

Call Me

Book II

Boy Toy

By

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Dedication

Thank you my friends and critique partners, Lena, Lucynda and Toria. Without your strong words of encouragement and knocks on the head when needed, I couldn't have done it.

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Chapter One

“Mrs. Marks. Mrs. Marks, are you okay?” Scarlett heard the concerned voice calling her name, and tried to focus on the face above hers.

“Mrs. Marks, I’m really sorry to break the news to you.” Artie Smith never thought of himself as a violent man, but as he looked at the soft-spoken woman lying on the floor, if his partner Jacob Rawley were here now he’d probably shoot him.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Smith. I’ve never fainted before, but it was a bit of a shock when you told me my money’s gone and I’m broke.” Scarlett, with the help of Artie Smith had managed to make it back into the chair she’d fallen out of when she received the news.

Artie’s lips twisted in what would have passed for a smile under other circumstances. “Believe me, Mrs. Marks, I almost fainted when I found out Jacob had disappeared, along with the money from several clients’ accounts. At least you didn’t take a swing at me like the gentleman I broke the news to earlier did.” Artie rubbed his chin where the man’s fist had connected. “You’ll be able to recoup some of the money through the insurance our firm carries, but it will take awhile, I’m afraid.”

On the bus ride home, Scarlett pondered her situation. She still couldn’t believe her income was gone. She’d been assured by Jacob Rawley there would be enough revenue to live more than comfortably the rest of her life. Now he had taken off with her money, along with that of numerous other clients. Her financial manager had become a financial destroyer.

When she arrived home she made a cup of hot tea and sat down to do some serious thinking. Making notes on a yellow legal pad as she drank her tea, Scarlett sat back and sighed. Thank goodness the house was paid for. All she needed to cover were the annual taxes and insurance, and of course maintenance.

Then there was also health insurance, gas, utilities, phone, and oh yeah—that little thing called food. Granted she could afford to lose weight, but she wasn’t too excited at the thought of doing it through starvation.

Fortunately, she never splurged the money she set aside for foolishness, the trip she dreamed of taking some day. Now she would use it to live on until she could find a job.

A job? Now that presented another problem. She didn’t think there would be much demand for a homemaker who had only completed one semester of college and never worked outside the home.

Though Scarlett had no real interest in college, her mother insisted she had to go. “After all Sugar, you’ll never meet the right man if you don’t.” Her mother was of the generation that believed college was where a woman found the man to give her the coveted MRS degree.

She found it strange Mama named her after the strong heroine in *Gone with the Wind*, but insisted her little Scarlett act more like Melanie, the sweet, proper Southern woman, instead of the willful, determined heroine. Naturally, being conditioned to do so, the Melanie in her capitulated to Mama’s wishes.

She succeeded in obtaining the MRS, even though the man was ten years older, and divorced. Her mother wasn’t thrilled about that part, but she was impressed with the fact that Joe was an ‘up and comer’ in the Atlanta banking world. The thing neither of them realized at the time, things weren’t exactly as they appeared to be. Joe could talk a good game, but he was no ‘go getter’. A transfer to Morgan City as a small town bank manger would be as good as it got.

After their marriage, Joe insisted, “Stay home and take care of me and the house. No need for you to go back to college.” To be honest, she’d enjoyed being a homemaker, and playing step-mom to Joe’s son Aaron when he came for summer visits. After all that was what she’d been trained for all her life.

There was the time in her mid-thirties when she considered going back to school, but Joe had been against it. “I don’t want to come home to no dinner, and then have a corporate bitch to deal with when she finally does get home to make dinner. I get enough of corporate bitches at the office.”

So as usual, she gave in to Joe as she had on ever major decision that concerned her life. After all, she did promise until death do us part. When he died suddenly three years ago, she had grieved. He was the only life she knew. Then she discovered alone wasn’t so bad. She didn’t have to answer to anyone when she wanted to do, or not do something. Yes, Scarlett had become very comfortable with quality reading time, and puttering around in her garden.

“Well my friend, things change. You may be fat and over fifty, but you have to find a job.

Scarlett rubbed her aching feet after kicking off the four-inch heels she had bought for interviews. She thought if she gave the illusion of being taller, maybe the person on the other side of the desk wouldn’t see the weight, and would overlook the mousey brown, salt and pepper hair. Besides, she loved the tiger stripes on the shoes.

Oh well, the only thing she had accomplished in her week of job searching was blisters on her heels, and the thought of trying standup comedy. After all, she was getting a lot of laughs from people when they looked at her application. Even her efforts through employment agencies had only produced a couple of, "If anything turns up that you're qualified for, we'll call you." Yeah, that would be a cold day in hell.

"Joe, Joe. Why did I let you direct my life for me?" She asked the picture on the end table at her elbow. "Let's face it, Joe; we didn't have the most exciting marriage in town. Your idea of sexy lingerie was a flannel nightgown, and a romantic evening was you on the couch with your feet in my lap. To you foreplay was a can of beer in your hand, with some sports program blasting on television. Definitely not the way the articles in Oprah magazine describe it."

A job would be a good thing right now. After all, her most stimulating conversations these days were with the picture of a dead man or herself.

Maybe the time had come for her to live up to her name and find her inner Scarlett.

Sighing, she turned back to the want ads. Same old stuff, she thought, as she went down the list of ads. *Wait a minute. This is something new.*

Wanted: Mature, open-minded woman to answer phones and do light office work. If you think you are this individual, call and ask to speak to Dulcie.

Scarlett turned to Joe's picture again. "I think fifty-three is mature, don't you? And I can be so open-minded it will blow Dulcie's socks off, whoever she is. This is definitely me."

"Hi ya, Dulcie. You look wrung out today." Finn Yates greeted the familiar face as she slid onto a barstool. "The usual?"

"Hi yourself handsome and yeah. Make that a double."

Finn placed a large coffee in front of Dulcie and four cream containers instead of the usual two. "Bad day?"

"Ahhh." Dulcie exclaimed as she poured in the creamer before taking a large swig of the coffee. "You've no idea how lucky you are just showing up for work and not having to worry about staffing and all the other crap that goes with owning a business."

"Have I hit the nail on the head, Hank?" Dulcie directed her question to the man sitting at the far end of the bar nursing a beer.

“On the head, Dulcie. Girls giving you trouble?” Hank moved off his bar stool and took a seat on one closer to her.

“Naw. At least not the phone girls. What’s driving me crazy is trying to find someone to cover the office.” For the tenth time that morning she mentally kicked Denise for getting married and moving out of state. Granted, it was her own fault. Teach her to play Cupid. All it ever did was lose her good help. “Since Denise left, I’ve hired these pretty young things and they either don’t show up, or think they’re being paid to talk to their friends. On top of that, they usually fuck something up related to business like getting a girl’s charges posted wrong. They can’t seem to understand, you don’t mess with people’s money.”

Dulcie sighed as she poured two more containers of cream into the cup Finn had refilled. “I don’t have to have eye candy out front in my business, and you’d think I’d learn not to get taken in by a sweet, pretty face. So help me, if I ever find someone to replace this last disaster, she’s gonna be so ugly she’d curdle milk, and have some common sense to boot.”

“Well, why don’t you consider hiring someone older if the young ones are giving you such grief?” Finn asked as he set another beer in front of Hank.

Dulcie and Hank laughed, as if sharing a joke. “Honey, if I want old, all I have to do is look in the mirror. I’ve always had a weakness for surrounding myself with pretty things and that includes the girl I have to look at every time I walk into the office. Denise might not have been twenty but she was still pretty. Guess it’s time to face reality and focus more on brains than beauty.”

Dulcie paused for a minute, thinking. “In fact, I’d better drag this luscious behind back over to the office. Got an interview set up in ten minutes, if she shows up.” Dulcie slid her well-proportioned rump off the barstool. “See you guys later, and Hank, since you own this place, don’t you think you should spend a little more time here instead of letting pretty boy have the run of it?” She grinned and waved as she exited through the door.

“You never told her, did you?” Finn fixed his intense blue eyes on the man sitting across from him.

“Didn’t see the need to. Fewer people who know, fewer questions I gotta answer,” Hank Robbins responded.

Finn nodded. “But you and Dulcie’ve know each other since she opened Call Me. That’s a lot of years you two’ve been friends. She’s not your average customer Hank. You once said she was your only real friend.”

“That was before you became my friend, and partner Finn. Hank’s Place wouldn’t even be open now if you hadn’t stepped in when I got sick. This cancer treatment kicked my ass, and I couldn’t have kept the place open, money wise or staffing wise, if you hadn’t come along. Besides, I’m on the mend now. Dulcie has enough on her plate juggling her stable full of phone sex operators, and staffing the office from the sounds of it.” Hank shot a tired smile at his friend.

“Go home. You need to rest. I got things covered here.” Finn pointed toward the door. “Don’t let it hit you in the ass on the way out.”

Finn stared at the door long after Hank had left. No, people didn’t know he was Hank’s silent partner. He’d developed the habit of dropping by Hank’s Place on his way home from the office. At the time he’d been a snot-nosed kid who owned his own company and faced all the stress that came with it. One evening he’d been the only customer, and as the talk became more personal, Hank had confided how tight things were. The bank had just turned him down for a loan, and closing the place might be his only option. Finn couldn’t bear the thought of losing the one place he felt relaxed, and proposed a deal. That had been ten years ago.

Since then Hank had become friend and father figure to a young man who had neither. Hank’s illness had come as a blow to both of them.

Finn had stepped in and taken over managing the bar. After all, it wasn’t like he had another job to worry about. Selling his company had left him rich. In fact, very rich. He wondered what to do next. Fate had made that decision for him, and Finn Yates decided he liked bartending. Once Hank was back to health, Finn intended to stay on as bartender. Give Hank the chance to enjoy life a little. After all, it wasn’t like Finn had any one else in his life to give his attention to. He resumed wiping down the bar, and glanced up as a plump woman stood in the door blinking while her eyes adjusted to the low lighting.

“What can I get you?” Finn asked as he placed a coaster in front of her and smiled.

Chapter Two

Scarlett felt it in her bones. This would be her lucky day. No matter what this job entailed, it belonged to her.

“Mrs. Marks.” Scarlett turned to see Reverend Phelps approaching. Great. Her regular church attendance had slipped to occasional, and she was on the verge of that being pointed out to her.

“Good morning, Reverend. Lovely day isn’t it?” *At least it was before I ran into you.*

“Yes, yes. Wonderful day. Mrs. Marks, I’ve stopped by your house on several occasions but I’ve not been able to catch you at home.”

“I’m sorry to have missed you, but my job search has me out and about often.” Then again she didn’t have to deal with his slimy innuendos and attempts to touch her.

“We’ve missed you at church, Mrs. Marks. You know the devil’s work is idol hands, and we can keep you busy with all the projects we sponsor.”

The man has a smarmy smile Scarlett decided. “Thank you for being concerned about my relationship with the devil, Reverend, but it’s safe to say I’m busy with my efforts to find a job. Let’s say the devil and I aren’t on speaking terms right now, shall we? Now, I really must run. I have an interview and don’t want to miss my bus.” Scarlett hurried toward the bus stop and didn’t bother to look back when she heard Reverend Phelps call after her.

“I hope to see you in church on Sunday.”

God save her from nosey ministers who needed to clean up around their own doorstep. The man’s womanizing was a walking testament to “do as I say, not as I do,” and a hard bench at church would be the last place she’d be on Sunday.

Scarlett found the front office empty when she went arrived. She could hear someone in a one-sided conversation and decided they were on the phone. Good, this gave her the opportunity to take a look around. The office had better furnishings than a lot of the ones she’d been in recently. Still it didn’t tell her anything about the business.

Several tasteful nude photos positioned on one wall drew her attention. Interesting, she thought

when the realization sunk in that not all of the women were young, anorexic nymphs. They depicted women of all ages and sizes, unlike the pictures that stared out at you from the magazine stands. These women had character; and she liked to see women who came across as more than a pretty face.

A sound from the other room from which she'd heard the voice caused her to turn. The doorway filled with one of the most impressive women Scarlett had ever seen. The milk chocolate face radiated against the fabric of the yellow and brown African print that flowed around her tall frame and covered her head.

"You must be Scarlett." The woman smiled and approached with her hand out.

Scarlett felt her hand caught in the vise of the brown goddess who towered above her. When the woman released her hand, she fought the urge to check for broken bones.

"I'm Dulcie and I own this business. Let me get you an application and you can come on into my office when you get it filled out."

Scarlett watched as Dulcie rummaged through desk drawers for the elusive application form.

"Ahha, here it is," she grinned at Scarlett and waved the paper like a flag.

Scarlett made quick work of completing the questions. It didn't take forever to fill out her name and address. She stopped in the doorway and cleared her throat to get Dulcie's attention.

"That didn't take long." Dulcie held out her hand for the application and motioned for Scarlett to take a seat in one of the chairs across from her.

Seated, she watched Dulcie appraise the form. Scarlett fought the urge to squirm in her chair as the woman frowned. *Great, here we go again.* She crossed her ankles to keep the nervous jerk of her right leg under control and bit the inside of her cheek to stop the quiver of her lips. God, she hated interviews.

Dulcie laid the paper on the desk and her eyes locked on Scarlett. "Sugar, I see you haven't had much experience in the work world."

The woman had the stare of a cobra before it strikes. Scarlett tried to steady the four-inch heel that wobbled, even though she was seated. The impassive stare glued her to the chair as sweat pooled in her armpits. "No. I've always been a homemaker, but circumstances changed."

"Hmmm. I see. What makes you think you can do this job?"

Scarlett struggled with how much she needed to share here. It would help if she didn't feel pinned to the chair by 'The Stare.' Desperation topped the list of why she could do the job. "I need a job and I'm a fast learner."

Lord that was brilliant. Maybe I should add how well I think on my feet and what a great

conversationalist I am.

“Do you know what kind of business we run here?”

“I don’t think so.” Scarlett’s eyes darted around the office in an effort to pickup a clue on the type of business. The boss’s office offered no more information than the reception area. Sweat trickled down her sides.

“You ever hear of adult entertainment?” A big grin spread across Dulcie’s generous lips.

The phone rang before Scarlett could reply.

“Excuse me, Sugar. I gotta get this since I’m short handed.” Dulcie reached for the phone. “Call Me Agency, how can I make your dreams come true?”

Scarlett had never heard anyone answer a phone in this manner. She watched as Dulcie listened to the caller and made notes for a couple of minutes before she replied.

“Of course Sugar, we got just the girl who can do that for you. Let’s get the nasty payment business out of the way, and then we can get you on the road to pleasure.”

Fascinated Scarlett waited as Dulcie pulled a credit card form out of the top drawer of her desk and begin to fill in information.

“How many minutes do you want me to set you up for, Sugar? My, my. We do plan to talk awhile, don’t we?” She punched numbers into a credit card machine as she chatted. “Okay, Sugar, you’re all approved. Let me get you set with one of our loveliest girls. Hang on and the next voice you hear will be hers.”

Scarlett was unsure what type of transaction this conversation covered. Dulcie punched another phone line and entered numbers, winking at Scarlett while she waited.

“Be right with you in a minute. This won’t take long.”

“No problem.” Besides, Scarlett was in no hurry to get another rejection.

“Jill. How you doing girlfriend?” Dulcie laughed at whatever was said in her ear. “Got a live one for you. He wants to talk to his mistress. Seems he’s been a bad boy and needs to be punished. From the amount he had me run on his credit card, he needs a lot of punishment.”

Punishment? Why on earth would someone call for punishment? Scarlett puzzled in her mind.

“Okay, hang on. Here he is.” Dulcie pushed more buttons and listened for a few seconds, then set her receiver down gently.

“Did you get the drift of what we do here, Sugar?”

“Well, I—uh—um. I’m not exactly sure. From what I heard, it sounded like someone wanted to be punished? But, why would they call you? How can you punish them over the phone?”

Scarlett felt the blood rush to her face when Dulcie exploded with laughter. *Yep, she definitely needed to try stand up comedy since she provided so much humor in job interviews.*

“We don’t exactly punish them.” Dulcie told her. “You see, a gentleman calls in and tells what he wants to satisfy a fantasy. He’s then connected with one of our Fantasy Techs, that’s what our phone girls like to be called. Anyway, the lady will share his daydream and play along with him. She might even have ideas of her own that’ll make him happy.”

Scarlett nodded in agreement. She had no idea what Dulcie was talking about.

“In fact, some of our ladies are so good with playing games they get customers who keep calling and asking for them.”

“That’s nice.” Scarlett nodded again as she watched Dulcie frown.

“I don’t think I’m getting my point across here, so I’m gonna spell it out.” Dulcie sat up straighter. “Here’s the deal. Our particular style of adult entertainment is called phone sex. Men call in and want a woman to talk dirty to them.”

“Oh my goodness.” Scarlett knew she’d fall out of the chair if it didn’t have arms.

“The man can either tell her all the things he wants have done to him, or what he wants to do to the woman. Some ladies are so good at the game he calls back and asks for the same lady every time. When they want get their rocks off...” Dulcie paused and seemed to be gathering her thoughts.

Scarlett still wasn’t clear on what the woman meant. “I’m sure you’ll think me ignorant, but I’m not familiar with that term.”

She watched Dulcie shake her head as if bewildered, and then continue. “You see, the man is on the other end stimulating himself. Jerking off, or to put it in nicer terms, he’s masturbating.”

“Oh.” Scarlett got the big picture. *Okay, reality time here. This involves sex but you need a job. This woman hasn’t kicked you out yet, even if you are the dumbest person she’s probably ever seen. Be gutsy for once in your life.*

“Anyway, does that give you an idea of what goes on around here?”

“Got it. Understand now. I honestly don’t know if I’d do too well as a Fantasy Tech, but your ad mentioned office work.”

“That’s right. I need someone to post the girl’s hours, run errands to the bank and post office, or whatever and field business calls when I’m not around. I got several other interests which take up my time, too.”

Scarlett stood up. “When do I start?”

She caught a surprised look flash across Dulcie’s face and felt proud of herself. Her heart

skipped a beat when the woman across the desk hesitated.

“Look, Dulcie I really need this job. I’d shovel manure along as it produced a paycheck.” Scarlett knew she sounded desperate.

“Okay.” Dulcie stood up and looked down at Scarlett’s feet and a smile played across her mouth. “How ‘bout I show you around the office and give you a run down on where things go.”

Oh my god! She had a job. She resisted the impulse to hug the large woman in front of her. Instead she followed her into the reception area.

Two hours later Scarlett had a severe case of information overload and writer’s cramp from the notes she’d taken. She flexed her hand and saw Dulcie look over.

“Well, I think we’ve covered enough for today. One area you need to think seriously about is education on the business. I got all kinds of books and magazines you can read.”

Scarlett bet these would be the magazines found in the adult section of magazine stands, where she’d never considered peeking.

“They’ll familiarize you with terms and words, so when you train for back-up dispatcher you’ll know what the caller wants and where to send the call to.” Dulcie grinned as she handed Scarlett a book. “Don’t want to offend your genteel sensibilities too much to right off. We’ll start you off slow and easy, and this one fits in your purse.”

Scarlett took the book and read the title, *Tropic of Cancer*. Good heavens. She’d read this. How could she have forgotten so much of what Henry Miller described?

“Thank you,” she returned Dulcie’s grin and slipped the book into her bag.

Outside in the sunshine, Scarlett leaned against the building and filled her lungs with fresh air. A quick glance at her watch told her she’d missed the bus and had over an hour before the next one.

The memory of her meeting with Reverend Phelps flashed into her mind. His reaction to Scarlett’s new job and her fall into wickedness should give him lots of fodder for his ‘*hell, fire and brimstone*’ sermon this Sunday. Too bad she wouldn’t be there to appreciate it. Oh well, as long as he lambasted her, someone else had peace.

A quick scan of the street didn’t turn up a coffee house, but across the street the neon ‘open’ sign on Hank’s Tavern beckoned to her. Forget the coffee. A glass of wine better met her needs right now.

Dulcie watched her new employee wobble across the street on those ridiculous shoes.

“Damn heels are too high. She don’t even know how to walk in ‘em”

The shoes pushed Dulcie to hire the prim little wren. The Church Lady suit probably said more about the woman who wore it. That and the salt n’ pepper hair slicked back in a tight bun. Then there were the too high heels with tiger stripes and a big rhinestone. That little touch of independence showed spunk.

Lord, it took everything in her not to roll on the floor laughing at the expressions that had danced across Scarlett’s porcelain face during the interview. At one point it looked like her eyes would pop right out. But you had to admit, the woman had courage. After all Scarlett heard, she still wanted the job. You had to admire that kind of gumption.

“Well Dulcie, my girl. You either got yourself a diamond in the rough or you’re a damned fool.”

Which ever, it should prove to be interesting as she watched Church Lady take on Sex World.

Chapter Three

Finn watched as the woman's eyes adjusted to the dim light, before she made her way to the bar. Setting a napkin in front of her he asked, "What's your pleasure?"

"A glass of white wine, please," she replied in a prim voice.

Placing the wine on the napkin, he noted how pale she looked. "Is it hot out?"

"No. I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"You look a little washed out. Thought maybe the heat had gotten to you." He smiled his most compassionate smile.

"Not the heat. My life."

Finn waited for her to continue, but she seemed lost in her thoughts. He moved down the bar and started restocking the beer cooler, occasionally glancing at the lone figure sitting at the other end.

"Another?"

"Excuse me, did you say something?"

The prim little voice again. It made Finn want to laugh. He pointed to the empty glass in front of her, "I asked if you want another." She looked down as if surprised to find the glass empty.

"Yes, please."

Finn took away the empty and replaced it with a full glass of wine. "Want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"Whatever it is that seems to be bothering you."

"Oh. It's that obvious?" She seemed to hesitate. "You don't want to hear my problems."

He saw the warring emotions in her soft blue eyes. Nice eyes, he thought. Beautiful skin too. Bet she's not as old as the hair and clothes make her look.

"Hey, goes with the job." He winked. "You know, pour drinks and then listen to customers cry into them."

That earned him a smile. "What's your name?"

"Scarlett. Scarlett Marks."

"Well, Scarlett Marks, I'm Finn Yates. All shifts bartender and listener to the world's problems. At least the problems which enter through these doors." He smiled and got another in return.

“Okay, but you asked for it.” And she was off, telling him about her new job and her doubts about being able to do it.

Yeah, he could see where working for Call Me would be a stretch for this woman. He almost felt like offering her a job at the tavern, but decided to mind his own business. After all she was an adult, capable of making her own decisions. Far be it for him to stick his nose in. Besides, if she worked across the street she’d probably be in here occasionally, and he’d like to get to know her better without the complication of being her boss. She seemed interesting, and he’d always been more attracted to older women than those his own age. Yeah, he’d leave well enough alone.

Scarlett couldn’t believe she was having a drink in the middle of the afternoon. Good grief, she’d already started her slide into sin as her mother always said about people who weren’t living their lives the way Mama thought they should.

Reverend Phelps would have a field day in the pulpit if he found out about this, not to mention her new job.

Now, if she could just make a decision and stick to it, maybe her nerves would calm down. At least a half dozen times in the last thirty minutes, she thought she should walk back across the street and tell Dulcie she couldn’t take the job. Then she’d remember that finally someone had faith that she could actually learn a job instead of laughing her out of the office. That caused her to feel a certain amount of loyalty to Dulcie.

Did the bartender say something to her? “Excuse me. Did you say something? Another drink?” She glanced at her watch. Still a little time to kill before the bus came. Well why not?

He really seems like a nice guy. She wasn’t sure why he was concerned about her problems, but he kept probing and before she knew it she was telling him about her interview with Dulcie at Call Me.

“Sure I know Dulcie. Great lady. She’s been friends with Hank the owner for a long time.” He leaned against his side of the bar and seemed ready to listen to her tale of woe.

“I’m just not sure I’m cut out for this job.” Scarlett confided after the second glass of wine.

“I can see where you’d have doubts.”

He’s been very sweet and understanding, she thought. Watching him as he worked behind the bar, Scarlett couldn’t believe she’d been so caught up in her own problems that she’d almost missed this gorgeous work of art.

In her younger days, he was what she and her friends referred to as a hunk. Tanned and golden, he looked like a Greek god. The dark blonde hair barely brushed his ears; the front looked like it had been kissed by the sun. His eyes reminded her of the sapphire ring her grandmother had given her when she graduated from high school. She admired his muscles as they danced under his shirt when he lifted the cases of beer into the cooler. And his smile—his smile was past warm. It was hot enough to melt silver, but at the same time inviting.

When she caught herself wondering how that lean muscular body would look without clothes, she knew she'd had too much to drink. After all, she was going to be fifty-four in a couple of months and had no business lusting after a man probably young enough to be her son.

Her eyes darted to the clock above the bar, and the realization that the bus was due in five minutes spurred her into action. Pulling a twenty from her wallet she tossed it on the bar and raced for the door, yelling "Goodbye," over her shoulder.

She chastised herself as she ran to the bus stop. There was no way she could throw twenties at every young hunk who crossed her path. This job messed with her thinking and she hadn't even started. Sex was a dead issue for her.

Scarlett was amazed how quickly the next couple of months flew by. The office was her domain now, with everything arranged for easy access. Even Dulcie could find what she needed if Scarlett was at lunch.

Dulcie. Scarlett paused while she contemplated her boss. The woman was still an enigma. A very outgoing, giving person in most areas, but very tight-lipped about her personal life. Either way, Scarlett had come to think of her as a friend, not just her boss.

"Hey ya, Scarlett. How's it hanging?" She looked up as Jill Nelson came through the door. She liked Jill, and wasn't sure why since she felt like a Salvation Army reject compared to her. Jill's clothes and makeup were always perfect, and she loved the way the blonde hair bounced when Jill walked.

"Honey, the only thing hanging on me is my tits. And all I do is tie them in a knot and toss them over my shoulder."

Jill laughed. "Well, at least you have something to tie in knots. You could be like me, so flat-chested you have to turn your bra around so your shoulder blades can fill up the cups," Jill shot back.

"Okay, you got me on that one." Scarlett agreed.

“Is Dulcie around? She left me a message to stop by.” Jill looked toward the closed door of Dulcie’s office.

“Yeah, she’s been on the phone about an hour. The guy with the funny English accent made his weekly call. She always sequesters herself behind closed doors when she talks to him.” Scarlett had been curious at first, but once, when she had asked about him, Dulcie had given her a look and changed the subject. To Scarlett that spelled ‘none of your business’.

“Gotcha. I’ll hang around for a little while and see if she comes out. I have a class, so I can’t stay for long.”

Jill’s attention seemed to be focused on Scarlett, making her wonder what was going on in the young woman’s head. Just as she got ready to ask, the door to Dulcie’s office opened and out walked the grand lady, herself.

“Jill, glad you had a chance to stop by. Come on in, Sugar. We need to talk.”

“Right behind you,” raising her eyebrows and shrugging her shoulders to Scarlett, she followed Dulcie into her office, and the door closed again.

“Humm, wonder what’s going on?” Scarlett thought. She stood to get coffee and had to adjust her pants. She had to use the ice pick to punch another hole in the belt she’d put on this morning, and still her pants were close to falling off. She definitely needed to get a smaller belt. Walking the two miles to work every morning had caused her to lose weight.

“Scarlett, why didn’t you tell me it’s your birthday?” Jill said when she and Dulcie appeared in front of Scarlett’s desk.

“It’s just another day to me. No need to tell anybody.” Scarlett felt the blood rush to her face. She was ready to forget she turned fifty-four today, so why didn’t everyone else. Dulcie had greeted her with “Happy Birthday,” and presented her with a bouquet of flowers when she came in this morning. Her gesture was enough.

“Dulcie told me.”

“Figures. She does have a big mouth at times.” Scarlett frowned at her boss.

“I’m glad she told me. It helps solve a little problem I have. See, I have this spa package that’s a two for one. I wasn’t sure who to invite to go with me, but this solves the problem. You and I are going to do a spa day.”

“I’ve never been to a spa, and don’t have the time to start now.” As far as Scarlett was concerned the subject was closed.

Jill didn’t seem to see it that way. “Well, there’s a first time for everything. Never worked for a

phone sex agency before either, did you?"

"Look. I appreciate your offer, but I'm just not spa material."

"Don't know if you don't try it. We get the full works on this package. Facial, massage, hair, nails, and makeup. Heck, I may even get a leg wax. Don't worry about a thing. I've got it all arranged and I'll pick you up tomorrow. The spa opens at nine, and we're going to spend the day being pampered. After that, we'll go shopping. A new outfit for your birthday won't kill you. Especially since we have big plans tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow? I have to work tomorrow. Sorry, I can't go." That should take care of that issue Scarlett thought. "Nor, can I afford new clothes. And, I'm busy tomorrow night. I'm going to finish the novel I'm reading."

"Not a problem. I'll talk to Amber. Since Ken convinced her to take this semester off, what with the baby coming and all, she's bored crazy. I'm sure she'll fill in for you for a day." Jill smiled.

"Amber's due in a few days. You can't put pressure on her."

"All the pregnant women I've known would welcome the distraction." Dulcie was putting her two cents in. "Give her something to do besides think about how big she is."

"As for the outfit, that's my birthday present to you since the spa costs nothing. And your book will just have to wait." Jill seemed determined.

Jill held up her hand when Scarlett started to protest. "It's decided then. Be ready at eight-thirty. I'll see you tomorrow."

She was out the door before Scarlett could respond. Turning to Dulcie she growled, "You really were no help," and shot her best glare at the woman.

Dulcie grinned and walked back to her office, once again closing the door.

Chapter Four

Death, Scarlett thought as she walked bowlegged into the massage room so her thighs didn't press together. Jill was going to die when she got her hands on her. Friends did not subject friends to waxing. Pure and simple.

The leg wax was uncomfortable, but when the woman started spreading the warm goop in a region that Scarlett herself didn't touch often, well that was nothing short of embarrassing. Then when Corrie, yeah that was her name, proceeded to rip the hair out by the follicles it caused her to just about come off the table.

Adding a little insult to injury, as Corrie said ever so sweetly, "You know dear, you really should trim up the rest of this bush. A lot of men don't want to have to hunt through the jungle to get to the prize."

Well, Scarlett thought she'd die. She had an idea of the prize made reference to, and there was no way in hell any man was going to be hunting for it.

"You've got a lot knots in your shoulders," the massage therapist commented as she kneaded Scarlett's back. "Do you work in a high stress job?"

"No." Scarlett snapped. "The only stress I've had lately is the bikini-wax that masochist down the hall just subjected me to."

"Ahh."

Climbing off the table when the massage was over, Scarlett was certain she was going to puddle into a pile of goo right there on the floor. Amazingly enough her legs held her up long enough to get to the room where her facial was scheduled.

"You've got beautiful skin," Sally said as she applied cleanser to Scarlett's face. "In fact you've got better skin than some women fifteen or twenty years your junior."

Well, maybe she wouldn't kill Jill today. The facial continued the euphoric feeling the massage had started. With the exception of the waxing, it really was a wonderful day. Next she was to meet up with Jill while they both had pedicures and manicures. She could get use to this pampering.

"Now remember, André has free rein when he does my hair so I think you should let him do what he thinks is best for you." Jill said after making the introductions.

André took Scarlett's face in his hand and turned her head from side to side. "Yes, yes. I know what we do for you, Cherí. Rich, darling, we are going to make your hair rich."

Two hours later Scarlett was shown the final results. "Keep your hands over your eyes until I tell you when, Cherí," André said as he turned the chair. "Now, darling. Look at the new you."

"Holy shit. What have you done to my hair?"

"I made it rich darling."

"Rich my ass. This is red, and not much of it." Scarlett had expected it to be short, but this—this was punk. Red, short and spiky. She'd need a bag to go over her head before she could walk out the door.

"I love it. I love it." Jill had just returned from her latest treatment, clapped her hands and jumped up and down like a little kid.

"Are you nuts? Look at it. This looks like something you'd see on a teenager."

"You'll get use to it, Cherí, not to worry. Then you will appreciate the artist André is." The stylist looked very pleased with himself.

The first thing Scarlett did when they got to the mall was head for the scarves by the door of small boutique. If she tied one over her head, maybe it would be better than going through the mall looking like a fire engine. All she needed was a siren.

"Oh, for crying out loud, settle down." Jill grabbed the scarf out of her hands. "Your hair is not that red. It's auburn and a great color for you, too. Did you even look in the mirror after your makeup was applied?"

"No. I couldn't bear another change."

"Then we're going to the ladies room and you're going to take a real look at yourself." Jill grabbed Scarlett's arm and pulled her along.

Standing in front of the mirrors in the ladies' room, Scarlett had to admit things didn't look as bleak as they had at the spa. The addition of makeup drew some of her attention away from the short red hair. *I don't care what Jill says, it's red.* The earth tone eye makeup emphasized her eyes, causing them to appear larger and bluer. The lip-gloss gave a touch of shiny color to her normally pale lips, and her skin glowed with the touch of foundation and blush. Eyeing the makeup bag on the counter beside her, Scarlett hoped her future efforts could come close to this look, given the investment she'd just made.

"Okay, maybe I'll get use to it. Besides the hair will grow." Anyway, this was a Scarlett haircut, and her Melanie voice could shut up.

“I’ll be damned,” Dulcie stopped as she came out of her office and saw Jill and Scarlett.

“So what do you think of our little mouse now, Dulcie?” Jill wanted to know.

“This is not our Scarlett.”

Dulcie’s intensive scrutiny made Scarlett feel even more uncomfortable. She tried to pull the slit on her skirt together with one hand while with the other she worked on pulling up her top so her tits weren’t spilling over. *Damn Jill and her insistence on a push up bra.*

When Jill pulled her into *Victoria’s Secret* she hadn’t expected to come out with the wardrobe of sexy lingerie that currently lay on her bed at home. Neither did she think she’d go home with short skirts, low-cut tops, and dangly earrings.

Now here she stood in an outfit the old Scarlett wouldn’t have been caught dead wearing. *See where not going to church on Sundays gets you. Standing here with red hair, in a skirt slit high to the nether land and a top cut low enough to advertise your tits.*

“Girl, all I can say, is this is definitely an improvement.” Dulcie wore as big a shit-eating grin as Jill had when she’d first seen Scarlett’s haircut.

“Yep, this definitely calls for a celebration.” Dulcie herded them toward the door. “Some of the girls are over at Hank’s. Let’s go get a second opinion.”

“Wow,” was the most heard word of the day. Scarlett found herself enjoying the attention, and the look on Finn’s face almost made the bikini waxing worthwhile. Then again, he’d never know she’d had a bikini wax, and probably like everyone else—just surprised at the change in her appearance. Shock hit her every time she looked in the mirror. Hell, she almost didn’t recognize the face that looked back at her when she passed her reflection.

“Ladies, ladies. It’s time for us to get moving. We do have show reservations.” Jill was clapping her hands to get the attention of the gaggle of noisy women.

“Don’t want to be late. Did you get us front row seating?” Tonya, one of the Pleasure Techs asked.

This was greeted with more catcalls and yelling from the rowdy group, before everyone started heading for the door.

“You girls be careful,” Dulcie said.

“Why aren’t you coming D?” someone called out.

“Been there, seen that. Besides got other plans. Me and Hank are gonna go have dinner.” She

looked toward the tavern owner sitting at the end of the bar. “He looks like he could use a little fattening up.”

“Thanks, Dulcie.” Scarlett hugged the woman. “You and Jill have made this the best birthday ever.” Her eyes locked with Finn’s as she turned to leave. Too bad he’s so young. She’d had almost enough to drink to find out if his lips are as kissable as they look. *Almost, but not quite.* Sighing, she flashed Finn a smile before she turned and followed Jill.

Finn hadn’t been able to keep his eyes off Scarlett. The change was amazing, turning her from a pretty woman into a gorgeous one. It also seemed to affect her personality, bringing out a side he’d not seen before, the center of attention. She flirted outrageously with the men who had moved over to join the group.

When she left with her rowdy group of friends, she took her new energy with her, leaving the tavern feeling empty, and him as well.

“You’re gonna wear a hole in the bar.”

“Huh?” Finn looked up to see Dulcie staring at him.

“You been rubbing that same spot for about ten minutes. Not to mention ignoring some thirsty people sitting down there.” Dulcie indicated her head toward the end of the bar.

“When did they come in?” Finn moved down and squared away the drink orders. His glance around the rest of room brought several more refills.

“Our girl cleans up pretty good, don’t she?” Dulcie laughed when he returned.

“Yeah,” Finn felt himself blushing as he remembered his reaction when Scarlett walked in earlier. His body had responded instantly to the slit skirt and low cut top, causing him to shift his stance in hopes his erection wouldn’t be noticed by the customers sitting at the bar. He’d always prided himself on not focusing on a woman’s appearance, but the whole package. In this case, he knew a lot about the inside, and when the outside showed up gift wrapped the way it was, well, what was a guy to do?

“Hey, buddy, how about another round down here.”

Finn quickly moved to meet the request, glad to have the opportunity to get away from Dulcie for a moment. His treacherous body had become aroused just remembering Scarlett.

“Hank, our boy here seems to think Scarlett’s makeover is for the better.”

Dulcie had an evil twinkle in her eyes and Finn knew she would be putting the spurs to him all night if he didn't get her out the door. Damn woman was like a Pit Bull when she latched onto you in one of her playful moods.

"I thought you two were going out to dinner." Finn hoped Hank caught onto the look he gave him.

"Well, Dulcie, I think we're being given a hint here." Hank stood up.

"You need to eat anyways, from the look of you." Dulcie stood also. "What're you in the mood for? Me, I want some nice home cooking. I want to keep the meat on my bones, not turn into a skinny lamp post like you."

Finn watched as the two friends headed for the door. Hank definitely needed fattening up. The cancer battle had taken a lot out him, but now that the treatments were finished, maybe he would put on some weight. Dulcie was definitely the person to see that it was done.

Pushing back the plate of bones that remained from the fried chicken, Dulcie sighed in contentment. Looking across at Hank's plate she frowned.

"Don't know why you didn't eat the rest of your mashed potatoes. Or your collard greens? I know you like them."

"Haven't you been reading all the stuff coming out about eating wisely?" Hank countered.

Without giving Dulcie the chance to respond, he changed the subject on her. "What do you think is going on between Finn and your gal?"

"I don't think there's anything going on between them right now, but I think there sure is a lot of wishing there was from both of them."

"What's holding them back?"

Hank couldn't be serious. Just like a man not to understand why a woman would hesitate over a big age difference. "She thinks she's too old for him."

"That shouldn't make any difference. What's a few years age spread?"

"Listen Hank, it's that old culture thing. Nobody thinks twice about it when men chase after women young enough to be their daughters. Let a woman go for a man younger than her, well, you know the kind of gossiping and snickering that goes on behind her back.

"Hold on, you're preaching to the choir here." Hank held up his palms. "I can feel something

between these two, and I'm just sorry they don't give it a chance to see where it could go."

Dulcie thought for a minute before a big grin spread across her face. "Sometimes people have trouble breaking out of a preconceived notion. Maybe we need to help them out a little bit."

"I'll drink to that." Hank held up his water glass to toast Dulcie's idea.

Chapter Five

“Woo, woo, woo.”

A group of man-hungry, screaming women surrounded Scarlett, lusting for the men promised to them. Her birthday entertainment was an all male review, a troop of dancers in town for the weekend.

“Here, Scarlett, have a shooter.” A shot glass was shoved into her hand. She watched in amazement as Jill and Andrea threw back the shots, then licked the salt, and sucked on the lime in their other hand.

“Come on.” Both encouraged Scarlett to follow their example. “The more you drink, the better you’ll enjoy the show,” Jill shouted in her ear.

Screwing up her courage, Scarlett slugged back the shot of tequila, licked the salt someone had sprinkled across her hand, and sucked like mad on the lime. She understood why this was part of the process, as the tequila burned its way down to her stomach. This was definitely something Melanie wouldn’t do. Maybe she was morphing into her namesake’s persona.

Gasping for breath, she tried to decline when another glass was pressed into her hand, but gave into the cries of, “one more, one more,” from her friends. Amazing, the second shot went down smoother. She could even breathe without gasping.

“Ladies.” Everyone turned their attention to the announcer standing on stage. “Bringing you exactly what you’ve been waiting for...” at the announcer’s pause catcalls erupted from the roomful of women. Grinning, he pointed to the curtain behind him, and yelled, “Let’s hear a warm welcome for the ‘Grind and Bumps,’ coming to you all the way from New York City.”

The room exploded as the curtain raised and twelve dancers gyrated on stage. Security had to restrain one over-excited woman who rushed the dancers, pulling her to the back of the room in an attempt to calm her down.

Scarlett realized her mouth was hanging open, and quickly closed it.

“Isn’t this great?” Andrea shouted in her ear.

“Great.” Scarlett echoed. Only she wasn’t so sure. What was so great about watching a group of men, young enough to be her sons, bumping and grinding their way across the stage in what was supposed to pass for dancing? On top of that, Finn was better looking than most of them, and possibly a

little older. After seeing these babies, Finn seemed to fall more into the brother category. A much younger brother.

Around her women were standing, dancing, and waving dollar bills. Scarlett watched in amazement as the group twisted and slithered out to the waiting women, allowing them to stuff money into the only item of clothing they were now wearing—G-strings. They didn't seem to mind when a roaming hand copped a feel of their butt cheeks, trailed down their six-pack abs, or brushed against the thin barrier covering their manhood.

As this group slid off to return backstage the spotlight came on, featuring a lone figure in a business suit. His hands pulled the restraint holding his long hair back, and he tossed the mane like a wild stallion.

“Oh my god,” Jill gasped as he threw his tie into the audience and proceeded to unbutton his shirt. The pelvic thrusts accompanying each clothing item removed worked the women into a frenzy. Scarlett wouldn't have been surprised if some of them were foaming at the mouth.

“Can you believe this?” Jill had to put her mouth next to Scarlett's ear to be heard.

“No,” she screamed back, watching while the dancer stood in front of a table of women, letting them put their money into his G-string with their teeth.

He didn't appear to mind as women on either side of him began licking his back, starting at the shoulders and working their way down.

“Man that is so hot. I'm gonna get me some of that.” Andrea dashed across the room to get in on the action.

The crack of a whip got the attention of the room, everyone turning toward the stage again. Two masked men stood there, decked out in black leather vests, thongs, and motorcycle boots. Between them set a chair, and the women started screaming “me, me,” as the men studied the audience.

“Here, here, it's her birthday.” The women at Scarlett's table were frantically pointing to her. One of the men stepped forward and stopped in front of Scarlett, reaching out his hand for hers.

“What the—” Scarlett's question was cut off by the gang of insane women around her.

“Go. Go with him,” they shouted. She found herself being led up onto stage, and placed in the waiting chair. Things turned from embarrassing to scary when handcuffs were slipped over her wrists and she was handcuffed to the chair.

“Relax, we're not going to hurt you,” one of the masked men whispered in her ear. “Just relax and enjoy.”

How could she relax handcuffed to a chair in a roomful of screaming women, and a masked man

in leather on either side? The dancers started to slowly move, touching and teasing her. One stood behind, rubbing his body against the back of her neck and head.

The other knelt down and slipped her shoe off, taking her foot in his hand, and began a slow licking ascent up her leg. Her body felt on fire, and the room suffocating as sweat trickled between her breasts. Damn. What a time for a hot flash to kick in.

The man at her back had moved to her right hand. He started sucking on her fingers, slipping one slowly out of his mouth before drawing another in, inch by inch.

Footman was now above her knees, lapping his way up between her legs. She thought she would die when his face rested against her new lace panties. The thing was, she couldn't decide if it was from embarrassment or the new sensations raging through her body. Her panties were wet with what had to be sweat. Didn't it?

When Scarlett was first cuffed to the chair, the women in the club had become as frenzied as a school of piranha at feeding time. The fever pitch noise that she had found deafening then was now a muted roar, as the men continued to touch and tease, while they danced around her.

Suddenly it was over. The handcuffs were removed and one of the men escorted her back to her table, whispering in her ear, what a good sport she'd been. Still shaking, she gulped down the drink someone placed in her hands, not caring what it was.

"Finn, Finn, give us a drink." Finn looked up to see the group of women from 'Call Me' crowding around the bar. *Sounds like they've had a good night so far.*

"I think you ladies have had enough to drink."

"Not us. We're fine. Scarlett's the one who can't handle her liquor." Jill said as she twisted her rear and shoved Andrea off the edge of the bar stool she'd been trying to encroach on. Andrea hit the floor hard but didn't seem to notice.

"Can't handle her 'licker' either, I'll bet." Andrea giggled from the floor.

"Yeah, we had to take her home and pour her ass in bed. Man, she's gonna be so hung-over tomorrow she won't know what hit her." Andrea said as she pushed her way up from the floor.

"Maybe we shouldn't have introduced her to tequila shooters," Jill commented as she offered Andrea her hand.

"Scarlett was doing shooters?" Finn couldn't believe his ears, but before he could find out more

the natives became restless.

“Ahh, come on Finn, give us a drink,” someone further down the bar yelled out.

This started a chant from the rest, “drink, drink, Finn, give us a drink,” followed by hoots of laughter.

Just as he thought they were calming down, Andrea piped up again. “Say Finn. Is it true what I hear?”

“Well, I don’t know Andrea. What do you hear?”

“I hear guys as good looking as you, are lousy lays because you don’t have to work at it. So, is it true?”

“Maybe Scarlett can test him and let the rest of us know,” Cindy, who was usually the quiet one in the group yelled.

“Hey guys, back off.”

Jill seemed at least sober enough to realize things were getting out of control.

“Okay, ladies. It’s getting close to closing time. I’m going to give you all a round, and it’s on the house.”

Finn turned and walked to the coffee pot. What had been whops of laughter, turned to boos, when they saw him pouring coffee in the mugs he’d lined up along the back of the bar.

Setting a cup of the steaming black brew in front of each one of the women he said, “Drink up. It’s on the house.” This was met with lot of groans.

The women became so engrossed in reliving the night’s events they didn’t notice Finn as he kept refilling their mugs. He wouldn’t call it eaves dropping, but he couldn’t help over hearing their comments.

“Did you get a load of Tony Thunder Thighs?” One asked.

“Oh yeah baby, he can wrap those thighs around me anytime,” another chimed in.

Finn listened at they talked about their favorite dancers, and debated who got the best kiss, lick, or even bite when they stuffed money in G-strings with their teeth. Finn shook his head as he started the closing process, thinking these girls were definitely in the right profession. Then he heard Scarlett’s name.

“I thought she was going to die when those masked men pulled her on stage.”

“No, no. The dying part was when the one licked her leg. Did you see how red she got?”

“Bet she had an orgasm out of that one. I know I would’ve.”

Finn listened closer as the women replayed Scarlett’s experience. He imagined himself as the

one whose tongue slid up that long leg, whose head was between those creamy thighs, not some strange guy who did it for entertainment. The jolt of fury that ripped through him caught him off guard. All he wanted right now was for these women to get out and take their stories with them. He'd had enough details from their evening of debauchery.

Looking at the clock, he saw the end was now. "Okay ladies, finish up. Closing time."

Looking at the group cupping coffee mugs, another thought hit him. "Are you sure you're sober enough to drive, or should I call a cab?"

"I'm okay, Finn." Jill said. "I'll get them all home safe and sound." She patted his arm reassuringly.

En masse they trooped out, quieter than when they came in. The loud laughter and teasing was now soft murmuring as they exited through the door.

Finn stood for a moment absorbing the quiet. Then his mind turned to Scarlett. Sounded like she'd had a good time tonight too, but he'd bet money tomorrow was going to be a bitch. Maybe Miss Scarlett needed someone to stop by and check on her in the morning. Maybe, just maybe, he was that someone.

Chapter Six

“What’re you doing here?” Scarlett squinted as the bright sunlight attacked her eyes. Even with her eyes half shut, she appreciated how good the man in front of her looked.

“I came bearing gifts.” Finn waved a cup of coffee under her nose. “Do I get to stand out here all day, or are you going to invite me in?”

“I’m not up to company this morning, and get that coffee out of my face,” she managed to whisper without gagging.

Finn grinned as he pushed his way past her. “I could offer you a little hair of the dog that bit you instead,” he said as he placed the bag he carried on the kitchen counter.

“Don’t you dare. If I never see another shot of tequila, it will be too soon. It should be called tekilla.”

Scarlett watched as he laughingly pulled several cans and bottles out of the bag, before looking at her. Seated at the table she held her head, wishing he’d stop with all the noise.

“Rough night, huh?”

“Nobody told me I’d have Sherman’s army marching through my head this morning when they kept handing me those shots last night.”

“You should know a hangover will give you a killer headache.” Finn’s search through her cabinets made more noise than a mariachi band.

“How would I know that? I’ve never had a hangover. Two glasses of wine’s usually my limit.” She covered her ears as he let a cabinet door slam.

“It’s a good thing you have a bartender for a friend. Here, take a deep breath and drink this down.” He set an evil looking brew in front of her. “Come on, drink up.”

Her stomach rolled over and she gagged when the glass was placed on the table, the odor assaulting her senses.

“What’s in this? Poison?”

“My secret recipe for hangover cures. Humor me. Take a sip. If it stays down, then toss back the rest of it. Okay?”

It was hard to say no to that smile, even when someone nailed a spike into the back of her head

as she reached for the glass.

It wasn't bad. Not what she expected from the horror stories she'd heard about hangover cures. She finished it and watched the ease with which he cooked. The ability with which he slid the bacon into the pan and broke eggs one-handed would have impressed a professional chef.

Just when she began to think nice things about him, he shoved a plate of eggs and bacon in front of her.

"Come on, try a bite. Just one," he coaxed.

Damn, he made her feel like a sulky little kid as he kept tempting her with different morsels and coffee. He'd even brought a carton of orange juice, and continued to refill her glass when the level went down.

She reached saturation. "That's it. No more, I can't eat or drink another bite." She pushed the plate away.

"Do you feel better?"

"I think I may live, if that's what you want to know." She managed a weak smile. That should make him happy.

"Good. Now go take a long hot shower. I'll clean up here." He shoed her out of the kitchen.

Standing under the hot, pounding water did feel good. She'd give him that. The food and whatever it was he forced her to drink also had helped. Maybe he should give up bartending and become the hangover doctor. Yeah, call Dr. Hangover to end your morning after woes.

Her smile changed to a sigh as she looked down at her flabby thighs. If only she were twenty years younger. She'd put on some of the sexy underwear Jill had insisted she buy, and strut right out there in all her glory.

A glance in the mirror pushed those thoughts out of her head. Why would a young, good-looking stud like Finn be interested in enough cellulite to create turbulence for an ocean liner? Not to mention the fact she could definitely pinch more than an inch, even if she sucked in her stomach and stood up straight. Pulling on her terry cloth robe, Scarlett padded back out to the kitchen, with a new mantra sounding in her head. *He's just a friend, he's just a friend.*

"See, all clean," Finn indicated with a wave of his hand around the kitchen.

"Thanks. I could have done it later. After all, you did save my life." She gave him what she hoped he knew was a grateful smile.

"Nope. All you need to do is take it easy the rest of the day. The doctor prescribes a long nap, then watch a movie, and pamper yourself." He reached out and stroked her cheek. "I promise you'll

feel better tomorrow.”

She felt his fingers linger a moment before he jerked his hand away. Scarlett caught herself wanting to reach out and pull them back.

“Guess I better get out of here and let you take the prescribed nap.” Finn leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “Bye,” he whispered.

“Bye.” Her throat felt so constricted she could barely force the word out. Tingles rushing through her body caused her to want to throw herself into his arms. *He’s just a friend, he’s just a friend.*

She watched with regret as he paused at the door.

“See you Monday. You should be back to normal by then.”

Was that a sad smile he gave her? No. She was deluding herself with the need for him to feel the loss of what could have been, too. Scarlett wiped away the tear that trickled down her cheek.

“Finn, you seem a little down the last few days. You doing okay?” Dulcie gave him the infamous x-ray scrutiny with her eyes. He understood why some of the girls complained. It felt like being under a microscope.

“Yeah. Just a lot of things going on. I don’t have to tell you Hank’s thinking about retiring. He wants me to take over the tavern on a full time basis.” That much was the truth Finn thought. I just left out the part about the deal being done. He was buying out Hank’s interest, and Hank was taking off for the Caribbean.

Nope, there was no need to tell Dulcie he was mooning like some teenager waiting for Scarlett to walk through the door. Only, she hadn’t been in all week, and this was Wednesday.

“Scarlett said she’d meet me a little later for a drink.”

Finn looked toward the door before he could stop himself. Damn, that woman must be a witch, he thought as Dulcie started laughing.

“That’s the perkier I’ve seen you the past few days. I think you’ve got a crush on little Miss Scarlett.”

“Naa, I like her, and I like you. You’re both good people.”

“Yeah, right, and I can squeeze my ass into a size two” Dulcie reached back and patted her ample rump.

“Finn, need another round over here.” Finn nodded to Bubba Thomas to let him know his shout

had been heard. Thank goodness for customers, even the obnoxious ones like Bubba. Relief that he didn't have to get into a question and answer session with Dulcie flooded through him as he excused himself to fill the order.

"I'll be damned."

Bubba's open mouth caused Finn to turn in the direction he was staring.

"That woman is one fine piece. She looks even better than she did Friday night" Bubba bumped Finn's tray as he pushed himself up from the chair, knocking over the pitcher of beer and several mixed drinks.

"Shit." Finn wanted to pound the clumsy oaf into the floor as he stood there with beer dripping down the front of him.

"Sorry 'bout that," Bubba threw over his shoulder, not pausing in his beeline to Scarlett's side.

"Dumb fuck," Finn mumbled under his breath as he cleaned up the mess. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Scarlett smile and shake her head, then point to Dulcie sitting at the bar. Bubba said something else, which made her laugh before going to greet Dulcie.

Relief filled Finn as Bubba returned to the table alone, but he wasn't pleased with the shit-eating grin Bubba wore. He had no right to be jealous, he told himself all the way to the bar, but when he stopped in front of Scarlett all reason left his head. He wanted her for himself.

"Hey, Finn. I haven't thanked you for Saturday."

"Saturday. What about Saturday?" Dulcie wanted to know when she overheard Scarlett's comment.

Dulcie perked up, and he'd bet anything her ears were tuned in like a bat's sonar.

"Finn saved my life Saturday." Scarlett turned toward her friend.

"And?"

"I woke up not feeling too well after my birthday...celebration. Finn stopped by with his hangover remedy and nursed me back to the living."

"Really."

"Really. That's all there was to it Dulcie. Don't let your imagination run wild here." Scarlett smiled at Finn and shook her head.

Finn laughed. He suddenly felt as if the sun had broken through the clouds. Scarlett was here and she was smiling and including him in the conversation. Maybe if she hung around long enough tonight he'd get up the courage to ask her out to dinner.

"Scarlett!" Andrea raced across the room when she spied her drinking companion from Friday

night. “Girl, I was so worried about you when we left the other night. Bet you had one big head Saturday morning.”

“That I did Andrea.”

“Girrrl let me tell you, you had some major fun. Do you remember when those two hot bodies got you up on stage? I thought you were gonna come right then and there when that one had his head buried in your coochie. I almost did just watching.”

“Andrea, remember the things you were asking me Friday night?” Finn leaned across the bar and looked her in the eyes, letting her know he remembered her comments about good-looking men being lousy lays.

“Oh yeah. Could we just forget about that? I’d had a little too much to drink. Guess I owe you an apology.”

“Maybe Scarlett had a little too much to drink and would like to forget about Friday night too.” He caught the smile and the mouthed thank you Scarlett flashed his way.

“Point made. Friday? Nothing happened Friday that I know about.” Andrea grinned.

Business was booming with the usual Wednesday night Happy Hour crowd. Something about ‘hump day’ and the week being half over always brought out the drinking bunch. Finn hustled to keep up with the bar orders as well as the ones the cocktail waitresses needed.

He watched Scarlett and Dulcie leave together and felt like kicking himself. He should’ve said something. Good grief man, asking if she wanted to have dinner would have only taken a couple of minutes. He’d blown it again...as usual.

When Scarlett returned a few minutes later, Finn knew she must have forgotten something. The man that now occupied the stool she’d been sitting on stood, and pushed the stool back. She picked up an item off the floor, laughed as the man said something, and moved his stool back up to the bar.

Finn knew it was now or never. He shoved the beer he was serving in front of the customer and started around the end of the bar, colliding with one of the cocktail waitresses. Frustrated at his clumsiness, he apologized and turned to see Scarlett talking with Bubba.

Damn his hide, Finn thought as he started across the room.

“Okay, see you.” Bubba swaggered back toward his table as Finn approached.

“Scarlett, got a minute?” Finn knew he sounded out of breath. “I need to ask you something.”

“Sure Finn, what’s up?” Scarlett glanced toward the door where Dulcie stood, motioning her to hurry.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out to dinner with me. I’m sure Hank would cover for me

Friday night, and we could try out that new Italian restaurant over on Oak Street.”

“I’m sorry Finn. I have a date Friday night.”

Finn realized he’d been holding his breath as the hissing sound he released mimicked a tire springing a leak.

“Oh, who with? Sorry. That was rude. Your social life’s none of my business.” Though he sure felt like making it his business.

Scarlett laughed. “It’s no big deal really. Bubba asked me to have dinner with him Friday night.” Smiling she started for the door, giving a backhand wave over her shoulder.

“Bubba. Son of a bitch.” Finn turned in disgust, casting a glare at the man sitting across the room engrossed in pinching the ass of a cocktail waitress.

Why can’t Scarlett see Bubba for the sleaze-ball he really is? Finn’s heart felt heavy as an anchor, and depression consumed him.

Chapter Seven

Scarlett mentally kicked herself all day for agreeing to have dinner with Bubba.

“Fool, you only did it to keep yourself from hitting on Finn,” she kept mumbling on the way to the restaurant.

At least she'd been smart enough to arrange to meet Bubba there. If things didn't go well, she could bail and catch the next bus home. Scarlett wiped sweaty palms on her skirt as she entered the designated meeting place. An immense wave of relief swept over her when she didn't see Bubba.

Retreating to the ladies room she applied fresh lipstick and continued to question her sanity factor. *It's been over thirty years since you had a date girl. You're definitely insane to start this foolishness again. You hated first dates when you were twenty and had the body to go with it. Look at you now. Fifty plus women don't act like twenty something women.*

Still no Bubba when she returned to the bar. Okay, she'd give him another ten minutes and then she was out of here. Thanking the powers that be, she'd been stood-up, Scarlett picked up her purse and turned to leave. Bubba chose that moment to rush in.

“I'm sorry darling. Got tied up on a conference call at the car lot and completely lost track of time.” Snapping his fingers at the hostess to get her attention he demanded they be seated immediately. Once seated, he ordered a double bourbon and downed it before Scarlett could swallow her first sip of the white wine he'd ordered for her.

Two more double bourbons and a slab of steak bloody enough to impress a wolf, Scarlett knew Bubba's life story. In between assuring her he was a wonderful catch, he kept telling her how beautiful she was. Talk about contrast.

“I love redheads, darling. Always thought you had promise, but when you walked in the other night with that new hairstyle and them new duds, well you just about gave me a heart attack.”

Scarlett smiled her best false smile. From what she'd seen of his interests at Hank's Place, Bubba not only liked redheads, but he also was crazy about blondes and brunettes. Funny, he didn't seem too interested in a grey little mouse though.

“Come on, darling. I'll take you home.” Bubba had his arm linked through hers and led her toward a luxury car parked in the darkened corner of the parking lot.

Scarlett smiled to herself when she saw the ‘dealer’ plate hanging at an angle off the front bumper. It looked like good ole Bubba had borrowed the luxury ride from the used car lot where he worked.

“That’s okay, Bubba. I need to go back to the office and tie up a few loose ends.” Going out to dinner with him was okay, but a little voice inside was telling her having Bubba know where she lived might not be good.

“Now honey, don’t go running off on old Bubba. I know I been talking your ear off all night about me, but I sure would like to know more about you. Why don’t we just sit a spell and talk?”

Scarlett looked up to see the bus drive by. *Damn*

“Where do you want to sit and talk, Bubba?”

“Why don’t we set right here in the car darling?”

“Okay, but we’re only talking, so don’t get any ideas.” She still wasn’t convinced this was a smart move on her part, but they were in a public parking lot.

Besides, spending another half hour listening to Bubba would be better than answering the questions she’d have to endure if she killed the time at the office.

Bubba opened the back door to the big luxury car, and motioned her to get in.

Now wait just a minute here. The backseat? What does he think this is, some teenage makeout session? Watch him girl.

“What’s wrong with the front seat?” Scarlett wanted to know.

“Nothing. Nothing at all darling. I just thought it would be easier on my bad knee if I could stretch it out a bit more than I can in the front seat.”

Well, that did make sense, Scarlett thought as she slid across the large backseat. She hadn’t realized he had a bad knee, but there were a lot of things she didn’t know about Bubba, beyond his life history.

Scarlett thought she was in a police interrogation room as Bubba peppered her with questions about her likes and dislikes. At some point in the process, Bubba had started massaging her neck. She admitted to herself it did feel good. A man’s touch was something she hadn’t experienced since Joe died. Come to think of it, there wasn’t a lot of touching going on there toward the end either.

Between the wine and the neck rub she began to relax. When he slid over beside her and snaked his right hand across her shoulder and caressed her bare arm, it felt natural and soothing.

She could feel the heat increasing as his thigh pressed against hers, and his free hand sensuously moved in slow circles up her thigh. Her body responded to the soft touches and she resisted the urge to spread her legs and let his fingers drift higher.

When he removed his hand from her thigh and pulled her chin toward him, she held her breath, wondering what the kiss would feel like. Did Bubba kiss as well as he touched? Yes, she wanted to be kissed.

As his mouth drew closer to hers, the smell of bourbon and onions gave her second thoughts about kissing him. *Ewww... gross. No way would she let that mouth touch hers.* Scarlett turned her head and Bubba missed his target, instead his wet tongue slid down her cheek. When he started to nibble on her neck, she tried to pull back only to find his right hand had slipped under her arm where it kneaded her breast, fingers digging in at her resistance.

A shift in position allowed him to finally capture her mouth with his. In addition to the bad breath his lips were wet and slick and his tongue sought entrance to her clinched mouth. Once again, Scarlett tried to push away, only to have him pull her tighter against him, tongue prodding until it found the entrance he sought when she tried to say 'stop'.

Once inside, his tongue flitted like a moth caught against glass, darting in every direction. Suddenly it was down her throat, with a sucking force stronger than a vacuum cleaner, trying to extract her tonsils.

She'd lived fifty plus years with her tonsils and she just be damned if some 'good ole boy' was going to accomplish what a doctor hadn't. Pushing against his chest Scarlett was able to free her mouth, only to realize she was now pressed along the full length of the back seat with Bubba's body covering hers.

"Stop it Bubba. Get off me, you ass." Common sense told her she should be scared, but instead of fear red rage filled her when she heard the sound of a zipper.

"Bubba, I'm not telling you again. Get your ass off me or I'm going to start screaming at the top of my lungs."

"Gotta have you baby. You make me so hot. I gotta have you." He panted in her ear as he humped against her body.

The damned fool didn't have sense enough to even try and get her panties down. Not only was she on the verge of being raped, but it was by an idiot, not smart enough to do it right. She inhaled deeply to start screaming when the air seemed to go out of Bubba. He collapsed on top of her, the only

movement being the trickle of warm wetness seeping through her stockings and down the inside of her thighs. It felt like Bubba had his before achieving entrance to the castle. Thank God for underwear.

Now she had another problem. Bubba was dead weight on top of her, and he wasn't responding to efforts in getting him to move.

"Dear Lord in heaven, I've killed him." Scarlett felt the panic building inside of her. A dead man on top of her was worse than the horny old goat battering her a few minutes ago.

What to do now? If she screamed, they'd be found like this and everyone would know he had a heart attack while trying to screw her. This had potential to be worse than the male review story. No, she had to get out of this even if he did outweigh her by a hundred pounds.

Pushing Bubba's body toward the back of the seat and then pulling herself toward the front as she twisted her body with his, Scarlett felt she was making progress.

"Only a little more. Come on you can do it," she encouraged herself. "A couple more shoves and you'll be free." She felt herself teetering on the edge of the seat.

A twitch and loud groan from Bubba came close to giving Scarlett a heart attack herself. When he tried to sit up, the remainder of Scarlett that had been caught under him was freed sending her crashing to the floor of the car.

"Wha...What?" Bubba, fully upright now, fumbled for the overhead lights.

Scarlett felt like she'd been trapped in a spotlight when he flipped the switch. She could only imagine the sight she presented with her dress up around her waist, and her makeup streaked from sweat and tears.

"What're you doing down there, darling?"

"What am I doing down here?" She now understood acts of murder. "What am I doing down here? What the hell do you think I'm doing down here you stupid oaf?"

"There's no need to get pissy about it, darling. Just because Bubba got a little over excited and shot his wad before he could get Little Reb in yo..."

"I thought you were dead, you dumb shit. You collapsed on top of me like a ton of bricks, and you're just about as heavy. Why didn't you say something instead of just laying there all that time, letting me think you'd had a heart attack or something?" Scarlett managed to pull herself onto the seat and by god she was going to get some answers from this manic.

"Well. Why didn't you say anything?"

Bubba looked sheepish as he arranged Little Reb back in his pants. "I got a little problem, you see."

“No I don’t see.”

“It’s like this. When I get over excited and Little Reb goes off early it kinda...” Bubba’s face was bright pink.

“It kinda what?” Scarlett demanded.

“Well, it sorta triggers this problem I have.” Bubba looked uncomfortable.

“Which is?” She didn’t care how miserable she was.

“If you must know I got narcolepsy.” He blurted the statement out in a defensive tone.

“Narcolepsy?” Scarlett was trying to remember what she’d heard about that.

“Yeah, I fall asleep at in-opportune times, especially during...you know.” Bubba squirmed with what was probably embarrassment.

Scarlett wrestled with the door handle. She just wanted the hell out this car and as far away from this sex crazed narcoleptic as she could get. Flinging the door open, she stepped out and took a deep breath of the cool night air before she started walking.

“Now darling, you won’t be telling anybody about this little incident, will you?” Bubba called after her.

Looking at her watch, Scarlett knew she’d miss the last bus of the evening. A lot of time had been wasted rolling around in the back seat with Bubba and Little Reb...my god; he called his cock Little Reb. She started to giggle at the memory of Bubba trying to blame his needy predicament on his organ. Men!

The effort to tidy herself up had been pretty much a failure for close inspection, so going to the office to call a taxi was definitely out of the question. She’d be grilled more than a steak on a barbeque if she showed up there looking like this.

The lights on Hank’s Tavern called to her, but wait a minute. She wasn’t up to facing Finn either. Trying to ignore her feelings for him had ended her up in this mess, and even though he was a man, he’d probably notice she looked like she’d been rode hard and put away wet. Then again, he did say he was taking the night off and Hank would be covering. Hank probably wouldn’t take a second look, and all she wanted was to slip back toward the ladies room and use the pay phone between the restrooms.

Relief flowed through her when she saw how empty the place was. Luck was on her side as only a few men sat around the bar engrossed in a ballgame. She quickly made her way toward the back.

“Scarlett?”

Shit! That was Finn’s voice, and that was Finn’s gorgeous body walking toward her. What the hell was he doing here?

“Scarlett, what happened to you? Your clothes look like you slept in them.”

Finn peered at her intently. That look would equal one of Dulcie’s. The boy had definitely been around her boss too much if he could copy ‘The Stare.’

“I just had a little mishap. I’m going to excuse myself and go to the ladies room and clean up a bit.” Maybe it would give her time to make up some fantastic lie too.

When she returned, there were only two hangers-on at the bar. Luck wasn’t with her tonight she’d decided after talking with the cab company. Everyone wanted a taxi and she had at least an hour wait. If they didn’t get here by closing time she’d either have to walk home or go over to the office and face the questions from the nightshift person. That should’ve been the first choice anyway, she thought as Finn kept casting glances her way while encouraging the two men to drink up.

“What’ll it be?”

He was standing in front of her now and looking none too happy.

“Coffee. Just black coffee.”

It would be nice if he smiled, instead of the fish-eyed stare, she thought as he placed the coffee in front of her.

“I thought tonight was your big date with Bubba.”

“I wouldn’t call it a big date, but yes, I had dinner with Bubba tonight.”

“Then what’re you doing here?”

“Listen Finn, I’m really not in the mood for a cross examination. I preferred to get home under my own power instead of Bubba giving me a ride and I’ve called a taxi.” She knew she was being defensive because she felt like such an idiot, but she wasn’t in the mood right now to play fifty questions. Especially with the man she’d rather have been having dinner with.

“I’m not cross examining you. Can’t a friend be concerned when you come in here looking like hell?”

“Thanks for the compliment.” Though he had a point and his concern was nice to hear. “Okay. Let’s just say it wasn’t the best of evenings and let it go at that.”

“Look, I’m going to be closing up here soon. Why don’t I take you home?”

Scarlett felt a war going inside of her. Part of her wanted to say yes, but logic told her if he was much nicer to her, she’d end up spilling her guts about the events of this evening. Realizing she really

needed to talk about what had happened and come to terms with her stupidity made her feel vulnerable. But was this the person she should be sharing confidences with? Definitely not. She'd talk to Dulcie about it tomorrow.

“Okay. If the taxi hasn't arrived by closing, I'd appreciate the ride.”

“Give me ten minutes. It's closing time.”

She watched as Finn shoed the two men off their bar stools and followed them to the door, locking it behind them.

“Finn, you're not scheduled to close for another thirty minutes.”

“I'm closing early tonight. No arguments.”

The ride home was strained. Another stupid idea Scarlett thought. Finn parked in the driveway and came around to open her door. What should she do now? Invite him in for coffee, or just thank him and say goodnight?

Still searching for a decision Scarlett turned to face Finn when they reached the door, only to find him reaching for her. She held her breath as his mouth lowered to hers. This kiss was nothing like the slobbering mess from earlier. This was soft, sweet, lingering, making her want more. She felt her body leaning into Finn, and his arms slip around her. Safe was the word that popped into her mind. She felt safe and never wanted to move out of the warmth the circle of his arms created. Sighing, she leaned against him.

“Why don't we go inside and you can tell me what happened tonight?” Finn whispered as tilted her head back and nibbled on her bottom lip.

Chapter Eight

“So, tell me what happened tonight with Bubba to get you so mused up, and needing to call a cab to get home.” Finn removed the arm he had around Scarlett once they were inside her house.

“Nothing.”

“Scarlett.”

“Okay, Then nothing I want to talk about. Let’s just say the boy ain’t right and let it go at that. Please.”

Her eyes pled with him as much as her tone of voice, and made him feel guilty for adding to an already bad night from the looks of it. “Let’s drop the subject for now.”

Finn took in the rumpled clothes and the tiredness around the eyes of the beautiful woman standing in front of him. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“It’s down the hall on the left.” Scarlett gestured in the direction she mentioned. “I’ll make coffee,” he heard her call after him.

A look in the bathroom told him this was only for guests. It took him two attempts before he found the room he sought, the master bedroom with its adjoining bath. A quick look around the bathroom confirmed what he suspected. The woman enjoyed bubble baths, and her collection of various scents made him smile. Selecting the lavender and vanilla scents which appealed to him, he adjusted the water temperature and poured a generous amount into the tub.

When he entered the kitchen, Scarlett faced him with a puzzled look on her face.

“Do you hear water running?”

“I do,” he confirmed.

“Oh good grief. That’s all I need, a flooded house.”

Finn caught her arm as she started toward the hallway. “I don’t think you have to worry about the house flooding if you get the water turned off before the bathtub overflows.”

“What?”

“I started a bath for you. Go in and soak for awhile. I’ll hang out and watch a movie or something.” Finn loved the amazed look on her face as he pushed her toward the waiting bubble bath.

He checked the refrigerator and found a bottle of chardonnay. Ahhh, just the thing, a glass of

wine after a relaxing bath and Scarlett should sleep like a baby. Too bad he wouldn't be around to confirm it.

Once he found the corkscrew and an ice bucket, he searched the refrigerator again. Cheese and crackers and a few grapes would go with the well chilled wine.

Discovering Scarlett had cable he checked the movie channels. *Romancing the Stone*. Perfect. Something light and humorous, exactly what they needed while they drank a little wine and munched on the snacks he'd pulled together. He darkened the room, leaving only one lamp, which cast soft shadows around the room.

A noise caused him to look up. Scarlett stood with the hall light on behind her, wrapped in a long robe. She looked glowing, relaxed, and sexy as hell. Maybe he shouldn't have stuck around, but second guessing himself at this point was not going to happen.

"Feel better?" The answer was obvious, but he couldn't say what was really on his mind. This wasn't the time to share his desire for her.

"Sure do. That was wonderful. I hope you don't mind that I just put on my old robe."

"No problem." Especially if I can get it off you popped into his mind. Man, you've got to stop letting your mind go there. It's obvious whatever happened earlier with Bubba wasn't good, and she doesn't need another man putting the moves on her.

"What's this?" Scarlett indicated the wine bucket and cheese tray.

"I thought we'd have a little libation and watch a movie. Or, if you'd rather, I can go."

"No. Stay. That would be fun. It's been a long time since I sat around and watched a movie with someone. *Romancing the Stone*. One of my favorites too." She clapped her hands reminding him of a little girl who'd just discovered a hidden surprise.

She's a delight to be around, bringing her energy into any room she enters. *And she doesn't even realize it.*

They sipped wine and munched on the tray of fruit and cheese as the hero wormed his way into the heart of the heroine. He really didn't remember too much about the movie; his focus had been on Scarlett's shoulder pressed against his as he inhaled the scents of lavender and vanilla from her bath.

After the movie, Finn got up to leave. Scarlett stood in front of him, her scent fresh and sexy. He bent his head down to kiss her without thinking. Her lips were as soft as rose petals, yielding and giving at the same time. He tasted wine and cheese, combined with a taste that could only be Scarlett.

She leaned into him, and for a brief moment he debated whether to take advantage of the situation, before deciding a few kisses would be all right. He wouldn't let things get out of hand.

Finn placed his hands on either side of her face. He kissed across her forehead, letting his lips trail down the side of her face, along the jaw line, and then returned up to her forehead by way of the other side. His lips explored every inch of the work of art in front of him. He wanted her to feel as precious as he knew her to be.

Finn slid his hands around her head and claimed the soft lips again. He pulled back slightly and used his tongue to trace the outline of the perfect petals. He captured her mouth once more and her lips parted, he slipped in to taste. Paradise, he thought, as he indulged in the ambrosia of the woman in his arms. Scarlett's soft moans fanned the flames within him; his throbbing erection wanted nothing more than to sink itself into the heat of her essence in the same way his tongue claimed her mouth.

She sighed when he took his mouth from hers, and shivered when his lips traveled down her neck.

"Finn, Finn"

Scarlett murmured his name, over and over again, reminding him of the times when a soft breeze whispered to him. His soul wanted to give this goddess pleasure. He would postpone the needs of his own body. Tonight would be only for her.

Finn loosened the tie on the robe, and as it parted, his mouth claimed the nipple of a full, ripe breast. She gasped as he licked and sucked, first one then the other of the sublime orbs.

"You're so beautiful," he led her to the couch and pulled her down beside him.

"No, I'm not," Scarlett tried to pull the robe together.

He captured her hands. "I say you are."

She offered her lips to him again and he drank long and deep from the well. Finn repeated his earlier path back to her breasts, where he took his time with each one, and then proceeded to blaze a trail down her body. His tongue flicked in and out of her belly button causing Scarlett to giggle, a sound that was music to his ears.

He smiled when he reached the soft thatch of fur between her legs, realizing she had been waxed, leaving a thin line of hair. It was sexy as hell. She tensed and started to resist his touch. Her hand caught his and tried to pull it away.

"No Finn, that's not nice. It's dirty."

"Dirty? I don't think anything between two consenting adults that gives both pleasure is dirty."

He saw the doubt on her face. "Besides, you took a bath. Didn't you?" He teased. "Now relax and enjoy."

From her reaction he didn't think this woman had ever experienced oral sex. This made him

more determined to make this an unforgettable pleasure and he returned to taste the delights before him. He felt her resist, then slowly start to relax as he stroked the inside of her thighs and blew his hot breath over her most sensitive area. Soon she pushed toward him, as if begging for more, instead of pulling away in embarrassment. He slipped a finger inside her, using her juices for the lubrication needed to pleasure her as his hands stroked the outside of her sex.

Finn took his time. He wanted her passion to build, to let her experience the pleasures racing through her body. He licked, nipped and sucked his way up as he switched between each thigh until he arrived at the honey pot. The juices flowed from her core, he relished each drop and again he traced along her thighs with his fingertips and mouth.

He judged his success by the sounds Scarlett omitted. First there had been only silence, her body rigid with resistance. Gradually soft mummings came from the tense woman as she relaxed. These changed to whimpers, and they became moans, which grew into loud groans and escalated into screams when she reached the threshold of her climax. Finn felt wave after wave convulse through her body until they slowed to rippling spasms.

Finn lingered and inhaled the aroma of sex and the fragrance from Scarlett's bath. He hoped the windows were closed so some concerned neighbor didn't call the police. This woman was a screamer when she gave into the pleasures of desire.

He ached with the need to fill her with his own passion, but decided tonight the focus was for the pleasure of Scarlett.

Slowly he withdrew his head from between her thighs, and paused to wipe his face; and then began to retrace the path he had taken earlier. Once again his lips paused at her belly button to tickle with his flicking tongue. He moved upward, and tarried at the luscious breasts in the path of his ultimate goal—her lips.

His lips felt wetness on her face. "What's wrong, darling?" He wiped the tears away and followed with kisses down her cheeks.

"I've never experienced anything so intense," Scarlett whispered. "I now realize what I've been missed all these years," and tears became sobs.

"It's okay." Finn picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. He settled them on the large bed, and then held her as he murmured meaningless words. He stroked her hair, planted soft kisses on her eyes, and watched her drift off to sleep, a smile on lips puffy from the demands of his passion.

Sleep was out of the question for him. He would spend all night relishing in the amazement of holding his heart's desire in his arms.

Scarlett awoke thinking about the delicious dream. Her eyes met a pair of blue ones as she looked at a head on the pillow next to hers. I'm still dreaming she thought as she closed her eyes again. She forced them open once more and realized this was no dream.

She pulled out of the arms wrapped around her and mumbled, "Bathroom," and retreated behind the safety of a closed door to figure out what was going on. Memories of the prior night rushed at her, along with the delicious sensations as Finn played her body like it was a rare, valued musical instrument. Feelings she never knew existed exploded inside of her and now plummeted her with guilt.

Here, in the light of day she faced the shame of what she had done. She'd given into her carnal desires and made love with a man probably young enough to be her son. She'd not only become a slut, but a predator. She was damned for sure.

The bedroom was empty when she finally got up the courage to come out of the bathroom. Following the smell of coffee she found Finn in the kitchen making toast.

"Thought we could use a little something in our stomachs."

"Finn, last night was a mistake. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you." There, she'd said her piece.

"What are you talking about? If anyone took advantage of the other, it was me taking advantage of you while you felt so vulnerable." He paused and reached out to stroke her face. "I hope you enjoyed last night as much as I did."

The man was crazy. She had perfect recall on who did the enjoying last night, and she was definitely the recipient. How could he be saying he enjoyed it when he'd not received any benefits? No, last night had been all for her. The most selfish sex she'd ever experienced, not to mention her first time ever orgasm. Now she understood all the fuss about sex. That was neither here or there, she had to nip this situation in the bud right now.

"This isn't going to work for me. Last night was a one time thing. I admit I enjoyed the pleasure you gave, and I'm sorry you didn't seek your own, but we can't let it happen again. I won't let it happen again. You need to leave."

"Are you crazy? Last night wasn't just about sex. We have the chance at something here that will be good for both of us." Finn reached out to touch her.

"No." Scarlett placed her hands up to fend him off.

"Scarlett, please give us a chance." Finn tried to touch her again.

“Go. Please just go.” Scarlett backed away.

The hurt in his eyes before he turned and walked out of the kitchen broke her heart. Hot tears streamed down her face. At the sound of the closing door she collapsed where she stood as sobs convulsed through her body.

Chapter Nine

“You look like shit.”

“Why thank you,” Scarlett snarled at the weekend dispatcher.

People seemed to think it was their job in life to comment on her appearance these days. She knew she didn't look well. Neither would they, if they'd cried all morning. Even a cold compress didn't bring down her swollen eyes.

She should have put off the backlog of work on her desk until tomorrow. Instead, she thought it would help her to focus on something other than the humiliation of allowing last night's events to happen. A young stud's head between her legs, and she'd enjoyed it. Enjoy hell. She'd loved every second. The pain now, she could live without.

“Sorry.” Jane pouted before the phone interrupted her.

Scarlett tackled the stack of papers on her desk, determined to find the error in her posting of the billable hours. Three hours, four aspirin, and several cups of coffee later she found the error. A sense of elation ebbed through her as she pushed the papers away and massaged her head, the pain having dulled to a low roar.

“Help, I need help.” Jane danced in front of Scarlett's desk like a kid needing to pee.

“What's wrong?”

“I need another girl for a two girl call. Everyone's either gone or busy with other calls. Can you help out?”

“I'm not a Fantasy Tech.” She'd never considered such a career step.

“I know, but you'll team up with Andrea and she'll walk you through what you're supposed to do. Please, oh pleasssse.”

Scarlett had to laugh at Jane's plea, and she really had to be desperate if she asked the office assistant to assume a phone role. What the hell. It wasn't like she had anything better to do. This would keep her mind away from who was behind the door of the tavern across the street.

“Okay, but if I blow the call and we lose a client, you get to explain to Dulcie.”

“Thanks.” Jane shot her a grateful grin. “I'd do it myself, except there'd be no one to cover the dispatches.”

“I guess I could do that if you want the call.”

“Ahhh, no thanks. I don’t have time to train you on the process. I’ll get Andrea on line and after you two figure out how you’re gonna do it, she’ll get the client. I’ll switch her over.” Jane was gone before Scarlett had a chance to blink.

“Scarlett,” Andrea screamed in her ear. “I can’t believe I’m working a call with you.”

“That makes two of us.” Scarlett had major doubts about this decision.

“Oh honey, we’re gonna have so much fun. You just wait. Now the first thing we gotta do here is get you a name. Who do you wanna be?”

“Gee, I don’t know. I’d forgotten you use made-up names.” Scarlett ran through a list of names in her head, deciding simple was best. “How about Lena?”

“Naaa, too close to mine. I’m Lana. Too many ‘l’ names will confuse the client.”

“Okay, then Amy. That’s easy to remember.”

“Yeah, Amy.” Andrea agreed.

“Now what?” Scarlett had no idea what was expected of her. “You’ll have to tell me what to say and when I’m supposed to say it.”

“No problem. Here’s the deal. This is a regular of mine. He’s a high-powered CEO, and like a lot of `em, he’s a closet submissive. Guess it’s the only time they actually have somebody telling them what to do. Before I forget, he’s also got a foot fetish.”

“Oh.” Scarlett wasn’t sure how she should respond to this new knowledge, but Andrea didn’t seem to notice.

“He calls two or three times a week. I throw new things at him from time to time and decided today to use two girls. Just didn’t realize the other girl would be you.”

Andrea’s laugh reminded Scarlett of a cackling hen who’d just laid an egg.

“Anyway, I’ll have him do some things to you, then make him stop and watch you and me. Follow my lead, do lots of moans, groans, and heavy breathing. That should do the trick. Oh, by the way, his name is James. I’ll get him now.”

A deep masculine voice answered. “James Elliott speaking.” Scarlett was surprised at the professional sound of his voice even though she’d been warned this was a corporate executive.

“Jimmy, this is your Lana, sweetie.”

“Lana. I thought you’d never call back.”

“Sorry baby, but Lana had to pee. After that I took a nice long bath with the bubble bath you like so much, and then I had to dry real good. Vinyl doesn’t slide too well over wet skin.”

“Vinyl? The black vinyl dress and over-the- knee boots?” James’ breathing became faster.

“That’s the one baby. Your favorite. You know how much I like to please you.”

“Oh yeaaaaah.”

James sounded less and less like a corporate powerhouse.

“Jimmy baby, Lana’s got another surprise for you.”

“Yesssss.”

“I brought someone to play with us.”

“Really Lana?”

“Say hi to Jimmy, Amy.”

“Hi, Jimmy.” Scarlett dropped her voice and thought she came across low and sexy.

“Hi, Amy. Glad you came to play.”

“Oh honey, you may not be so glad by the time we’re finished with you.” Gone was the sweet, coaxing voice Andrea had used at the start of the call. “I’m in charge here, and the two of you are going to do things my way. Got it?”

“Yes, mistress,” James was submissive.

“Jimmy, I want you to eat Amy’s pussy. If you don’t do it to my satisfaction, I’m going to stick my black shinny boot heel up your ass. Do you understand me?” Lana’s voice would tolerate no dispute.

“Yes, Lana. I’ll do it good. I promise.”

“You’ll do what good, Jimmy?” Lana demanded.

“I’ll eat Amy good.” Jimmy’s voice quivered.

“What?” The sound of a whip came from Lana’s end. Scarlett knew from the conversations she’d heard among the girls Lana probably had a doubled-over belt to achieve the effect.

“Pussy. I’ll eat Amy’s pussy good.”

“Then crawl over there and get started.”

“Oookay.”

“Amy, spread your legs further apart. I want his head buried in your honey pot. I want to see the juices running down his face.”

Scarlett recalled the sensation of last night when Finn dined on her. Heat and desire rushed through her body as it had then, and her moans and groans duplicated the uncontrollable ones from her first experience into the world of oral sex. She didn’t have to fake the sensations, only let the feelings surge forth.

“See, Jimmy. Amy likes the way you lick her, don’t you Amy.”

“Mmmmmm.”

“Answer me with words Amy.” The cracking whip sound followed Lana’s demand.

“Yes. Yes Lana. Jimmy’s making me feel good. I like it.” Scarlett pushed aside the memory of Finn and focused on the reality of the situation now.

“Lana thinks you both are enjoying it too much, and I’m jealous.”

She’s really good at this Scarlett decided. There’s a pout in her voice.

“In fact, Lana wants her turn. You go sit in the chair Jimmy. Lana’s going to play with our pretty little Amy here.”

“But, Lana—”

“No ‘but Lana.’ Get yourself in that chair Jimmy. Here let me help you. My boot has a nice pointy toe on it. Let me shove it up your ass.”

Scarlett heard rustling from Jimmy’s end. “I’m in my chair now Lana.”

“That’s a good boy, Jimmy. Now Amy, you sweet little thing, come see me. Don’t you think she’s pretty, Jimmy? All the long blonde hair and big blue eyes. I love to run my fingers through all this hair. Watch Jimmy. See how I do it, nice and slow.”

“Yessss.” Jimmy’s voice sounded strangled.

“Now, I’m going to kiss those soft pink lips, and run my tongue in that delicious mouth. My, my, she does have luscious breasts. See my hands lift them? Look at these rosy nipples, Jimmy. Shall I suck them?”

“Oh yes, Lana. Oh yes.” Jimmy’s breathing was labored.

“Does it feel good when I suck your nipples like this, Amy, or do you like it better when I nibble and bite them this way?” Lana wanted to know.

“I love everything Lana. Your touch feels good. Your touch makes me so hot.” Scarlett hoped Amy’s response sounded needy to Jimmy.

“Ohhhhh, look at these pretty toes Jimmy. Did you see how pretty and sweet Amy’s feet are?”

“I had a pedicure Lana. You told me Jimmy liked pretty feet. I wanted to make sure they were nice and soft for him.” Scarlett played into what Andrea had told her about James’ foot fetish.

“Do you like the color of polish Amy selected for her toes, Jimmy? Would you like to suck her toes?”

“Please Lana; please let me suck her toes.”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m going to. Watch how I run my tongue over her foot. Ooooo, the skin is soft and smooth. Her feet smell like lavender. Did you use a special lotion Amy?”

“I did Lana. I used my favorite for Jimmy.”

Lana appeared to think for a minute. “I know what would please Jimmy more than sucking your toes.”

“What would that be Lana?”

Scarlett could hear Jimmy breathing hard and wasn't surprised at his whispered, “Whhhhat.”

“We're going to please Jimmy using our feet. Amy you take this pretty little foot and put it on one side of his cock, and I'll use a foot on the other side. Let me pour lotion on first. We want our feet to slip up and down, slowly. Rub your foot slowly, like I'm doing Amy. Does that feel good Jimmy? Do you like the touch of our soft, pretty feet stroking your cock?”

“Oh, oh. Lana. I can't last much longer. I caaaannnn'.....t.”

Scarlett heard Jimmy's gasps then his breathing gradually return to normal.

“Thank you, Lana. Thank you Amy.”

“Of course baby. I'll talk to you soon Jimmy.”

Andrea disconnected Jimmy's line. “So, what do you think of your first phone sex call?”

“It was easier than I thought it would be, but it's still not something I want to do on a regular basis.” Scarlett knew that to be fact.

“You're a natural. If you ever change your mind I'm sure Dulcie would have no problem with you switching positions.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Scarlett laughed.

“Bye the way, I dropped off something for you when I was by earlier. Did you find it on your desk?”

“No.”

“Take a look around in that rat's nest on top.”

“I think I should be offended by your calling my desk a rat's nest.” Curious, Scarlett held the phone under her chin and moved the stack of papers marked for filing. “What's this?”

“What does it look like?” Andrea did the hen cackle from her end.

“I found something that looks like....oh my god. It looks like a man's penis.”

“Yeah. In chocolate, with a great set of balls in the bargain too. Don't you love it?”

“What am I suppose to do with this?”

“Eat it goose. Practice. Who knows, you might get lucky with that hunky bartender and you'll be able to give him the best blow job he's ever had.”

“Thanks. I think.” Scarlett knew her face glowed red as she picked up the chocolate organ.

“See ya.” Andrea hung up laughing.

Scarlett was drained. The emotional roller coaster of the past twenty-four hours finally caught up with her. She took her purse out of the desk drawer and pushed herself from the chair. Home sounded good right now. She’d say goodnight to Jane and be on her way.

“Jane?”

Jane paused in her efforts to devour the large piece of male anatomy in her hands. Lifting her head, she grinned at Scarlett with chocolate smeared lips and teeth. “Just practicing. Gotta date later tonight.”

“Oh. Well, I wanted to let you know I’m leaving.”

“See you next week. You should try to get some rest.” Jane returned to her endeavors. Scarlett watched as Jane swirled her tongue over the chocolate, then slid her mouth up and down the long shaft.

Joe had tried to get her to suck him a couple of times, but she gagged so much he told her to forget it. His one attempt to go down on her hadn’t been too successful either. Their sex life had become basic missionary and once he got his satisfaction he’d roll off and fall asleep. Sad to think of the pleasures they missed out on.

“Oh, well. That was then, this is now. No use crying over spilled milk.” Scarlett muttered to herself and returned to her desk and slipped the chocolate penis into her bag. After all, Andrea’s feeling would be hurt if she thought her gift wasn’t appreciated. Besides, a little chocolate was good for a girl.

Once outside the cool breeze reminded her fall was around the corner. She’d need to make sure she brought a sweater to work in the future. It would be good to have on those bus rides home as the days grew shorter.

Scarlett checked to make sure the office door was locked and turned. *Finn*. Her eyes didn’t leave Finn Yates as he stopped in front of the tavern. He paused and shrugged his shoulders before he opened the door open, and never looked back. Her heart thundered and the pain she’d kept at bay for the past few hours overwhelmed her.

Chapter Ten

Scarlett made her decision on the bus ride home. She had to get out of town for a few days and get her emotions under control. Her heart had shattered as she'd stood on the street and watched Finn enter the tavern without acknowledging her existence.

First, Scarlett called Dulcie to ask her to get someone to cover for her next week, then contacted the airline and booked a ticket to Savannah. From there she caught the Air Tran hop over to Hilton Head Island. A taxi delivered her to the door of the Marriott Hotel, situated on the beach. Water always soothed her soul.

The dining room of the hotel made her think of romance with the candlelight and cushy furniture. Scarlett had a book with her to read, but the dim light made reading impossible. After the waiter took her order, she decided one of her other favorite past times, people watching, would be a good way to spend the evening while she enjoyed her gourmet dinner.

"Excuse me."

Scarlett met the eyes of the distinguished man standing beside her table. She guessed him to be in his mid to late fifties. His suntanned athletic appearance made her think he was health conscious.

"I couldn't help but notice you're eating alone."

The smile against the tanned skin dazzled. If his teeth were a shade whiter she'd need sunglasses. "Yes. I am."

"I wondered if I might join you. I'm alone also and I really hate to eat alone."

He smiled again. What the heck. Conversation with a good-looking man in her age bracket couldn't hurt. "Why not?" She indicated with a wave of her hand for him to be seated.

"My name is Mac Pierson. I noticed you when you came in earlier, but waited to see if anyone joined you. When you ordered I decided it was time to act if I didn't want this gorgeous woman to disappear."

Scarlett smiled. The flattery was nice, but he was so full of bullshit she wanted to laugh. Whatever. She could use a little ego boost. "I'm Scarlett Marks."

"Scarlett. Makes me think of *Gone with the Wind*."

"You and my mama too. That was her favorite book, hence the name."

After diner, Mac pulled out her chair. A true gentleman, he held the light wrap she'd brought.

"Why don't we go dancing?" he asked as he slipped the shawl over her shoulders.

The music from the grand deck called to her and she agreed. It had been more years than she wanted to think about since she last danced, but here under the starlight with the ocean breeze caressing her skin the steps came back like it was yesterday. Mac was a skillful dancer and had the right touch to lead her where he wanted her to go.

At her door he leaned down and kissed her goodnight. It wasn't the wet, slobbery kiss of Bubba, but neither did it curl her toes the way Finn's did. Nice she decided. Just nice.

"Tomorrow," he whispered as his fingers trailed along her cheek.

"Scarlett. Scarlett. I'm so glad I caught you." Mac was hurrying across the lobby toward her. "I got a call this morning and I need to get back to the office immediately. I didn't ask for your number last night because I planned to spend a lot more time with you. I don't want to lose contact."

Amazed, Scarlett wrote her number on the back of a business card as Mac asked her to do, and dropped the one he'd given her with his number into her beach bag. He gave her a quick hug and hurried out to the taxi the valet had summoned, and Scarlett headed for the beach to stake out her place in the sand. She enjoyed the time spent with Mac the past couple of days and was flattered he wanted to stay in touch, but his kisses, though pleasant, told her the chemistry wasn't there. Her bruised heart wasn't ready to start a relationship, especially a long distance one.

Settled on the beach towel she stared at the horizon and allowed her mind to wander.

Scarlett felt the heat rise as strong hands massaged her shoulders. "Mmmmm, feels so good." The sensation moved to her stomach, then the top of her thighs. Large masculine fingers manipulated the muscles. "Finn, Finn," she murmured.

"What did you say?"

That voice wasn't Finn's. Scarlett pulled herself from the dream and opened her eyes. The name of man crouched by her legs evaded her for a moment. "Oh, hi Ted."

"You don't have to sound so excited to see me."

Scarlett stifled a sigh before it escaped. She felt like a cat in heat the way men swarmed around her the past two days, and their ages varied from the very old to the young hunks.

The most persistent, other than Mac, had to be the young stud that currently knelt by her legs as

if he worshiped at an altar; suntan lotion poised and ready to apply as his offering. Better yet, maybe this hard body with perfect abs made a better presentation for the gods, but not to her. Way too young.

“I’m surprised to wake up from a nap and find you applying sunscreen to my body.”

“You were getting red but looked so peaceful I thought if I put some protection on you carefully, you’d sleep through it.”

The shaggy sun bleached hair framed his face and set off the grin he flashed her way. Scarlett was sure this melted the hearts of many a young woman and kept his sex life active, but it wasn’t working on her. She was no dewy-eyed young thing, unlike this one. He probably wasn’t out of his twenties.

“Okay, enough.” From the look on his face Scarlett knew he thought the comment had been directed to him. “I mean enough sun. I didn’t intend to fall asleep. And thank you for trying to see I didn’t fry.” She packed up her towel and books.

“Let me buy you a drink.” The confident swagger of his body belied the doubt she read in his eyes. Scarlett felt touched.

“A cold drink would taste good. I accept.”

Over drinks Scarlett discovered she was on the money when she guessed his age. He turned twenty-nine the month before. Tired of the mooning, puppy-dog looks he sent she decided to nip it in the bud right now.

“Why’ve you been hanging around me Ted? There are a lot of beautiful women here closer to your age. It’s pretty obvious I’m old enough to be your mother.”

Ted’s smile faded before he looked her in the eyes. “I don’t think you’re old enough to be my mother. Sure, maybe you’re a few years older than me, but I happen to like older women.”

“Why? Are they an easier conquest because they’re grateful to have the attention of a good-looking young stud like you?” That sounded rude even to her ears, but before she could apologize, Ted jumped to his own defense.

“Hey, I’m not a stud. When I make love with a woman it’s for pleasure. Mine and hers. It doesn’t matter the age. But since you asked, I like older women because they’re more interesting. In and out of bed.”

“I see.”

“No, I don’t think you do. The older women I’ve been involved with know who they are, what they want from life. They don’t want a man to help them discover themselves. They’re interested in things other than if their eye shadow is the right color to match their outfit, or what big bauble the

current man is going to buy them.”

How sweet. Scarlett kept the thought to herself. Why burst his bubble when it came to older women. He'd find out with time, they'd just learned to conceal their concern over eye shadow and baubles.

This conversation did give her food for thought. She knew the time had arrived to take her sunburned body home and face up to her real life issue. Her feelings for Finn Yates.

Finn couldn't believe Scarlett vanished. He stopped by her house on his way to work Saturday and there'd been no answer. He tried again on his way home. If he woke her up, all he could say was good. He couldn't sleep, so why should she. After a light came on in the house next door, he decided to stop pounding and get out of there before the police showed to play fifty questions. This was just the kind of neighborhood where someone would call the cops when they heard pounding on a neighbor's door in the middle of the night.

Dammit. Why had Scarlett blown him off? Kicked him out? He knew she enjoyed their love making. No woman faked screams that loud, at least he didn't think they would. He didn't see Scarlett as a one night stand type of woman either. *So, what the hell is the problem?*

Finn dialed the number he'd committed to heart over the last few days, only to be told by the girl answering phones Dulcie wasn't in. He turned to see who had come into the tavern and smiled.

“Speak of the devil. I just tried to call you.”

Dulcie propped on a barstool and laughed. “Imagine that. You been calling me half a dozen times a day all week. Let's see, this would have been three or is four times today?”

Finn hung his head. He'd made a pest out of himself in the effort to find out where Scarlett had gone.

“The answers still the same handsome. Haven't heard a word. What I want to know is what happened between you two?”

“Dulcie, you know I'm not going to tell you details. We had a misunderstanding and we need to discuss it. I think we can work it out if I can ever find her.”

“I wish you luck. Hate to see two people I care about hurting each other.” Dulcie patted Finn's hand before changing the subject. “We got another problem to figure out here too. How're we gonna do this retirement party for Hank without him finding out about it?”

This challenge Finn had an answer for. “I told Hank I need him to cover for me a few hours Saturday night. I let him think there’s a hot date in the works. He’ll be in to relieve me around seven.”

“And here I was thinking you’re just decoration for this place. Looks like you got a brain under that beautiful head of hair. I’ll be over with some of the girls to decorate around six. Gonna miss my old friend, but he deserves the rest.” Dulcie got up and rubbed her behind. “You’d think as much padding as I got back there sitting on them hard stools wouldn’t make my ass go dead. See you later handsome.”

Finn watched Dulcie amble out the door. Scarlett, Scarlett. Where are you?

“Lord, girl. I didn’t expect to see you until Monday, if then.” Dulcie stood in front of Scarlett’s desk. “Like the nose. Matches the hair.”

Scarlett’s fingers touched her nose as she watched Dulcie retreat to her office. It’s a little sunburned but doesn’t glow in the dark, does it? *Damn, should’ve used more sunscreen.*

Dulcie had a handful of messages in one hand and the phone in the other as Scarlett closed the door and took a seat across from her boss.

“I guess this means you want to talk about something,” Dulcie replaced the phone and tossed the messages on her desk.

“Yes.” Scarlett fidgeted in her seat, not sure where to begin. “I went away to think about something that happened. As you know I had a date with Bubba that didn’t go well...”

Scarlett shared an edited version of the past week with Dulcie. “So, you see my confusion here, right? I’m a lot older than Finn, but he’s one of the nicest men I’ve ever met.”

“Not to mention he’s easy on the eyes, too.” Dulcie grinned.

“That too, and he’s—,” Scarlett bit down on her tongue before she blurted out how good in bed Finn was.

“Sugar, from where I’m sitting you gotta be nuts.”

Uhhoh, Dulcie looked like she was getting wound up for a sermon.

“Excuse me? Nuts for thinking I’m too old to have a serious relationship with a man young enough—,”

“You heard me. Don’t think I stuttered on that one. Here’s your chance to have happiness and you’re willing to throw it away because of a little thing like age. For your information, Miss Know it

All, he's forty-two. If I recall right, now correct me if I'm wrong here cause math never was my strong subject, that makes him twelve years younger than you."

"Yeah."

"Then what's the big deal. Don't you read the magazines these days? A bunch of them movie stars are hooking up with younger men. Look at Demi and Ashton. She's at least a good fifteen years older 'an him. Look at Cher and Bo Derek. Sugar, you're not the first woman to ever be attracted to a younger man. Bout time women reaped some of the same benefits as men, if you ask me."

"You mean older men and younger women?"

"Exactly. If they got the money and power, don't seem to matter how old they are, they get the young women chasing them. You need to stop this nonsense right now."

Scarlett watched as Dulcie appeared to gather her thoughts. "Let me tell you how's it's been around here this week. That man you been frettin' about has been driving me crazy with phone calls."

"Why has he been calling you?"

"To see if I'd heard anything from you. He's been worried sick. You need to march you butt across the street right now and let him know you're okay."

"I can't do that Dulcie. Not right now. Maybe later." Scarlett scurried out of the office before Dulcie started on her again. She would go see Finn, but in her own time. Right now she had a week's worth of work to catch up on.

"You ready?" Scarlett looked up from the computer screen to find Dulcie with a box of what looked like crepe paper and other types of decoration.

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to come help me get this decoration stuff put up for Hank's party tonight. I want it done before he arrives."

"Oh. I didn't know there was a party. Do you really need me?"

"Dang right I need you. Now get off your butt and let's get this done."

Scarlett's heart pounded so loudly it sounded like a drum in her ears as she entered the tavern. Her eyes locked with Finn's across the room. It seemed only a matter of seconds before he stood beside her.

"Are you all right?"

“Fine.”

“Fine. That’s all you’ve got to say after I’ve almost gone insane with worry.”

Saved a reply by Dulcie’s call from across the room, “You two sort out your problems later. I need help over here now.” Scarlett rushed to carry out the command.

The last streamer was hung as people started to arrive. Once again Scarlett had been saved from Finn’s questions. Dulcie pressed a glass of wine in her hands, and she joined in the “surprise” as Hank walked through the door.

Hank wiped away tears when Finn presented him with a picture of the tavern signed by all the regulars, and laughed until he cried again when Dulcie presented him with a lifetime pass for free calls to Call Me when he needed a woman’s touch.

“At least a woman’s voice since I’ll be too far way for touch,” he leered back at Dulcie.

Scarlett delayed her departure as the party wound down, having made the decision to talk with Finn. She wasn’t surprised when he came up behind her.

“Can we talk now?”

“Yes. I’m sorry if you were worried. I needed time to get things sorted out in my mind?”

“Did you accomplish it?”

“I think so. Let me help you clean up here and then we can talk.”

“Oh, you two go on and get out of here. Hank and me’ll do whatever needs to be done.” Dulcie handed Scarlett her purse.

“I left that at the office.”

“I know. Had to go get mine, so brought yours too. Now, say goodnight Dulcie.”

“Good night, Dulcie.”

Outside, Scarlett shivered in the night chill. Finn wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him. His kiss curled her toes just as she remembered.

“We’ve got more to do than talk,” she whispered in his ear, “but not here in the parking lot.”

Chapter Eleven

Scarlett walked through the door and was immediately impressed with Finn's home. When he suggested they go to his place, she expected something along the lines of what a bartender's salary could swing. This was anything but.

Finn interrupted her inspection by covering her mouth with his. Damn, this man could kiss like nobody's business. The quick little laps he applied around the outside of her mouth reminded her of puppy kisses. Maybe not the sexiest thought in the world, but definitely one that delighted her.

Those thoughts disappeared when the sweet licks turned into scorching demand that seared her to the very core when he covered her mouth again. She matched him thrust for thrust; her tongue warred with his until she pulled away. This time it would not be all about her. Two could play the game.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" Finn reached out again.

Scarlett stepped back and smiled. "No. You do everything right. That's the problem. I think we need to slow down a little is all. Why don't you show me around? Is this really your place?"

"It's mine for the moment."

"Hmmm." Scarlett followed him from room to room as he gave her the grand tour. Interesting she thought, he's too embarrassed to tell me this isn't his. He must be house-sitting or maybe it belongs to his parents. Whoever owned this place really had excellent taste and liked quality; that much was obvious.

The tub in the master bathroom off the bedroom that Finn used looked like a swimming pool. On the way out the bedroom door Scarlett paused. I'll join you in a few minutes. I want to freshen up.

"Sure. Why don't I go open a bottle of wine, or would you prefer champagne?"

"Champagne. That sounds wonderful. Yes, definitely make it champagne." Finn leaned over and stole a brief kiss before he headed off toward the back of the house.

Scarlett waited a moment to make sure he was gone. Her palms were sweaty at the thought of what she had in mind. A quick search of her purse revealed the small chocolate bar she wanted. She put the candy on the nightstand by bed after she opened the wrapper. Next she inspected the clothes selection in the large walk-in closet. No surprise here she thought as she surveyed the minimal choice in front of her.

"Ahhha. This should work."

Stripped of her own clothes, Scarlett pulled on the man's white shirt. A glance around the room as she rolled up the sleeves drew her attention to the gas fireplace in the corner. A quick study of the wall determined the switch to turn it on. She dimmed the lights, only leaving the lamp by a reading chair, on low.

"Perfect." She stood back and admired her handiwork.

"Scarlett, are you read..." Finn stopped and looked around the room, then at the woman wearing his shirt. "Wow."

"Like?"

"Yeah."

"The room does look pretty good if I do say so myself." The devil made her say that, sure the glow in his eyes didn't come from the dimly lit room.

"Room. Who cares about the room? It's you I see, and all I can say is that shirt never looked so good on me."

Scarlett smiled and walked over to him and took one of the glasses of champagne he had in his hands. She took a sip to calm her nerves, determined to see her plan through. The talk with Dulcie helped make things clear. This man she wanted. Screw the age factor. Enjoy the moment had become her mantra. She'd deal with tomorrow when it got here. Another thing Melanie wouldn't do.

"Good champagne." Scarlett sat her glass down and took the one Finn held and placed it beside hers. She stepped forward and pressed her body against his, feeling his strong reaction through their clothes. She ground her hips against the hardness and received her reward from his audible gasp.

"You're playing with fire and could get burned." Finn's husky voice whispered in her ear.

"I hope so. Oh, I really hope so,"

Scarlett eased a hand down his back and slowly pulled on his shirt. One side escaped the jeans and she snaked her hand under and caressed smooth skin. Her fingers trailed to the planes of Finn's abs where they seemed to think they had free reign to explore before tackling the belt.

The belt buckle wanted to be stubborn, but she conquered it too, sliding the jeans zipper down, inch by inch. Finn moaned as her fingers slid under the waist of his jockeys, playing in the downy fur that started in a reversed V just below his belly button.

Finn gave up his efforts to distract her and allowed Scarlett to have her way. Eyes closed, head dropped back, he moaned and groaned as she explored.

Scarlett stopped and stepped away. The sound of a strangled sob emitted from his throat.

"Come." She took his hand and led him toward the bed. Sitting on the bed she watched him

shuck his clothes. His body equaled that of the young hunk from the beach. His cock stood at full attention, throbbing with readiness. The sheer maleness of him caused Scarlett's breath to catch before she pulled him down beside her. Once again the battle of tongues began, each fought to be the victor.

He pulled his mouth from hers and tried to move down her body.

"Oh no you don't. My turn. Just lay back and relax." Scarlett started the descent down his body, her mouth lapping, licking, nibbling, while her hands wandered, stroked, and caressed every inch of the territory in front of her.

Sitting back on her heels, she admired the pulsating organ that danced before her eyes. It was truth or dare time. This was her goal; to give a blow job he would remember. After all, she'd spent several days practicing on the chocolate penis Andrea had given her.

Now faced with the real thing put a different perspective on the situation. Sweetmeat it might be, but if she expected to get that shaft down her throat, then it would require incentive. She reached over and picked up the small candy bar she'd placed on the nightstand. Placing it between her hands she waited to let the chocolate soften.

Finn's puzzled expression told her he didn't know what she had in mind until her hands reached for the prize. Realization spread over his face as Scarlett slipped her hands around his magnificent specimen of manhood. Chocolate spread over the head and down the rod as she stroked and twisted.

"Oh my god." Finn's breathing became labored.

Scarlett placed her lips over the tip and put a hand at the base, and the lollipop quivered in response.

"Take it easy darling. I only have so much control."

A Cheshire cat grin spread over Scarlett's lips as she paused in her administrations. Resuming with light tongue flicks on the tip, she moved to swirls around the top, pausing to nibble on the most sensitive part.

Slow licks upward from the base had Finn writhing under her, his thighs rubbing against her heated sex. Seeing him so turned on triggered all her buttons and gave her the desire to take him over the edge.

This is it girl. Scarlett's sucked the hot cock into her mouth and slid downward. The taste of Finn and chocolate melded into one, musky and sweet. Gradual upward movements and sucking downward had him squirming.

"Not yet," she murmured and her mouth slid off the pulsating cock. "No rest for the wicked and you've been very wicked."

Her hand caressed his scrotum before her lips captured a testicle, inhaling it into her mouth as her tongue slowly rolled, savoring the taste. Scarlett pulled back, allowing the firm ball to escape, centimeter by centimeter, and then applied the same detail to the neglected testicle.

A shift of her head and she moved to again attack the red flag waving in her face.

“Wait.”

Scarlett paused and looked into Finn’s eyes. He reached out and pulled her upward along his torso as if she were a fluff of down.

“As much as your mouth delights me, I want to be inside you.” His lips claimed hers, demanding, taking, as he rolled them over and used his knee to push her legs apart.

Gone was the gentle, controlled lover Scarlett knew. She felt herself devoured by the animal, the man no longer controlled, now released in abandonment. Finn pushed into her with force and she bit her lip to stifle the grunt of pain. He must have sensed it because he paused.

“No. Hard. I want you to fuck me hard.”

Her body moved under him, urging him to comply with her demand. He did, each thrust more demanding than the last until both of them plummeted over the edge.

To soften her screams, Scarlett grabbed a corner of the pillow and stuffed it in her mouth. She loved each sensation that raced through her body and melted her mind as she cascaded into oblivion.

“Oh, oooohhhh, oooooohhhh,” Finn howled with the wolves as his semen spewed into her waiting well. He collapsed against her, his breath ragged.

Bathed in the afterglow, they held each other in wonder.

“That was amazing.” Finn tightened his hold and kissed the top of Scarlett’s head.

“For me too.” Scarlett sighed with contentment. She battled in an effort to keep her eyes open.

“Wake up sleepy head.”

Finn’s smiling face floated before her bleary eyes. Oh, good heavens, it was morning and she’d spent the night with this man.

She smelled the coffee he waved in front of her nose. “Ooooo, I’ll follow you anywhere for coffee.”

“Thought so. Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll go down and make breakfast.”

“You cook too.”

I’m a man of many talents,” he leered as he moved in for a kiss.

“Ouch,” the coffee splashed out onto Scarlett’s hand.

“Sorry,” he took the cup from her and placed it on the nightstand and examined her hand for damage.

“Kiss the booboo and make it well.” A thrill raced through Scarlett’s body as he honored her request.

“Now, you shower.” Finn pointed toward the bathroom. “Me cook.” He thumped his chest with his fist.

“We could take a shower together.”

“Had mine. Besides, we need to talk. So take care of business and I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

Scarlett made a face and threw a pillow at his retreating back. Another round of lovemaking was more to her liking, but maybe not. If she didn’t get to the bathroom soon her bladder would burst.

“What’s this important issue we have to discuss?” Scarlett wanted to know as she entered the kitchen.

When the fog cleared and she thought about how oddly Finn acted this morning, fear clutched her heart. What if he’d decided he didn’t want to continue their relationship? Maybe a one-night stand satisfied his curiosity about older women.

“You get right to the point, don’t you?”

I want to know if my heart is to be broken, she wanted to scream at him, but instead shrugged her shoulders. “Sure, may as well.”

“Okay. Scarlett, I think you know how I feel about you.” Finn started to pace.

If I did do you think I’d be sitting here feeling like my body is trapped in an iceberg?

“Can’t really say I do.”

The pacing stopped and he looked her in the eyes. “I thought it was obvious. I’m in love with you.”

Scarlett stared at Finn in stunned silence, then burst into tears. “I’m sorry.” She frantically wiped tears from her eyes. “It’s just...I thought...I thought you were going to dump me. Now to hear that you love me instead...it’s a little over whelming.”

“I don’t understand why you think I wanted to dump you. Hell woman, I’m crazy about you and I need to know how you feel about me.”

How did she feel about Finn? Crazy about him for sure. The sex couldn't get much better and he definitely fell into the eye-candy category. On top of all that, add smart, sweet, and probably the most understanding man she'd ever come across. Add in the fact that when he entered a room, she only saw him, everything and everyone else disappeared. Damn. She loved him. Oh my god, she was in love with him.

"I think I love you too. No, I don't think, I know—I love you." Scarlett threw herself into Finn's arms.

He squeezed her tightly, and then took a deep breath. "There's something else you should know too. It's about this house."

"Don't Finn, its okay. We can live in my house."

"Why wouldn't you want to live here? I mean your house is nice, but this one is larger and has a few more amenities."

"Finn. You don't have to keep up the act. I know a bartender couldn't afford a house like this. I realized when we came in last night you were house-sitting for someone."

Scarlett stood shocked at the laughter. Finn laughed until tears ran down his face and he used the back of his arm to wipe them away.

"Oh Sweetheart, there is much more to tell you. This is my house. No, my bartending salary didn't buy it. In fact, I don't collect a salary for tending bar. I own half the bar and if there's a profit at year end, Hank and I split it."

Scarlett looked around in wonder. "Surely, the profits from Hank's Place aren't enough to afford this place."

"You're right about that. I made a lot of my money before I became Hank's partner. The name Finn Yates doesn't ring a bell for you?" Finn looked at her strangely.

"Finn Yates." Scarlett tried to remember where she'd heard that name. Something to with a big business sale; it was all over the news several years ago. "Are you related to him?"

"Darling, I'm not related to him. I am him. I'm Finn Yates. Boy Wonder who sold the business he started in his parent's garage for more money than he knows what to do with."

"You're filthy rich? What're you doing tending bar?"

"Enjoying myself and not dealing with a lot of corporate bullshit." Finn grinned and pulled her in for another kiss.

"Stop." Scarlett pushed away. "Let me understand this. You'd rather tend bar in a small town than participate in high powered meetings and dinners."

“I would, I do. Though there is one thing that would make my current life perfect. That’s having you share it with me.”

Finn dropped down on one knee. “Scarlett Marks, will you marry me?”

Chapter Twelve

The mist rolled in and fogged her brain. A lifetime passed before her eyes in a matter of seconds. This lifetime consisted of bending herself to meet the needs and desires of others. First Mama, who knew what, was best for Scarlett. Then Joe who told her how she should think and feel.

Scarlett could never go back to that life and as she looked at the man on his knees in front of her, fear clutched her heart. The fear of again being consumed by someone else.

“No,” she whispered. “No, I won’t marry you.”

“I don’t understand. You love me and I love you. I want to share my life with you.”

Ache surged through Scarlett at the pain in Finn’s voice. She had to explain, to make him understand.

Her hands cupped his face, turning it up for their eyes to meet. “Finn, I’ve spent most of my life married. I went from my Mama telling me what to do, to a husband who thought he knew what was best for me. The biggest decisions I had to make centered around dinner and when to do the spring cleaning.”

She watched as understanding replaced the pain in Finn’s eyes. “I can’t go back to that way of life. I’ve found myself. I love my job, my friends, and the freedom to think for myself. I can’t—no I won’t mold myself to what another person wants me to be.”

“Scarlett I don’t want you to change. I love you the way you are. I liked the timid, sweet lady I met, but I fell in love with the feisty, smart woman she grew into.”

“You say that now, but what happens when you want me to drop what I’m doing because what you want to do is more important? How will you feel about coming home to a house that’s not been cleaned, or dinner not waiting because I’ve been at work all day?”

“I say we keep the housekeeper I have now and you’ve forgotten I can cook. There’s also restaurants, and trust me, we’ll have enough money to go out to eat when we feel like it. Honey, I’m looking for a partner, not a maid. I want to grow old with you.”

“You seem to forget. I am old now. I’ve beat you to it.”

“Fuck the age thing. Don’t bring that up again. You’re younger than me in a lot of ways. You’re younger than a lot of people half your age. What you need to focus on right now is how’re we going to resolve you refusing to marry me?”

Scarlett silently contemplated the situation. If she held her ground, rejecting Finn's proposal then she would lose the man she loved. Her first and probably only true love in this lifetime.

On the other hand, giving in to his wants would start the same pattern she'd lived all her life. She didn't want to lose Finn, but she wouldn't lose herself again. The solution hit her like a brick between the eyes.

"I won't marry you, at least not at this point in time, but I would consider living together if you'll accept that."

Finn didn't respond immediately. Scarlett held her breath. She wouldn't push him to accept her terms. He had to do what felt right for him.

"Okay. If that's the only way I can have you, then that's how we'll do it. You're too important to me not to have you in my life. Live together it is."

The breath Scarlett had been holding whooshed out, letting her fill her lungs again before she threw herself into Finn's waiting arms.

Finn swung her around the kitchen, and they laughed like children. When he returned her feet to the floor with a quick kiss on the nose, he grinned.

"How about we retire to the bedroom to celebrate and then..."

"And then what?"

"Then we start moving your things in here."

"So soon?"

"You bet your ass lady. There is no way I'm giving you time to change your mind."

Dulcie listened as her new office manager fielded a problem one of the girls had dumped on her. The ease with which it was accomplished impressed Dulcie as did everything else about this confident, striking woman who ran the front office with precession and compassion.

Yes, the little wren Church Lady was gone, replaced by someone far better—Scarlett. Though occasionally Dulcie did miss the little wren.

"Dulcie, you've got a phone call." Scarlett stood in the door, a grin confirming who called. "I'll close the door so you can have privacy."

Yeah, Scarlett had changed and along with that change had come love. She and Finn appeared to have a solid relationship. True partners in every since of the word.

Dulcie watched the blinking button, telling her she had a call holding. On the other end was the only man she'd ever loved. And he could never be hers for keeps. Never show the pain, the demand she made on herself every morning when she opened her eyes. She took a deep breath and forced a smile on her lips as she picked up the phone.

“Hello Sugar, how's things going with you?”