it. To CWB. Not him. To CWB and their offer.

Yeah. That’s what he meant.

**2**

“WAS THAT HIM?”

Jane Kurtz leaned in Eve’s office doorway and, when she saw that Eve was alone, slipped inside and shut the door.

“Yes, that was him.” Eve gave up on trying to organize her desk for the following day and leaned back in her chair as Jane sat in the one reserved for guests.

The one he’d just vacated.

“His name is Mitchell Hayes, and he’s with CWB.”

“Oh, I like them. I watch Dirty Secrets of Daylily Drive every week.”

“Jane, we are not Daylily Drive. And we are not signing with them. I told him so and he vanished like a puff of smoke. But he’ll be back.”

“How do you know?”

“By the pricking of my thumbs.” And the humming in her ears. Not to mention the tingle of possibility deep in her belly, where it had no business being at all.

“Just how accurate are your thumbs?” Jane straightened a pile of research clippings on the corner of Eve’s desk. When Was the Last Time You Got Some? the headline on top wanted to know.

Eve resisted the urge to throw the latest issue of People on top of it. She didn’t want to think about that. She spent sixteen hours a day thinking about relationships, and men and women, and who was getting what and why, and whether they’d come on the show to talk about it. It covered up the uncomfortable fact—which she devoutly hoped no one else noticed—that she, Atlanta’s relationship expert, did not have one.

She bet Mitchell Hayes had one. Two. More. In fact, he probably had every eligible model and aspiring actress in New York lining up at his door. Well, she wished them luck. Mitchell Hayes wasn’t getting her show—or anything else, for that matter.

“Eve?”

She blinked and focused on Jane. “What?”

“I said, how accurate are your thumbs? Is this Hayes guy going to take you at your word, or are we going to have to get Jenna to take out another restraining order?”

Jenna Hamilton was the station’s attorney, and after the recent announcement about their $38-million lottery win, she’d already had to take out two restraining orders because things had gotten out of hand with an unruly fan and an angry truck driver with a nonwinning number. Once the news had gotten out about the protectiveness of the legal team, the number of nasty letters in the daily mail had dropped. Thank goodness.

Even yet, two months after the win and the press conference and all the hoopla, Eve still had a hard time believing that there could be seven or eight million bucks in her future. With that kind of money, she could buy some property outside of town. Travel. Do more than dabble in philanthropy. The only real problem they had was the lawsuit against the five of them, filed by her and Jane’s former best friend, Liza Skinner, demanding her fair share of the loot since they’d played her number. The whole subject caused Eve so much pain that she did her best not to think about it.

Again, she focused on answering Jane. What was the matter with her? Her mind was jumping around like a bean on a hot stove. “He’s on a mission. The network has tasked him to poach me away from here, and he’s going to do his best to do it. He won’t take no for an answer at first. I can tell.”

“He looked like a player, all right.”

For some reason, this rubbed Eve the wrong way. “I wouldn’t say he was a player. Not in the sense you mean. But he’s got a stubborn chin and there’s no dummy behind those eyes. He’s serious about this. The network’s talking big money.”

Jane waved away the thought. “Who needs it? We’re going to be set up for life. And what are you doing looking at his chin?” As soon as Eve saw Jane’s gaze narrow on her, she realized her mistake.

She shrugged with a pretty good imitation of nonchalance. “You know me. Always sizing people up. Reading them. Trying to figure them out.”

Not looking at lips and wondering what they’d feel like in a deep, hot kiss. Not sneaking peeks at long-fingered hands and wondering how they’d feel on skin. Nuh-uh. Nope.

For once Jane took her at her word and got up. She must be a better actress than she thought. “I’m glad I don’t have to deal with him, then. You can always make yourself unavailable and sic Jenna on him.”

“I already did.” Eve got up, too, and collected her briefcase. “Make myself unavailable, I mean. I have the Atlanta Reads benefit tonight, remember? I just hope nobody remembers I wore my green dress to the Women of Power fund-raiser, as well.”

“Put some peacock feathers on it like Nicole Kidman,” Jane suggested over her shoulder, already on her way back to her own office. “Or heck, zip downtown and get yourself a new one. By the time you get the bill, we’ll have settled the suit and you can buy a different dress for every night of the year.”

Eve laughed and shook her head as she pushed open the employee exit door and headed for her car. That would be the day.

Lottery winner or not, she couldn’t see herself shaking the careful habits of someone who had grown up with not much more than the basic necessities of life. Isabel Calvert, her maternal grandmother, who had taken in a traumatized eleven-year-old after the death of her parents in a car accident, had still been working as a Realtor. Though they lived in Coral Gables in a tiny stucco house with an orange tree, money was tight and Eve had learned to be practical along with how to turn out a decent meal and do her own laundry.

Not that those were skills to scoff at. They’d stood her in good stead through university and during her move from Florida back to the city her father’s family had called home for generations. And during the early years, when getting the job as associate senior meteorologist—aka junior weathergirl—had seemed like the apex of her life, she’d discovered she not only had a knack for throwing dinner parties on the cheap, but for digging out and retaining all kinds of information about people.

A great skill to have in this business. But it didn’t help her with a dress for tonight.

With careful investments, she’d managed to save enough for a down payment on a little house in the Vinings district. Nana would be proud. It wasn’t very big—in fact, it had once been a carriage house on a much larger estate—but it certainly had a good address, and in Atlanta, that was half the battle. With the worst of the rush hour traffic clearing, she made it home in record time. Which, of course, left her lots of time to shower, do her hair and contemplate her closet.

She had all kinds of things to wear on the set, some courtesy of Jane’s wardrobe budget and some of her own. She had jeans and camis to wear on weekends. But a couple of black dresses and the green one could only go so far. Now that she was starting to make the society pages, maybe she should take Jane’s advice and run up her credit card on a couple of evening dresses. If what Cole predicted came true, she was going to be spending even more time in the spotlight. Thank goodness for the lottery—because she’d bet her winnings the station wouldn’t be picking up the tab for her updated wardrobe.

The green one would have to do. It fit like a glove—though she watched her weight like a predatory bird, her hourglass figure would pack on a pound in a heartbeat. And everyone knew the camera packed on twenty in less than that.

A final spritz of hair mist and her grandmother’s diamond chandelier earrings, and she was good to go.

The benefit for Atlanta Reads was being held at the Ashmere mansion. The property had recently been made the headquarters of the Ashmere Trust with the hopes that it could become a moneymaking venture while it retained its Old South beauty. As far as Eve could tell, they’d succeeded in a big way. She stepped out of the cab and the soft, warm evening air caressed her bare shoulders. She draped the green chiffon wrap over one arm and breathed in the scent of ferns and mulch and eucalyptus from the gardens.

Straightening her shoulders, she mounted the fan of steps and swam into the crowd, turning to greet society belles and financiers alike with the grace of a dancer and the confidence of three years in the spotlight.

“Eve. Glad you could make it.”

Eve turned to see Dan Phillips, owner of both the station and the production company that produced Just Between Us, at her elbow. “Hey, Dan. I had to come. Who wouldn’t want to support helping people learn to read?”

“People in television,” he said, so deadpan she couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. Which was par for the course. “My wife forced me into my tux and out the door at the point of a nail file.”

“Maya’s a smart cookie,” Eve told him. “You won’t regret it. I hear Ambience is catering.”

“Really?” He brightened. “Then I guess I should start schmoozing. I do like to hear people talking about you behind your back, anyway.”

Eve held up a hand. “Just don’t tell me if it’s negative.”

“It won’t be. Everyone in Atlanta loves you.” He paused. “And a few people up north, too, from what I hear.”

Eve didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “I’m going to assume you spoke with Mitchell Hayes.”

“I did.”

“And?” She prodded when he took a sip of his martini and didn’t go into detail.

“And nothing. It’s not my decision, it’s yours. Though I made it clear that the show belongs to Driver Productions and if he managed to get you, it would be only at the end of your contract. The show stays here, though what it would do without its host is another headache.”

“You won’t have to worry about that. I told him no.”

Phillips looked her full in the face for the first time. “Did you, now?”

“Of course. We’re doing just fine right where we are. We have great facilities, happy advertisers, and we’re building the viewership in leaps and bounds. Why should I upset the applecart and risk everything on a young network that’s still trying to prove itself?”

“Because it might be the right thing for your career?”

Now it was Eve’s turn to stare at him. “Tell me I didn’t hear you say that.”

He shrugged. “I’ve known for at least a year that the big boys would come knocking. It’s what every regional host wants, Eve—a shot at the national level. CWB is handing you that on a platter. I wouldn’t blame you for jumping at it—though it might be best to wait for more of the networks to offer. Make the station an affiliate as part of the deal.”

Maybe he wouldn’t blame her, but how could she? They’d built a terrific team here, from Jane in makeup to Cole in production. If she agreed to go with any network, what would happen to all of them? They were practically family. The new organization would probably bring in all its own people and move her somewhere else. She’d get national exposure but she’d never see her friends again. She’d already experienced being the one who was left behind. No way would she do that to someone else if she could help it.

“You won’t have to worry about it, Dan,” she said. “I told Mr. Hayes no, and I meant it.”

“I’m sure you did.” His gaze caught on something over her shoulder. “But I think he means to make you change your mind.”

Something in his tone warned her, and she turned just in time to see Mitchell Hayes pause on the stairway. He had one hand casually on the polished banister, the other in his pocket, hitching up the jacket of his tux in a way that turned formality on its ear and made it sexy.

What in the world…?

He scanned the crowd lazily, and two seconds too late, she understood what he was doing.

He was looking for someone—and she had no doubt whatsoever who it was.

THE MOST DIFFICULT THING any of these people had to read was probably their bank statement.

Mitch knew he was being a reverse snob. His own paycheck was pretty generous, considering he hardly ever had time to spend any of it, but his annual salary was probably what some of these folks paid in income tax.

His gaze moved from one part of the vast marble foyer to the next, noting a thumb-sized emerald here, a designer suit there, a pair of skyscraper stilettos somewhere else. One thing was for sure—he needed to move to a room where the acoustics were better, or his head was going to split from the sound of high-pitched laughter and conversation shattering on the stone all around him.

He ducked into the nearest room, which turned out to be the location of the buffet, and exhaled in relief. There was no hurry. He didn’t even know if Eve Best was here yet, and he had nothing else to do except catch a movie on HBO back at the hotel. It had taken less than thirty seconds online at the local newspaper’s Web site to find the society listings, and from there to narrow down the field to the three that he’d define as a “benefit.” The other two were for sports and health care, so he’d gambled that a woman who made her living by communication would have a connection with people who communicated with words on a page—and those who were learning to.

He’d give this an hour. If he was wrong, at least he had the sports gig to look forward to.

The same connection at the affiliate station who had sent him the DVDs of Eve’s show had also done some calling around and come up with a spare ticket for this one. He owed her big-time, especially if he succeeded in convincing Eve to come to the network. In fact, a blue box from Tiffany would probably be in order.

Which showed how important it was that CWB get this show. Nelson would probably sign the requisition without even blinking. Or reading it.

He heard someone laugh behind a huge urn filled with stargazer lilies, and he inhaled sharply. After forty hours of recordings, he knew that sound. A strange feeling swooped through his gut, and he stepped cautiously to one side, peering around the flowers.

And there she was, heading for the buffet with an elderly woman, a polished older man and a woman with a neck like a swan. Or a ballet dancer. His gaze dropped to the woman’s feet, which were turned out. Yep.

He’d dated a dancer from the New York City Ballet for six weeks the previous year. He’d discovered about five weeks in that Analiese was much more beautiful onstage as a swan or a princess than she was as a girlfriend, so they’d parted amicably and he’d bought season tickets to the company’s performances. It was the music he liked best, anyway.

Eve and her companions filled plates that weren’t much more than wafers of china, and stood by the windows visiting and eating hors d’oeuvres. Mitch took a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and then stopped him.

“Who’s that, do you know?” He nodded toward the window. “That couple talking with Eve Best.”

The waiter glanced at them. “Don’t know who the old lady is. But that’s Roy and Anne Best with Eve there. Must be related. He was a developer before he retired. Put in that new retail complex in Decatur. Word is he’s looking to buy a share in the Thrashers.” His gaze swung to Mitch. “Too bad they didn’t make the playoffs this year. You follow hockey?”

“Sure do.” Hockey, soccer, snowboarding. Anything but football or baseball, a preference that would probably get him hung in one or two southern states. “Thanks.”

“Enjoy your evening, sir.”

Roy Best moved slightly, giving Eve an unobstructed view of the window, which reflected the brightly lit room.

Mitch realized that he was standing in that reflection at about the same time she did. So much for lurking behind the flower arrangements while he waited for a moment to speak to her alone. She turned, and the light slid along the silk folds of her strapless gown, which crisscrossed across her breasts and hips, throwing every curve into perfect relief before it cascaded in folds to the floor.

She looked like a goddess.

A really angry goddess.

She said something to her companions and stalked across the floor to where he stood next to the lilies, and he braced himself for thunder and lightning.

“I saw you when you came in, Mr. Hayes. How did you get in here?”

“I’m fine, thank you, Eve. You look beautiful.”

Her step hitched in surprise, and then she recovered. “Thank you. If you’re following me, the answer is still no.”

He managed to arrange his face in an expression of mild surprise. “I wasn’t, actually. I have a ticket, bought and paid for and arranged in advance.”

Okay, so two-thirds of that was true.

She narrowed her eyes at him and looked so completely touchable that he had to put his champagne down on the nearest table and stuff his hands in his pockets. What he really wanted to do was reach out and run them down her bare arms.

“I don’t believe you.”

He reached into his jacket. “I have it right here if you want to look at it.”

“No, of course not. Fine. Enjoy yourself.” She turned to walk away.

“And I’d heard such great things about Southern hospitality,” he said with regret to the nearest lily.

That stopped her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that I’d expected you to be a little more gracious in a social situation. Given your reputation for making people feel at ease and all. It certainly comes off on the screen.”

“Are you implying that I’m not making you feel at ease?”

She made him feel hot and slightly out of control and hornier than he’d felt in at least a year. “You could say so.” A pause. “Not that it matters. We only met today. Please.” He indicated the couple by the window, now chatting with a couple of guys in suits. “I don’t mean to keep you from your friends.”

“That’s my grandmother—my father’s mother—and my aunt and uncle.” The words came out slowly, as if she were reluctant to tell him anything personal, but now felt as though she had to in order to be polite.

“Are they here from Florida?” Again the narrowed eyes. “I did my research, Eve. That’s where you grew up, right?”

“Yes. And no, they’re not. All my dad’s family is here in Atlanta.”

His face relaxed into the first sincere smile of the evening. “It must be nice to have family so close. All mine are in New Mexico. I’m lucky to see them once every couple of years.”

“Planes fly both ways.”

“They do,” he allowed, “but after the November sweeps, things go crazy. I can never get out of New York during the holidays.”

She nodded slowly. “I know. Before she died, I only saw Nana—she’s the one who raised me—in the summer during our hiatus, and Florida in July is, well…”

“I know.” He took a breath as he caught a tune floating over the sounds of conversation. “Not to change the subject, but would you like to dance?”

“Dance?”

“Yes. An ancient rite performed in praise of the gods.” He surprised her into a smile, and his concentration fell into pieces. “My God, you’re beautiful,” he blurted.

Then he gave himself a mental slap and waited for her to walk away.

**3**

MITCH NEVER LOST CONTROL. He was always calm, cool and unbiased…which, now that he came to think of it, hadn’t been standing him in good stead lately. Was that why his last two bids for shows had fallen through? Because he hadn’t shown enough passion for the chase? For them?

Was that why his longest relationship in the last couple of years had topped out at six weeks?

Was that why he kept striking out with Eve Best?

But instead of rolling her eyes at his ineptitude, or sidestepping away as though he might be a stalker, Eve smiled again.

“That’s the first honest thing you’ve said all day,” she said, then held up a finger. “No, the second thing. The first thing was about your family in New Mexico. I’d love to dance. Thank you.”

Relieved and slightly dazed at this reversal of his expectations, he offered her his arm. She took it and they followed the sound of Duke Ellington into a massive glassed-in conservatory that had been converted into a ballroom. At one end, a big band played, perspiration trickling down the faces of the guys blowing trumpet and trombone. Fairy lights glittered in swaths along the wrought-iron ribs of the ceiling, and palm trees stood at intervals along the walls, with the windows opened to the night air. It felt like something out of the twenties, when mad young things danced the Charleston and the world held every possibility.

Maybe his world held possibility, too, Mitch thought as he whirled Eve into a spin and then took her in his arms. And he didn’t mean for business, either. Tonight he was an ordinary man dancing with a desirable woman, and he would leave business out of it and enjoy every second.

“So how long are you going to make me wait?” she asked.

The green silk of her dress moved gently under the hand he had flattened on the small of her back. Besides the heat of her body, he felt the movement of toned, controlled muscles and the beginnings of the curves of her hips.

“Wait?” He’d oblige her in the nearest closet, if she wanted.

“For CWB’s counteroffer. Didn’t you come here to talk business?”

Oh. He’d forgotten all about CWB.

“No. I came to contribute to Atlanta Reads. And to ask you to dance.”

“One out of two isn’t bad,” she murmured. He spun her into another turn and whirled her back. “Not that I believe either one.”

“Literacy’s a good cause,” he said. “My pet charity is Music on the Street.”

“Mmm, that’s three honest things. Tell me about it.”

“It’s a grassroots organization that teaches inner-city kids an instrument. They play in a band that gives concerts on basketball courts, in gyms, wherever they can get space. We fund the instruments and the teachers, because the schools can’t.”

She leaned back to look into his eyes, and his thinking ran aground on that clear green gaze.

“What’s your instrument?”

He nodded toward the band. “Trumpet. Or it used to be. I’ve been racking up so many frequent flyer miles I’m way out of practice.”

“Security would probably confiscate your horn as a dangerous weapon, anyway,” she said with a twinkle. The music segued into a slower number and instead of thanking him and leading the way off the dance floor, she fit her body closer against his. He slid his arm farther around her waist and tucked the hand he held against his shoulder.

Whatever witty and self-deprecating comment he’d been about to make fizzled away into soundlessness. All he could think about was how good she felt in his arms—how warm and silky her skin, how intoxicating her scent. The weight of her breasts against his chest and the brush of her thighs as they moved together across the dance floor were making him crazy.

Making his body temperature rise.

And that wasn’t all.

“Mr. Hayes, I’m shocked,” she whispered, her lips close to his ear.

He had two choices. He could make a break for the door and hope he could bribe his way onto the next flight to New York, or he could brazen it out and hope the sense of humor she displayed on TV was real and not put on for the camera.

“I am, too,” he whispered back. “Usually I’m much better behaved than this. But then, I’ve never danced with you before. Now I know I have limits.”

She giggled, tried to choke it back, then seemed to give up. She threw back her head in an honest-to-God laugh. Both arms crept up around his neck.

“I meant I was shocked you weren’t going to counteroffer.” Her voice wobbled with laughter.

Oh, no. Could he just go into cardiac arrest right here and now? Maybe if he went out on a stretcher she’d look at him with pity instead of…what was this?

Her face was alight with humor, not malice or derision. And in her eyes he saw appreciation and a lowering of her guard.

“Mitchell Hayes, you win the prize.”

“And what would that be?” he asked, trying to keep his head up in a sea of embarrassed misery.

“You’ve told me five honest things in the space of half an hour. That’s more than I’ve been able to squeeze out of half the guests we have on the show—and a lot more than I usually get out of the men I’ve dated.”

He huffed a breath of laughter and tried not to think about the way her arms were looped around his neck, bringing that delectable body even more flush against him. “So what’s the prize?”

“We’re going to start over. You don’t scout for a major television network, you never came to my office. I’ve just met you and learned that you’re from New Mexico, you love your family, and you play the trumpet and want kids to enjoy music the way you do.”

“You left out the fifth thing.” What was it his dad used to say? In for a penny, in for a pound.

She shrugged, and flashed that enchanting triangular smile. “Your body’s very honest, too,” she said. “I like that in a man.”

JENNA HAMILTON read the brief one more time in the cab: Skinner v. Best, Kurtz, Crawford, Reavis, Haas. The rolling in her stomach was due less to reading while in motion than to the simple fact that this was the biggest, most public case she’d ever had to handle.

And she wasn’t sure she could do it.

No, no. Scratch that. She’d learn as she went, and get the best advice she could find. She’d already read every scrap of case law in the online library—and she’d branch out to libraries in other states if that’s what it took to win this case.

As the station’s corporate lawyer, and a junior lawyer at Andersen Nadeau who had her eye on a partnership some day, this was her chance to shine. Eve and the others expected her to pull it off, and she wouldn’t disappoint them if she could possibly help it.

The cab pulled up outside the offices of Kregel, Fitch and Devine, which had once been a brick warehouse but was now part of the trendy Decatur district. She paid the driver and took comfort in the knowledge that she knew the details of Liza Skinner’s suit inside out and backwards. Not only that, the file rested in her Kate Spade tote. If there was ever a secret weapon designed to give a woman confidence, it was that.

When the receptionist caught sight of it a moment later, she straightened and announced her right away. The butterflies in Jenna’s stomach settled down. Maybe it was a sign of things to come. She took a firmer grip on the handles and followed the young woman into a spacious office that had enough of the warehouse’s bricks and pipes left showing to give it an edgy, industrial look while screeching “major interior designer” at every turn.

A tall man crossed the room, his hand outstretched.

Nice suit, was her first thought.

Nice hands, was her second, as Kevin Wade shook hers.

“Thanks for coming, Ms. Hamilton,” he said, his voice a smooth bass that tickled something deep inside her. “My client and I appreciate your willingness to be flexible.”

His café-au-lait skin was just a shade lighter than hers, and his brown eyes held a male appreciation that made her body sit up and take notice. No, that wasn’t it. Her spine was straight to give the impression of control, not because it would throw her breasts into prominence. Nuh-uh.

“We might be at this for a while,” she replied, “so please call me Jenna.”

“And I’m Kevin to my friends.”

She didn’t bother to point out that friends was the last thing they were—or were likely to become. Too bad. But with this much money at stake, it was far more likely they’d wind up on either side of a courtroom, each doing their best to grind the other into defeat.

Instead of seating himself in the power position behind the desk, he waved her over to an area by the window that contained a couple of couches facing each other across a low, square coffee table. Some case law and several manila folders already lay on it, as though he’d been doing the same thing she had in the cab.

As they went through the points of Liza Skinner’s lawsuit, she realized that he was darned good at his job, and that this was more of a challenge than she’d anticipated. If only she could focus on the numbered paragraphs of the filings instead of the way his long-fingered hands lay on the papers, or the way she’d get a whiff of his delicious cologne every time he got up to fetch a highlighter or a box of paper clips. This was not going to win Eve and the team what they wanted.

She reined in her errant thoughts with a stern hand. “Kevin, I’m afraid that’s not going to be acceptable to my clients,” she said after he reiterated Liza Skinner’s position on one particularly irritating paragraph in the brief. “The fact is, the lottery winners are not willing to cut her in on a share of the money—nor should they have to. It’s regrettable that they and Ms. Skinner didn’t think to set down the terms of their agreement in writing before they bought the tickets. But without any kind of contract, it’s impossible to hold my clients to what she’s demanding.”

“They were friends,” he reminded her. “Would you make your friends sign something before you gave them tickets, say, for a birthday gift?”

“This wasn’t a gift,” she said. “They all played the same number each week and they all went in on it together—except for Ms. Skinner. She was out of town, out of state—out of my clients’ lives permanently, for all they knew. Any reasonable jury would see that her claim is groundless.”

“It can’t be groundless if there was a verbal agreement,” he pointed out. “She may not have told them she was leaving town, but she never told them she was leaving the group.”

“Regardless of whether she told them or not, I think her departure managed to state it pretty effectively.”

“But metaphors don’t stand up in court.”

He smiled at her, and Jenna lost her focus. That smile had probably gotten what he wanted out of every judge in town. Well, it wasn’t going to work on her.

“The members had a verbal agreement, and Ms. Skinner contributed to the pot.” He pointed to the relevant paragraph in the complaint.

“They won after her monetary contributions ran out,” she reminded him, pointing to the paragraph that countered his in the brief she’d filed that week. “My clients may have played what she’s calling ‘her’ number out of a sense of friendship, but in practical terms, she herself was not a party to the win. She can’t own a number.”

“The fact remains that they threw money in the pot in her name, playing the number she played consistently—as you pointed out—over a period of time. She was a virtual member of the group, whether she was there physically or not, and deserves a share of the winnings.” Kevin Wade’s tone was firm. “The case of Barnes v. Hillman sets a precedent. I’m sure you’ve read it.”

Of course she had. She’d read every single piece of case law connected with state lottery winners in the database—texts that had kept her up past midnight for more nights than she could count. “Barnes v. Hillman isn’t relevant to our case,” she retorted. “In that case, the widow filed on behalf of her deceased husband, who was part of a group. Even though Georgia isn’t a community property state, for the judge it was open and shut.”

He leaned back and extended an arm along the top of the couch, for all the world as if he were giving her an invitation to join him.

Which was crazy. Focus, girl.

“Bradley v. Tillman, Morton and Ramirez, on the other hand, sets a precedent for our case.” She riffled papers until she found the one she wanted. “It was proved conclusively that unless all the group members agree in writing that they’re going to play their numbers together, the money can’t be distributed to anyone else.”

“Mr. Bradley, unfortunately, was a resident of another state that doesn’t allow lotteries,” Kevin said. “There wasn’t much the judge could do about that one.”

Okay, so she just hadn’t found a precedent that applied point for point to their case, but she would. Just give her time.

“So where does that leave us?” Jenna resisted the urge to tap her papers together and be the first to concede a standoff.

“I don’t know about you, but it leaves me starving. I didn’t get a chance to have lunch. Do you feel like going somewhere to eat?”

A second too late, she realized she was “catching flies.” She snapped her mouth shut. “I don’t think that’s appropriate, considering we’re on opposing sides of a case, Mr. Wade.”

“You called me Kevin before.”

“I think it’s time to reestablish some distance,” she said steadily, though her heart was bumping erratically in her chest. She dated a few guys on a casual basis, but no one seriously. She was just as likely to go dancing with a bunch of her girlfriends on her rare nights out. Certainly none of the guys she hung out with, most of whom had been her brother’s college buddies, had this sense of masculine power and casual authority that was drawing her into its seductive net, one breath at a time.

Kevin glanced at his watch. “Come on. It’s after seven. What difference does it make if we talk over the case here and go hungry, or talk it over at Cioppino and enjoy great Italian? It’s just a couple of blocks away, and it’s a nice night for a walk.”

Cioppino. She’d heard a couple of the partners talking about it and it sounded heavenly. And when would she have time to spend an entire evening there? Probably never.

“Fine,” she agreed. “But let’s set down some ground rules. Namely, we split the bill.”

“Done.”

As she tapped her stack of briefs together, Jenna added another ground rule to the list: no lusting after him. Because no matter what happened with the case, breaking that rule would get her into the most trouble—guaranteed.

EVE COULDN’T REMEMBER ever having had such a good time at a fund-raiser. A lot of events such as this involved chatting up people she didn’t know, trying artfully to get them to pull out their checkbooks or posing for the media or attempting to jazz up the obligatory speeches after dinner. But this one…it was like being the prom queen. Not that she’d ever been the prom queen, mind you. She’d been too focused on her SATs and getting into university and from there out into the real world.

But tonight, everyone conspired to make her feel desirable and sought-after and at least five pounds lighter than she actually was. Or maybe it just seemed that way because Mitchell Hayes managed to snag her for one dance out of every three. Then two dances…and then she found herself dancing with him exclusively. But it didn’t really matter, because it was close to midnight, the media had gone, and everyone with fat checkbooks had trickled out the door. That left the under-thirty-five crowd to take another run at the buffet tables and convince the band to play something less vintage.

She didn’t care what they played, as long as it had a beat and she could slip in and out of Mitch’s arms as he whirled her out and back. His hands never strayed where they shouldn’t, but each time he touched her, slipped an arm around her waist or took her hand it felt like a caress. Like a man touching his lover with that focused attention that told her he had plans for her later.

Which, of course, Mitch didn’t. At least, she didn’t think he did. And even if it were true, really it was impossible. She wouldn’t sleep with him under any provocation, simply because of who he was and why he was in Atlanta. But he was a fabulous dancer and after a couple of flutes of champagne she felt loose and happy and ready.

For what, she wasn’t sure.

Oh, to dance—that was it.

Without being obvious about it, he’d managed to dance her over to the French doors and out onto the terrace.

“We can’t hear the music as well out here,” she objected.

“The band is going to be packing up soon.” Still holding her hand, he led her over to a shady corner where ivy cascaded down the exterior wall. It smelled like green cinnamon, and the hem of her dress rustled on the flagstones of the terrace, echoing the way the breeze rustled in the trees. “I need some breathing space. You wore me out.”

She leaned on the stone balustrade. “I doubt that. You strike me as a man of endurance. You probably run marathons in your spare time.”

“If I had spare time, I’d do something less masochistic.” His voice warmed with a smile as he leaned beside her. “Back home, if I wasn’t doing something related to music, I’d ride my dirt bike in the pine forest. I never made it up to the top of the sandstone mesa behind our house, but I spent a lot of summers trying.”

As he spoke, he moved behind her. She felt his warmth down her back as his arms slipped around her and held her, loosely, giving her the choice to pull away.

Or not. She settled herself against his chest, her head leaning on his shoulder as they looked out over the darkened gardens. Tomorrow she’d remember that he was CWB’s scout and probably didn’t have her best interests in mind. On Monday, when he reappeared in her studio, she’d send him on his way with another firm no.

But tonight belonged to her and Mitch, their careers and worries stripped away, leaving only this elemental desire and the sense of anticipation and possibility that thickened the air.

She felt his warm breath on the side of her neck a moment before he tasted the bare skin where neck met shoulder. His tongue was hot and he took his time, as though kissing her there were all he had to do for the rest of eternity. Eve sucked in a breath and felt a jolt of pleasure arrow through her. Her nipples tightened, and her breasts seemed to swell in the satin prison of her strapless bodice.

“Do you like that?” he whispered against her skin.

“What if someone sees us?” she breathed.

“It’s dark over here.” He kissed her again, moving an inch up the side of her neck. “No one can see a thing. And you didn’t answer me.”

Now he nibbled her earlobe, running the tip of his tongue just behind the post of her earrings.

“Yes.” He pressed against her from behind, and even through her skirts she felt the hard demand of his erection. “You’re being honest again,” she whispered.

“I can’t help it. I’ve been holding you all night and doing math equations in my head so I don’t embarrass myself on the dance floor. Again.”

“And now?” She knew she was being deliberately provocative, but she couldn’t stop. Okay, she wasn’t going to sleep with him, but there was nothing wrong with flirting. Nothing wrong with appreciating the attention of a very attractive man.

“Circumference equals two pi R,” he murmured. “No, that’s no good. It just makes me think of—” He stopped.

“What?”

“I don’t want to spoil the moment by having you slap me.”

“I promise I won’t. Tell me.”

“Circumference makes me think of round things. Which doesn’t help my situation.”

“What things?” Her voice had gone low and throaty. Who knew that talking about geometry could be such a turn-on?

She could feel his breathing change rhythm now. “Oh, things hidden from view in green satin. Very round, very beautiful, very distracting things, for instance. Among others that don’t even have geometric definitions. They need to be explored. Measured. Mapped for posterity.”

Amazed at her own daring, Eve took both his hands in hers and slid them up her bodice until they cupped her breasts. “Tell me about how you measure,” she said.

He made a choked sound and his hips surged against her backside, pinning his erection against her softness. Under her fingers, his hands tented over her breasts, gently squeezing and shaping…and inadvertently pulling her bodice down until his sharply indrawn breath beside her ear told her that, from his vantage point, he’d just caught a glimpse of her nipples.

And she wanted his hands on them, wanted his mouth, wanted him to suck and lick and drive her wild with desire. Wanted him to throw her skirts up and drive himself into her right here on the terrace, where she’d brace herself against the balustrade and take every hard inch of him into the vast, soft, dripping ache inside her.

Oh, God, what was she thinking? Was she crazy?

As if he’d heard her thoughts, he hooked his thumbs inside the whalebones of her bodice and pulled it up to a respectable level. He dropped his hands to her waist and stepped back. “Eve, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for things to go that far.”

She turned, and realized that she was partially in the light from a window overhead, while he was in the darkness next to the ivy. All she could hear was his labored breathing.

“I know,” she breathed. She arched her spine, so that the bodice slid down a few precarious millimeters and her cleavage became even more pronounced in the golden light. “You make me want things I shouldn’t.”

You’re teasing him, a voice in the back of her mind warned. Don’t do it if you don’t mean to go through with it. Stop while you still can.

“Likewise,” he said hoarsely. “More than anything I’ve ever wanted in my life. But not here, where anyone can walk out and see us. My car’s here. Come back to my hotel with me.”

Balancing on the scalding edge of desire, Eve teetered and fell.

**4**

HE COULDN’T GET her into the Lexus fast enough. What were they, a pair of horny teenagers desperate for privacy? Mitch fumbled with the rented car’s keys and managed to get them into the ignition on the second try. Then he made the mistake of glancing to the right—and he was done for.

Eve leaned toward him, her eyes hot with desire and her lips parted. One arm wound around his neck as he crushed her mouth under his in a kiss that told both of them how much he wanted to be somewhere horizontal right now. She made a noise deep in her throat, like a purr, as her tongue met his and slid along it in sensual invitation, stroking its length and making his imagination go wild.

What couldn’t a woman with a tongue like that do to a man’s body? He felt himself stiffen even more at the thought.

She broke the kiss to nuzzle the soft skin below his ear. “My nipples are so hard,” she breathed. “I want you to touch them.”

He didn’t ask why the about-face. He didn’t want to know. All he knew was that they were both under some kind of spell—both crazy to have one another despite the fact that it was unethical and probably fatal to his mission.

“I will,” he promised fervently. “As soon as we get out of here.” The Ritz-Carlton, where he was staying, wasn’t far.

“I can’t wait that long. Now.”

“No, we—”

She moved her shoulders in a slow-motion shimmy, and the green bodice slipped down about an inch as she leaned toward him. His protest died on his lips as her breasts swelled out of their confinement. He couldn’t have shifted his gaze if he’d tried. With another breath, the silk slipped some more and twin shadows appeared above the rims of the cups.

“Touch me,” she whispered.

He pulled her toward him and captured her mouth in a kiss as he slipped his hand into her bodice and palmed her breast. She moaned under his lips as he filled his hand with her flesh, so hot and round and firm, and his thumb teased a nipple that was as hard as a blackberry.

Both of them were panting when he finally broke the kiss, and he barely restrained himself from rolling her into the backseat and tearing the gown off her altogether. Instead, he pulled away and watched the delicious process of Eve tucking herself back into her bodice, hiding her secrets from his avid gaze once more.

“You have the most beautiful breasts I’ve ever seen,” he breathed, turning the key in the ignition. “I’m that kind of guy. Easily visually stimulated.” He managed to get the car out of the driveway without hitting anything, and pressed the accelerator down once they were on the main road. “Do you ever go out without a bra?”

“Never.” Her hand lay on his thigh, and his erection practically strained toward it, he wanted her to touch him so badly. But he’d probably run off the road if she did.

“Would you if I asked you to?”

“Maybe.” A wicked smile teased the corners of her mouth.

“I want to see you tomorrow. For lunch or something. It’s Saturday—anything. We won’t tell a soul, and on Monday I’ll deny it ever happened.” She laughed, as if he’d confirmed something she already knew. “Wear a camisole for me and I’ll spend the whole time watching the shape of you under the fabric. Saying things to make your nipples as hard as they are right now, so I can look at them.”

“I’m so shocked,” she murmured, her hand sliding down the inner slope of his thigh. “What will people think?” Her fingers brushed his aching erection, and he sucked a breath between his teeth.

“They’ll think you’re a beautiful, sexy woman,” he got out, “and all the men will wish they were with you.” He managed to brake just in time for a Stop sign. “And if you don’t stop that, we’re going to have an accident.”

“You touched me,” she pointed out.

“You weren’t driving. And besides, you asked me to. Begged me, if I recall.”

“I did, didn’t I?” She pulled her hand back so its burning warmth rested once again on his thigh, and she gave him a sideways glance. “But I was just saying out loud what you wanted.”

“Damn right. Do I turn left or right here?” She pointed, and the car leaped forward. “Because there’s nothing I want more right now than to kiss that dress right off you, inch by inch.”

She did the shimmy with her shoulders again, and the bodice slid down so that it seemed only a miracle kept her nipples from popping out over the rim of the fabric. His entire body throbbed with anticipation.

“How do you do that?” He dragged his gaze back to the highway. In the distance he could see the lighted block of the hotel. Thank God.

“Faulty engineering. Keep your eyes on the road, Mr. Hayes.” With a fingertip, her eyes on his face, she traced the top of the bodice. Teasing. Promising.

“I can’t. Not when you’re giving me a visual feast. And I’m about five seconds from orgasm just looking.”

“At eighty miles an hour? Better slow down.”

“I’m in a hurry. I want to get you up to my room before you come out of that dress again.”

“Mmm,” she crooned, her other hand moving stealthily to stroke his erection through his black dress pants. He shuddered with pleasure. “I could come in it.”

“Not a chance. When you come, it’ll be screaming, naked and on top of me.” The speedometer edged up to eighty-five.

“Promises, promises.”

Her hand felt so good. “Eve, please,” he choked. “I can’t—I’m going to—” The tires chattered on the highway dots as he drifted into the next lane.

With a throaty chuckle, she pulled away and settled into the passenger’s seat, both hands primly in her lap, and he steered the Lexus back into the middle of the lane.

Almost there.

Dimly, Mitch heard a jingling sound, but his senses were so overwhelmed with Eve that it barely registered. Until the second time. Then the third.

“That’s my phone.” She sounded as surprised as if she’d never heard it before, and fumbled in her clutch bag.

“Let it go. We’re nearly there.”

She glanced at the wafer-thin screen, then back at him, her eyes full of apology. “I can’t. No matter how much I want to.”

THE NUMBER WAS JENNA’S, and Eve knew she’d been scheduled to meet with Liza’s attorney that day. The fact that it was nearly midnight made it even more necessary for her to answer.

“Yes?”

“Eve? Thank goodness. I thought it was going to roll to voice mail.”

“What’s up?” Her voice still sounded throaty, and the ricochet of desire through her veins distracted her—though she’d have to forego the distraction for a few minutes and concentrate.

“It’s stupid—I’m so sorry, Eve. I probably woke you up.”

“Yes, but not the way you think.” The heat in her blood dropped a couple of degrees back toward normal. “Take a moment if you need to.”

“It’s just dumb,” Jenna repeated. “But you’re so good at this kind of thing and I’m afraid I’ve messed up big-time.”

Eve glanced at Mitch, who was concentrating on a left turn into the hotel’s underground parking lot. “Did the negotiations not go well?”

“About what I expected. Kevin had his arguments, I had my counterarguments. It ended in a draw.”

“Kevin?” Eve said carefully.

Jenna sighed. “Yes. Kevin Wade, Liza’s attorney. Therein lies the problem.”

“What problem? Is he incompetent? If so, that’s good for us, right?”

Jenna laughed, a sound that conveyed more irony than humor. “No, he’s not incompetent. I am. I’m massively attracted to him and I made the mistake of showing it.”

Mitch pulled into a numbered spot and turned off the engine. But instead of making her feel rushed and guilty because he’d lost her attention, he seemed content to simply lounge against the driver’s side door, watching her. As if whatever she did gave him pleasure.

Focus. Jenna needs you.

“Where are you now?” Eve asked.

“Sitting outside his condo complex. I—I agreed to come back here with him—to discuss the case further, mind—but he must have stopped somewhere because he’s not here yet. I need you to talk me out of going in.”

Eve had to laugh. “He probably stopped at the drugstore for a box of condoms. If you want to do this, we’ll just ask Andersen Nadeau for a different attorney for the lawsuit, and you keep the station’s business as usual.”

“You’re not helping.”

“You don’t need my help. You’re what, thirty-one? Two? You didn’t put in all those years in law school to let someone else make your decisions for you.”

“I know,” Jenna moaned. “But I tell you what, Eve, that man is hot. And what’s more, he thinks I’m hot. I’ve been sitting here weighing my caseload against the fact that I haven’t been in bed with a real man in months, and the caseload is losing.”

Eve could certainly relate to that. “If we have to get another attorney assigned to the suit, we can. But I have to say, I really respect that brain of yours. If anyone can pull this off with sympathy and grace, it’s you.”

“Now you tell me.”

“I’m not trying to argue for either side. Just telling you how I feel.”

“I’ll never be able to explain the switch to Marv Andersen.” Jenna sounded as if she were trying to talk herself out of going into that condo. “I’d have to make something up, and I’m a terrible liar.”

“If you don’t go, it’s not like it’s forever,” Eve reasoned. “Mr. Wade must be as aware of the ethics as you are. Maybe he’ll wait until the case is over.”

“We had such a good time at dinner, Eve,” Jenna said in a rush. “He’s so interesting to talk to, and then the whole will-we-or-won’t-we thing just added this zing to the evening. I’m only supposed to be staying for a drink and another look at the brief, but I know as well as he does it won’t end there.”

Eve glanced again at Mitch, but he just grinned at her. Their situation wasn’t that much different, was it? She was consorting with the enemy, too, though it wasn’t likely she’d get into as much of a legal tangle over it as Jenna.

Men. They could really mess with a girl, couldn’t they? Since when had sex and a career become so complicated?

Hmm. That might make a good segment for—

“Eve? Are you there?”

She dragged her gaze off Mitch’s fly, where it had inexplicably landed, and gave her attention back to her attorney. “I’m here. I was just thinking.”

“I have to go,” Jenna said urgently. “Before he comes back. If I see him again I’ll give in, and I don’t want to do that. I want to see this case through.”

“Good girl.”

“I really appreciate you letting me talk through this.”

“No problem. I know you’d do the same for me.”

“So, where are you, anyway?” In the background, Eve heard keys jingle and an engine fire up.

“On my way home from the Atlanta Reads benefit at the Ashmere place.” Well, it wasn’t a lie. Technically she was between the benefit and home, which meant she was on her way there, right?

“Oh, yeah. I hope it was fun. Look, I’ve got to go. This is a stick shift and I need both hands.”

“Take care.”

“Bye, and thanks again.”

Eve snapped the phone shut and tucked it into her bag. “Thanks for being patient,” she said to Mitch.

The ghost of a smile was still playing around the corners of his mouth. “No problem. Sounds like we’re not the only ones with a hot date.”

“Isn’t that the truth. Only I managed to talk her out of it.”

One eyebrow rose. “Bit of a buzzkill, are you?”

Her body temperature was back to normal now. In fact, the skin on her bare arms and shoulders felt downright cool from the air-conditioning, which he’d considerately kept running. “It was the right thing to do. If she’d stayed, it would have compromised her ethics in a business matter.”

“Can’t have that.” He turned off the air, and silence fell. “Shall we go up?”

The moment of truth. Eve forced herself to relax her grip on her beaded handbag before she did some damage to it.

“I don’t think so, Mitch. Up until five minutes ago, my answer would have been completely different, but—”

“But your friend’s ethics problem might be yours, too?”

“I think you have to admit that it is,” she said quietly, and paused. After leading him on all night, she owed him honesty after changing her mind. “If I go with you, it might change the way I look at CWB’s proposal. And that wouldn’t be fair. I have to think about what’s best for the program, not only myself.”

“Is that likely to happen?” he asked. “The one has nothing to do with the other.”

The phrase triggered a memory of one of their shows from last year. They’d focused on the differences in the ways men and women process information. How much mileage had she and Nicole and Jane got from that? They’d all learned how much men tended to compartmentalize. Men—or at least the ones who had been guests on the show—seemed to have two boxes in their brains, one labeled Sex and one labeled Everything Else.

Clearly, for Mitch, this evening fell into the first box.

It had for her, too, for a couple of delirious, wonderful hours. But how long could she keep it there, particularly if, as he’d said, she’d be seeing him in her office on Monday, as determined as ever to buy her away from her friends? She couldn’t just put a dividing line between “fantasy weekend” and “real life” and expect everything to stay neatly on either side of the line.

“We might not see it that way right now,” she admitted, “but on Monday we will. And we’ll probably be sorry.” She felt the bullet shape of her cell phone under her fingers, through her bag. “Do you mind walking me to the lobby? There’s a cab line out front.”

“You’re not taking a cab.” He fired up the engine and fastened his seat belt once more. “I’ll take you home.”

She put a hand on his arm. “No, Mitch, a cab’s fine. Really. I’m not far from here.”

“In that case, it won’t take us long.” He backed out of the parking stall and she gave in.

“You don’t plan on stalking me once you know where I live, do you?” she asked, directing him to turn left at the intersection.

“It’s not a bad idea,” he said, “but I believe we have a date for tomorrow. This way, I can pick you up. Turn here?”

“The second right, then the first left. Were you serious about tomorrow?”

“Certainly.” His sidelong glance tracked lazily down her body, reminding her vividly that he hadn’t wanted her to wear underwear. “Breakfast, lunch, whatever you want. You could show me around. If you don’t have plans, that is.”

She couldn’t have told him what her calendar said if her life depended on it. That hungry gaze sent a ripple of desire through her belly. And it reminded her of how very dangerous it was to spend any more time with this man than it took to say no and show him the door.

“The white bungalow, there,” she managed to say. “Number 954.”

He turned into her driveway and parked, looking over the front of her house. “Nice,” he said. “Smaller than I would have expected for a celebrity. And the rambling roses over the door are a nice touch.”

You could still invite him in, the treacherous voice of her desire whispered. You could still have him, if that look a minute ago was any indication.

“Thanks.” She cleared her throat. “It used to be a carriage house for that mansion there.” She pointed through the trees. “But it’s big enough for me. Big houses are for big families…or big egos. None of which apply here.”

He glanced at her. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Which one was that?”

“Whether I can see you tomorrow.” A dozen different answers crashed into one another in her mind, and he seemed to think that her hesitation meant she needed convincing. “Take pity on a Yankee, Eve,” he said. “What am I going to do with myself for two days if you don’t help me out?”

She was absolutely sure he’d have no problem finding something. The Braves were playing, there were concerts galore all over town, and at least two art exhibits were scheduled to open the next day.

“Come on,” he wheedled. “Let’s forget our job titles and the size of our in-boxes and do something fun, all right?”

Absolutely not. The more time she spent with him, the more difficult it would be to see him on Monday. The show came first. The words organized in her mind, she opened her mouth to say them.

“All right,” she said. “But I’m wearing a bra.”

**5**

THE WARMTH OF THE SUN on her eyelids woke Eve, telling her she’d forgotten to close the drapes before she’d gone to sleep the night before. No wonder. Her mind had been such a maelstrom of sex and ethics and work worries that it was a miracle she’d remembered to lock the front door.

But then, Mitch had been on the other side of it, sitting in the car with the engine running until she’d let herself inside and turned the porch light on and off. She hadn’t locked him out. Oh, no. She’d locked herself in, away from him.

She’d done the right thing. Okay, so maybe it hadn’t been so smart to agree to see him today, but after all, what could happen in broad daylight? Last night had been a combination of champagne, dancing and moonlight; that was it. Now that she’d had some sleep and could think rationally, it’d be easy to keep her distance.

In fact, she could practice saying no all day to get herself in shape for saying it again on Monday.

She’d just started a pot of coffee when the phone rang. And here he was. When he’d asked for her phone number as she was getting out of the car, she’d given it to him, figuring it was better that he call instead of driving over here. Maybe he’d be happy with a phone call. Maybe he’d reconsidered seeing her.

“Eve, it’s Jane.”

Eve took a moment to regroup. Jane, not Mitch. Well, that was a relief.

Wasn’t it? “Hey, sweetie. I thought you were going to the benefit, but I didn’t see you.”

“No, we, uh, didn’t make it out of the bedroom once I got my stockings on. Perry calls me his sexy librarian.”

Eve smiled. At least someone was getting some action in the bedroom. If it couldn’t be her, she was glad it was Jane. After all she’d been through, Jane deserved every minute of the happiness she’d found with Perry.

“Stockings and high heels will do it every time. So, what’s up?”

Jane hesitated. “Can I talk to you?”

“Sure.” She pulled out a kitchen chair and made herself comfortable while the coffee dripped. “I’ve got nothing but time.” And while she was talking to Jane, Mitch couldn’t get through. And if he couldn’t get through, she could push off seeing him.

“Not over the phone. I’d rather talk in person.”

A chill wriggled through Eve’s stomach. “What’s the matter?”

“Can’t we—”

“Jane, you can’t say something like that and not expect me to ask. What’s going on? Are you okay? Did something happen?”

Jane sighed. “I’m fine, nothing happened. Relax. I’ve just been thinking, that’s all.”

“About what?” What could she possibly need a face-to-face for when they saw each other daily and talked all the time?

“I—I’ve been thinking about the future. About my place on the show, given all the rumors flying around the station about the networks coming to call.”

For a second, Eve forgot to breathe. Her lungs constricted, and she took a deep breath. “I’m listening.”

“Perry’s won his lawsuit. Once we win ours, he and I can move anywhere we want. Travel. Do the things I’ve always wanted to do but never had the guts or the reason. Don’t get me wrong—I’m yours for life if you want me, and I’d never leave the show just on a whim. But with the possibility of change in the future, I wanted to sound you out about it.”

Eve squelched the urge to wail, But you’re my best friend! What about me? With Jane, the facts worked best. If she could ground her argument in facts rather than emotion, she had a chance.

“Don’t forget we haven’t actually got the money yet. Wouldn’t it be wiser to go on as usual until we have the checks in our hands?”

“If you’re talking about the lawsuit, Liza has absolutely no grounds to stand on. The case will be thrown out.”

“It hasn’t yet, and how many hearings have we been to?” Eve asked. “It would be foolish to go into even more debt booking trips and buying land or whatever our dreams might be, when we may never see the money. Or at least, not for months or even years.”

“Don’t say that,” Jane groaned.

“Let’s look at reality.” Ha, that was pretty clever. Use one of Jane’s favorite expressions on her. “Until the lawsuit’s settled, we need to go on as usual. And if the show goes on, it’ll need you. I’m not setting foot in that studio without you to put my face on.”

“Makeup artists are a dime a dozen,” Jane said. “The minute the word gets out that the thought has even crossed my mind, the applicants will be lining up around the block along with the studio audience.”

“Your usual artist might be a dime a dozen,” Eve allowed, “but you’re not. You gave me my signature look with that nifty Swiss foundation. And don’t forget how valuable you are in the brainstorming department. Would we have done the ‘High School Reunion Makeover’ episode and broken a ratings record?”

“That was a lot of fun…”

Detecting signs of weakening resolve, Eve moved in for the kill. “And would Rosanne Horton have snagged the former quarterback she’d loved her whole life if not for you? I think not.”

Jane chuckled. “Low blow, Best. She still writes to me, you know. I’m expecting baby pictures anytime now.”

“She’s grateful. And so am I. Please don’t turn in your resignation just yet, okay? Let Jenna get the suit settled and then think about it.”

Jane was silent, and Eve held her breath.

“All right. I’ll tell Perry he’s going to have to wait to go to Europe, and he should put his bankroll into a nice money market fund instead.”

Relief washed over Eve in a cool wave. “Good plan. Have a great weekend. See you Monday.”

“I’ll make it up to him,” Jane said wickedly. “Where’s that other package of stockings?”

Laughing, Eve hung up. Then she poured herself a cup of coffee, splashed in some milk, and drank half of it down. A disaster, nipped in the bud. Not bad for first thing in the morning.

The truth was, she didn’t know what she’d do without Jane’s level head around the station. On some days, when a guest made impossible demands or dropped out without warning, or a sponsor was difficult, or even when Atlanta’s heat index got too high, Eve would find Jane, close the door and vent until she was calm again. Inevitably, Jane would have a different angle Eve hadn’t seen, or just a few words that would put everything in perspective again.

Facing the demands of live television without her oldest friend at her side was unthinkable. And not only Jane, but Cole and Zach and Nicole. What might they be planning? If the thought had crossed Jane’s mind, it had certainly crossed the others’, too.

Please don’t let them all decide to resign at once, she begged the universe. I can’t handle it right now.

As though it would give her strength, she topped up her coffee and padded into the bathroom for a shower. When she came out, a light blinked on the answering machine.

“Hey, Eve, it’s Mitch.” Eve sucked in a breath at the sound of that voice, pitched at an intimate baritone, as if he were right beside her. “Just wanted to call and say how much I enjoyed last night, and to see how you were this morning. Give me a call on my cell. I’m still up for breakfast—or lunch—if you are.” He left his number and rang off.

At least he didn’t want to resign.

Just the opposite. He seemed to want to sign up for all kinds of things—including the positions of dealmaker and lover. Too bad the latter came as part of the former. Why couldn’t she have met him at the benefit the way she might meet any other man, as a stranger with no strings attached? But if she did what her body had been moaning for since last night, she’d never be sure whether he wanted her in bed with him—or with the network.

She refilled her coffee cup and leaned on the counter, gazing at the answering machine and the single digit on the display. Common sense told her to erase the message and pretend she’d been so busy all weekend she’d forgotten to listen to it—and forgotten her promise to see him today. By Monday, she’d have squelched this urge to play it again, just to hear that intimate timbre in his voice. By Monday, she’d have distanced herself from the need to rip her clothes off and bare herself to that hot gaze, the memory of which was even now making her nipples peak under the tank top she’d put on after her shower.

Jane would advise her to do something sensible, like eat a healthy breakfast and then weed the garden before it got too hot. She could do two things at once—restore some order to the tangle of vegetation back there, and not hear the phone if it rang again.

But Jane wasn’t here. She was busy seducing Perry. And how fair was that?

MITCH HAD BARELY hung up the phone after leaving his message for Eve, when it rang again. He must have just missed her.

“Hey,” he said in his most welcoming tone.

“Hey, yourself,” Nelson Berg responded. “Something tells me it wasn’t me you were expecting.”

Mitch’s vision of a tousled Eve lying on embroidered white sheets, her fingers caressing the phone as she spoke to him, vanished in a wrench of disappointment. “Uh, no. I mean, not that I’m not glad to hear from you.”

“Spare me the bull. So, how are you doing?”

Mitch knew Nelson well enough not to assume this was an inquiry after his health. Nelson never wasted precious time on pleasantries, especially when there was a deal in the works.

“I met with Eve Best in her office yesterday, late. I made her the offer and she turned it down.”

Nelson sighed. “Why would she do that? It was a fair offer.”

“She didn’t give a reason.”

“Huh? She had to have one.”

“She just said no. She had an appointment to go to and left.” He didn’t mention that he’d been the one to leave, as flustered and dazzled as a schoolboy.

“Well, shit, Hayes, you can’t let it go at that.”

“I know. I’ve already—”

“Find out what her reasons are and get her past them. They can’t be anything that six million bucks won’t cure.”

Mitch wasn’t so sure of that. “Money isn’t going to be the best argument here, I’m afraid.”

“What do you—” Nelson stopped. “Oh yeah. The lottery. So if it isn’t money it has to be something else. Find out what it is and work on it. When are you seeing her next?”

“I saw her last night, socially, and she agreed to see me this morning.”

“Did she, now?” Nelson sounded gratified, as if a balky student had finally done something right. “That’s good. I’m glad you’re following my instructions to the letter. So, tell me, does she have as much appeal in person as she does on camera?”

Does she ever. And then some.

“Yes. And she works it. The event last night was a fund-raiser, and she walked in there like a star. She’ll be a huge draw publicitywise.”

“All the better. We can use some big guns on the talk shows and the publicity circuit, drumming up support for the network. Not to mention high-level meetings with advertisers. Make sure she knows that’ll still be part of her job, not just sitting pretty in the studio.”

“Sure.”

“Call me right away when you get her commitment. I want this wrapped up by Wednesday at the latest. And then I’m going to let all the other networks know we scooped them.”

Mitch frowned. Wednesday? No way could he pull a deal of this size off in that short a time. Did Nelson have something else to prove—something that involved saving face and putting one over on the competition?

If so, why hadn’t he come down here to woo Eve Best himself? Why send Mitch? But these were questions he knew Nelson wouldn’t answer. The guy only knew how to bark orders and bully people into giving him what he wanted. He didn’t share his motivations or the confidences of the stuffed shirts on the executive team. Nelson was old-school, even though he was only ten years or so older than Mitch himself.

“Wednesday.” No human could make that deadline, but he’d ask forgiveness when he got there. And there was something else bugging him. “What did you mean a minute ago when you said I was following your instructions? When have I not?”

“I told you to romance the socks off her. Probably not a very difficult job, eh?”

Mitch frowned. The words held an unpleasant aftertaste. Or was he being too sensitive where Eve was concerned? “She’s being a good Southern hostess and showing me around.”

The details of last night would never cross his lips to anyone, much less his boss. And the simple fact that Nelson assumed any contact with Eve would be to further their success at the deal made Mitch feel…less, somehow. Tainted. This electric attraction between the two of them had nothing to do with what they did for a living. It was bigger than that. The problem was, he had to keep his feelings to himself, no matter what he wanted personally.

Not that he’d ever say a word about them to Nelson.

“Look, I have to go,” he said. “I left a message for her to call me a few minutes ago. She could be trying to get through.”

That finally got Nelson off the phone, and Mitch hung up with a sense of relief. No matter what he felt about Nelson, or Eve, for that matter, of course he had a job to do. Convincing Eve to sign was his top priority—one he needed to remember if he saw her again this morning. He had to do his best not to see her as a desirable, sensual woman who could bring his entire body to attention simply by walking past him.

No, he had to shut down his emotions and look at her as a business entity. A package that CWB wanted. His future at the network depended on his ability to bring that package home—by Wednesday.

And what a package she was—one he had nearly unwrapped last night. Could anything be sexier than Eve Best leaning in for a kiss, her bodice slipping down to reveal lush curves and her voice husky in his ear? As the memory washed through his mind, his body stiffened in response.

So much for shutting down.

The phone next to the bed rang, and the vision in his head snapped off as suddenly as if someone had changed the channel. With a groan, he picked it up. It was probably Nelson, with one last order to give him. “Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Eve.”

The voice brought back the vision in full force. “Hey,” he said softly. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Sorry I missed your call. I was in the shower.”

A picture of wet skin, of water running in rivulets between her breasts and down her belly, leaped onto the big screen in his mind. In close-up.

“Mitch?”

He had to turn off the film, or he’d never be able to carry on a civilized conversation. “I’m here. Sorry. I thought there was a knock at the door.”

“Do you want me to hold while you check?”

“No, no. It was probably someone going past with a suitcase.” He was such a lousy liar. “So, does this mean we’re on for breakfast?”

“I know I said yes last night, but I really can’t. I’m sorry. I have a ton of things to do.”

“Like what?”

He really was interested in the details of her life, but as soon as the words were out, he realized how they must sound.

“Well, I have to work on Monday’s script, and go grocery shopping, and try to hack my way through the jungle in my backyard, and—”

“Don’t you ever relax on the weekend?”

“That is relaxation. Well, except for the script.”

“Do it tomorrow.”

“I have Tuesday’s script to work on tomorrow, and some preliminary work to do on this communications specialist we’re bringing in on Thursday. Then I have to go over to North Point Mall and try to find my cousin’s four-year-old a birthday present. I’m invited to my aunt and uncle’s place tonight for dinner and the party.” She paused. “That’s way too much information, isn’t it?”

“Boy or girl?”

“Boy.”

“Ah. He’ll love anything to do with dinosaurs or Spider-Man.”

“How do you know?”

“My sister’s kids are that age. Two boys and a girl. Brandon knows the Latin names of every dinosaur that ever lived, and a few that are cartoon characters, as well.”

Her laugh made his breath hitch. What was it about this woman that affected him this way? Was he that long overdue for sex and therefore more susceptible than usual? Or did she charm everyone like this?

“Duly noted,” she said. “That should simplify things.”

An idea whisked into his mind. “I could come along. Offer some suggestions. Dinosaurs can get out of hand in a hurry without the help of an expert.” And while he was at it, he could pitch her again.

“You seriously don’t want to go to the mall with me.” Her voice filled with disbelief, though laughter lurked in the back of it. “A big network exec like you? Don’t you have important stuff to do? Deals to nail down? People to see?”

“I do,” he said. “One deal in particular is very important to me, but I refuse to let it interfere with my weekend.”

She paused, as though this were sinking in. “I see. So today and tomorrow are a deal-free zone? The subject won’t come up, even in passing?”

“Will you push me into the fountain by the food court if it does?”

“I don’t think there is a fountain, but probably.” The laughter bubbled closer to the surface now, and his whole being seemed to warm with it.

“I’ll take the risk. So how about you put the garden off until tomorrow, and we hit the mall today? Do the script this morning, and I’ll pick you up after lunch.”

“What about breakfast?”

“I’ll get some here. If we bag our ’saur, we can celebrate with a victory drink.”

She was laughing openly now. “Deal. Pick me up around two. I’ll be done with the script by then if I concentrate.”

He agreed and rang off, her laughter still tickling his mind, giving him as much pleasure as her fingers might on his skin.

She might be able to find some powers of concentration. But the prospect of spending the afternoon with her had shot his straight to hell.

**6**

PROMPTLY AT TWO, the doorbell rang and Eve opened the door to find Mitch hunched awkwardly on the porch under the heavy cover of the rambling roses.

“You might consider trimming these things,” he suggested by way of greeting. “I think one of them just bit me.”

Eve waved him inside. “They don’t have thorns. And I keep them that way to remind myself not to let my head swell. You know, with success. They remind me to stay humble.”

Her house wasn’t that big—a dining room and kitchen on the left of the hall, and a parlor and family room on the right, the latter of which had become her office over the past three years. The bathroom and two bedrooms were at the back, but weren’t visible from where he stood.

“I can’t imagine you having problems with that,” he said. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.” She waved him into the parlor. “The furniture is from my aunt and uncle’s attic, mostly. The coffee table was my mom’s. My grandmother in Florida died a year and a half ago, and I got some of her pieces, too, like that sideboard.”

“So you have pieces of your family with you.” His tone was abstract, as if his situation were completely the opposite. “And the piano?” He opened the lid and touched a key with one long finger.

Eve looked away. “My dad’s. He was a big fan of Pinetop Perkins and the old boogie-woogie piano players. My mom used to keep plants on top of it and he could really make them dance once he got going.”

Sure enough, ancient water rings were etched into the finish. Mitch pulled out the bench and sat. “Do you mind?”

“Not a bit. It’s probably out of tune, though.”

“Boogie, huh? I wonder if anyone remembers where that word came from.” He rolled out a walking bass with his left hand.

She laughed, a huff of amazement. “I thought you said you were a trumpet player.”

He began to pick out notes with the right hand. “I started on the piano when I was a kid. Mom was a music teacher. I haven’t done this in a while. I think I’ve lost my knack.”

“Here, shove over.” Eve sat down on the other half of the piano bench and glanced at his bass notes to see the key. The rhythms her dad had pounded out on this very spinet seemed to be embedded in it still—or maybe they were just in her memory. She found a melody she’d learned as a kid and began to embellish it.

Mitch’s bass was as steady as a rock, if you didn’t count the flourishes of syncopation that made her shoulders sway with the rhythm, and suggested skipped beats and notes of her own.

Eve had had years of piano lessons when she’d lived with Nana, who had believed firmly that her dad’s talent slept inside her somewhere, all evidence to the contrary. In about her fifth year, she’d got the hang of it and the piano became pleasure, not work. She’d never played in a band, though, or any kind of ensemble that would prepare her for the sheer organic sensuality of making music with another person.

Melody and bass, rhythm and counterpoint. Line building on line, notes forming chords forming song. Two people bringing their experience together to create something entirely new and different.

The way they might when they made love.

Eve lost her concentration and a straightforward diminished A fumbled into discord. Mitch’s rhythm faltered and stopped.

“Whoa,” she said, summoning a grin and sliding off the bench. “Lost it. I guess I need more practice.”

“Sounded pretty good to me.” He slid off the bench, too, and closed the lid carefully over the ivories. “But then, I imagine there isn’t much you don’t do well.”

Eve mumbled something appropriately self-deprecating and headed down the hall to get her handbag. It wasn’t fair. The relationship gods must hate her. Here she was in a career that depended on the whole world of relationships for its bread and butter. She’d met a gorgeous man who seemed to be as attracted to her as she was to him, and who had voluntarily suggested going to a mall without being threatened with blackmail first.

Why did he have to be the one man she had to hold at arm’s length? In the practical light of common day, she reflected from the safety of her bedroom, she’d been insane to behave the way she had last night. Nana would be so—not shocked, because Eve couldn’t imagine much shocking her—but disappointed. And she’d always hated disappointing Nana. That sad look, that biting of the lip that meant she could be giving the young Eve an earful but was holding it back so as not to hurt…oh, yeah. Very effective. She could have used a shot of Nana last night.

Eve glanced at her tank top and jeans in the mirror, and pulled a gauze tunic off its hanger and slipped it on overtop. There. Much better. Some comfortable sandals in matching green, a green wallet-on-a-string, and she was ready to go.

If only Mitch wasn’t such good company.

As they cruised toy stores, movie tie-in stores and educational stores in search of the perfect dinosaur for four-year-old Christopher, she kept things deliberately on a friendly business-lunch footing. But by the time they’d begun triangulating the mall’s second level for a renewed attack, she’d given up the pretense. How was a girl supposed to keep her distance when he insisted on cracking jokes about passersby or things in the windows? How was she supposed to put last night out of her head when every time she turned suddenly, she caught him watching her? Which wasn’t a problem—lots of people watched her. So far three women had come up and asked for her autograph, in fact.

This was the gaze of a man silently undressing a woman in his mind. Not just undressing, either. He was making love to her behind that innocent, bland gaze, she was sure of it.

Luckily they found the perfect dinosaur in a nature store, and she led the way out of the mall with a sense of relief. She needed to go home and back to reality, and forget he was even in Atlanta, wanting her.

Just the way she wanted him.

No, no. She couldn’t let her thoughts wander that way. It wasn’t good for her peace of mind—and it certainly wasn’t good for Just Between Us.

“It’s four o’clock.” Mitch shook his sleeve down over his watch. “I vote for lunch.”

Eve arranged her face in a regretful expression—which didn’t take much. “I can’t. I really need to get home and get ready to go to dinner. And I should look at that script one more time.”

“Creativity never came on an empty stomach.” He grinned, and her resolve wavered, then straightened up.

“Then where do all the starving artists come from?” she quipped. “I appreciate your helping me out, Mitch. I now know as much about toy dinosaurs as I’ll need to know for the rest of my life. It was good of you to take the time.”

“Come on.” His long stride kept pace with hers effortlessly as they headed back to his car. “My hotel’s across the parking lot. Let me treat you to lunch. Or at least a snack before your dinner. Remember, you agreed.”

“I agreed to breakfast. Maybe it’s just as well we’re out of time.”

He put a hand on her arm to slow her down. “What does that mean?”

“Let’s talk about it somewhere less public, okay?”

She could tell he was holding back what he wanted to say with an effort that lasted through the parking garage, down the street and all the way back to her house. But as soon as she got out and retrieved her package from the backseat, he closed his door with the sound of finality.

“This is less public, wouldn’t you say?”

She opened the front door and dropped the package and her green bag in the hall, then turned in the doorway to face him. Even hunched under the roses, he looked completely masculine and, if not comfortable, then at least in command of himself.

Words failed her. How could she tell him she didn’t want to see him socially when she’d only be lying to herself—and him?

“May I come in?”

“No. If I had any sense, I’d ask you to go back to your hotel and book an earlier flight home to New York.”

“You know I’m not going to do that.”

“You should. There’s no reason to stay here.”

“I can think of one. And I’d like to talk about it somewhere other than on your doorstep. A beetle just dropped down the back of my neck.”

How could she chase away a guy who made her smile every five minutes? She turned her head so he wouldn’t see it flickering at the corners of her lips, and stepped back. “Fine. But only for a few minutes.”

He closed the door behind him and began to unfasten the buttons of his shirt. Her mouth dropped open.

One button. Two. Three.

What was this? Did he think an invitation to talk for a few minutes was some kind of thinly disguised come-on? Not that she was complaining about the view, but a girl had her principles.

Four, five. Was he—was he—

Oh, my.

He peeled off the shirt and her jaw felt as though it had become unhinged. Along with her mind.

Because, naked to the waist, Mitchell Hayes was just about the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. Muscle flexed and moved under smooth, tanned skin as he shook out his shirt. There wasn’t an ounce of extra fat anywhere. A broad chest narrowed to a finely honed set of abs, and dark, curly hair arrowed down and disappeared into the waistband of his jeans.

“There you are, you little rascal.” He knelt and scooped up the black beetle skittering across the tile of the entryway, then opened the door and tossed it back into the thicket of roses.

Breathe. Take a breath. Good. Now, close your mouth and behave as if everything is normal.

Turning, he buttoned up his shirt and tucked the tails into his jeans as though nothing had happened.

Look away from the jeans.

“Eve, you okay?” He bent sideways to look into her face.

“Yes.” She reached for something sensible to say. Should she apologize? “It’s not often that my visitors strip when they walk in, that’s all.”

“If I’m going to have someone walking on my back, I’d rather she didn’t have six legs.” He paused. “And I find that very hard to believe. I bet any boyfriend of yours strips when he hits the door.”

“I bet he doesn’t,” she batted back. “Or at least, if he existed, he wouldn’t. I’m sorry about the banzai attack. Usually my insect life is better behaved.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No. Once in a while the moths come in if I leave the porch light on, and the june bugs are awful, but—”

“I didn’t mean the bugs, I meant the boyfriend.”

The refrigerator door made a very effective shield. The last thing she needed was for him to see the color wash into her face. “I have a chunk of Brie and some grapes here. If you were hungry before, you’re probably starving now.”

Oops. Hadn’t she just said he’d get a few minutes and then he had to go? Now, see, that’s what you get for gawking at his abs. He’s completely scrambled your brain.

“And you’re avoiding a really interesting topic.”

She pulled out some celery and a plastic tub of guacamole. She had chips in the pantry, and half a salami. Would that be enough? All that muscle was probably the result of downing slabs of roast beef. “Are you kidding? You just took off your clothes in my foyer. It’s impossible to avoid you.”

“So let me get this straight. You’re the relationship guru, the most desirable woman in Atlanta, the subject of several fan sites—I do my homework, don’t look at me like that—and you don’t think your man would be racing to get naked for you?”

“Maybe,” she said as coolly as she could. She had fan sites? “But I don’t have time for a relationship, as I think I made clear.”

“That’s plain wrong,” he said.

She shrugged. “It’s reality.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a hip on the end of the breakfast bar. “Leaving time out of it, do you want one?”

Her knife sliced into the salami with precision. “Of course. But it’s pretty hard to ask a man to play second fiddle to the show. I mean, he’d have to. I work sixteen hours a day.”

“You’ve just never met anyone who could make you rearrange your priorities, that’s all.”

Was that a glint of challenge in his eyes? “Oh, and you think you’re the man who can do it?”

Certainly he could. If a man like Mitch were waiting at the studio door, she’d say damn the calendar and hit the stairs at a run. Not that she’d ever say that to him.

“Why not? Hypothetically speaking.” The challenge was now complicated by humor. And—face it—temptation.

“I don’t even have to speak hypothetically.” She put the Brie on a plate and slipped it into the oven to warm, then picked up the knife again. “I’m afraid you’ve been bumped off the candidate list because of who you are.”

“Didn’t we agree that I was simply an honest guy from New Mexico?”

“That was last night.” A subject she did not want to bring up. “The simple fact is that even seeing you like this compromises me professionally. I don’t even know why I’m making you a snack.”

“Because you’re a well-brought-up Southern girl?”

“That wouldn’t cut it with Dan Phillips. He owns CATL-TV and our production company. Mitch, I owe him a lot, including my loyalty. If it wasn’t for him and Cole having so much faith in me, I’d still be talking about overnight lows and how the rain is affecting the commute for four and a half minutes every hour.”

“That’s right. You used to be the weathergirl. I saw a picture on one of those fan sites I mentioned. You looked to be fresh out of college.”

“I was. So you can see that every minute we spend together makes it look like I’m consorting with the enemy. So to speak.”

“You can consort with whomever you like on your time off,” he pointed out.

“Most business consorting would happen in a meeting with you in my office, where everything is aboveboard. Not in my kitchen or—” my bedroom “—or anywhere else. I feel like I’m sneaking around on Dan behind his back.”

“Okay, I can see that. But you have to admit, this way of consorting is more fun.”

“Sure it is. But I’m a realist, and the reality is that CWB wants to take me away from CATL-TV. The station’s done a lot for me. I can’t just run out on them the moment the going gets good.”

“CWB can do a lot more for you,” Mitch said. “Take you national. Give the show a wider scope. Bigger production values. More audience reach.”

“Yes, so you said in our meeting. Which, I might point out, this is not.”

It was a sight better than talking about honest bodies and relationships, though. At least when they talked business, she had open-and-shut answers. When it came to Mitch and anything personal, she was very much afraid she didn’t have answers of any kind.

“Are you done torturing that salami?” He leaned over the counter and grimaced. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had some Freudian prejudice against the subject of relationships.”

“Or symbols of male power,” she said sweetly. “But I wouldn’t read anything into it. It’s a snack. A short one. Because I still have my to-do list waiting for me.”

Hands on hips, he looked over her kitchen, taking in the white tile, the skylight, the basket of onions and garlic on the granite counter. Her answering machine sat next to it.

“You have a message.”

She licked salami flavor off her index finger and punched the button. The man had strummed pleasure from her body the night before. He’d helped her find a dinosaur. It was a little late to worry about whether he should listen to her personal messages.

“Eve, honey, this is Grandmother Charlotte,” her dad’s mother said. If the Queen Mother had been brought up in the fields of Georgia, she would have looked and sounded like Charlotte Best. Eve straightened at the sound of her soft vowels, as if she’d reminded her about her posture. “I’m looking forward to seeing you tonight at Roy’s. Do bring along an escort if you’d like to.” Her grandmother laughed, and Eve’s stomach sank. “I know it’s hard, but choose one of your collection to introduce to your family. Bye-bye.”

Eve resisted the urge to bang her head against the nearest cupboard door. Could there be anything more intimidating than a Southern lady determined to get her eldest, most successful granddaughter married off?

When Eve glanced at Mitch, his eyes were dancing. “I take it your grandmother is deluded about your social life?”

She picked up the knife again and held the salami down as if it were going to escape. “In her day, the aim of a girl’s life was to get married. She knows I’m not like that. She knows how busy I am.”

“I don’t think it’s about being busy. I think you’re just afraid. Of getting involved. Of me. Of what could happen if we really got together.”

The knife thwacked through the last of the salami and hit the cutting board with a clack. Lucky thing her fingers hadn’t been in the way. “A woman who’s learned as much about men as I have can’t be afraid of lil’ ol’ you.” She mimicked Charlotte’s accent.

“Prove it.”

“How would you suggest I do that?” She licked her fingers, deliberately goading him. She knew exactly what he’d say. That he wanted to take her to bed. And then she’d tell him—

“Let me be your date tonight. Your grandmother would still be deluded, but at least she’d be happy.”

Eve froze, staring at him, one finger still in her mouth. Then she drew it out slowly, and his gaze dropped to it as though it were a magnet.

“I watched the ‘Meet the Family, Pass the Test’ episode,” he said, and pure challenge flavored that grin. “Or didn’t you mean what you said in your closing monologue?”

“What, that any man who’d subject himself to that voluntarily was a keeper?”

“Exactly. I dare you.”

She lifted her chin. “You’ve got a deal, Mr. Hayes.” She offered him the plate. “Salami?”

**7**

“SUGAR, YOU LOOK like one of my favorite actors.”

Eve held her breath as her grandmother allowed Mitch to take her hand in his and squeeze her fingers. This was never going to work. No one had ever put anything over on Charlotte Best in Eve’s lifetime. The woman had gone from riches to rags and back to riches again, and what she didn’t know about the stock market, gardening and human nature wasn’t worth knowing.

Eve couldn’t possibly pass off Mitch as a date or even a serious boyfriend. In fact, they’d agreed that the truth was probably the best strategy. Charlotte would see right through anything else.

“And you look like one of my favorite actresses,” Mitch told her. “But Helen Hayes only played women like you. She wasn’t the real thing.”

Charlotte chuckled and glanced at Eve. “You’ll let him sit beside me at dinner, won’t you, baby doll?”

Not on your life, sugar pie. “Now, Grandmother, no stealing my date.”

Charlotte laughed again and patted Mitch’s sleeve. “Mr. Hayes, this is my son Roy, and his wife Anne.”

Mitch shook hands with his host and hostess. “I saw you folks at the Ashmere benefit last night, but we didn’t speak.”

“No wonder,” AuntAnne said with a smile. “You spent the evening dancing with Eve—not that I blame her.”

“Did you, now?” Charlotte said with interest. “The whole evening?”

“Practically. She—”

“Are Karen and John and the kids here yet?” Eve asked hastily. “I have Christopher’s gift in the car.”

“Not yet, but I’m expecting them any minute.” Anne took their coats. “Why don’t you show Mitch around? Roy, that roast needs to be carved before it’s as tough as an old boot. Mama, would you like a cocktail before dinner?”

With the skill of a longtime hostess, Anne shepherded them out of the foyer until they were, Eve had no doubt, exactly where she wanted them.

Not that that was a bad thing.

She didn’t mind having several rooms between Mitch and her grandmother’s sharp gaze. Not to mention her sharp tongue. Charlotte figured she was too old to filter her comments through any screen but politeness. Other than that, the family had learned to expect just about anything.

They walked into the living room and Mitch looked around with a soundless whistle. “Is this how old money lives?” he asked in a low voice.

“No, this is how a developer lives,” she murmured. “We might be an old family, but the money is long gone. My great-grandpa managed to lose it somehow. My grandmother went from having servants and a big mansion to living over a shop in genteel poverty. But Uncle Roy has always been smart about money. They don’t want for much.”

“I can see that.”

“See what?”

Eve turned as Charlotte came in from the dining room, a pink martini in hand. “Can I offer you one of these, darlin’?”

“No, thanks, Grandmother. I’ll have wine with dinner.”

“The same,” Mitch said.

“Good.” Charlotte sipped it with satisfaction while Mitch studied the pictures on the walls.

“Mr. Best has a high regard for family,” he observed. “I’m assuming these are all relatives, right?”

“Understatement of the year,” Eve murmured. “There’s a reason the walls are all painted white.”

The ceilings in the house were high, which meant there was a good ten feet of wall space on which to hang more pictures than anyone should see outside of a gallery. When she’d first moved here, Eve had wondered how Anne could stand it, but then she’d realized there were as many from her side. A cluster of their immediate family hung over the sofa. Portraits marched up the wall next to the staircase, forming their own staircase pattern up to the second floor. There were black-and-white pictures on either side of the windows, and over the sideboard, and flanking the wall unit that housed a flat-screen television.

“There’s nothing wrong with having a little pride in one’s heritage,” Charlotte said.

“Does he know who all these people are?” Mitch asked.

“We all do, young man. They’re our family. In fact, if you’d like to—”

“Grandmother, I’m sure Mitch doesn’t want to be introduced to every person in the room,” Eve put in.

“That’s the second time you’ve interrupted,” her grandmother informed her crisply. “Where are your manners?”

Eve blinked. “I’m sorry.”

“As I was saying, Bests have been in these parts for nearly a hundred and fifty years. It’s quite natural that Roy would want to preserve as many reminders of where he comes from as he can. Of where you come from, lovey doll.” She looked at Eve over the rim of her glass. “I look forward to the day when I can tell your children the stories attached to these pictures.”

She was not going to get into that discussion with Mitch standing there.

“Do you like children, Mr. Hayes?”

Oh, God. Somebody stop her.

“I have to confess I haven’t given it much thought. I have nieces and nephews, but I don’t see them very often.”

“Eve is going to have beautiful children,” Charlotte said with satisfaction. “Roy’s eldest girl married young, only eighteen, and hers are lovely. You’ll see them when they get here. That Christopher reminds me of Roy when he was a boy.”

“Grandmother,” Eve said desperately, “I’m going to show Mitch the upstairs.”

“Don’t get up to any monkey business,” Charlotte warned. “Your cousins will be here any minute.”

It took the entire trip up the staircase under the watchful eyes of people in top hats and crinolines before the scalding blush faded from Eve’s cheeks. “I’m sorry about that,” she said to Mitch. “She’s a handful. Says what she wants when she wants.”

“Nothing wrong with that. If, as you say, she lost everything, it’s natural she’d value what she’s got left—her family. And their pictures.”

“I meant about the monkey business. Honestly, I think she thinks I’m still thirteen and playing spin the bottle.”

He grinned and pulled her into one of the bedrooms. “You have a problem with spin the bottle? Because let me tell you, you are amazingly kissable when you blush like that. You can spin in my direction anytime.”

“I am not blushing.”

“Are so.” With the pad of his thumb, he brushed the arch of her cheekbone. “Right here.” He touched the other cheek. “And here.”

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered.

“You took me up on a dare.”

“We agreed. We can’t go down there and pretend to be a couple.” His touch on her face was mesmerizing. In spite of herself, anticipation built as his fingers skimmed her jaw. “They’ll see right through it. Especially Grandmother.”

“Who’s pretending?” he breathed, and kissed her.

And there they were, right back under the ivy at the benefit. His mouth, so soft and yet so assured, coaxed hers open as she allowed the dammed-up desire that had been cooking inside her all day to burst free. She melted against him and slid her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, hauling him against her so that his big, hot body was fused to hers.

It was only for a moment. In just a moment she’d stop kissing him, stop falling into this fog of need that seemed to blow up between them and blot out reality.

Dimly, she was aware of noise below, but her senses were so filled with the scent of Mitch as his temperature rose, with the touch of his hands as they slid urgently down her back, with the taste of his lips and how they seemed to stoke the fire deep inside—

“Eve!”

Something small and hard rammed into her legs like a freight train and she gasped, jerking out of Mitch’s arms. Stupidly, she stared at the dark-haired boy wrapping her leg in a hug.

“Eve, it’s my birthday! Did you bring me a present?”

Mitch stepped back and sanity flooded in. Behind him, Emily, Eve’s cousin and Roy’s youngest daughter, hung in the doorway with the earphones of her iPod around her neck. She looked as embarrassed as Eve felt.

“I couldn’t stop him,” Emily said. “He came barreling into my room and then saw you guys across the hall.”

She hadn’t even noticed that Emily had been in her room. What if she and Mitch had gotten carried away, as they always seemed to do whenever they let themselves be alone together? Both Emily and Christopher might have gotten an eyeful that would have warped them for life.

Chris jumped up and down. “Present, present, present—”

“All right, all right, little man,” Mitch said as if he’d known the boy all his life. “The present’s in the car. I’ll get it. And happy birthday, by the way.”

Eve hugged Emily and followed Mitch and Chris downstairs. Now all she had to do was figure out how to keep the kid quiet—or at least distracted. Because what he’d interrupted certainly qualified as “monkey business.”

IN FORTY HOURS of digital TV footage, Mitch had not seen Eve as uncomfortable as she was now. She sat opposite him at a table laid out as artistically as a painting—Anne Best’s work. The lady might not be whipping out fouettés in Swan Lake any longer, but she sure knew how to bring art into daily life.

It was too bad that the whole scene reminded him of one of the photographs behind him on the wall—beautifully posed, with no indication of the emotion rolling around underneath.

“So, Mr. Hayes, where did you meet our Eve?” Charlotte Best asked after neatly cutting up her slab of roast beef.

“At the station,” he replied. “I was there on business.”

“What kind of business?”

How to put this without giving away too much? “I work for a network. We think her show can reach a wider audience, so I had some proposals for her.”

Emily snickered, and her mother frowned at her across two place settings.

“How long ago was this? Since we saw you at the benefit last night, I’m assuming it was before that.”

“That afternoon, in fact,” he said, just as Eve kicked him under the table.

“You only met yesterday?” Charlotte’s plucked eyebrows rose. “My, my. What a fast worker you are.”

“He was kissing her,” Christopher said around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. “Gross.”

“Chris!” His mother, who had been introduced to Mitch as Karen, tried to hush him.

“Well, he was,” Chris said.

“You don’t need to point it out,” Karen’s husband, whose name Mitch had forgotten, told him. “Eve might not have thought it was gross.”

“I certainly wouldn’t have,” Charlotte mused. “The next best thing to Pierce Brosnan.”

“Mother!” Roy looked up from his own plate. “You’re embarrassing our guest.”

“Am I embarrassing you?” Charlotte looked at Mitch, and he lost control of the grin twitching at the corners of his lips.

“Not at all.”

“You’re embarrassing me,” Anne informed them. “Can we direct the conversation away from Eve, please? She doesn’t need to be in the spotlight when she’s with her own family.”

Mitch shot a glance at Anne. The words were measured and considerate, but with all that stripped away, what lay underneath? Could this elegant woman be jealous? Of what? As far as he could tell, her life wasn’t tied all that tightly to Eve’s.

“She isn’t in the spotlight,” Charlotte said in a tone as crisp as the baby romaine leaves she speared with her fork. “I was merely trying to get a rise out of her young man. No need to be embarrassed, Anne.”

“Mama, please. Can we discuss something else?”

“I think Eve’s career is worthy of discussion. I hardly ever get to see the girl. So Eve, are you going to take Mr. Hayes up on his proposals? The ones relating to business, of course.”

“I can’t talk about that here, Grandmother.”

“Why on earth not? We’re your family, and obviously you’ve talked about it with Mr. Hayes.”

“As you might expect, any negotiations about the show are confidential.”

“It’s not likely we’ll say anything, is it? Roy’s got no connections to television, and Anne never talks about you anyway. Silent as the grave, that girl. No fun at all.”

Mitch almost felt sorry for Anne Best. She sat so straight in the ladder-back chair that you could draw the proverbial ballerina’s line from her earlobe to her hipbone.

“Just because some of us don’t believe in gossip—” Anne murmured against her wineglass.

“Bosh,” Charlotte snorted. “You like a good gossip as well as any of us. But I suppose we should be grateful that someone gives us an example of discretion to follow.”

“I’m discreet, Grandmother,” Emily said. “I never talk about Eve or her show, even though all the kids at school know I’m related.”

“I should hope not,” Anne said. “Half of what goes on in that show should be rated NC-17.”

“What?” Eve choked on a green bean, and Mitch clapped her on the back. “You can’t watch it anyway. It comes on before you get home from school.”

“I have TiVo,” Emily informed her smugly. “I tape it every day.”

“You do?” her mother asked.

“Plus they post the episodes on YouTube, so if I forget I can watch them there.”

“Emily, I hardly think that rainbow parties and finding out if your man is a keeper are the kinds of things you should be watching.”

“Why not?” Charlotte wondered aloud. “I’m sure the halls of the junior high ring with exactly that kind of thing.”

“Emily,” Eve said, her face pale, “maybe you should consider your mom’s feelings and watch something else.”

“Why? I’m fourteen. It’s a little late for the parental guidance now, and rainbow parties are so yesterday. Besides, you’re my cousin. I learn all kinds of things from you.”

Silence.

Mitch shifted in his seat and watched Anne. Half of him wanted to get Eve’s coat and hustle her into the car. Half of him was fascinated by the veneer of politeness cracking over what was obviously a very sore subject.

“You can ask your mom and dad if you want to know about the things we talk about on the show,” Eve said quietly.

“At least you talk about them,” the girl retorted. “Mom and Dad don’t talk about anything. Except what’s for dinner and who’s who in all these dumb pictures. Not about relationships and boys and stuff that’s important.”

“Emily, that’s not true. And that’s enough out of you. You’re being very rude,” admonished her mother.

“Now I can’t talk to my own cousin?” Emily threw her napkin down. “First you want me to stop watching her show, and now you want me to stop talking to her?”

“That’s not what I said.”

Mitch could see that Roy was hanging on to his patience for the sake of his guests. “Please sit down and apologize.”

“I didn’t do anything except tell the truth.”

“You have no idea what the truth even means,” Anne snapped. Then she took a deep breath and looked at Mitch. “Can I offer you some dessert, Mr. Hayes?”

“She’s right,” Charlotte said to Anne. “How can she know the truth if you don’t tell her?”

“Would you like some dessert, Mama?”

“You’re still not going to say a word, are you?”

“Fine, Mama. If no one would like dessert, then Roy will make some coffee. I’m afraid I’ve got a terrible headache. I’m going upstairs to my room. I’m so sorry, Mr. Hayes. Perhaps another time you’ll find us better behaved.”

And Eve’s aunt left the room like the Snow Queen exiting the stage, leaving Charlotte angrily staring at her plate, Emily in tears and Eve as white as the walls behind her, proudly displaying the endless generations of her family.

**8**

EVE SPENT SUNDAY regretting Saturday. The only bright spot in the whole disastrous evening had been Christopher’s shrieks of delight when he’d torn the wrapping off his presents—especially the dinosaur.

So, okay, Mitch had a good handle on what four-year-olds liked. That did not negate the fact that they’d left as early as possible and she still felt as though she’d left a conversation unfinished. She wasn’t sure with whom, though. Emily? Auntie Anne? Grandmother Best?

Grandmother was the worst of them all. Eve should never have brought Mitch along under false pretenses and gotten her hopes up. It wasn’t as if she’d never been attracted to anyone before, and Grandmother knew it. She could hop on a MARTA train, for Pete’s sake, and by the time she got downtown, she’d have seen any number of likely candidates for some fun between the sheets. So why did her family have to overreact like this?

Hmm. She might be able to work with that for the show. “Found Flings,” they could call it. “Single on the Subway.”

Never mind. Eve sighed and tried once again to focus on the script for Wednesday’s show. When the phone rang, it was a relief.

“Hey.” Mitch’s smooth bass made her stomach do that shivery thing it did every time she heard his voice. “Just calling to make sure you were okay after last night.”

“It really was as bad as I thought, wasn’t it?” she asked, pushing aside the script and putting both elbows on the desk. “You’re okay with me not inviting you in, right?”

“Sure. Not that I didn’t want to come in, but I’m a big boy. Anyway, it was your typical family dinner, though more interesting than most. For what it’s worth, I liked your family.”

“Most of the time I do, too. I don’t know what got into Grandmother. Usually she’s the epitome of the Southern lady. I’ve never seen her scratch on poor Auntie Anne like that before. What was up with that whole thing about ‘the truth’?”

“No idea. Probably some argument they got into before we arrived.”

“And Emily watching the show,” Eve said on a sigh. “Our demographics do include teenagers. It never occurred to me that Anne wouldn’t approve.”

“Are you sure it was the show she doesn’t approve of?”

“What do you mean?”

“I got the feeling there was some jealousy floating around.”

Jealous? Anne? Now, that was a stretch. “No. Couldn’t be. I think she was just trying to head off any tendencies to celebrity worship in Emily, that’s all. Myself, I deplore that kind of thing—while I stack the tabloids in my grocery cart.”

Mitch laughed. “Emily struck me as a sensible kid. What’s a rainbow party?”

A chuckle bubbled in Eve’s throat. “Go to Urban Dictionary. com and find out for yourself. And if you have any personal experience, I don’t want to know about it.”

“The only experience I’m interested in right now involves you. Any chance I can see you tonight?”

She glanced at the clock, then at the script. “I can’t, Mitch. It’s already half past eight and this script is close, but no cigar as yet.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow. Though it won’t be as much fun talking business in my office.”

“I can think of plenty of fun things to do in your office.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“What are you wearing?”

“My pajamas. Good night, Mitch.”

He chuckled, and she realized he was teasing her. “Good night, honey pie.”

Somehow, when he said it, it didn’t come out at all the way Grandmother said it.

Talk about a verbal stroke in all the right places. Yum. She forced herself to hang up.

AS SHE DROVE IN to the station and got back into the swing of a Monday morning, Eve had to put aside personal thoughts of Mitch and of her family, and concentrate on the urgent issue at hand: the network—as represented by Mitch—coming back for a counteroffer. Even if she didn’t have the whole loyalty issue to deal with, the simple fact was that she couldn’t leave her team behind and go national. Or if the unthinkable happened and she actually accepted CWB’s proposal, she wanted to take them all with her. But how could she do that? Would they want her to move into a new affiliate facility? That might mean Cole’s girls having to change schools or even cities. Jane and Perry might be looking at buying a house soon. What would the market be like somewhere else?

No, she couldn’t go and that was that. Just Between Us succeeded because of her, but she only succeeded because of Nicole, Jane, Cole and Zach. One for all and all for one, that was going to be her motto if any more networks came sniffing around.

When she got back from an early afternoon appointment, Dylan Moore materialized in the door of her office before she’d even put her purse away.

“Are you sitting down?” he asked, even though he could see perfectly well she wasn’t.

She pulled up her chair and sat. “I am now. Please don’t tell me today’s guest fell out.”

“No, but Thursday’s did.”

“What?”

“Eve, that’s not important. What is important is that the scout from SBN is in Dan Phillips’s office even as we speak.”

She stared at him, and he closed the door carefully behind his back.

“You told the CWB rep no, didn’t you?”

“Repeatedly,” Eve said. SBN? SBN was second only to the biggies like ABC and FOX—and they were in Dan’s office? What the hell was Dan doing, entertaining them without her there? What was going on?

“Keep an eye on them, Dylan,” she said. “I’m sure Dan will tell me all about it.” He’d better. She’d pull every word out of him with a pair of tweezers if he didn’t. “I’ll be in makeup.”

When she pushed open the door to the dressing room, Zach and Jane looked up as if they were expecting to see…anyone but her.

As if she didn’t show up ninety minutes before airtime every week?

Zach pasted a grin on a face that had been far too serious and got up. Jane stood, too.

“Hey, Eve,” Zach said. “Don’t mean to hold you up. I was just on my way out.”

“No problem.” She looked from one to the other, but Zach slipped behind her and out the door. She looked at Jane, who pulled the makeup tray over and waved her into the chair. “What was that all about?”

“Not much.” Jane pulled Eve’s hair back and whipped the apron over her pintucked gauze blouse. “We were only chatting.”

“Why? Did they change the lighting or something? Are we going with a different palette?”

“No, no. Personal stuff. Not to worry, he’ll figure it out.”

To her knowledge, Zach wasn’t in the habit of confiding his “personal stuff” to Jane. The only thing they had in common besides the show was the lottery. Eve put two and two together with lightning speed.

“He’s not thinking of quitting, too, is he?”

Eve closed her eyes as her friend began to dab on foundation. “He was talking out his options, that’s all. You know Zach. He comes at things from every angle.”

“But why would he come and talk to you? Did you tell him we talked on the weekend?”

“He wanted my opinion.”

“I hope you told him it’d be crazy to quit now when there’s no guarantee we’ll ever see the lottery money.”

“Not about that, and yes, I did tell him so. He wanted to know how you’d take it if he turned in his notice. I told him ‘Not well,’ but I think you know he has ambitions about filmmaking. It’s only a matter of time, if you ask me.”

“With eight million in the bank, you’d think a guy like him would be sailing off into the sunset with a bevy of blondes to swab his decks, not making indie films with no distribution.”

“It’s hard to know what Zach thinks. We’re not all going to leave you, but it doesn’t hurt to spare a thought for the future.”

A cold finger of dread touched Eve’s heart. Was that it? Was the fear of being left behind all that was triggering her anxiety?

She was no dummy. Back in Florida, Nana had made sure she’d talked with a grief counselor after the accident that had taken her parents. And she’d spent enough money on therapy since to know that she had a problem with that—being left behind. Deserted. Ditched as if she didn’t matter.

Maybe that was why she was always the dumper in her relationships, not the dumpee. She’d kept a weather eye open for signs that a man was losing interest, and she’d cut him off so fast that she left him blinking in the breeze of her departure. Rumor had it that Rafe Haddon was still showing up stag at charity dos. Maybe she’d scarred the poor guy for life. And what about Austin Taylor? And Sean Marshall? Should she give a little thought to an apology or at least an explanation there?

“Close your eyes,” Jane murmured, and dabbed on eyelid foundation. “Relax.”

“Do you think I should talk to Zach?” Eve asked her. “Or would he be upset that you told me?”

“Yes, and no, of course not. He knows we talk. That’s why he came to me in the first place. Like I said, he was only testing his options, not typing up the letter, okay?”

Eve nodded—carefully—and Jane got down to business with eye shadow, liner and lipstick. Then Eve had half an hour to run over the script and ten minutes to warm up the guest, a female professor of human sexuality who looked old enough to play canasta with Charlotte. The prof’s eyes held a sparkle, though, that told Eve they would both enjoy themselves in front of the cameras and the studio audience—and they did.

The audience loved it. Half the crowd flooded back to the station’s lobby, where the prof was signing copies of her book, and Eve slipped into her office for a moment to decompress before she took the heavy makeup off.

Dylan poked his head in. “This a good time?”

“It depends on whether you’re going to resign or not.” She eyed the stack of pink telephone messages, each one bearing Dylan’s spiky script.

“Not me. This is the most happening place in town. No, I wanted to report on my assignment.”

Assignment? “Did you find a replacement for Thursday? Damn, I spent hours on that script.”

“Not that one. You told me to keep an ear to the ground, remember? The scout from SBN?”

She’d completely forgotten. “What’d you find out? Is he gone?”

“She. And no. She took in the show and came back. I put her in the conference room to wait for you.”

Eve stared at him. “I need to talk to Dan.”

“He’s in there with her, eating the doughnuts I brought for the crew this morning.” He made a face. “Go on. You’ve got your game face on. Now’s the perfect time.”

Perfect for what? What was going on with Dan, anyway? Why was he running interference for her with SBN when he’d left her to CWB without a word?

Eve set her jaw. Lucky thing she’d worn red today. The power color. The color of sex and fame and confidence. She had a feeling she was going to need it.

MITCH HAD SPENT the rest of the weekend finding reasons to avoid calling Nelson Berg with an update. He’d fallen asleep to the sound of Eve’s husky voice on the DVD recordings. Consequently, the sweet sound had whispered, as elusive and maddening as she was, in restless dreams where tanned skin and curves always seemed to be within touching distance, but never quite reachable.

Nelson, however, had made himself unavailable for most of Monday, so Mitch didn’t feel guilty about not calling. First thing Tuesday, he called the station and asked for Dylan Moore.

“This is Mitchell Hayes from CWB,” he said when he had Eve’s assistant on the line.

“Nice to hear from you, Mr. Hayes,” Dylan said. “Ms. Best told me you’d probably call, but she’s in a meeting right now.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want to interrupt her. I’d like to get on her calendar for lunch, if she’s free.”

“The show airs at three. She preps from eleven to noon, and then goes into makeup at one-thirty.”

“Does she eat in between?”

“Not usually. Well, outside of a sandwich at her desk. She usually meets with the segment producers for a working lunch.”

“If I brought her that sandwich, do you think she’d meet with me?”

Moore hesitated. “I honestly can’t say, Mr. Hayes. The rep from SBN is here again and that’s probably going to mess up everything she’s got on her calendar.”

Mitch dragged in a breath while he tried to process this unexpected punch to the gut. “SBN has a guy there already, huh?”

He’d known it would only be a matter of time. But two scouts on-site? Had someone sent out a press release announcing Eve and her show were up for grabs?

“Not a guy. A woman. Not that it matters, since I’m not supposed to disclose anything.”

“It’s Mackenzie Roussos, isn’t it?” Mitch said flatly. “Tall, thin, dark hair, a smile like a shark closing in?”

“Yes.”

Mitch sighed. Of all the luck. The TV business was a small world, and the New York nucleus even smaller. Everyone in production knew Mackenzie Roussos. Some people called her “Mac the Knife”—but never to her face.

What her presence meant to him, though, was that CWB was probably going to get left behind in the bidding war. Nelson’s top offer for Just Between Us was the most generous the young network could afford. They’d been hoping they could get in and out with a contract before the big guns got wind of it, but that wasn’t going to happen now. He could just imagine the kind of money Mackenzie Roussos was at this moment dangling in front of Eve. Which made it even more important that he see her.

“Mr. Moore, I need your help.”

A pause. “My job is to assist Ms. Best, Mr. Hayes. And you can call me Dylan. Mr. Moore is my dad.”

“You should call me Mitch, then. If Mackenzie Roussos is here, then it won’t be long before all the vultures start landing and Eve’s calendar is going to explode, along with her privacy and most of her free time. I can’t do much, but if I get her away from there at least she’ll have a little space.”

“Which you’ll then fill with a repeat of CWB’s offer?” Dylan inquired with smooth politeness.

Mitchell’s respect for the people Eve surrounded herself with went up a notch. “No, actually. I—we saw each other on the weekend. Socially. No business—or hardly any. She’s under a lot of stress right now and I’d like to alleviate it some, if I can. As a friend. Not as Mackenzie Roussos’s competitor.”

Mitch could practically hear Dylan weighing the possibilities. “If you feed her, I can get her out of here.”

He released a long breath. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

“There’s a park on the other side of the apartment complex behind us. Be there with something for her at noon. And have her back by one-fifteen. No later.”

Mitch gave him his cell phone number in case something went wrong, and rang off. He didn’t have any ammunition up his sleeve to counter SBN’s offer.

But he could certainly spike their guns with the help of a club sandwich.

So, at noon sharp, armed with two paper bags filled with the most appetizing lunch the deli at a nearby strip mall could provide, he stationed himself on a wrought-iron-and-cedar bench between two huge flowering bushes that gave him a good view up the street.

At five minutes past, he saw Eve Best striding down the sidewalk. She looked absolutely mouthwatering in a pair of skinny black jeans and a gauzy crimson top that tied with an oversize bow under her breasts. She also looked as though she could tear the bark off a tree with her teeth.

She hadn’t seen him yet. Pausing in the middle of the sidewalk near the rock wall that formed the park’s boundary, she fisted both hands on her hips and scanned the area. He stood up and waved.

Her mouth opened in a soundless O and it suddenly occurred to him that he didn’t know what kind of story Dylan Moore had told her to get her down here.

Obviously, it hadn’t been the truth.

Unexpectedly, she laughed, and the anger went out of her body. “Well, you’re a big improvement on the person I was expecting,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m your lunch date.” He held up a hand, palm out. “Scout’s honor. Dylan and I set you up.”

“You sure did.” She swung a leg over the stone wall and joined him. “He told me one of Jane’s ex-boyfriends was down here, wanting me to help get them back together.”

“And you believed him?” He handed her a sandwich and a tall paper cup filled with a lime-and-kiwi smoothie. The counter guy had insisted that Eve Best came in there all the time, and that was her favorite. With a grimace, Mitch had bought it and ordered a tall bottle of water for himself. He was discovering that if you spent more than fifteen minutes outside in the Atlanta heat, you’d need it.

“Sure I believed him. Despite the fact that she’s crazy about Perry, an ex of Jane’s has been surprisingly persistent since the news broke about the lottery.” She bit into the sandwich as though it was someone’s neck. “And before this I’ve never had a reason not to trust anything Dylan told me.”

“It wasn’t his fault. We conspired to get you out of there for a break.”

“I’m glad you did. My calendar probably won’t be, but I’ll let Dylan take care of that.”

“Smoothie okay?”

She took a sip and nodded. “Dylan told you to go to Scarlett’s, didn’t he?”

“No. I wound up there on my own. But the counter guy said you liked those.”

She sighed and put her drink on the ground. “That was nice of you. This whole idea is nice. I have to admit I’m not having the best day.”

Mitch smothered his smile in a bite of his pastrami sandwich. “No problem. I know from experience that Mac the Knife can be a handful.”

A smile flickered at the corners of her mouth. “Word travels fast. Is that what the people in New York call her?”

“Not to her face. It’s Ms. Roussos then. I’m betting she pitched you an offer you couldn’t refuse.”

Eve began to relax against the wood slats of the bench back. A cluster of pink flowers from the bush nodded over her shoulder.

What was it about her that seemed to attract flowers? Her roses seemed to press against her door. Strange bushes cuddled up to her in the middle of the day. What next? An adoring dandelion wrapped around her ankle?

He resisted the urge to check.

No, he was probably just projecting his own desires onto innocent plants. It wouldn’t take much for him to press up against her door, begging for entry, or to nuzzle the bit of shoulder left bare by her sleeveless top. Or even, if it came to that, to press a kiss on the inside of that delectable ankle.

In fact, he’d love to press any number of kisses on any skin he could—

“Yep,” she said in answer to his question. “And surprise, surprise, my boss thinks I should take it.”

He blinked and focused abruptly. What left field had that come out of? “Take it? Isn’t he the one who benefits most if you stay?”

“Not if our happy little independent becomes an SBN affiliate.” She bit into her sandwich again. “Which—gee, how did I not know this?—has been his ambition for years. He has big plans for his production company, apparently.”

“Don’t tell me.” Mitch toasted her with his water bottle. “Part of the reason he gave you his support despite all odds was because he knew he was on to a good thing? A show that could get him the attention he wanted from the networks?”

“Bingo.” A sip of the green smoothie and another bite. “You’re a lot quicker off the draw than I was. It took me a good half hour to get it. And then when I did, there was your friend Mackenzie Roussos standing there with a fistful of dollars, waving them in my face like they were supposed to get my attention.” She snorted. “I just won the lottery, for God’s sake. Money is not going to get my attention right now. A really good financial planner, maybe. Not money. I should have known something was up the minute I heard she was meeting with him before she talked to me.”

“I’m glad I didn’t meet with him first, then. Or I’d have been suspect.”

She shot him a glance, and he saw the sunlight flicker on her smooth skin, lighting tiny spangles of auburn in her hair. Did she have any idea that she looked like an elemental goddess, made of crimson and fire, wrapped around with flowers?

Probably not. And he’d better stop thinking about throwing himself on that fire and breathing in the scent of crushed flowers, if he knew what was good for him.

“Suspect?” she repeated. “No. In fact…” Her voice trailed away. “It’s weird. I have no idea why I’m blabbing all this about your competitor. There must be some sort of unfair competition law I’m breaking.”

“I doubt it. But how many people do you know who would understand? Dan Phillips? Your friends?”

“They would sympathize, but there’s a lot to grasp here. The risks. The consequences.”

“Especially when some of them are going to be affected by the results, no matter what your decision is.”

Eve nodded. “I’ve been chasing that in my head, and I’m no closer to a decision than I was when you left my office on Friday.”

“How can that be? You said no.”

“I did. And then I started to think. What if I said yes? What would change? Can I keep my team? What would be best for everyone?”

“Why don’t you call a meeting and ask them?”

She looked at him with a wry expression. “At the rate we’re going, they’ll all have resigned before I can schedule it. It’s this damned lottery.” She waved a hand, as if Atlanta were somehow responsible. “We haven’t seen the money, and we won’t until this lawsuit is settled. Despite that, everyone wants to quit and make huge life changes on the prospect of it alone. I feel like that kid with his finger in the dam. Every time I convince someone to hang in there and stay, I hear someone else is reconsidering the options.”

“That’s got to be tough. It’s hard to make a decision that will benefit everyone if they leave. It becomes moot.”

“See, there’s your strategy.” Another bite of the sandwich. “You can talk my team into resigning, and then you’ll only have me to convince to come to the network. Not that you’ll have any vestige of a show once that happens, of course.”

He watched her finish her sandwich, crumple the wrapper and toss it back in the bag. “You really care about these people, don’t you? You want to make the right decision for them, not yourself.”

She stretched out her legs and crossed her ankles, holding her smoothie loosely in her lap. “Nothing wrong with that. Without them, I wouldn’t be here talking to you. We wouldn’t have the show that we do.”

“What does SBN propose?”

“Oh, they have all kinds of proposals. But the one Ms. Roussos and Dan spent the most time on was the one where I pack up and move to New York.” She paused. “Like that’s going to happen.”

“New York? You mean, even if Dan got his wish and merged into the network, he wouldn’t get to keep you? Isn’t that counterproductive, from his point of view?”

“Maybe. Or maybe he’s dazzled at being invited to swim in the big boys’ pond. But if he gets the affiliation, he can attract some big names. Maybe even a news anchor or two. Big advertising, lots of resources. He wouldn’t need the revenue Just Between Us brings in. Everybody wins.”

“Except you. And the team.”

“Cole Crawford would probably lose his job,” she agreed. “But Zach and Jane and Nicole wouldn’t. Every show needs good freelance production people, and they’re already in place.”

“They could go to New York with you, in that case.”

“I don’t think so. They have people they love, and their plans might not include a big move like that. And that’s as it should be.”

“And what about you?” he asked. “How would you like New York?”

“I’d hate it,” she said flatly.

That pretty much answered that. The bright, fragile hope he’d had burned out.

**9**

ON WEDNESDAY, Mackenzie Roussos arrived for her seven-thirty meeting with Eve in a towering temper, brought on by the fact that a scout from CBS was waiting in the lobby for his eight o’clock.

“I thought we were scheduled to chat for an hour,” she said, her mouth stretching in a smile that Eve could tell was an effort for her.

“We were, and I’m sorry,” Eve told her. “My assistant is doing the best he can to accommodate everyone.”

“It feels like six-thirty New York time,” the other woman said.

“I’m glad there’s fresh coffee in the kitchen for you, then.”

And Mac the Knife was forced to be satisfied with only twenty-five minutes in which to try to convince Eve to go along with what both the network and Dan Phillips wanted.

The rep from CBS, at least, had a sense of humor and a nice delivery of the same proposal. He’d already met with Dan for dinner the night before.

There seemed to be a pattern developing here, and Eve didn’t like it much. In fact, the more network people who turned up in the lobby, the more she wanted to collar Mitchell Hayes and run away to the country with him. They could find a pretty inn and spend a week straight doing something about her lack of focus—or rather, her inability to focus on much else besides his mouth and his hands—and what he might be able to do with both.

When Dylan again suggested that a walk in the park might clear her head, she fled the station gratefully, and the sight of Mitch relaxing on the bench was like a glass of cold lemonade on a hot day.

“Hey, beautiful,” he greeted her, and slid over to make room. She toed off her sandals and, with a sigh, let her feet rest in the cool grass.

He handed her a wrapped sandwich and a smoothie. “Your guy at Scarlett’s says the watermelon is an experiment. If you like it, he’s going to call it ‘Eve-ning in Paradise.’”

Eve groaned at the pun and took a sip. “Hey, this is good. It ain’t lime, but it’s good.” She glanced at him. “Is there a bug on my feet? Why are you looking at them?”

He settled back on the bench and unwrapped his sandwich. “I have this theory about you and plant life.”

Turkey and cranberry with cream cheese spread. Eve sighed with satisfaction. “I think you need to get out more.”

He ignored her. “You just look good in the great outdoors. As if you belong there. Plants seem to like you.”

“I don’t have my Nana’s green thumb—you should have seen our place in Florida—but I’m most comfortable in the garden. It relaxes me. Plus I can see direct results of what I do. Sometimes in television that’s hard to estimate.”

“Nielsen ratings not good enough for you?”

“We don’t get those. We’re an independent. Fan mail is a better indicator anyway. Some of it’s good, some bad. By the way, both SBN and CBS are here now.”

“I knew it was only a matter of time. I’d keep a close watch on your boss, Dan Phillips. Those scouts are players, and they represent serious money. It’s going to be hard for him to stay out of the decision-making process. Harder still for him to resist putting pressure on you.”

“He knows how I feel. Besides, my career and where I go aren’t his decision, no matter what he thinks.” She savored the tart flavor of cranberry on her tongue and mentally waved the thought of Dan away. “I don’t want to talk about work anymore. Tell me about your life in New York.”

He exhaled sharply in place of a chuckle. “What life? I jet around the country scouting shows. The baristas in the Starbucks at JFK have more interesting stories to tell.”

“So are you happy doing what you do?”

He met her gaze and shrugged. “I get my joy in other ways, like Music on the Street. And lately, seeing you.”

“Charmer.”

“I meant it, Eve. I’m developing this amazing capacity for fooling myself. I have an ultimatum from my boss about getting your signature by close of business today, and I don’t even care. In fact, I’ve convinced my conscience that seeing you has nothing to do with work. That it’s a pleasure I savor every day with no ethical relation to the whole reason I’m here.”

There was none of his usual teasing in his eyes. In fact, his gaze on her was intense to the point of sheer eroticism. Words failed her, and she licked her lips.

“You make it sound like a bad thing.”

“It isn’t. And just so you know, there’s no one waiting at home. Like you, the care and feeding of a relationship is too much for me under normal circumstances. But I’m beginning to wonder exactly what ‘normal’ is. And whether I want to tolerate it anymore.”

What was he saying? Was he leading up to something? And more important, how did she feel about it?

It was one thing to have a few sexy interludes with an attractive man. To banter and touch, to enjoy the longing and hint at something more. Like a game—one that kept the attraction simmering on the surface because it helped to balance the stresses of a decision that was creeping up on her faster than she wanted. But what if he made her dip below the surface? To start something bigger?

Could she handle that? Did she want more than—let’s face it—a hot fling with a man who would fly out of her life in a few days?

Or was that even what he was talking about? Eve’s everyday honesty faltered—and that in itself should tell her something.

She had to think about this properly. Somewhere where he wasn’t sitting within touching distance, looking scrumptious and casual in an off-duty linen shirt and khakis.

A glance at her watch told her she was saved. She crumpled her paper and drained her smoothie. “Let’s put a bookmark there and talk more about this later, okay? I have to get back.”

“Sure.” He looked easy and relaxed, but if it had been her waiting for an answer and getting none, Eve wasn’t sure she’d handle it so well. Especially if she had the ultimatum he did. “Give me a call.”

Back at the station, Nicole slipped into Eve’s office with a doomsday look on her face. Once again, Eve put her wayward thoughts in their compartment in her brain and smiled in a way she hoped was encouraging. “What’s up, girlfriend?”

“I finally managed to get Dr. Birdsall to commit to Friday.” Nicole sounded out of breath, as if she’d run down the hall as soon as she’d hung up the phone. “But we can’t do Friday because that’s the town-hall show. And we still have a hole for tomorrow. Cole needs to run a teaser during the six o’clock news and I don’t know what to do.”

Eve thought for a few seconds. “How about this? We’ll switch and have the town-hall show tomorrow, so run the usual teaser tonight. Instead of having the audience react to her talking about how men and women hide their motivations when they deal with the opposite sex, why don’t we tape segments of people telling their stories, and Dr. Birdsall can analyze what’s really going on when she comes on Friday.”

“Brilliant,” Nicole breathed.

“Bill it as a two-parter, a before-and-after, whatever you want. We’re good at making something out of nothing. You can handle it.”

“Thanks, Eve.” She vanished into her office, leaving Eve with her thoughts until she had to go into makeup.

Part of her admitted that it was crazy to talk to Mitch the way she did during these stolen hours. He was on the same side as the dark forces, i.e. the networks. But on the other hand, she was sure she’d go around the bend without his calm views on what amounted to a crisis situation.

Who else understood what she was going through? Who else seemed to know exactly what it took to change her perspective or set her heart at ease when her mind was blasting away at a hundred miles an hour?

She knew it was foolish and couldn’t last, but she put Mitch the Scout into a compartment labeled Business and put Mitch the Sexy Confidant into one labeled Friend. Okay, so it had a little subheading called Possible Lover in very tiny font below that. But anyway, there she’d keep the two of them until she was forced to combine them.

In the meantime, she was going to take his advice. The script that had been so troublesome on the weekend went off better than she expected. When she got back from taping, she sent out a scheduler message to the computers and PDAs of all her staff. She had just enough time to work up a business case before everyone gathered in the conference room for what they thought was the production meeting. She was going to tack another item onto the agenda and find out once and for all if her team was going to melt away on her, or stay just that—a team.

IF JENNA HAMILTON had been ten years younger, she’d have been running after Dylan Moore before he knew what was up. But since Kevin Wade had been haunting her dreams for the last couple of weeks, she was content to give Dylan an appreciative smile as he ushered her out of the lobby and past the studios.

“Everyone named in the suit is in the conference room already,” he told her. “Eve asked me to convey her appreciation for fitting the meeting into your schedule.”

“No problem,” she murmured. “You’d be surprised how much the case is on my mind anyway.”

When she entered the room, Eve stood to greet her. “Jenna, I’m so glad you could come. You remember everyone, right?”

In a single sweep, Jenna catalogued the people whose names had become as familiar to her as her own. Cole Crawford, the producer who’d been with Just Between Us since its inception. Twenty-four-year-old Zach Haas, the camera operator. California girl and story segment producer Nicole Reavis, whom she’d already met, and Jane Kurtz, who did makeup—maybe not the flashiest job, but Jenna had a feeling that Eve Best depended on her for a lot more than that.

Cole tilted his chair back and crossed his arms comfortably over his chest as Jenna sat opposite him in an empty chair. “Gee, boss, I wonder what this could be about?”

Eve gave him a winning smile. “Very funny. You’ve seen the reps from three networks around here. You’ve seen the show’s ratings, not to mention the press we’re getting. I figured we could use a powwow to catch everyone up and strategize a bit.”

“And for this we need a lawyer?” Nicole glanced at Jenna. “Not that I’m not glad to see you, Jenna.”

Jenna smiled at her. “Thanks. As CATL-TV’s corporate counsel, I’m only here to give y’all information and advice if you need it. We’re all playing on the same team, so your concerns are my concerns.”

“So, let me tell you what I know, and then you can tell me—” Eve paused “—whatever you know. Or want to know. Or anything else you have on your minds.” She glanced around the table. “Let’s talk about the networks first. As you know, Mitchell Hayes from CWB came to see me last Friday. We’ve met a couple of times since then.”

“Does that mean they’re the front runners?” Jane asked. “You haven’t met more than once with the others, right?”

A flush that wasn’t the result of Jane’s makeup tinged Eve’s cheeks. What was that about? Jenna wondered.

“Only because they haven’t been in Atlanta as long. Mackenzie Roussos from SBN got here Monday, and then Chad Everard from CBS showed up this morning. I’ve heard what they have to say and had Dan’s input, as well.” She passed out a sheet of paper with four columns of bullet points. “What I don’t have is your input, and no decision gets made around here without it.”

Jenna took her sheet. It listed all three networks’ proposed deal points, boiled down to their essence, as well as groupings of pros and cons. “Very nice.”

Eve shrugged. “We can’t talk about the future unless we all have the facts. So. I’ll go straight to the bottom line. We have three options. One, we say no to everybody and stay in Atlanta at CATL-TV as we have been. We enjoy what we’ve achieved and build on it. Two, we accept the offer of either SBN or CBS, and pack up and go to New York.”

Zach, Jenna noted, lifted his head like a puppy scenting the great outdoors. Jane frowned, Cole’s arms crossed more tightly, and Nicole looked mildly interested. Hmm.

“Or three,” Eve went on, “we accept CWB’s offer, which is substantially lower than SBN’s, and stay here as one of their affiliates. They’re a young network, still growing, so they don’t have the advertising weight the bigger ones do. But we will have national coverage in the small and medium-sized markets, though it’ll take a while to penetrate the big ones.”

Jenna broke the silence as six people considered the sheet of paper. “In case any of you are factoring the lottery win into this—which I’m sure you are—” She hesitated for a second. “Don’t. Ms. Skinner has informed me through her attorney that she’s not prepared to settle for anything less than an equal share of the prize money. That means we will be taking the case to court. Please consider the networks’ offers independently of any funds you might or might not receive from Lot’O’Bucks.”

Zach groaned, and Cole uncrossed both arms with such force he smacked the arms of his chair. Nicole jumped, and Eve frowned.

“You guys, we knew this,” Eve said. “I’ve told a couple of you that counting on the lottery money when it’s been challenged is like counting on it to snow on the Fourth of July. We’d be stupid to put our lives out on a limb—not to mention our finances and futures—for something that may never happen. That’s why we need to move forward together on this. I want to know how you feel about the networks’ proposals.”

“I’m for New York,” Zach said immediately.

“I’m not,” Cole threw out with the force of an air gun. “I’m not uprooting my girls and dragging them off to a place that may as well be another planet.”

“Yeah, but think of the career opportunities,” Zach said. “You could give them the kind of life they’d never get here.”

“What, away from their family and friends? And what am I supposed to do with them while I’m working the hours that we do? Nuh-uh.” Cole’s arms crossed again, and this time they weren’t relaxed and comfortable. “No networks for me. I’ll stay here and produce a different show, if I have to.”

“Jane?” Eve looked at the end of the table. “What’s your opinion?”

“I’d have to think about it for more than five minutes, but my instinct is to go with CWB and stay put. Yeah, the coverage isn’t as great, but we’ve worked up to regional success. We can work up to the big-city markets, too.” Jane glanced at Nicole, who sat on her left. “What do you think, Nic? You’re the one with out-of-state experience.”

Nicole looked uncomfortable at being the center of everyone’s attention. Or maybe, Jenna speculated, being the new kid on the block, she didn’t think her opinion would hold as much weight as that of the others.

“I—I’m conflicted,” she admitted. “Devon’s family and background are all here. Mine is on the West Coast. A move to New York would take him away from everything he knows, and me even farther away from what I know. I’d talk it over with him before I gave a decision, of course, but if we’re looking for gut reactions, I’d say no to the big networks. Let us stay as we are, where we’re happy doing what we do, or let us go with CWB. Either way, we get to stay in Atlanta.”

Jenna let everyone absorb this for a moment, and then said, “And what about you, Eve? This decision is going to impact you the most. You’re the one bearing the biggest weight, here.”

“Are you hinting that I need to go back to the South Beach Diet?” Eve cracked.

Jenna grinned at her. “Not a chance, girl. Those curves are bringin’ in the male demographic in a big way.”

Eve’s smile dimmed, but didn’t disappear altogether. “I have to say I’m with Jane. The CWB offer has a lot going for it. We’ve built our success in a regional market, and they specialize in that. So what if the big guys have the big markets sewn up—or think they do? We can work up to it. Give ’em a run for their money.” She looked around at everyone, and Jenna saw her straighten her shoulders. “I think we’re ready for the big time, guys. I know I am. We have a good show, a terrific team and a lot to bring to folks outside of Atlanta. I think going with CWB is smart. Not so ambitious we fall on our faces, but still a reach outside of our comfort zone. It’ll stretch us. Make us better, different. We don’t give up anything, and we get a lot. What do you say?”

Jane put up her hand. “CWB.”

So did Cole. “I agree.”

Nicole said, “Me, too.”

“That’s four. Zach?” Eve prompted.

Zach, Jenna thought, had the kind of face that would usually get him what he wanted. But this was bigger than he was. What kind of response would he give?

Zach sighed. “Well, I can’t very well go to New York by myself. Not after everything that happened there. So if you guys are determined to stay, then I’ll stay here, too.”

“Woohoo!” Jane leaped up and gave him a hug, and suddenly it was as if their team had won the hometown game. Everyone hugged the person next to them, and Eve practically disappeared in Cole Crawford’s big embrace.

Only Jenna stood apart, feeling for the first time that tug of absence deep inside. That urge to be a part of something bigger than just family and the horde of girlfriends she went clubbing with on Saturday nights.

When Cole turned toward her and gave her a big kiss, as if she’d had some part in this decision they’d made all on their own, she finally identified the feeling.

She wanted someone of her own to celebrate with. To be a part of. To build something with.

And she wanted that someone to be Kevin Wade.

**10**

MITCH ALMOST MISSED the call when his cell phone jingled at quarter past six Wednesday afternoon. He backed out of the hotel room’s shower, turned off the water and sprinted over to the bed. The phone vibrated against the glossy veneer of the nightstand.

“Mitchell Hayes.”

“Mitch, it’s Eve.”

It wasn’t his fault he couldn’t control the silly grin that spread over his face at the sound of that husky, musical voice. Good thing there was no one here to see what a goofball he was. He sank onto the coverlet. “Hey, Eve.”

“What could I tell you that would make you really happy right now?”

He paused for a moment to consider several dazzling possibilities. “You’re standing outside my door wrapped in a velvet ribbon and nothing else?”

“You’re lucky I don’t have speakerphone on,” she chided. “Try again.”

“You’re calling to ask me out?”

“Maybe. But before that.”

Maybe? “Before, after, I don’t care. The answer is yes, I’d love to go out. When should I pick you up?”

“Would you listen?” Her voice trembled with laughter. “I’m talking business, here.”

“You said what would make me happy, not the network. Okay, what happened between now and one-fifteen, when we said goodbye in the park?”

“I met with my team and presented our options to them. I told them we could make no changes…stay in Atlanta and go with CWB…or move to New York and go with one of the big networks.”

“And which did they choose?” He dragged his mind off where he might take her tonight—besides his hotel room, that is. He was really in fine shape when seeing her had become more important than the outcome of the deal. And speaking of that, he’d been inches away from packing it in and going back to headquarters to take his lumps. With the arrival of Mackenzie Roussos and Chad Everard and their bottomless pockets, he’d figured CWB wouldn’t have a chance at succeeding.

Money always won. Always.

“They want to stay in Atlanta and become a CWB affiliate,” she told him, triumph in her tone. “It may not get us as big a reach as SBN or CBS, but all of us know that reaching sometimes means overreaching, and that just makes you fall on your face. The ‘enthusiastically conservative’ approach to business has served us well so far. We figure we should just keep doing it that way.”

“I’m…delighted,” he managed from under his amazement. They’d chosen CWB. He’d won. After two failed deals in his immediate history, he didn’t have to go back to New York and face Nelson Berg’s derision. He was going to be able to keep his job—and meet the man’s damn deadline to boot. It was a miracle. “Amazed. Happy. Thank you.”

“There’s one caveat, though,” she said. “I want a guarantee that I can keep my team together. They’ve all agreed in principle to coming on board, and I realize we’ll have to negotiate compensation and all that. But what I don’t want is for the network to lay them off as soon as we sign the contract, and plug its own people in.”

“Fair enough,” he allowed, trying to breathe through the tight feeling in his chest. That feeling that meant he was holding back a shout of triumph. “I’ll present that as part of the deal.”

“I think the fact that we got an agreement at all calls for a celebration,” she said, “and I’m not talking about a walk in the park, either.”

“I can take your whole team to dinner. We’ll max out the network credit card in a show of good faith.”

“I hope you will, but not tonight. Tonight I want it to be just you and me. You’ve helped me so much this week. I wish there were some way to thank you.”

“You already found it,” he said fervently. “But sure. I’d love that. I usually spend the evenings watching the competition and thinking about you anyway.”

This time she laughed. “You know, you really should find a more romantic way to phrase these things.”

He had to smile, too. “Ah, but if I think about you and romance together, I get into trouble. Look what happened the last time, at your uncle’s. And at the Ashmere mansion.”

In his mind’s eye, for the thousandth time, he saw her silhouetted against that ivy-covered wall, her skin pale in the moonlight, her gown hugging the curves he still hungered to touch and taste. And then later, in the car, when she—

His body throbbed at the thought.

She had no idea how difficult it was to see her every day in the park and not beg her to come back to the hotel with him. To sit next to her on the bench and talk about the television business, when all he wanted to do was to lay her down in the grass. To explore the splendid curves revealed by her beaded, sometimes plunging necklines while with each inch of discovery, the chemistry all but ignited between them.

“I remember every second of what happened at the Ashmere mansion.” Her tone dropped to almost a whisper.

“Is your office door closed?” His own voice dropped, too, though there was no one within four walls of him.

“Yes.”

“I remember how silky your skin is. How sexy your mouth is when you talk. When I’m not with you, I fantasize about you. Basically, I’m hooked on you twenty-four seven.”

“You fantasize about me?” Her whisper had become downright breathless.

“Oh, yeah. In my mind, we’ve been on your desk, on my desk, at my hotel, in the park, on carpets of those pink flowers, you name it. We have an amazing love life for two people who have never seen each other naked.”

She giggled. “You’ve seen me nearly naked.”

His body stiffened with appreciation. “One of my fondest memories. I could write entire sonnets to that moment, I swear. Have I told you how much I like that red gauze top you had on yesterday? That was good for a real dream about you last night, not just your standard daytime fantasy.”

“I was wearing a bra, you bad boy,” she whispered.

“Mmm,” he rumbled. “A push-up. And a fine example of its kind. I and a couple of million male viewers thank you.”

“It didn’t show anything!” she squeaked. “I had the director and the guys in the control booth double-check. Both backlighting and spots.”

“I bet they enjoyed that. No, you only showed enough to run my concentration right off the rails. It was more the total effect. The jeans were great, too. Have I told you what a pretty rear view you have?”

“No, poor thing. With you, it gets no attention.”

“I am pretty consistent,” he admitted. “I hope you know what this conversation is doing to me, even as we speak.”

“If it’s anything like what it’s doing to me, it’s going to be difficult to get out of here without someone suspecting I have a very hot date.”

“You do. How soon can I pick you up?”

“Um, as soon as the swelling goes down?”

“Well, yes, that’s a given. Say, seven-thirty? That gives you seventy-five minutes.”

“We’re going to dinner, right?” she asked. “Just checking.”

“Dinner,” he promised. “And now that negotiations are over, after the champagne, I really, really, want you for dessert.”

It took ten minutes of steady concentration before Mitch could turn off the sensual images blending into one another in his head, and reduce his hard-on to manageable proportions. He had to call Nelson and tell him the good news, and he simply couldn’t do that when Eve filled his mind and affected his body in such an unbusinesslike fashion.

All he wanted to do was think about her and what was to come this evening. And he would—after he called in to report.

Mitch walked back into the bathroom and took his shower, with the water a little cooler than usual. Once he was shaved and dressed, he picked up his cell and hit Autodial.

Nelson Berg answered on the first ring.

“It’s Mitch.”

“Just how long do you plan to spend down there enjoying Southern hospitality?” Nelson barked. “You got some kind of Scarlett O’Hara complex says you’ll think about doing the deal tomorrow, or what? Let me tell you, tomorrow never—”

“The deal’s done, Nelson.”

That stopped him. For all of two seconds.

“When did this happen?”

“Just now. Consider your deadline met. It’s done for all intents and purposes, anyway. Eve Best called me to say she’d reached an agreement in principle with her staff, and then I called you.”

“Did she, now? How about that.”

Mitch’s forehead creased. “You sound surprised. Didn’t you think I could pull it off?”

“Oh, I knew you’d give it everything you had. It was that or the job postings on Craigslist.”

“Your confidence humbles me, Nelson.”

“It keeps you young bucks on your toes. So how soon will they be coming over? I’ve got a lot of logistics to handle once the process starts.”

“We have to iron that out, but I can’t see it going longer than six months. We may not make the November sweeps, but we’ll definitely get May.”

“I want November,” Nelson said immediately. “Get ’em on board by September at the latest.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Damn right you will. You might have pulled off this one, but anybody can do a handoff. I can replace you.”

Deep in Mitch’s gut, anger began to bubble. “Nelson, anybody ever send you to management training? Because the reward-and-punishment method of motivation is really getting old.”

“I don’t need to punish people who do their jobs properly,” Nelson snapped. “And if you don’t like it, you don’t have to stick around.”

“Fine. I can quit, if you want. Before we get Eve Best’s signature on this contract. Mackenzie Roussos and Chad Everard are both here. I’m sure they’d be happy to step in with theirs.”

Nelson swore so colorfully that Mitch wondered if he’d been in the navy at some point. Back in the dark ages. Before managers learned to lead by example instead of by threatening everyone in sight.

But Nelson also appreciated a man who had a spine. Mitch might not be a shark like Roussos, or a glamour boy like Everard, but he could bring in the results with the best of them.

Nelson ran out of steam eventually and surprised Mitch with a change of subject. “So, how’d you pull it off? Did you take my advice and romance her? That always works with women.”

As if Nelson would know. The guy had been divorced, what, three times?

“I did not. She needed someone to talk to and I stood in as a sounding board.”

“Talk to?” From his tone, you’d think Eve had demanded that Mitch eat raw squid.

“There aren’t a lot of women in this region in her position, Nelson. And it’s not like she can call up Oprah or Ellen DeGeneres for a pep talk. I’ve been around this industry a while and seen a lot of shows in production. She appreciates a high-level view.”

“As long as you’re not exchanging industry secrets,” Nelson warned. “You know my opinions about that.”

“If we’re going to be on the same payroll they won’t be secrets,” he pointed out. “I plan to bring her on board with CWB’s culture, org structure, all that. In time. Not now.”

“Too soon for that,” Nelson agreed. “Get her John Hancock on that contract and she’ll be inundated with all that stuff. Good work, Hayes. When are you coming back?”

“When I get the aforesaid John Hancock,” Mitch replied drily. “And we have a few things to iron out. For instance, she wants assurance that her team will stay together under our management.”

“Why? You’ve seen one producer, you’ve seen them all.”

“It’s not just the producer. It’s the cameraman, the main story coordinator, the makeup artist who happens to be her best friend.”

Nelson made a noise that expressed his opinion of that. “I sent you down there to get Eve Best. I don’t care about her friend the makeup artist. Those people are a dime a dozen.”

“In my opinion, it would be a mistake to upset the status quo,” Mitch warned. “This team has created a winner. Making the change from independent to network is going to be disruptive enough. I’d recommend strongly that we not make any further changes.”

“I’ll think about it,” Nelson conceded grudgingly. “We can always give them short contracts and unload them in a year. I’ll talk it over with the honchos in our teleconference on Monday.”

Mitch acknowledged this was the best he could expect for now. He and Nelson both knew that Eve had them over a barrel. If they didn’t meet her conditions, she could pull out and remain as she was, no harm done. At worst, she could call SBN or CBS and play hardball with them, cutting CWB out of the running altogether.

“So, what else?” Nelson asked.

“Tonight we’re going to—” he stopped.

“What?”

“Review the list of upcoming guest segments,” he lied. “That’s it for now. Talk to you later, Nelson.”

His boss rang off with his customary abruptness and Mitch snapped his cell phone shut.

He needed to watch his mouth. Because there was no way he was telling anyone that he and Eve were meeting for dinner. Or about what they had planned after that.

EVE PUT THE RECEIVER down quietly and marveled at what Mitch Hayes could do to her with words alone. Oh, and the low, sexy voice didn’t hurt, either. That was the second time she’d skated close to having phone sex with the man—and her blood was hot, and her body softened and ready. If Mitch had been here, she’d have locked the door and jumped him.

As it was, she had to get a grip on her rioting responses. Her first duty was to let Dan know the team’s decision before he heard the news in the hall.

For a few moments, she concentrated on slowing her heartbeat and calming her breathing.

Come on, seven-thirty. This would be the shortest meeting on record.

She climbed the stairs to the station’s third floor and tapped on Dan Phillips’s door. When she heard him call, “Come in,” she pushed it open.

And stopped on the threshold. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were with someone.”

Mackenzie Roussos uncurled her lanky frame, which topped Eve’s by about four inches, from the squashy chair in the corner. “Nice to see you, Eve,” she said. “Great show today. I’m looking forward to sticking around for the town-hall show tomorrow, too.”

“Thanks,” she replied, watching Mac the Knife the way a bird would watch an approaching cat. Shrugging off the last lingering thought of Mitch, her senses went on alert. “We never know what to expect with those. I think that’s why they get the highest ratings during the week. There’s something mesmerizing about unpredictability.”

“There’s something mesmerizing about Just Between Us, period,” Mackenzie purred. “I really think it would be a fabulous fit for SBN.”

Well, there was a perfect opening for you. “Actually, that’s what I came to discuss with Dan.” She glanced at him, then back at the other woman, and smiled. Let her make what she wanted of that. “In confidence. Do you mind, Mackenzie?”

Roussos smiled and snagged her silk jacket off the coat tree and her Dooney & Bourke briefcase from the floor. “Not a bit. I love it when you talk about me and my network behind my back. Later, Dan.”

She closed the door behind her, and Eve sank into the other chair, which was a hard-backed one close to the chaotic pile that concealed his desk. What had they been talking about? Was she making him pie-in-the-sky promises about the future of his production company if he guaranteed that SBN would get the show? Or was she here for more personal reasons? Just how much influence did a high-flying woman like Mackenzie Roussos have over a middle-aged, independent station owner who hankered for a taste of the big time?

There was no way to ask these questions, and she had a job to do. For a moment, she wondered how to begin, but he saved her that decision.

“Production meeting go okay?”

She nodded. “Town-hall prep is pretty straightforward. Give the audience a topic and stand out of the way of flying objects.” He chuckled, and she went on, “I was glad to have some extra time to talk over the networks’ offers with everyone at once.”

Dan eyed her, giving away nothing. “And?”

“I gave them the three options, and we talked over the ramifications of each one. In the end, it was nearly unanimous.”

Another pause. Then Dan said, “You want me to read it in tomorrow’s paper, or what?”

Ouch. She’d thought he’d be mellower after being schmoozed for however long Mackenzie had been closeted in here with him. Eve took a deep breath. “Everyone wants to go with CWB.”

His face froze.

She rushed on, “All of us except maybe Zach have reasons for wanting to stay in Atlanta. Me included. I’m just getting to know my extended family after being away for so long. Cole doesn’t want to uproot his kids. Nicole would rather not go even farther east and—”

“CWB?” he asked, as if she hadn’t even been talking. “You chose that Podunk network over SBN and CBS?”

“Yes.”

“Are you completely insane?” He pushed his chair back and stalked around it. For a second Eve wondered if he had a predisposition to violence she didn’t know about, and then he passed her and began to walk a tight circle on the area rug. “Their offer wasn’t even half as generous as SBN’s. What are you people thinking?”

“We’re thinking about our lives,” she said carefully, watching him. “About the quality of them. And frankly, with the exception of Jenna Hamilton, nobody in that room really cares about SBN’s money right now. We have enough of our own.”

“You would have if Liza Skinner hadn’t shown up, dragging her sour grapes into this. You can’t depend on that money, Eve. By the time she gets through with you, most of it will have gone on legal fees, and twenty years from now you’ll get a check for a thousand bucks.”

“Maybe.” Eve tried to keep her voice steady. Mitch had warned her, hadn’t he? She should have listened to him—and been ready. She should have realized how invested Dan was in going with one of the big networks. She should have seen the significance of all these têteà-têtes with Mackenzie Roussos. “But even leaving the money out of it, CWB still has the best deal. No one wants to go to New York. Period.”

“Maybe I do,” he ground out.

“Then go, if you want to. Sell the station outright to CWB instead of becoming an affiliate. Or sell Driver Productions to SBN and syndicate the heck out of it.”

He glared at her, and she realized that disappointment in her decision had clouded his ability to see reason at the moment. She valued her relationship with Dan, and staying any longer meant they’d probably both say things they’d regret.

“Look, I’m sorry that this is disappointing for you. But you’ll see in the long run that it’s best for the team. And that’s what we all want, right?”

He threw himself into the squashy chair—which was probably still warm from Mackenzie’s shapely behind—and stared out the window.

“Maybe we can talk about it later,” she offered, and slipped out, closing the door behind her.

Thank God she had Mitch to look forward to, she thought, as she clattered down the stairs. She snatched up her handbag and briefcase and left the station at the next thing to a run. The thought of Dan and his problems peeled away under the sharp edge of anticipation.

Dinner and dessert.

He’d promised.

**11**

HOW DID YOU dress for a seduction when you had to appear in public and eat dinner first?

Eve considered her closet for the fifth time since arriving home. After her shower, she’d done her makeup with special care and put her hair up in a twist decorated with one of Nana’s mother’s Art Deco diamond clips. The evening was a warm one, telling her that they’d all be wilted and sweaty when the blast furnace of summer actually hit. So with the temperature in the low eighties, velvet and anything satiny was out.

She fingered the red gauze blouse he’d said he liked. Unconsciously, she’d put on a bloodred lipstick that was a good match for it. Hey, why fight her instincts? She pulled the top on and cinched the wide sash ties into a big bow under her breasts, where it had the inevitable effect of drawing the eye to her cleavage.

No wonder Mitch liked it. Plus, this deep red was a good color on her. Now. Skirt. She chose a long black knit slit up both sides, and stepped into black stilettos that made her legs look much longer than they were.

Turning in front of the mirror, she nodded. The combination of the youthful top with her grandmother’s diamonds was unique and fun—an image she worked hard to project on camera. Not to mention comfortable. When you were in the public eye as much as she was, comfort couldn’t be overrated.

She decided against earrings—they’d only slow her down when she and Mitch were tearing each other’s clothes off. Oh happy thought. And where was he, anyway? Seven-thirty had come and gone.

As if she’d conjured him up with the thought, the doorbell rang, and she clicked down the hall to answer it.

Damn, he looked good behind a whole lot of red roses.

Mitch held out the enormous bouquet. “Sorry I’m late. Apparently there’s a shortage of these. I had to go to three places to make up a dozen. Can you believe that?”

Taking them from him, she buried her face in the fragile petals and inhaled their wildly romantic scent. “I can’t believe you went to all that trouble.”

“It’s worth it. Between the bouquet and you, I’m speechless.” He leaned over the flowers and kissed her.

His lips asked, “Do you feel the same way as you did two hours ago?”

And hers replied, “Oh yes. Just you wait.”

When he pulled back, his eyes were dark and he couldn’t seem to take his gaze off her mouth. “Are you sure you want to go out for dinner first?”

“If we don’t go,” she whispered, “we never will. And I hardly have a thing in the fridge.”

He nodded as if he were trying to convince himself. “You’re right. Ready?”

“Just let me do something with these flowers and get my wrap.”

It seemed to Eve that dinner was less about the food than about scent and flavor and heat—and Mitch. She couldn’t have said whether she ate pork or beef, but she knew what his hands looked like as they held fork and steak knife. The wine was a wonderful pinot noir—but she only knew that because he said it was the same color as her blouse.

Her senses—taste, touch, sight—seemed to be intensified, as though the addition of Mitch to her life made her experience it more deeply or more thoroughly. She’d been in love before—with Rafe in college in Florida, and then briefly Austin Taylor, a newscaster who had left CATL-TV just before the show had taken off. She’d thought she knew the signs, but they hadn’t been anything like this.

She didn’t love Mitch, she told herself as he handed her his steaming espresso to counter the sweetness of the exquisite crème brûlée. Love didn’t work like that—didn’t explode into being in the course of a week of business negotiations. But she was certainly a little bit in love with him, and the anticipation of what was to come was like frosting on the cake of a wonderful evening.

He hadn’t even touched her outside of a hand on her waist as he guided her out of the restaurant and into the car. But her whole body was singing with need until, by the time they got to his hotel, she was as soft and moist as if they’d been kissing the whole way instead of driving.

“I hope you appreciate the extent of my self-restraint,” he murmured in the elevator as they floated to the tenth floor. “I’ve managed to go two whole hours without throwing you down on the nearest table and ravishing you.”

“Name the last time you heard anyone say ‘ravish.’” Her tone teased. Her eyes promised that she’d let him do just that, if he wanted.

“You did.” He pulled out his key as they walked, and unlocked a door about halfway down the corridor. “In a show last winter on the physics of the bra.”

“I remember that one. Boy, did the ratings ever spike.”

He ushered her in and closed and locked the door. “As of this moment, we are not talking business anymore.” He slid the wrap off her shoulders and draped it over a chair. “Can I get you a small but criminally expensive drink from the minibar?”

“No,” she whispered. “I’ve been waiting all night to kiss you properly.”

“I’ve been waiting to kiss you improperly.”

And then there was no more waiting. He turned and scooped her into his arms, his mouth coming down on hers. Her head fell back as she welcomed his lips, his tongue and the promise of complete possession later. Because that’s what this kiss was—a promise of things to come.

She could hardly wait, and at the same time, she wanted this moment to last forever.

Oh, my, he tasted good. His tongue teased hers, and she met him halfway. He advanced, and she invited, until their kiss deepened into a conflagration of texture and desire. How was it possible that lips could be so soft and wooing, and a tongue could be so hard and suggestive?

Eve took every suggestion he made and turned it into a seduction until they were both gasping for breath.

Still holding her, he backed up until his knees met the mattress. He reached back and stripped the glossy coverlet off it with one hand.

“If we land on that thing, we’ll slide right off it,” he said, pulling her onto the crisp sheets.

“Good plan.” She lay beside him and toed off her sandals. They dropped to the floor with a double clack. He reached down and tossed his shoes toward the closet door.

“Stop right there,” she ordered softly. “I get to do the rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Very good.” Leaning on one elbow, with the other hand she loosened his tie and whipped it off his neck and over one shoulder. “You sound like a real Southerner.”

“When in Rome. Sure I can’t help you with these buttons?”

“Absolutely not.” She made short work of them, and obligingly, he lifted up so she could remove his shirt. “Mmm.” She ran an admiring hand over his chest, feeling the mat of curly hair, springy with life. “You feel good.”

“You look good. You wore my favorite blouse.”

“A Southern lady always thinks of others.” Her hand strayed down to his belly, slowly mapping the contours of his abs. My, oh my.

“Does a Southern gentleman think about what the lady has under her clothes?”

“I’m sure he does, but he would never, ever mention it.” She debated whether she should explore the growing bulge in his trousers from under his waistband and belt, or through the fine wool.

“Okay.” His voice was husky as he leaned over. “I won’t say a word.”

And he lowered his head to kiss the curve of her breast. His tongue swirled on her skin, tracing the plunge of her cleavage and working up the other side. It felt glorious, as though he were worshipping every inch of exposed skin.

“Have I told you lately how beautiful you are?” he whispered as he moved red gauze aside to expose the red lace of her bra. He ran his tongue under the scalloped edge.

“Not since yesterday,” she managed.

“What terrible manners. I like your lingerie.”

“I thought you might.”

“Next time, don’t wear any. Remember what I said before.”

Did she ever. “You like to look.”

“That I do. May I?” He pulled the edge of the cup down and exposed her nipple.

“Please, Mitch.” She arched her back and moved as if to force herself into his mouth, but he pulled back.

“Not so fast. I want to look first.”

The man was an expert at torture, but at the same time, it was tremendously exciting to be the focus of that hot gaze. He released the front catch and her bra sprang apart. And then, unexpectedly, he arranged the wrap front of her blouse over her naked breasts and pulled her up until they sat facing each other. The fabric was like a breath of sensation on her flesh, teasing her aching nipples while it hid them from his sight.

“Very nice,” he breathed. “I can see your luscious nipples right through it.”

Or not. Her breasts felt heavy with desire, and she was positive the nipples he loved had never been harder or more ready to be touched.

Slowly, he untied the bow in the front and unwrapped the blouse, pushing it and the bra off her shoulders. She kicked off her skirt, and he backed up against the headboard, where he pulled her into his lap so that she straddled him.

“Oh, my.” She settled onto his erection, shielded by her wet panties and his trousers. Ooh. Very nice. Her breasts jiggled as she adjusted her position.

“Miss Best, I’m overcome by my need to taste your nipples. They are quite simply driving me mad. May I?”

If you don’t, I’ll scream. No, a Southern lady would never say that. “Please do.” She resisted the urge to giggle and instead, rocked a little on his cock.

She settled her arms around his neck as he cupped her breasts in his hands and groaned with pleasure as her flesh filled them. “Lovely,” he breathed. “So round. So firm.” Then he lowered his mouth to her nipple and swirled his tongue around it before he suckled it. Delight darted along her veins as his clever tongue and teeth pleasured her, as he nibbled and sucked and licked his way from one to the other and back again.

“Miss Best,” he said, his voice muffled against her skin, “I would like your permission to lick your nipples every day.” He slid two fingers between their bodies, and she jumped with the sudden, unexpected pleasure as his fingers found their target. “And since we’re on the subject, your clit, as well.”

“Shall we write that into the contract?” she asked, and gasped as he hooked her panties with his thumbs and pulled them off. In return, she undid his belt and fly and yanked his trousers and boxers down, tossing them to the floor.

“If not the contract, then certainly your calendar.” He pulled her into her former position, and she settled onto his naked cock as he gazed up at her. His mouth was swollen and his eyes glazed and dark with passion. He tongued a nipple, drawing it into his mouth and releasing it with a sound like a kiss. “I can’t live a single day without at least looking at your magnificent breasts. Naked, of course. We’ll need to specify that in writing.” His hips rose under her, and she ground herself against him. “And making you come. In your office will be fine. On your desk, preferably, but I’ll make do with the carpet if I have to.”

“On my desk?” she asked weakly.

“Yes indeed. You can lie on it and I’ll sit in your chair and eat you for lunch.”

“Goodness,” she whispered. “Lucky me.”

“Miss Best, there’s a condom in that wallet on the nightstand. Would you be so kind?”

In seconds she had it unwrapped and rolled down on him. He repositioned her above him and she sank onto the tip. A moan escaped her as she stretched to accommodate him.

“Miss Best,” he ground out, cupping her breasts so that his thumbs abraded her nipples, “I can’t wait any longer. Please use me ruthlessly for your pleasure.”

She kissed him deeply and sank onto him, feeling his tongue slip into her mouth and his thick erection slide deep into her body. Feeling his hands on her breasts as she rose and fell in slow motion. Feeling his fingers slide between them to touch her clit and stimulate it, as slippery with her creaminess as it would be if indeed he did have her on her own desk, bringing her to orgasm with his tongue—

She shuddered as the pleasure detonated under his clever fingers, spreading through her body like a flash bomb. Her body contracted around him and he groaned. He gripped her waist and, even as she cried out with the magnitude of it, thrust into her again and again, his hips flexing against the mattress.

He drove into her a final time and gasped, and she clutched him tight with every internal muscle she knew how to use. “Eve!” he cried, and she felt his body shudder as his chest heaved with the effort to breathe.

And then they were spiraling down to the mattress again, twined around each other, holding on as if they were two survivors in a high sea.

“Yes,” Eve said on a long sigh. “This is definitely going on my calendar.”

**12**

EVE SAT ON a padded stool in the center of the set, facing the live audience. The spotlight felt hot on her scalp, but she was used to it—and besides, she never stayed on the stool very long. The electricity of the unpredictable usually goosed her off it within about five minutes—and goosed the ratings, too.

Atlanta loved these things.

Usually she did, too, but today her concentration was shot. The fact that she’d left Mitch’s hotel room with barely enough time to skate home, change her clothes and get down to the station probably had something to do with it.

She’d had an Army shower—three minutes flat. It was impossible that she could still smell the scent of Mitch’s aftershave, hours later. Impossible that her panties could still feel damp, or that her secret places could still be sensitive and slightly sore.

Something moved off to the side, and she saw the man himself take a seat at the far end of one of the right-hand rows.

What strings had he pulled to get a seat? People started lining up on the sidewalk outside at six in the morning. Getting in was a crapshoot. People who looked interesting, had interesting opinions or simply happened to be wearing a hat that their two PAs liked were admitted. Eve figured it was kind of like a New York club. It didn’t matter how much money you had or who you knew. If the PAs nixed you, better luck next time.

Her music died away and she grinned at the camera. “Good afternoon, Atlanta—I’m Eve Best, and I’d like to keep this Just Between Us.”

The crowd screamed and propelled Eve up off the stool. “We’re swapping today with Friday, folks, in order to give you a two-part show. I want to talk about Understanding His Motives—Is What He Says Really What He Thinks?”

The studio rang with shouts and applause.

“For those of you brave enough to come up here and tell the truth—or not—you’re going to be filmed, and then tomorrow Dr. Barbara Birdsall, who specializes in male/female communications, will analyze—” she put a hand on her hip and struck a pose “—just what exactly is goin’ on.”

The next half hour took all her ingenuity and stage management skills as two women took their boyfriends to task on live television. A husband made promises to his wife. A middle-manager type of about forty who was clearly skipping out on his day job talked about how difficult it was to get anything done in his all-female shop.

One of the angry women with the cheating spouse was a housewife who taught neighborhood women how to strip for their husbands or boyfriends. The crowd’s response to her was so terrific that Eve made a mental note to get her booked for a show later in the month.

And then Cole was giving her the signal to wrap and their twenty-two minutes of live television was over. Town-hall days, while they might be unscripted, exhilarating free-for-alls, left Eve with a combination of a mental high and physical exhaustion. She always stuck around afterward, though, to thank the people who had been brave enough to come up on the stage. If they asked, she would usually pose for pictures and sign autographs.

As she did what she’d done hundreds of times before, though, a part of her mind focused on Mitch, zeroing in on him and holding him on the screen of her awareness as though she’d developed a silent radar overnight. And when the crowd finally thinned, she knew the moment he got up from his seat and made his way down to the front.

She steered the stripper housewife over to Nicole and turned to find Mitch near the false wall that backed onto the hallway to the lobby.

“Nice work,” he said as he fell into step beside her. “It’s like a three-ring circus. How do you keep everyone from killing each other?”

“This isn’t Jerry Springer,” she reminded him, ushering him up the stairs and into her office, and closing the door. “People are here to have fun, get something off their chests or contribute. I had a guy a couple of weeks ago get onstage as part of his civic duty. It was kind of funny because our topic was How Early Is Too Early for Sex Ed? He was a teacher. Took a day away from his classes because he felt so strongly that kids should be armed with information from day one.”

“He should’ve had a talk with my mom,” Mitch said. “She’d have preferred day billion. My dad wound up having to tell me about the birds and the bees when I was twelve.”

What had he looked like at twelve? She’d bet those brown eyes and that narrow dimple at the side of his mouth had been just as effective on the girls in seventh grade as they were on her.

“Precocious child,” she teased. “I’m happy you’ve made up for lost ti…mmm.”

The rest of the word became a purr as he kissed it into oblivion. Mitch could make her forget every other sense she had except touch and taste. Her office disappeared in a slow swirl of sensation and anything else but this man and this kiss.

Several dazed minutes later, she surfaced and pulled back enough to breathe and to gaze into his face.

“Can I just move in here?” One corner of his mouth twitched as he spoke, and she kissed it.

“No. I’d never get any work done. And people would begin to suspect. Where would I hide you when I met with Dylan, for instance? You’re too big to stash behind a potted plant.”

“I’d have to go under your desk.” He waved a hand at it. “Just think what I can do under there.”

A slow flame kindled in her belly at the thought of it. An answering flame burned in his eyes—and the knowledge that if she so much as spoke the word, he’d crawl under there and do under it what he’d promised to do to her on top of it.

But before she could give in to temptation, a knock sounded on the door. “Eve?”

“Come on in, Dylan,” she called.

She seated herself safely behind her desk, while Mitch leaned on the wall and gazed out the window.

“Oh good, you’re both here.” Dylan looked from one to the other. “Dan Phillips wanted me to set up an informal dinner for the three of you. Would today suit?”

Dinner? Eve frowned at Dylan. Dan wasn’t a dinner kind of guy—informal or otherwise. And what had brought about this sudden burst of hospitality when he’d been so angry yesterday?

“What’s going on, Dylan?” He always knew the hallway gossip. In fact, she counted on him when she needed to get the word out about something discreetly, or when she needed some clandestine detective work done.

But this time, her assistant shrugged, his brown eyes full of honest regret. “I don’t know, boss. Word is he’s pretty upset about you turning down the big networks—” he glanced at Mitch “—in favor of a smaller one, but you probably already knew that.”

“That he told me,” she admitted.

“And I saw both Ms. Roussos and Mr. Everard in the lobby this morning, a couple of hours apart. They didn’t contact me to set up a meeting with you. So my guess is, they were meeting with Dan.”

“Why would they do that if they’re out of the running?” she wanted to know, turning to Mitch.

“They’re coming back with a counteroffer,” Mitch said flatly. “It’ll be either money or location.”

“Money won’t do it, so it’s probably location,” she said. “What do you think, an offer to let us stay in Atlanta?”

“Would you take it?” He answered her question with one of his own.

“At first glance, no. We already agreed that CWB was the smarter way to go. That we’d risk less if we built our audience slowly.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mitch said simply. “I’m free for dinner, if you are.”

“This ought to be interesting.” She turned to Dylan. “Let Dan know we’ll meet him over at Scarlett’s at five. That’s as informal as you can get.”

“Will do.” Dylan closed the door discreetly behind him.

Eve got up and joined Mitch at the window. She could feel the heat of the day radiating through the shaded, dual-pane glass.

“Tell me again we won’t have to move if we go with CWB,” she said. “That’s not going to change.”

“No, it’s not,” he said quietly. “The team stays in Atlanta, no matter what.”

She nodded, and looked up at him. “This won’t be pretty.”

“Maybe not. But he wants to see us together. I’ll back you up.”

Outside of her team, it had been a long, long time since anyone had said anything like that to Eve. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

After a pause, he said softly, “You’ve been on your own a long time, haven’t you?”

Surprised at his perception, it took a second for her to shrug one shoulder in assent. “You get used to it.”

“You must have had a good foundation as a kid. To learn to make your own decisions and develop the kind of confidence you have.”

“My grandmother is responsible for that, I think. Being a teenager is never easy at the best of times, and when you lose your parents you feel like you’re drifting in space, mostly. I don’t remember junior high at all. Just vague images.”

“I have junior high blocked out, myself. Sounds like your grandmother did a good job—I’m sure that was a bad time for both of you. But they say a person’s character is formed by the time they’re five. So your folks get some of the credit.”

She glanced at him. “What brought this on? About my family?”

He shrugged and looked slightly embarrassed. “Just trying to figure you out. Learn what kind of influences made you the fascinating woman you are. And not just the TV host. The real woman.”

The truth was, she’d allowed him to learn more about her in the week he’d been in Atlanta than almost anyone outside of her small, tight circle of friends. What did that say about him? And if it came to that, what did it say about her that she was opening up to him? There had to be more going on here than a fling with a time limit.

And was she ready for something like that? To get into a relationship that brought both her sexuality and her maturity to the table?

That she’d never done before. She needed to stop asking herself these questions and make some decisions about herself.

“How long are you in town?” she asked suddenly.

“As long as I need to be. We still have to come to agreement on the terms of the contract, so I’ll be around for a few days yet.”

“Do you want to go somewhere with me on the weekend?”

“As long as it’s not to a baseball game, I’m your man.”

She grinned. “That’s right. You’re a hockey and soccer guy. Thank God. No, there’s been something I’ve wanted to do ever since I came back to Georgia and I’ve never had the time or the guts to do it.”

He looked confused. “The first I can understand, but not the second.”

“You’d be amazed. Good. That’s settled. Saturday, then.”

“Uh, aren’t you going to tell me what it is?”

She shook her head. “Not now. We have to go over to the deli to meet with Dan and it would take too long.”

She hustled him out the door before she lost her courage and told him to forget she’d mentioned it. But deep inside she knew that by asking him to do this with her, she’d committed herself.

To a trip into her past.

And maybe into her future.

DAN PHILLIPS WAS waiting when they arrived at Scarlett’s, looking as though he were afraid the spindly deli chairs would collapse and drop him on the tile. Maybe it wasn’t the best choice for a business meeting, but it was informal. It was also busy and noisy and, from what Mitch had learned, Eve’s turf. All the staff seemed to know her, and she’d hardly seated herself when someone called out from the back, “The usual, Eve?”

“Thanks,” she’d replied, and then he and Dan had had to play catch-up with the menus so their orders would all arrive at once.

He didn’t care. Food wasn’t high on his list of priorities on the best of days. But if Eve had meant to make Dan uncomfortable for this discussion—which he was sure she hadn’t because that wasn’t her style—she’d succeeded.

She didn’t waste any time getting down to brass tacks. “So, Dan, why don’t we get started? Dylan didn’t say what you wanted to talk about.”

Deliberately, Dan chewed and swallowed, then took a sip of his cola, taking back control of the conversation. After working with Nelson Berg, Mitch knew all the signs.

“I wanted to talk to you and our rep from CWB together, since that seemed fair, about what’s best for the show,” he began. “I’m not convinced that we’re on the right track.”

“In what way?” Mitch asked. “I’ll do whatever I can to assure you CWB is the best choice.”

“The thing that concerns me most is the advertising revenue,” Dan said bluntly. “It’s a fact that the bigger networks attract deeper pockets. That means they can attract advertising from cosmetics companies, car companies, pharmaceuticals. Not the local department store and Beulah’s House of Curls.”

“We have ad revenue from all those companies,” Mitch assured them. “Maybe Kia instead of Chevy, and wineries instead of Coors and Bud Light, but that fits your demographic.”

“Beulah’s House of Curls was one of my first advertisers, Dan,” Eve put in. “She stuck with us when things were really rocky in our first year. If you’re thinking of cutting her out now that we’re—”

Dan interrupted, and Eve looked taken aback. “If you go with CWB, she won’t be able to afford the rates. But Beulah isn’t relevant to this discussion. I still have reservations about partnering with a smaller network. I’ve been talking with Mackenzie and Chad, and they’re willing to throw their hats back into the ring and negotiate about location.”

Mitch exchanged a glance with Eve. Bingo.

“If you agree to go with one of them, they’ll allow the show to stay in Atlanta.”

“Will I get to keep my team?” Eve asked immediately.

“I can’t guarantee that, but they do guarantee that any production people who come on board will be equal or better in terms of quality and experience.”

Eve’s eyebrows, which normally had a beautiful curve like the wings of a sea bird, drew together in a frown. “I don’t want equal or better. I want my people. Cole, Zach, Nicole and Jane, in particular. And my two PAs and the junior segment producer.”

Dan put his sandwich down and wiped his fingers. “Eve, I know you’re not used to playing in the big pond, so let me give you some advice. You need to learn to give a little to get a lot. And in this case, we don’t know if the network will replace some or all of your folks. But we do know that we can stay in Atlanta, so chances are good. If you appear to concede on that point, they’ll be more likely to concede on location.”

“So it’s not a done deal, then.” Mitch jumped on that like a duck on a june bug. “Whereas CWB has already given Eve a commitment.”

“It’s under very favorable discussion,” Dan said, nettled. “SBN has told me that if it’s a deal breaker, they’ll concede.”

“But it’s not a commitment,” Eve pressed him.

“It’s on the table.”

“That’s not the same.”

“Eve, listen to me,” Dan said. “This strategy you’re talking about with building slowly with a regional network—that may have worked in years past, but it won’t work today. This is the MTV generation. People want a big splash, they want it now, and they want a lot of it. If you’re going national, you have to go for the biggest deal you can get.”

“No matter what it costs?” Mitch asked.

Dan eyed him, as if searching for sarcasm. But Mitch was perfectly serious. “I met with the other two networks in private, so inviting you along today was to give you the same opportunity to adjust your offer in light of what they’re willing to do,” the other man told him. “I’d hoped we could be objective about Eve’s choices, but I see that allowing you to sit in on this meeting was a mistake.”

“I disagree,” Eve said at once. “I should have been in on those meetings, too. But I think you have more at stake here than I do, Dan. It seems to me you’re the one having difficulty being objective, not me.”

“You’re not the only one with a career path.” Dan’s voice sounded muffled as he tried to keep his voice from carrying.

“That may be so, but it’s not your career that the networks are buying,” Mitch put in. “It’s Eve’s. We need to focus on the best thing for her and her team, and objectively, I believe that CWB is it. I disagree about your MTV philosophy. Eve’s demographic isn’t that generation. Her success has been regional, and building on that is the best way to go.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to talk about objectivity, Mr. Hayes, when your relationship with Eve has been about as far from that as you can get.”

Mitch sat back in his chair, unsure if the man meant what it sounded like he meant. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes,” Eve said with scathing politeness. “Clarify that for me, would you, Dan?”

The man shrugged and picked up his sandwich. “It just seems odd to me that the other network reps have been very aboveboard in their meetings with me, while you choose to meet with Eve alone, in nonbusiness settings. Aside from the fact that you seem to be cutting CATL-TV’s management out of your discussions, it disturbs me that the way you spend your time with Eve can be, uh, too easily misconstrued.”

“Speak English, Dan,” Eve suggested, clearly trying to keep her temper.

“Meetings in the park, Eve?” he asked, eyebrows rising. “And at your home? Come on.”

“I’ll have my meetings wherever I want. We’re talking business.”

“If I were meeting with Mackenzie Roussos in my apartment, would you say that about me?”

“Yes. And I’d mind my own business, and so should you. Have you got somebody following me, or what?”

“I have sources all over town,” he pointed out. “If one of the tabs happens to call me with a question about Eve Best’s latest arm candy, it’s my job to know.”

“That comment was derogatory to Mitch,” she snapped. “And you have no right to talk to a journalist about me. That’s been our policy from day one.”

“Times have changed,” Dan replied.

Mitch decided it was up to him to step in before one of them said something that couldn’t be taken back. “I think each of our positions is very clear,” he said. “I recommend that we table this discussion. Eve will consider everyone’s offer and let us know what she and her people decide. Isn’t that right?”

He put all the appeal he could into his gaze, begging her not to lose it and back Dan into a corner he couldn’t get out of without loss on both sides.

Eve pushed her sandwich away and got up. “That’s fine. Excuse me, gentlemen. I don’t mean to cut this short, but I have video to screen and a script to prep for Dr. Birdsall tomorrow. I’ll talk to you both later.”

She laid a hand on Mitch’s shoulder, as if trying to communicate to him that she wasn’t angry with him. He saw Dan Phillips register the gesture and frown before she was out the door, leaving it swinging shut behind her.

**13**

EVE COULD ONLY be grateful that watching the video cut into segments for her by the show’s editor required every ounce of her concentration. The script for their male/female communications show, which she’d been working on this morning, didn’t need much support from her. She’d structured the show so that Dr. Birdsall’s commentary on these video clips would be the highlight.

She was glad that for once, the focus wouldn’t be on her.

Sitting in one of the station’s three editing booths, she and Cole approved the segments they would send to Dr. Birdsall, which had been promised by 8:00 p.m. Try as she might, though, every time the editor finished a clip and saved it into its own file—“Cole, don’t let me forget to follow up and see if Nicole got that stripper housewife booked”—the anger and guilt bubbled up out of the cracks in her concentration.

If she’d been alone, she could have fumed at Dan aloud. But as it was, she had to stuff him in a box in the back of her mind. She’d take him out later and yell at him in private—in her imagination.

Or better yet, she could call Mitch and they’d yell at him together, in absentia. Maybe she’d do that, as soon as she and Cole were finished. Any excuse to hear that voice one more time.

“Four clips, right?” The editor ran the digital counter under the last frame and clicked the mouse. “One for each five minutes?”

“I think so. If we keep them to two minutes each, that gives Dr. Birdsall time for her analysis and me time to elaborate. Plus a minute each for the opening monologue and my close.”

“Have I told you lately how brilliant this idea is?” Cole watched the editor save the four clips up to the production server, where two of their five camera operators would run them at the times Eve had indicated in her script. “It’s something new. I bet that you’ll get a boatload of letters asking that the town halls be moved permanently to Thursday. The chance that an audience member can star in their own segment will be a big draw. Reality TV comes to Atlanta.”

“We’ll see. If the lines get any longer, we’ll have to hire bouncers.”

Cole thanked the editor for his work, and when the kid had made his escape, he opened an e-mail screen. “What’s Dr. Birdsall’s addy?”

She gave it to him, and watched him type a message letting the psychologist know where she could view the clips. When he hit Send, she glanced at the clock. Eight-fifteen. A little late to call Mitch. She’d make it an early night. Lord knew she could use it, after getting next to no sleep the night before.

Had it only been the night before? It seemed a week ago.

“Everything okay with you, Evie?” Cole asked, leaning back in his chair as the e-mail went off into cyberspace. “You seem…preoccupied.”

What a sweetheart he was. He had his own problems with being a single dad, not least among them the fact that he’d had to arrange child care in order to stay here with her tonight. And still he could take the time to show her his concern, the way he had since the earliest days at the station when they’d both been green as beans.

“I am,” she admitted. “I didn’t mean for it to show, though.”

“About the buyout? Or about…other things?”

“Both.”

“I figured so.” He stretched his big frame, making the chair squeak. Not for the first time, Eve wondered what kept him in this industry when he was so much happier bushwhacking around the wilderness or loading his kids and the dog into a canoe in the north woods. “Word in the halls is that Dan’s got his panties in a twist about us choosing CWB.”

“Word in the halls is right. But what’s worse is that SBN and CBS have come back and said that they’ll let us stay in Atlanta, too.”

Cole lifted an eyebrow. “And this doesn’t make us jump for joy because…”

“Because I don’t think they mean it. I think it’s a bait and switch to cut CWB out before any signatures go on paper.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Could be. From what you said, they seemed pretty adamant about New York in the beginning.”

With a sigh, she said, “I have to admit this is getting to me. I thought we had a decision we could all be happy with. Now I have to call another meeting and present the new offer to everyone. And goodness knows how that will go. It’s pretty hard to turn down more money plus staying here if that’s all you see.”

“I think Nicole sees the big picture. And Jane and Zach would, too. But yeah, it’s still a risk.” He paused. “Word in the halls didn’t stop there.”

“Oh?”

He grinned at her. “You have that innocent look perfected. It’s me, remember?”

Someday, some lucky woman would convince this guy that she could be trusted. Eve looked forward to that day.

“I never forget,” she said, smiling back. “Come on, out with it.”

“It’s kind of personal.”

Obviously it was. It had probably gone around the station at the speed of light. “I can handle it.”

“Word is that you and the CWB guy have a thing going on. That being the reason you want to go with them instead of the big guys.”

“Is it, now?” Keeping something on the down low around here was like keeping M&M’s in your desk. It wasn’t a matter of if someone would find them, but when. “Are people saying he’s romancing me to get the deal? Do they know how insulting that is?”

“I don’t know, Eve. It seems too pat that he’d appear out of nowhere like this and sweep you off your feet, just when they need you on their roster.”

“And I’m ripe for the picking, being totally inexperienced where good-looking men are concerned.” Her tone dripped sarcasm, but Cole only reddened slightly. She had to give him credit. He wasn’t ducking and running.

“You know that’s not it. You have a good head on your shoulders—not to mention more knowledge about the subject than any ten women. Besides, God help any guy who hurts you. After you’re done with him, the rest of us will run over his remains with the camera dolly.”

“You think Mitch is going to hurt me? Are you giving me relationship advice, Cole?”

“No, I’m passing on the dirt is all. I thought you’d want to know.”

“Well, if it should come up again, you can let the hallway gossips know that if—and I stress the if— there were anything between me and Mitchell Hayes, it would have occurred after the team agreed to the deal, not before.”

“If?” Again that questioning eyebrow.

“So maybe there might be now. I don’t know.”

“No kidding.” A slow grin, different from the previous one, spread across his face. “Good for you, Evie.”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” she asked quietly. “What they’re saying.”

“Who cares? If the guy honestly makes you happy and he’s on the up-and-up, it’s nobody’s business. I’d be careful, though. You don’t want to compromise the deal.”

“I’m not giving anyone any ammunition. We don’t see each other very much, and when we do, we keep it private.”

“Except for those lunches in the park.”

“Where we sit at opposite ends of a hard bench and talk. Good grief, are people saying we’re at it like rabbits under a bush?”

He laughed, the sound burying itself in the egg-carton walls of the editing booth, which was part of the recording suite. “I wouldn’t go that far, but there was much interested speculation. Not everyone is suspicious. Some of us are happy for you, Eve. We think you work too much.”

Maybe that was true. “Y’all will be happy to know I’m not working on the weekend, then.”

“Got something fun planned? The girls and I are taking the boat out.”

“I was thinking of Mirabel.” At his puzzled look, she elaborated. “It’s a plantation house south of Social Circle.” She hesitated and then decided to go on. This was, after all, the man she trusted day in and day out with her public self. Why shouldn’t she trust him with a glimpse into her private self? That’s what she planned to do with Mitch, right? “A hundred years ago, my family used to own it.”

Now both eyebrows rose. “You’re from a plantation family? How did I not know this? On what side?”

“My dad’s. Bests farmed Mirabel for something like a hundred years, until my grandpa lost it in the sixties. Couldn’t pay the mortgage or the taxes or something. I don’t really know. I’ve never been there.”

“Why don’t you have Dylan do some research on it? He’s good at that stuff.”

“No.” Eve dropped her gaze to the keyboards behind Cole. “I’d rather keep it just between us, if you don’t mind.” A second too late, she realized what she’d said when he grinned again. “And don’t even think about putting that up on the board as an idea for the show, because the answer is no.”

“Aw, come on. It’s perfect. The hidden history of our favorite celebrity.”

“It’s personal. Never you mind.”

“You’ll let me know if you decide otherwise?” He got up and picked his khaki jacket up off the back of his chair.

“You’ll be the first.” She let him usher her out and walk her back to her office, where he waved and headed down the hall toward the stairs. Cole Crawford never used an elevator if he could help it.

Ha. That would be the day that she made an episode all about her discovery of her family—or not. Mirabel, she’d discovered during a couple of Google searches, was open to the public on the weekends, but nobody lived there now. During the week, one of the charity trusts held events in the drawing room and had an office upstairs. Chances were low she’d discover anything about her ancestors there, but she wanted to check it out anyway.

It was something to share with Mitch. With him, she was discovering all kinds of things about herself. Maybe she’d discover something more if they did this together.

EVE HAD BARELY opened her eyes Saturday morning when the phone next to her bed rang. It had to be Mitch. None of her friends would think of calling before ten o’clock on a weekend unless they were hoping for a ruptured eardrum.

“’Lo?”

“Oh, no, I woke you.” His voice was as deep and dark as corn syrup, and just as sweet.

“No, you didn’t. But not by much.” She yawned, and then caught herself. How rude was that?

But he chuckled. “I’m only sorry I wasn’t there to do it in person. I called both your numbers last night but got no answer.”

“You should have left a message. I wanted to call you, but I got home pretty late.” She stifled another yawn, and stretched instead. “I wondered who those hangups were. Are you coming over?”

“Would you think I was a dork if I said I was parked outside?”

“What?”

Mitch laughed and hung up. With a thrash of her legs, she kicked the sheet off and dashed into the bathroom. A quick swipe of toothpaste was all she had time for before she heard him knock on the door.

Hair! Three licks with the hairbrush made it lie flat, at least, and then she had to answer the door or he’d think she was putting him off.

Naturally, he looked good enough to eat in a pair of soft, faded jeans and a light shirt open over a white T-shirt. His hair was loose and tousled, as though he’d been driving with the windows open.

Sigh. She had no idea where this was going or how long it would last—or even if it could, considering the fact that people were talking already. But she had today—and she’d promised herself she’d enjoy the heck out of it.

“My dream come true.” He stepped inside and slid both hands around her waist.

“Right,” she said. “Lucky for you I had toothpaste handy.”

“Lucky for me all the way around.” He leaned in and explored the sensitive skin under her ear. “You are finally not wearing a bra or some miracle of modern engineering.”

She slept in a tank top and a pair of seersucker drawstring pajama bottoms that were probably wrinkled to a fare-thee-well. But from the heat building in his eyes, Mitch wouldn’t have cared if she slept in chain mail, as long as there wasn’t a bra under it.

With a delicious sense of her own power, she backed out of his reach. “Just let me get dressed.”

“Oh, no, you don’t.” He followed her down the sunny hall, stalking her like a big, casual cat.

“No, really. No Southern lady would ever greet a guest in such dishabille.” She reached her bedroom door and pushed it open with one hand. “I’ll only be a—”

With a growl, he tackled her, and she shrieked with laughter as she landed on her back on her bed. He rolled her on top of him, both his arms around her waist, and she kicked and slid off, landing on her side and wriggling away.

He grabbed her again from behind and this time he pinned her down with one leg thrown over hers. Breathless with laughter, she pretended to struggle as he pushed her hair aside and nuzzled the nape of her neck.

Shivery kisses, she thought with delight as goose bumps prickled on her shoulders. And that wasn’t all. Her skin seemed to come alive in response to the touch of his mouth and her nipples hardened as well.

A sound of satisfaction rumbled in his throat. Looking over her shoulder, he eased his grip on her waist and cupped a breast with one hand. And oh, it felt good to be fondled and shaped like this, as if her body had been waiting for his hands ever since that mad rush out of his hotel room yesterday morning.

He caressed her shoulders and bare arms, and slid his hands down to the hem of her top. With a whisper of fabric, he pulled it over her head and tossed it away. She rolled to face him and did the same with his shirt. “It’ll get wrinkled,” she whispered in explanation as it landed partly on the floor and partly over the arm of the wicker chair next to the window.

“Like I need an excuse to get naked with you.” He toed off his tennis shoes. After he snagged a condom out of the pocket, his jeans followed the shirt through the air to the chair.

She wiggled out of her pj bottoms and then his big body lowered itself to hers. His hips fit into the cradle of her thighs, forcing them apart, before he turned his attention to her breasts. Her eyes slid closed with delight as he stroked pleasure from her skin with his tongue, swirling and tasting and sucking. Her nipples ached with impatience as he took his time getting there, as though he were saving the best for last.

“So hard for me,” he whispered, his lips hovering an inch away from the aching peaks. “So sexy.”

“Mitch.” She arched her back, but he drew away, teasing. “You know how sensitive I am. Don’t make me wait.”

“I want a promise first.”

There could be only one thing he could torture her for like this. “All right,” she said, her breath coming fast. “No bra today.”

“That’s my girl.” His voice was rich with satisfaction as at last he lowered his mouth and gorged himself on her. She marveled at the delight he took in her body, at the sweet fire he could ignite inside her with only his eyes and his mouth. His tongue swirled over her areolae and the slick abrasion made her moan. When he tugged, she gasped, and when he nibbled, it drove her mad.

Who would have thought that the part of her that gave him the most pleasure would be the part that felt pleasure the most?

This man is made for you.

Oh, no, she couldn’t think that way. She couldn’t think at all, because now he was rolling on the condom and positioning himself between her legs. And she couldn’t wait another second. She was so ready—so wet and soft, her body demanding his.

Eve pulled up her knees to give him easier access and pulled him toward her. “Now,” she gasped. “I need you now.”

In a single stroke, he plunged into her, and she shrieked. Again and again he drove home, his gaze locked on her face and yet turned inward as though his own pleasure were taking over his senses. She slipped her hand between their bodies and touched herself, finding the center of her pleasure and adding the stroking of her fingers to the rhythm of his body.

“Eve—” he choked.

A red explosion of pleasure erupted inside her and she clenched around him like a vise, shuddering and making incoherent little cries. He cried out, too, and found his release as he rocked into her one last time.

His skin felt damp and hot under her clutching fingers as he collapsed onto her in a spent heap. Her bed folded them both into its soft embrace.

This man is made for you.

Maybe. Maybe not. But one thing was for sure.

The people at CATL-TV couldn’t possibly be right about him. No one could make love like this and have an ulterior motive.

No one.

**14**

ONCE WAS NOT ENOUGH.

Or twice, because it hadn’t even been an hour and he wanted her again. Maybe making love to Eve three times a day would satisfy him.

Mitch watched her strap herself into the Lexus and swallowed. She’d kept her promise, and the only question was how long he could control himself before someone caught him staring—or worse, touching.

He must have been crazy to ask her to do this.

She wore cargo pants that came just below her knee and rode low on her hips. A little strip of bare skin showed between the waistband and her top, not enough to be vulgar but just enough to draw the eye and tease.

And talk about teasing. She hadn’t worn the red gauze number, because his eyes and his brain would have fried within a block. But she wore a cotton camisole that looked like it had come out of some Victorian lady’s wardrobe. It fastened down the front with tiny pearl buttons, and scooped low in the neckline, a narrow lace ruffle framing cleavage that was truly spectacular.

He was a goner.

And if he caught any other guys staring at her, he’d bite off their heads.

“So. Where to?” He pulled out of her driveway and headed for I-20, which was one of the reference roads he’d memorized. In every city he scouted in, he scoped out the two main freeways. That way, he never felt lost, which meant he never felt out of control.

As for being alone in a lot of strange places, he’d gotten used to it. Came with the territory.

Eve pulled a piece of paper out of her sleek leather backpack. He caught a glimpse of a sun hat and a digital camera tucked away in there, as though she’d come prepared for an excursion. An adventure.

“I printed a map before I left the office last night,” she said. “Head east and turn south at Social Circle. The plantation is about fifteen miles south and then east again.”

Following her map, it didn’t take long before the Lexus slowed to a stop at a wrought-iron sign that swung next to the country road.

“Mirabel,” Eve read. “Est. 1858. Property of the Ashmere Trust. That’s the same people who organized the benefit we went to last week.”

“I have fond memories of that benefit,” he said. “Personal reasons aside, they seem to do good work.”

He pulled into a driveway that was more like a lane, winding off into a tangle of trees and some kind of voracious ivy that covered the ground. Eve sat forward in her seat, gazing intently out the window.

“Recognize anything?” he asked. “Any ancestral memory?”

With a flash of a smile, she said, “I’m interested in everything, that’s all. It’s a shame we’re too late for the rhododendrons.”

He was a desert rat, transplanted to the concrete jungle. All the trees and shrubs looked pretty much the same to him, but if she said those tall bushes with the dark leaves were rhododendrons, he’d take her word for it.

And then he forgot about the plants. He was too busy watching Eve’s face from the corner of his eye as the house came into view.

“Wow,” she breathed.

It wasn’t your standard Old South icon, with marble pillars and tall windows. Mirabel had been a working farm, and its spreading, clapboard lines showed it. But still, its two stories and eight front windows looked welcoming, as did the wide verandah, where Mitch had no doubt some previous generations of Bests had taken an afternoon whiskey and played games.

As they got out of the car in the parking lot, the front door opened and a petite woman of about seventy stepped out. “Are you folks here for the eleven o’clock tour?” she called.

Eve exchanged a glance with Mitch. “Uh, no, but we’d love to take it,” she said.

“Come right this way. My name is Adele Pierce and I’m a volunteer docent at Mirabel.”

They shook hands and Adele ushered them into the front hall. Then she looked Eve full in the face. “Pardon me for saying this, but you look terribly familiar. Have we met before?”

Eve smiled, and Mitch realized she probably got that same question every time she went to the grocery store. Look what had happened at the mall last weekend.

“I have a show on CATL-TV called Just Between Us. Do you watch it?”

The woman shook her head, eyeing Eve as much as politeness would allow. “No, I don’t have a television. My husband tells people I was born late…by about a hundred years. He was in the computer business, but I’ve never even turned one on. Never mind. It will come to me. It always does.”

Mitch waited for Eve to tell the docent that she was a member of the Best family, but when Adele showed them into a room that she explained was one of the parlors and Eve still said nothing, he concluded she didn’t want to go public about her interest in her family.

When Adele led the way across the hall to what was obviously a formal dining room, Mitch leaned in and whispered, “Not going to out yourself to our guide?”

Eve shook her head. “How weird would it look? I mean, what old-line Southerner doesn’t know everything about their family heritage, right down to the last twig on the family tree? Nana told me some stuff about my mom and dad’s generation when she was alive. And yes, I got the tour of Uncle Roy’s family photos, but as far as the family that lived here, I know next to nothing.”

“So you’re a tourist in your own backyard, huh?”

“Literally.”

Adele stopped next to the fireplace, where a massive mantelpiece was held up by a pair of Art Nouveau nymphs. “The house has had a number of renovations,” she explained, “the most extensive of which took place in 1910 after Artimas Best made a killing on the stock market.” She ran an affectionate hand over the lines of a nymph’s flowing tunic. “This mantel, which even I have to admit looks completely out of place in a structure that was essentially a farmhouse, was imported from England. And over it you’ll see the wedding portrait of Artimas and Evalyne Best. Evalyne was one of the Eden sisters, who were the belles of their generation. She married Artimas in 1903.”

Dutifully, Mitch looked up at the black-and-white photo, which was a little blurred with age.

And he blinked. Looked from Evalyne to her…what? Great-great-granddaughter? And back again. There was the sensual mouth and the wide-set eyes. Evalyne’s hair was pulled up and poufed out in Gibson girl style, but it was dark like Eve’s, and while she was nearly lost to sight in a cascade of ruffles, there was no mistaking the corseted hourglass figure.

He couldn’t tell if Eve was having the same sense of déjà vu. She stood on the Turkey-red carpet, gazing silently at her ancestors as if they were a puzzle she’d figure out if they just gave her long enough.

Mitch glanced at Adele, who had obviously made the same discovery he had.

“Miss, if you don’t mind me saying so, I now know why you seem so familiar. I’ve been looking at your face for about nine months, that’s why.”

Eve turned to her. “My face?”

The older woman gestured at the portrait. “You’re a dead ringer for Evalyne Best. Are you a member of the family, by any chance?”

Mitch waited for Eve to fib and end the odd moment with a suggestion that they move on with the tour.

“I am,” she said instead. “My name is Eve Best.”

Adele put a hand on her heart. “Mercy sakes. You don’t say.”

“And from what I can figure out, that lady up there is my great-great-great-grandmother.”

“Great…Let’s see now.” Adele did some figuring in her head. “Artimas and Evalyne had a boy and two girls. The girls married men from Savannah—brothers, they were—and moved away, but the boy stayed on to run the family business, which was a savings and loan outfit until the crash of twenty-nine. He had two boys, Cecil and Merlon.”

“My grandpa was called Cecil.”

“Well, there you go. Cecil had two boys, as well. Your dad must have been Gibson, because your Uncle Roy is on the board of the Ashmere Trust and I know both his girls.” Eve nodded. “I was so sorry about your parents, dear. Such a tragedy.”

“It happened a long time ago. But thank you.”

“When you’re as old as me, ‘a long time ago’ is relative,” Adele said with some asperity. Then her voice softened. “So you’ve come back to Atlanta and have a television show, do you? I’m glad to hear it. Your aunt and uncle will be glad you’re home, too.”

“They are. Do you know them well?”

“Roy and my husband did some business together. A start-up, I think you call it. I never pay much attention to that kind of thing. It’s much more interesting to learn about lace-making patterns and how to preserve quilts, in my opinion.”

Eve laughed. “My aunt might agree with you. She tried to teach me to sew when I was a kid, but I was never very good at it.”

“Your mother wasn’t, either, poor thing. But lands, she was a beautiful woman. Talk about the belle of her generation. The family had fallen on hard times by the time she married into it. Your grandpa had to give up this property and they moved to a place in town when your dad and uncle were boys. In fact, I babysat them when I was a teenager. Now, that was a long time ago.”

Mitch had to smile at her truthful but self-deprecating humor. Then she took Eve’s elbow and led her to the main staircase in the hall.

“I really shouldn’t do this, but since you’re a member of the family, I’d say you have the right. There are some pictures and things upstairs that you might be interested in.”

As they followed her up the staircase to the second floor, Mitch asked, “There are family pictures still here? Didn’t they go when the family moved away?”

“The originals did.” Adele waved a hand at the open rooms they passed. “These are the children’s bedrooms. The photos are in the master bedroom, here at the end. When the trust took this place over, Roy Best gave permission to make copies of some of the portraits. The walls were bare, you see.”

She led them into a huge room with ten-foot ceilings and narrow windows that had to be six feet high. A canopied bed occupied one end, and a fireplace the facing wall. On the wall to the left of the door, more portraits hung in a cluster. Some of them, Mitch was sure, had to have been taken right after the invention of the camera.

“Here’s Evalyne and the children,” Adele said, pointing. “That’s Cecil and his bride in the forties, just before he went off to England to fight in the war. And Eve, here’s your mother and dad and your Uncle Roy. This was taken in the early seventies, I think.”

“Belle of her generation is right,” Mitch murmured to Eve. “I see where you get your looks.”

“Not really.” Eve studied the picture. “I might have her chin, but not much else. I’m surprised how much I look like Evalyne, though. My niece Emily does, too. She’s fourteen.”

“Roy’s daughter?” Adele asked. “She does, now you mention it. It’s the mouth and the eyes. Very distinctive. Evalyne was said to be a woman of, shall we say, a very firm character, too.”

“That definitely describes my niece,” Eve said with a smile. “Much to her mom’s dismay.”

“You, too,” Mitch put in. “Not every woman could step onto a set and have a couple of hundred people in the palm of her hand within a few minutes.”

Eve shrugged modestly, then turned to Adele. “I don’t suppose there’s a copy of this picture, is there? I would love to have one. I don’t have many photos of my parents, and I’ve never even seen this one.”

Adele’s forehead creased as she thought. “I’m not sure. Let me check in the office, all right? Feel free to ramble around. I’ll come and find you.”

Mitch waited until he heard Adele’s footsteps on the stairs before he spoke. “I hope she finds a copy for you. If she doesn’t, maybe you can ask your relatives for one.”

“Nana didn’t have it in her belongings when she died.” Eve’s voice sounded puzzled. “I hardly have any pictures of my family. It’s strange, don’t you think?”

He considered this. “Maybe they were all sent to your uncle when your folks passed away.”

“Not even when I was a kid,” she said, as if he hadn’t spoken. “You’d have expected my parents to talk about the family like Adele does. All proud, with tons of detail that would bore to tears anyone who wasn’t related. But they never did. And the only pictures I remember seeing were Nana’s wedding photo and the ones I got of myself at school.”

“Some people just aren’t pack rats.” What was she getting at? And what was with that odd, tense look around her mouth, as though she’d turned over a rock and found something ugly under there? “I wouldn’t upset yourself over it.”

“I’m not upset. I’m confused. This isn’t the first time I’ve wished I could ask my mother questions about her life. Like this picture, for instance.”

He looked at it again. Three people. Two guys in lightweight suits with shaggy hair, a young woman with long hair parted in the middle, wearing platform shoes and a miniskirt.

“What about it?”

She pointed at one of the men. “That’s my dad, the blond guy.” Her finger moved to the other man, the one with his arm around the young woman. “And that’s my Uncle Roy.”

“Okay.” He let his voice rise a bit, giving her room to go on.

“So why does my Uncle Roy and not my dad have his arm around my mom?”

Why did anybody do anything? “Maybe they were goofing around for the camera. Maybe Uncle Roy was trying to get your dad’s goat or something. I have friends like that. Everything’s a competition, a contest to see who can one-up the other.”

“They look like they’re together, don’t they?”

“Huh?” Mitch blinked at the picture.

“Look how he’s holding her. How his hand is on her waist, how she’s snuggled up against him. A Southern girl from a good family, even in the seventies, would only let a boy hold her like that if they were serious about one another. Engaged, even. And look at my dad. He isn’t smiling, but the other two are.”

“And this means…?”

Her shoulders drooped. “I don’t know what it means. All I know is that I’ve never seen this picture before, and there isn’t one like it at my uncle’s place.”

“It could be packed away. My mom has boxes of old family pictures in albums, stacked in the closet under the stairs.”

She glanced at him. “You probably noticed that all the family pride missing in my folks came out in my Uncle Roy in spades. If it was there, I’d have seen it, trust me.”

Mitch heard Adele coming up the stairs, slower than she’d gone down them. A lady would have to be in good shape to act as docent around this place. No elevators.

“I still think you’re reading something into it that isn’t there.”

She would have answered, but Adele came in holding a photograph in a plastic sleeve. “Well, this is a funny thing. Good for you, Eve, but funny all the same.”

Eve took the photo and turned it over. “Oh?”

There was nothing written on the back.

“This is the original,” Adele said. “It must be a mistake. Roy said that all the photos he donated to the trust were copies, except Artimas and Evalyne’s wedding picture. That one’s the real thing.”

“Adele, did you know Roy and my dad? When they were teenagers, I mean. Like in this picture.”

Adele, who up until now had been a fountain of facts and knowledge, dried up like the arroyos of Mitch’s childhood in the summer. She cocked her head.

“Oh, there they are now, dears. The tour group that was supposed to have been here at eleven.” She patted Eve’s arm and ushered them out into the gallery. “You keep that photo, Eve. And you might want to check with your uncle and let him know we’ve returned an original. Feel free to poke around the grounds. I’d better hustle, or I’ll never get them rounded up. People always think they can treat these houses the way they do their own.”

Her voice faded as she clattered down the stairs, and in a moment they heard her greeting the group. The buzz of a busload of people filtered up through the floor.

“Ready to go?” he asked. “Or do you want to look around?”

“No, I’m ready.” Her voice was flat. Preoccupied. “But I’ll be back. That woman was hiding something, and I’m going to find out what it is.”

**15**

MAYBE MITCH WAS RIGHT. Maybe she was making too much out of a silly photograph. So two teenagers were cuddling. What did that mean? Teenagers cuddled all the time. It was the seventies, for heaven’s sake. Just because her mom was cuddling with the wrong boy…

Wrong in whose opinion? Yours?

Maybe she’d dated Roy at one time and then decided that Gibson was The One after she’d graduated from college. Then why had Adele changed the subject so fast?

Eve hadn’t been coaxing secrets out of guests four days a week, nine months a year for three years for nothing. She could spot a diversionary tactic a mile away—especially from a person who wasn’t used to lying.

Eve pulled out her phone while Mitch stood in the eerie blue light in front of the windows of the dolphin tank at the aquarium. He was lost in a completely appealing, childlike wonder at the swooping and darting of the creatures.

“Dylan,” she said when he answered, “I need you to do something for me on the qt.”

He didn’t even remind her that it was Saturday and he would have been completely within his rights to ignore her number on his digital display. “Sure. What’s up?”

“I need you to get the home number of a docent who works at a plantation called Mirabel. Ever heard of it?”

“I’ve been there, yeah.”

“You have?”

“My senior thesis was on representations of slave culture in the cinema. I’ve been to every place open to the public within about fifty miles of Atlanta.”

No kidding. The things she was learning about people this weekend. “You probably talked to this lady, then. Her name is Adele and she’s a volunteer with the Ashmere Trust.”

“So you need home phone and address?”

“Just phone. I think she has some information for me, but I want to talk to her in private.”

“Am I doing this clandestinely or as a rep of the show?”

“Use whatever method gets you that number.”

“Copy that, boss. I have thumbscrews and cuffs in my date book. Agent Moore out.”

With a smile, she hung up. She’d lobbed him some pretty weird requests since he’d come to work for her, and only once had he come up empty-handed. Of course, as it turned out, that particular member of the state senate had been arrested for shoplifting shortly afterward, so maybe it was just as well she hadn’t had him on the show.

It took Dylan less than half an hour to call her back. “I’ve got your number,” he said without preamble. “Got a pen?” He dictated it, and she wrote it on the notepad she kept in her handbag for this kind of thing.

“How’d you get it? Or should I not press you to reveal your sources?”

“It was easy,” he said with a touch of pride. “I just explained to the girl at the trust’s switchboard who I was and hinted that Adele might be on the scope for the show, and she was happy to give me her phone number. She probably would have given me the lady’s address and all the names of her kids, too, but I stopped her in time.”

Eve thanked him and disconnected. Now what should she do? Call Adele and arrange a meeting so she could force out of her whatever she was hiding? Or come at it in a more circuitous way and hope she let something slip?

Ha. Adele was a Southern lady. No manipulation would work on her. Honesty was the best approach.

“Have you been here so many times that you’re bored silly?”

Mitch ambled up to her, his presence like a breath of air in the stifling confusion of her own thoughts.

“No, actually, I’ve never been here. It’s kind of fun being a tourist in your own town.”

“Forgive me for noticing, but you’ve spent more time on the phone than you have looking at the fish.”

Speaking of honesty…

“I’m still bugged about that photo. I had Dylan track down Adele’s home number so I can talk to her about it some more.”

“Seems to me you’d be better off talking to someone in the family, like your grandmother or your uncle,” he said reasonably. “Up until today, you never even heard of Adele.”

“I’m going to do that, too.”

“Are you sure you want to?” He took her hand and began to walk slowly toward the exit. “I mean, look at it from their point of view. You turn up on their doorstep asking a bunch of questions about a casual photo taken thirty years ago. All weirdness aside, how can it matter now?”

She exhaled, a long breath that acknowledged he was probably right. “I know. I can’t argue that. Maybe it’s just some compulsion inside me to connect with the past.”

“Brought on by what?”

She glanced at him. Was the timing right? “I don’t know. Maybe because I’ve spent the last couple of weeks thinking about the future.”

“I hear you. I have to admit this deal is consuming most of my waking hours, too.”

Now, what had happened here? She’d given him a classic opener to have a conversation about whether this was only a fling, or whether it could be something more, and he’d sent it swerving back to her. She didn’t want to talk about business. If the truth were told, she was sick of thinking about the lawsuit and the station and the show and everybody’s expectations.

Eve wanted to talk about them. She’d spent the last three years talking about relationships, while her personal life was as bare as a winter field. So how long could a person talk about something without really experiencing it?

If she were really honest with herself, maybe she’d been happy that way. If you became an expert on something, you could control it. You could live it in a surface kind of way, without risking your emotions and your vulnerabilities. The time had come to delve below the surface. To experience something so deeply that it might change her forever.

A deeply frightening thought.

But a challenge, too. And who had learned to be good at dealing with those over the last three years?

“I didn’t mean the deal. I meant my personal future.” She took a breath and plunged, feeling like one of those dolphins landing in the deep end of the tank. “And yours. Do you mean to tell me you haven’t spent your waking hours thinking about me?”

As they went outside, the late afternoon heat clamped down on them like a smothering blanket. Eve hurried her steps as they made their way back to the car.

“Let me rephrase that,” Mitch said. “Thinking about this deal means thinking about you. At night I dream about you. I wake up aroused, which means I start the day thinking about you. I’ve come to the conclusion I must be some kind of obsessive personality.”

Well, there was nothing wrong with that. This was more like it.

“Have you given any thought to what happens when the deal is done?” she asked carefully. “About where this affair of ours might be going? Or if it’s going anywhere?”

He pulled onto the freeway and she realized he was taking her back to her place.

Ooh. Maybe they could shower the sweat of the day away. Together. She had some beautiful European soap that would suds up nicely and—

“Are you always this forthright?” he asked.

“I like to be honest. I think we fell into this out of sheer sexual chemistry, but the more I do goofy things with you like going to the aquarium and the mall, the more I like being around you.”

“I like being around you, too. And I really like being in bed with you.”

“Yes, I noticed that you’re taking me home.”

“Only to drop you off, I promise. I’d like to go back to the hotel, grab a shower and take you someplace nice to eat before I take you to bed.” That grin and those eyes were so wicked that Eve felt her body respond with enthusiasm.

“Any suggestions?”

What a beautiful mouth he had. And what a skillful tongue. Those alone were worth taking a risk for. “About what?” Maybe she could convince him to skip the hotel and have his shower at her place.

“Eve,” he teased. “Focus. About food.”

“Oh. Sure. Southerners love to eat, remember. It’s just a matter of picking a place.” It took them nearly the whole way home to settle on a restaurant, with Eve thinking all the while about a way to steer the conversation back to what she really wanted to discuss: themselves.

Finally she concluded there was nothing for it but to dive right in. “Are you sure you have to go back to your hotel?”

“Patience,” he said as he pulled into her driveway. “Anticipation adds spice.”

“Is that so.” She watched him put the car into Park and then leaned in for a kiss. “How long will you make me wait?”

Ha. There was a reason she’d worn this white cotton confection. A girl used the gifts she was given. She’d seen him heroically keeping his eyes on her face while they’d been rambling through public places today. Even though he’d asked her to be a little risqué for him, he was too much of a gentleman to do more than sneak an occasional peek. And she was happy about that. She had no desire to be embarrassed in public.

But now they were in private—or as private as her driveway would allow. As she leaned over, her plunging neckline gaped away from her skin, giving him a view of her lush curves.

“Guh,” he managed.

“Come inside,” she whispered against his lips, taking his hand and holding it tented over one breast. “Anticipation is overrated.”

He made a low sound in his throat and kissed her deeply, his tongue thrusting against hers the way his body had earlier. The heat of his hand burned right through the fragile fabric as he fondled her, caressing the nipple with his thumb in a slow rhythm that made her squirm.

She had him. No man could say no after an invitation like this.

When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were black with desire, and he was breathing as heavily as she.

“You don’t play fair,” he rasped.

“I’m not playing at all. I want you now,” she told him, her lips a promise against the underside of his jaw. “I don’t want to wait until you get back.”

“Neither do I,” he admitted, “but I have to. My boss called. I didn’t answer it at the aquarium, but I need to, soon. Otherwise he’ll keep calling, and I’ll go insane. I don’t want to be crazed when I make love to you.”

“Call him from here.”

“The documents he wants to talk about are all at the hotel. I promise I’ll be back in two hours, max.”

He was as dedicated to his job as she was. Up until now, she’d have admired that. But her ideas were changing. She smiled, knowing when she was beaten.

At least there was a bright side, she thought as she waved goodbye and then turned to let herself into the house. If anticipation added spice, she was going to be as hot as a Thai chili by the time he got back.

NELSON BERG MAY have been a mediocre executive, but his timing was superb.

Superbly lousy.

Mitch cursed him, his job, CWB and all its affiliates all the way back to the hotel, which meant his emotions were a roiling soup of aggravation and sexual frustration when he opened the door to his room. Not the best frame of mind in which to talk to the man who could pull the plug on his career as easily as he could advance it.

Mitch took a shower to give himself time to calm down. When he came out, feeling clean at least, if not calm, his cell phone was already sounding the message alarm. He sighed. Nelson was as predictable as…well, hot weather in Atlanta.

He hit Reply To Last Caller and opened his briefcase, where the terms of the acquisition were laid out in a deal memo.

“What took you so long?” Nelson barked without so much as a hello.

“Most of a major metropolitan center was between me and this paperwork. I came back to the hotel to call.”

“And what were you doing that far from your briefcase?”

“Nelson,” Mitch said patiently, “it’s Saturday. I know the days of the week have no meaning for you, but try to imagine a life where leisure time occurs once in a while.”

“I tried to reach you yesterday, but you didn’t reply then, either. If you’re on the network’s dime, Hayes, you’d better make yourself available.”

“I turned my phone off during the taping yesterday. Must’ve forgotten to turn it back on again. I tell you, Nelson, this show is a gold mine. Eve came up with a new twist on the town-hall segment this week where audience members participated and then were analyzed the next day by a professional.”

“Yeah, I saw it. What’d she have, a scheduling conflict with the talking head?”

Mitch pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it, then put it back. “So, what can I do for you, now that we’ve connected?”

“I met with the executive committee this week, like I told you.”

“You were going to let them know that Eve was signing on, the show was staying in Atlanta, and she would be able to keep her team.” He glanced at the deal memo, where each point was laid out.

“Yeah. So about that.”

Something in his voice caused a cold dart of apprehension to shoot through Mitch’s belly. “Yes?”

“You know how NBC has Leno and CBS has Letterman?”

Was there anyone in the country who didn’t? “Yes.”

“The executive committee thinks that Eve has the potential to go national on that level. Instead of this daytime TV thing, they think she should do late-night. Dr. Phil and Oprah and the soaps pretty much have daytime wrapped up in the big markets, so CWB is looking to establish itself in the late slot.”

Mitch took a deep breath. “Have they considered they’ll lose Eve’s primary demographic? Those viewers who tune in during the day aren’t going to stay up until eleven.”

Nelson started to say something, but Mitch cut him off. “And what about our plan to grow slowly? Eve totally bought into that. It was our primary differentiator over SBN and CBS. Which, by the way, aren’t going to propose she go late-night. They want her for the daytime, where she’s been successful. You run the risk of her backing out and choosing them. You know that, right?”

“The executive committee has more faith in her than you do, it seems,” Nelson told him. “It’s your job to keep her from signing with anyone else. Get her signature on that deal memo today, so she can’t back out. And then tell her that she’s going to need to move her show to New York after all. We can’t compete with Letterman right down the street unless she’s here.”

“She’s not going to go,” Mitch said coldly. “You’re reneging on every point that made us attractive.”

“You’ll have to work harder. I know you have it in you, Hayes. And what are you thinking about her for? You need to think about you. Your career. And what a coup like this is going to do for it.”

“A coup like this is going to turn me into a liar and make me lose every atom of trust I’ve managed to build up here, Nelson.” Mitch’s voice deepened with conviction. “She trusts me on a personal level, and I don’t know about you, but I don’t have so many good friends that I can afford to alienate them.”

“I just bet you’re good friends,” Nelson said with satisfaction. “I knew you’d take my advice and romance her. Well, playtime’s over. Now it’s time you justified your paycheck.”

“Listen, Nelson. I want to fly back and pitch the executive committee personally, okay? There has to be a way to make them see how counterproductive this is.”

“You crazy? I’m not about to authorize all that travel, even if they’d listen to you.”

“At least set up a time for me to talk to them. I know you don’t care one way or the other, as long as she signs. So what can it hurt?”

“It’ll hurt me when they see you’re wasting their time,” Nelson said. “You’ll be lucky to get a phone call. Don’t even think about flying back here.”

“All I need is fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll see what they say. I’m telling you, you’re beating a dead horse.”

And he hung up, leaving Mitch with a dead connection and a sick sense of loss around his heart.

**16**

EVE SHOWERED AND dressed carefully for the evening in a halter sundress that evoked the forties while emphasizing her curves in all the right places. Mitch could resign himself to enjoying the unbound look in private. When she was out in public, she had an image to maintain, and the bra that went under this dress gave her such great cleavage he’d probably be able to make do.

With a smile, she applied a touch more mascara, clipped on garnet earrings (When had Grandpa Calvert bought them for Nana? Had it been an anniversary? Their wedding?) and settled down at the dining table with the mail while she waited.

Electricity bill. Cell phone. Internet connection. Lot’O’Bucks. She ripped it open, scanned it and sighed.

Something to fax over to Jenna on Monday. That’s all they needed: a ticking clock to bump up the stress another level. Here she was, in one of the most difficult periods of her life, when a woman gathered her friends around her and gained strength from their support. Jane had Perry now, so it was natural that she think of him and what he needed first, rather than her friends. Same with Nicole. Liza was so far away from them emotionally that Eve sometimes wondered if friendship was possible anymore, even if they came to some agreement about the lottery money.

She could use Liza’s unconventional, no-holds-barred approach to life right now. How had it come to this? She, the relationship guru, couldn’t hang on to even her oldest friendship to save her life.

Even Mitch had withdrawn emotionally—not a lot, but enough to be noticeable—when she’d brought up the subject of where they might go from here. Because of course he’d have to return to New York eventually. Would they have a long-distance affair? Doable, but not very convenient on those nights when she was feeling sexy and ready to jump him the minute he walked in the door.

Like now, for instance.

Where was he? It was nearly six—half an hour after he’d said he’d come back.

Do not call, she told herself firmly. Don’t go all clingy on him. He ran into traffic, that’s all. Not surprising on a Saturday evening.

The phone rang with a suddenness that made her jump. Don’t be Mitch, saying you’re not coming.

“Hi darlin’, it’s Grandmother.”

“Hi!”

“Don’t sound so surprised. Do you have a minute to chat?”

So far, Charlotte hadn’t been much for chatty phone calls. Maybe this was a sign that their relationship was about to become closer. That could only be good.

“Of course. I’m just waiting for Mitch to show up. He’s late, so you can keep me from throwing ornaments at the front door while I wait.”

“Mitch. He’s the young man you brought to dinner?”

As if she didn’t know. Eve murmured in the affirmative.

“He didn’t strike me as a man who would keep you waiting long. I saw how he looked at you. Is he going to be The One?”

That surprised a chuckle out of Eve. “I have no idea, Grandmother. I sort of brought up the future earlier today and he vanished. He said he had business to do, but I think he’s having a cave moment.”

“Let him have it, then. He’ll come around.”

“I’m wearing a tangerine sundress. If that doesn’t do the job, I’m taking it back.”

Her grandmother laughed. Maybe this was the moment of change in a relationship that, if cordial, hadn’t exactly had those moments of closeness and companionship that had marked her relationship with Nana. Although, she’d only seen Charlotte a couple of times a year, and she’d lived with Nana. Allowances had to be made. But all the same, hearing her grandmother laugh like that was almost worth the risk of revealing her hopes and fears.

If you couldn’t trust your family with your inmost self, who could you trust?

Hold that thought. “I went to Mirabel today,” she blurted with no lead-in whatsoever.

A careful silence hissed gently on the line. “Did you, now? And what did you think?”

“It was lovely. Smaller than I expected. Wonderful grounds, though. Grandmother, how come we never talk about our family?”

“You obviously haven’t spent enough time with Roy and Anne, honey pie.”

“They talk about ancestors and people from eighty years ago. I’m talking about what it was like recently. You know, when Dad and Roy were kids.”

“Did it ever occur to you that it might be painful for me to think about what was, in comparison to what is now, Eve?”

When Grandmother dropped the “honey pie,” things were getting serious. Eve gave herself a mental smack. “I’m sorry. But I was talking to a docent there—it’s open to the public now, part of the Ashmere Trust—and I had this moment of weirdness, knowing I was hearing more about my family from a stranger than I’d ever heard from you or Uncle Roy or even Nana Calvert.”

“Who was it?”

“A lady named Adele Pierce. She said she used to babysit Dad and Uncle Roy when they were kids. Do you remember her?”

“Adele. Adele.” Her grandmother sounded puzzled. “Good heavens, you don’t mean Adele Crosby?”

“She said her name was Pierce. Her married name, I suppose.”

“She did marry a Pierce, now that I think of it. No wonder you learned a lot…that girl was the worst gossip I ever met. She could talk the hind leg off a donkey.”

“And yet, when I wanted her to talk, she wouldn’t. There was a photograph there. She gave it to me. It showed Uncle Roy with his arm around Mom, and Dad standing off to the side. Did Mom date Uncle Roy before she got together with Dad?”

“When was it taken?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t dated. But Mom had hair down to her waist, parted in the middle. And platform shoes. So I’d guess early seventies. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen.”

“I have no memory of such a picture, or why it would be at Mirabel instead of in one of our photo albums.”

“Uncle Roy donated copies of some pictures to the trust. Adele gave me the original, though. Maybe it got mixed in by mistake.”

“Maybe. Your mother was good friends with both my boys, Eve. They hung around together like the Three Musketeers, until Gibson and then Roy went off to college.”

Her tone was dismissive, as though the picture were insignificant. Maybe it was. But there was something in the expression of that boy who had become her dad—some hurt, some pain that the camera had caught—that made her reluctant to let it go. And there had been that swift change of subject on Adele’s part, too.

“Honey pie, the girls are at the door for our book club meeting. I need to go.”

“Bye, Grandmother. I’ll call you next week.”

“You do that. I want to hear more about your young man.”

Eve hung up with a smile, and went to get her notebook out of her handbag. Still no sign of Mitch, and it was ten past six. There must have been an accident on the freeway. Well, if he wasn’t here by six-thirty, she’d call the restaurant and move their reservation out another half hour.

Adele Crosby Pierce answered her phone on the fourth ring, about when Eve expected it to jump to voice mail.

“Oh, hello, dear. How nice of you to call.”

She didn’t seem bothered that Eve had tracked down her phone number. But then, her mind lived in a different era, when people called to get a recipe, not to steal a person’s identity or stalk them.

“I wanted to thank you again for showing us around Mirabel, and for giving me this picture of my family,” she began.

“You’re most welcome. I love to introduce people to the past, you know. And today it was particularly lovely, since it was your past.”

Nothing like plunging right in. Eve took a fortifying breath. “That’s what I wanted to ask you about, Adele. This picture that you gave me. Is there some kind of story behind it?”

Silence.

Eve went on, “It seemed to startle you when I asked questions about it, so I wondered if perhaps you would rather talk about it in private. That’s the reason for my call.”

“That’s very considerate of you, dear. You’re the second person who’s asked about it.”

“Oh? Who was the other?” Uncle Roy? Mitch?

“I didn’t catch his name. He said he worked for your television station, though. A terribly nice young man.”

She must be referring to Dylan’s call, earlier, and gotten it muddled up. “Anyway, I was wondering if you’d tell me about the picture, that’s all.”

Another pause. “You know I abhor gossip of any kind, dear.”

Eve thought about what Grandmother would think of this, and smothered a smile. “So do I. Though giving me your memories of my family isn’t gossip, is it?”

“No, I suppose not. Yet, I don’t want to hurt anyone. It wasn’t dear Charlotte’s fault that Loreen couldn’t talk to her. Or Isabel’s either, for that matter. But I was so close to those boys, and even in those days, they would have sent her away anyway.”

“Sent who away?”

“Loreen, of course. But I’m not going to say any more. It isn’t my place. You take that picture over to your Uncle Roy and ask him to explain.”

“Uncle Roy?”

“I’ll bet you fifty dollars that picture got put in the donation pile on purpose. So it was out of the house. You go ask him.”

“But—”

“I’m no gossip. A man should clean up his own messes, in my opinion, and this one’s been a mess for nearly thirty years.”

With that, she hung up.

Eve stared at the receiver in her hand, utterly mystified. “It’s a picture,” she said to it, and hung it up. When she did so, it beeped, signifying that a call had come in while she’d been talking. She pressed the playback button.

“Eve, it’s Mitch.” He sounded agitated. She’d been right, then. He’d probably driven past a wreck on the freeway. “I’m sorry, but I have to cancel our plans tonight. Something’s come up with the deal, and it’s important I figure out the best way to fight this fire. I’m looking at flights to New York right now. I’ll fly up there on my own dime if I have to. I don’t know if…whether you…” A sigh of frustration. “I feel like shit. I’ll do my best to straighten this out. Goodbye.”

The answering machine winked off, leaving Eve sitting in her best tangerine dress with no evening, no answers and most important…no Mitch.

Eve Best, you’re not going to take this sitting down.

Within sixty seconds, she’d grabbed her bag and car keys and was backing the car out of the driveway. If he booked a flight online, she had maybe twenty minutes while he scrolled through his options. Add ten to that if he checked out of the hotel. If the traffic gods smiled on her, she could get to the Ritz before he walked out.

The time for sitting around and waiting was long gone, if it had ever existed. She’d already decided that she was tired of living a life on the surface, endlessly talking about things that mattered instead of actually taking a risk and experiencing them.

Well, she was going to take a risk now. If Mitch got on that plane, something deep inside told her he wouldn’t come back. Okay, so he hadn’t responded quite the way she’d expected him to when she’d brought up a future together. She could handle that. Hadn’t she done a whole show on the caveman mystique? She and the girls had even turned it into a catchphrase: the “cave moment.” That crucial juncture in a relationship when a guy pulled away and went into his cave to think or flee or whatever they did when they faced the naked truth of a woman’s feelings. Sometimes he never came out. And sometimes he had to be coaxed out with the warmth of a good fire.

Eve had plenty of fire, and she wasn’t about to let Mitch fly out of her life without getting one more taste of it.

Twenty-three minutes later, she pulled up to the front doors and leaped out.

“Hey, aren’t you Eve Best?” The valet looked about twenty, so Eve pulled out all the stops in the smile she turned on him.

“How sweet of you to recognize me,” she said. “Would you mind looking after my car for just a moment?”

“No, ma’am,” he said, blinking at the sheer wattage of the smile, and she tossed him the car keys and a tip.

“Thank you, sugar.” God, she was turning into her grandmother. But hey, whatever worked.

Two steps inside the lobby, she realized the hotel was hosting some kind of computer electronics convention. Crowds of men wearing everything from iPods to Ralph Lauren milled on the carpet. She wove between them, heading for the front desk—and arrived in time to see Mitch turn away, tucking his credit card into his wallet and picking up the handle of his rolling suitcase.

“Mitch!”

He blinked as she rushed up to him. “How did you get here?”

“Drove. Fast. Tell me you didn’t check out.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the mob pressing itself toward the harried clerks behind the counter. “I have a ten o’clock flight to LaGuardia. Just as well. This place is a madhouse.”

“Ask them to reinstate you.”

“Are you kidding? My room’s probably already gone.”

She thought fast. “Then come home with me.”

His face looked tired—not quite defeated, but getting there—and her heart squeezed. “I can’t, Eve.” She took his arm and guided him toward the door. He didn’t seem to notice. “My boss talked to the executive committee and they want to change the terms of the deal. Apparently they want you to be the next Letterman.”

“Letterman doesn’t do daytime.” She smiled her thanks to the valet and Mitch, who obviously thought she was taking him to the airport, got into her car. She’d let him think that. For now.

“I know. They want you to move to New York, and they’ll create a late-night show for you.”

Sliding behind the wheel, she said, “We already agreed I’m staying here.”

“Yes, but the deal memo isn’t signed yet. My instructions are to get you to agree to the new terms, or else. So I’m going to New York to meet with them personally. It’s a long shot, but I have to convince them they’re shooting themselves and the network in the foot.”

“You don’t need to go all that way.” She sped up the on-ramp to the freeway.

“I feel I do. Nelson said he’d set up a phone call, but that won’t cut it. I have to do this in person to have any chance of convincing them.”

One exit. Two. The next one was hers.

“It’s a helluva trip, though.” He rubbed the back of his neck, as if stress were making his muscles seize up. “There aren’t any nonstops at this time of night, so I have to route through North Carolina and Philly. I get in at some ungodly hour in the morning, but I had to take what I could get. I just hope I’m coherent.”

The things he was willing to do in order to keep his word—or at least the network’s word. Talk about above and beyond. That meant something, didn’t it? Surely he couldn’t be motivated strictly by loyalty to the network? There had to be more to it than that.

“I have a better idea.”

“You do? Hey!” He sat up as she took her exit. “This isn’t the way to the airport. Do you want me to miss my flight?”

“You don’t need to kill yourself doing this, Mitch,” she told him. “You don’t need to fly to New York when we have a network feed right at the station. What’s the point of technology if not to use it?”

He stared at her, and then his gaze narrowed, as if he was remembering something. “You have a video linkup. I saw it the first day I was there.”

“Right. We can beam your pitch right to CWB’s head office. And I happen to know a damn good executive producer who could run, say, a kick-butt presentation with a voice-over and graphics if you wanted. We’re all in this together, right?”

She pulled into her driveway and shut the engine off. He was looking at her as though she had just announced the cure for cancer.

“I knew there was a reason I was crazy about you,” he said.

She grinned. Maybe her tangerine sundress wasn’t going to be wasted tonight. After all, it was the color of fire.

**17**

“YOU’RE RIGHT. It was a total cave moment. All men have them and all women have to learn to deal with them.”

Jane brushed the excess powder off Eve’s nose and turned her face toward the light with the gentle fingers of long friendship.

“I agree.” Nicole, with her ever-present clipboard in her lap, pulled her legs up under her and watched the two of them in the dressing-room mirror. “When a woman tells a guy she thinks it’s more than a fling, his first instinct is to run.”

“But last night…” Eve’s voice trailed off, and she caught Jane and Nicole exchanging an amused look. The station’s dressing room had become the equivalent of a girls’ clubhouse, and she’d just told them everything. Except about the puzzling photograph. That was private—and she wasn’t sure she wanted to dig any more, anyway. Grandmother thought it was nothing, so it probably was. She had bigger fish to fry.

“Can I just say that the man is fabulous in bed and funny to boot? What sane woman wouldn’t want to keep him around, and tell him so? I took a risk. I was honest. Now it’s up to him. Unless he thinks making love is the answer.”

Jane examined her work with a critical eye. “Eve, not everyone is as forthright as you about their relationships. And it does look kind of bad that he tried to leave town practically as soon as your agreement about the show was in his hand.”

So Jane had heard the rumors, too. “Mitchell Hayes did not romance me to get the show. He really does care about whether I’m happy.” He’d been prepared to fly all night for her. The least she could do was show some faith—unlike some people. “I’m not a teenager. I can tell when a man is sincere. And he is.” The pain she’d seen in his face was proof of that. Wasn’t it? “He couldn’t have made love to me the way he did last night if his feelings weren’t real. We all know that some men communicate through action. For them, it’s not about the words.”

“Eve, Eve,” Nicole said, shaking her head. “You did a show about this only last week. ‘Is What He Says Really What He Means?’ Maybe you should do one called ‘It’s in His Kiss,’ like that song.”

“I think that stripper housewife said it all,” Jane put in. “‘All that’s real during sex is sex. Anything else is gravy.’”

“Ow.” Eve winced. “Easy on the hair.”

“Don’t jerk back like that, then.” Jane loosened her grip on the curling iron. “We don’t want you expecting gravy when all there is is meat. No pun intended.”

“Ha. And here I thought you guys would help me build up the nerve to try to talk with him about it again.”

“I’ll be happier when he comes out of his cave and tells you something honest, with real words,” Jane said. “Until then, I’m reserving judgment.”

“We still need to address this rumor that you two are an item,” Nicole added. “Even if you are, we still have to maintain your privacy. The answering service has had half a dozen calls from that rag-mag Peachtree Free Press, over the last twenty-four hours. Every one of them was for you. I don’t know how they got wind of who you’re dating.”

“The tabs can screw themselves.”

“They usually do, with the crap they print,” Nicole said. “The Free Press is one of the worst, though I must say their cameraman must love you. Your pictures are always great.”

“I never talk to the tabs, and they know it. Okay, Jane. Am I ready?”

“Ready and able. You’ve got half an hour to prep, so make the most of it. And here’s your bug.”

Eve took the wireless transmitter and fitted it in her ear. Because she had a habit of rambling around before the show in an effort to control her adrenaline, Cole had invested in the bug so he could give her the countdown without tying her to her desk. With a final tug at the hem of a new beaded tank, Eve strode down the hall toward the set, where the guys in the control booth would be doing sound and lighting checks before showtime at three.

But underneath it all the question of Mitch nagged and prodded at her. Was she wrong to want resolution? Why wouldn’t he talk about them, even when he was wrapped in her arms, with no one to listen in but the night? Communicating through action seemed to be a male thing. Maybe she needed to do that. But how?

Through the thin false walls of the studio, the noise levels rose as the doors opened and the audience began to file in. Her thoughts spun on as her blood began to pump in anticipation. Deciding to act—to take a risk and reach out for what she wanted—was one thing.

But finding the courage to do it was quite another. Because what if, after she tried again, he got on that plane anyway and left her?

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE at CWB had agreed to the video link at three-thirty, which worked out perfectly. Eve would still be on the set, mingling with her audience, and she wouldn’t be able to watch his attempt to turn this fiasco around. Mitch would rather have no witnesses, thanks. What he did want was to succeed. To come out with a gift safe in his hand—her show, intact, exactly the way she wanted it.

He glanced at his watch. He had an hour yet. Cole Crawford had given him a brief window of time to put some bells and whistles on the presentation he’d been working on all morning. But Mitch had it all in his head. He’d been living this for weeks, after all.

He was still amazed that Nelson Berg had gotten out of his way and agreed to this. Mitch was the one who had the information at his fingertips. He knew the talent. But primarily, he was the most heavily invested in winning.

With everything up in the air—his job, the show, his future—the only thing he had left to hang on to was Eve’s simple admission of her feelings. As far as he was concerned, that was worth taking a chance on. That was worth figuring out the logistics of time and distance for. He could probably hub out of Atlanta for most of his trips instead of Chicago or Dallas, so he’d be able to see her once or twice a week. Lots of relationships survived on less than that.

“Mr. Hayes!”

Mitch blinked and raised his head. Dylan Moore stood in the doorway, panting.

“I’ve been searching the station for you. Come on—it’s showtime.”

Puzzled, he got up. “I’m not going to be in the audience for Just Between Us. I’m doing a video link in the newsroom.”

Dylan made a rolling movement with his hand. “I know, I know. It’s started and there’s a panel of suits waiting for you.”

“But it’s only two-thirty. I’ve got an hour yet.”

Dylan shook his head. “Not according to them, Mr. Hayes. I don’t know what time zone they’re in, but it’s not eastern.”

“Shit!”

He took the stairs three at a time and skidded into the small studio, which held not much more than a couple of lights, a stationary camera and a desk behind which someone could transmit breaking news or a timely interview. A technician nodded at him and pointed at a monitor, where—thank you, God—Cole Crawford had loaded his presentation.

He only hoped he hadn’t left his carefully thought-out arguments back there at the top of the stairs.

He knew most of the network’s execs by sight. Three men and two women. As he slid into the chair and Nelson introduced him—without editorial comments on his tardiness—he made careful note of each name and position, so he could target his appeal personally. His aptitude for memorizing music came in handy in these kinds of applications.

And then he went to work.

With the right amount of detail, he explained to the people on the big flat-panel screen why Just Between Us worked so well in the regional market. Looking steadily into the camera, he outlined the team approach, and the talents of each of Eve’s production people that gave the show its own distinct flavor.

“Remember what happened with The X-Files when it went to Los Angeles?” he said. “The Vancouver production team had created that unique atmosphere and mood that was almost a third character in the show. When it moved, a vital element seeped away and it changed. And, I might point out, it only lasted a couple more seasons. We don’t want that to happen to Just Between Us.”

The execs looked at each other, and the woman on the left nodded. The others shrugged, and Mitch tapped the keyboard in front of him to move on to the financial projections. As he might have expected, the numbers got more attention than a discussion of production values, but that was okay.

A move to New York was wrong on so many levels that every point he could make only added to the solidity of his case.

At last, he wound up with, “You should know that CBS and SBN have made very lucrative offers to Eve and her team, and she turned them down in favor of CWB simply because the others wanted her to move to New York. Please reconsider this move, ladies and gentlemen. It would not be in the best interests of the show, its personnel, the network…or our viewers.”

With that, he sat back and prepared himself to field the inevitable barrage of difficult questions. But to his surprise, Nelson Berg stepped into view as the execs began to pack up their notepads and laptops.

“Thanks, Mitch. You’ve been very helpful in laying out the case. Don’t terminate the connection, please. I want to have a word, since I’ve got you here.”

Mitch took some deep breaths while he watched five people file out of camera range and waited for the adrenaline to stop zooming through his system.

Off camera, Mitch heard a door close, and Nelson seated himself at the table, smack in the middle of the screen. The guy was impossible to read on the best of days—that face was usually set in a frown of disapproval. Mitch resisted the urge to ask—beg—for information.

Nelson sighed and steepled his fingers over his stomach. “You made a good pitch.”

“Thanks.”

“I couldn’t have done better myself. The video link was a good idea. Nice cost-saving measure. Shows you’re a team player. Unfortunately, it didn’t change their minds.”

What? How could it not?

“It’s insane to bring that show to New York and you know it.” Mitch felt hope draining out of him with every word. “Is there anything I can do that will convince them?”

“Afraid not. They were shaking their heads before they even left the studio.”

“I could run the numbers again. Do some more research.”

“It won’t do any good. It’s unanimous, Mitch. Stop beating your head against the wall.”

“This is going to kill them.”

“Who? The people there?”

“Yes. They won’t come. I can guarantee you’ll lose this deal if you make me walk down that hall and tell them this.”

“I can guarantee you’ll lose your job if you don’t.” The words, as usual, were brutal. Like being hammered over the head. But Nelson’s expression was less sour than usual. “I’m sorry, Mitch, but sometimes we have to take it on the chin. You were a big success at getting Eve to commit the show to CWB against the odds. You can do it again. I have faith in you.”

Eve had faith in him, too. Cold despair touched his heart as he thought of those long talks in the park, when he’d come to understand that a simple conversation about the workings of this business was nearly impossible for a woman like her. How happy he’d been to fill that need—and all her other needs, too. He thought of Eve, head thrown back on her pillow as she groaned in ecstasy under him just last night, opening up to him utterly, making herself vulnerable for the sake of the pleasure they made together.

How could he find her and tell her that all the plans they’d agreed to would be snatched out from under her? Would she ever trust the network again?

To hell with that. Would she ever trust him again?

“I can’t do it, Nelson.” The words came out of his mouth before he could bite them back.

“It’s a dirty job, but it’s your job.” He leaned forward, his gaze stony. “You and I don’t make these decisions, Mitch. We just make ’em happen.”

“Well, this one isn’t going to happen. Not with me.”

“Is that a threat?” Nelson sounded amazed. It wasn’t Nelson’s fault—he was simply the messenger. Mitch couldn’t remember the last time he’d stood up to what the network’s management wanted. Maybe he never had. Maybe that’s why he was so damned unhappy with his job. And why he didn’t have a life.

“Of course not,” he said. “I’m offering you my resignation.”

Nelson’s jaw—well, it didn’t drop, but its usual grim clamp got looser. “You’re overreacting. Pull it together, Hayes. We have work to do.”

“No, Nelson. What we have here is a lose-lose situation. You told me before that if I didn’t complete this acquisition, you’d be forced to give me my walking papers. If you send me out of here with these terms, I’ll lose the deal. So whether I resign now or you fire me tomorrow, I’m still out of a job.” It wouldn’t take long to compose a resignation letter and send it. “I prefer to leave on my own terms. I’ll have an official letter on your desk in half an hour, and I’ll take the two weeks’ vacation I have coming in lieu of notice.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Nelson warned. “You can’t leave this deal half-baked. Who’s going to go down there and finish it?”

Mitch looked into the camera, knowing his face must look as grave as Nelson’s did on the screen. “Someone who doesn’t give a rat’s ass about Eve and her people, that’s who.”

**18**

EVE COULDN’T HAVE moved out of the studio doorway if the building had been burning down.

She watched as Mitch closed his laptop and put it in his briefcase. He nodded his thanks to the technician in the control booth, and the video screen went dark.

And then he turned toward the door and saw her.

Their gazes collided, and it seemed to Eve that a silent explosion happened right there in the middle of the room. How could she bear the pain in that gaze? And how could she put into words this maelstrom of emotion whirling inside her as she realized what he’d just done?

He’d thrown away his career for her.

The enormity of it staggered her. Humbled her. And showed her the depth of her own feelings for him. Instead of reaching out hesitantly, throwing out hints and signals the way she’d been doing, he’d gambled his whole future in one grand act for her sake. Could she really have underestimated him that much? How blind could she be?

“How long have you been standing there?”

Eve leaned on the door and the On Air light went out as the technician exited the back of the booth and moved on to his next task. They were alone—and the studio was soundproof.

“A few minutes. I slipped in when you were running the financials.”

“So you heard Nelson Berg.”

“And I heard you. Oh, Mitch, you don’t have to do this.” Her voice trembled, and she swallowed.

“What else could I have done? They had me between a rock and a hard place. Either way, I would lose—because I know damn well you aren’t going to New York. Or am I wrong?”

Why was he still standing there behind the desk? Why wasn’t he pulling her into his arms? “No, you aren’t wrong. In fact, you’re amazingly right.” Maybe he only had one grand gesture in him. Maybe it was up to her to take this the rest of the way. Eve gathered her courage and circled the desk.

“Right for the show, and right for me,” she said softly. “When I heard you say that, I—”

“Eve, ten minutes,” Cole said in her ear. “Guest’s in the green room waiting for you.”

Ten minutes that could change her life.

She reached out to lay a hand on Mitch’s sleeve, but he picked up his briefcase instead. “Mitch, don’t go. I want to talk to you, but I just got my ten-minute call.”

“I’m unemployed. I have all the time in the world.”

His voice was hollow. What did he expect from her? She had to say something, quick.

“I appreciate that you’d do such a thing for my sake. I know what it must have cost you. And I want you to know that it—it just makes me love you all the more.”

“What?”

“I mean it. But I’ve got to go. Please don’t leave. Meet me in my office after the show. Promise.”

What did that look in his eyes mean? Pain, wonder, confusion. Oh God, why did this have to happen seven minutes before showtime? Why did he look like that?

If it were up to her, she’d stay right here in this studio and show him exactly what she meant—preferably horizontally on the news desk. But the two hundred and fifty people in Studio One would probably stage a riot.

Briefcase nothwithstanding, she grabbed him by his lapels and planted a kiss on his mouth as full of promise as she could make it. “In my office,” she repeated, and ran.

With no time to process what had just happened, she thought she’d make a complete hash of the show, but instead, she found herself drawn right into the topic: the chemistry of love. Nicole had produced a researcher from the local university, and the man was only too happy to explain his life’s work to her. And in view of the last half hour, it was illuminating.

“It’s a well-known fact that job loss is one of the greatest contributors to male depression,” the guy said. “But what we’ve discovered is that rejection—which is what losing a job really is, right?—causes the production of testosterone in a man’s body to drop. That’s what leads to depression, withdrawal and loss of self-esteem.”

“So what can he do to come out of it?” Eve leaned in to ask. Was this a sign from heaven, or what? Bless Nicole. She was getting a raise for this.

“Well, he can go down to the gym and shoot some baskets,” the researcher said, “or he can make love to his wife.”

“Hear that, ladies?” Eve asked the audience. “If any of you have unemployed partners out there, your duty to his testosterone is clear.”

The audience cracked up, and she finished with her monologue, feeling as though a lightbulb had gone off in her head. She couldn’t do anything about Mitch’s decision to end it with CWB, but by God, she could help him through what had to be the most stressful afternoon of his life.

Boy, could she help. He’d already said he had plans for her desk, hadn’t he?

She sprinted up the stairs and arrived in her office breathing fast with anticipation. Would he be there? He had to be. He couldn’t have gone off to his cave at a moment like this, not when she had the cure for what ailed him—

“Eve?”

He turned from the window when she burst in. “Oh, thank God. I was convinced you’d be on that plane.”

“I should be. I need to start networking. Putting out feelers. Talking to people. You know the drill.”

He sounded so distant. But she wouldn’t let him get away with it. Not with your testosterone levels circling the drain. Have I got a cure for you. The marvels of modern—and very ancient—chemistry.

“I have a better idea.” She wrapped her arms around him and pressed up against his back. “Seems to me you made some rash promises about my desk. Want me to lock the door?”

He chuckled and turned, and his arms went around her. This was more like it. “Believe me when I say I’d like nothing better—if I can take a rain check. You understand, don’t you? I’m shell-shocked right now. My brain is zooming at top speed—only it’s going in circles.”

“Mine is, too,” she said against the soft wool of his suit jacket. “But you’re in the middle. I meant what I said down there in the studio, Mitch. About—” Do it. Dive right in, like he did. “—about loving you. I want to make sure that, at least, is clear between us.”

He drew back to look into her eyes. “How can you love an unemployed failure? A woman like you—beautiful, the one everyone wants? The self-made woman who pulled herself up from tragedy to be a celebrity? Trust me, Eve, you have a whole world of choices out there. You don’t need to settle for what’s at hand.”

Loss of self-esteem. She was going to have to invite that researcher back. The man was a gold mine.

“You’ve been reading too many headlines. A woman would be crazy not to grab a guy who would sacrifice himself and his career to protect her happiness. And believe me, I ain’t crazy.”

Gently, he set her away from him, and a chill prickled over her skin. Withdrawal.

“I need some time alone. We both do. I think it would be best if—”

A muffled sound from behind her closed office door made them both turn. “No! I absolutely forbid it,” Dylan said outside.

“She’s got to know,” a female voice said. “Better I tell her than she gets blindsided in the hall or worse, during town hall tomorrow.”

“Girl, you ain’t goin’ in there and showin’ her that. What kind of a friend are you?”

Whatever it was must be serious if it made Dylan revert to what he called “informal speech.”

“Dylan?” Eve called. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” A torrent of hissed whispering ensued, and something thumped against the wood.

Eve crossed the room and jerked the door open. Nicole practically fell into her office, Dylan right behind. Each of them hung onto a side of a rag-mag that Eve recognized as the Peachtree Free Press.

Nicole gave a final yank and ripped the tabloid out of Dylan’s hands. Flushed with triumph, she glared at him, then turned to Eve.

“Some people might think it’s better to keep you in the dark, but I thought you’d want to see this,” she said.

“What?” Eve took the paper.

And then everything seemed to fall away as time ground to a halt.

TV MILLIONAIRE’S SECRET REVEALED   
EVE BEST IS TYCOON’S DAUGHTER

Eve Best, the darling of daytime talk shows, Atlanta’s go-to girl for everything the city wants to know about sex and relationships, has been hiding a relationship of her own. No, not the handsome executive arm candy from CWB recently seen squiring her about town. This relationship goes deeper into the dark secrets of her past.

A recent investigation has revealed that Eve, supposed daughter of the late Gibson Best, who died tragically in a car accident in 1990, is not Gibson’s daughter at all. Rather, she is the illegitimate child of tycoon Roy Best, Gibson’s brother, who married socialite and Atlanta Ballet Theatre director Anne Delancey in 1985.

A close family friend, who declined to be named, has known the ugly truth for years and only recently was prevailed on to bring it to light. “I’m no gossip, mind,” says the source, “but those boys confided in me right up until they went away to college. I’ve kept my mouth closed for nearly thirty years, but that poor girl deserves to know that her father did not die in that crash. Her real father, that is.”

All Atlanta knows that, as a member of the old-money set, Best used her social connections and obligations to pull some golden strings, propelling her from the obscure position of junior weathergirl to that of Atlanta’s most popular TV star. But how far will she go now that it’s known she’s not entitled to the Best name in quite the way she thought?

According to our source, Loreen Calvert Best became pregnant by Roy Best just before he went away to Yale. Gibson went to school, too, but before he left, he married the deserted Loreen in a secret ceremony attended only by our source as witness. When Roy came home, he went into business, trading on the Best name to attain a fortune in the electronics and then the real estate markets. He married Anne Delancey in what was then billed as the Wedding of the Year, and two other children followed immediately.

Repeated calls to Eve Best at CATL-TV have gone unanswered. Roy Best has refused comment.

The investigative staff at Peachtree Free Press challenge Eve Best to come out of hiding and tell her viewers the real story. After all, why should she put the blinding spotlight on the secrets of others on live television when she’s so unwilling to bring her own to the light of day?

Eve looked up, and Dylan flinched. She could only imagine what her face must look like. Nicole reached out a tentative hand and laid it on Eve’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Nobody could be fine after reading something like this.”

Mitch took the paper from her and scanned the article. “It’s a bucket of lies, Eve. They’re just trying to sell more of their lousy rag.”

“You’ve never heard this rumor before?” Nicole asked.

“Never.” But the word rang hollow. Because it would explain that photo. And Adele Pierce—so obviously the paper’s so-called source—who had said Uncle Roy needed to clean up his mess. And Aunt Anne at dinner, behaving so strangely. What had she said? Something about the truth.

“I have to talk to my uncle,” Eve blurted. “Today. This minute.”

“You’re not driving anywhere after a shock like this.” Mitch picked her cropped linen jacket off the back of her chair and handed it to her. “I’ll take you.”

Her phone rang, and Dylan picked it up, waving the two of them toward the door. Then he called, “Eve. There’s a visitor in the lobby for you.”

“Not interested. We’ll go out the back door.”

“Yeah, you are. It’s your uncle.”

Eve stopped dead in the middle of the carpet. “My Uncle Roy? Is downstairs? Now?”

Dylan nodded.

She resisted the urge to ask Dylan why he wasn’t already on his way to fetch him. “Escort him in here, please, Dylan. And find us some brandy or something. Don’t look at me like that—this is a crisis. Raid Dan’s office—I know he’s got liquor in his sideboard.”

Mitch backed toward the door. “I’ll give the two of you some privacy. This is a family matter.”

She grabbed his jacket. “Please don’t. I need you. Please.”

For a moment, she thought she’d lose him—that the shaken self-confidence he’d allowed to swamp him earlier would come back and separate them just when she needed him more than ever before. But then a new expression filled his eyes, and he straightened his shoulders.

“You do?”

“Yes.” She burrowed into his arms and felt like shouting hallelujah as they went around her body, strong and sure. “Now. Later. Forever. Just stay.”

And that’s how her Uncle Roy found them when Dylan ushered him in a moment later. Dylan put a brand-new bottle of Courvoisier and three ceramic coffee mugs from the kitchen on her low table and shut the door behind him.

Roy Best looked as though he didn’t know what to do with himself. He stood uneasily, searching Eve’s face, no doubt for some clue as to her feelings.

She could have helped him out if she’d only known herself what those were. To give herself a moment to find her equilibrium, Eve poured a shot for all of them, then sat next to her uncle on the short couch. Roy was neatly put together in an expensive suit and sober tie, but his face…he looked as though he were in shock.

Maybe he was. Even though Mitch stood behind her, Roy didn’t seem to be aware there was anyone but Eve in the room.

“You must hate me,” he said at last, swirling the brandy in the mug but not sipping it. She supposed they were committing some kind of brandy sin by not drinking it out of snifters, but they had to work with what they were given.

“Of course not,” she assured him softly. “I only saw the paper just now, but ever since I went to Mirabel on the weekend, I’ve seen and heard things that have puzzled me. The paper has one slant that would explain them. I’d love to hear yours, if you want to tell me.”

He gave up on the drink and put it on the table. “That’s just it. It isn’t slanted. Except for the nasty tone of it, the paper has its essentials correct. I’m your biological father.”

Luke, I am your father, she heard James Earl Jones say in her head. You look like Evalyne, Adele said, her voice threading over it. So does my niece. She’s fourteen, her own voice said, adding to the mix. She wasn’t blond, like both Loreen and her da—Gibson. She was a green-eyed brunette. Like Evalyne. Like Roy.

“Do Karen and Emily know?” she rasped, her throat dry. “And Aunt Anne?” She took a gulp of the brandy, and it burned all the way down.

“Anne has always known. Do you think I would keep something like that from her? When you were eleven, and fixing to come out here for Christmas a few weeks before the accident, she wanted us to tell you then. Your mom agreed, but your dad was dead against it.”

“They had a fight in the car,” Eve said, remembering. “They went out somewhere, and even before they left, they were fighting. That was the night they went off the road. Because they were fighting about me.” Her voice dropped as she spiraled down the tunnel of time to a place she thought she’d blocked out. The flashing lights outside the house. Nana running to stop the policeman on the sidewalk. The funeral, with two closed caskets that she to this day had a difficult time believing contained her parents’ bodies. They’d never let her see them. It wasn’t fitting, Nana had insisted.

Maybe not, but she’d never been able to say goodbye, either. Hadn’t been able to control the situation. Hadn’t been able to give vent to the depths of emotion she’d been feeling. Going deep into emotion hurt too much. She couldn’t bear it then.

Things have changed now, haven’t they? Because of Mitch.

“We can’t know that,” Roy said heavily. “Believe me, I’ve had my share of regrets over this. But it seemed kinder to let things go on as they were. The kids think of you as their cousin, not their half sister. That will change now, of course. And I’ll be asking their forgiveness, too.”

“I have close family.” She marveled that she was only now realizing it. “If you want to acknowledge that.”

His face crumpled. “Acknowledge? I’m begging your forgiveness, Eve. For being such a coward. For letting Gibson clean up my mistake. For what it’s worth, he adored your mother, even while Loreen and I were dating. I think he would have done what he did a hundred times rather than let her face those uptight society biddies who would have looked down their noses at her.”

“She loved him, too,” Eve said softly. “It was the right thing to do, their getting married. I had a great childhood. And maybe it prepared me for what I do for a living now.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Anne will be glad, too. She’s been absolutely beside herself, hardly knowing whether to blame me or comfort me. Adele called, you know. That’s why I got here so early. I don’t read that particular paper, so when she told me what that reporter had written, I broke a couple of speed limits getting over here.”

“I have a few things I’d like to say to that woman,” Eve said grimly.

“Don’t be too hard on her. She was absolutely right. She’s been nagging me for thirty years, just the way she used to nag us to brush our teeth and quit talking after she turned out the lights.”

“It was none of her business.”

“Maybe not, but you’d have a hard time telling her that. It’s the way families are around here. My mom—your grandmother—had to go out to work, you know. She couldn’t be home much for us, so Adele stepped in to help. She became a kind of second mother. A confidante, in many ways. Even for Loreen.”

“I’m sure Grandmother did what she had to, to keep body and soul together.” She couldn’t blame a woman for that.

He nodded. “That’s in the past. I’m most concerned about the present. Are you going to be all right?”

Unexpectedly, her throat closed up, and she nodded. “I think so. This is a lot to take in.” She glanced at him through her lashes. “It might be a while before I can call you Dad instead of Uncle Roy.”

Tears trembled at the corners of his eyes. “I’ll do my best to earn that honor,” he said gruffly.

And then he pulled her into his arms.

**19**

MITCH LEANED BACK in his chair—Row 1, Seat 8, reserved for special guests—and studied the raucous crowd around him in the studio as they waited for “All About Eve” to begin. With the story of her parentage out, the wires were burning up and the media were having a field day. There had even been an invitation this morning to appear on Letterman on Monday night—no doubt a last-ditch effort by Chad Everard to convince her to come over to the dark side. Mitch had the feeling it might backfire, though, and do nothing but give Just Between Us a nice boost in the ratings.

He also hoped she’d accept, so he could go with her and show her the sights of New York before he called a Realtor and put his condo up for sale.

Because he’d discovered that mundane things like nailing down a job worked a lot differently here in the South. Armed with nothing but a phone number and Eve’s belief in him, he’d decided to face reality head-on, knowing that to get what you wanted out of life, you had to get out there and ask for it. The way she had. And while Eve was doing her prep work this morning, he’d gone for the most unusual job interview he’d ever had. When she wrapped today’s show, they were definitely going to celebrate. And maybe he’d even come through on his promise and make use of her desk. So far, today was turning into a very good day to try things for the first time.

Applause broke out all around him, and there she was. She took her seat alone at the front of the stage, a single spotlight beaming down on her.

God, she looked good. His heart turned over.

“Good afternoon, Atlanta,” she said. “I’m Eve Best, and I’d like to keep this just between us.”

The audience roared, and she made jokes with the people in the front row until the noise died down. Then she looked directly into the camera, which was positioned above the audience so that she looked directly at them, too. Mitch sat mesmerized by the emotion in her wide green eyes.

“Today I’d like to do something different with our town-hall meeting. Y’all know what I want to talk about. My family. You guys have been with me through thick and thin. If anyone is going to get me through this, it’s my friends, and I count y’all among them.”

Shouts of approval and another burst of applause.

“So, that said, lemme have it, Atlanta. What do you want to know about what you’ve been reading in the papers and seeing on TV?”

Two production assistants roamed the audience with wireless microphones, picking people at random. The camera zoomed in on the first volunteer, a heavyset woman with apple-red cheeks.

“First of all, Eve,” she said, her voice trembling with nervousness, “is it really true or a bunch of made-up gossip aimed at selling papers?”

Over the laughter, Eve said, “It’s true. My biological father is Roy Best. He and my mother dated before he went away to college. He was young, only eighteen, and when you’re eighteen, maybe you don’t make the kinds of decisions that last well over a lifetime. He chose to leave when my mother told him she was pregnant.”

“Bastard!” someone yelled.

“Not to my knowledge,” Eve said calmly. “But you can ask my grandmother. She’s sitting right over here.”

The camera zoomed in on Charlotte Best, who was sitting a few seats down from Mitch and whose cheekbones were a force to be reckoned with. Mitch grinned as she quartered the studio, located the guy who’d yelled and pinned him with a glare.

“Sorry, ma’am,” the guy said, subsiding into his seat.

“But meanwhile,” Eve went on, “the man I’ll always think of as Dad had been carrying a torch for my mom for years. Since grade school, I think. Anyway, she married him instead and gave me the happiest childhood a kid could ask for. Except for the accident that took them away from me, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

You go, love. Mitch’s heart swelled with emotion at her bravery. He knew what it had taken for her to choose dealing with this head-on instead of hiding behind her legal team and maintaining the chilly, private silence that Charlotte would have preferred. That would only have inflamed the media into a frenzy. This way, she controlled people’s impression of her, and the media would have to take her leftovers.

She was brave. She was brilliant.

She was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

The PA handed the microphone to a middle-aged woman with a couple of kids sitting on either side. “Have you been able to forgive your uncle for what he did to your mom?”

Ouch. Mitch winced for Eve’s sake, but her expression only softened.

“The same afternoon the story came out, my father came to my office to tell me everything. Now I feel I know him better than ever—and I love him more than ever, too. It takes a brave man to admit he made a mistake.” She paused. “The mistake I mean was that he didn’t tell me years ago. As for him leaving my mom, I don’t see that as a mistake. Not now. Not when it turned out that Gibson and Loreen were actually right for one another.”

They cut to commercial then, and Mitch dragged in a deep breath. Funny how he’d been so tense, as though he’d been afraid her audience would draw and quarter her over what could have been a scandal.

But she was carrying it off so well. She knew her viewers. The reason they tuned in was because she was honest, spontaneous and had the kind of positive energy that you’d want in a best friend. That’s what she was doing. Treating her viewers like her friends. Maybe that resulted in the necessity for a few restraining orders, but on the whole its biggest result was a devoted following who tuned in day after day.

CWB had been insane to think of taking her out of this environment. To disregard the slow-growth plan. Mitch had no doubt they’d come to regret it, especially if Eve wound up with another network.

The monitors flickered and they were back. Mitch focused on Eve with as much attention as Zach, who was up there behind him operating the crane.

This time, a guy in his twenties had the microphone. “So, is it true that you’ve been offered a spot on a national network if you, like, move to L.A.?”

“It’s true,” Eve said. “And it’s New York, not L.A. I’m not going.” She spread her hands as the audience erupted with cheers. “How could I go without taking y’all with me?”

Laughter. Mitch saw that the guy hadn’t relinquished the mike. “So that exec guy you were dating, is he out of the picture? Are you available?”

Eve threw back her head and laughed, exposing her lovely throat. Mitch sat up in his chair and squelched the urge to climb over there and choke the guy.

“Define available,” she teased. “Wouldn’t you say it takes a lot of man to play second fiddle to all of you?”

A woman in a pink dress wrestled the microphone out of the young man’s hand and spoke into it breathlessly. “I saw a picture of him—that man you were dating. If you’ve turned him loose, could you send him my way, please?”

The audience cracked up, and so did Eve. When she could speak, she said, “He’s fine, isn’t he?” She glanced at him, her face alive with laughter. “Mitch, stand up and take a bow.” He got up and waved at the woman in pink, and saw his own face appear on the monitor. “Folks, this is Mitchell Hayes, and he used to work for one of the networks bidding on the show.”

“Mitchell! Mitchell!” The audience began to chant. “Mitchell!”

Eve beckoned with one hand. “Come on up,” she mouthed.

He should have expected this. After all the DVD footage he’d watched, he should have known that anything might happen at one of these town-hall shows.

A PA ran out with a stool and a third wireless microphone, and he made himself comfortable next to Eve.

“How do you feel about the news, Mitchell?” With the spotlight in his eyes, he couldn’t see much, but the monitor off to the left showed a guy in a suit. “Does it make you feel weird that the woman you’re seeing is illegitimate?”

Wow. He took that one right in the solar plexus and drew in a breath.

“Legally, I don’t think she is. But it’s irrelevant to me.” He turned and gave the rest of his answer to Eve. “The woman I see is talented, beautiful and has a family who adores and protects her. I’m not sure what she sees in me, but I’m crazy in love with her.”

Under lashes heavy with stage makeup, Eve’s eyes widened.

“Atlanta, you’re lucky to have her,” he went on. “And so am I.”

Huge applause, and a few wolf whistles.

“Are you still with the network?” the next person wanted to know. He barely heard the question. He was too busy watching that beautiful face, those eyes that were shiny with tears and filling with everything she wanted to say and couldn’t. Not out here in public, with cameras and people and half of the South listening in.

Okay, so it hadn’t been fair to out them so completely, in front of all those thousands of viewers. And yet, it had seemed absolutely the right thing to do.

Something that would only happen on Just Between Us.

The volunteer repeated his question, and Mitch finally dragged his gaze from Eve’s face. “No, I’m not,” he said. “I’m happy to say that I’m the new director of business development for the Ashmere Trust.” Beside him, Eve gasped, and he turned. He couldn’t get enough of looking at her. “In fact, we’re throwing a benefit next Saturday night at Mirabel, which you may or may not know is the plantation that Eve’s family owned up until the sixties.” He returned his gaze to the cameras. “I’d like to invite all of you to join us in support of a new program in Atlanta. It’s called Music on the Street.”

Eve made a choked noise, and covered her mouth as the tears spilled over. Happy tears, he knew that. Tears of celebration that sparkled on her cheeks like diamonds.

He grinned and took the hand of the woman who had made all his dreams come true, and together, they turned their faces toward the spotlights.

**Epilogue**

JENNA HAMILTON CLOSED her office door with a sense of satisfaction, shutting out the buzz of activity in the offices of Andersen Nadeau.

She’d just spent the last half hour with a hard-nosed fireplug called Nelson Berg, who had been handed off to her by Eve Best when he’d made a pest of himself at CATL-TV. He’d come here with ultimatums and too much testosterone, and had left with a contract and a greater respect for the negotiating power of a woman.

Jenna smiled. That man hadn’t met a hardnose until he’d met her.

Just Between Us would be staying in Atlanta, broadcast by CWB. Score one for the little guys.

Now that the show’s future was taken care of, she had to make another trip to the law library and continue digging for precedent on lottery cases. Despite her feeling of buoyancy about her success with the CWB negotiation, she had no illusions about the possibility of losing this case for Eve and her friends. Twice now, she’d picked up her phone to call the senior partner and admit that, while she was darned good at corporate law and contracts, she didn’t have the experience for this. To ask him to have her reassigned, and give the case to someone who actually knew what they were doing and could pull it off.

But she’d disconnected before she went through with it.

Both Nicole Reavis and Jane Kurtz had called her yesterday in a panic, saying they’d arrived home to find a letter from Lot’O’Bucks. In it, the state lottery board was reminding the women that they had only eight months from the time of the announcement of their win to collect their money. Already, nearly three months had been eaten away because of the lawsuit.

The clock ticked with relentless disregard for deadlines, and Jenna was no closer to reaching a solution than she had been during those first dreadful weeks when Liza had returned to announce she wanted her fair share.

There was one tiny bright spot in this gloom, however. The Lot’O’Bucks ultimatum gave her a perfect reason to call Kevin Wade.

She took the elevator down to the lobby, where there was an espresso bar, and fortified herself with a double-shot, no-whip latte. It wouldn’t last long, but at least it cleared her brain enough to communicate like a mature woman, instead of the breathless idiot she seemed to become when she talked with him. At least on the phone, she wouldn’t be distracted by those warm brown eyes and the hot focus she saw in them. Or that mouth that spoke Latin terms and precedents when it should be making pillow talk and kissing her.

Ow. Back in her office, Jenna stubbed her patent-leather toe on the leg of her rolling desk chair.

So much for not being distracted.

She took another hit of the latte, sat and dialed his number.

“Jenna,” he said with satisfaction as soon as he heard her voice. “I was just thinking about you.”

Part of her melted. The rational part said, “Oh? Did your client get a letter from Lot’O’Bucks, too?”

He chuckled. “As a matter of fact, she did. This steps up the pressure a bit, doesn’t it?”

“It does. But I’d prefer not to drag it out, in any case. Is your client more inclined now to come to a settlement agreement?”

“Are yours?”

“I asked you first.”

“Then I would have to say no. Remember that in Karpik v. Post, the judge awarded the claimant a percentage of the winnings.”

“That case isn’t relevant to ours. Even though they went in on the tickets together, they didn’t choose the numbers together. The complainant just bought a batch of tickets with the defendant’s money.”

Kevin chuckled. “Can’t put a single thing past you, can I?”

“I’ve memorized every case I’ve been able to find having anything to do with a lottery, ever,” she admitted. “Along with work on my other corporate clients, I’m getting a bit fried.”

“Me, too. Why don’t you take a break and meet me?”

Well, at least it was nice to know they were on the same wavelength. That she wasn’t just having a sweet fantasy, all by herself.

“Kevin, you know we can’t while we’re on opposing sides of this case.”

“You said that the other week and met me anyway. And didn’t we have a good time—until you got cold feet and ran off on me?”

Her whole body sighed at the thought. “Yes. But it can’t happen again. Look, I admit I’m very attracted to you. But I’m not willing to risk my success on this case by setting up a possible ethics problem. You understand.”

After a moment, he said, “I do. But that doesn’t make it any easier. I’ve been thinking about you ever since.”

“Likewise.”

“So what are we going to do about it? Are you going to send me on my merry way?”

“I’d rather not,” she said carefully. He probably had flocks of salivating women on speed dial. It wouldn’t take more than five minutes for a man like that to find someone to spend his time with. “But I don’t see any way past it.”

“I do.”

Gee, a virtual affair. Lovely.

She dropped her voice, even though the walls were thick in this old building. “I’m not having some kind of online e-mail sex thing. Absolutely not.”

His laugh startled her. “Hey, what do you take me for, a teenage geek? No, I simply meant that I’m willing to wait until after this case is over to see you on anything more than a professional basis.”

He was? His voice had become as soft as melted sugar. Man, was she ever in trouble.

“I feel as though I’d sat down to this wonderful feast,” he murmured, “and after I took one bite, someone took the plate away.”

Come on, there wasn’t a thing a girl could say to something like that. “You do?” she managed to reply.

“I’m willing to wait, so that I can enjoy that wonderful feast to the fullest when it’s the right time for me to do it,” he said. “What about you?”

With you to look forward to, five months is nothing.

No, no, she couldn’t say that. A girl had to have some pride.

“After all, what’s five months when there’s someone like you at the end of it?” he asked softly.

Oh, man. If he was reading her mind, she was done for. “I’ll make it worth your while when we get there,” she promised.

“I’ll hold you to that.” He chuckled, and added, “Meantime, see you in negotiations.”

And suddenly, the prospect of yet more negotiations took on a golden glow. True, she had a ton of work to do. More wakeful nights. More meetings with Eve and the other winners at the station. But at the end of it all lay the prospect of victory—for her, and for the people she represented.

She refused to consider any other outcome.

“You will,” she promised, a smile warming her voice. “And may the best lawyer win.”

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ISBN: 978-1-4268-0629-2

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