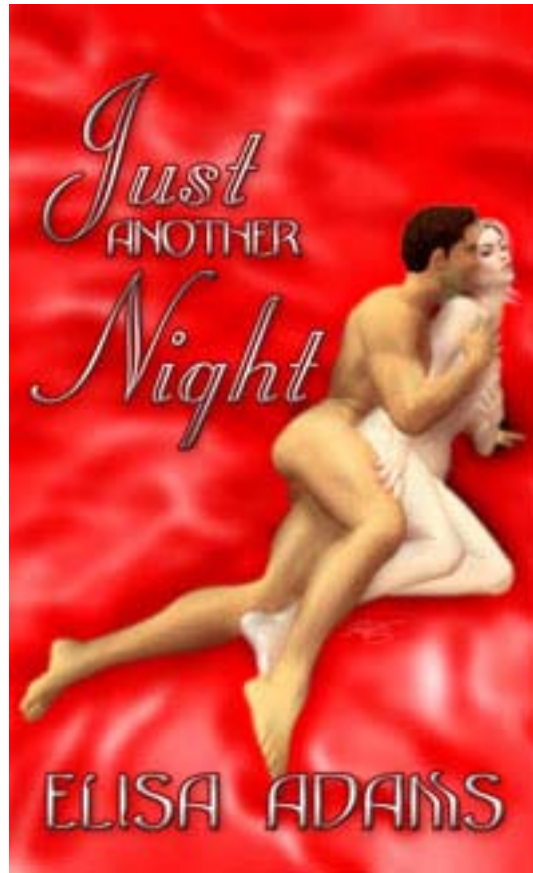




This ebook has been digitally marked by Digimarc Corp. If you purchased this ebook from a source other than Ellora's Cave or one of its legal affiliates, contact legal@ellorascave.com immediately. Please note that reading this title without first purchasing it through legitimate means is against international laws and will result in heavy fines. As always, our authors thank you for your support and patronage.



JUST ANOTHER NIGHT

An Ellora's Cave, Inc. electronic publication in association with author:
Elisa Adams

MS Reader (LIT) ISBN # 1-84360-205-9
Mobipocket (PRC) ISBN # 1-84360-206-7
Other available formats (no ISBNs assigned):
Adobe (PDF), Rocketbook (RB), & HTML

All Rights Reserved. <http://www.ellorascave.com>
© Copyright Elisa Adams, 2002.

Ellora's Cave
USA & U.K.

This book/e-book may not be reproduced in whole or in part by email forwarding, copying, fax, or any other mode of communication without author and publisher permission.

Edited by Martha Punches.
Artwork by Darrell King.

Chapter 1

"I hope you know what you're doing," Erica said to her image reflected in the mirror in front of her. "Because if you aren't careful, you could get yourself into a lot of trouble."

She nervously tucked a strand of sleek blond hair behind her ear, swiped a third coat of double black mascara over her lashes, and blotted her deep red lipstick with a tissue from the box tucked under the vanity counter.

What she saw in the mirror scared her. She didn't even recognize herself. Her eyes, normally a clear blue, appeared almost navy with the dark eyeliner and glittery shadow she'd caked around them. She'd rouged her cheeks with red to accentuate her barely-there cheekbones, but she had a feeling she might have gone a little overboard.

The lips were the kicker. She had full lips to begin with, something she wasn't exactly crazy about showing off. But with the *notice-me* lipstick, she looked like she'd gotten collagen injections. But according to the salesgirl at the makeup counter, this look was sure to attract some attention.

"This could be the best night of my life," she said to her reflection, testing a small smile, "Or the absolute worst."

Giving herself a final once-over, Erica decided she was as ready as she would ever be. She snapped off the bathroom light and walked into her hotel room on shaking legs. She'd barely made it to the bed when she found she had to sit down and get her bearings. This just wouldn't do. If she was going to pull this off tonight, she was going to have to get control of her raging insecurities. Other women did this sort of thing all the time. Why was she having so much trouble?

"Come on," Erica prodded herself, standing up and self-consciously tugging on the hem of her too-short red dress. She had the sudden urge to change into a pair of jeans and her favorite sweatshirt. Maybe then her body might relax.

This dress simply wasn't comfortable. It was sexy as hell, even she could tell that much, but comfort had obviously not been in the designer's mind when he created the fiery velvet concoction. But what choice did she have? She needed a come-hither dress tonight-it was the only way this was going to work. Men simply did not look at Erica Blake as a sexy siren. They never had, and they never would; at least not without a lot of help. Tonight she was going to do something about that.

The dress hugged Erica's curves in all the right places, and the salesgirl at the boutique had told her she would have every male with a pulse beating a path to her door when she wore it. That was exactly what Erica was counting on. Only she didn't need every man on the planet. One would do just fine. Tall, dark, and sexy as all get out. Just for tonight, those were her only criteria.

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms vigorously, trying in vain to warm her chilled body. She'd come too far to chicken out now. She'd bought the dress, bathed in jasmine scented water, spent an hour on her hair and makeup, and even rented a pricey hotel room, one she could barely afford. She was bound and determined to do this, and it was going to happen tonight. Her friends thought she needed more excitement in her life, and she was going to get it, even if it killed her.

She needed sex. Dirty, anonymous sex with someone she'd never met before and would never see again. Incredible sex that she'd never forget. Tonight, she was going to get exactly what she needed.

The only thing missing from her plan was a ready and willing man, preferably an irresistibly sexy one. She hoped one of those would be easy to come by in the bar across the street. From what she'd heard about the place, finding a good man willing to spend the night with a woman was never a problem. Erica intended to put that theory to the test, if she could convince herself to actually take a step out of her hotel room, that is.

She wanted to do this. She really did. It had *nothing* to do with the fact that everyone thought she was dull. It had *nothing* to do with the fact that her first serious

boyfriend had played her for a total fool. It had *nothing* to do with the fact that she'd never experienced good sex, not really.

Tonight was about Erica Blake figuring out who she was as a woman, who she could be if she let go of her silly inhibitions and tried something, or someone, new. Tonight was all about Erica. No one else mattered. She could be whoever she wanted to be, and who she wanted to be was a woman who actually felt alive. She would finally bury the aching emptiness she'd felt ever since Carl left, at least for tonight.

"It's now or never," Erica said. She felt a sudden rush of excitement. She grabbed her handbag and keys and hurried out the door before she could change her mind. Tonight would be a night to remember, she would make sure of it. Erica Blake was finally going to know what it meant to live.

* * * * *

Erica closed her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath before she pulled open the heavy wooden door of the bar and stepped inside. The loud music, chatter of the customers, and cigarette smoke that hung in the air overwhelmed her, caused her nerve to slip more than a little.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She could do this. It wasn't that hard. Millions of women did it all the time. She walked over to the bar and took a seat on one of the few empty stools.

Almost as soon as she sat down a short, balding man slid onto the seat next to her.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, thank you." Erica forced herself to unclench her fists, which she had made into tight balls the second she heard his grating voice.

"Just one drink?"

He was definitely *not* the type of man she was interested in. Not tonight. Erica sighed and looked away. "I don't think so."

"Maybe we could dance, then." He took her hand in his sweaty one and tried to get her to stand up. She pulled her hand away and wiped her palm on her thigh. "Look, I'm not interested."

Maybe this wasn't the right kind of place to find the man of her fantasies. Maybe she should try somewhere a little less, well, busy, like the library or the grocery store. Maybe she'd be better off just turning around and going home.

"Why not?" He had the gall to look genuinely confused. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yes. I am." Erica couldn't have thought of a better excuse on her own. "Now if you'll pardon me..."

"I think I'll just stick around until he gets here." The man made himself comfortable on the stool next to Erica's. "Then if he doesn't show up you won't have to sit here alone."

"How kind of you." Erica rolled her eyes.

"My name's Trent." He held out his hand, which Erica absolutely refused to touch again.

"That's nice." Erica turned her head in the opposite direction and drummed her nails against the bar.

"What's your name?" He just couldn't take a hint.

"I'm involved with somebody."

"Well, he's not here now, is he?" Trent's oily smile gave her the creeps.

She was seriously considering scrapping her plan altogether when she saw him. She knew he was the right man by the way her heart thumped loudly against the wall of her chest and her pulse kicked into overdrive. He was sitting at the other end of the bar, toying with the label on the bottle of beer in front of him. He had to be the best looking man Erica had ever seen, and he seemed to be alone. Erica had found her perfect man. Now she just had to convince him they were destined to spend an incredible evening together in each other's arms.

“Actually, he is.” She pointed to where her dream guy was sitting. “Thanks for keeping me company.”

She flashed the jerk her biggest smile and walked across the room.

Absorbed only in the drink in front of him, he didn’t look like he was waiting for anyone. That was a good sign. Mustering all the courage she could manage, Erica sauntered her way to the bar, or at least did the best she could on her four-inch heels, and slid onto the stool next to him. She ordered a red wine from the bartender, stealing sidelong glances at the Greek God on the next stool.

The man was sheer physical perfection. Just sitting next to him, Erica could feel electricity humming in the air around him. Her fingers itched to get tangled in his thick black hair, and she could just imagine what his strong hands would feel like running all over her body. His broad shoulders and muscled physique suggested someone who knew how to take care of himself. Erica liked that in a man. Now she just needed to get up the courage to talk to him.

“So what’s a pretty lady like you doing in a place like this?” the man asked, catching her off guard. Lost in her own fantasies, she hadn’t noticed that he’d been looking at her until he spoke.

“E-excuse me?” Erica fumbled for a sexy reply but unable to think of anything. When his dark gaze met hers, all thoughts were erased from her mind. She mentally berated herself for acting so inexperienced. This was *not* the way to catch a man.

“This just doesn’t seem like your kind of place,” he continued slowly, his piercing green eyes never leaving hers.

God, he just smoldered. Just a few sentences and the man had her damn near hypnotized.

“I come here all the time,” she lied, hoping that he didn’t notice. Fat chance. She was fumbling this whole thing badly, but she couldn’t seem to help it. She was way out of her league, and she had the sinking feeling he knew it.

"Yeah, sure you do," the man said, his voice so deep and sexy Erica's legs turned to jelly. She was glad she was sitting down, or she might have embarrassed herself further by fainting at his feet.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" he asked. His fingers snaked out and brushed against the back of her hand. His touch sent little jolts of electricity through Erica's entire body.

"Carolyn." She recited the first name that popped into her head. It figured that it would be Carolyn. Her best friend, the woman who had convinced her to do this tonight. Carolyn would get a month's worth of laughs when she heard this story, and if Erica was ever brave enough to fess up about her embarrassing failure.

"Carolyn," the man echoed huskily, and Erica thought she caught a glimpse of humor in his voice. Could he tell she wasn't being truthful? Was she really that obvious? She looked down at her drink, unable to meet his knowing gaze any longer.

"What are you doing here, Carolyn? Are you looking for something in particular?" He hooked a finger under her chin and lifting her eyes back to his.

The heat, the blatant longing she found in his eyes bolstered her confidence.

"Yes, you," Erica said before she could stop herself.

The second the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could take them back. She just wasn't cut out to be a modern woman. Instead of sounding sexy and desirable, she'd only sounded pitifully ridiculous.

The man stared at her, mouth slightly agape, for what seemed like an eternity before he spoke again.

"Me?" he asked, looking genuinely surprised. "I don't know you, do I? I think I would have remembered a lady as beautiful as you."

Beautiful? No one had called Erica that before besides her own father. She'd been called conservative, classy, even pretty on the rare occasions that she took the time to dress up. She knew she wasn't hideous, but she certainly wasn't a fashion model, either.

She couldn't describe herself as tall or short, fat or thin. She pretty much fell somewhere in the middle with everything. She was average, and on any other night she'd be happy to keep it that way.

But he thought she was beautiful. A slow smile crept across her lips at this man's words. Maybe this night would be all she imagined, after all.

"You don't know me." Erica wondered where her newfound courage had come from. "But do you want to?"

"Hell, yes," he answered, his hand making slow circles up Erica's arm. "Can I buy you another drink?"

"No, thanks," Erica said softly. She didn't want an alcohol-induced haze to ruin her memories of the evening. "One's enough for me."

He chuckled softly as Erica lifted the glass to her lips. She grimaced at the taste of the dark red liquid-she'd never been much of a drinker. After a few attempts at looking sophisticated, Erica finally gave up and gulped down the contents of the entire glass. Eyes watering, she set the glass on the bar in front of her and tried to look like she did this sort of thing all the time.

"You don't like wine, do you?" Her stranger picked up Erica's wine glass and swirled the last drop of liquid around in the bottom. He lifted the glass to his own lips, right on Erica's lipstick mark, and drank the last bit. "That's too bad. It's a good wine. Definitely worth savoring."

"Really?" She hoped she didn't sound as clueless as she felt. Her experience with wine was limited to the jug grocery store variety.

"Really." He stared at the glass. "Definitely not what I expected here."

Erica couldn't help but wonder if he was talking about her or the wine.

"Well, Carolyn," he said smoothly. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles gently. "You don't seem comfortable here. You want to go somewhere else?"

"I thought you'd never ask." She tried her best to flash him a sexy smile. She figured she must have pulled it off when he returned the smile with a devastating one of his own that caused heat to pool between her legs.

"Do you have anywhere special in mind?" he asked once they were outside standing on the sidewalk.

"I have a room across the street." Erica waved the key in his face. He took it from her hand and gave her a lopsided grin.

"Sounds perfect." He grabbed her hand and guided her across the street and into the lobby of the hotel.

When they got to her door, Erica was trembling with both fear and excitement. Was she really going to do this? Her decision was made when the stranger slid the key into to lock and opened the door, making a grand gesture to allow Erica to enter first. He followed Erica inside and closed the door behind him, but didn't come any further into the room.

Erica spun on him the moment the door was shut. Before they went any further, there were some things she needed to know about this sexy stranger.

"You're not married, are you?" she asked.

"Not anymore." The look of sadness that flashed across his eyes was enough to make Erica flinch.

"What happened?"

"Let's just say that my wife didn't understand what it meant to be faithful."

"I'm sorry," Erica mumbled. She knew what it was like to be trampled on, and she knew it didn't feel very good.

"You do like women, right?" Her next question caught even her by surprise. Well, she wanted to be thorough.

"What do you think?" He gestured to the fly of his pants. Erica's mouth gaped in surprise. He was already hard, and, judging by the bulge, he was very impressive.

He laughed softly at her obvious appreciation, running a hand through his hair.

"Yeah, I definitely like women," he said. "Especially blondes in red dresses who know exactly how to drive a man crazy."

Erica blushed at his statement and turned away to get her bearings. She'd heard that great sex was ninety percent a mind game, and this man seemed to know that better than anyone.

"What about you?" He caught her off guard once again. She turned to look at him, noticing he had a worried expression on his face. "Are you married?"

"Not even close."

"Good." He didn't sound like he believed her.

This was starting to get a little too personal. If Erica were smart, she would send this sexy stranger packing, gather her things, and drive back to her apartment and her sparse but familiar life before things got out of hand.

She mentally shoved that thought out of her mind. She'd come this far-why not go all the way? After the preparations she'd endured, she might as well try to have a good time. And she had found the man of her dreams, hadn't she?

Well, she really couldn't be sure of that. He was still a stranger. But she had found the man of her fantasies.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He gave her one last opportunity to change her mind.

"Yes," Erica answered breathlessly.

She wanted this; she wanted him, more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. He hadn't offered his name, but she didn't need to know. She didn't *want* to know. It didn't matter. She only wanted one night. After tonight, they would go their separate ways, never to see each other again. But for tonight, Erica wanted to know passion like she'd never felt before. She wanted to be desired. She wanted to feel sexy. This handsome stranger could do just that. He was exactly what Erica needed.

"Then you need to relax." He pointed to her arms. Erica hadn't realized until this moment that she'd crossed them over her chest.

"Put your arms down," he demanded, and Erica couldn't do anything but obey. Her arms dropped limply to her sides.

"Look at me." At his command she raised her eyes to meet his, and gasped at what she found in the murky depths of his gaze. She'd never known such passion was possible until tonight. It made her feel both vulnerable and empowered at the same time.

"I want to touch you," he said softly. "All over."

"Okay," was Erica's meek reply.

"I want to touch you with my hands," he said rakishly, "And my tongue. Everywhere."

Erica's knees buckled and she sat down on the edge of the bed.

He crossed the room in only a few steps, pulling her up from the bed and crushing her body against him. Burying his fingers in her long hair, he tilted her head back. He stared intently into Erica's eyes for what seemed like an eternity before his mouth found hers for a hungry kiss. She parted her lips, moaning softly as his tongue stroked into her mouth, igniting desire so powerful she had to hold on for dear life or be swept away on its waves.

Erica was struck by the power one kiss contained. A jolt of lust shot through her as if she had been hit by lightning, and her legs began to wobble uncontrollably. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, fighting to keep herself from falling to the ground. Her blood sang as his hands roamed her body, not missing an inch of aching flesh. The sensation was pure heaven. Erica didn't know how she'd lived without this feeling, how she had ever existed without this kind of passion. Her life would never be the same after tonight.

As his tongue delved deeper into her mouth, his fingers expertly slid down the zipper on Erica's dress. He lifted the spaghetti straps from her shoulders, and the dress

fell to the floor in a hiss of velvet. He released his hold on her and stepped back to admire what he'd uncovered.

"Beautiful," he whispered, almost reverently. He reached a hand out to graze the black lace that barely covered her breasts. "Incredible."

He then did something surprising. His hand, so gentle moments before, grasped the band of Erica's bra and tugged. The elastic gave way and snapped, leaving Erica exposed from the waist up. She gasped, a spark of fear running through her blood.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said roughly. He tossed the bra aside as if it were an ordinary rag.

He bent down took a nipple into his mouth, sucking hard, using his teeth and tongue to bring it to a hard peak. Then he trailed a path of kisses from one breast to the other, giving each of her nipples equal treatment.

Erica writhed and moaned under his touch. Her hands tunneled through his hair, pulling him closer. She couldn't stand much more of this. She was close, so close to coming now, and he was still fully dressed.

"You're wearing too many clothes," she said between ragged breaths.

"No," he said softly, grinning slyly. "*You* are. Take off your panties."

Erica hesitated just a moment before drawing in a shaky breath and grasping the waistband of her panties. She shimmied the black silk off her hips and down her thighs, letting them drop to the floor around her ankles.

"Give them to me," he demanded, holding out his hand.

Erica wanted to ask why, but she didn't dare. She wasn't sure she'd like the answer. She wondered if she was getting in too deep, but pushed the thought away. Something about him said she could trust him. He wouldn't hurt her. She knew it wasn't sensible to make such a judgment about a man she'd barely met, but instinct told her he was on the level.

"Please," he said when she hesitated.

She couldn't resist a man who begged. Stepping out of the silk panties, Erica bent down and picked them up off the floor.

She placed them in his outstretched hand, and a look of triumph passed across his steel-colored gaze.

"Turn around," he said, and she was helpless to disobey.

She turned slowly until she faced the far wall, then waited for his next instruction.

"Bend over and put your hands on the bed," he said, stepping closer.

Erica closed her eyes and leaned forward until her palms rested lightly on the mattress. She locked her knees in place and kept her back straight to keep herself from falling over. The fear was slowly being replaced by a new emotion-arousal. She'd never been so horny in her life.

She felt him push his knee between her legs, spreading them wider. Then he pushed gently on the center of her back, and she arched toward the bed against the pressure.

"Exquisite." His voice was practically a moan as he explored parts of her body few men had ever seen.

Erica inhaled sharply as something soft and warm slid up the inside of one of her thighs, then the other. She opened her eyes to see him dragging her panties along her legs. When he came to her mound, she nearly fell over.

"Easy, now." He wrapped one strong arm around her waist to steady her as his other hand, covered in black silk, found her clit.

Erica threw her head up and moaned as he rubbed back and forth, up and down along her clit, increasing and then decreasing the pressure of his strokes. She felt the stirrings of an orgasm low in her belly, and she fought for control. She didn't want to come, not yet. She wasn't ready for this to be over.

Just when she thought she couldn't take another second, his hands left her body and he stepped back.

"No, don't move," he said as Erica started to stand. "I'm not done with you yet."

Chapter 2

He pushed her down further, so that her forearms rested on the soft lace of the comforter and her forehead practically touched the mattress. As the cool air hit her pussy, she whimpered. She'd never felt so exposed.

"Let go," he said huskily as he dragged the silk of her panties lightly along her clit. "Come for me."

"Not yet," she moaned. She wanted him to continue forever. She fought against the rising sensation, fighting not to relinquish her control. It was a lost cause. She was ready, whether she wanted to be or not.

"It won't be the last time tonight, I promise."

With his words, Erica's control slipped and fell completely away. Just one more nudge of his thumb and Erica came. It was the best orgasm she'd ever experienced. Time stood still, maybe even stopped. She didn't know anything but this man and how he could make her feel.

When her breathing started to return to normal he lifted her up and turned her to face him, his mouth crushing down on hers hungrily. She melted into the kiss, her arms wrapping around his neck as she pulled him closer. Her nipples brushed the soft cotton of his tee shirt enticingly. To her surprise, she was ready for more.

Amazed at her own boldness, she yanked his shirt out of the waistband of his pants and pushed it up his chest. He broke the kiss to allow Erica to pull it over his head and drop it to the floor.

She ran her hands across the expanse of his chest and shoulders, savoring the feel of his perfect muscles under her hands. She stroked her fingers down his chest to his abdomen. When her fingers found the button of his jeans, his hands grasped her wrists and held her away.

"I want to touch you," Erica protested, but he didn't release her.

"If you touch me now, the night is going to be over." He said gently. "I want my cock inside you when I come."

"I want that, too," Erica agreed. "Now."

With a wild groan, he stripped off his remaining clothes and drew Erica to him once again. They fell to the bed together, skin against skin, in a delicious tangle of limbs. His mouth trailed a path of hot, wet kisses along her throat and down her body until he reached her breasts. He took his time with each one, bringing her nipples again to hard peaks.

Erica didn't think she could stand it anymore. She arched against him, offering him more. She needed him-now! If she waited another moment, she felt as if she might burst into flames. He found her pussy with his fingers and plunged them deep inside her, drawing them completely out before thrusting in again.

"Don't think, just feel," he whispered huskily. His thumb flicked her clit while his fingers slid deeper into her pussy.

It wasn't enough. She wanted his cock inside her, wanted it more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. Her body and soul ached with the need to join with this complete stranger.

"I can't wait much longer," he said gruffly, mirroring her thoughts.

"Don't wait," Erica replied, her voice hoarse with renewed passion. She handed him a condom packet from the nightstand next to the bed, yet another purchase for her one night of freedom, and he quickly tore open the wrapper and rolled it over his cock with shaking hands. Erica had a feeling that he had about as much control as she did right now, and that wasn't a whole lot. In another minute, she would gladly sell her soul to the devil to feel this man inside her body.

She reached between them and grasped his cock, finding him hard and ready. He throbbed in her hand as she stroked him, gently teasing and enticing. When she released him, he positioned the head of his cock against her pussy and entered her fully in one smooth stroke, making Erica cry out in lust, longing for more of what he had to

offer. She ground her hips against his urgently as she felt another orgasm already beginning deep in her body. She had never felt so complete.

“How can you do this to me, make me feel this way?” he asked. “I didn’t know this was possible.”

He withdrew and then thrust his cock into her again, harder this time. She planted her heels firmly on the bed and pushed her hips up so he filled her more completely. She ground her hips against him, shamelessly begging for him to make her come.

He groaned savagely, thrusting hard and fast. Erica had to struggle to keep up with his frantic pace. She was so close to coming, and she could sense that he was, too.

“I hope you’re ready.” He plunged his cock into her pussy one final time.

They came together, toppling over the edge of sanity into a world where nothing existed except pure sensation. They floated together, clinging to each other as they slowly came back to earth. He relaxed on top of her, burying his face in her neck and kissing her throat gently.

“Thank you,” he whispered so tenderly Erica almost wished there would be more nights like this one. But she couldn’t let herself get caught up in the moment. All she’d wanted was a single night in the arms of a passionate man, and she wouldn’t take any more than that. It wasn’t her right to demand more now that she knew what he had to offer.

But she would allow herself to bask in the afterglow of their beautiful lovemaking for a while. For now, she would just enjoy the feeling of being totally satisfied in every way. She could think about the consequences tomorrow.

“Thank you.” She ran her finger along the ridge of his shoulders. “You have no idea how much this night means to me.”

He looked into her eyes intently for a long moment, and then gave Erica an amazed smile.

"I think I have some idea," he chuckled. Planting a kiss on Erica's forehead, he rolled off her and lay on his back. He pulled her against his chest, and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Sleep," he commanded softly.

Erica was too tired and sated to disobey. She drifted off to sleep in the arms of her handsome stranger, the man she'd have just for the night.

* * * * *

Erica woke up slowly to the feel of something brushing against her side. Something nuzzled her neck as she cracked open her eyes.

"Hi there," her stranger whispered against her ear. Erica smiled a deep, sleepy smile and rolled toward him.

"Is it morning already?"

"It's about three." He moved her hair aside and kissed her throat. "I couldn't sleep."

"Umm," Erica mumbled.

His hand slid down her body and spread her legs. His mouth came down and gently bit her nipple. Erica was suddenly wide-awake. He parted her folds and slowly circled her clit. At the intense sensation, she arched against his hand.

She could feel his erection pressed against her thigh. She reached for him and took his cock in her palm.

"You do have more condoms, don't you?" he asked. "Because if you don't you're going to have to stop touching me right now."

"I have plenty."

"Good."

Erica rolled over and grabbed a condom out of the box. She tried to hand it to him, but he shook his head.

"You do it."

"Um, okay." She tried to control her shaking hands while she sheathed him.

He kissed her hard on the mouth and then slid two fingers into her pussy and out again. "I need to have you right now."

He rolled onto his back, taking her with him so she straddled his hips. He gripped her waist and pushed his cock into her pussy, then pulled her down on top of him. Erica moaned and raised herself up, then came down hard on his cock. She threw her head back as she rode him. She was determined to take everything he had to offer, because she knew she'd never get it like this again. This was definitely a once in a lifetime opportunity.

She came quickly and explosively-her body felt like it shattered into a million tiny pieces. He rolled her onto her back and wrapped her legs around his waist, then continued to thrust into her. He kissed her breasts roughly and dug his fingers into her thighs.

Erica gripped his upper arms as a second orgasm took her by surprise. He thrust his cock into her pussy to the hilt and came with a loud groan. He stilled on top of her, his eyes closed, as he breathed deeply. Erica let her body go limp on the mattress. He collapsed on top of her and kissed the side of her face.

They laid together for what seemed like an eternity before he raised his head and looked into her eyes.

"I'm really glad I met you," he whispered.

"Me, too." She couldn't even begin to describe what she was feeling. It was all too new. She was sure in the coming days, when she had time to think about it with a clear head, she was going to be embarrassed by what they'd done. But for now she just wanted to savor how he made her feel.

"Come here." He pulled her against his side. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in doing this again?"

Her whole body tensed. As much as she wanted to say yes, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Her best bet would be to stick to her original plan. She didn't have time for a relationship, even if the only thing it involved was sex. Besides, once she came to her senses she'd never be able to face this man again without feeling mortified.

"That's not a good idea," she said carefully.

"I figured you'd say that."

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just that..."

"You don't have to apologize," he said. "Believe me, I understand. It was just a suggestion, and you're right, it's not a very good idea."

"Okay." Erica smiled and relaxed a little. She would be okay as long as they were in agreement. Lasting attachments were the last thing she needed or wanted, even with someone like him.

Chapter 3

Erica woke up alone the next morning, which was fine with her. In all honesty, she hadn't expected the man to stay as long as he had. He'd left some time during the night, without a goodbye she didn't need. Somehow, he'd understood what she wanted from him, and he hadn't offered her more. He'd been perfectly hers for just one night.

Erica sat up on the edge of the bed, holding the sheet tightly against her body. It was morning, and she had returned to her old self. She was uncomfortable in this state of nudity, even though she knew she was alone, and she had to get dressed.

She stood up, surprised at the soreness she felt all over. She closed her eyes, letting the sheet drop back to the bed, remembering the way he had touched her. All of her. She wasn't a virgin, but she hadn't known passion of that magnitude was possible in anything but the romance novels she loved to read. She'd wanted a fantasy, and boy, had she gotten one.

Last night was a night that would stick in her mind for the rest of her life. Erica knew she would never again be able to settle for anything less than sheer perfection in any man. That could prove to be a problem when she finally had the courage to return to the dating scene.

She needed to get moving. She had a very important meeting with a client today, and she couldn't afford to be late. If anything went wrong, she could lose everything. She needed the money more than she was willing to admit to anyone, even Carolyn. This client literally meant the difference between keeping her apartment and living out of her car, and Erica much preferred the former to the latter.

She packed up the dress she'd probably shove in the back of her closet as soon as she got home, the silk stockings she'd never cared for in the first place, the scratchy bra, and the makeup she'd never wear again if her life depended on it. She searched the carpeted floor of the hotel room, under the bed, and even in the trash, but she couldn't find her panties. The pair was probably the one thing she would have worn again.

When she didn't find them after tearing the covers from the bed, she decided to give up. They were probably stuck behind the headboard or something. She'd have to buy a new pair later.

After a quick shower, Erica dressed in a pair of black wool slacks and a white silk blouse she'd brought from home. She tied a dark scarf around her neck, adjusting it until it was just right. She applied just the usual bit of rouge and pale peach lipstick and brushed her hair back into a conservative twist. Looking into the bathroom mirror, she was relieved to find she looked much more like herself than she had last night.

"So long, Siren," she said softly to her reflection. "It was nice knowing you."

The funny thing was, she was starting to think she might miss that bold woman.

The night before had been a game of make-believe, suggested repeatedly by Carolyn in the months since Carl had walked out on Erica. It had felt good to pretend to be someone else for a night, but that night was over. She could never live her entire life that way-it just wasn't in her.

The sun had risen on a new day, a day in which the real Erica Blake had a job to do, and a life to live. And once she got past the guilt that had been seeping into her consciousness, she would have one heck of a set of memories. Whatever happened, she knew she would treasure for the rest of her life what her mystery man had given her.

Twenty minutes later, packed and checked out of the hotel, Erica pulled into the brick driveway of one of the most impressive homes she'd ever seen. She parked in front of a four-car garage and stared up at the home Nick Wilson had hired her to decorate. The massive, cold, gray stone house that lay before her made her shake in her black pumps. She'd heard the man was a tyrant. From the aura surrounding his house she knew the rumors had to be true. Only the promise of a large paycheck kept Erica from running in the other direction.

She knew her sudden attack of nerves wasn't solely the fault of the house. Nick Wilson was, according to anyone who came into contact with the man, a control freak who couldn't stand the slightest imperfection in anything. He'd already fired two

interior designers for apparently no reason at all, and Erica was going to have to try her best *not* to be number three. The amount his secretary had offered Erica would help her climb out of the hole she had been in since Carl disappeared with her life savings. She just hoped suffering through the job was worth it.

She had no choice. She needed this money. No job she could find elsewhere would pay the kind of money Nick Wilson was offering. As nervous as she was, she had to walk up the front steps and ring the doorbell. Besides, she was now officially an independent, thoroughly modern woman. After what she'd had the courage to do last night, working for a bullheaded idiot should be a piece of cake.

She hoped.

She mustered all she could of her courage, and then walked up the steps to the front door and rang the bell. She waited for what seemed like an eternity, and had finally decided that no one was home when she heard the click of a lock from the other side of the door. The door swung open slowly, and Erica's heart stopped when she was greeted by the tall, dark-haired man in the expensive looking navy blue business suit.

* * * * *

Nick hadn't been able to get the woman out of his mind all morning. Carolyn, or whatever her real name was, had rocked him to his very core. He'd never felt that way with any other woman before, and he didn't want to start now. After what his wife had put him through, there was no way he was going to let that happen again. But that woman, with her intriguing blend of innocence and passion, just wouldn't let his mind have a moment's peace. The highly erotic images of what they had done were etched in his brain, and he couldn't seem to shake them.

He'd known from the moment she walked into the bar that she'd been looking for a one-night stand. It was obvious from the way she kept sneaking glances at him from under those heavy eyelashes, and the way she ran her fingers along the edge of the bar, closer and closer to his arm. When she'd tugged on her pouty red lip with her teeth he'd nearly groaned.

He hadn't been able to help himself from offering to give her exactly what she wanted.

He'd seen her type in there before — bored with her life and in need of something to spice it up a little. Heck, she was probably married. She was probably some old rich guy's trophy wife looking for someone who could actually get it up more than once a week. That would explain the fake name. Nick didn't have a clue as to what her real name was, but he knew without a doubt that it wasn't Carolyn. One thing he knew about her was that she was a terrible liar.

What did it matter? He was never going to see her again. He'd fulfilled his part of the silent bargain. He'd snuck out like a thief in the night while she was sleeping, even though part of him wanted to stay for another round, or two. He hadn't even told her his name at all for fear that she would bolt if it got too personal. He'd seen the look of uncertainty that had clouded her eyes when he'd talked about his ex-wife. She was obviously looking for a night of totally anonymous passion.

But he couldn't help the pangs of regret over leaving without at least getting her phone number. He hadn't had such an amazing night in too long to remember. There had been women since his wife, probably too many women, but none like his petite, blond mystery woman. Would he ever be able to free himself from the spell she'd cast over him? He certainly hoped so, because he couldn't spend the next fifty or so years obsessed with a woman he'd never see again.

He didn't know exactly what it was about her that attracted him. He'd seen beautiful women before. He'd *had* beautiful women before. Lots of them. But there was something about her that turned his head.

She was real. Even under all that makeup and glitz he knew she wasn't very comfortable with, her reactions had been honest and open. She didn't try to impress him by lying about her experience. She didn't *fake* her responses. After the spoiled, boring women he'd been seeing, she was a refreshing change of pace. One he could get used to, if he'd been a man and stayed until morning.

He ran the black panties through his hands, rubbing the silk between his fingers and thinking of *her*. He lifted them to his nose and took a deep breath, her scent making him crazy. Taking her panties had been a mindless act at the time, just a memento of the night they'd had. Now he couldn't put them down. Just the feel of the silk in his palm made him think of how beautiful and honest her responses were, even if he did scare her a little at first.

God, she was amazing. He was rock hard just thinking about her now. But he didn't know anything about her. Was he a fool for wanting her in his bed again? Probably, but his cock didn't care if she was a mass murderer. She was that hot.

The chime of the doorbell interrupted his thoughts. It took a moment to register the fact that the interior designer he had hired was coming to view the house this morning. He didn't really want some strange woman invading his space and making suggestions he was sure he wouldn't like, but it was too late to cancel the appointment. Besides, she'd come highly recommended by Devon, his former brother-in-law, who had used Miss Blake to redecorate his office last year. Nick had seen the office, and he had to admit that he was impressed.

Devon had said Miss Erica Blake could work magic on any space. In fact, he continued to sing her praises nearly six months after she'd finished the job. If he hadn't known Devon was happily married, Nick would have thought he was sleeping with the woman.

From the few things Devon had told him about Erica Blake, he had a mental picture of the woman in his mind. Nick pictured a young, plain woman who wore severe black suits and conservative bun in her hair. Didn't sound a thing like Nick's type. Devon didn't think she was much of anyone's type. Good thing, since he'd had to fire the last two decorators because of the relentless come-ons they'd thrown his way. He needed his house updated, which was all. He wasn't looking for a relationship.

He sighed a deep, sleepy sigh, as he walked to the door and opened it on the woman who would be spending way too much time in his house over the next few weeks.

At first Nick thought he must have been seeing things. It was just a trick of his imagination, still replaying the scenes from the hotel room last night. It had to be. This was what he got for obsessing about his angel from the bar. Now he was destined to think every woman with remotely the same color hair and eyes was his “Carolyn.”

But the look on her face told him he wasn’t imagining anything. If he replaced her conservative outfit with a short, curve-hugging red dress, added a few extra layers of makeup, and pictured her hair flowing loosely around her shoulders he could just about see it. A slow smile crept across Nick’s face.

Fate definitely had a sense of humor. Erica Blake was his mystery woman.

Chapter 4

He hadn't thought he would ever see her again, but here she was on his front step not twelve hours after they'd parted. This had happened for a reason, that much Nick was sure of. At the very least he could hope for another night like the last one. The fact that he'd be stuck with her for the next two weeks or more suddenly took on a whole new meaning. That is, if she didn't decide to quit first. He'd just have to make her an offer she couldn't refuse.

Erica Blake would end up in Nick's bed again, and she would love every single incredible minute of it.

"Good morning, Carolyn." He spoke in the deep, sexy voice that had just last night nearly made her swoon. "Or should I say, Erica?"

"What...how?" Erica stammered, not able to form a single coherent sentence.

She felt like she'd been slammed in the chest by a very large truck. How could this be happening? She was supposed to be meeting with Nick Wilson, not the stranger from the bar last night. How had he found her? Or had she found him?

She pulled her date book out of shoulder bag and flipped through the pages until she found today's appointments. Comparing the address in her book with the one next to the front door of the house, she knew she had the right house. So what was going on here?

"You are Erica Blake, aren't you?" the man asked, an amused grin lighting his face.

"Y-yes," Erica said, the realization of what had happened hitting her stomach with a sick thud. "You're Nick Wilson."

"Sure am," Nick answered, looking like he was enjoying this far too much. Apparently he wasn't nearly as upset as Erica. "Are you going to come inside, or can you decorate the house from my front porch?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. I should go now." Erica said, her hands trembling uncontrollably.

What must he be thinking about her now? She wanted to shout out that she never indulged in one-night stands, that she'd simply given herself one night free of worries and cares. She didn't normally dress so scantily or wear even half the makeup she'd applied that night.

But she was silent. She didn't want to give up this job; she couldn't afford to lose it, but what other choice was there? She couldn't work for Nick Wilson, not after the night they'd shared.

She couldn't spend any time in his house and not think about how wanton, how free she'd been with the man. Heck, she'd allowed him to bend her over the bed and do unspeakable things with her undergarments. And she'd enjoyed it!

"I'll throw in an extra five hundred dollars if you stay," he said as she started to walk back down the steps. "I need this job done yesterday, and you're my last hope."

Erica froze, not able to move another inch. Five hundred dollars? That would cover the rent in her small apartment for a month. She needed every cent she could get her hands on. But could she work for Nick Wilson, the man who had seen her behave in a way that no other man had seen? Could she spend countless hours in his house, in his company, and not think about what his hands could do to her body?

Could she work for the man and not want more?

She flushed in embarrassment at just the thought. Erica would be working for him. She couldn't let herself get carried away in fantasy. If she accepted this job, she could never be anything but professional. She would treat the previous night's activities as if they'd never happened. She could pretend that Nick Wilson did not exist. Staying was a bad idea, but Erica needed the money. She couldn't bring herself to turn down his offer.

"I'm hardly ever home, anyway," he said softly. "I'm at the office from early in the morning until well past suppertime every day. You wouldn't even have to see me at all."

"Really?"

"I'll give you a key. You can come and go as you please."

"This sounds too good to be true," Erica said suspiciously, turning to face Nick.

"If this is about last night, we can pretend it never happened." He said, raising his hands up at his sides. "After today, you won't ever have to see me again. I'll even mail you the check. So what do you say?"

"Okay." Erica spoke hesitantly, still not sure if she was making a big mistake.

Forget last night ever happened? It may have been easy for someone like Nick, a man who was obviously much more experienced than Erica. But his touch had burned a path to her soul. His hands and his body had earned a permanent place in Erica's mind. She could ignore how he had made her feel, but there would be no forgetting.

"Why don't you come inside and I'll show you the house." Nick turned on his heel and walked into the house, leaving the door open for Erica to follow. After a moment's hesitation, she did just that, closing the heavy door behind her and praying that she would be able to handle working for Nick Wilson.

* * * * *

Nick had a hard time keeping his hands to himself during the hour he showed Erica around and explained what he wanted done. He had originally wanted only the downstairs redecorated, since his mother had done all the bedrooms a few years ago, right before she died and Nick inherited the house. But now that he had Erica in his home, he wanted to find a way to keep her there a little longer.

New emotions, ones Nick had never before felt, crept up on him. The situation with Erica reeked havoc on his well-being. He didn't get attached-it wasn't in his nature. But Erica was somehow different. The pull he felt was stronger with her than with most women. With other women he could take them or leave them. He discarded them like yesterday's socks. With Erica Blake, he had to have her. It was an actual physical need.

Yes, he wanted her body again. *Did he ever.* And he wanted her in so many ways, he couldn't count them all. Maybe it was her innocence. It had been a long time since he'd been with an inexperienced woman. Maybe it was her sudden shyness. He didn't know,

and he really didn't care. All he could think about now was satisfying the incredible lust he couldn't shake.

He'd told her he was at the office more than he was home. That was true. His work, the advertising agency his father had started so long ago, was all he had since his parents were killed in a plane crash three years ago. He had the agency running better than it had ever been, but that took time. Nick's personal life took a backseat to the business that had been his father's dream, and he'd never regretted a minute of it.

Until now. He would have to find some way to spend more time at home. By the time Erica finished his house, he would have her in his bed again, no matter what it took. That was one promise Nick intended to keep.

* * * * *

Erica arrived the next morning at Nick's house at a little past eight. She opened the door with the key he had provided, and walked into the house. This job was going to take a while. She'd been told that she would only be decorating the ten rooms downstairs, but now Nick wanted all eight bedrooms and the four bathrooms done as well.

If she didn't get started soon, she'd be still working on the house this time next year. And that was something she definitely didn't want. She didn't want to spend one extra minute in Nick Wilson's house. Every second spent with him reminded her of the idiot she'd made of herself when she'd picked him up in the bar. He'd known how naïve, how inexperienced she was. He'd probably remember it as the worst night of his life, if he even remembered it at all.

Slowly, Erica walked up the stairs, hoping to get a better look at some of the bedrooms while Nick was at work. From what she'd seen yesterday, they really didn't need much, but what could she do? Nick wanted her to do the whole house, he'd pay her for the whole house, and so that is what she would have to do.

She reached the top of the elegant curved staircase and took a right down the hall, heading in the direction of Nick's bedroom. She told herself she was just doing her job, but she knew she had other reasons. Nick Wilson had her curiosity piqued. He'd shown her the room so briefly yesterday that she hadn't gotten a good look at anything. She wanted to know more about him, and what better place to start than his bedroom.

She didn't usually invade a client's privacy, but she couldn't help it with Nick. Besides, they weren't exactly strangers anymore.

The door hung open just a crack, and Erica felt a sliver of anxiety rush through her. Even though she'd been given run of the house, she couldn't help feeling like she was snooping in places where she didn't belong. Erica brushed away her doubts and pushed the door open and walked into Nick's bedroom.

The morning sun poured through huge windows and filled the spacious room with glorious morning light. The long curtains had been pushed back from the glass and the windows were wide open, letting in as much of the beautiful summer morning as possible. The suit Nick had worn yesterday lay in a pile at the foot of the bed, as well as the leather jacket and jeans from the night in the bar. The rest of the house was neat as a pin, but not his personal sanctuary. Erica thought idly that he must have a housekeeper. He couldn't clean this entire house himself. He couldn't even manage to put his laundry in the hamper. Heck, even his sheets lay in a tangled mess of black satin in the middle of the bed.

A second look at the king-sized mahogany sleigh bed told her why. He hadn't bothered to make it because he was still sleeping in it! Erica's heart rate increased tenfold when she saw Nick so peacefully still, his black hair falling softly over his closed eyes; one leg, minus pants, uncovered and draped over the edge of the bed. She couldn't breathe when she thought about how good his bronze skin had felt against hers, the way his cock had felt in her pussy, and the way their bodies had moved together in silent rhythm.

No! This was definitely not the time to be thinking about Nick's...*assets*.

He'd told her he kept long hours, that he would be at the office early. So why hadn't he even made it out of bed yet? She had to get out of here. Erica had to tell him she couldn't keep this job. It just wasn't going to work. She started to back out of the room, but when she tried to pull the door shut, it creaked on its hinges.

"Erica?" Nick said sleepily, making her wince. Her mouth went dry as she fumbled for an excuse for being in Nick's bedroom so early in the morning.

She stood still, hoping he would go back to sleep and she could be on her way. His eyes opened slowly and his gaze met Erica's, and she knew it was too late. He'd caught her. She couldn't get away now, not without looking like a complete fool.

"Uh huh," she answered breathlessly, reddening at the thought of standing this close to a near-naked man, one who she knew without a doubt could offer her pleasure beyond her wildest dreams. She had to keep control before she said something stupid. After all, he knew the other night was just a one-night stand. He surely wouldn't want to repeat it, not after he'd found out how boring Erica was in bed.

"Want to join me?" Nick asked. Erica's pulse raced and her blood pounded loudly in her ears. So much for forgetting.

"No!" She fairly screamed, compensating for her deep embarrassment.

She watched in both horror and fascination as Nick rolled the covers off his lean body and climbed out of bed, naked and aroused. That night they had spent together, Erica had been too wrapped up in her own insecurities to notice how finely sculpted Nick's body was. But she couldn't help looking now, as he stood before her in all his glory in broad daylight. Erica tried to look away, but she couldn't pull her gaze away from his incredible, muscular chest. And his other incredible body parts.

He obviously worked out frequently. Her gaze drifted from his toned shoulders and his solid biceps to his washboard stomach. Her eyes moved a little lower and landed on his cock. He was huge and hard, and her mind wandered to how incredible he had felt in her pussy. God, she wasn't going to be able to stay away from him.

"You filled my dreams last night, Erica," Nick said, inching toward her. "So much that I couldn't sleep."

"Nick, don't," Erica said softly.

"Don't what? Don't want you?" he asked, chuckling softly. "I can't stop that. I want to do it again. Right here, right now."

"No," Erica said simply. She didn't trust herself to say anything more. As much as she wanted to keep this professional, her body screamed for Nick to grab her and pull her down into her big bed. Her control slipped a notch, and Erica struggled to regain it.

"Aren't you going to ask what we were doing in my dream?" he asked, a sly smile on his face.

"No," she said, hoping her control would hold until she got out of his bedroom.

"Well, I'm going to tell you anyway. I dreamed we were back in that hotel room, and you stripped for me. Then I made you lie down on the bed and spread your legs." His voice was a husky whisper.

"I don't want to hear this." Erica put her hands up to cover her ears.

"Sure you do." Nick looked like he might laugh at her. "The other night you didn't seem to have a problem with inhibitions."

"That night I-"

"I put my face between your legs and licked your clit."

Oh, God. Erica's knees felt weak.

"Then I put my tongue inside your pussy and-"

"Nick, please." She'd meant it as a protest, but it came out as a moan.

"That's exactly what you said in my dream," he said. He took a step closer to her, then another. "You screamed my name when you came."

Erica was breathing heavily now, and she could feel herself getting wet. She wanted him so much that she almost gave in. Almost.

"Are you sure you don't want to join me? We were so incredible together, Erica." Nick said, the amusement obvious in his tone. He was enjoying this a little too much. If he expected Erica to be the uninhibited woman he had met in the bar, Nick Wilson was in for a very big surprise.

"I can't, Nick. You and I both know that would be a bad idea," she said softly. "I work for you, remember?"

"Yeah, but I guess I was kind of hoping you'd changed your mind about us. You *are* standing in my bedroom."

"I thought you would be at work," Erica said apologetically. "You said you leave very early in the morning."

"I stayed well past ten last night, so I thought I might take the morning off." He spoke in a deep, husky tone that set Erica's insides on fire.

The closer he got to her, the more she wanted to reach out and run her fingers through his thick hair. Mentally, she slammed the door on such thoughts. She couldn't think this way about the man she worked for, no matter how much he begged for it. Or how much she begged *him* for it.

"Is that going to be a problem?" he asked softly. He moved across the carpet until he was mere inches from Erica.

He bent his head slightly to speak to her, and she could feel his hot breath feather across her skin. She shivered despite the growing warmth of the early September morning and shoved her hands into the pockets of her light brown slacks to keep from burying her fingers in the soft mat of dark hair that covered Nick's chest. Her legs nearly gave out on her, and she had to grab onto the doorjamb for support.

"No problem," Erica said jaggedly as she struggled for control. Nick's breath glided across her neck seductively. "I'll just start on the downstairs today."

"You'll stay right here," Nick commanded. He cupped the sides of Erica's face with his hands. "With me."

* * * * *

Nick couldn't believe his luck. He'd taken the day off, hoping he'd run into Erica at some point. He hadn't expected to find her in his bedroom at eight o'clock in the morning. He didn't want to think about the fact that she was here to work. It didn't matter. Soon she would be here for very different reasons.

He leaned closer, enjoying every minute of her obvious discomfort. What was it about Erica Blake that fascinated him so much? It took all the strength Nick had to keep his hands on her face, when what he really wanted to do was pull her into his arms and convince her she belonged in his bed. Whatever the reasons, he couldn't get her out of his mind. He couldn't concentrate at work. His mind kept going back to that night in the hotel room, with Erica playing the unlikely seductress.

He didn't care that he knew nothing about her. He no longer cared about right and wrong, about morals and what was good. Erica Blake, single or not, belonged in Nick's bed.

He wasn't going to get carried away. This was just an affair-amazing sex between two consenting adults. He'd gone down the marriage road before, and it had been terrible. After the wedding, his wife had become a different person; one Nick found he couldn't stand. He'd found out the hard way that he wasn't cut out for marriage. But sex? That was a whole different story.

He liked sex, and he'd *really* liked it with Erica. If they could recreate the passion they'd had in her hotel room, they would be guaranteed one hell of a burning hot affair. Now he just had to convince her of what was best for her.

Nick didn't want to admit it, but the night he spent with Erica had been the most incredible night in his life. He'd been with other women, maybe too many, but none of them had been able to please him like Erica Blake. He had an idea that she didn't even realize the power she had over him. Just thinking of her body made him grow harder than he already was, and there was no way to hide it.

"Maybe you should put some clothes on." Erica said sharply as her gaze traveled quickly over Nick's body.

He could tell she was aroused by the catch in her breathing and the flush in her cheeks. Why couldn't she just admit she wanted him? His cock should be deep inside her pussy by now.

"I don't have anything you haven't already seen," he laughed, "Or touched. Isn't it a little late to get shy now?"

"That night was a mistake, Nick, and we both know it."

"It didn't feel like a mistake to me," he replied. He cupped Erica's chin tighter with his hand and brought her eyes up to his. "In fact, nothing has ever felt so right."

Nick leaned in closer still and brushed his lips across Erica's. He took it as a good sign when she didn't try to pull away. He drew her into his arms and he kissed her again, this time with much more insistence. Erica melted into him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pressed her body against his.

Nick pressed his cock into the soft shirt that covered Erica's stomach to show her how much he wanted her. He thrust his hips against her a couple of times so she'd see exactly what he had in mind. When she arched into him and moaned softly, he thought he would lose it right there in the doorway. He broke the kiss reluctantly and leaned back to look deep into Erica's cornflower blue eyes.

"Did that feel like a mistake?" he whispered, trying to regulate his breathing.

"No," Erica replied, breathless from the kiss. Nick smiled when he noticed the flush in her cheeks had deepened considerably. Convincing her to share his bed might not be too difficult. They were magic together-they ignited. Was it so wrong to explore that?

"Just because it feels good doesn't mean it's the right thing to do," Erica said. She pulled out of Nick's arms and backed out of the doorway.

He nearly groaned in frustration. This was going to be harder than he thought. But Nick didn't give up. Once he'd set his sights on something, he always got it. Always.

Right now, he wanted Erica Blake under him, hot and wet and ready, and he would stop at nothing to convince her that it should happen.

“Now if you don’t mind, I think I’ll get started for the day,” Erica said as she stepped back even further down the hall and away from Nick. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me. If not, could you please try your best to stay out of my way?”

Nick watched Erica hurry down the hall and disappear down the staircase. He leaned back against the doorframe. Part of him wanted to chase after her, to shake her and make her see things his way. But he knew he had time. It would take her weeks to finish the job he had set for her, and Nick intended to spend every free minute trying to convince her to follow her feelings. He knew she wanted him, now he just had to get her to act on that.

“Hell yes, woman, I need you,” he said softly. “But I’m a patient man. I can wait.” He paused, and added, “And just see if I stay out of your way.”

Right now, he needed a few minutes in the cold shower to relieve his throbbing cock.

* * * * *

Once Erica was safely downstairs in the kitchen, as far away from Nick and his sexy deep voice as she could manage, she fell into a chair at the table and rested her head in her hands. How could she have let him kiss her? What had she been thinking? The man was trouble, trouble she didn’t need any part of. Not after what Carl put her through last fall. She didn’t want anything from Nick except the paycheck he would give her when she finished this job. At least, that’s what she had to try to convince her body.

In truth, Erica had never met such a sexy man. Nick Wilson, with his magical touch and a body to die for, had Erica interested in every sense of the word. The man was liquid sex, irresistible, and she would be better off if she stayed far away from him. But how could she help it when she would be spending so much time in his house?

She would have to keep her emotions to herself, no matter how difficult it would be. She would have to keep Nick at a distance, whether he liked it or not. She'd just wanted one night of fun and freedom. One night to be the brash, confident, sexy woman she'd never had the courage to be. She'd needed to be the one to leave, to walk away and never look back.

How had she gotten herself into this mess?

Chapter 5

"What's wrong?" Carolyn Price asked as she flipped her long, black hair over her shoulders and sat down at Erica's kitchen table with a mug of steaming coffee. Erica could always count on her best friend to know when she was hiding something.

"I'm fine, really," Erica lied, even though she knew full well that Carolyn would see through it.

"Uh huh," Carolyn said. She narrowed her green eyes as she studied Erica's expression. "Spill it."

"I took your advice," Erica murmured. She winced a little at Carolyn's excited expression.

"You didn't!" Carolyn squealed and clapped her hands together. "So tell me all about it. Was it the most amazing night of your life, or what?"

"Yeah, I suppose it was," Erica said. She grinned at the memory of her night with Nick. "But it didn't go as planned."

"What happened? Don't tell me you couldn't find a guy willing to have a one night stand with a beautiful woman?"

"I found a guy, all right," Erica said softly. "But he doesn't seem to want to agree to the one night part. Of all the men in the bar that night, I had to approach Nick Wilson."

"Nick Wilson? The man you're working for?" Carolyn questioned right before she burst out laughing. "Boy, Erica, you really know how to make a mess of things with men."

"Thanks a lot," Erica said sarcastically. But she knew what Carolyn said was true. Her last relationship had ended so badly that Erica had nearly lost everything she owned.

"Tell me all about it. I want every sordid detail," Carolyn said, a mischievous look in her wide eyes. "I mean *everything*."

"Well, let's just say that working for him is not exactly comfortable," Erica said. She took a long sip of coffee and ran a hand through her hair nervously. She hoped Carolyn would drop the subject, but that wasn't going to happen.

"You know what I mean." Carolyn shook her head. "You forget that Nick Wilson's firm did the commercials for my father's car dealership. I know how sexy that man is. So, is he as good as I've heard?"

"What have you heard?" Erica asked sharply. She felt a sudden and unwelcome twinge of jealousy, but she didn't understand it. She knew Nick was experienced, so why did it bother her so much to hear about it?

"One of the girls I work with used to date him," Carolyn said. "She said he was an absolute animal in the--"

"Okay, okay. I don't need to hear any more," Erica said. Her face reddened at the thought of describing every detail of that night, even if what Carolyn had heard was true.

"I guess it's true," Carolyn said. "Well, look at it this way, Erica. He's less apt to be a rotten boss if you're sleeping with him."

"I'm not sleeping with him," Erica said quickly. She didn't want to give Carolyn the wrong impression.

"Why on earth not?" Carolyn looked surprised. "You said yourself that he is having trouble with the one night part, and you're not seeing anyone right now. What would the harm be in having a few more incredible encounters? An affair never hurt anyone."

"I-I can't do that," Erica said, flustered.

"You didn't think you could have a one-night stand, either, but that worked out okay."

"Yeah, but..." Erica's voice trailed off as she thought about what Carolyn was saying. As crazy as it sounded, it also made some sense. What would it harm if she let

herself give in to Nick? It wasn't like she had anything to hide from him-he'd already seen every part of her body, and he'd apparently liked what he saw.

"Nick Wilson doesn't commit," Carolyn said in a low, conspiratory tone as she leaned a little closer to Erica. "You won't have any problems walking away when it's over. It's a new century, Erica. Women are expected to have a little fun."

"You think?" Erica asked. She gave some serious consideration to Carolyn's suggestion. Could she do it? She wasn't nearly as experienced as Nick seemed to be. Would he get bored with her in the bedroom and fire her from the job she so desperately needed? Or would it be the best two weeks or so of Erica's life?

There was only one way to find out.

"I don't think so, I *know* so," Carolyn corrected Erica, laughing. "You deserve a little happiness, without the strings. Casual sex might just change your outlook on life. You're not as hopeless as you think you are. Who knows, maybe it will help you relax."

"We'll see," Erica said, but she already knew what she was going to do. Nick Wilson, watch out!

* * * * *

Erica was a little disappointed that Nick wasn't home when she arrived at his house a few hours later. He'd told her he worked long hours, but after she found him in bed yesterday morning she'd hoped for a similar situation today. She sighed and set to work on the job she'd been hired to do. If he showed up sometime during the day, well, that would be an added bonus.

Erica walked up the stairs and back through the door of Nick's bedroom. She'd start in there, and then work her way to the other rooms in the house. But she had to make sure this particular room was done to perfection. Even if she never saw Nick's private quarters after the job was completed, she would make sure that every time he brought another woman into the room he would remember her. She felt the need to leave her

mark on his sanctuary. It might just help ease her mind about what she'd decided to do with the man.

She began to jot down ideas in the notebook she had brought as she drew sketches and made lists of items she would need to create the perfect masculine bedroom, with a very personal touch. She was so deeply absorbed in her work that she didn't hear Nick walk into the room a half-hour later.

"Do you know how many nights I've dreamed about finding a woman like you in my bedroom?" he asked huskily. Erica nearly jumped out of her skin.

"When did you get home?" she asked when she'd recovered.

"About ten minutes ago." He gave her a slow, sexy smile.

Damn, the man just smoldered. Did she have the courage to give in to the sultry promises in his eyes? Of course she did. Modern women did this kind of thing all the time. Erica seriously began to doubt she was even close to being a modern woman.

"I was hoping you'd be here when I arrived." She tried her best to sound bold and daring, but knew she fell a little flat.

"Did you need me for something?" Nick asked, his face lit with both hope and suspicion. Erica couldn't say that she blamed him. Just yesterday she'd all but told him to never cross her path again. She wasn't surprised that the man was a little confused.

"Maybe," Erica said, giving Nick what she hoped was a thousand-watt smile.

She prayed that she wasn't getting in over her head with all this. Nick Wilson had the power to hurt her very badly if this didn't go as planned. She had to remember to stick to one rule-no emotional involvement. If she did that, the rest would work out fine.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked. He got closer until Erica could practically feel the heat from his body reach out for her. "Did you change your mind about us?"

She only managed to nod her head *yes*. With Nick this close, her mind refused to function. Her breath came in raspy waves as her body cried out for his touch. Still he

made no move to get closer, and the anticipation was killing her. She wanted him, but he was going to have to make the first move. She wasn't that brave yet.

* * * * *

She was here, in his bedroom, and she sounded a little like the woman she'd pretended to be in the bar the other night. She wanted him, that much he could see in her eyes. The question was, would she go through with it? If he gave her what she thought she wanted, would she bolt? Would she stay and spend the rest of the morning in his bed? The uncertainty of it all was almost too much to take.

Did it even matter? Temptation, the very woman of his every fantasy, was standing not a foot away from his bed. One swift move and he could have her exactly where she'd been in all his erotic daydreams.

Did she realize that her little bit of hesitation, her innocent desire, turned him on more than the red lipstick or the skintight dress ever could? He liked sweet, pretty Erica Blake more than he'd admit to anyone, especially her. She did more for him with just a look than other women could do with...well, a lot more than that.

He walked toward her until he was only inches away. He could feel the heat radiating from her body, warmth he wanted to bury himself in. But he couldn't take it if she changed her mind at the last minute. He didn't want any more solo showers right now.

"Do you want me to wait for you downstairs?" Nick asked. He reached out his hand to brush the stray hairs from her neck that had worked their way loose from her tight bun.

Just grazing her creamy skin sent a shiver through Nick's entire body. His fingers worked furiously to remove the pins that held her hair, finally able to enjoy the silky strands as they tumbled across her shoulders.

"I don't want you to go downstairs." Erica averted her gaze.

He knew she was nervous, but he didn't know what he could say to ease her worries. What was she afraid of? Certainly not him. In this situation, Erica held most of the power. She was the only one with enough control to put a stop to it. She wanted exactly what he wanted-just the two of them, no fears, no inhibitions and no boundaries. Would she give herself to him? Would she let him touch her in every way? Nick had to find out.

"Do you want me to stay?" He whispered into her ear. He delighted in the way she trembled when his breath touched her skin. He hoped she would say yes, because if she didn't, he would have to take one long, cold shower.

"Yes," she said breathlessly, but she still didn't meet his gaze.

Nick knew how much that admission had cost her. She wasn't ready to be as free with him as she had been before, but he was going to change all that. Erica was an incredible woman who deserved to know how sexy she was.

She needed a lot more confidence in the bedroom, and before Nick was through with her, she would get just that. He'd make an animal out of her yet, even if it killed him. He had a feeling that might just happen if he didn't have her soon. His cock was so erect it was painful.

"Erica," he said softly. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

"Yeah, right."

She actually sounded cynical. Well, he'd have to change that attitude, and quickly. Crushing her against him, he made sure she could feel exactly what power she had over him. Not that he wanted any woman to have power over him, but no other woman had captivated him like Erica Blake. Dreams of her had kept him awake every night since they'd fucked, and he wanted more.

"You have no faith in yourself," Nick said. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back so their eyes met. "Look at me, sweetheart. I want to show you how incredible you are."

"Nick, listen." Erica stiffened under his touch. "I'm not who you think I am. The other night, I wasn't myself."

"I know." Nick leaned closer to nip her ear gently with his teeth. "I like you like this so much better."

"You do?" Erica asked, incredulous.

"Hell, yes," Nick confirmed. He had to fight back laughter at Erica's naivete. She didn't realize how beautiful and sensual she was. She'd never been treated like the sexy woman Nick knew her to be. He'd bet money that she'd been hurt, hurt badly, by someone she cared about. Nick had the fleeting desire to beat that man to a pulp for hurting her. She didn't deserve that kind of pain.

"I just have to know one thing," he said, his mouth mere inches from her lips. "Are you married?"

"No! I already told you I wasn't." Erica sounded surprised that he had asked such a question. "Do you think the other night would have happened if I was married?"

"It wouldn't be the first time a woman cheated on her husband. Believe me," Nick murmured. He fit his mouth over Erica's with such passion that she would have no doubts of his intentions for her this morning.

* * * * *

Erica wanted to ask Nick to elaborate on his comment, but when his lips found hers she lost the ability to form coherent speech. He had such amazing lips. One kiss and Erica was lost. No! She couldn't let herself get lost in this man. This was only temporary, and she would do best not to involve emotions at all.

She was the new, improved Erica Blake, the woman of the new millennium. She could take what pleasure Nick Wilson would offer, and walk away when she finished this job. She'd have sex simply for the sake of a good time, no emotions allowed. Sounded easy, but was it? She'd never had an emotionless relationship before. Until she'd met Nick, she'd never wanted one.

Could she truly walk away from him when it was over? Yes, she thought she could. She knew she couldn't keep him; he didn't want to be tied down. In truth, neither did Erica. She'd tried that once, and that had ended in an unbelievable disaster. Her willingness to trust a man who promised her the world had cost her every cent she had ever made, and then some. She still got credit card bills courtesy of her darling Carl almost daily. She never wanted to go through that again.

The more she thought about it, this seemed like the perfect solution. She'd get to satisfy her cravings with an incredible man, and not have anyone to answer to later. What could be bad about that?

"You seem distracted." Nick broke the kiss to look deep into Erica's eyes. "I can't let that happen. Not when you're with me. What would that say for my reputation?"

He didn't give Erica a chance to answer. The second his hand slipped into the waistband of her slacks, she could no longer think, let alone respond. His fingers dipped into her panties and found her clit, rubbing hard. Her knees nearly gave out.

"Nick." She moaned softly.

"Much better," he said as he gently pushed her back on the bed.

He took his time undressing her, button-by-button, clasp-by-clasp, kissing his way across her skin while lighting fires only he could put out. He didn't seem to be in a rush to douse the flames just yet. If she had thought that night in the hotel had been fabulous, Erica had a hunch she didn't know half of what Nick was capable of making her feel.

He laid her down on the bed and bent over her, bringing his lips to her stomach. He kissed the sensitive skin there before traveling up to her breasts. Then he cupped her breasts in his hands and circled her nipples with his thumbs.

He took his own clothes off quickly, joining her on the bed. In the daylight, Erica couldn't help but stare openly at Nick's impressive body. *All of it.* And it was impressive. She'd never seen a man so perfectly built before. Not that she'd had the

opportunity to see many men naked in her lifetime, but she knew a good one when she saw one.

The old hesitation crept up on her again, and she tried to beat it down. She wanted this, so what was the problem? She wasn't doing anything wrong, neither of them was. In fact, it seemed that Nick was doing everything right. She wanted him so badly she could barely breathe. His hand covered her mound, his fingers slipping between her folds and rubbing her clit. He dipped one finger into her pussy to test her readiness.

"God, Erica. You're so wet," he practically moaned.

"I need you now, Nick." *Before I change my mind.*

"We have plenty of time. I won't let you leave until you're completely satisfied."

He caressed every inch of Erica's body with his hands, touching her from head to toe. When he came back to her pussy, she arched against his touch, raising her body to meet his exploring fingers. Soon her hesitation was nothing more than a distant memory.

He trailed kisses across her breasts, down her stomach, and down even lower to her abdomen. His hands grasped her thighs and pushed her legs open as he lowered his mouth until his lips grazed her inner thigh. He bit her gently, and then kissed then pain away. He kissed a little higher, and a little higher still, until he reached her pussy.

When Erica realized what Nick had planned, she froze. She tried to push him away, but he wouldn't let her.

"Relax," he said softly. "Trust me. This will be good."

"No one ever..." Erica's voice trailed off in frustration as her eyes stung with unwanted tears. She'd made a grave mistake. She couldn't be wild and free like Carolyn. It just wasn't possible.

"Don't fight it, Erica. You have no idea what you're missing."

Before she could protest, Nick brought his tongue to her, tracing her skin from her pussy to her clit. She nearly came off the bed. He worked on her clit with his lips, teeth,

and tongue, alternately licking and sucking, until she'd forgotten all her inhibitions. It felt too good to make him stop. He moved slowly at first, and then increased the tempo as Erica ground her hips against his mouth. He nuzzled his lips against her pussy, and then grazed her clit with his teeth. She was shocked that her body responded so quickly.

The first waves of her orgasm hit her within minutes. Erica writhed and moaned as she came with an intensity that shocked her. Still, Nick continued his assault on her clit. Just when she thought she couldn't stand another moment, Nick tore his lips away from her flesh and left Erica drained and panting.

He moved slowly back up her body, leaving a trail of hot wet kisses along the way. He fitted himself between her thighs and pressed himself against her still-trembling flesh. He kissed her hard on the lips, letting her taste herself on his tongue. The kiss continued as he pressed his hips against hers, his cock rigid against her mound. She could feel him throbbing between her legs and desire overtook her again. His mouth wasn't nearly enough. She needed him inside her.

"Are you okay?" He gave her a wolfish grin.

"Uh huh," Erica said between ragged breaths. "More."

"More, huh?" Nick all but laughed at that. "You didn't get enough yet?"

He started to move back down her body, but Erica grabbed a handful of his hair to stop his descent.

"No, Nick," she said. "I want to feel you inside me. I want you to fill me."

"You don't have to ask me twice."

He took a condom out of the nightstand drawer and rolled it on. Erica was glad he'd remembered, because in the state she was in, she would have been likely to forget. She didn't need to add unplanned pregnancy to her list of problems.

Nick fitted his body between her legs, close but not close enough. She arched up into him and tried to pull him down on top of her, but he didn't move. He was still too far away.

Still he didn't give her what she so desperately craved, what she needed more than anything on this earth. He was holding out for some reason, trailing soft kisses along her face and throat when what she really wanted was hard, wet, hungry kisses as his cock slid into her pussy.

"Nick, please," Erica said, her voice raspy from unspent passion as she dug her nails into the skin on his back. "I need you now."

* * * * *

Nick had wanted to wait, to prolong penetration as long as possible. He wanted to show Erica just what she'd been missing all her life.

He'd wanted to make her come at least three times with his mouth and hands.

But her plea undid him. He could no longer control any part of his body or mind. Her pussy was slick and ready, hot and warm and just what he needed. He was so hard he ached.

He pushed his cock into her pussy with a fury he'd never before experienced. His head was spinning, rocking with whatever it was that drew him to Erica. She pressed her hips against his, almost urgently, keeping pace with his frenzied motion. He thrust into her again and again, each time rougher than the last.

"I want all of you," Erica whispered, and Nick happily obliged.

His cock was buried to the hilt and he had to hang on to the bed sheets to steady himself as her nails bit into his shoulders. She drew blood, he was sure of it, and the pain nearly made him come.

Chapter 6

She wrapped her legs around his waist and used her heels to pull him closer. He brought his mouth to the skin just above her breast and bit hard, making her cry out and dig her nails deeper. He needed to take a second to compose himself or Erica wouldn't be getting another orgasm.

He pulled his cock out her and got up on his knees. Then he lifted her hips and her ass on his thighs. He pushed her knees apart as far as they would go and let her legs hang limply at his sides. Then, Nick pulled her tightly against him and drove his cock back into her pussy. He liked this position better-he could see everything.

"Keep your eyes open, baby," he said when he noticed Erica's eyes were closed. "Watch my cock move into your pussy."

She opened her eyes, her gaze glazed with desire. Her eyes followed his gaze down to where his cock joined her pussy and she moaned.

It was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen. He slid in and out of her, his cock slick from her juices. God, he could watch this all day. He brought his fingers up to her clit and pressed down hard. Erica moaned again and tightened her legs around his thighs.

"This is so good, Nick."

"You have no idea, baby," he mumbled as he rubbed her clit hard. "Come for me, Erica. I want to feel you come."

Another flick of his finger and she obeyed, the clenching of her muscles triggering his own staggering release. His control was shot. He was a slave to Erica now. If she wanted him to quit his job and spend the rest of his life fucking her brains out, that was okay with him.

"That was incredible." Erica's voice was ragged, her breathing heavy.

"Yeah," Nick agreed. He pulled out and lay down beside her on the bed, pulling her close.

His fingers drew lazy circles on her nipples as he felt her relax against him. She sighed a soft, feminine sigh when he kissed the top of her head.

He'd never experienced such an intense lust with any woman before. Not even with Kathy, and he'd been enough of an idiot to marry her. Erica was different. Somehow they fit together in bed. They were in synch in a way he didn't even know was possible. There was no way in hell he was going to let her end this affair now. It wasn't over until he'd had enough of her, and he had a feeling that would take a while.

"Are you okay?" Erica asked. Nick shuddered as she feathered soft caresses across the sensitive skin on his chest, finding his flat nipples. She ran her tongue along them and nipped with her teeth.

"You keep doing that and you're not going to be getting out of this bed until tomorrow," he half-teased. In all honesty, that didn't sound like a bad idea.

What was wrong with him? He was acting like a horny teenager. Actually, he hadn't been this horny even in his teens. He'd played hooky from work yet again, and didn't feel the least bit guilty about it. That in itself was very unusual.

Now there was a word to describe his feelings for Erica. *Unusual*. He was driven by this incredible, uncommon desire that made him want to screw her all over again, two minutes after the last time. With most of his women, once or twice was enough, and then he moved on. Maybe Erica had finally satisfied him enough that he could stick around a bit longer, see how this whole thing played out. Who knows, maybe they could get even more adventurous.

Now he just had to convince her to stick around.

* * * * *

The next morning Nick stayed out of the house so Erica could get some work done. It almost killed him. Twice he'd nearly picked up the phone and to call her, hoping she'd agree to meet him at some downtown hotel over his lunch hour. He had to force himself to hang up the phone both times. Around one o'clock he'd finally had enough.

He packed up his briefcase, said an early goodnight to his stunned secretary, and headed home.

Erica was at the kitchen table when he walked through the door.

"Hi." She looked up from the pad of paper in front of her.

"Hi yourself." It took all he had not to rip her clothes off.

"Is everything okay? You're home awfully early."

"What? Yeah, it's fine," he answered. "Great even. Are you hungry?"

Erica didn't answer. She just gave him a strange look.

"Erica? Are you hungry?" he repeated.

"I guess so," she said slowly, her brow furrowed. "Why?"

"I thought maybe we could go grab some lunch." He could tell from the look on her face that she'd misunderstood his intentions. "Not like a date or anything. I just thought maybe we could talk a little bit."

As much as he prided himself on not getting emotionally involved, he still enjoyed a little conversation with an intelligent woman from time to time.

"Um, sure." Erica still looked uncertain, but Nick was glad she agreed. "Let me get my purse."

Nick watched her incredible ass sway as she left the room. He suddenly couldn't wait for lunch to be over so they could come back and screw the afternoon away in his bed.

* * * * *

"Tell me about yourself," Nick said after the waitress had taken their order.

The restaurant Nick had selected was small and dark, and the hostess had seated them in the secluded back corner. She was surprised that, instead of sitting across from her, Nick chose to take the chair next to her. She idly wondered if Nick had requested this particular table for a reason.

"That's kind of a broad question." Erica laughed softly. She tried to hide her nervousness over the newness of this situation. "What would you like to know?"

"Where did you grow up?"

"Right here in Massachusetts," she said. "In Concord."

"Yeah? That's a nice place," he said. "I was born in Boston, but we moved to Roxbury when I was three. I still live in the same house."

Erica smiled, wishing she'd had a family legacy to carry on.

"What made you decide to move here? Do you have family in the area?" Nick asked.

"After college I was offered a great job with a design firm, and I couldn't pass it up," she answered. "I don't have any family left. My parents died a few years ago and I'm an only child."

"I'm sorry." Nick looked like he truly was. "I understand. My parents are both gone, too. But I have a sister who lives in the city, too."

"Devon's wife." Erica remembered Devon. He was the one who'd recommended her to Nick.

"Yep, her name's Andrea."

The waitress brought their food and they spent a few minutes eating in relative silence. Erica was glad for the break-she still wasn't used to the curious side of Nick Wilson.

"Have you ever been married?" he asked just as Erica took a bite of her chicken. She almost choked, startled at the bluntness of his question. She took a big gulp of water before she answered.

"I came close once," she admitted. "Last year."

"What happened?"

"I found out what a jerk he was." This wasn't the time to get into a conversation about Carl. He was the past, and Nick was the present. It was pointless to rehash bad memories. "End of story."

Nick nodded, and seemed to consider what she'd said.

"Think you'll ever get married, start a family?" he asked after a moment.

"Someday, but not anytime in the near future." She was still reeling from Carl's sudden departure. "I'm still young; I have plenty of time for family down the road."

Nick seemed to like her answer. He let out a big breath and smiled a little. If he was worried about her trying to tie him down, he could have just asked directly. She had no intentions of getting any closer to Nick than she already was, at least not emotionally. When she finally settled down to raise a family, it would be with a man who shared her dreams, her ideals. A man who actually wanted marriage. In that sense, Nick was definitely not her type.

Erica finished her meal and put her napkin on her plate. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Lots." Nick smiled. "Your favorite color, favorite food, favorite time of day. What makes you laugh, what makes you cry, what makes you want to hit something. Your favorite movie, book, and music, where you like to spend your free time. That should do it for now."

Yikes. He sounded like he was reading off of a rehearsed list.

"Okay. Blue, anything spicy, the later the better, men who wear black socks with shorts and sandals, sappy greeting card commercials, depends on the mood I'm in." She took a breath before continuing. "Anything with Audrey Hepburn, something steamy, definitely eclectic, and wherever I can find some peace and quiet. There you go, the condensed version of Erica Blake."

Nick nodded and took a sip of his coffee. She waited for him to tell her about himself, but he remained silent.

"Your turn," she said.

"My turn for what?"

"To answer your questions."

He laughed softly and shook his head. "A lot of my answers would be the same, but I don't cry, I prefer more modern flicks, and I'd rather watch a steamy movie than read a steamy book." He paused then chuckled.

"Oh, and one more thing," he added.

"What's that?"

He leaned over until his face was inches from Erica's. "Where I like to spend my free time is inside your pussy."

Erica gasped as Nick kissed her, a quick kiss with his tongue thrusting into her mouth once before he pulled away.

"Don't do that," she said sharply.

"I didn't hear you complaining yesterday." He sat back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head.

"We weren't in a restaurant at lunchtime yesterday."

"Who cares?"

"I do," Erica said primly. She had to draw the line somewhere. "What if the waitress comes back?"

"Do you really think she's going to care if we kiss?" Nick placed his hand on top of Erica's thigh. "Now this might bother her."

His hand traveled up her leg and inside her panties. His fingers stopped millimeters away from her clit. She reached under the table and put her hand over his to stop him.

"Why don't we go back to your place?" she suggested. Her breath caught despite her fear.

"But I'm not finished." Erica didn't know if he was talking about food or something else. "What do you think, Erica? Would this make her uncomfortable?"

He pushed two fingers inside her pussy. "God, you're already wet."

"Nick, we can't do this here." She made a desperate plea for him to stop, but he wouldn't listen.

"What exactly are you afraid of, Erica?" His fingers slid in and out of her pussy at a frantic pace. His other hand spread her legs wider so he could gain better access.

"Getting caught."

"That's half the fun." Nick smiled rakishly and Erica had a feeling he'd done this sort of thing before.

His thumb massaged her clit as his fingers continued to move into her. Her breath was coming in ragged gasps now. She knew she should push him away, but that was no longer an option. This was too good to pass up. Her head fell back and she locked her hands onto the edge of the table, giving herself up to Nick's control.

"You're so tight," he whispered. "I can't wait until we get back to my house and I can stick my cock in you. I'm gonna make you come, Erica, right now *and* later."

She bit back a moan; glad the restaurant was nearly deserted. She rocked her hips against his hand.

"That's right, enjoy this," he said. "Tell me you want me."

"I want you," she repeated raggedly.

"Good girl." He increased the pressure with his thumb, urging her to let go. "I want to watch you come, right here in the restaurant. I want to feel your juices soak my fingers."

She couldn't hold on anymore. One more thrust of Nick's amazing fingers and Erica came hard. She nearly ripped the tablecloth off the table as her body spasmed. It took all her will power not to scream. Her legs closed together, holding Nick's fingers inside her as she struggled to regain her composure.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” Erica was mortified when she realized the waitress was standing at the table.

She immediately released Nick’s hand and blushed furiously, but the waitress didn’t seem to notice anything had happened.

“Just the check please,” Nick said. His eyes never left Erica.

“Yes, sir. Was everything to your satisfaction?”

“Everything was incredible.” Nick raised his hand from under the table and licked the fingers that had been inside Erica. “The best I’ve ever tasted.”

Chapter 7

Nick hurried Erica out of the restaurant and into his car. He drove back to his house in record time, jumped out of the car, and hustled Erica through the front door. Given his present state of arousal, he was lucky his cock didn't break off when he tried to walk. Who'd have thought watching Erica come would be such an incredible turn on.

"Are you in some kind of a rush?" she asked. Faint amusement lit her eyes. "We have all afternoon."

That was easy for her to say. She'd been plenty satisfied not too long ago. He wasn't sure he'd even make it up the stairs without coming in his pants.

"You look like you could use some help." She stared at his erection through his pants. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes." He took her hand and led her to the living room. The bedroom wasn't even an option. He needed release, and he needed it now. "I wanna fuck you. I wanna fuck you until we both come. I want it hard and fast, and I want it now."

He started to take off her blouse, but she batted his hands away.

"Come on, Erica. Don't tease me," he practically begged. "I'm in a mess here."

"Tell me what you want me to do," she said huskily.

He froze, realizing what she'd just done. She'd very adeptly turned his game around on him, and now she was the one with the control. He'd promised to turn her into an animal in bed, and it looked like he'd succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Erica was no longer shy; she'd turned into a monster.

This was going to be one hell of an afternoon.

Erica's fingers worked the buttons of Nick's shirt free with excruciating slowness. She spread his shirt open and ran her hands up his chest before she dropped it off his shoulders.

"Take off your shoes," she said, her hands on her hips. He quickly obeyed. His socks quickly followed the shoes.

"Now your pants."

He quickly stripped off his pants, then his boxers. Erica looked him over slowly and smiled.

"Nice," she said huskily. "I love your cock, especially when it's so hard."

"Erica," he moaned, as he tried to pull her closer.

"Sit down," she commanded. He sat, and she got down on the floor and positioned herself in between his knees.

"Tell me, Nick, exactly what you would like me to do to you," she whispered. Her breath on his skin nearly drove him nuts. "Just say it. I'll give you what ever you want. You just have to ask."

"Wrap your pretty little lips around my cock, and suck."

Erica smiled and licked her lips before she took his cock into her mouth. He groaned as she slid her lips up and down him. He was even harder than he'd been before. One of her hands cupped his balls as the other one grasped the base of his shaft and squeezed. She lifted her mouth up and off and she used her fingers to massage the head. She kissed the skin on his inner thighs.

He grabbed her by the hair and guided her mouth back to his cock. He pushed his hips against her so she'd take him deeper into her mouth. She worked him like a pro, her teeth gently grazing as she brought her mouth up and down. She made the most incredible mewling sounds deep in her throat.

"If you don't stop now I'm gonna come," he rasped. He knew he was seconds away.

"Isn't that the idea?" She lifted her head long enough to speak to him.

"I want to be inside you when I come."

"You will be." Erica smiled, licked his cock from base to tip, then took it in her mouth again. He tried to hold off, but he couldn't. He tried to pull her up, but she stayed where she was. Finally he gave in with a loud groan, his come filling her mouth.

His body shook with the force of his orgasm. God, it hit him hard this time. Where the hell had she learned to give a blowjob like that? If he'd known she was that talented he'd have begged for one a lot sooner.

"Feel better?" Erica licked her lips again and rose to her feet in front of him.

"Oh, yeah." He gave her a satisfied smile. "Wanna go upstairs?"

"Later, definitely." She smiled back. "I have some work to do right now."

She leaned over him and kissed him deeply. She wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and drew him closer. He wanted to pull her onto his lap, but she broke the kiss. She smiled and winked, giving him a little finger wave as she left the room.

Oh, yeah. He let his head drop back onto the couch, rolling it back and forth over the rough material. Erica never ceased to amaze him.

He redressed but didn't bother to tuck his shirt in. He whistled to himself as he went into the kitchen for some water as he wondered what he'd ever done without her. Sexually, Erica Blake was the best thing that had ever happened to him. A man could definitely get used to this.

* * * * *

Erica woke up in the middle of the night and reached for Nick. He wasn't there, and the bed was cold. She sat up, disoriented at first, but then she realized her mistake. She was at home in her own bed. Alone.

Maybe she should have taken Nick up on his offer to go upstairs yesterday afternoon. She'd been stupid, and a little nervous, and walked away. She was still embarrassed about what had happened in the restaurant and after-she hadn't even been able to look him in the eye when she left the room.

She rolled over onto her back and pulled the covers up to her chin. What was happening to her? When did she turn into such a *nympho*? Nick must think she did this kind of thing all the time.

Well, she didn't. Nick was the first, and he would probably be the last. As much as she enjoyed this little game, she was having too much trouble keeping her heart out of it. It would be easy for Nick. He had meaningless affairs all the time. Erica just wasn't programmed that way. As much as she'd wanted this, she knew it was going to hurt when he ended it.

She flopped back over onto her stomach, wondering what had ever possessed her to agree to his plan. Must have been some leftover courage from that night in the hotel room. This just wasn't like her at all. She tossed and turned for most of the night, finally falling asleep two hours before her alarm clock was set to wake her. For once her sleep was blessedly dreamless-not plagued by visions of Nick.

* * * * *

Erica walked through Nick's door at a little past ten in the morning. She'd dragged herself out of bed with promises of coffee and possibly an afternoon nap, knowing that if she didn't start getting some work done soon, Nick was probably going to fire her. It didn't matter that they were sleeping together; he still managed to keep his business going. Besides, she wouldn't feel right about taking his money if she didn't do a good job. That would be a lot like getting paid for sex, and she didn't even want to go there.

Nick's car wasn't in the driveway, so she assumed he was at work. That was good. She didn't need the distractions he provided. The first thing she needed was a change of scenery. She was going to stay out of his bedroom today. All day. She'd spend her time instead in the living room.

Bad idea.

The second she walked into the big, dark room she thought about what they had done yesterday. Rather, what she had done to him like some shameless...

She really should take a look at the dining room.

She spent a few minutes half-heartedly getting a feel for the room, but she couldn't focus on her job. She was thinking about giving up and going home when she found the album. She'd been searching through the drawers in the hutch that sat in the corner of the room when she came across a dusty leather book with "photos" printed on the front in embossed gold letters. She refused to call it *snooping*, but that's what it really was. Curious, she sat down at the table and opened the cover.

The first few pages of the album were covered with pictures of what Erica assumed were Nick and his sister, Andrea, as children. Toward the end she even found a few wedding pictures of Nick and his wife. She was stunning. Erica felt a pang of jealousy, even though she knew it was unfounded.

"Hi." She looked up to find Nick standing in the doorway.

"Hi." She smiled. "I hope you're not mad. I just wanted to take a look."

"That's fine." He didn't look upset. He walked over to the table and sat down in the chair next to Erica's. "Let me see."

Erica slid the album across the table and Nick flipped back to the first page. "It's been years since I've looked at this thing. My mother was sort of a fanatic when it came to pictures."

He explained a little about each picture to Erica as he went through the pages, telling her about family vacations, holidays together, and the important occasions his mother had documented so well. She couldn't help but wish her mother had kept an album. But then again, when she'd been a child her family hadn't done half the things Nick's had. Her parents had been too busy working to notice she was alive.

"This is when I got married. Not the happiest day of my life." Nick tried to flip to the next page, but Erica stopped him.

"You look pretty happy to me," she said softly.

"My marriage was over pretty much as soon as it started. There's really nothing else to say."

"Obviously you loved her enough to ask her to marry you," Erica said. "You must have been happy for a little while."

"I was," Nick admitted. "We were happy. At least I thought we were. I found out a year after we got married that Kathy was having an affair with some guy from work. It had been going on since before I'd even proposed."

"I'm so sorry." Erica hadn't meant to dredge up bad feelings, but maybe it would be best if this were all out in the open. Then she'd have a better understanding of Nick's fear of commitment.

"She wanted my family's money," he said bitterly. "That was the only reason she agreed to be my wife. I trusted her, and she ruined my life."

Erica didn't say anything. She simply held Nick's hand and let him continue.

"You think you know somebody, that you know everything about them. Then something happens and you realize they're really a complete stranger." He rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Sorry to depress you. You don't need to hear any of this."

"Nick, if you need to talk, I'll gladly listen."

"No. I'm not going to burden you with problems best left buried." He picked up the album, slammed the cover shut, and got up to put it back in the drawer where Erica had found it. He stood by the hutch, his shoulders slumped and his head down.

"I'm going to get my stuff and go now." She got up to leave, sorry to be the cause of Nick's state of mind. "I'll come back tomorrow."

"Don't go." He turned around and met her gaze, and she saw his eyes were filled with pain. "My mother was so happy for Kathy and me. It would have hurt her to know we were having problems."

"She didn't know?" Erica walked to the hutch and stood next to Nick.

"She passed away before the divorce was final. I didn't have the heart to tell her the marriage had gone bad." Nick took a deep breath and put his arm around Erica. "I didn't want to hurt her any more than I already had. I caused a lot of trouble when I was a teenager. I put my parents through a lot of shit, and it wasn't fair. I never did get to say I was sorry."

Erica felt a little tug at her heart. She'd wondered if Nick was capable of real human emotions, and now she knew. He kept himself hidden away, but a little of his wall of protection had chipped away and she'd gotten a peek at the man inside. She liked him. A lot.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked softly. She wanted to hold him but thought he'd object. She knew it had cost him a lot to tell her the things he had. She didn't want to be pushy.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely. "Yeah, I'm fine. I guess I just needed to get that off my chest."

He walked over to the door and started out of the room, and then looked back over his shoulder. "Erica?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for listening." He smiled a little. "It means a lot to me. It's been a long time since I've had someone to talk to."

"Anytime," she said truthfully.

She waited for Nick to leave; then slumped down into one of the dining room chairs. Her heart clenched when she thought of what his wife had put him through, and she wanted to tear out every hair on the woman's head for doing that to Nick. Why would any woman cheat on a man like Nick? If he were Erica's man, she would never need to go anywhere else to get what she needed. Nick would be enough for her.

Just like *that* it happened. She went from wanting no emotional attachment whatsoever to thinking about spending the rest of her life with Nick. She shook her

head, knowing this was a mistake. With Nick, there was no such thing as forever. Now she just had to convince her heart.

* * * * *

Nick sat in the living room, his head in his hands. He'd spent hours wandering through the house, trying to stay out of Erica's way. Hours, trying to pretend he didn't care that she was here. It was now after seven, way past time for her to go home, and he couldn't stand it any more.

What had come over him? Why had he told Erica about Kathy, about what she had done to him? It was none of Erica's business. He'd never felt the slightest urge to tell a woman he'd brought home about the demise of his marriage. He'd never told them anything remotely emotional. He didn't want them getting attached.

So why had he told Erica?

He tried to tell himself it was that, when he saw her with the photo album, he'd felt the need to explain. But that wasn't it. He was attracted to Erica in more than just a physical sense. As much as he hated to admit it, he trusted her. He'd sworn not to trust another woman again, and up until now he'd done pretty well. Erica had come into his life and messed with his mind. She'd gotten under his skin and broken through every barrier he'd set up against her.

That couldn't be good. He'd have to do something about it, before she had him wrapped around her little finger. He didn't need that, not now, not ever.

He went to find Erica, sure she was still somewhere in his house. He had to show her who was boss in this relationship.

Chapter 8

"You almost done in here?" Erica heard Nick's voice behind her. She spun around to find him standing inches away, not looking very happy.

"Um, yeah," she said. "I can get out of here now if you'd like."

He walked past her to the kitchen sink and poured himself a glass of water. "I think we should talk."

"Okay." She wasn't sure if she liked the sound of that.

He drained the glass then set it down on hard the counter. He walked back over to where Erica stood, and crossed his arms over his chest. He stared into her eyes as if he was assessing her, but he didn't speak.

"I thought you wanted to talk," she said.

He nodded, but remained silent.

"Nick, what exactly is it that you need?" She was aggravated now at this little power display. Did he think she was going to cower like she used to? Well, that wasn't going to happen. She knew him well enough now to know he wasn't going to hurt her.

"This is getting a little too comfortable, Erica," he said. "I think we need to do something about that."

Something about the way he said it made her pause. She felt a little sliver of fear, but chose to ignore it for now. "I have to go, Nick. Maybe we can talk about it in the morning."

She tried to walk away, but he grabbed her upper arms and roughly pulled her against him. "You're not leaving yet."

He crushed his lips to hers, not giving her a chance to speak. She put her hands to his chest and pushed, but he wouldn't budge. She bit his lips hard and he broke the kiss.

"Nick, slow down," she insisted. He loosened his grip a little, but not much.

He shook his head and turned her around so she faced the table. Then he pushed on her back and leaned her over so her chest rested on the oak surface. His hands ran up her legs and under her skirt, pushing the hem over her hips.

"You are so beautiful," he said huskily. He seemed to have calmed down a bit, which relieved Erica. His touch was gentler than it had been a minute ago, and she found herself getting aroused.

"You're so incredible, Erica. So hot." His fingers slipped into the waistband of her panties and yanked them down. "I need you."

"Nick." She moaned when he slid a finger into her pussy. "Nick, please let's go upstairs."

"In a minute." He continued to slide his finger in and out.

His touch was like fire. He had her rocking against him in seconds. She wanted him, but not here. Not in his kitchen. She wanted to be in his bed. They'd screwed, and now she wanted to make love. Nick had shown her he was capable of tenderness, and now she wanted it. She wanted gentle caresses, kisses, and tender words. She wanted to know that she meant something to him other than a good fuck.

"Bedroom, Nick." She said between breaths. "Now."

He groaned, lifted her into his arms and took her upstairs, setting her gently down on the bed. When she looked into his eyes, she could have sworn she saw fear mixed with the obvious desire. What could he be afraid of? Was it possible that he felt a little of the same need for something more than physical?

He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, turning his back to her. His body shook as he clenched and unclenched his fists. He looked like he was fighting for control.

"Nick?" Erica whispered. She raised her upper body and supported herself on her elbows.

He sighed and turned around to face her, a pained expression in his eyes. She reached out her hand to him and he took it and joined her on the bed. She felt like something big was happening here-that the whole dynamic of what they shared was changing. Nick was finally letting go of his old insecurities and giving himself to Erica.

This was different from anything else she'd experienced. Even Carl, whom she'd thought she was in love with, hadn't seemed this connected to her. What she felt for Nick was strong, and it almost made her forget her past problems and fears where relationships were concerned. She was almost ready to admit that what she felt for him was an emotional attraction as well as a physical one. With his actions, Nick seemed to be saying the same thing.

"Erica," he whispered into her ear as his fingers worked the buttons on her blouse free.

He spread her shirt and unhooked the front clasp of her bra to expose her breasts. He took them in his hands and pushed them up and out, then took a nipple in his teeth and squeezed. Erica moaned and threw her head back when his teeth clamped harder.

"Lay back," Nick ordered softly. She let herself flop back onto the mattress, enjoying what he was doing to her.

He used his teeth and tongue to tease her nipples rigid, at the same time pushing her skirt up higher while he traced his hand along her mound. His fingers glided between her folds, slowly stroking her clit.

She reached between them and unbuttoned his pants, slipping her hands past the waistband of his boxers and grasping his erect cock. He was so hard; she wanted all of him now. She rubbed her hands up and down, but he stopped her.

"Slow down, baby," he commanded. "Let's take our time tonight."

Erica liked the sound of that. He sat her up and helped her remove her clothes so that she was completely naked. He directed her to lie on her back on the bed.

"Relax." His voice was barely above a whisper. Erica let herself go limp, enjoying what he was doing to her body.

Nick stroked her face, then ran his fingers down her neck to her breasts. He toyed with her nipples until she whimpered. Erica breathed slowly, determined to enjoy every moment of this. She gave herself completely to Nick. She surrendered more of herself than she'd ever thought possible.

"That's it." He ran his hands down the sides of her body from her breasts to her hips, warming her skin. She had to fight the urge to arch against his hands.

"Wait right here." Nick got up the bed and walked into the adjoining bathroom. A moment later he came out with a small bottle.

"Massage oil." He squeezed a small amount into his palm. "Strawberry."

"My favorite," Erica said softly.

He moved further down the bed, taking her right foot in his hands. He massaged the sole of her foot, kneading the tension away. Then his hands traveled up her leg to her calf, stroking and rubbing. He placed a soft kiss on her instep when his hands moved to her thigh. He pressed the heels of his hands to the inside of her upper thigh, working in slow circles. When he reached her mound, he stopped, put her leg down, and moved to her left leg to repeat the process.

"Roll over," he commanded when he finished with the left leg.

She rolled over onto her stomach and Nick positioned her hands above her head. He took the bottle and held it above her. He squirted a line of the richly scented oil from her shoulders to her buttocks. He continued to massage the muscles of her shoulders and upper back. His pressed down hard on the muscles of her lower back and she let herself sink completely into the mattress. The soft down comforter felt like silk on her bare skin.

Nick reached under her and rolled her back over and ran his fingers along her stomach.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I feel like I'm floating." Erica barely felt connected to her body.

“Good.” He rolled her over easily again and spread her legs. He squeezed a bit more oil onto his fingertips, found her clit and stroked. Erica nearly came off the bed.

“Relax, remember?” he chided.

“I can’t.” The friction was incredible. The oil heated against his fingers as he caressed until she could barely stand it. It took all she had not to move against his hand.

His fingers moved away from her clit and slid down to her pussy. He pushed two inside her and she gave in to her body’s urges. She arched her back and lifted it off the bed. This time he didn’t tell her not to move. She was breathing heavily by now, her hips moving in a rhythm with his fingers. He sped up his pace in answer to her body’s demands until he had her at the very brink of an orgasm. Then he pulled his hand away. Erica moaned in frustration.

“Selfish.” He smiled at her as he got off the bed and stripped off his clothes.

Erica sat up and picked up the bottle of massage oil from the nightstand where Nick had left it. He lay down on the bed and she squeezed oil on his chest, using her fingertips to rub it into his skin. She smiled as she licked the oil off him.

She moved down his body, spreading the oil with her hands and licking it off with her tongue. By the time she reached his cock his breathing was jagged. She poured more oil into the palm of her hand and gently rubbed it on his cock and balls, bending over and blowing to heat the oil. He groaned and gripped the edges of the mattress, holding on so tight that his knuckles were white.

Erica lapped the oil from his balls, and then took his cock between her hands. She rubbed her hands back and forth slowly, knowing what she was doing to him and enjoying every minute of it. Nick’s eyes closed and his head flopped to the side, his hands clenching tighter on the mattress.

She moved her hands up and down his cock, alternately increasing and decreasing the speed and pressure. She cupped his balls with one hand and squeezed them gently, then dropped her hands to the mattress and leaned into him.

She took his cock in her mouth, sucking the oil from the velvety skin. She moaned against him, circling her tongue around the head. He threaded his hands through her hair, guiding her to move up and down his cock. He arched into her and thrust, pushing his shaft into her mouth further. A loud breath escaped him, and Erica knew he was close. He pulled her mouth off his cock by her hair and lifted her up to him, rolling her onto her back and spreading her legs with his knee.

Stopping only long enough to roll on a condom, Nick pushed his cock inside her pussy all the way to the base, then stilled. He put his head down and sighed against Erica's hair, kissed her forehead, and began to move. Her hips moved to match his slow, languid thrusts, the pressure increasing gradually. He pressed his mouth to the side of her face and kissed her gently.

"You're beautiful," Nick whispered into her ear. Erica glowed. "So beautiful."

"So are you," she said, and she could feel Nick smile against her cheek.

Nick put his hands under her ass and pulled her tighter against him, changing their position slightly. She was ready to come, and she thought he knew it. She gripped his ass with her fingers to pull him closer still. His cock thrust faster and harder, pushing her further and further until she reached the brink. She came, digging her nails into his ass and bucking against him. Nick came immediately after, rolling onto his back and pulling Erica on top of him.

Breathing heavily, he shook his head and smiled.

"Wow." Erica was at a loss for words.

"Yeah," Nick agreed. "Oh, yeah. I could get used to having you around."

She hoped that was true, because the more time she spent with him, the more she wanted him in her life permanently.

* * * * *

Erica woke up slowly the next morning. Her eyes didn't seem to want to open. She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. She really could use another couple

hours of sleep. Last night with Nick had worn her out. Come to think of it, she hadn't really had a good night's sleep since they'd started this affair. Well, he wouldn't mind if she was a little late today. She just wanted to stay in bed for a few more hours.

Her arm flopped to the side, landing on something warm and solid. She froze, opening her eyes fully and turned her head. Nick. She looked around, only just realizing she'd fallen asleep in his bed. The last time she remembered looking at the clock was shortly after nine when they'd last had sex. She must have been more tired than she thought. Nick must have fallen asleep when she had, because he didn't wake her up and send her home.

"Morning," Nick mumbled, half opening his eyes.

"Go back to sleep," Erica whispered. "I'll make breakfast."

She climbed out of bed, grabbed one of Nick's white dress shirts from the closet, and walked downstairs to the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later Nick walked into the kitchen in his boxer shorts, rubbing his eyes and looking groggy. Erica told him to sit at the table and she put a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of him.

"You did make coffee, right?" he asked hoarsely.

"Couldn't live without it." She poured him a cup and put the mug in front of him along with the milk and sugar. "I don't know how you like it."

"Just the way it is." He picked up the mug and took a sip. "How did you sleep?"

"Good." She looked into his eyes, finding his uncertain expression mirrored her own. "You could have kicked me out last night, you know."

"Yeah, I know, but you looked so peaceful sleeping there I didn't have the heart to wake you." Erica took that as a good sign.

"What are your plans for the day?" Nick asked in between bites.

"Just work. Why?"

"I have to buy a birthday present for my sister. I was hoping you could help me pick something out."

"Oh, okay. Sure," she agreed. "But I have to go home and change first."

"What's wrong with what you had on yesterday?"

"I need to shower, and I have to put on clean underwear," she explained. "Maybe I could meet you somewhere in a few hours?"

"I'll just pick you up." Nick said, shrugging. "We can go to the mall from your place."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Nick's home was a palace compared to Erica's tiny apartment. She didn't want him seeing where she lived. Then he'd put an end to this for sure. "My apartment is a really big mess. I haven't had time to clean it in days."

"Give me a break, Erica. It can't be that bad. I'll pick you up at your apartment in two hours."

"Really, Nick. I think it would just be easier if we met at the mall."

"Nope." Nick put his fork down on his empty plate. "I'm picking you up in two hours, so you'd better get moving if you want time for a shower. Just tell me your address and I'll meet you there."

Erica considered giving him a false address, but that would only create more problems. So she gave him the address, hoping he wouldn't ask for the grand tour before she could hustle him out the front door.

* * * * *

Erica stepped out of the shower just as the phone rang. She hoped it would be Nick calling to cancel their trip or to tell her to meet him at the mall. She wasn't that lucky.

"Where have you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you for days!" Carolyn said into the receiver.

"I've been busy," Erica said evasively.

"Busy with work, or busy with Nick Wilson?" Carolyn sounded suspicious.

"Well, I haven't been getting a heck of a lot of work done lately."

"I knew it," Carolyn said triumphantly. "So when do I get to meet him?"

"You won't."

"Why not?" Carolyn sulked. "You've never had a problem introducing me to your boyfriends before."

"Nick is not my boyfriend." Erica sank down on the couch.

"Yeah, right. You spend all your free time with the man."

"Our relationship is purely physical," Erica said. *At least right now it is.*

"Sounds fun." Carolyn was back to her bubbly self. "How are you handling that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've never been the type for that sort of thing. Are you holding up okay?"

Erica nearly broke down and told her the truth. No, she wasn't okay. She was terrible. She'd learned the hard way that she wasn't the type of woman who could give her body freely with no commitment. But that's not what she and Nick had agreed upon, and she should really try to remember that.

"I'm fine. Great even," she lied.

"You don't sound it."

"Listen, Carolyn, I have to go," she said quickly. "Nick is going to be here soon and I want to be ready. We're going shopping for his sister's birthday present."

"Oh? That sounds like something more than physical to me." It did to Erica, too, but she wasn't going to mention that to Nick.

She disconnected the phone call after she promised to call Carolyn as soon as she got home, and then went back into the bedroom to finish dressing.

Ten minutes later, clad in jeans and a red tee shirt, Erica walked out of the bedroom when the doorbell rang. If that was Nick, he was about an hour early.

"Hi, babe," he said as she opened the door.

"You're early." She raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm not ready."

"That's okay. I can keep myself occupied while you finish." He pushed past her into the apartment before she could protest.

"So what exactly were you worried about earlier?" He turned to face her. "Do you have a man hidden somewhere in here?"

She shook her head, wondering if she'd really been that obvious or if Nick just knew her better than she thought. "I don't keep spare men in the closets if that's what you're wondering. I just didn't want you to see where I lived."

"I got that much from your attitude this morning." He walked across the room and sat down on the couch. "What I don't understand is why."

"Nick, your house is so amazing. This is all I've got." She gestured to the postage stamp sized apartment.

"Do you really think I'm that shallow?" he asked. "Erica, I could not care less how much money you have. It's not the money I'm after."

No, it's just my body.

"Why don't you get ready so we can go?" he continued.

Erica nodded, and then went into the bedroom to rush through her makeup routine. She didn't want Nick out there alone for long. She didn't want him to get a glimpse of what her life was really like.

"All set." She emerged from the bedroom to find Nick exactly where she'd left him. Good. He hadn't been snooping.

"Great." He got up off the couch and took Erica's hand, leading her to the door.

* * * * *

"What do you think of this?" Nick held up a lavender cashmere sweater.

"It's nice," Erica agreed.

"But is it something you'd want?"

They'd been at the mall for over an hour and looked through every store, but still Nick couldn't seem to find something Andrea would like. Everything he picked out was generic-sweaters or scarves or earrings. Erica wondered why he didn't try to pick out something more personal.

"Is it?" he repeated when she remained silent.

"Not really," Erica said softly. "But is it something Andrea would like?"

"Probably not," Nick confessed. He folded the sweater and put it back on the display. "She doesn't even like cashmere."

Erica turned away so Nick wouldn't see her smile.

"Tell me, Nick, does she usually ask for a receipt with the gift you buy her?"

Nick grunted, but didn't speak.

"What *does* she like?" Erica tried not to laugh.

Nick thought for a moment before answering. "She likes to read. She's always got her face stuffed in front of a book."

Erica's smile widened. She knew the perfect place to find a birthday gift for Andrea.

"Come with me."

She led him across the mall to a small, out-of-the-way bookstore at the end of one of the halls.

"This is one of my favorite stores," she told him as she led him to a display in the back. "She'd like one of these if she doesn't already have one."

Erica picked up a book light and handed it to Nick.

"What is this?" He turned it over and over in his hands.

"It's a portable light that can hook onto the headboard of the bed, or pretty much anywhere you can clip it," she explained. "I have one, and it's the best."

Nick looked skeptical, but he took the light and headed for the cash register.

"Hold on, Nick." He wasn't going to buy just that.

"What?"

She followed him to the register and picked out a beaded ribbon bookmark. "You need something more personal to go with it."

He took the bookmark and put it up on the counter with the light. "Thanks."

* * * * *

As they left the store, Nick suggested they get some lunch.

"I'll keep my hands to myself, I promise," he added when Erica looked at him funny.

"Okay," she agreed.

"You pick the place this time," he suggested, not sure what she liked to eat. He hoped she'd suggest some place well lit and busy so he wouldn't have too much trouble keeping his promise.

"I'm dying for a big, greasy cheeseburger," she said, surprising him.

"A cheeseburger?" he echoed. "Most of the women I know don't eat that kind of stuff. They're afraid of getting fat."

Erica smiled. "I'm not most women, Nick."

Didn't he *know* it.

They decided on a fast food place in the food court, ordered double cheeseburgers and French fries and sat down to eat at a small table in the middle of the mall. Nick hadn't eaten in a place like this since he was in high school, and he had to admit he was enjoying it. Or maybe he was just enjoying watching Erica devour her meal and half his French fries.

"You want anything else?" he asked when she was finished.

She looked at him and grinned sheepishly. "Sorry. I have a high metabolism so I tend to eat a lot."

Nick laughed, glad to finally find a woman who wasn't afraid to eat in front of a man. He was a little sick of his dates ordering salads with fat free dressing and only taking two bites.

He watched Erica finish her soda-regular with all the caffeine and sugar-and thought about what was happening to him. He could feel himself starting to get attached to her. Maybe they should think about breaking this off soon before someone, or both of them, got hurt.

But then she smiled at him and he knew he couldn't break it off with her. Not yet. They were having too much fun, in bed and out. He didn't want to lose her yet.

"Are you ready?" she asked sweetly, and he had the sudden urge to kiss her then.

"Yeah." He stood up and pulled her to her feet. He kissed her gently but thoroughly before releasing her.

"What was that all about?" she asked. "I thought you weren't going to do that."

"I changed my mind." He led her out to his car and opened the door for her, then slid behind the wheel.

He was on some kind of natural high today, and it had started when he found Erica in his bed that morning. He was glad she stayed, even though he hadn't expected her to. It was nice not to have to wake up alone for once.

He put the car in drive and left the parking lot, heading in the direction of Erica's apartment. He'd been alone for so long that he hadn't realized it bothered him until he'd met Erica. She was nothing like the controlling, conniving Kathy. She'd never try to pin him down and mold him into what she wanted him to be. When they were together she was fine with their relationship, when they weren't she didn't complain.

The strangest thing was, he hadn't even thought about other women since he'd met Erica. That was unusual. Normally he'd be out looking for the next conquest by now. Even in his marriage he'd felt the urge to stray. He hadn't, but the drive had still been there. Erica was different, and that was both very good and very, very bad.

She had the power to change the way he lived his life, and he wasn't ready for a change. Even when he'd tried to show her who was on top in this affair, he hadn't been able to follow through. She brought out a tender side he didn't even know he possessed. He should end this before he turned into a spineless mess, but he couldn't. He'd just have to wait around a little longer and see what happened. Maybe Erica would get fed up and end it before he had to.

"You're awfully quiet," she said, breaking his train of thought.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about work," he lied.

"Yeah." She didn't sound like she believed him. It was probably time to change the subject.

"What do you want to do now?" he asked.

"Anything."

"Why don't we go to a movie?"

"Sure," she agreed, but she sounded as confused as he was. The line between sex and commitment was getting hopelessly blurred, and neither of them had any idea what to do about it.

Chapter 9

Morning already. Erica dragged herself out of bed, her eyes fighting to stay shut even as her feet landed on the cool wood floor of her bedroom. She stretched her arms over her head and took in a rush of air that seemed to help wake her sluggish body. A glance at the clock told her it was a little past six. Yuck. But she had work to do, a lot of work.

She couldn't believe it had been four days since she'd seen Nick. As much as she'd hated to do it, she'd taken a long weekend to herself. From Friday to Monday, she'd stayed home. Nick had been resistant at first, but she'd explained that she had some home improvements to do and he relented.

She had to admit it; she'd gotten a lot done. She'd painted the bathroom and the bedroom, refinished the kitchen table, and cleaned the place from top to bottom all to keep her mind off of Nick. During her downtime, which hadn't been much, she'd had to force herself to stay away from the phone.

She was hoping the time away would give Nick time to think about what he really wanted from her. If it was still just sex, fine. She could handle that for a little longer. If he wanted something more, well, that was what she wanted, too. She was due at his house in a few hours, so she'd just have to wait and see.

She padded into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, or two or three, her stocking feet making a soft swishing sound on the hall floor. Rolling her head from side to side, Erica yawned and grabbed a mug out of the cabinet above the sink. The aroma of the freshly brewed coffee filled her nostrils, her mind finally snapping to life. Thank God for timed coffee makers.

She walked to the sliding door that led to the small balcony and opened the door on the warm July morning. Birds were singing, heat bugs already humming, and her few neighbors that left for work this early were leaving the building from the door three floors below Erica's apartment.

Sighing, she flopped down into the one piece of furniture that adorned her balcony—an old wicker love seat with a worn and tattered cushion she had found while shopping at a flea market with Carolyn last year. She'd planned to replace the cushion and even repaint the chair this fall, but the piece had actually grown on her. Erica was in luck now that the shabby, grungy look was in style. She couldn't afford much more.

She breathed in the humid air, taking in the scents of the flower boxes she'd placed along the edge of the wrought-iron railing. The tulips, daffodils, and peonies mingled with the aroma of the steaming coffee from the mug in her hand. Erica inhaled deeply, savoring every last note of the scents. She felt her mind slowly pull out of the early morning fog, and her nerves tingling with the sensation of being alive.

This was the best part of the day—when everything seemed so uncomplicated. When life was simple, and the biggest decision she would have to make was whether or not to prune her little gardens today or leave it for tomorrow.

But the moment was far too short. Soon real life invaded, creeping up on Erica so stealthily that she couldn't quite pinpoint the moment of its arrival. She just knew that it was there, and her fragile peace was destroyed for another day. She got up from her perch, walked back into the kitchen, and shut the door for yet another morning on her fantasy world.

Erica cast a sidelong glance at the kitchen counter as she passed on her way to the bathroom. Her eye caught on the stack of bills she would never be able to pay. *Thank you, Carl.* She'd spent her meager savings paying the bills he'd left when he disappeared, and she was still working to catch up on her own. If this kept up, soon she'd be crawling back to her mother, begging to move back home. The fee she would receive from Nick Wilson was the only thing that could save her from such embarrassment.

Nick. He just created a whole new set of problems.

When she was with him she, was so blissfully ignorant to the outside world that she forgot she was in deep trouble. If only she could spend the rest of her life in his bed. Then she'd never have to think about her problems again.

Erica shut the bathroom door behind her and turned the shower water on as hot as she could stand it. She had the feeling she should be taking a cold shower, with what a thought about Nick did to her body. She stepped under the spray and let the heat of the water take some of the tension from the muscles in her shoulders. She wished it were Nick's strong hands caressing her back. What he could do to her, if he had been here this morning.

Erica leaned back against the shower wall and thought about what it had been like with Nick yesterday and all the other times she'd spent in his arms. What his mouth alone did to her was pure heaven. The man was a genius. The orgasms he gave her were so fierce she'd drawn blood on his back from her nails digging into him, but he didn't mind. He actually seemed to like it.

A girl could get used to having a man like Nick Wilson around. Heck, she might even fall in love with him before this was over.

Erica mentally slammed the door shut on such crazy notions. She couldn't let herself do something as stupid as fall in love. Not with Nick Wilson, a man who had sworn off commitment for the rest of his natural life. A man who had no time for anything in his life but work, and maybe a few scattered affairs.

Erica was just another one of those affairs. She knew that without a doubt. She'd even started it herself. Falling in love was not an option. She would be better off to keep that in mind. He wanted her body. He wanted her in his bed, and that was all. She was a modern woman; she was fine with that.

Wasn't she?

* * * * *

By eight o'clock, Nick was sitting at the breakfast table with a toasted bagel and a cup of black coffee. He'd showered, shaved, and dressed, and even picked up the clutter on his bedroom floor in case Erica happened to step into his room today. She'd banished him to the office for a few days and he wasn't very happy about that. Especially since she'd been hiding from him all weekend. But what could he do? She was right-he'd hired her to do a job. Far be it from him to keep a woman away from her work.

He also had his own job to think about. The agency was his, and he had to take care of it. Three days away wouldn't hurt business, but he had to at least make an appearance today. His employees might mistake him for a human being if this thing with Erica kept up. Then all hell would break loose.

He snapped his newspaper closed, threw it down on the table, and got up to place his dishes in the sink. His housekeeper, Monica, would be in a little later in the morning, so he didn't have to worry about washing them today. Monica Parish had been with the Wilson family since before Nick had been born, and she'd only cut back her hours in the past year. Nick was having a little trouble getting used to the fact that, except for the two days a week Monica was here, he had to pick up after himself.

His bedroom was the only room in the house that she refused to touch. She told him that a single man's bedroom was his castle, and far be it from her, a lowly servant, to invade on such a private place. From the chuckle in her voice as she said the words, Nick had an idea of the real reason she wanted to avoid the room, and it had a lot more to do with his revolving door policy with women than his privacy.

Since Erica had been spending time here, he'd started to make an extra effort to be neat. Usually he didn't mind the lived-in look when it came to his home, but with Erica Blake under his roof on a daily basis, Nick tried a little bit harder. He didn't quite understand it, but he wanted to impress her. Not just in the bedroom, but in every aspect of his life. That thought unnerved him to no end.

The sound of a car door slamming sent tingles through Nick's body. Erica was here. He'd promised her that he would be gone for the entire day, and Nick planned to keep that promise. But he had to see her before he left. He had to touch her, even just a little, before he spent the day wrapped up in his work. He knew that she would be on his mind every second, no matter how he tried to push her out. That was just the kind of woman she was.

"Good morning, Nick." He heard from the kitchen door, and his heart deflated. Not Erica.

"Hi Monica." He returned her greeting, knowing it came out a little flat. Silently he chastised himself for getting his hopes up like that.

Surely Erica would walk out of his life if she knew he had these feelings for her. In the kind of relationship they had embarked upon, emotions were strictly forbidden. After all, that's what they had silently agreed upon that first time. Nick had gotten what he set out to get—Erica Blake in his bed. So why did he have the sinking feeling that having her temporarily wasn't going to be enough? He'd warned himself to be careful, but the warning hadn't helped. Erica was part of him forever. Now he just had to find a way to keep that part of him a secret, especially from Erica Blake.

"Some greeting," Monica said sarcastically. "I'm happy to see you, too."

"Sorry, Monica." Nick felt bad. He again tried to shake Erica from his brain, but it wasn't working. "I thought you were someone else."

"That woman you hired to redecorate the house?" Monica asked slyly. "You planning on yelling at her some? So tell me, Nick Wilson, what's wrong with this one? Did she insult your sense of style? Accuse you of having no taste? Or did she try to get you into bed? Isn't that what happened with the last few?"

"There's nothing wrong with Erica," Nick said a little too defensively. He realized his mistake as soon as the words were out of his mouth, but it was too late to take them back. Monica Parish had seen him grow up. She knew him too well, and now he was in for it, big time.

"Erica?" she asked, a hint of amusement in her sharp eyes. "You're on a first name basis with a woman who has been working for you for less than a week, a woman you probably never see since you spend every waking moment at the office? What's gotten into you, boy?"

"Nothing," Nick said quietly, but he felt his face flush with embarrassment. He'd given himself away, and they both knew it.

"Nothing? Why do I doubt that? Didn't your father tell you never to get involved with your employees?"

"She's not an employee. She's working with me, not for me."

"So you *are* involved with the woman, then?"

"Not like you're thinking." Nick tried in vain to regain his dignity. Monica had always treated him like a son, and now was no exception.

"Oh, I know exactly what you and your women do, Nick Wilson. I'm not blind, and I know how you feel about marriage." Monica scolded him, her hands on her slight hips. "But I also know that I've never seen you act this way over one of them before, not even that floozy you made the mistake of marrying. You walk around here like your head is in the clouds. You're in love with her, aren't you?"

"No!" Nick denied weakly, more for his own benefit than Monica's. Falling in love, especially with Erica Blake, would have disastrous consequences. He could never let that happen. Besides, love didn't happen in a week. It had taken him two years to propose to Kathy, and he still hadn't been sure he was head over heels for her.

"Uh huh." Monica peered at Nick from over the rims of her wire-framed glasses. "And it's going to snow in August."

"Come on, Monica. You know me better than that," he said. "I don't fall in love."

Monica nodded and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Your sister told me about the wonderful birthday present you picked out for her," she said after a moment. "Did your interior designer have anything to do with that?"

"She came shopping with me to help pick out a present." Nick was reluctant to admit this, even to Monica.

Monica nodded again.

"And I suppose you've been keeping your bedroom neat for the heck of it."

"I didn't want her to come over *to work* and see a big mess in there."

"And you're being so defensive, why?"

"Because I'm not falling in love with her!" he said, exasperated. Monica merely smiled.

"Am I interrupting something?" Erica stood uncertainly in the kitchen door. Nick had been too wrapped up in his denials to hear her come in. How much had she heard?

"No, dear, come on in. Have some coffee. It's fresh," Monica answered when Nick remained silent. He couldn't seem to get his mouth to work right. Erica Blake had that kind of effect on him.

"You must be Erica." Monica gave Erica an appraising once-over. "I'm Monica Parish, Nick's housekeeper."

"Yes, I'm Erica. Nice to meet you." Erica filled a mug with coffee and sat down across from Nick. Monica took the seat between them.

"Is Nicky treating you well?" Monica asked.

"Of course," Erica answered.

"Well, he's got a short fuse with some of his employees," Monica continued. Erica actually had the gall to laugh.

"I haven't noticed."

"No?" Monica threw Nick a questioning look. "You know he's fired quite a few of his past designers."

"I'd heard something about that." Nick wasn't aware she'd known. "But I haven't noticed any tantrums or anything."

Tantrums?

"Stick around long enough and you'll see what I mean," Monica warned. "Nicky's prone to be hard-headed."

"I'll keep my eye out."

Nick tried to speak, but Monica cut him off with the wave of her hand. And who did she say was hard-headed?

"Since you have a good job, I'm assuming you have a college degree?" She continued her not-so-subtle inquisition. Nick sat back and listened. Admittedly, he was a little curious.

"I have a liberal arts degree from Harvard. I got a scholarship." Nick's head snapped up. He definitely hadn't known that. Maybe he should have actually read her resume when she'd sent it to him.

"Harvard?" Monica repeated. "What are you doing decorating people's houses?"

"It's hard to find a job with only a liberal arts degree, even from Harvard," Erica stated. "I got a good offer right out of college and I took it. I found out I actually liked the work. I worked for a firm for a few years before opening my own business."

"Good for you," Monica said. "Ambitious."

Nick smiled. Erica had gone to a better college than he had. She'd made her own place in the working world instead of inheriting it like he had. He had to admit he admired her for it.

"How do you feel about children?" Monica asked next, and Nick almost died. "Nicky says he doesn't want any, but you should see him with babies. He's a natural."

"I like children." Erica gave Nick an amused look. He was glad she wasn't taking any of this too seriously. Monica was known for being blunt, and Erica was experiencing it first hand.

"Good. Maybe you can change the boy's mind."

Erica shook her head and hid her smile behind her hand. Nick couldn't tell if she was amused or embarrassed. Right now he was a little of both.

"Monica, I think Erica needs to get to work." He stood up from the table. "Right, Erica?"

She nodded, and trying not to laugh, stood up. "Nice to meet you, Monica."

"You'll be seeing me around, I'm sure of it." Monica said, smiling at Nick.

Erica shook her head and walked out of the room.

"This one's a keeper," Monica said to Nick on her way back to the sink. "Don't you dare do anything to screw it up, boy, or I'll have to break your neck."

Nick walked into his home office and gently closed the door behind him, hoping that Erica would leave him alone for a few minutes. He didn't need her coming in and thinking she owned him because his housekeeper had voiced approval. A few beats later she knocked softly on the door.

"So what was that all about?" Erica asked.

"What was what all about?" Nick feigned innocence. He hoped Erica would let it go. No such luck.

"I thought we agreed to keep this fling a secret."

Nick was more than a little relieved. He'd thought, after what she'd heard in the kitchen this morning, that she'd immediately begin planning their wedding. Isn't that how it worked with most women? They trapped you, and before you knew it you were walking down the aisle into a spider web that was almost impossible to break free from.

But not Erica. She didn't seem the least bit interested in trapping Nick. She just wanted to make sure word of what they did never left the house. Given a little more time, she might just change his whole view in the female population.

"I didn't tell anyone anything. Cross my heart," Nick said huskily, advancing on Erica slowly.

“You didn’t, huh?” Erica asked, just before Nick covered her mouth with his, hoping to kiss her senseless. That way she couldn’t ask any more questions he couldn’t answer.

“I promise,” Nick said against her lips.

Chapter 10

Erica's only response was a deep sigh as Nick's hands pushed their way under her shirt and unhooked the clasp of her bra.

Erica's mind went blank as Nick planted kisses along her jaw and his incredible hands kneaded her breasts. His fingers dipped into the waistband of her skirt and eased inside her panties and she gripped his arms to keep from falling.

"I'm sorry if Monica made you uncomfortable," he said. "She doesn't mean any harm."

"I know." Erica spied the neat stack of bills on Nick's desk and stiffened.

"What's wrong?" Nick asked, pulling away to look at her.

"Nothing." She lied weakly.

"Come on, Erica. Don't lie to me now."

"I was just thinking about something else." She looked down at the floor.

"I want to know who hurt you. What did he do to you?"

Erica took a deep breath and blew it out, knowing they would have to have this conversation eventually. She just wished it didn't have to be now.

"Carl Williams," she said softly, her mind flooded with painful memories. "He told me he loved me. He lied."

"I'm sorry, baby," Nick said, his breath hot against Erica's ear.

"He controlled every aspect of my life for a year. He dictated what I did, where I went, and how I spent my money," Erica continued, unable to stop the flood of words that poured from her mouth. "Then he left. And he took every cent I had."

"Oh, sweetheart, don't cry," Nick said, wiping a tear from Erica's cheek. "It's going to be fine. I'm right here."

Erica almost believed him. She had to give Nick credit, he was very convincing. He took her into his arms and held her, stroking her hair idly with his hand while he

whispered soothing words into her ear. Eventually she was able to stop crying, and Nick took her chin in his hand and lifted her face up.

"Don't even think about him," he said softly. "He isn't worth worrying about."

"I know," Erica agreed.

"Think happy thoughts." Nick smiled. "Think about what we're going to do now that I finally have you back in my arms."

She knew he was trying to distract her, and she had to admit it was working. The more he held her, the more she melted into him, and the less she thought about Carl. Soon all memories of Carl had faded into oblivion, and all that was left was Nick. And boy, was she thinking about what they could do before he left for work.

He kissed her again, this time with more passion. He pulled her tightly against his chest, and she could feel he was already aroused. She reached a hand between them and rubbed her fingers along his cock and he groaned.

His teeth grazed her neck as she increased her pace. She squeezed him gently through his khakis and he bit down on the skin just under her earlobe.

"Erica, you really should stop before you get into trouble," he said haltingly.

"What's the problem with that?" She rubbed her body against his.

"You don't seem to understand. It's been four days." She continued her assault and he bucked against her. "Four days since we've fucked, Erica, and I've really missed you. If you keep teasing me, I'm liable to do something that will scare you."

"I'm not teasing." She took his earlobe in her mouth, sucking and nibbling.

"Yes, you are." His voice was hoarse and his breathing heavy. She raked her nails along the crotch of his pants and he grabbed her wrists hard.

"If you keep this up I won't be able to be gentle with you like I was the other night."

Erica didn't want gentle. She'd had gentle and she'd enjoyed it, but now she wanted what they'd had in the hotel room.

"I don't want that," she whispered huskily. "I want hot, wet, messy sex. I want to feel you slam into me. I want you to fuck me hard."

"You don't know what you're asking." He seemed to be close to losing control. All she had to do was push a little bit more and he'd give her exactly what she needed. "You don't even know what *hard* is."

"Then why don't you show me?" she whispered against his neck, and then sunk her teeth into his flesh.

He uttered something between a curse and a growl and gave in.

"Nick." She moaned as he pushed her back against the wall and shoved her skirt up over her hips.

He grabbed the waistband of Erica's panties and gave them a hard yank. They tore free of her body with a loud ripping sound, and Nick dropped them to the floor.

"I need you, Erica," he said hotly. "I need to be inside you now. I don't think I can wait another second."

With that, Nick unzipped his pants, freeing his cock, and lifted Erica's legs a few inches off the ground. He gripped her ass and pulled her close. She wrapped her legs around his waist as his cock thrust into her pussy.

"Yes, Nick, now," she pleaded softly, even as he thrust harder.

There was no evidence of gentleness this time. With each thrust, Nick drove himself deeper into her pussy, carrying her along with him to a place she'd never before known. He squeezed her ass with his hands and drove his cock deeper until his shaft was in her completely.

"I love how wet you are," he whispered. "I almost come every time I think about it."

She raked her nails along his shirt-covered back, fighting for control.

"Tell me how I make you feel, Erica," he demanded.

"You make me feel good." She could barely speak. "So good. You're amazing. I'm gonna come, Nick."

Her orgasm hit just as Nick started to thrust harder. She threw her head back and arched against him, screaming his name as she came, her muscles clenching around his rigid cock. The feel of him inside her as she spasmed triggered a second orgasm almost immediately.

He increased his pace to a frenzied motion, banging Erica against the wall as his own orgasm took him. He came with a fierce shudder, his head falling to her shoulder.

"Erica." Nick's ragged voice in her ear brought her back to Earth as he released his hold on her body and slowly set her feet back on solid ground. "Oh, God, Erica. What you do to me."

Erica started to pull her skirt back into place when Nick's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Not yet," he said slowly. "I'm not through with you yet."

"But Nick, we both have work to do." Erica's protest sounded weak, even to her own ears. She wasn't surprised when Nick waved a hand to silence her.

"I'll tell you when you can go back to work," he said. "Right now, the only thing you need to do is take off your clothes. Take them off, Erica." He added when she hesitated for a brief moment. "Slowly."

"Nick, your housekeeper is still here," she protested.

"That didn't bother you when you were screaming my name a few minutes ago."

He had her there.

"Come on, baby," he said huskily. "Lose the shirt for me. I want to see all of you, and neither of us is leaving until that happens."

Erica worked her shirt over her head and tossed it to the floor.

"Get rid of the rest, Erica."

She obeyed, stripping off her bra and tossing it on top of the shirt. She looked down at Nick's unzipped pants and saw his cock was rigid and ready. She smiled a little and unzipped her skirt, letting it fall to the floor at her feet. She was left standing in front of Nick in her thigh-high stockings and pumps.

With an impatient growl Nick stepped away from Erica and toward his desk. His arm shot out, clearing the desktop in one swipe and sending papers and pens sailing across the room. He wrapped an arm around Erica's slender waist, lifted her against him, and deposited her on the desktop with a thud.

"Nick, I'm still not sure if this is a good idea," Erica said softly, and he thought he caught a glimpse of fear in her eyes. He nuzzled her breasts and the fear was quickly replaced with desire.

"What, you don't trust me?" he asked raggedly. "I would never do anything to hurt you. I promise."

She seemed to relax a bit, which was good, since Nick was now beyond the point of reason. He couldn't have stopped for anything in the world, even if Erica had asked him to. His control was shot. She did that to him every time, and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

He leaned over her and dipped a finger into her pussy, then rubbed her moisture over her clit. God, she was so hot. He didn't understand how he could be ready again this soon, but he was. He couldn't wait another second.

He positioned his cock at her entrance and slammed into her pussy, groaning as she arched her hips up to meet him. He gripped her hips in his hands and lifted them, pulling her even more tightly against him. She positioned her heels on the edge of the desk and lifted herself higher.

"Look at me, Erica," he demanded, slowing his thrusts.

She obeyed, her gaze coming up to his. His finger traced a line from her clit to where they were joined and back again.

"God, Nick." Erica moaned, her eyes locked with his. "I love it when you fuck me."

“Me too, baby. Me too.” He withdrew his cock completely and played with her clit. He thrust back into her again, the entire way to the base of his shaft, and then pulled out.

Erica whimpered, lifting her hips and trying to pull him closer. He pushed his cock into her pussy only a few inches, and then pulled out. He kept fondling her clit while he teased her, bringing her to the brink of orgasm and then backing off, only to thrust his cock into her and start the pattern all over again.

“Nick.” She practically growled when he rubbed the tip of his cock across her clit. “Nick, please.”

He stood her up and dropped into the chair behind his desk, pulling her down on top of him.

“Ride me, Erica,” he said, grinding his hips against her.

She raised herself up and impaled herself on his cock, lifting herself almost completely off of him before she brought herself down again. She was so slick and wet he didn’t think he could hold on much longer.

She continued to move on top of him, circling her hips as she brought him more fully into her pussy. He moaned and clung to her, thrusting into her as she brought herself down. He took one of her nipples into his mouth and suckled her until she trembled against him.

She unbuttoned his shirt and lifted his undershirt up to his chest, clawing his stomach with her nails. He loosened her barrette and her hair spilled out over his face and shoulders. It smelled like apples. He would always remember that about Erica.

Her breath came in gasps now and she made the sexiest little moans in the back of her throat. He laved her other nipple, then left a trail of bite marks along her neck. Nick gripped her hips tighter and pulled her down hard. She screamed again as his shaft filled her pussy. He ground her against him, and he knew he was close to coming. He didn’t want to do it without her.

“I’m close, Erica,” he warned.

"So am I." The second the words were out of her mouth she came with a sharp cry, stilling on top of him as her inner muscles squeezed him hard. She ran her hands up the sides of his chest and pulled the hair on his chest. He came with a primal groan, then tugged her against him and held her close.

"Nick?" she asked softly after a moment.

"Umm," was all he could manage. He didn't think he'd ever been so satisfied in his life.

This woman, this whole situation, was absolute perfection. So what if he cared more for her than he was willing to admit to her? So what if, when she finished her job here, he would never see her again? As long as he didn't let her know the true depths of his feelings he could walk away relatively unscathed.

In a few months, he'd forget all about Erica Blake and his silly, childish obsession with her. He'd move on to his next conquest, and the next, and the next, and life would be wonderful. Everything would return to normal, and soon. Everything would work out fine.

"I love you," Erica whispered.

Nick's stomach did a nosedive to the floor.

His heart stopped, his breath caught in his throat, and his pulse pounded in his ears. This couldn't be happening. Love? No. Not possible. He had to convince her that what she felt for him wasn't love. It was temporary insanity.

"You can't love me, Erica," he said quickly. He moved her off of him and set her on the floor. He stood up, buttoned his shirt, and tucked it back into his pants. "I'm utterly, totally unlovable. Besides, we talked about all this. This is simply not that kind of a relationship."

Nick's fingers fumbled with his zipper. His face and palms were soaked with sweat, and he felt like he'd just run a marathon. He steadied himself against his leather chair and gulped in big breaths of air as he tried to calm his raw nerves.

"I'm not the marrying kind, Erica," he said. "My one trip down the aisle convinced me that I'm not cut out for that."

That was the understatement of the century. Once Kathy knew Nick was hers, she walked all over him. She stayed out all night, presumably with other men. She bled him dry with her extravagant shopping sprees, and she flaunted her "assets" to every member of the male community within a hundred miles while denying Nick the simple pleasure of even a good night kiss before bed. There was no way he'd ever make that mistake again.

"Relax, Nick." Erica laughed softly as she pulled on her clothes. "I told you before I wasn't interested in anything long-term. I'm still not. I just got caught up in the moment."

"You didn't mean it?" Nick asked slowly. He slanted his eyes in Erica's direction.

"Of course not." She waved her hand in the air as if it were no big deal. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Without waiting for his answer, Erica slipped on her shoes and walked out the door, not even sparing Nick a second glance.

He should be happy. He should be downright ecstatic. Erica didn't really love him. She'd just said something she didn't mean in the heat of passion. That happened to everyone on occasion, even him. It was just a simple mistake.

So why did he feel like someone was beating his heart with a sledgehammer?

He wouldn't even dignify that question with a response. Temporary insanity. That's all it was. Just like Erica, he'd gotten himself caught up in what they'd just shared. He didn't love her any more than she loved him. He couldn't, *wouldn't* allow himself to feel this way.

Yet every time he was near her, his feelings grew stronger. This simply would not do. His relationship with Erica would be much better if they returned to a simply professional level of commitment. There was no other way. If they continued along this path for much longer, Nick was going to find himself helplessly lost in a woman he had

no chance of keeping. It was better to let her go now than deal with even more complications down the road.

He would break the news to her tonight, after he returned from work. He just hoped she took it well. He didn't know how to handle a crying female, and he really wanted his house finished before the turn of the century.

* * * * *

Erica had spent the entire day trying, but failing, to absorb herself in her work. She couldn't stop thinking about what an idiot she'd been this morning. She'd so hoped that the look she'd seen in Nick's eyes had been what she thought-love. But it was only her imagination. Nick didn't love her one bit.

That much was evident in the way he reacted to her sudden confession. He'd seemed on the verge of a full-fledged panic attack. It amazed her how three little words, spoken at the wrong time, could turn something as beautiful as the love they had just made into regret and despair.

To make matters worse, she'd lied to him. She did love Nick, with all her heart. She loved him like she'd never loved before, and would never love again. Erica had found her perfect match, her Mr. Right, her soul mate.

Too bad he didn't want her.

What she needed to do now was pick up the pieces of her broken heart and move on with her life. It would be hard at first, but she would survive. She always did.

Erica sighed and dropped into one of the chairs surrounding the kitchen table to pour through her notes. The quicker she got this job done, the quicker she could get away from Nick and all his foolish insecurities. Once they were apart, she only hoped she'd be able to forget him.

The sound of a car in the driveway startled Erica. Nick was home. Gathering her papers, she retreated to the closet at the back of the kitchen to gather her briefcase and purse. The last thing she needed right now was another lecture on how he wasn't the

man for her. With any luck, she'd be able to sneak out the back door before he even found her in his kitchen. Her luck didn't hold for her today.

"You're still here," he sounded very surprised.

"Yes, I am," Erica answered as she turned to face Nick. The coldness in his voice angered her. "You hired me to do a job, and as far as I knew, that entitled me to spend a little time under your roof."

Nick turned away, dropped his briefcase onto the kitchen table, and ran his hands through his hair.

"You know what, Erica?" he said icily. He didn't seem to want to meet her eyes. "I really need to be alone right now. You've been here a little too long. I think you're done for the day."

Erica was at a loss for words. What was wrong with him? She'd expected him to be a little tense, but nothing like this. This was downright scary.

If she didn't know any better, she'd think she was getting a brush off. Then again, maybe she was. She'd known from the very beginning that Nick would be hers temporarily. As much as she'd begun to hope for more, it just wasn't going to happen. Maybe this was just his way of letting her down easily.

But she didn't want to be let go. Nick had carved a place in her heart in such a short time, and she wasn't ready to give him up, even though she'd spent the day convincing herself that she had to. It was silly to think a man like Nick Wilson would want anything more, well, committed, but Erica had to try.

"What's wrong, Nick?" She moved closer and lightly brushed his forearm with her fingers. She thought she felt him shiver before he pushed her hand away.

"Nothing," he said harshly. "I'm just busy. I do have a job that I've been neglecting lately, and I believe you do as well."

His comment stung Erica to her very core. Hadn't he been the one to keep her from the job she was assigned to do?

"On second thought, don't worry about rushing out of here early tonight, Erica. I only stopped home to change," Nick continued, oblivious to the tears that had started to burn Erica's eyes. "I have a date, and I doubt if I'll be home much before morning."

"A date?" Erica's temper finally snapped. "I thought we had something going on here."

"Yeah, we do. We did. It's called sex. Casual sex, Erica, no strings. I thought you understood that."

She understood all right. This whole time she thought they'd been cultivating something worth keeping and Nick was out scouting for other women in his off time. Maybe Carolyn was right. She really did have lousy taste in men.

"I thought you were different." She seethed as she placed her palms against his chest and shoved with all her might. He stumbled back a few steps, stunned from the sudden onslaught.

"I thought I could trust you. I thought I knew you, but you're just like Carl. Just like all the rest. You're only after one thing, and it certainly isn't what I expected after what we've shared." Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to cry. She wouldn't show him how much he was hurting her. He wasn't worth it.

"Yeah, you've got me pegged. I only wanted your body. Now I've lost interest in even that. I'm sorry to disappoint you, Miss Blake, but all men are only after one thing, and I'm one of the worst."

For a moment, Erica thought she saw genuine regret flash in Nick's eyes. It was gone before she had time to establish if it were real or imagined.

"So how much longer do you think it will be before my house is finished?" Nick asked, his voice cold, professional.

"You know what, Nick Wilson; you can take your house and shove it for all I care. I wouldn't spend another second with you if you were the last man on Earth." She smiled bitterly.

That said, Erica stomped from his office, slammed the door shut so hard one of the paintings on the hallway wall fell to the ground with a loud thud, and hurried her way out the front door and out of Nick's life for good.

Chapter 11

Nick had been a damned fool. He understood that now, as he sat alone at the end of the bar nursing the same glass of scotch he'd had for over an hour. Why in hell had he pushed away the best thing that had ever happened to him? He'd *thrown* away the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He'd spent the past two weeks trying to push Erica from his mind, but it was no use. He'd even tried to hook up with a woman he'd met a few nights back. He'd only made it as far as her bedroom door before he'd realized he couldn't do it. He didn't want anyone else but Erica.

He'd known right from the moment his eyes had met hers over her glass of wine that first night that she would be unforgettable. He hadn't planned on falling in love with her. How it happened so fast, he had no clue. He just knew that he'd fallen, hard, and it was too late to keep his heart from breaking every time he thought about her walking out of his life.

He'd been scared. He still was, but he wanted Erica back. Unfortunately, he had a feeling that that wouldn't be happening. If he'd only listened to Monica. If he'd only listened to his heart. Then Erica would be in his arms right now. He'd never be lonely again.

Now it was too late for apologies-too late to fix what he'd done. It was too late to make Erica understand that his mind wasn't entirely focused on sex. He loved her, damn it, and now she'd never believe him again. He was destined to die pining for the one woman he had no chance of getting into his life.

Hooking up with Erica had been a mistake from the very beginning. If Nick had just ignored her that night she sat next to him in the bar, if he'd been smart enough to go home instead of practically inviting himself into her hotel room, things would have been very different. She could have been simply a person hired to work for him temporarily.

But in Nick's mind, he wondered if any of that would have mattered. Fate had destined for them to meet. Powers out of Nick's control had been at work the night he met her. They were *supposed* to be together. The only mistake he made was to send her away.

He had to do something. Living without Erica was not an option. If she didn't love him, well, too bad. She'd just have to learn. He wasn't about to let her go without a fight. He'd get her back one way or another, even if he had to lock her in his bedroom until she came to her senses.

Nick shoved aside the glass. Some of the liquid spilled on the bar in front of him. He stood up, threw a couple of bills on the bar to cover his untouched drink, then stalked out of the bar into the humid night air.

* * * * *

Erica sat in her cramped office and tried her hardest to concentrate on something other than Nick. She'd known their time had been limited, and that after what his wife had done to him he no longer believed in lasting commitments, but she'd just hoped with all her heart that she would be the woman to change his mind.

Obviously she was wrong.

Still she'd clung to that tiny molecule of hope that he'd come for her, that he'd tell her how much he loved and needed her. But those were words she'd never hear, at least not from Nick. She couldn't break through a stone heart. Carolyn told her it was time to move on, to find someone new, but Erica knew the truth. No one would ever compare to Nick. She would rather die an old maid than even think about loving another man.

Erica felt like everything was hopeless. Nick didn't care about her, at least not in the way she'd so desperately wanted him to care. If she were any kind of modern woman she'd chalk the whole situation up to a great set of memories and move on with her life. Apparently she was far less modern than she'd been pretending. The loss of Nick's

presence in her life left a big, gaping hole; one she knew would be a long time in healing, if it ever closed at all.

Erica laid her head against the chair back and closed her eyes, fighting a wave of nausea. Taking a deep breath, she took another look at the paper on the desk in front of her.

"Pregnant," Erica whispered, again reading the results of the blood test she'd taken two days ago.

A solitary tear escaped from Erica's welled eyes and trailed a hot path down her cheek. She grabbed a tissue from the box in front of her and violently wiped the errant tear away.

"So now what am I going to do?" she asked herself, shaking her head slowly back and forth.

This was one complication she hadn't expected. That one morning in Nick's office, they'd been less than careful. But Erica had prayed nothing would come of that. She wasn't sure she was ready to be a mother. Now she didn't have much of a choice.

She was having Nick's baby, even though she knew she'd be going through it alone. Nick didn't want anything to do with Erica, and he'd made it quite clear he didn't want to have children. Sure, he'd probably be more than willing to cut her a support check every month, but she wasn't going to count on him taking an active role in the child's life.

Now she just had to work up the courage to tell him.

Picking up the phone, Erica dialed Nick's number. When she got the machine, she hung up immediately. She wasn't ready to drop this bombshell on him via a telephone message. She needed to speak to him in person.

Tears welled up in Erica's eyes at the thought of seeing Nick again. She wasn't ready to face him, not after the brush off he'd given her that last evening. The pain was still too raw.

"I will not cry," she told herself vehemently, swiping at her cheeks with a tissue from the box on her desk. "I will not waste my time crying over a man like Nick Wilson."

"That's too bad, since I've spent a hell of a lot of time lately crying over you." A voice from the doorway interrupted her reverie. She looked up and right into the eyes of the very man she never wanted to face again.

He looked good-too good for Erica's comfort in jeans and his soft leather jacket. Although she admired the way he filled out those impeccably tailored business suits, Erica would always remember Nick on that night they had first met, when he wore an outfit so much like the one he was wearing now. He looked disheveled, rumpled, and sexy beyond belief. Too bad he didn't want her.

"Go away, Nick," Erica said, trying to sound aloof but knowing she was falling miserably flat. "You don't want me, remember?"

"Actually, that's what I want to talk to you about," Nick said smoothly, flashing Erica a sexy grin.

Well, she wasn't falling for it this time. No way. Nick Wilson could take his sexy body and heart-melting grin right out of her office and to the next conquest on his list.

"There's nothing left to say," Erica mumbled sadly. "You said it all when you told me we were through."

"I don't think I said nearly enough." Nick said with an intensity that made Erica brace herself for the next verbal blow.

"You made yourself perfectly clear then. I don't need to hear it again." She spoke before he could utter another word. "I promise I won't be one of those obsessive types. I won't bother you at work, and I will never set foot in your house again. I won't call you in the middle of the night, I won't."

Tears filled Erica's eyes and her throat closed with emotion, making her unable to go on. She buried her face in her hands, unable to stop the flood of tears but not wanting Nick to see how weak she was.

"Baby, please don't cry. I didn't mean to hurt you." Nick spoke soothingly, walking across the room and gently stroking Erica's hair. "I love you."

Erica's head shot up and she looked deep into Nick's eyes.

"You what?"

"I love you, baby, more than I've ever loved another woman," he continued, his voice gaining strength as he spoke. "I can't imagine living the rest of my life without you. I thought, all these years, that I could do it alone. But now I know the truth. I wasn't alone, not really, I was just waiting for you."

"Nick, please don't say anything you're going to regret later, because I have something to tell you that could change everything," Erica cautioned, feeling like she was stuck in a dream that she might wake from at any minute.

"The only thing that I regret is pushing you away. I know I don't have any right to beg for your forgiveness, but I have to try." Nick swiped a hand across his eyes, looking very close to tears himself.

"I was so scared of getting involved again that I didn't even realize my feelings for you until it was too late," he continued, dropping to the floor beside Erica's chair. "I've been lost without you. I need you back in my life."

"You do?" Erica asked hopefully, praying that she wasn't dreaming. Did he really mean what he was saying? For the first time in what seemed like ages, Erica dared to smile just a little.

"With all my heart and all my soul. Can you forgive me?"

Unable to trust her own voice, Erica nodded vigorously. She wrapped her arms around Nick's neck and sent them both tumbling to the floor.

"Then you'll marry me?" Nick asked, catching Erica off guard once again.

"M-marry you?" She stammered.

"Yeah, you know, the church, the rings, the white gown, the reception," Nick paused for a moment, giving Erica another unbelievably sexy grin, "The wedding night."

A wave of heat rushed through Erica's body at the thought. Then she remembered the test results from her doctor. Would Nick change his mind when he heard about the baby? She had to find out.

"Nick, there's something I need to tell you first." Erica took a fortifying breath before continuing. "I got a note from my doctor today."

"Is everything okay?" Nick looked suddenly worried.

"I'm not sure," Erica said truthfully. "I'm pregnant."

Nick looked stunned, and Erica wasn't sure if that was a good thing. His mouth gaped open, and she was pretty sure she could knock him over with a feather right now.

"Nick?" she asked softly, hoping to God he didn't stand up and walk back out of her life.

"A baby?" Nick asked, a slow smile spreading across his face. He took both of her hands in his and squeezed tight. "Really?"

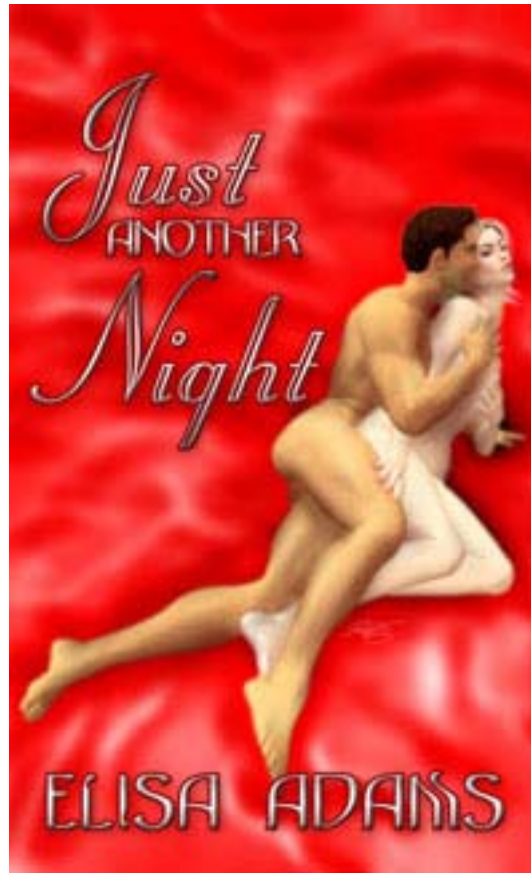
"Really." Only then did Erica dare smile. Relief washed over her as she saw the excitement and acceptance in Nick's eyes.

"So I guess we'll have to get started on planning that wedding right away," Nick said.

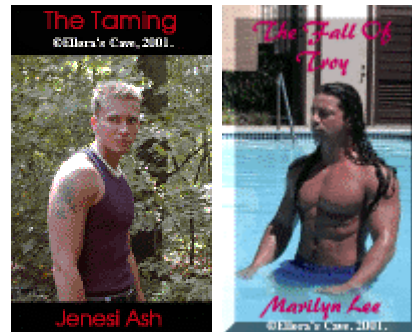
"I don't want to plan anything." Erica smiled. "Why don't we just elope?"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." Erica had a feeling that this might just turn out to be her boldest move yet.



Also at Ellora's Cave:



Ellora's Cave

www.ellorascave.com