



## Praise for the writing of Katriena Knights

### *My Cyber Valentine*

This is the first work by Katriena Knight I have ever read, but it definitely will not be the last. *My Cyber Valentine* is a fast-paced romance that pulls you into Val and Chandler's lives. I could not believe how quickly I warped through this, completely delighted and satisfied! Great read!

-- Kally Jo Surbeck, author of *She Blinded Me With Science...Fiction* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Smart humor and sexy twists make this romantic comedy an erotically charged read.

-- Daria Karpova, author of *Loose Diamonds* (Loose Id)

Katriena Knight has written a lovely romance teeming with the nostalgia and down-home feeling of a Norman Rockwell portrait. Chandler and Val both mistake each other for the other sex, and that is only the beginning. Both involved with someone else when they meet, an instant attraction has them shedding those connections to concentrate on what promises to be a relationship filled with "sparks". I loved the way the author advanced the romance step by step, without hurrying us into the bedroom for another meaningless romp between the sheets. When these two finally get together, the heat is intense and the interaction caring. Well worth reading, *My Cyber Valentine* will find its way onto many a keeper shelf.

-- Camille Anthony, author of *Light on her Toes* (Loose Id)

# MY CYBER VALENTINE

Katriena Knights

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This book is rated:



For sexual content and graphic language.

# My Cyber Valentine

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## Dedication

*For Archimedes, Tasha, Fermi, Dax, Sisco and Spike, ferret companions throughout the years.*

*And in memory of Barb, who met her honey online, but stayed with us far too brief a time.*

## Prologue

*Oh, joy of joys*, Chandler Carlisle thought. More e-mail from Val Kinsey. What was that woman complaining about now?

Chandler should have expected it. She'd sent out the new version of her user manual last week, and Val couldn't let the opportunity go by without making her usual extensive, retentive suggestions for revision. Four versions of the manual, four long-winded e-mails from Val explaining obscure points of grammar Chandler was sure she'd forgotten somewhere between sixth grade and the Real World.

Ever a glutton for punishment, Chandler skimmed the note. "Is to are, was to were, affect to effect," she muttered. It was all the same stuff, and half of it wasn't even right according to the company style guide.

She shook her head, lips pressed tightly together.

"Cancel your plane trip, Val," she growled at her terminal. "Cause when you come out to Jersey tomorrow, I'm gonna rip you to shreds."

She turned off the computer. One good thing about Val's annoying message -- after suffering through that, even a date with Gifford sounded good.

## Chapter One

Chandler stopped just inside the front door of Flannagan's, looking at her watch. At the bar sat Gifford, nursing a Heineken. Same time, same place, same boyfriend. Same freaking beer, even. Chandler sighed. What a way to finish off a Monday.

The hostess approached her, bright and perky and not looking a day over twelve. "Just one tonight?"

"No, I'm meeting someone," Chandler said. "He's at the bar. I'll go over there, and he'll ask if we should get a table. I'll say yes, we'll sit down, he'll order veggie sticks when I really want nachos, then we'll talk about work and then he'll try to talk me into getting rid of my ferret and buying a cat instead." She stopped, realizing the hostess was staring bemusedly at her. Chandler smiled crookedly. "Don't worry. You'll understand when you grow up."

She joined Gifford at the bar. He asked if they should get a table. They sat down, and Gifford ordered veggie sticks.

"So, how was work?" Gifford asked.

"Awful." Chandler looked at the picture of the nachos in the menu. They looked really good, with all that sour cream and guacamole. But veggie sticks, of course, were so much healthier, and there was no convincing Gifford to have some fun once in a while. "We're

getting ready to deploy StarBase at the St. Louis office. Of course, they didn't finalize the dates until this morning," Chandler went on, "so we're all running around like idiots trying to get the documentation ready. And by 'we,' I mean 'me.' They're meeting here tomorrow, which gives me all kinds of lead time." Gifford nodded, with a knowing smile. "Anyway, whatever happens, I'll finally get to meet some of these people I've been frantically e-mailing for the past six months. Including that annoying Val Kinsey woman who keeps sending me all these stupid corrections to my user guides."

The waitress dropped off the tray of vegetables. Gifford took the cup of ranch dressing off the plate and set it aside, just out of Chandler's reach. He never touched the stuff. Chandler looked at it wistfully.

"I'm sure you handled it -- you always do." Gifford smiled, apparently pleased he could offer her such unconditional support.

Chandler made a face. "Yeah, I handled it. I just about lost my mind, but I *handled* it."

"Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. Give me the salad dressing."

Gifford picked up the cup, looking at it with distaste. "*This* stuff?"

"Yes, *that* stuff."

"It's not good for you."

"I don't care. I was late to work this morning because Sophocles decided to run up my leg while I was wearing my last pair of clean pantyhose, then he stole my glove and hid it under the bed, then the traffic was horrible; I ran around like a nutcase trying to finalize documents that should have been done two weeks ago, but weren't because nobody in my department thinks I'm serious when I give them a deadline, and now my boyfriend's making me eat dry carrot sticks when there's perfectly good salad dressing on the table."

Looking sidelong at the other tables, Gifford set the dressing down. Chandler grabbed it and stuffed a carrot stick into it. Apparently satisfied none of the other patrons perceived Chandler's tirade as a floorshow, Gifford leaned forward.

"You really should get a cat instead. That ferret gives you nothing but trouble."

Chandler glared at him and ate her carrot. The ranch dressing tasted like heaven, but even so, did little to calm her. "*You* should really try a couple different brands of beer."

"What?"

"Never mind."

Gifford smiled a little and returned to his usual, implacable self.

By the time their entrees arrived, the conversation had settled into the allowed pattern. They talked about family, work, this week's TV. Chandler barely had to pay attention, it was so familiar.

"*DeathCharge III* comes out Friday," Gifford said while Chandler picked the olives out of her salad. "Want to go?"

Chandler shrugged. "It sounds awfully violent. Besides, I wasn't crazy about the first two."

"Well, maybe I'll go with Roger or something."

Chandler munched a cucumber slice. Once -- just once -- she wished he'd try to cajole her into doing something he wanted to do. A good argument would provide some variety.

"I'd think you'd prefer something with a little intellectual challenge."

Gifford placidly sipped his usual beer -- still the same bottle, since more than one was bad for his waistline. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You just seem a little edgy, that's all."

"I'm not edgy." She glared at Gifford, deliberately trying to provoke him, part of her appalled. Gifford hadn't done anything to deserve this.

Maybe that was part of the problem. Only Chandler wasn't entirely sure there *was* a problem. No, there must be a problem. Otherwise she wouldn't have such an urge to slap that calm, accepting expression off his face. He took a bite out of his grilled chicken sandwich and chewed thoughtfully, watching her. *Like a cow chewing its cud*. Why did she feel this way? It was the wrong week for PMS.

Gifford just chewed, and chewed, and swallowed, and said quite calmly, "If you don't want to go to the movie, that's fine. I can go with Roger, or you and I can go see something else. Or we can stay home and rent something, if you like."

"How about *Titanic* again?"

Gifford's jaw shifted a little, just enough that Chandler knew she'd finally annoyed him, however slightly. She fought a triumphant smile. "If you insist," he said.

Chandler looked down at her salad, feeling like she'd won a round in a battle Gifford hadn't even known they were fighting. Even she was getting a little tired of *Titanic*. The triumph faded quickly. She was being ridiculous. Gifford was Gifford -- and many women would have been pleased with his imperturbability.

But Chandler wanted something else. Something more exciting. No, not quite that. John had been exciting, and that had been a disaster. Maybe just a relationship with a man she could actually imagine herself sleeping with.

They skipped dessert, as usual. Gifford walked Chandler to her car.

"I'd be glad for the company tonight," he told her, "if you feel like driving down to Basking Ridge."

Chandler really didn't feel like driving all the way to Basking Ridge. She didn't feel much like spending any more time with Gifford, either. At this point, she'd rather go home,

curl up on the couch with a good book, and read while Sophocles ate soap out of the bathroom and rearranged all the sponges under the kitchen sink.

But the thought occurred to her that maybe she hadn't given Giff a proper chance. Maybe the only reason they hadn't had sex was because she'd never given him the chance to seduce her.

"Maybe you could come over to my place?"

Giff shrugged, without enthusiasm. "Sure. But I, um ..."

"But you, um, what?"

For a moment, Chandler was sure he was trying to come up with a reason not to come over. Then he smiled and he was plain old Giff again, not equivocating, trying-to-weasel-out Giff.

"Nothing," he said. "Never mind."

So they went to Chandler's apartment. She put on a pot of decaf and thought some more about her relationship with Gifford.

It bothered her that he could hesitate before accepting her invitation. It couldn't be a good sign that neither of them was all that excited about traveling thirty miles or so to see the other. If they truly cared about each other, a little distance shouldn't matter.

It *really* couldn't be a good sign that Chandler was spending so much time trying to convince herself there was something to this relationship.

She poured two cups of coffee. Black for Gifford -- that much she knew. She'd fallen into the habit of drinking hers black, too, just because he did, and because he'd made comments about cream and sugar and diets and cholesterol. Looking at the second cup of richly dark brown coffee, she firmed her mouth. This was her house, and she certainly had no worries about her weight, so she was damn well going to have some cream and sugar. And a good-sized glop of chocolate syrup.

She sat down next to him and handed him his coffee while he draped an arm over her shoulders.

“What is that, mocha?” Gifford said, making a face at her odd-colored coffee.

“Yes,” said Chandler. “It’s good. Would you like me to doctor yours?”

“No, thanks.”

*It’s not good for you.* He didn’t say the words, but Chandler heard them in his tone. One point for her, she thought -- she could read his mind.

Gifford sipped his coffee as if to fortify himself, then set it down on the end table next to the lamp. As he leaned sideways toward her, Chandler took her own gulp of courage.

*The one time in your life you had to go and make decaf,* she thought, and then Gifford kissed her.

He slipped his hand under her jawline, cupping her face and turning it a little to deepen the kiss. Chandler responded as best she could, but it really wasn’t doing anything for her except getting her lips wet. When his tongue touched her, requesting access, she drew back with a jerk.

“What?” Gifford said, looking insulted.

“Sophocles,” Chandler ad-libbed. “I heard Sophocles. He probably wants out of his cage. I’ll go check.”

In her bedroom, Chandler sat down on the floor next to the ferret’s cage. Sophocles, ever uncooperative, was sound asleep. Glancing back toward Gifford, who couldn’t even see her from where he sat on the couch, Chandler shook the cage. Nothing.

“Okay, okay, baby, I’ll let you out.” She unlocked the cage and poked the ferret. Still nothing. “I know, you’ve been in here all day and you really want to come out and play.”

Yeah, sure he did. Chandler picked him up, hoping he’d wake up and show some interest in the world. But he only hung over her hands, limp as a wet dishrag, so sound asleep she doubted a nuclear meltdown would wake him. Chandler shook him.

“Wake up, Sophocles, you little idiot,” she hissed. He made a deep, long-suffering sigh and opened his little black eyes. Chandler set him down on the floor. “Go play.”

Sophocles yawned and stretched, then crawled into Chandler’s lap and went back to sleep.

“Oh, great.” She picked him up by the scruff of his neck, like the vet did when he gave the ferret shots. That caught Sophocles’s attention. He opened his eyes and blinked at her. “Go freaking *play*.”

He looked at her as if to say, “Yeah, whatever,” and started to squirm. Chandler put him down. Finally getting into the swing of things, he meandered into the living room. Gifford grimaced.

“Is it going to bite me?”

“Not unless you take your shoes off and wiggle your toes.”

“You should get a cat.”

“I don’t like cats. I like Sophocles.”

Finally awake, Sophocles chittered and jumped at the sound of his name, then disappeared under the couch.

Well, that distraction had been milked for all it was worth. Chandler sat back down on the couch, took another drink of her decaffeinated fortification, and turned her attention back to Gifford.

He decided to make another attempt at kissing her. She responded as best she could, hoping he would do something -- anything, please! -- to spark her interest. His mouth teased hers, his hands sliding down her arms, up her back. She tried leaning into him a little more, shifting with his caresses. Still nothing.

Then it got worse than nothing. She started falling asleep.

Gifford put his hands against her waist, and suddenly time warped and they were lying down, leaving Chandler with no memory of how they'd gotten there. This couldn't go on much longer, she thought. Surely he'd notice if he initiated foreplay and she started snoring.

Still, she didn't know how to get herself out of this. She couldn't just stop --

The phone rang.

*Thank God*, Chandler thought, and reached for it, but Gifford stopped her. "Let the machine get it."

*Well, hell*. Chandler suffered through four rings, then the machine kicked in.

"Chandler, it's your mom. Are you there?"

Chandler took advantage of her mother's patented patient pause to jump out of Gifford's arms and grab the phone.

"I need to get this. It's important -- Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"I just wanted to tell you I got the card you sent."

"Oh, my God!" said Chandler. "That's horrible!"

"What in the world are you talking about?" her mother protested. Chandler covered up the mouthpiece. "I'm sorry, Giff. It sounds like a family emergency."

Gifford stood. "I'll just get going, then. Call me later if you need anything."

Chandler gave him a quick kiss and saw him out, telling her mother everything was going to be all right. As soon as the door closed behind Gifford, she said, "Thank God you called, Mom."

"Why don't you just break up with him if you hate him so much?"

"I don't *hate* him, Mom. I just --" Okay, so how did she explain this to her mother?  
"There's no spark."

"Well, dump him, then. If there're no sparks now, he'll never be able to give you a decent orgasm."

“Mother!” Sometimes she wished her mother wouldn’t talk to her like she was a grown-up. “Don’t say things like that. You know I’m a virgin.”

“Yes, your sister told me all about your declaration of re-virginization. Now, I just wanted to say thank you for the card, and I wondered if you’ve decided when you’re going to come visit.”

“Not yet, Mom.” Sophocles gave a muffled squeak, and determined scratching sounds came from under the couch. “Look, Mom, I have to go. Sophocles is tearing up the couch lining and I have to lure him out. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“All right, hon. Go attend to your ‘family emergency.’ Oh, and don’t let the specter of Testosterone Johnny scare you out of another relationship.”

“It’s not that, Mom. Gifford’s nothing like John.”

“That’s what you said about Brian, and I think you could have worked that relationship out quite nicely.”

“He watched too much hockey.”

“He had a nice ass.”

“I’m hanging up now, Mother.”

“Goodbye, dear. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

Chandler lured Sophocles out from under the couch by shaking the bottle of liquid ferret vitamins, which was one of Sophocles’s favorite treats, then sat down with her day planner to see when she could squeeze in a trip to Illinois to see her family, including her mother who wanted to talk about orgasms and raise the specter of Testosterone Johnny. All of it was easier than thinking about how pathetic her life really was.

## Chapter Two

Tuesdays were supposed to be better than Mondays. This one wasn't. Andrea, Chandler's blonde, often too-perky officemate, leaned her chin on her hand to listen while Chandler ranted.

"They told me fifteen people were coming in from St. Louis, so I made twenty copies of the training manual." She jerked said manual down from an upper shelf and the book next to it fell down as well, narrowly missing her head. "So instead of fifteen people, twenty-five show up."

She tossed the errant second book on the desk, scattering a pile of papers in the process. "As far as I know, only eight people in St. Louis are even going to be using StarBase directly."

She thumbed through the training manual. There wasn't time to send the binder to Central Reproduction for copies, and the department secretary was running herself ragged trying to score more cinnamon rolls. Chandler would have to make the copies herself. "We never had these problems when I did the training myself. Outsourcing for the teachers and still making me handle the manuals was about the stupidest thing I've seen Novotel do since I started working here."

"Sixty-seven," said Andrea.

Chandler blinked. "What?"

"That's the sixty-seventh time I've heard you say that." She grinned as Chandler rolled her eyes. "I agree with you, though."

"Thank God somebody does."

"At least you've got somebody to take it out on later," Andrea commented.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you say you were having lunch with Val Kinsey?"

Chandler slapped the training binder closed. "*Yes*. And I hope that chick is wearing her asbestos underwear, because I am *so* in the mood to take her down."

Andrea grinned. "Go git 'em."

"She's dead meat." Chandler pushed her office door open, steeling herself to face the temperamental copier on the fourth floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You look like hell, Val."

Val Kinsey drained his third cup of coffee, trying to wake his brain up. Judging by Steve's observation, it wasn't working. He didn't know how he was going to sit through the first day of StarBase training without falling asleep on the conference room table. "After that fiasco last night at Newark Airport, I didn't get to sleep until midnight, then my sister Noël called at three this morning and wouldn't let me get off the phone."

Steve frowned. "What's wrong? Is she all right?"

"She just gave birth. You'd think she'd be too tired to yammer for nearly two hours, but she did it anyway. On her husband's cell phone, too."

Steve shrugged. "Probably cheaper than the hospital phones."

Val shook his head, still dumbfounded. “She said she’d already been on the phone for a week with my mother, too. You’d think she’d want a little rest after all that. And I still haven’t figured out how she tracked me down at the hotel.”

Steve nodded soberly. “As always, your relatives frighten me. So what did she have?”

“A girl. Rhiannon something. I forget.” He pushed his glasses up to rub the grit out of his eyes. He was truly happy for his sister -- how could he not be? -- but he’d really needed his sleep, especially after the late flight into Newark. Oh, and the nearly sleepless weekend club-hopping with Belinda. He was beginning to think dating a younger woman was a bad idea.

“So she has to tell me every single gory detail -- how she’d been massaging oil somewhere or other to keep from tearing, and how the nurse had to help her pee because of the IV pole, and how she didn’t have any drugs this time and how great it was to feel the baby’s head coming out ...” Val shuddered. “I finally just tuned out. What is it with pregnant women?”

“She wasn’t pregnant. She just gave birth.”

“Whatever. It’s all hormones.” He drained the last of the coffee and considered getting another cup. Maybe not. He was starting to feel dizzy.

“You’d better get it together, Val,” Steve said. “You’ve got to take on that Carlisle guy at lunch, and I’ve got money on you for a TKO in four rounds.”

Val smiled ruefully, shaking his head. “Not a good bet. He’s going to tear me up, and I deserve it for letting Shelly talk me into sending him all her dopey editing suggestions so they’d be ‘taken more seriously.’”

“No, I think your biggest mistake was not reading them first.”

“How did I know Shelly was an anal retentive grammar freak?”

“Don’t you ever read her e-mail?”

“Good point.” The conference room door opened and a woman entered, carrying a large plate full of cinnamon rolls. “Thank God,” Val said. “More sugar. Maybe that’ll wake me up.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler looked at her watch. Val was supposed to meet her for lunch in five minutes, but Kyle just droned on and on, in spite of Chandler’s repeated attempts to direct his attention toward some kind of summary.

“I’m sorry, Kyle,” she finally said, interrupting a long-winded discussion of screen captures.

Kyle looked up, blinking one long, slow blink as if taken aback by her very presence.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you,” Chandler went on. “I think these ideas are wonderful, but right now I have to go.”

“Oh,” said Kyle. “I see. Could I just show you this last item in section eight ...”

It was nearly 12:15 before Chandler managed to extricate herself. Hoping Val hadn’t given up on her, she half-ran back down the hallway to the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

The training session ran a little late before breaking for lunch, so it was nearly 12:10 when Val stepped off the elevator and headed for Chandler’s office. After six cups of coffee and two huge cinnamon rolls, he wasn’t awake, but he was wired enough to fake it.

One of the two desks in the office was empty; behind the other stood a woman with dark blonde hair and blue-framed glasses, rummaging through the desk drawers and mumbling to herself. Val rapped lightly on the door.

“Hello?”

The woman looked up. “Yes? May I help you?” Her voice came a bit short as she flung a handful of pencils back into the desk drawer.

“I’m looking for Chandler Carlisle. We’re supposed to meet for lunch.”

“Chandler’s --” The woman stopped practically in mid-word. Her frown of frustration dissolved, to be replaced by a grin Val could only describe as evil. “You’re meeting Chandler for lunch?”

“Right. I’m Val Kinsey, from Novotel St. Louis.”

“You’re Val Kinsey?”

“Yes. And you’re ...?” *Mentally disturbed*, Val thought, judging by the woman’s expression and the fact she’d totally lost interest in whatever had so occupied her only moments before.

“Andrea Miller,” the woman said. “I’m Chandler’s officemate.”

“Nice to meet you. Do you expect him back soon?”

Andrea made a strange choking sound. “Any minute.” She waved toward the empty chair. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks.” He sat down behind the unoccupied desk. Andrea settled in her own chair, rummaging again through the drawers, but with much less urgency. After a minute, she jingled a set of car keys.

“There they are,” she said. “I was beginning to wonder if I’d lost my mind.”

“Were you getting ready to leave?”

Andrea’s smile quirked again into wickedness. “I *was*. Now I think I’ll stick around. This’ll be much more entertaining.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough.”

Val quirked a smile back at her, not entirely sure how to take her. She was cute, but he wasn't convinced all her brain cells were banging into each other. She disappeared behind her desk again, so Val turned his attention to the desk he sat at. A strange sound came from Andrea's side of the office. Val wondered if she was choking.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, but didn't reappear.

Chandler's desk was neat and tidy, the wall behind it decorated with Dilbert cartoons and photographs. There were a few pictures of a ferret, and another of a pair of people. The woman was striking, with short black hair and blue eyes, the man less so. Some guys had all the luck, Val thought; apparently, Chandler Carlisle was one of them.

"So, Andrea," Val ventured, "are you involved in the StarBase project, too?"

"No, I'm just --"

"Excuse me. May I help you?"

Val looked up. In front of him stood the woman from the picture on Chandler's desk. A spark of poorly disguised irritation lit her blue eyes. She was smartly turned out in a sapphire suit and ivory blouse. The sleek, black cap of short hair framed her elegantly boned face. And she radiated -- something. Val wasn't sure what it was, but it sucker-punched him right in the gut.

He stood slowly, feeling like he'd trespassed somewhere he had no right to be. But why was she here? Something in the room had gone totally out of whack.

From behind the other desk, Andrea made a noise that made Val wonder if he should drag her out and administer the Heimlich maneuver.

"I'm waiting for Chandler Carlisle," he said.

"I'm Chandler," said the woman. "But I'm afraid I'll have to meet with you later. I have an appointment for lunch --"

She stopped and stared at him. He stared at her. Small pieces of a disordered universe began to fall into place.

Andrea stopped choking and let out a full-fledged guffaw.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler gulped as a great wave of confusion broke over her and began to subside into something that made sense.

Sort of.

He was six feet or so and looked like he might lift weights. His face was -- well, strange at first, as if it had been taken apart and put back together by somebody who didn't quite know what he was doing. But crystal-blue eyes behind lightweight glasses somehow unified it. And he exuded masculinity like an odor. An intoxicating odor.

"You're Val Kinsey," she said suddenly, and heard him say, "I'm Val Kinsey," at the same time. His voice was like velvet and whiskey, or really good chocolate melting over a double boiler.

"I'm Chandler Carlisle," Chandler said again.

Val smiled, and suddenly all the pieces of his face fit exactly right. "I thought you were a man."

Chandler returned his smile; it was impossible not to. "I thought you were a woman."

Gales of laughter came from behind Andrea's desk. Chandler leaned over to find her officemate curled up in her chair, gripping her sides while tears poured from her eyes.

"Shut up, Andrea," Chandler said, then turned back to Val. "Well, this is an interesting turn of events. Maybe we should go somewhere and talk where we can actually hear each other."

Chandler led the way down the hall, still not quite oriented. She'd planned to have lunch with a woman from St. Louis. They'd have a civil, womanly disagreement over the

user guides, from which Chandler would emerge victorious. Val would apologize profusely and offer to pay for lunch, gooey dessert included. Then all would be well again in Chandler's world.

Instead, she had a lunch date with this ... man. It wasn't at all what she'd prepared for. Especially since this particular man had such an unmistakable and remarkably intense effect on her hormones. How was she supposed to look at *that* and say, "Your stupid user guide comments suck"?

"So," Val said, and that velvety voice slipped inside Chandler's ears, wrapped around her brain, and choked out all her common sense. "So, is your officemate completely insane?"

Chandler laughed. Stopping at the elevator, she pushed a button to take them to the lobby. "Given my experience with her, I'd have to say yes."

The elevator door opened. As the doors closed behind them, Chandler found herself under Val's scrutiny. A discreet scrutiny, but one that left her aware of trails his gaze left on her body. His smile still held a trace of incredulity.

"All the times we talked online, you never said anything to make me think you were a woman. And I just assumed ... I mean, the only person named Chandler I've ever heard of is that guy on *Friends*."

"You never said anything to make me think you were a man." She bit her lip then, but it was too late -- the words were already out and bouncing around the little elevator car.

"Ouch," said Val, and laughed. "I should say this is awkward, but it's -- well, I'm not sure what it is."

"It's awkward," said Chandler. The elevator stopped on the ground floor and they stepped out. "Flannagan's okay?"

"Do they have burgers?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I'm in. My car or yours?"

“Might as well take mine, since I know where we’re going.” Plus, it would give her more control. Sad that suddenly she couldn’t completely trust him, just because he’d turned out to be a man.

Val didn’t seem concerned that Chandler might drive him down some deserted road and have her way with him. Which was foolhardy of him, because she was seriously thinking about it. Unfortunately, deserted roads were hard to come by in this part of New Jersey.

As Chandler started her car, she noticed Val watching her carefully out of the corners of his eyes. The glasses disguised his scrutiny, but not so much Chandler missed it. He buckled his seatbelt and sat, shifting, fingers tapping on his thighs. The tip of his right index finger was missing -- it looked like it had been chopped off just behind the fingernail. Up close, it appeared his nose had been broken, and a thin scar slid under his chin. At least three stories, then, that she could see readily. How many more stories did he carry around on his rangy body?

Their eyes met suddenly, and both realized they were checking each other out. Chandler’s hands clenched on the steering wheel and she jerked her eyes forward. Val cleared his throat and turned his gaze, too, forward.

They were silent for a time, Chandler uncomfortable with the silence but equally uncomfortable with anything she could think of to say. Finally, as they pulled out of the parking lot, Val said, “So, how long have you worked for Novotel?”

It made for a non-threatening conversation, more or less, until Chandler pulled into the parking lot at Flannagan’s. But when they stopped, Val unfolded himself out of her car again and there he was. Tall, lean, lanky, with his story-scars and his bright red Cardinals jacket. Suddenly it was hard to remember what she was talking about, what she’d meant to say, or what her name was.

She led the way to the front door of the restaurant, where Val managed to get in front of her to hold the door open. He brushed past her as he made the maneuver, the fleeting contact making her skin prickle. The man was too sexy for his own good, and Chandler had the distinct feeling he was totally unaware of it.

Some level of social comfort returned as they took care of the rote business of being seated, discussing the menu, and ordering. But then there came another need for conversation.

Chandler filled the void with more work talk, passing on details about the StarBase project -- dates, figures, plans, personnel. Dry as dust, conversationally speaking, but it was stuff Val needed to know. Plus, it was all data Chandler had sitting around in easily accessible spots in her head, so she could rattle it off without thinking about it. Which was good, because she was finding it harder and harder to think with Val sitting there across from her. In these close quarters, she could smell him. She wasn't even sure it was cologne, but it was spicy and musky and wonderful. Soap, maybe, or -- even more likely -- pheromones.

So she kept babbling -- numbers, names, facts, figures -- because it was the only way she could think of to get through the meal.

\* \* \* \* \*

She just kept babbling -- numbers, names, facts, figures -- until Val had to consciously shut out the words. She wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. And without the actual meaning attached to it, the sound of her voice was mesmerizing.

He'd pretty much gotten over the shock of discovering Chandler was a woman, but he hadn't gotten over the shock that she was so beautiful. And it was more than just the sapphire eyes and classic cheekbones, more than the willowy body. It was the way she carried herself, with a strong dignity Val would have found intimidating a decade ago. Even

in this situation, where she was obviously uncomfortable, she comported herself with a steady confidence.

And she smelled incredible. Not perfume, he thought, something more subtle, herbal but not flowery. Shampoo, maybe -- Val wasn't sure.

They kept up a conversation, functional but not scintillating, and Val wondered if it would be wrong to act on his instincts. After all, he had to go back to St. Louis Friday evening. Even if he made a move, it wouldn't get him very far.

But, he thought, technology was making the world smaller and smaller. And when chemistry like this hit, it seemed a shame to ignore it.

So when they stopped in the Novotel parking lot, before she got out of the car he laid a hand on her arm. She turned toward him, an expression on her face that made it all too obvious the chemistry had hit her, too.

"Thanks for meeting with me today," he said. "I think it'll help us communicate a little better now we know each other. And by the way, I'm sorry about the user manual comments."

Chandler planted a fist on one hip. "Yeah, what the heck was up with that?"

"A co-worker asked me to forward them. I owed her a favor, and I never even thought to read them until just a couple of days ago." He watched her face as she considered. She seemed inclined to forgive him. "So are we okay?"

She shifted a little, moving a little closer. "Yeah, I guess."

"Good. I was wondering --" He stopped. Was it worth it?

"Yes?" Chandler prodded. Her smell wafted over him again and he steeled himself for the plunge.

"I know I'm only in town a few days, but I was wondering, if you're free tomorrow night, if you might like to get together on a less professional basis."

“You mean like a date?” Her words came too fast, and Val knew right then he had blown it.

“I guess, unless --”

“I’m sorry, Val,” Chandler broke in. Her tone was strange -- brittle, but not as if she was angry. More like she was -- could it be regretful? “I’m sorry, but I’m seeing someone. It wouldn’t be right.”

Val remembered in that moment that he was seeing someone, too. A hot, 22-year-old minx who would probably drive him to a heart attack if he ever took her to bed. The prospect didn’t excite him nearly as much as the thought of having dinner with Chandler.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I understand.”

Chandler smiled, and this time Val was almost certain the slight twist to her mouth had been put there by regret. “No hard feelings?”

“No, not at all.”

They walked into the building, to the elevator, where they would have to part company. Chandler pushed the button and the doors opened.

“Drop me some e-mail when you get back,” she said. “Or call, even, if you like.”

She stepped into the elevator and the doors closed behind her. Val stared at them. He had a strange, sinking feeling that opportunity had just knocked very loudly on his door, and he, Val Kinsey the romantically incompetent, had been unable to close the deal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thankfully, Andrea was still gone when Chandler came back to the office. She knew Andrea would want a blow-by-blow, and Chandler wasn’t in the mood.

Just last night, she’d wished for a man she could actually imagine herself sleeping with. Now she’d found him -- and he lived halfway across the country. It wasn’t fair.

No, it wasn't fair at all, but it had led her to a decision. It was time to make some changes in her life. She picked up the phone.

A few minutes later, she hung up. She would meet Gifford at seven tomorrow night. Sometime before eight, she was breaking up with him.

### Chapter Three

Chandler sat very quietly in the booth at Flannagan's, picking at a pile of nachos. Gifford was late. Normally she waited for him before she ordered, but tonight she needed something to occupy herself while she waited. She had no appetite, but shifting the chips on the plate and picking off the jalapeños kept her mind off what she was going to have to say to Gifford.

She scooped sour cream up with one chip and deposited it on another, thinking of Val. It wasn't fair that the man who set her senses on fire lived across the country, while the man who seemed interested and lived nearby left her cold. If only Val lived in New Jersey. Or even New York, Connecticut, or Pennsylvania -- any of them would be better than Missouri.

But it didn't matter. What *did* matter was that Chandler had finally seen the need to make changes. Meeting Val had brought the situation into blinding focus. That was what she wanted in a relationship -- fire and electricity, breathless passion, without the dark undercurrents John had brought along. She couldn't really pursue it with Val, since he lived so far away, but she knew she'd never have it with Gifford. The best thing she could do for both of them was to end the relationship.

And here he was, walking toward her. The chip in Chandler's hand snapped into three pieces. Time to face the music. He smiled, and she forced herself to smile back.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's all right." *Just delaying the inevitable.* "Have some nachos."

Gifford slid into the booth, pointedly ignoring the nachos. "I had a phone call at the last minute."

"Really, it's okay. I've just been ... relaxing."

Gifford smiled. "That was probably good for you. You don't seem to do that very often."

"No, I guess I don't." *Why hadn't this worked?* Gifford was a decent, attractive man. More attractive than Val, in the classical sense. He probably made more money, and there was a certain calm stability about him that Chandler knew she should find appealing. So why did she feel so very little when she was with Gifford, and so very much when she was with Val?

"So how was your day?" Gifford asked, dragging Chandler out of her thoughts.

"Hectic as usual. Yours?"

"Pretty much the same."

Chandler swallowed. This was pointless. She couldn't act like this was business as usual.

"What's wrong?" said Gifford. "You seem a little down."

Chandler shook her head. "We need to talk."

Gifford nodded. His expression gave away very little, but Chandler thought she saw a tightening around his eyes and mouth. He knew. Or at least suspected.

Gifford looked into his drink. "So talk. Whatever it is, I'm listening."

Oh, this was going to be hard. “Gifford, you’re a good person. And I care about you, I really do, but --” She dared a glance at him. His face was emotionless, waiting. She let her eyes slide to one side, looking at his temple, at the sprinkle of gray there, at his ear. “But there’s just no spark.”

“Spark?” Gifford’s face remained expressionless.

“I don’t ... I don’t see a future for us.”

His face finally moved. He took a deep breath as his eyebrows shot up. Looking into his drink, he said, “And what exactly made you decide you needed to tell me this today?”

“I’ve just been giving it a lot of thought over the past few days. I need to make some changes in my life.”

“And this is one of them?”

Chandler winced. It sounded so cold-blooded, worded that way. “That’s not exactly what I meant --”

“No, I know what you meant. I should have seen it coming.”

“I’m really sorry, Giff.”

“No, there’s no need to be sorry. Sometimes these things turn out to be ... one-sided.”

Chandler blinked, then forced herself to look into his face. In spite of the ease of his tone, his mouth was set in a brittle line, and his eyes glistened -- good grief, was he *crying*? But then he blinked, and all seemed well again.

“I wish you all the best, Chandler,” he said. He started to say something else, but stopped and only shook his head a little. Finally, he gathered his dignity with a shrug and left her there.

Chandler watched him go, gaping. One-sided? So maybe he’d been sparking while she was sitting there sparkless. She’d done what she’d thought was right for her, but she’d hurt him, unintentionally, irrevocably, and inevitably.

Romance sucked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Home wasn't much better. She didn't feel like watching TV, and, though she wanted to tell her mother about the breakup, she didn't feel like talking on the phone. Even Sophocles was subdued, curling up on one of his blankets on the living room floor instead of playing.

Finally, she fired up the computer. Online shopping was sure to cheer her up.

In the middle of an order at L.L. Bean, something "dinged." A window opened up in the middle of her screen, announcing the arrival of a real-time message. She shook her head in amazement. It was from "valkinsey."

"Hi," it said. "Is this chcarlisle from Novotel? If so, how are you doing?"

Chandler considered ignoring the message, then, out of nowhere, she remembered his smell. The spicy odor was so real he could have been in the room with her, and it short-circuited her common sense every bit as thoroughly as it had when they'd been face-to-face.

"I'm fine," she typed back. "What's up with you?"

"I was just fooling around online -- got thrown out of a singles chatroom because the ladies there thought I was a lesbian (ba ha ha). How's the rat?"

Chuckling, Chandler glanced at Sophocles, who had been romping around the house, and now lay sprawled in blissful unconsciousness on a towel next to Chandler's feet. "He's fine."

"Maybe I'll get to meet him next time I come out."

"That would involve coming to my apartment. Are you suggesting something?"

There was a long pause, for which Chandler gave him credit. Then the message came up, and Chandler swallowed hard.

"There's something I've wanted to tell you since I left New Jersey, but I haven't had the nerve."

Another pause. Maybe he was going to wimp out and just log off, leaving it unsaid. But, after a few seconds that felt like an eternity, more words came up.

“The truth is, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. I know we only got together the one time, and that was just work, but there was something ...”

The note ended. Nothing else came. Chandler sat staring. Maybe *she* should just wimp out and log off. Instead, she set her fingers to the keyboard.

“I know what you mean.”

“Whew.” Chandler smiled as the word appeared on her screen. Val went on. “Do you think it’s something we can afford to ignore?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying. No luck, really.”

“I know you don’t know me that well, but you know more about me than, say, somebody you’d meet at a club, or somebody your best friend might set you up with. Think you might give me a chance next time I’m out?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Fair enough. I’ll keep you apprised of my schedule. Smile.”

“Smile back. Talk to you later.”

No more messages came. Chandler leaned back in her chair and put her face in her hands for a moment, letting her skin cool. Then she abandoned her shopping and turned the computer off. It was, she decided, dangerous.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, Val found himself in his boss’s office.

“He just quit,” Pamela told Val. “Apparently Markham made him an offer he couldn’t refuse, and they needed him immediately.”

“So he’s going to San Diego. Who’s going to manage the StarBase project?”

“You are.”

An hour later, he went back to his office, mind still staggering from what he'd just been told. He was going to handle StarBase from here on out. Which meant he'd have to exercise skills he wasn't sure he had, to coordinate the work and the personnel.

Which meant he'd be spending a lot more time in New Jersey.

Grinning, he picked up the phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"For the fiftieth time, yes, I think you did the right thing. Now, don't you have some work to do?"

Chandler put her face in her hands. "I'm sorry, Andrea. I just keep second-guessing myself."

"I know. Could you do it more quietly, please?"

Andrea's irritation was more put-on than sincere, and her exaggerated eye roll made Chandler smile. But she couldn't forget the expression on Gifford's face, how obviously hurt he'd been.

"Do you want to know what *I* think?" Andrea asked.

Chandler cocked an eyebrow at her. That was a loaded question if there ever was one. "Um ... okay."

"*I* think you should look into snagging that Val Kinsey. That man is yummy."

"He lives in St. Louis. It'd never work."

"But you're working on the same project. There's potential for a lot of contact."

"Still."

"Yummy. Delicious. Major eye candy. And a nice ass, if I remember correctly."

"Okay, I'll take it under advisement." Her phone rang. Almost glad for the distraction from Andrea's comments, Chandler picked it up.

“Good afternoon, New Jersey. It’s Val.”

And oh, that voice. Chandler closed her eyes while it worked its magic. “Hey, Val. What’s up?” She could almost hear Andrea’s ears perking up on the other side of the office.

“My project manager just quit and I got his job.”

“Really? What happened?”

“He got a sweet offer from Markham Telecomm in San Diego. Just thought I’d let you know I’ll be heading your way next week. Pamela wants me to re-introduce myself to everybody out there and get up to speed.” He paused. “So, you think we might be able to do something off the work record? Dinner, maybe?”

“Um ...” Chandler hesitated, looking at Andrea, who waited with raised eyebrows. “Okay. That sounds nice.”

“Great!” Val sounded surprised, but pleased. “I’ll see you next week, then.”

“Well?” asked Andrea when Chandler hung up.

“Val’s coming out next week. We have a date.”

Andrea nodded in sage approval. “An excellent choice. Very tasty. I don’t think you’ll regret it.”

Chandler swallowed the tremor of anticipation that had begun in her stomach. “I hope not.”

## Chapter Four

Val's schedule for the week, as it turned out, was packed, and they couldn't get together until Wednesday evening. Worse, it was the only evening he had free, what with all the hob-nobbing his boss had asked him to do. So they had one chance. It would be sink or swim.

*No pressure at all*, Chandler thought as she fixed her hair in the ladies' room mirror. Short as it was, there wasn't a lot she could do with it, but she could at least be sure it wasn't sticking up anywhere. It wasn't, but her makeup didn't look right. She washed it all off, dragged her back-ups out of her purse, and redid everything.

In the back of her mind, she knew she was putting way too much importance on this date. She had convinced herself her entire romantic future depended on this evening's going well. Because Val had brought sparks, and if she couldn't pull a relationship together based on that wonderful, intense chemistry, she might as well just hang it up right now.

Giving her rouge one last touch-up, she evaluated her appearance in the mirror. Not bad, she supposed. At least she hadn't dropped any tuna salad on her white silk blouse at lunch. Deciding it was the best she was going to get, she repacked her makeup and headed out.

They'd agreed to meet at Flannagan's. Chandler wondered if she was in a rut, since that was about the only restaurant she frequented lately. But it was familiar, and it seemed safer to embark upon new ventures against a familiar backdrop.

He was waiting in the lobby, and she almost didn't recognize him except for the bright red Cardinals jacket. It had been a while since she'd seen him, and her memory had changed the shape of his face. Though not, she noticed with a wry grin, the set of his shoulders or the curve of his hips in his chinos.

He was looking away, which gave her a moment to collect herself. She took advantage of it, then stepped up to him.

"Val," she said.

He turned and gave her that devastating smile, the one that transformed his mismatched face to perfection. "Chandler. You made it."

"Of course I did." The sparks were shooting all over, ignited by his eyes, his voice, his smile. Suddenly Chandler wasn't sure she could stand to make casual conversation for more than a couple of minutes. Her brain had completely short-circuited. "How long until we can get a table?"

In answer to her question, a hostess behind them announced, "Kinsey, party of two, your table is ready."

*Oh, thank God*, Chandler thought, then realized she'd mumbled it aloud. Val gave her an odd look.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry. I just -- I have to use the restroom. I'll catch up with you."

"Okay. Can I order you a drink?"

"Just a Diet Coke."

She beat a hasty retreat into the ladies' room, leaving Val to apologize to the confused hostess. Inside, she washed her hands, more out of habit than necessity, and looked at her reflection.

"Okay, Chandler, get it together. You wanted sparks -- now deal with them." She splashed a little water on her face, blotted it with a paper towel, and went to join Val.

Her Diet Coke awaited. Val had shed his jacket. Under it he wore a dark blue rugby shirt. A narrow gold necklace glinted at his throat. He tapped the menu with the end of his truncated right index finger.

Chandler shrugged out of her coat. She didn't know what to say to him. She wanted to hear at least one of the scar stories, but somehow, "Hey, so what happened to your finger?" didn't seem like the best conversation starter. There had to be something a little more innocuous.

"That's silk, isn't it?" Val said suddenly.

Chandler looked up at his face. He looked sheepish, and his crystalline gaze flicked away from her as he self-consciously pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry?" Chandler said.

"Your blouse. It's very pretty."

"Thank you." She looked down automatically, and for the first time in the five years she'd owned the blouse, realized its neckline was low enough to show a soft swell of breast.

Great. He was ogling her. But it didn't feel like ogling. It felt like ... she wasn't sure what it felt like, but she wanted him to do it again. No one had ever looked at her quite that way before. She shifted her shoulders, so the blouse lay more modestly, and picked up her menu.

"Yes, it's silk," she said. "Not very many men would have noticed that." It still made her think maybe he was looking too closely.

Val cleared his throat. "My sister wears silk a lot. She says her husband ... likes it." The end of the sentence trailed off, as if he'd realized it was far too charged a thing to say. Chandler had a sudden vision of Val's hand smoothing the silk against her naked breast. She grabbed her Coke and sucked down a good third of it in an attempt to send her body temperature back down. Val became extremely interested in his menu.

The waitress arrived, rescuing them momentarily from the disaster of a non-conversation. But then she left. Chandler felt like calling her back. Maybe she could suggest some topics to get them started.

Chandler cast around for something to spark a conversation and saw Val's jacket.

"So," she ventured, "you're a Cardinals fan?"

Val perked up. "Yeah. You follow baseball at all?"

"No, not really." *Well, that worked.* "But I saw clips of that homerun thing in '98. That was pretty neat. What team did that guy play for?"

"The Cardinals."

"Oh, well, then, you must have been really happy about that."

"You could say that."

*Lame, lame, lame.* This was a disaster. What good were sparks if they rendered you incapable of acting like an intelligent human being?

"So, tell me about your ferret." That sounded like *he* was grasping for a topic. Which, strangely, made her feel a little better.

"His name's Sophocles and he's a silver mitt."

"Silver mitt?"

"That's his coloring. He's silvery with white paws. They also come in albino -- white with pink eyes, and sable, which is the dark fur with the mask."

Val leaned forward, warming to the conversation -- or perhaps to the fact that there *was* a conversation. "So is he just a pet, or do you breed them, or what?"

Obviously he didn't know much about ferrets. "He's been fixed."

"Ouch."

Chandler grinned. "Male ferrets stink abominably if they're not fixed. Plus breeding ferrets isn't the most pleasant business, as I understand. The males are very ... sexually ... aggressive ..."

That topic had taken a nasty turn. This time, it was Val who sucked desperately at his drink.

While he was cooling off, the food arrived, giving them a good excuse not to talk. But Chandler couldn't keep her eyes off Val's hands -- the smooth, graceful movement, the long fingers and wide palms. She wanted so much to know what had happened to his finger. She couldn't ask. No other topic of conversation presented itself.

She had never felt so totally aware of another person. Every time he moved, her adrenaline surged. Every time he breathed, she felt as if he'd stolen the oxygen directly from her lungs. He looked at her and her skin warmed. She couldn't even think for the raw awareness.

Sparks, she decided after fifteen minutes of near-silence, sucked big-time.

She was about ready to call it quits when the waitress brought dessert menus. Val took one look at his, then leaned across the table and said three of Chandler's favorite words.

"Chocolate brownie sundae."

Chandler looked up, right into his eyes. He had an absolutely wicked grin on his face. Taking his glasses off, he leaned forward a little more. "Split one?"

"Sure," said Chandler, without any thought whatsoever. All she could see was the unfettered power of those pale blue eyes, and that insufferable grin. She would have said yes if he'd asked her to split a haggis.

The dessert the waitress delivered a few minute later was considerably more appetizing than a haggis. Unfortunately, she brought an extra spoon, but not the extra plate Val had requested. Val turned to flag her down, but she seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

“How’d she do that?” Val said, looking comically amazed.

Chandler smiled in spite of the unease still plaguing her. “A couple of the waiters here know that trick.”

“Well, if we wait for her to come back, the ice cream’ll melt. So ...” He picked up a knife and divided the whipped cream, hot fudge, ice cream, and brownie neatly in half. “There. Dig in. Cross the line and die.”

Bending toward each other across the table, they started into the sundae. It wasn’t until they began to wrangle over the maraschino cherry that Chandler realized they’d both loosened up. Val was laughing and so was she, and the sound made her cozily warm.

“Oh, all right,” Val said. “Go ahead and take it.”

Smiling, Chandler dangled the cherry by its stem for a moment, then laid it down on the plate and cut it in half. “I get the stem, though.”

“Fair enough.” Val ate his half of the cherry, then put on his glasses, which he’d left off throughout dessert. Chandler wondered why, or if there was any reason at all, but unaccountably, her uneasiness returned and she couldn’t bring herself to ask. She ate her cherry and wiped her hands on her napkin. As she reached to pick up her purse, Val lifted a hand and shook his head.

“No, no. I’ll get it.”

Chandler shook her head. “We go Dutch. I insist.”

“Insist all you want.” He pulled a credit card out of his wallet and laid it down on the table. The waitress mysteriously appeared just then to pick it up. “I’m paying.”

“At least let me get the tip.”

Val shrugged. “All right.”

She deposited five dollars on the table -- too much, really, considering their waitress's disappearing acts. As she stood, Val stood quickly beside her. He picked her coat up from the booth and held it up for her. Smiling thanks and feeling suddenly -- not really shy, just strangely, intensely aware of herself and of him -- Chandler let him ease the coat up over her shoulders.

His hand trailed down her back as he moved away. Chandler had an urge to turn toward him and put her hands on him, anywhere, just so she could feel the contours of his flesh beneath her palms. She felt strange suddenly; heady and giddy, as if she'd drunk a glass of wine too quickly. But she'd had no wine. Only a couple of hours in the company of a man she could barely talk to, but who sent all her hormones into a tizzy with little more than a look.

He was looking at her now, as she turned toward him, a strange expression on his face. She had no idea how to read it. It wasn't a smile, or a frown, or quite a look of longing, but had elements of all three. After a moment, he blinked and looked away, picking up his jacket.

He walked her to her car. It was a clear night, and the silvery light of a gibbous moon augmented the lights in the parking lot. Chandler had parked right under one, out of habit -- her mother was always reminding her to take such precautions. Under the light it was nearly day-bright, but the light was too yellow. Val looked sallow under it, and the scars in his face stood out in sharp relief.

"Well," he said, smiling. A strange little smile, almost sad, really. "I guess this is good-night."

"I guess so." Her tongue almost said something else, something like, "Would you like to come by my place for a drink?" but she stopped its betrayal at the last moment. Why she would even consider such a thing was beyond her. The evening had been far from perfect. It had just been awkward and strange and uncomfortable. And she hated to see it end. Gamely, she stuck out her hand.

Val took it. As his hand closed around hers, she felt small tremors all down her body, as if he might pull her to him and kiss her, long and hard, under the harsh glare of the streetlights. He shook her hand firmly and let it go.

“I’ll call you next week,” he said.

“Sure. Looking forward to it.” It would be about work, nothing more. The attempt at a date would be mercifully forgotten.

## Chapter Five

Predictably, Andrea was full of questions the next morning.

“So, how did it go?”

“How did what go?”

“The date, ding-dong, the date!”

“Well ...” Chandler paused, partly to annoy Andrea and partly because she wasn’t at all sure how to summarize what had happened last night. “It could have been better.”

Andrea sagged a little. “Oh. That’s too bad.”

“I mean, there’s all kinds of chemistry -- he’s really sexy, but I couldn’t *talk* to him.”

“Because you were too busy imagining him naked?”

“Andrea!” Chandler was almost genuinely shocked. A co-worker, passing by their office, glanced in quizzically at Chandler’s exclamation. Lowering her voice, she added, “What kind of a thing is that to say?”

Andrea grinned. “He knocked your socks off so bad you couldn’t even talk to him for the rest of the evening, because you were trying to figure out what he looks like naked. That was it, wasn’t it?”

“No!” Chandler was suddenly uncomfortable. Her protests weren’t ringing true, even to herself. She *had* been strongly attracted to Val. Not that it had gone so far last night as imagining him naked, but now that Andrea had mentioned it ... “No. It was nothing like that.”

Andrea’s grin had faded only a little. “Then what was it like?”

“It was like a really mediocre first date. We couldn’t find anything to talk about until dessert.”

“Well, there you go. You did find some common ground.”

“Andrea, I can’t base a relationship on a mutual chocolate addiction. I’ll be three hundred pounds in a month if I can only talk to the man over a chocolate brownie sundae.”

Andrea’s eyebrows shot up. “Relationship?” she repeated. “What’s this ‘r’ word popping up already for? You just broke up with Gifford.”

This was not going well at all. Chandler leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms protectively across her chest. “I don’t know. I just thought --”

“Thought what?”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought everything would be perfect because of the sparks. All they did was make it hard to concentrate.”

Andrea shrugged. “Well, you’re on the rebound. You should have just had sex with him and moved on.”

Chandler gave her a dark look. “That idea is screwed up on so many levels. I mean, I still have to work with the guy, and that would make it way too awkward --” She broke off as an unbidden thought suddenly struck her. “Besides, it’s just not what I want.” Not with Val. He deserved to be more than a one-night stand.

Andrea studied her, her expression more solemn than Chandler had ever seen it. “Never, ever go after something you don’t want.”

The weightiness of Andrea's tone took Chandler by surprise. Then Andrea grinned, taking some of the weight off her statement.

"Because when you get it, it really bites."

Chandler smiled, recognizing the shadow of pain in her friend's levity. It was good advice, she thought. Advice she would follow.

Trouble was, she wasn't sure what she wanted. She knew it wasn't the too-comfortable relationship she'd had with Gifford. Nor was it the uncontrollable, untamable chemistry she had with Val, crazy sparks that reminded her uncomfortably of Testosterone Johnny. Maybe she wanted something in between. Maybe she just wanted something different.

"Thanks, Andrea," she said, sincerely but with just enough sarcasm to make it worthy of her relationship with Andrea. "You're ever so much help."

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday morning in St. Louis was damp and dreary, with a low overhang of clouds that promised more rain. It had looked much the same when Val had left. For once, he was glad he didn't have a window office.

Steve was already there, drinking coffee and proofing a memo. That made Val glad his possibly temporary promotion didn't rate an office change. He enjoyed Steve's company. He set his briefcase on his desk and hung his coat on the hooks behind the door.

"Welcome back," said Steve. "How was the schmoozing?"

"Not bad." Val went to his desk and sat down. Steve had left a pile of mail on his desk; Val began to sort through it.

"Did you meet up with Chandler?"

Val, opening an envelope, didn't look up. "Yeah. We had lunch."

"So how did it go?"

"Hard to say."

And it *was* hard to say. He'd been instantly, irretrievably attracted again, but the conversation had been a disaster -- probably because he'd been instantly, irretrievably attracted again. He'd been so boggled by the chemistry that his normal conversational abilities had completely disappeared. He'd made an idiot of himself and probably turned Chandler off completely. Best to forget about it and go on with his life.

Trouble was, he couldn't forget about it. He'd thought about little else all through the flight home, and all weekend. He had half a mind to send her e-mail telling her exactly how much she turned him on, and exactly how much he really wanted to see her again, however complicated that might be.

Maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea. She'd freaked out enough when she'd caught him appreciating her cleavage. He wished now he'd had a little better control. But the cleavage had been exquisite, framed by the lapels of that white silk blouse. He could imagine the way her skin would feel, there where her breasts plumped together slightly. The small valley would be as soft as the silk -- softer, even. The thought aroused him far too much. He'd never felt that kind of instant, almost violent attraction.

Steve had said something. What, Val didn't know.

"What did you say?"

"I said," Steve repeated with infinite patience, "that doesn't sound very promising."

Val shrugged and set aside the pile of mail. "I don't know if it was or not."

He turned to his computer terminal and logged on, then skimmed his e-mail. Social mail, note from the boss, spam ...

Wait. That was Chandler's address. And the message had been sent Friday morning, after their date.

"Too bad she's not closer." Steve was still rambling. "You could introduce her to me, since you don't like her."

"She wouldn't like you," Val informed him, clicking on Chandler's message.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re an idiot.”

Steve laughed and returned to his memo. Anxious, Val leaned back and cracked his knuckles, then read Chandler’s message.

*“Just wanted to drop you a note to thank you for dinner last night. I’m sorry things didn’t go better.*

*“A thought, though -- the more I think about it, the less it seems like a disaster. Let’s just say that if you didn’t live in St. Louis, I’d be more than happy to go out again. In the meantime, there’s always e-mail. Maybe we could get to know each other a little better?*

*“Hope to talk to you soon, Chandler.”*

“What’s going on?” said Steve. “The boss just fire you by e-mail?”

Val realized his jaw was hanging open. He snapped it shut, read the message one more time to be sure he hadn’t been hallucinating, then said, “No. It’s just a message from Chandler.”

“She tell you she hates your guts?”

Val shook his head slowly. “No. Nothing like that.”

Steve said something else, but Val didn’t hear it. His brain had derailed. He couldn’t believe she’d echoed his thoughts so closely. Maybe the electricity between them had shorted her out, too. Whatever the case, he’d best come up with just the right words for his reply. The note from the boss could wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler checked her e-mail one last time before she finally gave up and turned off her computer. She couldn’t hold in a sigh of frustration and regret. She’d been positive she would hear something from Val today, but not so much as a sentence had come her way to let her

know he'd received her carefully thought-out message. Even given the hour time difference between here and St. Louis, she should have heard something by now.

"What's wrong?" Andrea asked. "Still nothing from Val?"

"Nothing. I was sure he'd answer that message." Chandler shrugged into her coat, trying to recapture the optimism she'd had at the beginning of the day. It was nowhere to be found.

"Oh, great." Chandler led the way out of the office. "This is worse than waiting by the phone."

\* \* \* \* \*

Belinda called Val that afternoon. She'd been out of town all weekend, and for whatever reason insisted she had to see Val that night after work. Just thinking about her made Val tired. She didn't know how to spend a quiet evening at home. He needed to end their acquaintance before she killed him.

"I really missed you," she said. Her voice was velvety, not her natural tones

Val agreed, mostly because he could think of no way to bow out gracefully. With his brain full of Chandler and confusion, it was difficult to construct subterfuge.

So he met her at the diner at seven. She wore a dark gray cashmere sweater and a black skirt that barely reached her knees. The sweater clung softly to the full curves of her breasts. Val's eyes caught on them for a time, but instead of appreciating the smooth beauty, he found himself thinking of Chandler's white blouse, the deep neckline and what it had displayed ...

"So how was your trip?" Belinda asked.

"Fine." Val ran a finger down the outside of his glass, through the cold sweat. "I think I'm up to speed."

"What else did you do besides work?"

“Nothing, really.”

She leaned forward, pressing her hands against his. Her eyes sparkled, and she bit her lower lip sweetly. “I missed you, Val. I really did.”

He just smiled.

As usual, Belinda held up far better than half of the conversation. She worked as a fact-checker for a local magazine, and though the job sounded tedious to Val, she seemed to always have an amusing story or two at the end of the day.

She had a certain charm, he supposed. Any number of men would find her enthralling. But she really was too young for him, and --

A set of small, pantyhosed toes prodded at his shin, then slipped down, edging under the cuff of his trousers to nudge the skin beneath. Val jerked out of his thoughts. Belinda’s eyes were full of soft heat. Her foot slipped up, higher, and a little higher. Val shifted, uncomfortable.

“Um ... Belinda ...”

“Don’t say anything,” she said. Her voice held promises of things he would have killed for ten years ago. Now her vocal seduction brought on a response that was purely physical. On an emotional level, it touched him not at all.

Now, if *Chandler* had talked to him like that ...

As requested, he said nothing. Her feet continued to torment him, tantalizing but never quite crossing the line into obscene conduct.

In the parking lot, by her car, she dealt her final blow. He bent to kiss her goodnight and she reached up, grabbing his head with one hand to press it down. Her other hand unzipped his Cardinals jacket and slipped inside it, around to the hollow at the small of his back and down inside his jeans. Her mouth scorched his, tasting of dinner and pure youth. For a split second, he wanted her. The moment passed.

Gently, Val disengaged himself from her embrace. She looked up at him, searching his face.

“Come home with me,” she said. Her body still pressed hard against his. He was certain she could feel that he had not been completely unmoved by her attentions. He lifted a hand to caress her face, letting his fingers slide from the slight dip at her temple to the clean line of her jaw. She smelled like honeysuckle.

“Not tonight,” he said.

She looked like she’d just been slapped. “Val --”

He laid a finger against her lips. “You’re very beautiful,” he said, “and I enjoy spending time with you. I just ...” He stopped, realizing what had to be done. He put his hands in his jacket pockets and stepped back. “I’m sorry, Belinda. This isn’t fair to you. I think we need to break this off.”

Belinda’s jaw dropped. “Break it off? What are you talking about?”

Bad timing, Val thought. Abysmal. “Look, maybe I’m just tired. Maybe I just need to think about everything.”

“I should say so!” She yanked open her car door, eyes spouting flame. “I don’t want to discuss this anymore, Val. Call me tomorrow and we’ll get things *straightened out*.” She got in and slammed the car door behind her.

Val didn’t like the sound of that at all. He took a few steps back as Belinda’s car peeled out, tires squealing in protest. He’d really stuck his foot in it this time.

But no matter how difficult it might be for Belinda, Val had to break it off. It wouldn’t be fair to string her along when he knew he wanted to be with Chandler.

He climbed into his own car and started the engine. How *could* he be with Chandler, though? She was halfway across the country. They’d see each other off and on because of their work situation, but how could that possibly be enough?

He didn’t know the answer. But he was willing to do what he had to do to find it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday morning, Val's reply to Chandler's message finally arrived. Andrea was blithering as usual -- Chandler waved her to silence and called the message up, stomach full of trembling.

*"I'm really glad you sent that message. I was having some of the same feelings on my way home, but I wasn't sure how to bring it up. I didn't want to scare you, since I barely know you.*

*"As for getting to know each other better, I think it's a great idea. Here's a start: I went to Purdue, and I have a MS in computer science. I'm a Cards fan -- but you knew that. I like to stay up late watching weird old sci fi movies. I've read Dune nine times.*

*"Later, Val."*

"What'd he say? What'd he say?" Andrea demanded, fairly knocking over her chair in her efforts to look over the top of Chandler's computer.

"He read *Dune* nine times."

Andrea made a face. "That's all he can come up with to impress you?"

Chandler gave her a chastising look. "He's not trying to impress me. We're going to try to get to know each other better."

"Well, you can only get to know him so well over e-mail." She paused. "On second thought, I guess you can get to know him pretty well, at that." She settled back in her chair. "Good luck. I think you should try to arrange to see him again, though."

Chandler gave an absent nod, already engaged in formulating another reply. After a moment, she began to type.

*"Finally got your message. I guess the Net was constipated. Here's my start: I have an English degree from the University of Illinois, but I've taken a lot of computer-related classes. I like to stay up late watching reruns of Magnum, PI. I never read Dune, but I read The Lord of the Rings twice, and that was before the movies.*

*"Bye for now, Chandler."*

*Not a bad start*, she thought. Val must have thought so, too, because when she got back from lunch, she had voice mail.

"Be online tonight at eight," said Val's velvety voice. "We'll talk. Call me if you can't make it. And please be aware -- this is a date."

\* \* \* \* \*

At 8:01, Chandler was in front of her computer, per request. It dinged.

"Hello?" said valkinsey.

"I'm here," she typed back.

"Cool. I was afraid you wouldn't make it."

"You engaged my curiosity."

"Curiosity is a good thing. Okay, here goes. So the date didn't go quite like we'd hoped. We could always try again."

"But we don't know how long it'll be until you're out again."

"Why let that stop us? We could date right here."

"That'd be kind of silly."

"No, it wouldn't. We can just have a conversation."

It would certainly be easier, Chandler thought, without all those distracting pheromones bouncing around. Maybe they could actually say two coherent words to each other.

"Well, okay, I'm game."

"Great. How about I pick you up in a bar."

Chandler wondered where he was going with this. It seemed kind of dorky, but she could always log off if she wasn't into it.

“Okay, I guess.”

“Okay, so I walk up to you and I say, ‘Hey, I’m new in town, can you give me directions?’”

Role-playing. That was all right -- maybe it could be fun. “Where are you going?”

“Your place, if I’m lucky.”

Chandler stared at the screen, unsure what to type next. If they’d actually been in a bar, she would have tossed her drink in his face. Well, unless it was one of those expensive drinks.

Val beat her to the keyboard. “Ba ha! I’m trying to be funny.”

“You’re failing.”

“Okay, how about this one. ‘Are you from Tennessee? Cuz you’re the only ten I see.’”

“Boo, hiss.” Actually, though she never would have responded to those horrible lines from a stranger in a bar, they were amusing coming from Val.

He didn’t seem insulted, either, but was warming up to the game. “Okay -- That’s a nice sweater.”

Chandler blinked. She actually *was* wearing a sweater -- a ratty old blue one with big sleeves. Sophocles was sleeping inside one of them. “Thanks,” she typed.

“It’d look great on my floor.”

She sputtered a laugh. “Oh, that one’s bad.”

“Hey, baby, did you clean those pants with Windex? Cuz I can see myself in them.”

Chandler guffawed in spite of herself, disturbing Sophocles to the point where he actually moved. “Okay, you got me. I’m either calling the police or I’m going home with you.”

“Cool. I’ll buy you a drink first.”

“How generous of you. Do I get dinner, too?”

“Sure, why not. How about surf and turf and champagne?”

“I am *so* there.”

“Of course, at the end of the meal, my credit card gets declined ...”

Chandler laughed. This was fun. Why couldn't they be like this face-to-face? Clever and funny and comfortable with each other.

“Okay, so we wash dishes for a few hours before we head back to your place.”

She second-guessed herself after she sent the message. Was that too forward? She shrugged. It wasn't real life, after all.

Val's reply put her even more at ease. “Wait -- I thought we were in New Jersey.”

“Oh. I thought we were in St. Louis.”

“We can't be here -- this place is a mess.”

Grinning, Chandler typed away, letting the first thing that popped into her head flow out her fingers. She couldn't believe it was going so well.

“Describe it to me.”

“Well, it's not very impressive. Kind of a small place. Big TV, though. Big computer. Big mess -- I haven't done laundry in a couple of weeks. Need to wash dishes, too.”

Chandler thought of Gifford's immaculate condo in Basking Ridge. Somehow a laundry-strewn apartment sounded more appealing.

“I'll forgive you the mess,” she told him, “but if you'd be more comfortable, we can go to my place.”

“Well, my mom would be appalled if I let you see my apartment in its current condition.”

“Heaven forbid we should offend your mom. Okay, answer one question, and that'll clinch the decision -- what do you have in your refrigerator?”

“Hang on, I'll check.”

He was really doing it. Chandler sat waiting, watching her cursor blink. He must be taking the task pretty seriously, because the pause went on and on.

Chandler smiled. The Val she'd met in person had knocked her socks off with his sexual energy. This one was knocking her socks off with pure charm. An absolutely deadly combination, in her book. She looked across the room at the calendar on the refrigerator. How long until she could see him again? The rows and rows of Val-less days suddenly looked profoundly empty.

The computer dinged and she jerked her attention back to the screen.

"Okay, I'm back. Refrigerator contents: A half-empty case of beer, a jar of mayonnaise, a bag of coffee beans, and a loaf of bread."

Chandler blinked. "That's *it*?" She sent the message, then, doing a double-take, added, "A bag of coffee beans? Wait -- a loaf of bread in the refrigerator?"

"I like my coffee fresh, and if I don't put the bread in the fridge, it molds before I can eat the whole loaf. And yes, that's pretty much it."

"So at your place we can have beer and a coffee-bean-and-mayonnaise sandwich -- I think you're right. We should meet here."

"Good plan. What does your place look like?"

Chandler glanced around. Her apartment wasn't all that impressive, either, but it was clean.

"Well, I just did laundry Monday, and all my dishes are clean -- medium-sized TV, ditto for the computer. Big couch, bookshelf, a couple of little blankets on the floor for Sophocles. Lots of stuff in my fridge -- hey, I could make dinner!"

"But we already had surf and turf, remember?"

"Oh, right. I forgot. We could have dessert here -- there's a cheesecake in the freezer." Not a good thing to admit, she realized after she'd sent it.

"And why do you have a cheesecake in the freezer?"

“Same reason I keep four pints of Ben & Jerry’s. For emotional emergencies.”

“I have a ton of Girl Scout cookies in my freezer. I bought enough from my niece this year for her to win something. I forget what, but she was happy about it. Okay, so we’re going to your place.”

“All right. Just remember I have pepper spray in my purse.”

“A wise precaution. Okay, we go in and sit -- where?”

“Let’s start at the kitchen table. I’ll dish out the cheesecake.”

“Mmm. Delicious. Got any Hershey’s syrup I could put on that?”

Chandler had a sudden vision of Hershey’s syrup, but it wasn’t on cheesecake. It was on Val, dripping over all those scar-stories on his body -- the ones she had yet to see, but had manufactured quite vividly in her imagination.

“Be my guest.” She paused. “Would you like some syrup in your coffee, too?”

“Oh, absolutely. Hit me a good one.”

Inexplicably, tears sprang to Chandler’s eyes. He wanted mocha. She put her hands over her mouth and sat still while the moment wrapped itself around her heart.

“Chandler?” came the message. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here. I’m sorry. I had to --” What? “-- take care of Sophocles.” She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. This was silly. So he liked chocolate syrup in his coffee. Real good thing to base a relationship on.

Of course, he also valued his mother’s opinion, bought Girl Scout cookies from his niece, and told atrocious jokes. She pressed her knuckles against her mouth, waiting for his next message.

“Chandler, are we having an awkward moment?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“How come? What’s going on?”

Chandler laid her fingers against the keyboard. The keys felt strangely warm. Finally she typed, "I'm trying to decide whether to kiss you."

A long pause. Chandler couldn't help but wonder what Val was thinking, if she'd stepped over the line, breached some form of Netiquette --

"Please do," the reply came back. "Do it while you still taste like chocolate."

*Oh, God.* He could have been right in the room with her, the way her skin prickled. He could have actually touched her, the way the heat curled through her body. She tried to collect herself, to restore some semblance of order to her short-circuited synapses, but she couldn't get her skin to cool down, couldn't get her breath or her heartbeat to resume a normal pace.

Finally, swallowing hard, feeling as if the top of her head had been taken off, she typed, "Was it good for you?"

"Splendiferous," came the prompt reply.

The moment ended, but didn't end, as the heat dispersed and became something soft and fragile that filled Chandler's throat and made her smile.

"We'll have to do this again sometime."

"That we will. I'll look for you tomorrow night."

He signed off. Chandler sat staring at her terminal, still smiling, until suddenly Sophocles sneezed.

"Gezundheit," she said. She dumped the ferret out of her sleeve and went to make coffee. With cream, and a good hit of chocolate syrup.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, a package arrived for Chandler at work.

"What's that?" Andrea asked, nosy as usual.

"Novotel St. Louis," Chandler said, reading the return address.

“Oooo, it’s Val. Open it up.”

“I will, I will.” Chandler took her time peeling the tape, deliberately annoying Andrea. Finally she pulled the last of the paper loose. It was a hardback copy of *Dune*.

Andrea rolled her eyes a little, but she was smiling. “Oh, how romantic.”

“I think it’s sweet.” She flipped open the front cover to see if he had written anything inside. Sure enough, he had: “Chandler, hope you enjoy this as much as I did. Val.”

She sent a message back right away.

“Val, thanks for the book. I’ll put away my Stephen King and start reading it tonight.”

Just before she left work, she got his reply.

“You read Stephen King?”

And that started a whole new conversation.

## Chapter Six

Touched by Val's gift of the book, Chandler prowled the malls every day at lunch for days until she found what she thought might be an appropriate gift for him. It was a silk tie with tiny dinosaurs all over it. It was pricey, but somehow perfect. Chandler bought it.

She wondered how long it would take to hear from Val about the gift. The question was answered three days later when, instead of e-mailing, he called.

"Chandler! Hi! It's Val."

Chandler set her very white morning coffee down carefully, going a little wobbly at the sound of his voice. "Hi. How are you doing?"

"I got the tie today. It's great -- thanks."

The pure enthusiasm in his voice made her smile. She wondered what he looked like right now, and pictured him at his desk, blue eyes sparkling behind his glasses, his hair perhaps a little mussed. "I'm glad you like it."

"You know, just because I got you the book, you didn't have to feel obligated to get me something."

"Oh, no, no, it wasn't that at all. I just -- I wanted to."

There was a pause. She could hear him breathing. Suddenly, she wondered what that breath would feel like against her ear, without the intervening phone lines. Warm, moist -- and then maybe she would kiss him -- She shifted uncomfortably. Where had that come from?

“Well, anyway, I *do* like it. I’ve been eyeing a similar one at a shop over here by work. And ... there’s something else I want to say.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you over the phone. Be online tonight.” His sultry voice made Chandler’s heart lurch.

“What time?”

“Eight. Be there.” She could hear his smile.

“Count on it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Early evening had never drawn on so long. Chandler had started out watching TV, but nothing held her attention well enough to distract her from her impending “date.” Finally, at 6:30, she logged on, figuring she could easily kill an hour and a half goofing around online.

It turned out not to be the best plan. She answered all her e-mail, read some entertainment news, then did some online shopping before she realized she was spending too much money and contented herself with playing games, instead. Which didn’t help very much because computer games just didn’t go well without a bowl of ice cream.

She was scraping the last of the chocolate syrup from the bottom of the bowl when Val’s first message came through.

“I see you’re on. Are you busy?”

Heart pattering in her throat, Chandler abandoned her ice cream bowl. The clock said 7:50.

“No. Just finishing off some shopping.” She hoped that didn’t sound too eager. It was sort of the online equivalent of answering the phone on the first ring. Of course, his early arrival didn’t exactly make him Mr. Cool Cucumber, either.

“Great. Thanks again for the tie. I’m wearing it right now.”

“I’m glad you like it --” Chandler started to type, then the rest of Val’s message arrived.

“That’s *a//* I’m wearing.”

Chandler’s fingers froze on the keyboard. What was he doing? Did he really want to ruin everything? Besides, what good did it do her if he was wearing nothing but a tie, if he was halfway across the country?

“Ha, ha, just kidding.” His next message broke the spell, relieving her, but irritating her at the same time. “I’m actually wearing sweats.”

Chandler backspaced over the message she’d started and tried again. “So you’re not wearing my tie at all? I’m offended.” She let that message go so he’d have a couple of seconds to think about it, then chased it with a, “Smile.”

“Smile back. What are you wearing?”

Chandler felt herself grin and knew it was a wicked one. “Oh, the usual. A garter belt and Hershey’s syrup.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“Turnabout’s fair play. Okay, jeans and a sweater.”

“Maybe we should change clothes. I was going to take us out.”

“Where? Someplace fancy?”

“Not really. I was thinking maybe a movie.”

“What movie?”

“How many times have you seen *Titanic*?”

The question caught her by surprise. “Three. You like *Titanic*?”

“Not really, but it gives me three and a half hours to sneak looks at you in the dark.”

Chandler cocked an eyebrow. Sweet, but a little too smooth. “Are you working from a script?”

“No, but I have to admit I’ve been thinking about this all afternoon.”

“Well, stop thinking. I like you better that way.” Another message sent too quickly, to be second-guessed as soon as she sent it.

“I’m sorry,” came the reply. “I’m a little nervous.”

“Don’t be. Let’s go to the movies.”

So he was nervous. The thought made Chandler smile, then wonder what he was up to, that he had something to be nervous about. No worries, though -- if something didn’t seem right, she’d just log off.

Then she realized she had control of the situation. How had that happened? Oh, well. Best to go with the flow.

*The movies, the movies.* How to start this out?

“Popcorn?” she finally typed.

“Share a jumbo?”

“Okay, but I want my own pop.”

“Works for me. Butter?”

Chandler hesitated only a moment. Giff wouldn’t have even bothered to ask. “Lots. And a box of Good & Plentys.”

“Red Hots for me. Okay, let’s go.”

“Don’t even think about hogging the popcorn.”

“I won’t,” he said, “but every time I try to get some, your hand’s in it. Our fingers keep touching. Maybe we wrestle over it a little.”

Chandler sat staring at the screen. She could actually smell the popcorn, feel his fingers brushing against hers as they dipped into the cardboard tub. Fingers long and strong and slippery with popcorn butter.

She was beginning to get a good idea why Val was nervous. He was, in a real sense, making his move. Chandler smiled wryly. Too bad he wasn't really here. But she wasn't sure if she'd slap him or just strip him down and have her way with him. Even here, in this relatively safe environment, she wasn't sure which direction to take.

She wanted to go for it, though -- somewhere deep in her gut, she really wanted to.

"Okay," she typed. "We wrestle over the popcorn. I win. From now on, if you want popcorn, you have to beg me for it."

"Please may I have some popcorn?"

"Too late -- it's all gone."

"But the movie hasn't even started yet."

"Isn't that the way it always works?"

"Pretty much. Here, have a Red Hot. They're dimming the lights."

Inexplicably, Chandler's skin tingled. She reached up and turned off the lamp above the computer.

Val wasn't done. "You look beautiful and mysterious in the dark, with the light from the movie flickering on your face. I wait until the movie starts. You're watching it, and you smile that perfect smile. I put my arm around your shoulders."

Chandler closed her eyes, feeling the weight of Val's arm over her shoulders. God, how she wished they really were in a darkened movie theater, or that he was here in the room with her ...

The computer dinged and Chandler's eyes snapped open. She'd paused too long, it appeared, and Val had sent another message.

"Is that all right?"

“Yes. Yes, it’s fine.”

“Your hair smells like almonds.”

Almonds. Chandler shook her head, a bemused smile on her face. How had he noticed that, in the short time they’d spent together? “It’s my shampoo.”

“It’s lovely.”

“Thank you. You smell like ... citrus?”

“That’s my deodorant.”

“Ewwwww!” Chandler typed back. The soft spell of romance he’d been weaving around her broke, but something just as warm remained beneath it. “Deodorant or not, it’s a nice smell.”

There was a long pause. Chandler wondered what Val was doing, nearly a thousand miles away on the other end of a vast, interconnected link of phone lines and modems. Finally, the next message came.

“I want to touch you.”

Chandler stared at the words. He was already touching her, according to the scenario -- he’d draped his arm over her shoulder. But somehow she knew he meant a more intimate contact. His hand against her bare skin, his fingers toying with the lace trim of her bra --

“Chandler, are you still there?”

Hastily, she typed back, “Yes, I’m still here.”

“Was it too much?”

Chandler gave it one more thought, then answered, “No.”

“I want to touch you. I want to let my fingers slip under the edge of your collar, touch your collarbone, slip down toward your breast --”

There was more, but Chandler didn’t see it. Panicking, she typed, “I can’t do this,” sent it, typed it again, “I can’t do this.”

There was another long pause as the link remained silent. Finally, a last message came across.

"I'm sorry. Bad idea, I guess."

Chandler pressed her fingers against her mouth, blinking back tears she didn't understand.

"I'm sorry, too," she typed, the words blurring in her vision. "Call me tomorrow."

"I will. Smile. Please?"

"Smile."

Chandler turned away from the computer. She didn't understand the turmoil of emotion pouring through her. It thickened in her throat until it almost hurt.

At first she thought it was fear, or anger -- a reaction to Val's decision to shift their relationship into a higher gear. But she wasn't afraid. She wasn't even angry. He'd surprised her, that was all. She still wasn't even sure why she'd backpedaled so quickly.

Then she held still for a moment, letting herself feel.

The emotion still filled her, thick and wondrous, so that her heartbeat pounded with it.

And then, suddenly, she knew what it was.

She was in love with him.

"Oh, *damn*," she said to no one, very emphatically.

This was not good at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Val flipped off his computer, then mentally kicked himself. He'd moved too fast, screwed up everything. It was prom night all over again, when he'd unhooked Sherry Sanders's bra before they'd gotten in the limo and she'd refused to speak to him the rest of the evening even though they'd agreed this was going to be The Night.

What had he done, though, really? He'd put his arm around her, maybe he'd tried to cop a feel. It was supposed to have led up to something special and romantic. But he'd backed off when she asked him to --

Oh, hell! He hadn't done anything. Nothing at all. He'd just typed some words on a keyboard and done some heavy-duty wishful thinking.

Maybe she'd just been self-conscious. He'd felt a little silly, himself. After all, what was he going to type next? "I stick my hand down your shirt and grab your boob?" Yeah, that'd be a real turn-on.

"You're an idiot, Val." He headed for the kitchen, pulled a box of frozen Girl Scout cookies out of the freezer. "You're a freaking idiot."

Oh, well. Cybersex wasn't for everybody, he supposed. And she'd asked him to call her, so maybe he hadn't screwed up completely.

He was trying to decide whether to toss the cookies in the microwave and risk melting them, or just eat them frozen when the doorbell rang.

"What the hell?" It was a little late for Jehovah's Witnesses. He hoped it wasn't somebody trying to sell magazines again.

It was worse than Jehovah's Witnesses. It was Belinda. Angry Belinda. Belinda with flames shooting out of her eyeballs.

"You didn't call me," she said, shouldering her way past him into the apartment. She threw her purse on the couch, jerked off her coat and threw it down, too. "It's been almost a week. You said you were going to call."

Val rubbed his forehead. He felt a major headache coming on. "I'm sorry, Belinda. I called several times and you weren't home. I didn't want to leave a message on your machine. I was going to call you again today and I forgot."

"You *forgot*." She crossed her arms hard over her chest. Her lips trembled as she pressed them together, collecting herself. This was bad. He really had to get this dealt with.

“You *forgot*,” Belinda said again. Her voice was steady now, hard and brittle. “It’s nice to know exactly how much this relationship means to you.”

“Relationship?” Val blurted. “We went out a few times. How was that a relationship?”

Her eyes widened again, as if he’d slapped her. “I thought we had something. I thought we were *building* something.”

Val took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Look, Belinda, I’m sorry. I’m doing this all wrong. Why don’t you come in and sit down.”

She did, looking shell-shocked and numb. Val took advantage of her disorientation to collect his thoughts. He knew everything he’d said so far had been wrong -- what he didn’t know was what was right.

What had he been thinking, dating a twenty-two-year-old woman? He was seven years older, and the distance seemed like an eternity. She hadn’t screwed up enough relationships to interpret the signs of one that was destined for failure.

He went down on his knees on the floor in front of her because he wanted to look into her face, but he didn’t want to sit next to her. He took her hands in his, looking down at her small fingers, her perfect manicure.

“I’m sorry, Belinda. You’re a beautiful woman, but I’m just not --” No, that was the wrong approach. “I’m not the right man for you.”

“How do you know? You barely gave it a chance.”

“I’ve had more experience with these things than you have.” He paused, studying her face. She looked pale and fragile. He didn’t want to break her. He could do this without making her feel belittled, he thought. It would make him look like a class-A jerk, but at least she would emerge intact. “You’re a career woman. I’m really looking for an old-fashioned girl.”

The soft fragility in her eyes was suddenly edged with suspicion. “Old-fashioned?”

“Yeah, you know. Get married, have a baby right away, stay home with the kids. I’d like at least five, and I think they should be close together. I don’t see you doing that.”

The suspicion turned to anger. “Damn straight! What are you, some kind of Neanderthal?” She shot up out of the couch, grabbing her coat and purse. Some tears still flashed, but Val was relieved to see the anger was greater. Val scrambled to his feet.

“I’m sorry, Belinda. I thought you should know. But I hope we can still be friends.”

She shrugged her coat on. “I don’t know, Val. I’ll have to think about it.”

“I’m really sorry, Belinda.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she said, and slammed the door in his face.

That hadn’t gone well, Val decided. He didn’t know how, or where, but somehow he was going to end up paying for this one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Work didn’t feel like a very high priority the next morning, though Chandler’s boss had a different opinion. He seemed to think Chandler should be hammering out documentation like nothing else important existed in the world. Chandler, on the other hand, couldn’t keep her mind on work for thinking about Val.

She wanted him to call. No, she didn’t. She had no idea what she would say to him. She was afraid that if she started talking, things would come out of her mouth that she really didn’t want him to hear. Things like, “I think I might be in love with you.” Or, “Forget the cybersex -- I want the real thing.”

For the hundredth time in the past hour, she pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, trying to gather some semblance of concentration.

“Argh,” she said.

Andrea peered around her computer terminal. “Argh?” she repeated. “I thought only pirates said that.”

"Pirates and me," Chandler said.

"So why are you argh-ing?"

Chandler considered. "I just can't concentrate. I keep thinking about ... stuff."

"Val stuff?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"Want to talk about it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I want to hear about it."

Chandler cocked an eyebrow. "Never mind."

"Oh, come on. Are you guys having cybersex? Save the files and let me read them -- I'll help you improve your technique."

"Andrea --" Before she could decide what to say next, her phone rang.

It was Val.

His velvety voice was the last thing she'd expected to hear, and Chandler knew it was a dodge when he said, "I just wanted to check a couple of items on the reference manual. I had the feeling we weren't completely clear last time we talked."

Chandler shot a cautionary glance at Andrea, then turned toward her desk, trying to shield the conversation from her officemate.

"You're right -- we weren't completely clear last time we talked. And it had nothing to do with the reference manual."

"Chandler --" He broke off. Chandler heard papers rustling, another voice mumbling in the background. "This isn't the best time to talk about all this."

"Then why did you call?"

Another pause. When he spoke again, his voice was pitched lower, the soft velvet in it sending tremors through her.

“I thought it was safe when I called -- wait, I think he’s leaving again.”

Silence for a moment, more scuffling from Val’s side of the line. Then a rustle from the other side of the office. Chandler glanced toward Andrea. She had gathered an armful of documents and was walking toward the door. On her way out, she leaned toward Chandler.

“I think it’s against company policy to have phone sex in the office.”

Chandler waved her off.

“What was that?” Val asked.

“Nothing. My officemate. She’s leaving.”

“Good. Look, about last night. I’m sorry I pushed it.”

“It’s okay. It just caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

“Anyway, I’m sorry to call you at work, but I don’t have your home number -- and I’m not fishing for it, either.”

“I didn’t think you were. Look -- about last night. Like I said, it caught me by surprise. Let’s try again tonight.”

“All right. I’ll do that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Are you there?”

“I’m here,” Chandler typed back. Just a few simple words, but they took her into another realm, where words took the place of voices, where imagination summoned caresses. In some ways it seemed more real than when they met face-to-face. Reducing the relationship to words seemed to peel away all that was irrelevant or equivocating. It made it easier to be honest. Maybe that was why it scared her so much.

“Want a cookie?”

Chandler smiled. “What kind?”

“Girl Scout cookies. The mint ones. They’re frozen, but they’re pretty good that way.”

“Sure, toss me a couple. Now when you kiss me, I’ll taste like mint.”

So there it was. She’d jumped in with both feet, and wondered if she was going to regret it.

“You want me to kiss you?”

Suddenly shy again, Chandler typed, “Just a little hello kiss.”

“Wimping out?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Okay. Just a quick kiss, then, to say hello. You taste like chocolate mint.”

“So do you. How many of those cookies have you eaten, anyway?”

“Couple of boxes. What would you do if I kissed you again? A little deeper this time.”

Chandler drummed her fingers on the keyboard, considering. “I’d let you.”

“I want to taste your whole mouth.”

A small, tight shiver ran up Chandler’s spine. She could almost feel his lips on her, coaxing, cajoling. His tongue exploring. She could almost smell him in the room with her.

“I’m not sure what to say,” she finally typed, because she wasn’t.

“Don’t say anything. Just think about it for a minute.”

“Okay.”

So she sat in silence for a minute, thinking about his kiss, imagining the shape of his mouth and how it would fit against hers. He would gently press her mouth open, to explore her, to take her --

“Your neck.”

The words appeared on her terminal, mysteriously, she thought for a moment, as she had quite lost herself in the imagining of his kiss.

“My neck?”

“You have a lovely neck, and your short hair sets it off beautifully. I would slide my hand up the back of your neck, into your hair.”

She could feel the tips of his fingers, hot against her scalp. She wanted to close her eyes, to lose herself in the picture, but she had to follow his words as they appeared on her screen.

“Then I could tip your head back and kiss under your chin, down the line of your throat.”

Chandler swallowed, amazed at the intensity of the image he conjured. Her fingers twitched. She typed, “Your mouth is hot.”

“How hot?”

“Scorching. Like little spots of fire moving down my neck.”

“Do you have buttons on your blouse?”

Chandler looked down at the front of her sweatshirt. “Yes.”

“I slide my hand down into the V between your lapels -- brush the backs of my fingers against your skin.”

“Oh, Val, you’re wicked,” Chandler said aloud, and realized then that she was enjoying this. Her inhibitions were beginning to break away. She had nothing to worry about with Val. She typed, “What does it feel like?”

“Like velvet. Soft, warm velvet. Are you wearing silk? That white silk blouse.”

“Yes.” She said it out loud while she typed it, then clapped her hand over her mouth. Her voice sounded heavy and eager, ready for sex. She laughed then and sent the message. All of her was heavy and eager. Achy, even. She didn’t think she’d ever felt quite like this before. She’d felt passion before, sure, but nothing like this deep longing. Need. “You have wonderful hands.”

There was a pause. Finally, he said, “Scars and all?”

“Every scar tells a story. I want to read all your stories. With my fingers. With my tongue.”

There was another long pause. Chandler sat with her fingers pressed against her lips, knees bouncing in nervous anticipation. Finally, the reply came.

“I hope you have a good supply of chocolate syrup.”

Chandler smiled while her body tingled. “Of course I do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, my God,” said Val to his computer as Chandler’s message appeared. If she’d backed out yesterday because of self-consciousness, she’d sure gotten over it in a hurry. He wondered how far she’d go. He wondered how far he could stand to go. He wondered if he could ever use chocolate syrup again without getting aroused.

“You’ll have to share that syrup, I think,” he typed. “No fair if you’re the only one who gets to use it.”

“Far be it from me to be selfish,” came her reply.

Val was sweating. This was incredible. He’d never dreamed he could get so turned on just sending messages back and forth. Maybe he should have tried this a long time ago.

He had a feeling it wouldn’t have been the same, though. After all, it wouldn’t have been Chandler.

He couldn’t believe how deeply she affected him. It was more than just the physical attraction. In fact, it seemed like it was in spite of the physical attraction. Communicating online had helped them circumvent the awkwardness. What had fallen out, between the volatile chemistry of face-to-face and the more ordinary interaction online, was something more comfortable, more genuine, than anything he had ever experienced before.

Tapping the keys lightly, he wondered what to say next. Wondered if there was even a remote chance the relationship they had built here could weather another face-to-face meeting.

He'd waited too long, and another message from Chandler came through before he could formulate a reply.

"What's up? Do you want to start, or shall I?"

Nearly a thousand miles away, Chandler gathered courage, then went for it. "I close my hands over yours. Your beautiful hands. I pick them up, lift them away --" She paused, then made herself go on. "I set your hands back down lower."

"Where lower?"

Chandler closed her eyes. She had to do it. If he'd been here in the room, she would have done it without a second thought. Only the words made it hard.

"On my breasts," she typed, and she felt them there, heavy against her breasts, which were already heavy with longing. She wished she were actually wearing the white silk blouse, but it was in the laundry. Maybe she could go dig it out --

"They're beautiful," came his reply. "You're beautiful. I could spend hours just touching you, mapping your body with my hands. Just that."

And she would let him, she thought, and love every blessed minute of it. She set her fingers to the keyboard, ready to tell him that, then realized she couldn't do it. Or maybe she could --

He beat her to the punch.

"I can only think of two things that would make them better."

Chandler cocked an eyebrow, wondering where he was going. Strangely, she felt no trepidation. Had it been Giff, she might have anticipated a comment about implants, or a more flattering outfit.

"What?" she asked.

"If they were here," he said. Chandler smiled, a tear or three warming her eyes. Then he added, "And if they were covered with chocolate syrup."

She laughed. "A man after my own heart," she said.

"I'm glad you think so."

She didn't know what to say next; there were no words to describe the warm thing growing against her heart. She sat still, just feeling it. After a moment, Val "spoke" again.

"I have some bad news and some good news."

"Go on."

"The bad news is I don't think I can stand much more of this right now. It's getting a little too -- stimulating, if you get my drift."

"Yeah, I think I'll be taking a cold shower, myself."

"Sorry," he said. "I don't mean to tease and leave."

"It's okay, really. What's your good news?"

The pause seemed to go on forever. Finally, the words came.

"I'm flying out next week. Will you see me?"

"Yes," Chandler typed, and again, "yes, yes, yes."

"You could be a little more enthusiastic. Smile."

"Great big happy smile."

"I'll get my flight information to you as soon as I have it."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Me, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Go shopping with me tomorrow."

Andrea looked owlishly up at Chandler over the tops of her glasses, which had slid down her nose. Slowly, she pushed them back into place.

"Since when do you need my help shopping?"

Chandler stuffed a binder into her briefcase. "I need to buy some clothes."

Andrea looked confused. "Since when do you have any respect whatsoever for my taste in clothes?"

Chandler chewed her lip. "Well, not clothes, exactly. Lingerie."

"Lingerie?" Andrea repeated, a wicked gleam rising into her eyes. "You're buying lingerie? Do tell."

Chandler wasn't sure she wanted to tell Andrea everything. She also wasn't sure she'd have the nerve to buy what she wanted to buy if Andrea wasn't there to egg her on.

"Yes. I'm looking for something nice for next week."

"Next week. Nobody buys lingerie for the week -- wait! Unless their boyfriend only comes in during the week and then flies back to St. Louis for the weekend."

Chandler didn't find Andrea's put-on ignorance amusing. It was typical Andrea, though, so she let it slide.

"He's not my boyfriend," she protested lamely.

"Why do you buy lingerie for somebody who's not your boyfriend?"

"Okay, he's not my boyfriend in the traditional sense."

"Nobody these days has a boyfriend in the traditional sense. So is he your boyfriend in the non-traditional sense?"

"Um ... yeah, I guess so. Anyway, he's flying in late Sunday to meet with Gary on Monday, and we're probably going to get together Monday night --"

"During which encounter you hope the need for lingerie will present itself?"

"Okay, yes, something like that."

"Then meet me tomorrow morning at Menlo Park Mall at ten. Be there -- don't wuss out on me."

Chandler nodded. This sounded serious. "Okay, I won't."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, holding a miniscule, leopard-print bra and panty set on a teeny-tiny hanger, Chandler started having second thoughts.

“These panties look weird,” she said to Andrea.

“Yeah. They’re crotchless.”

Chandler blinked, then took another look. “Oh. Right.” The split down the middle of the bra cups, with the little ribbons tying the halves together, suddenly made sense, as well. “Isn’t that a little ... I don’t know ... gross?”

Andrea shrugged, looking through a collection of miniscule garments on another rack. “It depends on what kind of image you want to project.”

Chandler put the crotchless set back on the rack. “Well, I really wasn’t shooting for Whore of Babylon.”

“How about Whore of Menlo Park?”

“I think Thomas Edison already took that one.”

“That’s Wizard of Menlo Park. What do you think of this one?”

“This one” was a teddy, a bit more modest than the bikini set, but bright red. “That’s not too bad.”

“How about in a plum?”

“Oh, I like that.”

In the dark purple, the teddy somehow looked less sexual and more sensual. A soft froth of white lace down the front set it off prettily.

“Okay, so we’re looking for ‘I’m not easy, but if I let you get this far, you’re really going to appreciate the rest.’”

Chandler nodded. “Yes. Yes, I like that.”

“Then maybe we should look for something in silk.”

“Oooo, yes. Silk would be great.” She loved the way it felt, and she knew Val liked it, so it seemed an ideal choice.

“How about this?” Andrea pulled out a hot pink teddy.

“I like that, too -- Tell me honestly, Andrea, do you think this is too much?”

“For a guy you’re so obviously nuts about? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t want to seem -- overeager.”

“Just having the stuff on doesn’t make you overeager. What matters is how long it takes him to get to it.”

Chandler held the hot pink teddy up to her, looking at it in the mirror and imagining Val looking at her in it.

“You think five seconds is too long?”

\* \* \* \* \*

By lunchtime, Chandler had picked out a half dozen items. They headed to the food court for lunch.

“So you finally found your sparks,” Andrea commented as they sat down.

“Yeah. But that’s not really what did it.”

“What did it?”

“Other things. The way we talked online. It was the Hershey’s syrup and the Girl Scout cookies. Does that make any sense?”

Andrea smiled wistfully. “Yes. It makes a lot of sense.” She lifted her soft drink for a toast. “Best of luck.”

Chandler smiled back and touched her cup to Andrea’s. “Thanks.”

## Chapter Seven

Chandler's phone was ringing when she walked into her office Monday morning. Stumbling toward the desk, she lunged to grab it.

"Good morning," said Val's voice. "I didn't think you'd be in."

"I just walked in."

"Sorry for the early call, but Gary wants me in a meeting at eight-thirty."

"Will you be free for lunch?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I've got a lunch meeting with Gary's boss. The earliest I can get with you is six. I'm really sorry."

Chandler swallowed her disappointment. He *was* here for work, after all, not just for pleasure. "It's okay. I understand."

"I'll call you as soon as I'm done this evening."

"Okay. I'll talk to you then."

It wasn't an easy day. Chandler was wearing the purple teddy under her suit, and she had a feeling it was going to start chafing before six o'clock. She'd hoped they could get together at lunch. That wouldn't have worked, though -- they'd only have an hour, there'd be pressure --

“Condoms,” she said suddenly, then clapped her hands over her mouth, hoping nobody in the hallway had heard her. “Damn, I’m an idiot!” All the thinking about teddies and bustiers and crotchless underwear, and she hadn’t given any thought at all to practicality. If she was going to lose her virginity again, she was going to do it right. Taking unnecessary risks wasn’t on the agenda.

Well, she’d just have to buck up and grab some somewhere at lunchtime.

This was going to be way worse than buying lingerie.

\* \* \* \* \*

At 12:30, she threw a bag from the drugstore onto her kitchen table. “Well,” she said, taking off her coat. “That was fun.”

Inside the bag were three Snickers bars, a pile of miscellaneous greeting cards, four magazines, a paperback book and a box of condoms. For a split second, standing in the drugstore, she’d been ready to give up the mission and just hope Val had thought about it. Then she’d swallowed hard and done what she knew she had to do.

She went into the bedroom to let Sophocles out, then dug through the refrigerator for the leftover tuna salad she’d made day before yesterday. She ate slowly, giving herself time to regain her composure before she had to go back to the office and face Andrea. Andrea had no idea what Chandler had just done, but Andrea also had an eerie way of finding these things out. And it wasn’t every day Chandler bought condoms. In fact, this was the very first time.

Finally, with a good-sized tuna sandwich in her stomach, she felt ready to deal with the world. She took the bag into the bedroom and tossed it on the bed, then put Sophocles back in his cage.

\* \* \* \* \*

At five, she was ready. She'd checked her teddy in the ladies' room to be sure the lace hadn't gotten too squashed from the day of hiding under her blouse. The silk against her skin, the thought of seeing Val in a matter of a few minutes, made her feel sleek and sexy.

Finally, her phone rang. Val was waiting for her downstairs in the lobby.

"I'm out of here," she told Andrea.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Chandler shrugged into her coat. "And what exactly wouldn't you do?"

"I wouldn't put ketchup on a turkey sandwich."

Chandler nodded. "Neither would I, so I guess we're safe. See you tomorrow."

"And I wouldn't waste a minute I could manage to spend with that man, so if you want to come in a little late tomorrow morning, I'll cover for you."

Chandler smiled, appreciating Andrea's sentiment, as well as her offer. "He probably has more meetings tomorrow, unfortunately."

But the thought of coming in a little late had crossed her mind. Coming in late after a long, leisurely breakfast with Val. Having breakfast with Val after a long, leisurely night of making good use of that box of condoms --

She forced the thoughts away, certain she was blushing. The elevator ride seemed to take forever, but finally she reached the lobby.

Val sat in a corner by one of the wide windows. Chandler took a moment to soak him in, remembering the shapes of him. He'd been reading -- his finger held his place in a red hardcover book -- but now was talking to a young, uncomfortably attractive blonde woman. She leaned toward him and laughed, touching his arm. Chandler bristled. Did women just gravitate to him, or what? Clenching her teeth over her unjustified jealousy, she stalked across the lobby.

Jealousy vanished as Val looked up. A bright eagerness came into his eyes when he saw Chandler.

"Excuse me," he said to his companion, barely looking at her. "I have to go now. Nice to meet you." And then he stood, and looked at Chandler as if no one else existed in the entire world. Chandler went warm and a little weak. For a moment, she thought her knees might buckle, then strength came back and with it a slow heat that coursed down the small of her back, around and up the insides of her thighs.

"Are you ready?" Val said.

"Yes." He reached out and took her elbow. The energy came, potent, invisible. This time, it didn't fry her wires. This time, she knew this was the man with a freezer full of Girl Scout cookies.

"Where are we going?" she said, leading the way out to her car.

"Flannagan's again?" Val suggested. "It's our place now, right?"

So Flannagan's it was. They were seated at a booth in a back corner. The illusion of intimacy made Chandler that much more apprehensive. It was a good apprehension, though -- not fear, but an intense anticipation. What would happen tonight? She couldn't wait to find out.

They were able to talk this time. The awkwardness of their last face-to-face encounter was offset by the intervening on-line conversations. He didn't feel like a stranger anymore.

"I don't know about you," Val said, "but I'm hungry. You game to split a plate of nachos?"

"Go for it."

The nacho plate was huge, and Chandler only hesitated a moment before digging in.

"So how are the meetings going?" she asked Val, retrieving a piece of melted cheese that had come off her chip.

"Fine. I've had a few run-ins with your boss already, but I think we managed to deal with them. Paula's happy -- that's *my* boss -- and that's all that matters right now."

They chatted lightly about work and the weather until the nachos were gone, then the waiter brought the main course. Chandler barely had time to reflect that this was the same man she'd had such a hard time talking to only a few weeks ago. Now she talked to him with the same ease she felt with Andrea.

"I'm too full to eat this," Chandler said, looking wistfully at the pile of pasta as the waiter set it down in front of her.

Val grinned over his rack of ribs. "Then just sit there and pick at it while I make an insufferable pig of myself."

So she picked while he pigged, and after a time she said, "Val ... there are a couple of things I've been wanting to ask you. I hope you won't be offended ..."

"Ask away."

"Why did your parents name you Valentine?"

Val grinned, sucking barbecue sauce from his stunted index finger. "Not an uncommon question. According to my mother, I was conceived on Valentine's Day. My older brother's name is Lincoln and my sister's Noël." He shrugged. "What can I say? My parents are weird. Anything else?"

That had been easy enough. Maybe the next question wouldn't be so bad, either. "What happened to your finger?"

"Jigsaw. I was making a Christmas present for my mom. I was twelve. Dad told me not to use it without his help, but I was afraid I wouldn't get it done in time, so I fired up the thing myself. Turned out not to be such a good idea."

"And your nose?"

"It's not easy growing up with a name like Valentine." He smiled, his eyes warm. "How about you? Where'd you get those beautiful blue eyes?"

Chandler felt herself blushing. The heat suffused more than her face. She laid her fork down.

"From my mother's side of the family," she said in a weak voice. Val's smile widened. There was promise in it -- of what, she wasn't sure. Her eyes went to his hands as he wiped barbecue sauce from his fingers.

"I'm done here. Do you want dessert?"

"Chocolate brownie sundae?" Chandler said, and grinned.

So they split a chocolate brownie sundae, one dish and two spoons, as they had before. And, as before, the dessert worked its magic on them. Hardly realizing what she was doing, Chandler found herself eating from Val's spoon. And, when he held out a finger adorned with hot fudge and whipped cream, she leaned forward and took it in her mouth, laughing.

He froze, staring at her. The laugh on his mouth faded, falling into a more serious expression. Chandler, looking at him, quickly withdrew and wiped her mouth on her napkin.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was ..." She trailed off. She didn't know what it was. Forward? Impolite? No, arousing, that's what it had been. Like something they'd do on-line.

Val cleared his throat. "No apology necessary." His voice sounded strained. He shifted in his seat, staring at her. Discomfited by his gaze, Chandler turned her attention to her hands, her napkin -- anything but those crystalline eyes, hypnotic even behind the lenses of his glasses.

"I'll get the check," he said.

Chandler barely heard him. She didn't have enough composure left to argue with him. He paid the bill and they rose to leave.

Chandler nearly flinched as Val helped her into her coat. She was almost afraid to let him touch her, afraid of what might happen. She was full of a low, smoldering fire -- it would take the merest breath to turn it to cresting flames. As they stepped into the parking lot, he took her hand. She felt her own hand clench hard on his. It was almost as if she no

longer controlled her own body. It worked against her will to bind her closer to him. Her mind raced as they walked to her car. What would she do? What would he say?

He didn't say anything. He let go of her hand and looked at her. In the strange lamplight and the glare off his glasses, she couldn't quite read his expression. Finally, she averted her eyes and went to the driver's side door. Once they were both settled into the car, she sat gripping the steering wheel, listening to the engine run.

"Would you like to meet Sophocles?" she finally said.

He didn't look at her. "Sure. I'd love to."

She pulled out of the parking lot. Still at a loss for words, she flipped on the radio. They were playing a smarmy ballad, one Chandler had liked the first hundred or so times she'd heard it.

"Nice song," she said lamely.

"Yeah. I like it."

Chandler swallowed. This was ridiculous. They'd been fine all through dinner. Having the sparks kick in should be enjoyable now -- the timing was certainly better. But Chandler could barely breathe past the tightness in her chest, could barely think past the tightness in her loins. She'd been with men who turned her on, but this was something more. It felt more than arousing -- it felt important.

Her rapid heart began to slow a little as she forced herself to think. It had taken such a strange series of coincidences to bring her and Val together. Surely that meant something. Surely that meant she was simply a victim of fate. This night had been destined to happen since time began.

Hell, who could fight that?

Almost laughing at the crazed turn her mind had taken, Chandler suddenly realized she had driven all the way to her apartment complex without saying anything at all to Val.

Pulling the car into an empty space, she dared a sidelong glance at him. He was looking at his hands, folded tightly in his lap -- so tightly the skin stretched white across his knuckles.

"We're here," she said.

He looked up with a jerk, as if only then becoming aware of his surroundings. Chandler unbuckled her seat belt.

"I think you'll like Sophocles," she said. "He's really very friendly. He nips sometimes, though, so don't be surprised if he does."

"I'm sure he's adorable," Val said. His voice was strained. He wedged himself out of the car rather stiffly. The shifting of his tan chinos as he moved made the source of his discomfort blatantly obvious. Chandler swallowed. Hands shaking a little, she opened her door and stepped out.

The crisp air cooled her skin. Trying not to look at Val, she led the way up the stairs to her apartment. She closed the door behind her and started to shrug off her coat.

"Sophocles is over there --"

She broke off, unable to continue as Val pinned her against the door, closing his mouth over hers. Chandler froze, her heart slamming in her throat. Val's body was hard and solid against hers, trapping her. His mouth moved insistently, molding to hers, then opening against her lips. She didn't fight him. She had no desire to. She was weak and willing against him. He deepened the kiss, the soft heat of his tongue pressing past her lips. He still tasted of chocolate. The exploration was insistent but not forceful, and Chandler welcomed it. She'd wanted it all night. Had wanted it since the first time she'd seen him. And now she wanted more. The hard length of his erection, pressing against her, told her he was of like mind.

Suddenly, he broke away, backing off. Chandler stood staring, still feeling the pressure of his mouth on hers.

"I'm sorry," he said, lifting his hands. "I'm really sorry."

Chandler slid her coat off and carefully hung it in the closet. "Why are you sorry?"

“I was ... I was out of control.” He started to move toward the door. “Maybe I should --”

Chandler stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Maybe you should take off your coat.” Her fingers found the zipper of his Cardinals jacket and slid it down, then eased the coat off him. He stood very still, looking at her. “Now maybe you should take off your glasses.”

He didn’t move for a minute, as though what she’d said hadn’t quite soaked in yet. Then, with a quick, jerky movement, he pulled his glasses off. Chandler took them from his hand, folded them, laid them down on the kitchen counter behind him. She stepped toward Val, wrapped an arm around his neck, pulled his head down, and kissed him.

This time, it was on her terms, as she moved her mouth against his, exploring the fit and the shape of his lips. His mouth was warm and pliant, ready for her as she initiated her own exploration. She’d been caught off guard before; this time, she slipped her arms around him and let her hands find the feel and shape of him under his shirt. Her fingers explored the flat planes of his shoulders, the grooves of his ribs, then the line of his spine between the muscles of his back, sliding down until they reached the flat place just beneath the waistband of his chinos. She found the tail of his shirt and pulled it free. His skin was hot under her hands. She traced his flesh, memorizing it.

He had stood frozen in her embrace while she learned him. Now, finally, his own hands came up. He closed them around her waist, and for a moment, she thought he would push her away. Then they moved up, his palms flat against her sides, sliding around to her back. He pressed her closer to him, if that was possible.

Chandler broke off the kiss this time, not because she wanted it to end, but because she needed to catch her breath. His taste and his smell and his nearness made it hard to think, hard to breathe. She had to collect herself before she did something she might regret.

Trouble was, the only thing she could think of doing that she might regret was stopping along the course they had started. She ached with wanting him.

He looked down at her, a question warring with the obvious desire in his eyes.

“What next?” he said, his voice low and husky.

Chandler didn’t answer. She only reached down and curled his hardness into her hand.

“Oh, God,” he breathed, and bore her down to the floor.

He had her blouse open almost before they made it to the carpet, supporting her with one hand while he pressed the buttons loose with the other. The frothy white lace on the front of the purple teddy sprang free. Moving back a little, Val looked down at her, a smile playing on his mouth.

“What?” said Chandler, suddenly self-conscious.

He looked into her eyes, cupping her breasts in his hands. The silk moved sleekly against her skin. “You’re beautiful.”

Inexplicably, tears sprang to her eyes. She closed them tight, willing the water to recede. She felt his big hands move against her breasts, molding them, almost reverent in his caress. Then his mouth closed warm and wet over her nipple, his tongue teasing her through the silk. She grabbed at his hair, anchoring him to her as fire coursed through her. He lifted his head to claim the other breast, then his mouth went lower, lips soft below her breastbone, down to the hollow of her stomach. But as his fingers unfastened the button on the waistband of her skirt, Chandler suddenly thought of something. She grabbed Val’s head again, rotating it so he was looking at her. He blinked away a haze of passion.

“What?”

“Condoms,” she said.

Val blinked rather stupidly. “Right. Do you have any?”

“Yes, I bought a whole box --” She couldn’t finish the sentence, because his tongue was in her mouth again. Her mind fixated on that, thinking she’d never tasted anything so -- human -- before. He stroked, teased, making the most incredible love to her with his mouth.

“Where are they?” he said finally.

“Where are what?” Her hands on his skin weren’t enough. She wanted every square inch of him against every square inch of her, hot and bare and hungry.

“The condoms.”

Oh, right. At least one of them was managing to think straight. “They’re in the bedroom --”

She pushed away from him and forced herself into the bedroom, where she’d left the box of condoms on the bed.

There were condoms, all right. Everywhere. A trail of them, leading from the bed to a far corner of the bedroom, plus a few scattered between the bed and Sophocles’s cage. His open cage.

“Interesting,” said Val, coming up behind her. “I’ve heard of leaving a trail of clothes ...”

Chandler could only stare. Sophocles lay curled up in his blanket, sound asleep, while the cage door stood wide open.

“I must’ve not gotten the latch closed after I let him out at lunchtime,” Chandler said. She got down on her hands and knees, gathering the crinkly packets of condoms. Belatedly, her face went hot as she realized what she must look like, crouching on the floor in her current state of dishabille.

Val squatted next to her, eye on the innocent-looking, sleeping Sophocles. “Does he make a habit of playing with your condom supply?”

“He’s never had the opportunity --” She stopped, staring at the packet in her hand. “And he never will again, because I’m going to *kill* him.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary. It was just a little harmless ferret fun.”

“*Harmless?*” Chandler’s voice squeaked. “*Harmless? Look* at this!” She waved the packet in his face, clearly displaying the set of holes. “He *chewed* on them!”

Val stared. “*All* of them?”

"I don't know. But would you trust *any* of them?" She flapped the condom in his face again. He snatched it from her.

"Would you please stop that?" he said.

"I'm sorry. I just --" Everything had fallen apart. After all her careful planning --

Val took her shoulders in his hands and gently turned him to face her. "Look, I'll pick some up tomorrow and we'll try again. That way, you'll have time to think about it. I mean, this is all pretty sudden." He looked at the floor.

Chandler folded her arms over her chest, squashing the spill of white lace. Suddenly embarrassed, she didn't want to look at Val, but her eyes kept pulling to him, to the rugged lines of his face, the shapes of his body under his shirt. "Val, I don't need to think about it."

His head jerked up, eagerness leaping into his eyes. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," she said. "I'm really, really sure."

Val surged to his feet. "All right, then. Didn't I see a drugstore across the highway?"

Chandler nodded mutely.

"Then let's go." He found his glasses on the counter and shoved them back on while she got her coat, tossing it on right over the teddy.

So they were in her car again, desire running like water between them. Chandler felt almost as if she could reach out and cup the feelings in her hands, lift them to her lips, let them run down her body. She sat very still and said nothing.

When they got out of the car and walked toward the drugstore, she tried hard not to walk too close to Val, moving as he moved, so that she wouldn't touch him. But, as they went through the door, his hand found hers and closed over it, hard, possessive. She trembled a little in his grasp. This was too much -- it was more than she'd ever felt before in her life.

They found what they were looking for quickly enough, and Val picked up a package and headed for the cashier. Chandler stopped him, tugging at his hand.

"You can't just buy that," she hissed. The store was nearly empty at this late hour -- it seemed her voice slid to every corner of the room.

He looked at her blankly. "What?"

"I mean, isn't it a little ... obvious?"

"It's all we need. Let's go."

"No, no, no." Chandler wanted to get back to her apartment as much as he did, but she couldn't just waltz out of the drugstore with nothing but a package of condoms. It was crude. It was -- unladylike. She pulled Val to the back of the store, to the refrigerated and freezer sections.

"Grab a bottle of Coke," she said. "Diet, caffeine free." Shaking his head a little, Val complied. His mouth was tight. Chandler couldn't tell if it held back anger or laughter. She opened the freezer compartment and took out two pints of Ben & Jerry's. "All right, now we can go."

Val eyed her. "You're sure? You don't need anything else? Cereal? A loaf of bread? Some toilet paper, maybe?" His mouth twitched, and this time she could tell it was laughter, although he was trying very hard to make it look like anger.

Chandler sniffed, giving him a slightly haughty flounce. "Well, I *could* pick up a *TV Guide*."

The smile broke through, barely, twisting Val's mouth to one side. He grabbed her elbow.

"Come on. Let's go before I explode."

The cashier rang up the items, stone-faced, with hardly even a smile. Chandler rummaged in her purse for her billfold, but before she found it, Val pulled a twenty out of his wallet and slapped it down on the counter. The cashier dawdled with the change. Val fairly snatched it out of his hand and shoved back out the door, to Chandler's car.

The ride back seemed interminable. Chandler prickled with anticipation, but doubts were starting to creep in. Should she be doing this? She barely knew this man next to her, staring out her car window with his eyes glazed as he obviously tried very, very hard to think about anything but what they were about to do.

*No, that's not true.* Just because this was only the second time she'd seen him in person didn't mean she didn't know him. She knew him very well. They'd shared hopes and dreams, personal revelations -- everything a couple should share. It just hadn't been face-to-face. She knew more about him than she'd known about Gifford.

And she wanted very, very much to learn more.

The doubts settled inside her, falling down beneath the surer emotion like silt moving to the bottom of a river. The clearer tumult carried her forward. She pulled into the parking lot, got out of the car, and followed Val up the stairs to her apartment.

She had barely put the bags down on the counter when he had his glasses off and Chandler in his arms again, crushing her to him, claiming her mouth with his mouth and her body with his hands. She heard the crinkling of paper behind her as he groped past the ice cream and Coke for the package of condoms. Then, pushing her toward the living room, he found the buttons of her coat and pushed it off her, his mouth taking over where he'd left off before they'd run their errand. A long, slow heartbeat later, he slid down, taking the teddy with him, until he was on his knees in front of her, face pressed into her belly, his fingers sliding between her bare thighs. He looked up at her, his face framed by the curve of her breasts.

"Val," she said, just to hear his name. His fingers traced up the backs of her arms and closed just above her elbow, bearing her gently down to the floor beside him. The rough carpet prickled her shoulder blades, his clothes rasped against her skin as he settled down half on top of her. There was a situation in need of a remedy. Finding his buttons, she undid them with quick, deft fingers, then slid the shirt off him. The button on his chinos was tighter, more of a challenge, but she loosed it with a twist, then pulled down his zipper. A

moment later, only a thin layer of cotton shorts separated him from her; then even that was gone as he disposed of them. He pressed to her, breast to breast, his body hair rasping against her, his sex prodding her stomach. For a breath, Chandler wondered what the hell she was doing, then Val's mouth lowered to hers again and she was lost in the intoxication of his kiss.

His mouth explored her body again. She buried her face in his shoulder when he returned, feeling his hot skin against her lips, tasting his flesh as he shifted over her. She heard a faint ripping sound. It took a moment to register that he was opening the condom package.

"Let me," she muttered against him. Obliging, he pressed the square package into her hand. Lifting her head, she pressed at his shoulder, signaling him to roll over. He moved to his back, looking up at her. There were no questions in his eyes, only the soft glaze of trusting passion.

Folding her fingers around the condom, Chandler pressed her face against Val's chest. She kissed him, mouthed his nipples, bit his hair. The hair was crisp and blond, and she traced the line of it down his flat belly with her tongue. With her hand she spread his thighs, sliding her hands up the soft flesh to the fold of his groin. He stiffened a little and closed his eyes.

Chandler lifted her hand again and pressed it down his belly, stopping when the side of her palm met the root of his sex. Teasing, she caressed him, coming close but never quite touching the object of her exploration. Finally, when he made a small but emphatic male sound deep in his throat, she closed her hand around his shaft. He felt like steel, or stone, under a delicate veneer of velvety skin. She stroked him once, again, her free hand worrying the condom from the paper. When it came loose, she brought it to him. Still stroking, with Val trembling beneath her, she rolled the thin sheath down and covered him.

Immediately his hands went to her, closing around her arms and pulling her forward until he could kiss her again. His mouth was hard and insistent, his tongue finding hers in a

sharp, staccato dance. Finally he broke away and rolled her back over. Pressing his legs between hers, he lifted himself over her.

“You could drive me completely insane,” he said, his voice barely audible.

Chandler smiled. “Good.” She lifted her legs and pressed her thighs against his hips. He nudged forward and came inside.

Chandler bit her lip and made a small sound. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. He pressed deep into her and held still, trembling, as if holding the moment, or memorizing the shape and feel of her. When he withdrew, it was like losing a part of her own body; but then he came in again, and she was whole. He shifted, easing a hand between them. His fingers moved on her and fire poured into her.

It seemed it was over too soon; it seemed to last forever. One moment, they were bound in movement; the next, he froze above her, hips jerking minutely. At the same moment, her pouring fire broke free into rings of sensation, pulsating against him as he pulsated, emptying himself. Chandler came back to herself a few moments after he did, to find him looking down at her, a smile on his mouth and a hint of tears in his eyes. He looked at her for a long time, then lowered his head to kiss her softly.

“Chandler,” he said, and she knew he needed no answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later they sat together on the couch, eating the ice cream Chandler had grabbed at the drug store. She hadn’t even noticed the flavors when she’d picked them up, but she’d ended up with chocolate fudge brownie and Chunky Monkey, so that was good.

“How’s yours?” she asked Val.

He sucked his spoon thoughtfully. “It would’ve been better if we’d managed to get it into the freezer.”

Chandler grinned. The ice cream had sat forgotten on the counter while they had made love. Now it was soft, almost runny. “Oh, well,” she said.

Val returned her smile, but it faded as his gaze drifted to the wall clock. “It’s late,” he said, setting down the carton of ice cream. “I should get back to the hotel.”

Chandler’s heart twisted suddenly. She couldn’t bear to see him leave. “Stay here.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’d love to, but I don’t have a change of clothes, or a toothbrush ...”

“I have an extra toothbrush, and I can drop you by the hotel in the morning to change clothes.” She stopped, swallowed. “I don’t want you to leave.”

He studied her face, his expression gone soft. It was harder to read his eyes, she’d discovered, when he wasn’t wearing his glasses. Perhaps because they were working harder to focus. “All right,” he said finally. “I’ll stay.”

He didn’t have any pajamas, either, which proved to be their undoing when he slid naked into bed beside Chandler, who wore only a long T-shirt and underwear. Within moments, she was in his arms again, and found his body more than up to the demands she made of it.

It was going to be very hard to get out of bed in the morning.

## Chapter Eight

Even after dropping Val off at the hotel, Chandler managed to get to work only a few minutes late. He'd take his rental car, he said. "If you come in, neither of us will get to work."

Realizing he was right, she gave him a lingering kiss and went on.

Andrea, as usual, was already behind her desk. Pushing her glasses down her nose, she peered over them at Chandler.

"You're late," she said, then pushed her glasses back up. "Not late enough, though."

Chandler sat down at her desk, stifling a yawn. "Not late enough for what?"

"For anything interesting to have happened last night." She frowned a little as Chandler closed her mouth hard around yet another yawn. "Or maybe not. How was it?"

Chandler was surprised to feel a blush creep up her throat. "It was nice. Fun. We had a good time."

"How good a time?"

"A very good time." Chandler forced herself to keep her voice steady, but to her own ears it sounded suggestive, almost lewd. Andrea frowned again, though, so perhaps it hadn't been as bad as Chandler had thought. "Are you seeing him again tonight?"

“Probably.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler didn't hear from Val all day. When he finally called, after four o'clock, she wasn't sure whether she was worried or angry. Worried that he'd decided to avoid her, angry that he'd left her hanging so long.

“Hi,” he said. “Are we on for tonight?”

Chandler bit her lip to counter the effects of his voice. “Maybe.”

He chuckled. She closed her eyes. She could almost feel the little laugh, drifting down her skin. “Maybe?” he repeated.

“You could have called me earlier.”

“I was afraid to. I've had enough trouble concentrating without making it worse by hearing your voice.”

The anger melted a little. At the same time, Chandler wondered how long it had taken him to think up that line. “I would've liked to have heard from you.”

He hesitated, and the laughter was gone from his voice when he said, “I'm sorry.” Another pause. “Do we need to talk?”

Chandler smiled, feeling the tension leave her. “No, it's all right. It's just ... it's hard, when we have so little time together.”

“I know. It *is* hard.” The laughter came back. “It's *definitely* hard.”

Heat rushed to Chandler's face, but a laugh bubbled up, as well. “You're bad, Val. I'll see you in a few.”

After dinner, as they walked to the car, Chandler said, “You never did get properly introduced to Sophocles.”

“I don't suppose I did.” He paused by her car while she unlocked the door. “I have other things on my mind for tonight, but I guess I could take a few minutes to meet him.”

"I think you'd better." Chandler unlocked her own door and slid into the car. "If he doesn't like you, I'll have to never speak to you again."

Val grinned, blue eyes twinkling. "I knew I should have picked up some ferret treats."

"Well, let's hope he forgives you."

Sophocles seemed forgiving enough. When Chandler let him out of the cage, he sniffed around Val's shoes until Val finally bent and picked him up. Then the ferret curled cozily into the bend of Val's elbow, stretching out long, eyes half-mast, while Val rubbed between the little round ears.

"He's cute," Val decided.

"He's a big baby," Chandler said, giving Sophocles a scratch. She sat down on the floor in front of the couch and flipped on the TV. Sophocles chose that moment to start wiggling. Val juggled his long, awkward body for a moment, then deposited him less than elegantly on the carpet.

"That's fine," said Chandler. "Let him run around for a while." She patted the floor next to her and Val sat down.

"Will he stay out of trouble?"

Chandler grinned. "He doesn't understand that concept. Don't worry. The worse he'll do is climb up on the bathroom sink and eat the soap."

"Won't that make him sick?"

Chandler shrugged. "He pukes bubbles sometimes, but for the most part, he seems to handle it pretty well."

Val made a face. "Well, now you've put me in a really awkward position."

"How's that?"

"How, exactly, do I segue from puking soap bubbles to a blatant seduction?"

Chandler grinned. "That's easy. Just kiss me."

So he did, and for a time they thought about Sophocles not at all. Chandler lost herself in the soft shapes and flavors of his mouth, the contours of his body under her hands. Sadness invaded her slowly as she remembered he was leaving tomorrow, and she didn't know when she would see him again. The uncertainty heightened her need for him. She pressed close, soaking up his warmth. Their bodies slid together like pieces of a puzzle, meshing edge to edge and plane to plane. With her mouth hard against his, she pressed his lips open.

"Ach!" he said suddenly, pulling away from her. Chandler leaned back, surprised, wondering what she'd done wrong.

"What?"

A surprised grimace twisted across Val's face, and he jerked against her, kicking one leg. "There's something in my pants."

Chandler grinned, but she was confused. "I know. I was just getting ready to look for it." She tried to pull him back to her, but he moved away a little further, pulling at the leg of his pants.

"No, I mean there's something in my pants that doesn't belong there ... Agh!" He shot suddenly to his feet, kicking his right foot violently. "And it's ... ach! ... trying to ... ouch! ... dig a hole in my thigh!"

The size and shape of the lump halfway down Val's thigh told Chandler immediately what the problem was. She moved toward him, on her knees, and grabbed the squirming lump, pulling it as far away from his leg as his pants would allow. "It's Sophocles," she said. "Undo your pants and let him crawl out the top."

Val gave her a look of horror. "Out the top? There's stuff in the way I don't want him walking on."

"It's the quickest way to get him out."

Obviously reluctant, Val undid his button and fly. Chandler let go of Sophocles and he crawled the rest of the way up Val's leg. A moment later, Sophocles's pink nose appeared out of Val's fly. Chandler grabbed the ferret by the scruff of the neck and extracted him.

"I'm sorry," she said, carrying him to the cage. "I should have put him back. I sort of ... forgot how much he likes a nice baggy pant leg."

"Well, I think I'm still intact." Val was hauling his fly shut. Chandler laid her hands on his, stopping him.

"Let me check."

A little smile crept onto his mouth, and he moved his hands away. She drew his unfastened pants down and carefully examined his inner thigh. Sophocles had inflicted a few small scratches. Chandler bent her head to kiss them.

"Better?" she asked.

"Hm, yes."

"Does it hurt anywhere else?"

"Higher. A little higher. No, even higher ..."

Chandler peeled his underwear down and kissed everything, just to be sure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Val left the next afternoon. They had lunch, then Val turned in the rental car locally so Chandler could drive him to the airport. He wanted to spend as much time as he could with her, not to waste any moments that remained to them. He had a hollow place in his chest, thinking that he would leave her and didn't know when he would see her again. He wanted to put his arms around her and carry her with him, sit her down on the seat next to him and take her home. But the only thing of her he could take with him was the emotion growing warm and heavy against his heart.

Before he got out of the car, he kissed her hard and long, branding the taste of her on his mouth so that he could remember it until he tasted it again. Because he *would* taste it again, no matter what he had to do.

He drew away finally, cupping her face in his hand. Her dark blue eyes glistened with tears. He hoped they wouldn't fall -- he didn't think he could bear it if she cried.

"I'll miss you," he said. "I'll call you when I get in."

She nodded, her mouth too tight, her lips trembling a little. "Take care, Val," she said.

He had to go. He had no choice. He looked at her one last, eternal, infinitesimal moment, memorizing her face. Then he let her go.

The flight home seemed to last forever. In his mind he was reliving those two glorious nights with Chandler, the heat of her under him, the way her body received and sheathed him. He had never felt this way before. It was as if he had discovered a part of himself he hadn't realized was missing.

By the time his feet hit the jetway at the St. Louis airport, it had become quite clear to Val that he was in love with Chandler Carlisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler ate dinner at Flannagan's alone that night, because it made her think of Val. She even ordered what he'd ordered for lunch. She was wallowing, she knew, but she'd decided it was okay. He was so far away, and she was left here alone with her skin still humming from last night.

She was halfway through her brownie sundae when she looked up to see a familiar face. An unexpected familiar face. Gifford sat at a table not far from her. There was a woman with him, a pretty blond with sparkles in her eyes. Chandler knew at a glance there was no chance Gifford would even look her way. He leaned over the table, absorbed in a way he'd never been with Chandler. The woman seemed equally entranced.

Chandler smiled ruefully. Sparks, she thought. Sparks all over the place. She'd been right to let him go. He looked every bit as happy as she'd hoped he'd be.

Her ice cream was melting. She spooned up the last of it and thought about Val. It made her happy, but it also made her sad. When would she see him again? How long would she have to be content with his voice on the phone, or words on a computer terminal?

Maybe it had all been a huge mistake.

Or maybe it was the smartest thing she'd ever done.

## Chapter Nine

Heading out to lunch with Steve the next day, Val was surprised to see a familiar face in the lobby. Belinda sat in a big leather chair next to a ficus tree, clutching her bright red purse in her lap. Her eyes were big with emotion -- nerves, Val thought.

Catching sight of him, she stood abruptly, slung the purse over her shoulder and took a single, confident step toward him, then stopped. She looked so young, he thought, young and uncertain. She'd seemed so much different when they'd gone out. She'd seemed mature and together. Strong.

Well, he had to be strong now, he supposed. Knowing there was no hope of just sliding by her, he approached her instead, while Steve kept his distance but looked on with an expression of frank appreciation.

"Belinda," Val said. "I'm surprised to see you here. Why didn't you call?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't talk to me." She fortified herself with a subtle shift of her posture. "I was hoping to catch you on your way out. I'd like to talk to you. Could we go somewhere?"

Val glanced at Steve. "Yeah, I suppose we could."

"Good. We can just go for a little walk."

So they headed down the sidewalk, in the general direction of Gateway Arch Park. It was a beautiful day, full of the promise of spring. Val glanced back over his shoulder a few times. As he'd suspected -- and hoped -- Steve was shadowing them.

"What can I do for you, Belinda?" Val said finally, when she showed no signs of starting the conversation.

She pressed her lips together and shifted her posture again, straightening her spine, lifting her head so her hair bobbed along next to her jawline. "You wanted to know if we could be friends."

"Yes."

"Well, I think we could be more than that."

Val blinked. He hadn't expected anything like this. "Belinda, I thought I explained all that."

"You did. But I thought about it, and I think -- I think I could be what you want me to be."

Dumbfounded, Val stopped walking. "What do you mean? I didn't ask you to be anything."

"I know. And that's why I think I could give it a try. Because you didn't ask me to change. But I could be an old-fashioned girl for you if that's what you want. I could try that."

This was bad. What kind of pain was this girl carrying around, that she would be willing to change herself for the possibility of a relationship?

"Belinda, you don't understand --"

"No, I think I do. I understand that you have an idea of a future built around a certain kind of woman. I think I could be that kind of woman, if I worked at it."

"But you shouldn't have to work at it. You should be able to be who you are."

"But I could be that."

She wasn't getting it. Val wanted to find whatever man had done this to her and beat the shit out of him. He started walking again, leaving her to follow as he made his way to a more secluded spot.

"You shouldn't have to change for anyone," Val said. "You should be able to be yourself, and find a man who'll help you do that." It occurred to him then that she might not know yet how to be herself -- she might not even know who herself was. He hoped she got a chance to find out before some man latched onto her fragile, unmolded self and reshaped it without thought. "Besides -- what I said about the old-fashioned stuff. It wasn't true."

She stopped dead, eyes big. Good. She seemed so much less vulnerable when she was angry. "You *lied* to me?"

"I was trying to keep from hurting your feelings."

"What do you mean?"

"I wanted to make you feel like it was all my fault. I didn't want you to think there was something wrong with you, or that it was something you did. I thought it would be easier for you that way."

She didn't seem to have absorbed very much of that. Her blue eyes had filled with flame and anger, behind it a sort of empty desperation that wrenched Val's guts. He could *see* the wound there, raw and open. He hadn't caused it, but he hadn't been able to heal it. It was simply too much to ask of him.

"You lied to me," she said again. "How could you do that?"

"I told you, I was trying to --"

"Goodbye, Val," she said shortly. She turned on her heel and left him.

Val watched her go, then turned to look for Steve. To his surprise, Steve broke away from a building a few yards away and, instead of coming to Val, trailed Belinda off into the shadows and sidewalks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler came to work the next morning bleary from lack of sleep, half-wishing she'd stayed home. She'd been up half the night thinking about Val -- restless, unsettled thoughts that didn't make sense.

When she brought her mail up, though, she had a message from Val already. Strangely, there was no subject line, and the time stamp showed it had been sent just before two a.m. today, from his home account. What did he have to say that was so important he would dial in at that hour? Chandler swallowed a lump of nervousness as she pulled up the message. Her finger hesitated over the "Page Down" key, and when she keyed past the routing information to the message, she wished she hadn't.

*"Chandler, I'm sorry to have to send you this message, but it seems to be the right thing to do. We've moved too fast, and I think we've made a mistake. A long-distance relationship would be complicated, and I don't think I'm prepared to deal with that. I'm sorry for any hurt I have caused you, but I thought it was best to break this off before things got too serious. Val."*

Chandler just sat staring at her screen. She felt as if someone had reached inside her and ripped pieces out. Vaguely, she saw Andrea come into the office.

"Hi, Chandler," she said cheerily. "Here's your coffee ..." She trailed off. "Chandler, what's wrong?"

The emptiness in Chandler's chest rose up to choke her. She bolted from the office, seeking solace in the ladies' room.

When she came back a few minutes later, calmer, eyes red but makeup carefully redone, Andrea was sitting at Chandler's desk, reading Chandler's computer screen.

"What an asshole," she said as Chandler came in.

Chandler sat down at Andrea's desk. "Why are you reading my mail?"

"Sorry," said Andrea. "I was worried about you."

“So are you happy now?”

“No, I’m not happy. You’re upset, so I’m upset.” She paused, looking at the computer.

“He may be right about one thing,” Andrea ventured. “Maybe it’s best to break it off before things get too serious.”

Anger flared. Chandler bit it back before she spoke, but her voice still came tight and brittle. “He should have thought about that before he took his pants off in my apartment.”

Andrea’s eyes widened a little. “It went that far?”

“It went about as far as it could get.” Chandler rubbed her eyes. “For a few hours there, I thought I was in love with him.” Tears began to spill again in spite of her efforts to contain them. “Oh, Andrea! What am I going to do? Everything’s completely screwed up.”

Andrea came around the desks to put an arm around Chandler’s shoulders. “No, he’s screwed up, that’s all. Why don’t you just relax for a while. Don’t do anything until you’ve thought it all through. In fact ...” She glanced at her watch. “The malls are open. Go shopping.”

Chandler daubed at her eyes. “I can’t just leave.”

“Sure you can. I’ll tell Gary you’re sick. Go shopping. And call me when you get home.”

Chandler nodded. “All right. Thanks, Andrea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Puzzled, Val hung up the phone. He’d been calling Chandler off and on all day, only to be transferred to her voice mail every time. And she hadn’t answered any of his e-mail messages. Maybe she was sick. He called New Jersey information and got her home phone number, but only the answering machine picked up. He hung up at the last minute, without leaving a message.

*She's fine*, he told himself. *She's a big girl -- she can take care of herself*. But her absence nagged at him until finally, in the late afternoon, he called the main number to Novotel, New Jersey.

"I'm trying to reach Chandler Carlisle's officemate. Is there any way you can look that up?"

"What's the name?" the receptionist asked.

"Andrea something."

There was a moment of silence. Val could hear the exasperation. He hated to make generalizations, but a good number of people in New Jersey seemed to be awfully tense.

"How about the room number?"

That much he knew. He gave it to her.

Silence again. Val heard computer keys clicking.

"All right," said the receptionist. "Her name is Andrea Miller. Extension 5491. I'll transfer you."

"Thank you."

The phone rang twice, then a familiar voice said, "Andrea Miller."

"Hi. I'm trying to reach Chandler Carlisle. Is she in?"

"No. She went home sick."

"She's not at home. I tried there. Is she all right?"

There was a pause, then Andrea's voice came back, a little clipped. "Who is this?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's Val Kinsey --"

"What the hell are you doing looking for Chandler? I think you've done enough damage for one day."

Val lifted the phone away from his ear, almost surprised to discover that there were no flames shooting from it.

“What are you talking about?” he said when he had recovered from the shock.

But Andrea was still raging. “You know, I think it’s pretty damn tacky breaking up on e-mail. You could’ve at least had the decency to call her.”

“Breaking up? What --”

“She was so upset, I sent her shopping. Now I would suggest that you not bother calling here again.”

“But I --”

The last words were spoken to a dial tone. Val stared, rattled, at the phone in his hand. What was going on? He hadn’t broken up with anyone, via e-mail or otherwise, except Belinda, and he’d thought all that was settled.

She’d been so strange, though, the last time they’d talked. Had she been upset enough to hack into his account? Would she even know how?

Whatever the case, something had obviously gone dreadfully wrong, and it was going to take more than a little ingenuity on his part to set it right.

## Chapter Ten

Chandler came to work the next day in a dark blue linen suit with a cream-colored blouse. Andrea, looking up from her terminal as Chandler came in, gave a low whistle.

“Nice suit,” she said.

Chandler smiled, smoothing her lapels. “I picked it up yesterday at the mall. Like it?”

“It’s great! Clothes shopping is always good therapy.”

Chandler nodded, sitting down. “I spent a shameful amount of money on clothes. And then I went to the bookstore, and the record store -- well, you get the idea.”

“No chocolate?”

“Four pieces from the Godiva place. Plus cheap Mexican food and one of those gigantic cinnamon rolls.”

“That’s the problem with emotional turmoil. Not only is it hard on the wallet, it’s hell on the waistline.”

“That’s for sure. I do feel better, though.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Did you come to any conclusions?”

Chandler considered. She *had* come to some conclusions, but they certainly weren't the kind of take-no-prisoners plans Andrea would have come up with.

"I decided I need to take a vacation," she said firmly.

Andrea nodded. "Not what I expected to hear, but still probably a good idea."

"I thought so. I haven't been to see my folks in quite a while."

"That sounds like a good idea." Again, Andrea looked expectant. But this time Chandler didn't volunteer any more information. Because she hadn't come to any conclusions at all about how to handle Val.

She turned on her computer. She didn't even want to look at her e-mail, and wouldn't have if she hadn't needed to check for work-related messages.

Val's break-up message was still there. She should have deleted the stupid thing. He'd sent other messages, too, while she'd been gone. Several of them. Chandler chewed the inside of her lip, trying to decide if she cared what Val had to say. The subject lines were innocent enough: "Good Morning" and "How's Today Going" and "Where Are You?" But at the end of the list was one titled, "We Have A Problem."

"No kidding," Chandler muttered. Somewhere between enraged and apathetic, she pulled up the message.

"Talked to Andrea," it said. "I don't know where that message came from, but I did *not* send it. Please call me. We need to talk."

"Well, there's a novel approach," Chandler said as Andrea came in, carrying her coffee. Chandler was surprised at the bitterness in her own voice.

"What's a novel approach?" Andrea said.

"He's telling me he didn't send the message. And he says he talked to you about it."

Andrea sat down at her own desk, putting one of the two Styrofoam cups she was carrying on Chandler's desk. "He called here yesterday acting like nothing was going on. He wanted to know where you were."

Chandler peeled the lid off her cup of coffee and sipped. She was still too numb to think clearly. "This is very weird."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

She thought about it while she finished her coffee. Finally, she pulled up Val's message and hit "Reply."

"Val, I can't talk to you on the phone about this right now. I'm simply too angry. I don't understand why you did what you did, or why you're badgering me now. If you want to break this off, fine, but quit bothering me."

An hour and a half later she got another, brief note:

"Forward the message I supposedly sent you. I want to see what I said."

"Maybe he has a split personality," Andrea suggested when Chandler related the new ploy.

"Maybe he's just an idiot," said Chandler. She forwarded the message.

\* \* \* \* \*

Val studied the e-mail message, frowning; then he picked up the phone.

Belinda answered the phone pleasantly enough, but her voice went icy when she heard Val's voice.

"What do you want, Val?"

"I want to know how and why you sent e-mail from my account very early yesterday morning."

There was a pause -- slight, but enough to tell Val he'd hit the mark. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"How did you get my login and password? Would you mind telling me?"

There was a long silence. Finally she said, her voice brittle, “You sent me e-mail once, so I knew your login. As for the password -- c’mon, McGwire? How hard is that?”

Anger rose, hot and hard up Val’s throat. “Belinda, this relationship is important to me --”

“How important could it be? You probably lied to her, too.”

“Belinda --”

But she had hung up.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

\* \* \* \* \*

Throughout the morning, Chandler found herself progressively growing sadder. She’d shaped her days around Val, and now he was gone, leaving her feeling lost.

*This is ridiculous*, she told herself. *He’s just a man. No big loss.*

But, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t deny the fact that he was also a man she loved.

Just before quitting time, Chandler got a call from a security guard in the lobby.

“There’s something here for you, Ms. Carlisle. Could you come down and pick it up?”

Chandler gave a puzzled frown. “Sure. I’ll be right down.”

Wondering what might be waiting for her, Chandler rode the elevator down to the first floor. As she came around the corner to the security guards’ station, she stopped in her tracks.

One side of the security desk was covered by one of the biggest flower arrangements Chandler had ever seen. The woman on duty caught sight of Chandler past a protruding spray of baby’s breath.

“Is it your birthday?” she asked. She looked partly amused, partly teasing, and just a shade irritated. Chandler was anxious to see who’d sent the flowers, but too embarrassed to look right away, given the big logistical problem they were causing the security guard.

“No, it isn’t,” she said. She came up to the desk, wondering how in the world she was going to get the huge mass of flowers upstairs. Investigation proved they were more awkward than heavy, though, so she lifted them carefully and hid behind them as she rode the elevator to the tenth floor. When she got to the office, she had to turn sideways to get in the door.

“Whoa,” said Andrea. “Who sent you *that*?”

Chandler set the flowers down on her desk, effectively eliminating all her work space. She had to sort through the flowers to find the card. There were red roses, white carnations, a forest of baby’s breath and greenery. Finally, she found the card. It was a large card in a white envelope, not one of the miniature cards that come with flowers. The handwriting was unfamiliar.

Then it occurred to her that she’d never seen Val’s handwriting. This had to be it. It certainly wasn’t the careful, rounded script typical of florists. Plus, the message was too long for him to have entrusted it to anyone over the phone. He must have filled out the card and dropped it off to be sent with the flowers.

She almost wished he *had* asked someone else to write the note. His handwriting was cramped and couldn’t quite decide which way it wanted to slant. It was more than a little hard to read, but once she managed to puzzle out the words, turmoil began again in her heart.

*“I wish very much that we could do this face-to-face. But, since that’s not possible, and given the options, this seemed like the best.”*

*“I apologize profusely for the e-mail. I did not send it, but I feel it’s my fault in a way. You see, there’s something I didn’t tell you. When we met, I was seeing someone else. It*

*wasn't serious, and I don't think it ever would have been, but she's young, and I think she had other ideas. I broke up with her before things got serious between you and me. Apparently, she hacked into my account and sent that message.*

*"I want to get past this. I feel something for you that I've never felt before. It's not something I will give up on easily.*

*"Chandler, I don't want to lose you. Please call me tonight, when we can talk. And please know that I love you."*

Chandler's hands shook as she folded the card back up, sliding it carefully back into the envelope.

"Well," Andrea prodded. "Who are they from?"

Chandler stared at the huge mass of flowers, her eyes misting. "Val," she said.

"Good grief." Andrea came to look at the bouquet, eyes straying curiously over the envelope. "What did he say?"

"That he's sorry. That he wants to talk." *That he loves me.* That part of it was for herself, though. She needed to think about it. To hold it against her heart and see how it fit. She cupped a rose in her hand and lowered her face to the soft, delicate smell. Tears still prickled behind her eyes. She would have to talk to him, she supposed. Trouble was, she had no idea what she was going to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

She had to fight the urge to call him as soon as she got home. Instead, she forced herself to sit down and eat a reasonable dinner, though she barely tasted it.

It wasn't until after she'd eaten that it occurred to her to be indignant. Why should *she* call *him*? He was the one who had the explaining to do, after all, so why should she be the one to foot the phone bill?

Angry now, instead of just restless, Chandler picked up her microwave dinner dishes, let Sophocles out of his cage, and sat down to watch TV. The New York City news was violent and depressing, as usual, and made her even angrier.

*What nerve! Asking me to call him. And what an idiot I am to seriously think about doing it.*

She felt a nudge at her ankle and looked down to see Sophocles trying to figure out how to get past the elastic on her sweat pants. Chandler picked him up, smiling grimly as she recalled Val's last encounter with the ferret.

"Maybe you should have dug a little harder, and a little higher," she said, scratching behind Sophocles's ears. The ferret stretched out along her arm, eyelids lowering in contentment over his black eyes. "You could have done him some permanent damage."

Disgusted with the news, she flipped channels until she ran across some stand-up comics on one of the cable channels. Sophocles got tired of being petted and wriggled out of her arms. Her mood lightened only slightly by the comedy show, Chandler finally picked up the phone and stabbed the buttons that made up Val's number.

The phone rang once, then Val said, "Hello?" The deep, velvet voice should have placated her, but Chandler found herself becoming even more irritated.

"Hi," she said, her voice brittle. "It's Chandler."

"Hi!" He sounded enthusiastic, and a little relieved. "Let me call you right back, okay?"

The change in tactic forced Chandler to backpedal over some of her anger. "All right. I'll be here."

She hung up. A few seconds later, the phone rang.

"Hi. Val?"

"Yeah. Listen, I'm sorry about that, but I figured it'd be better if I paid for the call. I just wanted you to call so I could be sure you were home and had time to talk."

“That’s ... that’s okay.” More of the anger drained away, leaving Chandler disoriented. She’d been certain she should be mad at him. Now she had to start over, reevaluate her emotions. “Um ... thank you for the flowers. They’re very pretty.”

“I’m glad you liked them.” There was a pause, awkward. Chandler heard Val draw a breath, then a thin buzz of static over the phone line. What had happened to the ease they’d found with each other? A few days ago, such a painful silence would have been unthinkable. More than anything, she wished she could touch him, feel the warmth of his blood beneath his skin, and look into his face, read what lay there. But she couldn’t, and she didn’t know how long it would be before she could again.

And that, she knew, was the root of the problem.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” he finally said. “I feel responsible. Belinda was a mess, and I didn’t realize it until after I stopped seeing her. I never dreamed anything like this was coming.”

Chandler smoothed her hand along the arm of the couch. She still wasn’t sure she believed this story. “Did she really ... care about you so much that she felt she had to try to sabotage our relationship?”

Another pause. Val was obviously giving serious thought to his answers, at least. “I don’t think so. She’s young, barely out of college, and the way she looks, she’s probably never had a man tell her no before, about anything. If I had to guess, I’d say she did it more out of spite than love.”

Though she knew Val’s words were meant to placate her, Chandler found they had the opposite effect. If she’d been in the same room with him, she probably would have slapped him.

“If she’s so young and pretty, why don’t you just go ahead and amuse yourself with her, then, and let me get on with my life?” She snapped it, and when she had finished, she was

embarrassed at her own temper. She swallowed, on the verge of an apology, then swallowed that, too.

Val responded with another silence, this one strangled.

"Chandler," he finally sputtered, "that's not what I meant, and I think you know it."

"How can I know? You're a thousand miles away ..." She trailed off, gulping tears. "I wish ..."

Val's voice was gentler now, and its deep music stirred up primal reactions in Chandler's heart. "What do you wish?"

"I wish we weren't so far apart."

Silence fell again. This time, Chandler felt herself drifting away from him, as if the silence on the phone line encompassed the whole of the distance between them.

"Look." Val ventured. "Belinda and I weren't serious. We'd only been out a few times."

Chandler found herself waving him off even though she couldn't see him. "It's all right. I was seeing someone, too." Chandler paused, wondering just how much she should say. "I broke up with him right after we met that first time."

"I'm sorry," Val said.

"Why? Gifford wasn't right for me. We would have fizzled out eventually, anyway."

Another pause, this one filled with something that made Chandler's skin prickle.

"And who *is* right for you, Chandler?"

Chandler closed her eyes and took a long, slow breath. "I don't know. For a while I thought it was you."

"And why wouldn't it be? Why can't it be?"

Chandler chewed her lower lip. She'd wondered what exactly she was going to say to him -- now she was going to find out. "Because you're there and I'm here. I don't think I can deal with it."

“Can we try?” Val sounded hurt, but like he was trying to hide it. “See how it goes?”

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you what. I’m taking some time off to go see my folks. I’ll give it some thought then -- serious thought, when I don’t have to be worrying about work or anything else. And then we’ll see.”

“But don’t your folks live in Illinois? They’re only a few hours from me. We could see each other.”

“I don’t know, Val. I’ll think about it. I’ll give you a call.”

She could hear defeat in his voice as he pulled out the last weapon in his arsenal. “All right, Chandler. But remember one thing -- I love you.”

Chandler blinked quickly and the new-sprung tears retreated. “I’ll call you,” she said firmly, and hung up the phone.

## Chapter Eleven

Val had no desire to go to work the next morning. In fact, he had little desire to do anything at all, except maybe fly to New Jersey, where he could grab Chandler and shake some sense into her.

At work, he leaned against the back wall of the elevator, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. He hadn't slept well. His eyes were gritty and he felt like someone had run him through an old-fashioned laundry wringer. He'd known Belinda's little prank would be difficult to pick up after, but he'd never imagined anything like this. Chandler seemed ready to give up everything just because their relationship presented some challenges. Well, he wasn't ready to quit. Every relationship held challenges. If Chandler was determined to be one of them, Val would have to just, well -- overcome her.

In his office, Val threw his briefcase down on his chair. Steve, engrossed in something on his terminal, glanced up.

"Problems?" he asked.

"You could say that."

Steve looked back at his computer. "You busy for lunch?"

"No. Why?"

“I want to talk to you about Belinda.”

Val blinked, taken aback. “What about?”

Steve didn’t look up. “I’ll tell you at lunch.”

An interesting development, to say the least. Val managed to keep his curiosity under control until lunchtime.

“So what’s up?” Val asked as they slid into a booth at their usual diner.

“I’m seeing Belinda,” Steve said bluntly.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m seeing Belinda. I walked her around town the other day after she talked with you, and something clicked. She’s psychotic, but I think I like that in a woman.”

“So why are you telling me?”

“I just thought you should know.”

Val leaned back as the waitress deposited his food on the table. “Do you know what she did to me?”

Steve cocked an eyebrow. “No.”

“She hacked into my account and sent Chandler a message telling her I didn’t want to see her anymore. Now Chandler thinks we should break things off because it’s too hard to have a long-distance relationship.”

Steve chewed thoughtfully on his roast beef sandwich. “If it helps any, I think she’s over you.”

“That doesn’t help very much.” Val had ordered a turkey club, and the lettuce kept falling out of the bun. He poked it back in with his fork.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“I’m not sure. I sent Chandler flowers and tried to talk to her, but she didn’t seem to want to listen.”

“Well, that’s women for you.” Steve pointed a french fry at Val, stabbing the air with it to emphasize his point. “You should drop her, Val. She’s right. Long distance relationships are way too hard to hold together. You should just get out before it gets too serious.”

“Too late,” Val muttered. The words were partially muffled as he took a bite from his sandwich, but Steve apparently heard them, anyway.

“Then, my friend, you have my utmost sympathy.” He paused, then added, “Because, frankly, I’m beginning to understand how you feel.”

Val couldn’t answer. His mouth was full, for starters, but he was also too shocked. He could harass Steve about this development, but he decided just to let it drop. With luck, maybe Steve and Belinda would both find something they’d been looking for.

They ate in silence for a while. Val’s brain hummed, and by the time he’d finished his sandwich, he had hatched a plan.

When he was through with Chandler, she wouldn’t know what had hit her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting in a window seat just ahead of the wing of a 727, Chandler felt like she could use a nap. It had been a long week, her unsettled emotions making it hard to sleep. The man next to her had already donned headphones and closed his eyes. Chandler debated following his example -- she’d brought a Walkman and a stack of tapes. She didn’t feel like relaxing, though. She was tense and her stomach fluttered, as if she were nervous about flying. She looked out the window, took a few deep, slow breaths, and thought about nothing.

Completely without her permission, “nothing” changed to Val.

In less than three hours, she would be in Illinois. How much would it cost to fly from O’Hare to St. Louis? If she showed up unexpectedly in Missouri, would Val come get her at the airport?

Chandler closed her eyes, her mouth tightening in irritation at herself. She was going to Illinois, not Missouri. She was going to see her parents and her sister, not Val. Val was out of her life, by her own choice. She would never see him again. It was better that way.

She opened her eyes again, staring at the tarmac. It had started to rain. Who was she kidding? Val would never be out of her life, not as long as he sat there at the back of her heart, mocking her pragmatism, daring her to love him. She thought about his crystal-blue eyes and his big hands on her body. Outside, the tarmac darkened under the rain. Chandler squeezed her eyes shut tight and swallowed tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler's mother met her at the airport. As usual, Maria was perky and smiling. Chandler loved her mom, but all that perkiness could get on a person's nerves.

"Hi, sweetie," said Maria, putting her arm around Chandler's waist and giving her a peck on the cheek. "How was the flight?"

"It was fine."

"Do you need to get any luggage?"

"No. I just brought the one bag. So what's on the agenda?"

"I don't really know. I think your sister said something about taking the kids to Six Flags."

"Really?" Chandler liked amusement parks, particularly the roller coasters. She and Gifford had gone to Great Adventure in New Jersey last year, but he hadn't shared her enthusiasm for the experience. Chandler was sure she wouldn't have that problem with her niece and nephew. At seven and nine, they would undoubtedly be willing to accompany her on the coasters.

It was nearly a two-hour drive from O'Hare to the Carlisle home in Urbana. Chandler's mother taught at the university, while her father worked for a local software company. They

chatted about local news, campus events, and scandals. Chandler was just beginning to relax when Maria said, "So, how's Val?"

Chandler's moment of silence was enough to turn both her parents' heads toward her. Chandler fidgeted in the back seat. Her father looked back out the front window first, which was fortunate since he was driving.

"What's wrong?" Maria prodded gently.

"I think we broke up," Chandler said. She knew she should have told her mother over the phone -- it would have been easier than sitting here under this scrutiny of motherly concern. "I, um ... I haven't talked to him in a while."

"My goodness, Chandler. Why didn't you say anything before?"

"I don't know. I guess ... I guess I just wasn't ready to talk about it."

"You didn't say anything was wrong. I thought you liked him. I thought there were sparks."

"There were sparks all over the place. It seemed like things were going really well. Then -- something happened, and it just all feels too hard." Chandler stopped, realizing how stupid it all sounded. "He's so far away ..."

"I'm sorry, hon." Maria sounded far too perky, as usual. "I hope things get better soon."

"I'm sure they will, Mom."

Chandler steered the conversation back to less personal matters, and by the time they got home, she was comfortable that the subject had been dropped.

Chandler's sister's minivan was waiting in her parents' driveway when they arrived. Chandler was greeted at the door by her overenthusiastic niece and nephew. She hadn't seen them in nearly a year. They'd changed quite a bit.

"Goodness, Melanie!" Chandler caught her niece by the shoulders and held her at arm's length. "You're getting so tall!" She really was; last time Chandler had seen her, she'd still been pudgy and a little babyish. In the past year, she'd shot up at least three inches and

appeared to be on the verge of a gangly adolescence. “And you, Brian. Are you in second grade this year?”

Brian backed out of his aunt’s embrace, puffing himself up with pride. “Yes. And I can read the fourth graders’ books.”

“My goodness.” Chandler didn’t have to manufacture her amazement. Every time she saw Melanie and Brian, she wondered if someone had kidnapped her relatives and replaced them with more mature impostors. The kids just grew so fast, and the snapshots Charlotte popped in the mail from time to time just didn’t do them justice.

Charlotte herself emerged then, from the kitchen, drying her hands on a dishtowel.

“I put together some lunch,” she said. “Just cold cuts -- nothing fancy. Come on in and help yourself.”

Chandler put an arm around her sister as she passed. “You look great, Charlie. How’s Bill?”

“Busy as usual. He’s going fishing tomorrow with his dad, so we decided to take the weekend off, too. That way he can enjoy himself and not have to worry about deserting us.”

Chandler eyed the plate of cold cuts Charlotte had assembled on the kitchen counter. The ham looked inviting. She put a slice of wheat bread on a plate and began serious sandwich construction.

“I hear the kids want to hit Six Flags,” she said.

“Yes yes yes!” Brian and Melanie chimed in. “Aunt Chandler,” Melanie continued, “will you ride the Screaming Eagle with me?”

Chandler froze, a knife full of mustard poised over her bread. “The Screaming Eagle? But that’s at Six Flags Over Mid-America. I thought we were going to the Six Flags up by Chicago.”

“No way,” said Brian. “We went there last time.”

Chandler felt a little patter of panic growing around her heart, becoming a strong flutter. “But isn’t there a Batman roller coaster or something?”

Brian looked at her, clearly of the opinion that she was about as intelligent as a fencepost. “Ye-es,” he said, “and we rode it last time. *This* time we’re going to ride the Screaming Eagle.”

Chandler shook her head a little and finished applying mustard to her sandwich. *It doesn’t matter*, she told herself. *You’re just being silly*. But she would have felt a great deal better if Six Flags Over Mid-America didn’t just happen to be in St. Louis, Missouri.

\* \* \* \* \*

After lunch, the kids began to bemoan the absence of their computer, their Nintendo 64, and the hundred or so games they could have been playing if they were at home. Chandler, hoping Maria hadn’t completely rearranged the house since her last visit, headed for what used to be her room, upstairs in the split-level house. Sure enough, there was still a stack of board games in the closet. She brought the Monopoly game down and set it up on the kitchen table while the kids watched as if she were performing some sort of arcane ritual. Once they got started, the kids got into it right away and were soon taunting each other when they landed on each other’s high-rent properties. Chandler stayed out of the arguments, kept track of the bank, and moved her little metal top hat around the board.

They stayed amused until dinner time, then afterwards decided to abandon the game in favor of television. Charlotte sent them to bed at nine. Chandler, who had been letting her mind drift while she paid little to no attention to the TV, found herself again the center of attention. She also found herself yawning in a particularly unflattering manner.

“Thanks for keeping the kids amused,” Charlotte said.

“No problem.” Chandler stifled another yawn. “I haven’t seen them in a while. It was fun.”

"I hope you don't mind us dragging you off to Six Flags tomorrow. I mean, if you're tired, I'll understand if you want to stay home."

"Oh, no. I haven't been on a roller coaster in ages. I wouldn't miss it. What time are we leaving?"

"About five. We like to get there when the park opens."

Chandler nodded. "Well, I guess I'd better be getting to bed, then."

"Yes, you look like you could use some rest," Maria put in. "Your room's made up for you. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks, Mom." Chandler stood and stretched a little, turning toward her sister. Her back was still stiff from sitting in the plane, and she felt wrung out, as if all the emotion and tension of the last couple of months had suddenly fallen on her head. "It's been a long day," she said to Charlotte, "and frankly, the last month or so hasn't been the best time of my life."

*Some of it was, though.* That little voice again, the one that wouldn't shut up no matter how many times she told it to. Too tired even to protest, Chandler turned toward the stairs. "I'll see you guys in the morning."

The bed was warm and cozy, if a bit small. The smell of the clean sheets and the mumble of her mother's voice downstairs sent her back in time, to days when she had lain in this bed reading books under the covers by the light of a penlight. Life had been so much simpler then. It hadn't seemed so at the time, but it certainly did now. She snuggled into her pillow and let herself fall asleep.

Thunder woke her. It was a distant, rolling thunder that sounded like it could go on forever. The kind of thunder she hadn't heard since she'd moved to New Jersey. Her mind drifted back again, to nights when she had lain awake for hours listening to the thunder roll across the prairie. She'd always wondered who else might be listening, and if maybe, somewhere, the man she would marry was lying awake listening to the same deep, profound echo of rolling thunder. Now, she wondered what Val was doing, if perhaps there were

thunder in Missouri, as well, and if he might be in bed, awake, thinking of her. And she wished, fruitlessly she told herself, that she could lie next to him again, with his hand in hers, and share the precious isolation of the darkness. Tears pricked her eyes as she drifted back to sleep.

## Chapter Twelve

At five the next morning, Chandler and Charlotte herded the kids into the car. Whenever it came time to get the pair organized, they seemed to clone themselves. At least once -- maybe twice. By the time they were all in the back seat of the car, though, they had reduced their number again to two. As they started down the road, a brief scuffle broke out in the back seat.

“Knock it off,” said Charlotte, “or we’re going home right now.”

Silence fell, and reigned for the rest of the trip.

Against the backdrop of behaving children, Chandler found herself involved in a serious conversation with her sister for the first time in ages.

“When you met Bill,” Chandler said, “how did you know he was the right one?”

Charlotte snorted. “I didn’t. In fact, I didn’t like him very much at all when I first met him.”

“Really?” Chandler was surprised. Charlotte and her husband had known each other for a long time before they had married, and Chandler had always assumed they had felt the call of destiny right away.

“Well, I *was* only ten at the time,” Charlotte admitted. “I wasn’t keen on anything male back then.”

This also caught Chandler off guard. “Jeez, you’ve known him that long? I didn’t realize.”

Charlotte shrugged. “Well, it’s different for everybody. Mom and Dad only knew each other a couple of months. Grandma and Grandpa were pen pals for two years before they ever met.”

“I’d forgotten about that.” Chandler lapsed, thoughtful. Being pen pals wasn’t much different from conversing on-line. So why did it seem so romantic to fall in love by letter and so brash and foolhardy to fall in love via e-mail?

“What’s wrong?” Charlotte asked after a moment.

Chandler shook her head. “Nothing. Nothing really. It’s just --” She stopped. She had told herself she was going to put Val completely out of her mind, that she would accept the fact that their relationship was impossible and move on. But that little voice kept piping up, and now it was telling her that she’d thrown in the towel too soon. And that she was a coward.

“I met a guy a while ago,” she said finally. “We started talking on-line, and then we met in person. It was ...” She glanced into the back seat. The kids didn’t seem to be paying attention, but Chandler decided to err on the side of caution. “It was pretty intense.”

“Yeah, mom told me about Val. What happened to split you guys up?”

“I got e-mail from him telling me he wanted to break up. Only it wasn’t from him. His ex-girlfriend hacked into his system and sent the message.”

“So now you’re back together and everything’s fine?”

“No.” Chandler felt the unwelcome prick of tears. “No. I told him it was too difficult to try to maintain a relationship over that distance.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitched. Chandler wondered what exactly she found so amusing.

“What are you afraid of, sis?”

Chandler clenched her teeth, feeling any number of defense mechanisms click into place. “I’m not --” she started to protest, then stopped. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m afraid of.”

Charlotte was silent for a time, eyes on the road. They were only about a half-hour from their destination.

“When you fall in love,” she finally said, carefully, as if considering each word, “it can be so intense that it just knocks you silly. It’s a very scary feeling. You have no control over it -- it just sweeps you away. So, sometimes, you do whatever you can to regain control, even if it means backing away completely.” She gave Chandler a sidelong glance through blue eyes that seemed, to Chandler, suddenly wise beyond their years. “And that’s the worst thing you can do, because if you back away, you may never be able to find that feeling again.”

Chandler considered. Was that what she was doing? She honestly didn’t know. Everything had just gotten too confusing. Maybe it was best that she’d backed off a bit, to get her bearings.

Or maybe she had stubbornly thrown away her best chance for happiness.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were lines at the park already, even though it was early, but not long ones. Chandler stood holding Melanie’s hand. Brian, who fancied himself too mature and manly to submit to such motherly nonsense, stood a bit ahead of the others, trying to look aloof. The line moved fairly quickly, and soon they were inside the park.

“I’m going to the Screaming Eagle,” Brian announced.

“No!” Melanie protested. “I want to get cotton candy!”

Charlotte calmly perused the map of the park. “First we’re going to get something to drink.”

Brian immediately put on a sullen look. Chandler didn't approve of his methods, but she understood how he felt; the lines for the big coaster could get long if they left it for too late in the day.

"I can take Brian to the coaster," Chandler offered. "Then when I get back, I can have my share of the cotton candy."

Charlotte gave her sister a look that left no room for argument. "I said we're going to get something to drink. It was a long ride, and I'm thirsty."

Chandler knew when to shut up, so she did. Charlotte located the closest fast food area, and they all headed that way.

Chandler sat with the kids at a table while Charlotte bought drinks. It seemed a little strange. She'd assumed they'd head for a coaster or check the times for the marine show. But apparently they weren't the only ones who'd opted to grab a drink before heading into the park. Three boys, about the same age as Brian and Melanie, sat at another table, squabbling over what ride they were going to visit first. The adult with them had his back to Chandler and was trying to restore some order to the discussion.

Charlotte returned then with a tray full of soda cups. She passed them out.

"Now," she said. "I'm going to enjoy a leisurely drink before I turn things over to you kids."

"Aw, Mom!" Brian protested. "How long is it going to take?"

"That depends on how much you complain about it."

Brian closed his mouth, fiddled with his straw, then apparently decided to make the best of it and took a few sips of his pop. Chandler sucked at her own straw, still watching the boys at the other table. They had quieted a bit, and another man had come to their table with drinks. Dad and a friend, then, maybe giving Mom a well-deserved day off. Or maybe one of the men was an uncle.

The man who had been sitting at the table stood as his companion arrived. As he reached out to take two drinks from the tray, he turned so Chandler could see the side of his face. She swallowed hard to keep from choking on her Diet Coke.

It was Val.

"Ohmigod," she murmured. She stared, then quickly averted her eyes, afraid he might see her.

"What's wrong?" Charlotte asked.

"It's him."

"Who him?"

"It's Val. The guy I was telling you about. The guy I just broke up with."

Charlotte's eyes lit up with interest. "Where?"

"Behind you. Don't look!" she added sharply as Charlotte swung around to do just that.

"Ooooh, he's nice. Why don't you go say hi?"

"Are you nuts?" Chandler hissed in an exaggerated stage whisper. "Haven't you been listening? We just broke up."

"You broke up via e-mail. That doesn't count."

"Well, actually, it was on the phone --"

"Still doesn't count. If you have a shred of decency, you'll march over there and break up with him face-to-face."

Chandler eyed her sister, part angry and part frantic. And as she glanced up again at Val, another part filled with elation. He was here, she was here. She could look into his face and talk to him, reach out and touch him. How could she have ever let him go?

Before she quite knew what she was doing, Chandler came to her feet. Val was bent over his table, talking earnestly to one of the boys. As Chandler took a step forward, Val looked up, laughing, and he saw her.

Chandler went perfectly still. The laugh slid from Val's lips, his face going blank. Something lurked in his eyes, though. Chandler couldn't quite read it, but it sent a soft shiver down her back. Gathering herself, she took another step toward him.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," said Val. He sat very still, waiting. Chandler was suddenly aware of all the people looking at her. She felt blood rush into her face. "I ... I, uh, I saw you over here and I figure it would be rude not to come over and say hi."

Val smiled a little. "I'm glad you did." He looked at the boys. "This is Randy, Scott, and David. Oh, and my brother, Lincoln."

Chandler smiled, still exceedingly uncomfortable. They all looked related, all with faces that didn't seem to quite fit together right, all with St. Louis Cardinals emblems emblazoned somewhere on their clothing. Lincoln, older than Val by at least five years, probably more, had a shock of gray in his hair.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "I'm Chandler."

Lincoln nodded pleasantly, with a brief, sidelong glance at his brother. Chandler turned to point at her sister. "That's my sister Charlie and her kids, Melanie and Brian." She paused, considering. "Would you ... like to join us?"

Val shrugged, looking at Lincoln. "Sure, why not?" said Lincoln. And the entire Kinsey contingent rose and went to join the Carlisle table.

The kids hit it off immediately. The two younger boys launched into conversation with Brian, arguing the relative merits of various video game systems. The older boy, Randy, approached Melanie. This surprised Chandler; she had guessed him to be of the age when most boys thought all girls had cooties. Then again, she knew from experience that the Kinsey men could be consummate charmers when they wanted to be. She caught Lincoln smiling at his oldest son and judged by the expression that Randy was acting a little out of character.

“So,” said Val, settling down at the table next to Charlotte. “What brought you all the way out here?”

“The kids went to Gurney last time,” Charlotte said, “and it’s really not that far. Besides --” She paused to take a drink of her Coke, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “-- I *love* the Screaming Eagle.”

They finished their drinks and started off down the main trail to find some rides. The kids surged ahead eagerly, stopping at the nearest directory kiosk to find their bearings. Chandler tried to stay close to Charlotte, but Charlotte, for whatever reason, kept drifting toward Val.

“You know, I’m really glad the weather turned out to be so nice,” Charlotte said. Chandler gave her a sidelong look, perturbed that she could make small talk in this potentially volatile situation. “There’s nothing more disappointing than planning a nice day out with the kids and then having it rain or something.”

“Or something,” Chandler muttered. Something like having the guy you just broke up with show up for no apparent reason. She couldn’t figure out what to do with herself. Even walking she felt self-conscious, like her hands and feet had suddenly quadrupled in size.

“You like coasters, Chandler?”

Chandler jumped. That was Val’s voice. The rich velvet of it made her prickle all over. It was totally unfair that he should have that effect on her, especially when she was trying so hard to pretend he didn’t.

“Yes, I like coasters. Very much.” At least that was what she thought she said. She was so flustered she wasn’t even sure her mouth had moved, and she could barely hear her own voice over her heart slamming in her chest.

“Good. So do I.”

Chandler dared a glance at Val and found him smiling at her, gently, with that look in his eyes that turned her to water. This was just not working.

And Charlotte wasn't helping a bit. Chandler looked ahead to see her sister and the kids several yards ahead, Lincoln and his kids with them.

"We'd better catch up," she said to Val.

"All right. Let's go."

Before she quite realized what was happening, he caught her hand and started forward at a lope, pulling her after him. His hand closed perfectly around hers, as if they were two puzzle pieces cut to mesh together. Suddenly she remembered what it had been like to make love to him, and she found it difficult to see straight, much less walk. Val slowed down and she careened into him. The shock of the sudden full-body contact left her breathless. For a moment, she thought she might rip his clothes off and have her way with him right in the middle of the sidewalk.

Val stopped and turned toward her, taking her shoulders in his hands. "You all right?"

She nodded, unable to form words. He started to step away from her, then stopped, looking into her face, his eyes gone suddenly hazy behind the lenses of his glasses. Chandler recognized the tension of desire in the subtle changes in his face -- the slight narrowing of his eyes, the set of his mouth.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he said, his voice low and husky.

Chandler swallowed. Her mind was full of images of bare skin and sweat. "I think so, Val," she said. "But where are we going to find a hot fudge brownie sundae in the middle of an amusement park?"

A slow, wide smile invaded Val's face. "Let's ditch the grownups," he said.

"Shouldn't we at least tell them where we're going?" Chandler looked around for her sister, but saw no sign of either her or Lincoln. Or the five kids, for that matter. Val followed her gaze.

"Hm," he said. "Too late. Looks like *they* ditched *us*." He turned back to her, his hands sliding down her arms until both her palms rested against his. "Let's go ride a roller coaster."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandler had never dreamed standing in line for a roller coaster could be fun until she did it with Val. He kept edging up behind her, surreptitiously cupping her buttocks as they stood so close together no one could see where his hands were going. Then he would move back, slip a hand into her back jeans pocket, then move close again and slide his hands into her front pockets. It became almost a game, to see how close they could get without doing anything to offend their fellow line-standers. By the time they reached the front of the line, Chandler was wondering if it was possible to make out in a roller coaster.

It wasn't, of course, but the game continued as Val laid his hand on Chandler's thigh. He caressed her leg, brushing his fingers up and down just below the seam, until Chandler was ready to scream with the torment of it. Then the coaster rumbled beneath them, and they were off.

*It's like sex*, Chandler thought, as the coaster rode slowly up to a peak, then plummeted down again, only to climb to another peak, then another, and finally, gradually, work its way to the highest peak of all. The last descent was the most powerful, and afterwards was only the slow roll until the coaster found its way home.

Chandler let Val help her out of the little car. She was tired, wrung out, as if she had just been through a powerful emotional experience. Perhaps she had. She had fallen in love again.

They rode a few smaller coasters, then went to one of the fast-food places for a drink and a snack. Chandler sat studying Val's face as they sipped Cokes and nibbled at a funnel cake.

"You planned this, didn't you?" she said finally.

He looked up at her, over the tops of his glasses, pure innocence in his crystal-blue eyes. "Why would you say that?"

Chandler pulled off a chunk of funnel cake and poked it into the powdered sugar in the paper plate. "What are the odds of the two of us being in St. Louis, at Six Flags, on the same day, and both deciding to stop for a Coke before we headed to the park."

Val chewed thoughtfully, looking amused. "Think about what you're saying, Chandler. I would have had to go through either your mother or your sister, neither of whom has ever met me. As far as I know, they've never even heard my name. What possible reason would they have to trust me?"

Chandler had to admit it sounded pretty unlikely. She turned back to her snack, looking a little sheepish. "Well, you *can* be pretty charming when you want to be."

Val grinned, his face lighting slowly. Chandler had the distinct impression he thought he was forgiven. "Nobody could be *that* charming," he said. The grin reached his eyes. Sapphire light danced behind his glasses. "Not even me."

Chandler sipped at her Coke to hide the smile she couldn't quite quell. "So all this," she said when she had control again, "was just a big coincidence."

Val leaned over the table toward her, light of a different sort in his eyes. A slower, more sultry sort that made Chandler's breath hitch a little. "It can be anything you want it to be," he said, his voice full of husky velvet promise.

Chandler bent her head to her drink again, this time to hide a blush.

"What do you want it to be?" Val went on, leaning even closer. She could smell him suddenly -- his hair, his citrusy deodorant. The smell brought back too many images, mostly of him naked and sweat-slick, and of what they had been to each other, if only for a short time.

Suddenly it seemed she could see every small detail around her, down to the sunlit dust in the air between them. She met Val's gaze, letting his eyes hold her and take her in.

"A new beginning," she said, so quietly she was barely sure she said it at all.

Val slid his hand across the table to her, palm up, his fingers curled lightly over air. *He holds my heart*, Chandler found herself thinking, and reached her own hand out to close over Val's. His hand was warm and firm, his eyes and smile gentle.

"I love you," he whispered.

Chandler felt tears. She smiled. "I love you, too."

## Chapter Thirteen

They spent the rest of the day riding the rides and watching the shows. Val won a stuffed tiger in the carnival section of the park by knocking stacked cans over with a tennis ball.

“For you,” he said, handing Chandler the toy almost shyly. She took it, smiling. How could she have even thought about letting him go? Here next to him, the misunderstanding, the distance didn’t matter. It might be hard, but they could work through it. They had to. Because if they didn’t, Chandler didn’t know what she would do without the piece of her that was Val Kinsey.

“His name’s Tannenbaum,” she said. The tiger had a round, smiling face and blue plastic eyes. “In keeping with the holiday theme, of course.”

Val nodded dubious approval, then grinned. “Tanny the Tiger. I like it.”

Chandler shook her head, groaning. Val laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “Let’s get some cotton candy.”

She repressed a strange urge to giggle as Val bought a stickful of pink froth from the vendor. Val pulled off a hunk and held it out, raising his eyebrows. Obediently, she opened her mouth and he stuffed the candy in. She caught his finger with her tongue as he drew

back, and he arrested the motion, holding quite still as she retrieved the melted sugar. His eyes narrowed a little, and Chandler could sense the slight stiffening in his body. Her grin changed to a sultry smile as she let him go.

They walked for a time, sharing the candy in silence. Twilight had crept in around them, mostly unnoticed. Now Chandler noticed the light-lined arcs of the coasters above the darkening silhouette of the park.

“One more,” she said. “One more coaster in the dark.”

Val gave her the look of a completely willing partner in crime. He caught her sticky pink fingers in his and started off at a trot for the nearest roller coaster.

The lines had diminished, but still it was nearly full dark before they slid into their seats. Attendants had closed the lines a few yards behind them, so this would be one of the last rides of the night. Chandler clenched Val’s hand in hers and drank in his shadowed face. She wasn’t certain why it was so important that she look at him just then, that she memorize the shape of his eyes and the line his neck made, plunging into his collar. His smile faded as she looked at him, and he leaned over to kiss her, gently, then firmly, not quite sliding into passion. Then they were off, rushing through the darkness with only lines of light to lead their way.

The tearing speed of the coaster took Chandler’s breath from her, flinging her into the blackness. She felt as though she were connected to nothing but Val’s hand. The lights rushed past her, and as they scaled the hills, she could see more light spread out all around her on the ground, as if stars had fallen to the earth.

It was over in a matter of minutes, but it seemed like an eternity, and when Val had helped her from the car, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly, unmindful of the other passengers or the ride operator who smiled at them. Val was a little breathless when she backed away. He claimed her with an arm around her and guided her down the steps to the sidewalk.

“How would you like to see my apartment?” he said, so quietly Chandler wasn’t certain she’d heard him. She shook her head.

“We can’t just leave. We should probably go to the front gate. If Lincoln and Charlotte are looking for us, that’s probably where they’ll go.”

Val steered her out of the traffic to a bench under a tree. She sat, and he sat down next to her. “They already left,” he said.

“What do you mean they already left?” Something strange was going on. Val looked nervous, guarded. “And if they did, how would you know?”

“Well ...” He stopped and took both her hands in his, looking down at them as they lay in her lap. “I wasn’t entirely honest with you before.”

Chandler felt chilled suddenly. She blamed it on the night breeze, but she knew it was fear at what he might be about to say. “What do you mean?”

He peered up at her, his mouth set oddly, almost grinning. But it was a guilty grin. “I did set all this up.”

Chandler blinked. “What?”

“I set all this up. I arranged for your sister to come today, and I convinced Lincoln to come, and we agreed to meet at the place where we had pop this morning, so I could hook up with you. I told Lincoln that if it didn’t work out, I’d meet him at the fried chicken place at noon, but that if he didn’t see me then, he should just go on about his business and go home whenever he wanted to.”

“You ...” Chandler didn’t know whether to laugh or smack him. “Then how do we get home?”

“I drove my own car.”

Chandler sank back on the bench, shaking her head. “How did you pull this off? How did you convince Charlotte?”

“Well, I had a little help from Andrea.”

“Andrea?” She pulled her hands free from Val’s and crossed her arms indignantly.  
“When I get back, I’m going to kill her.”

Val sat back, as well, obviously uncomfortable. “As long as you don’t want to kill me.”

Chandler reached across the small distance between them and grabbed a handful of his hair. “I have other plans for you, you double-crossing little liar.” But there was laughter in her voice, and when she had finished admonishing him, she kissed him, hard, then let him go.

“You’re not mad?”

“No.” She smiled gently. “How could I be mad? You went to an awful lot of trouble.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t know what else to do. You were being so stubborn and ...”

“Stupid,” she supplied, since he apparently was too much of a gentleman to be so blunt.

“Well, yeah.”

“I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

“I think I can be persuaded.”

“Then let’s go back to your place and see about some persuasion.”

\* \* \* \* \*

His apartment was neat and tidy, Chandler managed to notice as he dragged her through it. He had his mouth on hers, and his hands were undoing her blouse almost before he got the door closed behind them and the light on. He half-dragged, half-chased her into the bedroom, and before she made it to the bed, he picked her up and threw her onto it. Laughing, he followed her. As he fell, she caught the waistband of his jeans and managed to pull the snap loose. At the same time, he loosened the final button on her blouse and slid it off her. His hands cupped her breasts through the satin of her bra, and all laughter stilled as his mouth closed on sleek cloth and the hard nipple beneath.

She fell still beneath him as he slid the narrow bra straps down her arms. His hands molded gently to her shoulders; then his mouth came down on her throat, kissing her in a soft, wet line from behind her ear to her collarbone. Only when he unfastened her bra, baring her breasts to him, did she turn her attention to his clothes again. She wanted his shirt off. She wanted his rough hair against her breasts. She wanted to feel the heat of his skin.

With his cooperation, the shirt was off in moments. His jeans followed suit. His hands moved to her jeans, ready to divest her of them, but she pressed herself hard against him. The gymnastics involved in the clothing removal had brought them to a kneeling position on the bed. With her face against his throat, she slid her hands down his bare back until her fingers rested just inside the waistband of his briefs.

“Are we better prepared this time?” she asked.

“In the top drawer of the nightstand,” he said. “I made sure I had them, just in case.”

Chandler leaned back a little to look at him, an expression of mock disapproval on her face. “So sure you were going to get lucky, huh?”

“Just hopeful,” he said. “And very much in love.”

“That kind of mushy talk will get you nowhere.” She was lying and she knew it. She’d never heard a man say he loved her. Not like this. Not in that tone of voice that laid his soul open. Chandler leaned back a little more, so he could finish with her jeans, then scooted back along the bed until she could reach the nightstand. Foil packet safely tucked under a pillow, she returned to him and peeled his briefs down, cupping him in her hands. He hung soft against her palms, the softness cushioned by hair. His shaft stood up against his belly, prettily arched and longer than she remembered. She slid her fingers up it, feeling the velvet and the hardness.

“So pretty,” she said. “It seems a shame to cover it up.” And then she lowered herself to the mattress and took him into her mouth.

He moaned as her tongue explored his shapes and textures, his hands weaving into her hair. She'd never done anything like this before. It didn't matter, though, because with Val everything was right. Her mother would have told her she barely knew the man, but that wasn't true. Most of the memories they shared were words marching across a computer screen, but she still knew him. Knew him better than she'd ever known Gifford, or any other man she'd shared a portion of her life with. And she loved him.

He backed away from her and she looked up to see his face clenched in tight control. She let him go and straightened.

"I want you," he said, his voice low and rough with need.

"Then take me," she said.

He bore her back to the bed, pinning her beneath his chest. She opened beneath him; she needed no more preamble, except to make a quick grab under the pillow.

"I love you," he whispered against her ear. She slid her hands between them, to sheathe him quickly before he sheathed himself, driving deep inside her.

They moved at the same time, in the same urgent but controlled rhythm, and for a moment, she felt as if they were a single being, joined at the soul. His hand between them urged her to fire in a matter of moments, she was so ready for him. Her body leaving her control, leaving her soul suspended somewhere in the musky space between their chests, she pulsed hard on the length of his shaft. He bucked once against her, reaching his climax just as hers tapered off. He was silent a moment, arched above her, his eyes closed. Then he opened his eyes, shifted his weight, and cupped her face in his hand.

"I love you," he repeated. "Please don't close me out again."

Chandler shook her head, tears pricking her eyes, for what she had just found, and for what she had nearly lost.

"Never again," she said. "Never again."

He lowered himself down beside her and took her in his arms. Wrapped in the warmth and the smell of him, she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Light crept across the bed and touched Chandler's face, waking her. The blankets next to her were chilly. Val no longer lay beside her.

Chandler sat up to see him sitting on the bed next to her, the early light limning his bare back. She reached out to touch him, tracing the groove of his spine.

"Good morning," she said.

He turned a little toward her, peering over his shoulder. He hadn't put on his glasses, and his eyes looked a little vague without them. He hadn't put on his clothes, either. Chandler tried to keep her eyes from exploring him, but the temptation was too great.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said gently.

"You didn't. I don't think you did, anyway."

He turned all the way around in the bed and stretched out naked next to her. Now her eyes stubbornly refused to stay decently on his face. Her hands weren't much better. She tried sitting on them, but they ended up tangling in his chest hair, anyway. There was a strange look on his face, though, and the discomfort in it took the energy out of her caress.

"What's wrong, Val?"

He closed a hand over hers, cradling it against his chest. "You were right."

She shook her head a little, trying to dislodge his words from reality. "Right about what?"

"About this long distance thing. It's too hard. I don't want you a thousand miles away. I want you here, with me. If you can't be with me, then there's no real point."

Chandler swallowed a lump of cold fear. "What are you saying, Val?"

He looked down at their joined hands on his chest, his grip tightening a little. "I'm saying," he said, slow and quiet, "that I've come to a decision."

Chandler almost jerked her hands away, but found she couldn't. She was riveted to every sensation of him: the waft of his smell, the subtle, spongy tickle of his hair beneath her palms and between her fingers. She didn't want to let go. "What decision is that?" She could barely force the words out.

He was silent a moment, then looked into her face. His eyes seemed darker somehow, pure sapphire instead of a paler crystal. His mouth was set in a firm line, and his voice held the same decisiveness as he said, "I want you to marry me."

Chandler's breath came out of her in a gasp. That wasn't what she had expected him to say.

"What?"

"I want you to marry me. Then one of us could transfer."

"One of us could transfer, anyway."

Val shrugged, a grin beginning to play around his mouth. "True, but it would be easier if we were getting married. They'd be less likely to deny it."

For a moment, Chandler thought she was angry, then realized she had no idea how she felt. "That's a lousy reason to get married -- so your transfer will get accepted --" She left the sentence hanging in midair, as if she had more to say. But she didn't. Words had failed her.

Val sat up in the bed next to her, taking her shoulders in his arms. "Then don't marry me. I'll just move to New Jersey and hope they approve the transfer. If they don't, there are plenty of jobs to be had out there."

Chandler shook her head. "No, no, that makes no sense. My family's out here, yours is out here -- it would be much more reasonable for me to move out here --" She stopped again. What was she saying? What had he said, just a minute ago? "You want to get married?"

He nodded soberly. "Yes. Very much."

“Isn’t it a little ... soon?”

“No.”

She just looked at him, at such a loss even her hands didn’t know what to do. It occurred to her that it had been in the back of her mind last night, but she hadn’t dared let herself consider it a real possibility. Now a blossom of fear bloomed in her heart, followed quickly by sheer joy.

“So that’s it?” she said, trying to hold the smile off her face. “Just, ‘I want you to marry me?’ And I’m supposed to do what? Fall at your feet?”

The twinkle that rose in his eyes told her she’d been completely unsuccessful in her attempt to chastise him. He pushed himself off the bed and, still buck naked, went to his knees on the floor by the bed. He reached up to take her hand in his.

“Chandler Carlisle,” he said, quite serious but still twinkling, “I love you. I don’t want to live without you anymore. Will you marry me?”

Chandler smiled down at him. He should have looked ludicrous but, instead, he was elegant in his nudity, wearing it with all the grace he might exhibit in a tuxedo. And within his incongruous dignity, he was beautiful, and desirable. She could think of nothing she could ever want more.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I will.”

He squeezed her hand, and Chandler thought she saw him blink back tears. She leaned forward to kiss his forehead and the blankets fell away from her breasts. She wasn’t exactly well-dressed, herself.

“So what’s for breakfast?” she said.

Val looked straight at her breasts, his eyes caressing her so that she could almost feel their touch. “I want those.”

Chandler laughed. “Not very filling, but you’re welcome to them.”

They were a long time getting out of bed, and when they finally settled down for a real breakfast, Chandler noticed it was nearly ten a.m. in New Jersey.

“Can I use your phone?” she asked Val. “I’ll put it on my calling card.”

Val nodded over his plate of pancakes. “It’s okay. Don’t bother. Just call.”

“Thanks,” Chandler said, but put it on her calling card, anyway. No point taking advantage of him. Not this way, anyway.

Andrea answered her phone after three rings.

“Good morning, Andrea,” Chandler said.

“Chandler!” Andrea was obviously surprised. “You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“I *am* on vacation. I’m in St. Louis. And you’d better mark your calendar so you know when I’m coming back, ’cause when I get there, I’m going to kill you.”

Andrea laughed. “Consider it marked.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Chandler reiterated, “and then I’m going to ask you to be my maid of honor.”

The choked silence on the other end of the line was all the reward Chandler could ask for.

 THE END 

## Katriena Knights

Katriena Knights began writing at the age of three and a half. Her early works include "Ode to a Pancake" and a 70-page novel about a blind horse who wins the Kentucky Derby. She has since become the award-winning author of several paranormal romances, including *The Haunting of Rory Campbell* from ImaJinn Books. Other books include *Time and Time Again* and *The Vampire Apocalypse* novella series, all available from ImaJinn, and *Dealing With David*, a best-selling short contemporary published by Hard Shell Word Factory.

Katriena now lives in the mountains of Colorado, where she writes from her living room while watching elk eat from the bird feeder. In her "spare" time she likes to read, watch TV, catch up on movies and play sword-and-sorcery computer games. She's a die-hard *X-Files* fan and knows more about Pokémon than anyone over the age of ten should ever know.

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\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*68 & Climbing*

by Kate Douglas

Available Now from Loose Id

## 68 & Climbing

“Think what you like.” She ground her teeth with the effort to remain calm. “I’m only asking for a little neighborly decency until you complete your renovation and get out of my neighborhood.”

“I thought I already showed you neighborly.” Nick’s voice dropped in husky familiarity and he grinned again, a seductive smile promising pleasures Annmarie could only imagine.

Unfortunately, since this morning her imagination had suddenly become quite graphic.

Her mouth went dry with the sensual images flooding through her mind. Once more she felt his long fingers stroking her intimately, shuddered with the pressure of his lips against her straining nipple.

Blinking herself rapidly back to reality, she attempted to swallow. Her throat tightened.

“I told you,” she said, suddenly aware of how difficult it was to speak calmly through clenched teeth, “I do not want to discuss your concept of *neighborly*. I want -- ”

“Look, sweetheart.” Hands on his hips, Nick leaned over, invading her space and intimidating her with his size. “Enough is enough.”

Annmarie fought an elemental urge to turn and run.

“We both know you’re no Mother Superior protecting her novices’ virtue. This morning’s little escapade is proof of that. Face it, the work we do is hot,” he paused for an effect not lost on Annmarie, “and physical. When the temperature goes up, the shirts are gonna come off. It’s the way we work. My boys will continue to take their shirts off when they damn well feel like it, just as I will. They will enjoy the company of your young ladies, who are all past the age of consent from what I understand, as long as both parties are in agreement and the girls are on their own time.

“If you can’t control your employees’ libidos, or your own for that matter, that’s your problem, not mine. As far as getting out of your neighborhood, forget it. After I put in my bid on the job, I decided I liked the neighborhood, so I bought the building. As soon as the job is completed, I’m moving my business and myself into it. As far as what you want... I think we both know. You want the same thing I do. You’re just not woman enough to admit it.”

*Oh God, I do... I... dammit!* Just thinking about some of those things turned her legs to rubber. “Mr. Marone... .”

Now was not a time to show him any weakness whatsoever.

Annmarie took a deep breath and stepped back, carefully placed her matching pocketbook on the desk and nonchalantly settled her hip against the solid ebony corner, revealing a sleek length of silk-clad thigh in her subtle search for support. She fought the urge to tug her hem lower.

Instead, in a show of defiance, she lifted herself up to sit on the corner of the desk. Then she let her gaze travel slowly from his Italian leather shoes, up the long line of his legs, across his broad chest, to a point just below his very Italian chin.

If she actually saw his mouth, or looked into his cobalt-blue eyes, she knew she’d be lost.

She decided to address his chin. “Mr. Marone,” she repeated, sighing with all the patience of a third-grade teacher. “I believe your massive ego must act as a counterbalance to your shameless audacity. It’s the only logical explanation.”

Despite her best intentions, Annmarie realized her gaze had drifted higher and she was looking at his mouth, at the soft curve of his full lower lip. She swallowed and blinked rapidly when he spoke.

“Some things defy logic, Ms. Weston. The attraction between us is one of them.” He crossed his massive arms over his broad chest and gifted her with a most condescending smile.

She thought once more of a wolf. A very hungry wolf.

Then she dragged her gaze away from his mouth and concentrated once more on the firm line of his jaw.

“There is... ” She cleared her throat and lowered her voice. “There is no attraction.”  
*Yeah, right. Liar, liar, pants on fire... dammit, Jean. Get out of my head!*

This was neither the time nor the place for Jean’s childish taunts. For some reason, Annmarie couldn’t get the stupid rhyme out of her head. “I told you once. I will tell you again. I did not come to your office this morning because, as you so crudely put it, I wanted you. Nor did I come here for that reason tonight.”

“I don’t agree, Ms. Weston.” He dropped his hands to his sides and stepped closer. “You might think you had another reason, but...”

“Whether you agree or not, Mr. Marone, is not the problem.” The problem was the fact that even his chin was sexy. Annmarie licked her lips and concentrated on the crisp white collar of his shirt where it met his darkly tanned throat. Oh, how she wanted to taste that smooth stretch of skin!

*Control, Annmarie. Control.*

“But it is, Ms. Weston. The signs are perfectly clear; your body language is quite... revealing.” He paused again, as if giving her time to disagree. All she could do was bite her lips against the husky invitation in his voice. “One, you choose to sit where you can tantalize me with your unbelievably long legs...”

Annmarie struggled not to tuck her legs up under her.

“Two, you’ve seriously avoided looking me in the eye.”

Defiantly, she raised her chin and glared directly into his hooded eyes. Once again, the naked desire in their deep blue depths stunned her.

Stunned her and took her breath away.

She didn't even protest when Nick gently captured her arms in his powerful hands and lifted her from the desk. She parted her lips to say something, anything, and breathed in the taste of him.

"Three..." he whispered. His mouth settled over hers, molding lip to lip, tongue to teeth in a searing kiss that shut down the circuits and ran her entire nervous system into overload.

He tasted different tonight, of brandy and toothpaste combined with his own unique, subtly familiar flavor. His tongue stroked the tender inner flesh between her teeth and lips, then dove deeper, teasing the sensitive ridges across the roof of her mouth.

She spread her hands across his broad chest to push him away, but her contrary fingers curled into kitten claws, kneading the cool starched surface of his shirt in time with the soft mewling he drew from her.

The sound, emanating from deep in her throat, finally dragged Annmarie to her senses. That and her gradual awareness of strong fingers gripping the tender flesh of her buttocks, stroking her tingling skin through her panty hose.

"No-o-o-o..." She gasped for air and pushed against his chest. Her overloaded synapses protested the separation. What they really wanted was for her to plaster her body against his and give into the desire raging through her.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## 68 & Climbing

*68 & Climbing* is an awesome read, full of humor and blood-sizzling erotic love scenes. Ms. Douglas pens a truly delightful romantic read. *68 & Climbing* is a fast-paced story that I read in one sitting, and it made me sigh with enjoyment until the very last page.

-- Joy, *Sizzling Romances*

This is spicy erotica backed by a plot line which develops quite naturally. Not only is the story crafted well, completely in Annmarie's point of view, but it is also hot. Hot is an understatement, in fact. You might want to read this poolside so you can jump in the water and cool off. Or else behind closed doors so you won't be interrupted.

-- Maitresse, *Romantic Interludes*

*68 & Climbing* is a sensual romantic story that will pull at your heartstrings. The dialogue between Annmarie and Nick is to die for; there are sexual sparks flying everywhere making this story truly exciting... The sexy love scenes are some of the hottest scenes that I've read and it will captivate you and keep you with the story every step of the way. Pick up this steamy book - you won't be disappointed.

-- Susan Holly, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*