

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Shiloh Walker

*Silk Scarves
and
Seduction*

SILK SCARVES AND SEDUCTION

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Shiloh Walker

Dedication

Thanks to Lora and Valery for letting me borrow Blush...

Chapter One

Now, what Tessa saw when Dr. Marc Ford walked by wasn't a bad sight. He was definitely a good-looking guy with dreamy blue eyes and thick gold streaks threading his curly brown locks. If she hadn't known him from childhood, she'd have bet the diamond anniversary band that Caleb had given her for their first anniversary that the gold streaks were salon-assisted.

But she had known him since she had been able to walk, so she was pretty certain the streaks were all his, unless Mama had started him on the road to vanity very early.

He also had a long, lean runner's build, and nicely sculpted muscles that she knew came from the athletic life he lived, hiking, camping, swimming. He went to the gym several times a week, but she thought that was more of an afterthought, a "practice what you preach" deal.

He was only about five ten, but he had that loose-hipped, lazy kind of walk that drove a woman crazy. And Tessa had to admit she had noticed that tight ass of his a time or two.

At least before Caleb.

Well, maybe even after, she thought with a grin.

Long-fingered hands, and a sweet smile that could calm even the most nervous of kids. There was something terribly endearing about a man that adored kids as much as Marc did.

He had some wonderful traits, she would give him that.

And he definitely wasn't hard on the eyes.

But Valery Taylor, also known as Blush, couldn't look at him without literally devouring his admittedly fine ass with her eyes.

When he walked by the door to Tessa's office, he barely even tossed them a greeting, so Valery didn't bother hiding the look in her eyes.

Tessa couldn't help but grin at her.

The woman was so pathetically smitten, it was almost...pathetic.

When her friend dragged her eyes back to Tessa's face, she licked her pink tongue over her lips before a sad sigh whispered out of her.

"Blush, darlin', has it ever occurred to you to just *tell* him?" Tessa asked.

Her pale skin colored the soft pink that had earned her the nickname "Blush" from Marc, as a matter of fact. Running a hand through her tousled red curls, Valery stared dolefully at Tessa. "Oh, yes. I'm so sure that will go over well... *Hey, Marc...I know we've been mortal enemies since we were in middle school...but you really ought to know, I've been lusting after you for almost that long. Is that a problem for you?*"

Blush cocked her head as she spoke, talking into thin air, a thoughtful look on her pretty, elfin face. Then she scrunched up her nose, grinned at Tessa and said, "Ya know, for some reason, it just falls flat."

"You really ought to let that go," Tessa said with a laugh. "Does it really matter in the scheme of things what happened at River View? I mean, that was middle school, well, high school for him. For Pete's sake, he did you a favor—if he hadn't gotten you in the bandroom, you wouldn't have found out that the love of your life was playing tonsil hockey with some perky high school cheerleader."

Blush rolled her eyes. Put like that, it did sound rather...immature. "He wasn't the love of my life. We would have most likely broken up within a month. But that kind of thing crushes a kid, Tess. And now...it's just—habit," she finally said.

Marc Ford and Blush Taylor at each other's throats, well, it was almost like the Hatfields and McCoys, just expected. Even if a lot of her hostility stemmed from the very real fear he'd someday find out how she felt about him.

A bittersweet sigh escaped her. There had been a time, though, when he had been almost as dear a friend to her as...as, well, as Caleb had been to Tessa.

Valery had always known Caleb would come back for Tessa. Bloody hell, she had even known who the secret admirer had been. It had taken everything inside her not to laugh about it, to look mystified and curious as Tessa had gleefully and giddily shown her the gift basket, and then the letters, each one with a blush on her face, and her eyes dancing.

Oh, yeah, Valery had known, and she had snickered on the inside, while she waited for Caleb to make his move. And he hadn't let her down, either.

She had once hoped that Marc had felt that way about her, but that was so obviously a joke. A pitiful one, and all on her.

So now, she played the cool, cutting brat of a woman to him, and let people think most of her jibes still came from her childhood animosity toward him. But her problems now were the same as then...he scared the hell out of her.

And she was scared to death he'd someday learn that.

Oh, yes. That would just be the absolute crowning glory for him.

Some twenty minutes later, the doctor was damning his own luck.

He was quite certain he had the worst luck on earth.

Dr. Marc Ford should have known this would happen. Not one week could go by when he didn't see that haughty, fey smile or hear her husky laugh. Not a week that he didn't go without smelling the indescribable fragrance of her skin.

How in the hell was he supposed to forget this woman?

Wasn't that the plan for his thirty-fifth year?

And here he was, almost thirty-five and still smitten, still as in love with her as ever, still lusting after that long, lush body.

Valery and Tessa were the best of friends, and when he had hired Tessa for the office manager position after their last one had left them high, dry and shy about twenty thousand, he should have expected to see Valery Taylor, a lot.

Hell, Tessa had lousy taste, so of course her taste in friends hadn't improved. After all, look at the jackass she had almost married. Tyson James. A brilliant man, a gifted cardiologist, and one of the most arrogant bastards Marc had ever met. And considering they had both gone through medical school, that was saying a lot. You tended to run into a lot of arrogance there.

But the thing was...Valery was—amazing. So that argument really fell sort of flat. She was so damned brilliant, so damned funny, and so cute—hell.

Marc sat back in his chair and tunneled his fingers through his golden-streaked hair, blowing a sigh out. His lashes lay against his cheeks as he closed his eyes and gave in to the knowledge that had plagued him for all the months that he had refused to think about her.

He had managed to even go months at a time without seeing her, until he hired Tessa. And sometimes, he even fooled himself into believing that he had managed to get over her.

But he was wrong.

Nothing had changed.

He was just as in love with her as he had been in high school.

Fortunately, he had gotten a little better, a little more mature about dealing with it.

Even through the rotten pranks he had pulled on Blush, Marc had graduated early from high school, from college, and he breezed through medical school a good three years earlier than most in his field. After serving his internship, he had done exactly what he had expected to do, open a pediatric office. Even though his professors had urged him to another field, and offers from everywhere from Boston to Philadelphia to New York had come rolling in, none of it had changed the fact that Marc simply wanted to work with kids.

And hiring Tessa had been one of his smartest moves. Taking over an established practice hadn't been easy—so many parents were used to having things done a certain way. And Dr. Joe Morrissey had been...archaic.

They hadn't accepted him quite as easily. He was too young, too different, and out of the corner of his eye, he had seen half the moms checking out his butt as he walked past. But the parents had adored Tessa. As had the kids. The employees loved her.

She had convinced the more doubtful parents into giving him a chance, and by then, the kids had done the choosing for them. They loved Dr. Marc, plain and simple.

However, within the first month of hiring one of his old childhood friends, he had realized that hiring Tessa came with problems. Some unrectifiable problems. Tessa was still the same—coolly efficient until you got to know her, and then full of life, laughter...and still friends with Valery Taylor.

If ever he had had a nemesis, it was her.

Tessa and Blush were night and day. Tessa all cool blonde delicacy, slender and petite, like a little china doll. She looked like a stiff wind would blow her over, but she was as stubborn as the day was long, loyal to a fault, smart and quick-witted. Tessa was organized, efficient, almost to the point that it was scary. She could recall figures from meetings a month ago.

Blush was five-feet-nine inches of leg, hip and ass. And breasts...damn it, he had been drooling over those breasts since she had developed them at the tender age of twelve. But he had been a mature fourteen and couldn't be troubled with the wisecracking, smart-assed tomboy who would rather play ball and go fishing than deal with makeup and brush out the mop of Shirley Temple curls she still wore in a ponytail. He wondered if she still threatened to cut them. Damn it, he hoped not.

She was as unorganized as her tousled head of hair, and she couldn't remember her phone number for three months after getting it changed.

But...on the other hand, she was stubborn as the day was long, loyal to a fault, smart and quick-witted, just like Tessa.

She also liked to sharpen that wit of hers on his hide, so to speak.

He forced himself to leave his office, walking slowly down the hall, listening to the squeals of laughter coming from the waiting room, mingled with the music of Disney.

With a deep sigh, he braced himself and opened the door to Tessa's office, nodding coolly at Blush, watching as her eyes—those pretty brown eyes—met his and all the shutters came down.

"Well, hello, Blush...you seem to be a regular visitor to the pediatrician's office," he drawled. "Is there something going on I ought to know about?"

The innuendo didn't slide by—he hadn't really expected it to. A broad grin bloomed on her elfin face, her eyes dancing with it for a moment. She lifted a brow and said sarcastically, "Oh, yes. Can't you just see me all aglow with pregnancy? Children playing at my feet?"

Yes. His cock raged to rampant life at the image, and Marc thought for a second that he was going to die if he didn't drag her out of that chair and fuck the living daylights out of her. That long, lush body ripe with a baby...with *his* baby? And toddlers playing at her feet? Her camera in hand, no doubt.

Slowly, he blinked, masking the raging lust in his eyes as best he could. "Well, not everybody can be a Madonna, I guess," he finally said. Going by her comments, it sounded like she didn't want them. *Finally*, something about her that didn't strike him as utterly perfect. Because Marc did want kids, desperately.

She smiled coquettishly and with a bat of her lashes, asked, "Now, why would I want to be a pop singer?"

Marc rolled his eyes and turned to Tessa. Brusquely, he said, "There's a couple coming in at lunch. Dr. Flynn recommended us—they aren't happy with Dr. Thayer, so they are going to come by and talk...what?"

The look on Tessa's face cut through the fog in his head and he started racking his brain. He had forgotten something, it seemed. What was it?

"Marc, you forgot," Tessa said, confirming that feeling in his gut as she sighed and pressed her fingers to her eyes. When her hands dropped away, she pinned him with that level stare of hers and he had to fight the urge to fidget.

"Ahhh...what did I forget?"

"Administrative Assistant's Day," Blush chimed in, glancing over her shoulder at the large write-on calendar hanging on the wall. "I'd bet Tessa has a nice lunch scheduled for the ladies in the office. That sounds like the kind of thing she'd do. And the kind of thing you'd forget."

"Fuck."

"My...what language he uses in the workplace," Blush whispered in a conspiratorial tone, waggling her brows at Tessa.

Tessa snickered. "Only with me around. He is utterly, well, not utterly, but he is almost a professional around the employees. And if he hadn't known me all my life, he probably wouldn't do it."

Marc didn't know whether to laugh or groan. "Damn it, I can't cancel. It won't look good," he said, dragging a hand through his hair. The short golden-streaked locks fell back into tumbled disarray.

"No," Tessa agreed. "You can't cancel. But...I'm also not allowing you to cancel the lunch we planned more than two weeks ago. So you're going to give me your credit card and I'll take the girls out. *And* you'll also take them out again next week." She settled back with a beatific smile on her face and waited.

"Fine." He dug a card out of his wallet and started to hand it over. Then he froze. "Wait. Where exactly are you going?"

"Well, we were going to go to *Comptons*," she said, demurely.

Comptons...that wasn't so bad.

“But I think *Vientas* in downtown Louisville will be better,” she finished once he placed the card in her hand. “After all, we can’t have them thinking you don’t appreciate them. Since you aren’t coming and all.”

Hell. She had gone and picked one of the pricier restaurants in town. “You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?” he said sourly. *Vientas*, for crying out loud. And the place was his favorite, paying for the meal wouldn’t be so bad, but he wouldn’t even be able to enjoy it.

Tessa smiled. “I know.”

He walked away after meeting Blush’s eyes once more. She was staring at him, her gaze blank, level, that soft little smile dancing around her pretty bow-shaped mouth.

One of these days, damn it, he was going to taste that mouth.

At least once.

Chapter Two

Blush ran the silk scarf through her hand, tossing her camera a restless look.

Tell him.

Yeah, right.

But damn it, she was tempted.

The look on his face would almost be worth it...and actually...she had an idea, a way of telling him without really telling him—maybe she could drive him a little insane. Just for a while. Have some fun.

Her own secret admirer had given her the idea.

The scent of her body lotion rose hauntingly as she pressed one fisted hand to her lips, debating. That scent had been off the market for more than ten years. But she had her own personal stash of it. Specially blended for her by some European salon. She even knew where the salon was located, though they refused to tell her who had custom-ordered the blend.

It was an exact replica of *Moonlit Walk*, a fragrance she had loved since she was in high school, and then the franchise mall store pulled it off the shelf. She had been surprised with a delivery of it on Valentine's Day...more on her birthday...then for no reason in August, then in December for Christmas. Every few months, so that she never ran out. For more than a decade, it had come, along with the card signed, *Does this seduce you the way you've always seduced me?*

No name...nothing else.

Just those words, and *always* those words.

She had wondered at first when he was going to come out of hiding. But then, she had finally decided it wasn't ever going to happen. And that was fine. It was cool, having somebody who cared that much—in theory.

But she was so desperately in love with Marc, she'd just disappoint whoever it was that had been so thoughtful over the years.

But his gift gave her an idea.

Finally, she whispered, "You're not going to get it accomplished by daydreaming," so she started to strip.

She angled the camera so that it was taking very detailed close-ups. Tying the scarf around her neck, she draped the ends so that they framed just one breast, and then she took the pictures, the remote hidden in the palm of her hand. Her breast, the right one, the curve of her hip, this time with the scarf criss-crossed around her hips, her hands holding the opposite ends, her softly rounded belly, one calf. Nothing more. Nothing that would give away her identity. Just her body, draped in that silky black scarf, shot through with threads of purple.

She piled all her hair up on her head, and shot pictures of her body from the neck down, hiding the telltale corkscrews, the scarf draped across her shoulders, almost demure.

Valery developed them in black and white and they turned out amazing. With an artful trick, she was able to color in the scarf only. Now that took some magic, plus an extra day or two. Ah, the wonders of digital photography.

The first batch had more than fifty photos.

Only ten were accepted.

With her critical eye she boxed the ten she actually liked, and pitched the rest. Then she waited.

She debated.

Valery argued with herself, thinking she was a moron.

Then she told herself he'd never know. She damn well knew her own body and there was nothing on those pictures that would give her body away. And, she had to admit, they were damn good.

Finally, a week later...she did it. She boxed up the portraits and addressed them, sliding the scarf inside at the last moment. And then she waited. Again. She just needed to get up the nerve to actually send them.

But before she could start debating with herself, she stopped the cycle.

"Damn it, you are pathetic," Blush muttered to herself.

Finally, she drove to UPS and made herself do it, scheduling for it to be delivered on Marc's birthday. To his office, of course, and she knew when the cute UPS guy usually made his rounds there. So maybe she could even be on hand for the delivery. *If* she had the nerve.

There was little that was worse than working in an office full of females on your birthday. Of course, there was also little that was better. They were so damn funny. So damn cute.

Marc couldn't make up his mind whether to be outraged with half their comments or just outright amused. He accepted the package from Tessa and escaped to his office with relief.

They had all shown up to work wearing black.

There were *dinosaurs* all over the front of the medical arts building's lawn—*thirty-five damned dinosaurs*. He couldn't stop scowling over that one.

Thirty-five did not make him a damned dinosaur.

He still had to go to lunch with those insane ladies.

Had to listen to more of their teasing jokes, more of their subtle pokes at his persistent single status, more *bad* jokes at his age...but then again, they always bought very good presents.

Heaven help him. A low, husky laugh drifted to him and he had to fight the urge to whimper as he slit the box open. Damn it. Of course, Valery Taylor was going to show up to torment him on his birthday. The day just wouldn't be complete without Blush around to give him grief.

The knock at the door distracted him for just a second.

But only a second.

He wasn't even able to respond.

What in the hell...

His mouth was dry.

His cock was throbbing.

And his eyes were locked on the most erotic pictures he had ever seen in his life. Black and white pictures of a woman, but only parts of her, one breast, the puckered nipple framed by the ends of a scarf. The color of the scarf had been added back in, in every single picture. The dip of her waist, and the roundness of her hip. The taut, curvy muscle of her calf.

Something silky brushed his hand and he stared as the scarf from the picture fluttered out of the box to puddle in his lap.

"So what's it like to be almost old, Doc?"

He lifted his eyes and stared into Blush's merry brown eyes.

"What?"

"You're thirty-five now...few more years, you'll be forty. We used to think that was ancient," she teased him lightly, propping her shoulder against the door. "How does it feel?"

He clutched the scarf in his hand, crushing it. A scent, soft, seductive...*familiar*...drifted up to tease him and his eyes widened, his nostrils flaring as he dragged more of it into his lungs, all the while staring at Blush.

Her scent was on that scarf.

He had to force a slight smile, and he knew that his voice sounded like rusty nails as he responded, "Can't say just yet, Blush." Then he couldn't resist as he added, "Why don't you come and give me a spin?"

Her eyes widened. The tip of a pink tongue darted out to wet her lips—if he didn't know better, he'd say she was speechless.

Her eyes fell to the pile on his desk and she asked softly, "Birthday present?"

He grinned wickedly, "I'd say. Wanna take a look?"

And she blushed. Her trademark.

And he knew.

"I've got stuff to do. I'll have to take a rain check."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Did he know?

No. There was just no way he could have figured it out. There were no identifying marks on those pictures. The scarf was just something pretty she had picked up in the airport in New York City and he had been in the office the day she had bought it. She hadn't ever worn it or used it for anything before those pictures.

There was just no way.

Plain and simple.

She had been reading too much into that naughty grin of his. That was all. But as she sauntered back up the hall to Tessa's office, she could feel his eyes blazing into her back, like he was measuring every step she took.

Or maybe he did know she had sent the pictures and he was wondering how she looked naked.

Of course, if he did know she sent them, he already knew how she looked naked.

Well, parts of her.

Just...the way he had looked at her as he lifted his gaze, staring at her with hazy, cloudy eyes, then they'd cleared and widened just a bit, his nostrils flaring as though he was tracking something in the air.

A dull flush of red color appeared on his lean cheeks and his grin had flashed oh so wickedly on his sexy face as he said, *Why don't you come and give me a spin?*

Hell, yeah.

Did he know?

No!

She forced a deep breath into her lungs as she continued on down the hall to the bathroom, a separate hall for employees or family. It was kept separate from the public area of the office and no patients would be around to see her as she debated her sanity.

Hopefully, the girls up front were too damn busy squaring the morning away to see her muttering to herself as she stomped into the bathroom.

Marc picked up the phone after Blush had walked away, buzzing into Tessa's office. He already knew that she might have gone back in there, and that was fine. But he had to have her around for a little while longer...had to judge her reactions a little more. Why had she sent those pictures?

Was she trying to torment him?

Was this some sick trick she played on guys, trying to drive them insane?

Or—damn it. Was she as secretly insane about him as he was about her? Was that even possible? Tessa hinted that it was.

"Yes, birthday boy?" she drawled teasingly.

He didn't even mind. Hell, he didn't even mind all the black clothes the staff had worn today, or the teasing over-the-hill comments, or the banners taped to walls any more. He could almost even forget the dinosaurs.

With the raging hard-on he was sporting, over-the-hill was the last thing to describe him.

"Bring Blush to lunch with us," he said.

She paused. "Umm...excuse me?"

"Your hearing has always been good, Tess," he teased. "Maybe *you* are the one who is getting old."

"Mind if I ask why?"

"Hmmm...well, I'm just a glutton for punishment," he replied. Drawing one picture out of the stack, he stared at it. It was the 8x10 glossy of her breast, and he imagined it was damn near a perfect match for size. Rubbing his thumb on the flat image, he closed his eyes and imagined he actually had her flesh under his hands.

Oh, soon.

Damn it. He had never imagined he'd ever have her skin under his hands. He'd planned on getting a bite of that tasty mouth, but figured he'd get a fist in the gut once it was over.

He couldn't settle for a nibble now...he needed the whole feast and damned if he wouldn't get it—that smooth, milk-pale skin—he would.

Soon.

Chapter Three

Tessa stared at her best friend, and blinked. Finally, she turned around, sipped her tea, set the cup down, then turned back. Taking a deep breath, she shouted, "Are you crazy?"

"No." Valery finished gathering the last of her most recent batch of pictures and secured them together with the scarf she had used this time, a fire-engine red, lacy confection.

A month had passed since she had sent the last set to Marc, and after day upon day of gentle teasing, she had just concluded this was a new system of torture for him. No way could he know for a fucking month and not say anything.

Not Marc.

She fingered the fringe of the scarf and studied the pictures one more time. They were undoubtedly the best she had ever done, and the most erotic.

She had laid it across her mound and draped herself over a cloth-covered table, her head hanging back. Her waxed mound had been just barely visible through the sheer lace and she flushed as she thought, *What in the hell am I going to do if he does know it's me?*

"Blush, there is no way I can put those pictures on his desk. He will think it's somebody in the office!" Tessa argued through gritted teeth.

Sliding Tessa a narrow look, she chided, "He has eyes, Tessa. Even to the untrained eye, my body looks nothing like anybody who works there. Rocio is too short, too petite. Alicia is the same. And you...hell, you look like a damn china doll. Then there is Beth and she's a bloody Amazon, with just a tad too much flesh to be me. I think it's safe. For crying out loud, toss them under the door in the waiting room and let him think someone slid them under the front door!"

Tessa's eyes widened. "Did you send him whatever he got on his birthday, you know, whatever it was that had him walking around in smiles for...well, a damned bloody *month*? He still walks around with a smile on his face, and he started carrying a damned briefcase. A *briefcase*!"

Valery cocked an eyebrow and smiled delightedly. "Really?"

Tessa pounced on that smile and crowed, "You did send him something. More pictures?"

Valery shrugged. "Maybe," she replied, but the blush on her cheeks answered Tessa well enough.

"You tramp," Tessa said, shaking her head. She arched her neck around, studying the pictures, pursing her lips. "Hey...maybe you can do some of me. I'd like to see Caleb's face if he saw some pictures of me that way."

Valery winked. "We'll take them. Just get the pictures to Marc."

Tessa groaned. "You know, he still keeps that stuff with him and he doesn't share them with anybody. I've walked in his office and seen him flipping through and asked what he's looking at. And he won't share," Tessa said. She cocked a brow and leaned forward, grinning conspiratorially. "I bet he's framed one of them and stuck it in his briefcase...wonder if he's jacking off to it?"

Valery muffled a giggle, and then she had to fan her hand in front of her face as that picture slammed into her mind. Marc staring at an image of her, his hand wrapped around his cock as he imagined taking her, that it was her flesh wrapped around him, as he slid his hand up and down, pumping his way to climax —

"Damn it, Tessa, that was mean," she sulked, shaking her head. "That would be almost as bad as me telling you to think about Caleb 'nekkid' in the shower but that you couldn't ever go and join him again."

"I'd hurt you if you tried to keep him away from me," Tessa said with a grin. "Look, just send them UPS again."

"I don't want to do it the same way," Valery said placidly. "This way..." She pursed her lips. "I could always ask Caleb to do it. He would..."

Tessa groaned and thrust her hands through her blonde locks. "And he will want to see. No way am I letting him see you naked! All right! All right! I'll do it. Damn it. Damn you. You are such a pain in the ass."

Valery settled back with a cat's smile on her face.

Marc had been waiting damn near a month. It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop. Was that all she planned? No follow-up?

No.

That was too simple for Blush. Too unfinished. She always finished things. This was barely even started.

He ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the glass framed picture of her that he had taken to carrying in his briefcase, and shook his head. He had become obsessed. Because at home, he had another one, framed and hanging in his bedroom, along with the rest of the pictures, all centered over his bed.

So when was she going to make the next move?

Leaning his head back, he sighed and ran his hands over his face, and wondered if maybe...just maybe, he had guessed it wrong. Maybe it wasn't her.

Because if it was her, wouldn't she have already done something else? Would she still be keeping him waiting?

The knock on the door had him stifling a muttered curse. *Couldn't they tell he was brooding in here?*

"Come on in," he called out, lowering his feet to the floor and opening his eyes, watching as Tessa strolled in, lifting her brows at him.

"You look pissed off," she said bluntly.

"Bad night," he said levelly.

“Ah.” Tessa thrust the envelope at him and Marc cocked a brow at her.

“What is this?” he asked curiously, as his heart started to beat a slow, heavy tattoo—he already knew.

Tessa’s face was cool and blank, but she’d always been damned good at keeping secrets. “Beats me. It was on the floor in the waiting room, according to Rocio. She found it this morning when she went to open up,” Tessa lied, and she hoped the lie didn’t show on her face. The subterfuge struck her as terribly juvenile—but she hadn’t been able to resist. Hell, she couldn’t exactly deny her best friend. She had put up the best argument she could, but Tessa had known she’d give in eventually. She just couldn’t tell Blush no. Especially not with her history. After all, Caleb had crept into the office like a ghost to leave her love letters.

Valery didn’t have that knack, but not everybody had spent time in the Navy Seals.

Once Marc finally took the envelope, eyeing the block letters with blank eyes, she blandly said, “Don’t forget you have a prenatal today. New mom, expecting twins. And there’s the prenatal classes over at Clark. You’ve got a pretty busy schedule, so you need to stay on top of things today.”

His only answer was a noncommittal hmmm. But when he looked up, she could see the heat he hadn’t been able to hide, so she turned around to leave, unable to keep the smile from spreading over her face.

Damn it, those two were so gone over each other, it was pathetic. How much longer could they hide it from each other?

Chapter Four

His hands were sweating.

A pulse was throbbing viciously in his temple, and his throat was tight.

Marc hadn't ever been so damned turned on in his entire life. And all he was doing was looking at pictures.

More pictures.

The scarf was red lace this time. It was covering her pussy in one, the open weave of the pattern showing enough skin that Marc could tell she most likely shaved or waxed. She had draped herself over something so that all he could see were her thighs, her covered cleft, and her belly, before her torso arched back and down, out of sight.

Then another, with the position reversed. And her fine, *fine* ass was showing, the scarf lying diagonally, from one shoulder down across her back to the opposite hip. But he couldn't even see her neck, not the color of her hair, not anything. Just from her shoulders to her ass.

Then a profile shot and she had used the scarf to bind her breasts.

And oh *fuck*, she had one hand buried between her thighs. He could see her fingers glistening in the light, and almost hear a moan rippling out of her.

Even if she hadn't sent the scarf, he would have known this was Blush's work. Nobody else could make him feel, and hear, and taste when he was looking at pictures like she could.

Only her.

Damn it, he was going to paddle her ass for doing this to him.

Rubbing the scarf between his fingers, he lifted it to his nose and breathed in the scent, a smell as familiar to him as his own name. Then Marc settled down to plot.

It was time he figured out exactly what it was Blush was up to.

And time he got his hands, and his mouth, all over that body she had been taunting him with.

Tessa had been keeping a spare key to Blush's house for as long as anybody could remember. A quick trip into Tessa's office while she was in the break room, and Marc added theft to his list of sins. Of course, at this point, he decided there was no point in keeping track.

As he strolled up the drive to Blush's house, he tossed his "borrowed" key up in the air, studying the old farmhouse with a smile.

He loved this house.

It was so...her. Not that he had ever been invited—he had only been in it on New Year's Eve, when he persisted in crashing her annual party.

The first few parties had been held in her studio apartment in Louisville, and she had snubbed him, ignored him, insulted him, badgered him...but lately, Blush no longer seemed to mind.

He frowned a bit at that. It wasn't as much fun when she didn't scowl and snarl at him and he couldn't wheedle his way into staying.

She had taken the ramshackle old farmhouse in the rolling hills of Charlestown, Indiana, and made it a combination home/photography studio/workshop. The place was a veritable showplace, with pieces of art she had collected from around the world, from glass to pottery to canvas and every medium in between. Her own work was placed among them.

She tended to take pictures on the third floor. She had gutted the attic and installed skylights throughout the room so that she was in natural sunlight most of the day. One corner had been darkened, so she could use whatever means of artificial light she chose. There were various backdrops, drapes and props for when she was talked into taking

an assignment, although she worked mostly on her own and just sold her work when and where she chose, and she seemed to be doing pretty well.

Her darkroom was in the basement.

The second and first floors were her living quarters.

An odd setup. Unless you knew Blush. Because then it made perfect sense...because Blush was just plain...odd.

Her parents had died unexpectedly less than five years ago, and this house had been deeded to her at the reading of their will. Apparently, the three of them had been out here driving and Blush had loved it. They had bought the house for her, planning on giving it to her as a present at some point, once her handyman of a father fixed this and that up.

It hadn't worked out that way, but Blush had her house, and a wonderful last gift from her parents as a testament to how much they had adored their only child.

Marc whistled tunelessly to himself as he prowled the first floor. Her office had a large write-on calendar, much like Tessa's, and he saw she had accepted a wedding today...rather menial for her, but the side notes had him grinning. Kelsey Hampton. Was that *the* Kelsey? Kelsey Hampton had been the biggest bitch on earth—he wouldn't put it past Blush to do it—just to totally hassle her, jerk her chain. And probably to rub in the fact that Blush was fast becoming a world-renowned name when it came to photography.

And the Hamptons were loaded. Blush wouldn't be above making them pay through the nose for wedding pictures, charging a hell of a lot more than the standard wedding photographer would have.

After all, she wasn't exactly the standard photographer—she had studied at Columbia, graduated, spent a year or two wandering around Europe with her camera and a backpack when she had stumbled into a country B&B in Edinburgh, and struck up a conversation with a wealthy American couple.

Before long, they were looking at her pictures, which she had kept tucked into a plain school folder, a purple one, according to Tess.

They had paid her a thousand dollars, outright, for ten of them, and told her she needed to stop treating her art so badly. Then they'd given her the name of a gallery owner in New York and said she needed to go see the lady.

Tess had told the story, laughingly, a hundred times. And Blush still had a foolish look on her face every time she overheard Tess repeating it.

No, not the standard wedding photographer. He scowled and recalled how much he had paid for a few of the framed and matted portraits he had in his house. Of course, they were originals, and nobody else would ever have another like them.

But that didn't make the paying for them any less painful.

Blush still took jobs when she felt like it, but more often than not when he heard her talking to Tessa, it was a job working with younger kids, people she knew and liked.

Flipping the light off, Marc headed out of the office and eyed the door leading to the darkroom.

She guarded that space like a demon.

With a passion.

Well, he thought with a grin, she wasn't here now.

He tried it, and it opened under his hand. Flicking on the light, he jogged down the steps, eyeing the prints scattered around in what looked to be reckless abandon to him. He was sure, for her, there was some kind of order, but it resembled a tornado's wake. He walked alongside one table, seeing a child playing in the park, and he could almost hear her laughter. Then an old man sitting on a bench, and there was the whisper of a sigh of regret on the air, the bittersweet taste of memories.

Marc felt his throat tighten just staring at it.

Damn, she is good.

But she always had been. College had only refined that raw skill, and a year or two in Europe had added a depth of emotion that was enough to bring the sting of tears to one's eyes, or the bubble of laughter to one's lips.

Tessa, Blush and Marc had known each other since elementary school. And Caleb...mustn't forget the silent, ever watchful Caleb. The dark-haired, quiet boy had moved in a few years later, a little after the bond had been formed between the other three, and he had slid into their small group like a shadow. Watching. Always watching.

And it had been Tessa he had watched, with those dark, impenetrable eyes. But the three of them, Caleb, Tessa and Blush had grown closer, and Marc had watched as he was cut adrift. He had been older, and damned if he hadn't been jealous of how close they had gotten, leaving him feeling just a little on the outside.

Blush had been in fifth grade when her daddy had given her a camera, after she had begged and begged. Marc could still remember how she had been chasing after the boys, all right, but she had been chasing after them to shoot pictures of them on the court, not to flirt.

Damn, all of fourteen, he had been fourteen when he felt the punch of love when she had come running up to show the pictures she had gotten of the babies she had been watching for her next door neighbor. They had been decent pictures, he guessed. But, watching her sparkling eyes, his breath had caught in his throat and he had felt the heady rush of a boy's first real crush.

For a kid—a twelve-year-old kid. It didn't matter that she didn't look like a kid. That never mattered. What mattered was he couldn't possibly let his friends know he had it bad for a seventh grader, when he was in the hallowed halls of high school.

But then, she got her first boyfriend. That made it a whole new ballgame.

Especially once he found out Danny Winston was playing around with a cheerleader in Marc's homeroom. Now, what friend would let that go?

But Blush hadn't taken it lightly, being made a fool of. And unfortunately, she had blamed both him and Danny. It didn't matter that wasn't what Marc had set out to do. He hadn't intended on seeing tears fill her pretty brown eyes, or seeing a hot red flush of humiliation stain her cheeks. That had given him some very bad moments, and that alone had made him take the pranks she had dished out over the years. Her pride had taken a beating at Danny's hands, and Blush had always held a grudge. Why, exactly, she had decided to blame Marc, instead of Danny, he'd never known.

But he hadn't counted on the tears. Marc had expected temper, he supposed. Not shame, not embarrassment. Maybe, if he had known how it was going to hurt her, he would have dealt with it a little differently.

Instead of pushing her gently into the room so she could see her darling boyfriend's tonsil hockey for herself.

After seeing him getting all hot and heavy with Samantha Moriarty, she had just blackened Danny's eye and called it quits. But she had looked at Marc with her brokenhearted eyes and whispered furiously, "I'll never forget this, you...you...you jerk!"

When he had found pictures of his mama and daddy naked, posted throughout the neighborhood a week later, he had damn well known who to blame. It had taken all of her allowance to bribe somebody from the high school photography club to develop them for her, although Marc suspected they would have done it for free if they had known what was on the roll of film.

Marc had been forced to endure a week of humiliation for that one. But then, he had gotten back at Danny for what that cretin had done, so people forgot the naked pictures. Especially once they saw Danny tied up naked in the schoolyard, an orange Nerf ball stuffed in his mouth.

Sighing, Marc reached up and rubbed at his neck, surrounded by all the portraits, lost in memories. As he turned around, his eyes passed over a studio-style framed,

black matted portrait hanging on the wall. He didn't really see it as he started to turn around and head upstairs.

He had already taken the first step when he froze.

Turning back, he stared at the picture that erased all doubt that Blush had indeed been the model for the pictures he had received. Not that he had ever had much doubt.

She was standing before the camera, her face turned to the side, those glorious red curls piled on top of her head, the lacy red scarf draped so that it hid one breast and trailed across her belly to cover the other hip. Her cleft was naked.

She did remove the hair. All but one small, neatly trimmed patch.

Oh, hell.

Like the others, the portrait was black and white, the only color in the scarf, deep shocking red. It was so fucking erotic that his cock was aching just from staring at it. And it was so unbelievably beautiful that it would do any museum in the world justice.

And he knew, just from knowing her style, that she had taken it herself.

The sound of a powerful truck engine alerted him and he thanked God she had the windows down here blacked out. Hitting the lights, he tore up the stairs and hid himself in the shadows of the living room. Tucking one hand into the pocket of his jean jacket, he caressed the silky red scarf as he waited.

* * * * *

Valery couldn't stop snickering as she tossed her keys onto the table.

Kelsey Hampton had just reaped what she had sowed her entire life. The guy she was marrying was a philandering perv who just wanted her family's money, and the beauty of it...the jackass couldn't have kids, according to Kelsey. So he could make Kelsey miserable, as Kelsey had made people miserable for years, and no child would suffer for it.

There was nothing worse than seeing a child suffer for the parents' mistakes, Valery suspected. She had been blessed with a great childhood, but she had far too many friends who hadn't.

Ahh, yes. This was justice for Kelsey.

It was perfect. A wonderful last shoot right before she left for the biggest job of her career. So far.

In a week, she'd be in Scotland, shooting for a calendar. Haunted castles of Europe. Oh, it may seem trite, but it was pretty big exposure.

She had pieces hanging in museums in New York, Milan, and France.

But this could help launch her name even more.

She may never become as famous as Ansel Adams, but...she was making a name for herself.

Sighing, she released the clip that held her hair in the tight chignon, arching her neck with relief as the weight of her hair tumbled free. She rolled her shoulders, feeling the tension dissolve slowly as she smiled, picturing Kelsey as she discovered what a fine mess she had landed in.

It had taken Valery no time to peg J.D.

J.D. Morgan had flirted shamelessly with her the entire time, and his bride had known it, too.

In turn, Kelsey had turned and started flirting relentlessly with the best man, who looked to be happily married.

Happily married...something she had started to believe was a fairy tale. At least for people her age. Not that she didn't believe in love. Her parents had been madly in love, until the car crash that had killed them. But until she had seen Tessa and Caleb, she just hadn't really seen it hit anybody, well, like that. So hard. So powerfully.

So necessary.

And returned.

Hell, she had been in love for half of her life with one man. Even when she had given her virginity to a fellow photographer in Kilkenny, Ireland the summer she had toured there before starting college, she had been dreaming of him.

Marc Ford...always, Marc.

Those dreamy blue eyes, and that wicked smile. And his hands—damn it, thinking about his hands was enough to make her want to whimper. She had a fixation about his hands, and it wasn't an artistic one, either. Not that she hadn't thought about asking him to let her shoot some pictures of him before.

But her problem was personal.

Valery wanted to feel those hands on her. And his mouth. A fine tremor racked her body and she whispered, "Get a grip, Val. This is so not going to happen."

Too bad he couldn't stand her. His face tightened up and his back went ramrod straight whenever he saw her, like somebody had shoved a poker up that fine ass of his. Hell, he seemed to think causing her pain was an amusing pastime. That humiliating her was fun.

Well, to be honest, he hadn't done anything like that in years...but still...and maybe, well, maybe...he hadn't exactly set out to embarrass her when he'd showed her that there was more going on in the bandroom than music lessons.

Maybe he had been trying to help. It wasn't like he had stood there and laughed at her or anything.

And if somebody else had done it, maybe she wouldn't have felt that punch of shame quite so bad. She could still remember it, that greasy, hot humiliation that had crawled over her when he had gently shoved her into the high school bandroom and she had seen Danny in there, making out with Samantha.

But that was only the start of it.

Staunchly, she refused to remember how many times she had spurred things on, like the pictures of his parents. Or how she had done the "sewing" on his date's dress

for the Anchor Club. She had done a damn fine job of hemming it. She had a knack for it, always had. Wasn't anything she liked, but she didn't hate it. And the take-up job on the hem couldn't be faulted.

However...she had loosened the seams on the bodice. And Grace had gone without a bra.

Of course, Val hadn't been expecting that. If she had known Grace wasn't going to wear a bra, she probably wouldn't have done it. But her mind wasn't exactly moving on the level of a sixteen-year-old girl who was ready to "do it", which had been Grace's plan.

Valery didn't think Marc had been prepared for what Grace was going to do to Valery either. It's possible he wouldn't have agreed to drive her there if he had known Grace was going to punch Valery in the nose.

Valery's nose was still slightly crooked from that.

Frowning thoughtfully, she mused about the fact that they had broken up that weekend. Nobody but Grace and Marc really knew why – Valery had been too steamed over her broken nose to think of it. And the fact that her parents had taken her camera equipment away for a month.

That still stung.

With a sigh, Valery slid out of the tuxedo-styled jacket she had worn to the wedding and tossed it on the back of the couch, never once glancing in that direction. The jacket landed on somebody's hand as she moved into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. She didn't see it lifted to a shadowed face or hear the softly inhaled breath as somebody breathed in her scent, before her watcher folded it and draped it gently over the back of the couch.

In the kitchen, Valery toed her high-heeled sandals off, the rhinestones on the straps glinting in the bright lights of the pure white kitchen. She wriggled her candy-apple red toenails as she kicked away each shoe in turn, getting them out of the way so she didn't

trip over them later. More rhinestones glittered on the buttons of her shirt, giving the mannish suit a feminine flair.

But the sparkling drops at her ears weren't rhinestones. Neither was the half inch thick bangle-style bracelet at her wrist. There was a long gold chain at her neck – twenty inches – with a wand-shaped diamond of more than a carat, and nearly an inch long. It hung between her breasts and it was very real. The anklet on her left ankle was diamonds as well.

The tomboy had come to like flash, and she liked the real stuff.

She undid the snap at her waist and stepped out of her trousers, giving them a half-hearted fold and flopping them over the kitchen island, rolling first one ankle and then the other as she lifted the glass of wine and sipped. The cold, crisp wine rolled over her tongue like liquid gold, so much better than the mediocre vintage that had been offered at the wedding. Kelsey had offered it with a proud smile and said, "Daddy bought this in Italy..."

Valery snickered. It doesn't matter where you buy wine, if a person doesn't know what to look for. Shoot, even France sells bad wine.

Turning and bracing her back against the island, she polished off the first glass as she unbuttoned the glittery rhinestone buttons on her shirt. Reaching for the bottle, she poured a second glass, then rubbed the cold bottle against her bared abdomen. The glass clinked against the charm in her pierced navel and she smiled with pleasure. The chilled bottle felt so damned good.

Damn it, she was still hot. The reception had been held in the humid Holidome, and although lovely, unless one was sitting down the entire time, one would get drenched with sweat.

"I'll damn well plan my wedding a lot better," she told herself, shaking her head.

Then she smiled slightly. "You really need to stop being so petty," Valery admonished, laughing at herself.

"Do you talk to yourself a lot, Blush?"

Chapter Five

She froze.

Her nipples tightened.

Cream flooded her pussy.

Her eyes widened as they flew to the doorway.

Marc stood there, leaning against the doorjamb, a gentle smile on his face. His eyes glittered, that odd little smile sending shivers down her spine as he stared at her. His gaze drifted down to her parted lips and lingered, before drifting back up to meet her eyes.

And in his hands, he held the red scarf. Twining it round and round...she stared at his hands for a long moment, hypnotized. In a tight, rusty voice, she asked, "What are you doing here, Marc? How did you get in?"

He smiled wider. "I swiped the key off Tessa's key ring when she was in the break room yesterday. Shame on me," he said, one lid dropping in a quick wink. He propped one shoulder against the doorjamb, looking as comfortable and easy as could be, grinning at her, unmoved by her obvious discomfort.

"Taking up breaking and entering isn't going to look real good to your patients, Doc. But that doesn't answer the what," she said softly, clutching her wineglass desperately. She downed the contents and poured another glass, feeling all of her natural confidence die.

Marc pushed away from the doorjamb, and started toward her, cocking his head as he smiled at her, a wide, knowing smile.

Damn it, he was grinning at her like he knew.

How could he know?

"You look awful nervous, Blush," he murmured, stalking her, cocking his head.

"I am," she griped, forcing a bitchy tone into her voice. "I've got a jackass in my kitchen late at night. Hell, he *broke* into my kitchen—stole a key and broke into my house uninvited. How do I know you didn't grow into a raving maniac?"

He smiled and stopped in front of her, looping the scarf around her neck and using it to tug her close. Lowering his head, he stopped just a breath away from her mouth. "Now...I think you know I'm not a raving maniac." Then he paused. "At least not normally. I started going a little mad a few weeks ago, when I got these pictures in the mail...and a scarf, soft, black and purple silk. It smelled..." Lowering his head to her neck, he nuzzled her skin before he rasped, "It smelled like you. Have I ever told you that I love the way you smell?"

Her knees buckled and she fell back against the island, the strong hands at her waist steadying her. "Puh-puh-pictures? What pictures?" she stammered. Then her brain started to whirl and she locked on something else. *Her smell?* He liked the way she smelled.

"Hmmm, naughty pictures. Very naughty. I got some more just the other day, and this scarf was used in them. I really like this scarf. Something about red lace. And those pictures... Hell, I think I damn near came just looking at them." He brushed his lips against her ear, his words a soft rumble, and Valery shuddered, the picture that brought into her mind turning her insides to molten lava. Her womb clenched and her knees buckled—if he hadn't been supporting her with his body, she would have puddled to the floor bonelessly.

He started to move his mouth down her neck, his hot breath moving the wisps of hair that clung there. "Care to tell me about them, Blush?" he drawled. Then he traced a damp, hot trail down her neck, nudging the side of her shirt out of the way with his chin.

"Pictures are visual representations of images painted, drawn, photographed, or otherwise rendered on a flat surface," she said lamely, her mind shutting down on her. "Want to hear the history of the photograph as well?"

He grinned widely at her. "I'd like to hear the history of *these* particular photographs, babe. How you did them, why I got them..."

"Ah...why do you think I know anything about the pictures, Marc?" she asked roughly, even though her mind was screaming that she just tell him. Damn it, the gig was up. She was caught.

But what if he was just playing with her?

"C'mon, Blush...I knew it was you the moment I caught your smell on the scarf. I could recognize you blindfolded, out of a room of hundreds of other women. A thousand. Your smell. Damn it, the way you smell has seduced me for years," he muttered gruffly, bracing her with an arm behind her back and bending over her. From under his lashes, he studied her, his gaze searing hot. "Do you know I watched you slide out of your clothes?"

Her face flushed and she realized, mortified, that her shirt was still hanging open, and he was spreading it apart, baring the mounds of her lace-covered breasts. "Marc, what are you doing?" she whispered.

"I'm going to see you naked. You teased me with those pictures and now damn it, I'm going to see you completely naked, completely open, and then I'm going to kiss and stroke every inch of your body," he growled. Staring at her with hooded eyes, red flags of color riding high on his cheeks, his chest started to move harshly as his breathing picked up.

He was serious...wasn't he?

"What?" she demanded, her eyes wide. He was serious. She was pretty sure he was serious.

“And then I’m going to fuck you the way I’ve been wanting to for years,” he whispered, sliding up her body and slanting his mouth across hers, driving his tongue deep.

Oh, yeah. He was serious. He tasted her thoroughly, more thoroughly than any other man had ever done, making love to her mouth, eating at her, feasting on her. If she hadn’t already been aroused, that kiss alone would have made her more turned on than ever in her entire life.

His tongue possessed her mouth, while his hands supported her waist, one knee wedged between her quivering thighs. Valery clutched at his shoulders, her fingers digging into the hard ridge of muscle as she rocked back and forth on his thigh, riding him hungrily without even realizing.

But damn it, he did. Marc had been afraid he would show up here and she would laugh at him—that those pictures had just been another of her successful attempts at making him miserable. In this case, showing him something gorgeous that he would never, ever have.

But then, he had stepped forward and seen half-terrified, half-shocked arousal on her face, had smelled it on the air, and seen in the soft flush of her body, and the peaking of her nipples under the stiff white shirt she had worn.

And now he was losing it—his control over his body, his control over his mind. That long, lush, pale body that he had been dying for a taste of for years...all spread out like a banquet.

Literally, now.

Because he had just boosted her up onto the island and arched her back, caressing the pebbled nipples spearing through the white lace as he pushed her thighs apart, revealing her lace-covered cleft.

“Why, Blush?” he whispered, kissing a line down the panel of lace that stretched over sweetly rounded hips.

"Huh?" she mumbled. Her eyes were glassy, and that berry-pink mouth was wet from her own tongue, and swollen from his mouth and from where she had bitten it. "Huh?"

"Why did you send me those pictures?" he asked patiently, working ever closer to the heart of her.

"I...I just wanted to," she said weakly, arching her hips up and twining her fingers through his hair.

"No other reason?" he asked, feeling a little disappointed. "You do that a lot? Send pictures of that sweet, naked body of yours to guys, make them hotter than hell, just because you want to?"

A frown pursed that pretty mouth and the cloud of lust fogging her sparkling brown eyes cleared just a little. "No. You're the first," she said shortly, her hands falling away from his hair and pushing on his shoulders instead. "Get off of me, Marc."

"No...no, I don't think so," he murmured, catching her hands and pinning them gently beside her head. "I want to hear more about why you decided to send me the pictures, why you decided to torment me like that, why you wanted to drive me out of my mind."

He laughed, lowering his head to stroke his tongue over the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh before he murmured, "Damn, if only you knew. You see, you've been driving me crazy for years anyway. And then you decide to start toying with me like that. You could have killed me."

Then he lowered his mouth between her thighs and blew a puff of air on her before placing his mouth against the white lace and kissing her through it, working through the weave of lace with his tongue for a moment, shuddering at the sweet, spicy taste of her. Closing his mouth around her clit, he sucked gently and a satisfied groan left him as she shrieked and tugged her hands, trying to free them.

He tightened his grip, lacing his fingers with hers. She in turn laced her fingers with his and tightened her grip, her nails biting into his hands as she screamed out his name.

Her thighs wrapped around his head and her heels pressed against the back of his head as she worked her lace-covered cleft harder and harder against him. He pulled back long enough to wrench his hand free from her desperate grip, pull her panties aside and then spread the slick, dewy-wet slit with his fingers, piercing her with his tongue, stiffening it as she started rocking up and down, fucking her hungry little body up and down against his mouth with short, eager lifts of her hips.

He speared two fingers inside her and shuddered at the tight grip of her pussy on his flesh. Damn it, she was tight—tight and hot—her taste was just too addictive. Groaning, he moved up and caught her clit with his teeth, flicking the captured bud with his tongue. He plunged his fingers deep inside the honeyed walls of her pussy and listened as she screamed out his name as she came, the hand he had freed clenched in his hair.

Lifting up, he levered his body over hers and stared down at her. Her face was flushed and damp, tears staining it. Damn, Marc knew he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. Lowering his mouth, he kissed her, cradling her head in his hands, and reveling in her response, in how she didn't pull away from him, even though the taste of her was on his lips.

Stroking his tongue over hers, across the roof of her mouth, the inside of her cheeks and the smooth, pearly surface of her teeth, he searched out every part of her mouth, tasted everything before pulling back to nibble at her lower lip, down her chin, along her jawbone, and up to her ear. Biting down on the fleshy part of her earlobe, he whispered roughly, "Damn it, Blush, you taste better than any other woman I've ever kissed in my life, you know that?"

Against his neck, where her cheek pressed, he could feel the heat of the blush that raced up from her chest to her neck, until her entire face was suffused with it. He grinned, lifting up and staring down at her, delighted with her. "Telling you that you taste good makes you blush, but me having my head between your thighs didn't do it," he teased, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing her up against him.

She blushed harder and turned her head aside, pushing at his chest.

Lowering his head, he caught her cheek, turning her to face him. "What if I tell you that I'm dying to do it again? To kiss you from your sweet mouth, down to your even sweeter pussy, all the way down to your toes, and back up again? And I know every last inch will taste just as sweet..."

Her face burned bright red and she mumbled, "Then you obviously have no idea what I've been doing today. I've been sweating like a pig and there's no way every last inch will taste sweet."

He laughed and argued, "I think it will." Lowering his face to her neck, he breathed in the scent of her body lotion, the scent of her, the light scent of female sweat, and felt the punch of hunger hit him hard.

Against his chest, her nipples felt tight and swollen, dark pink and just begging for him to taste, just barely hidden behind the lace of her bra. "Damn it, I could eat you up," he growled, lowering his head to stroke one with his tongue.

"You already did," she reminded him with a cheeky grin. The grin died away in a gasp as he took her nipple into his mouth and suckled.

"Hmmm. Now it's time for dessert," he crooned as he pulled back and drew her down, watching as she wobbled on her feet. Her eyes dropped away and Marc lifted her face back to his with a finger under her chin. "I want to take you to that big bed you have upstairs and spread you out and make love to you, Blush," he said softly. "And to be honest with you, that's been a fantasy of mine for years."

"Ahhh...well, I'd hate to deny a man his fantasy," she said, licking her lips, staring up at him with wide eyes, as though she didn't entirely believe he was there.

Arching a brow, he asked, "Is that the only reason you'll do it?"

"No," she murmured. Reaching up, she laid one finger against his lips as she rose up on her toes and whispered against his ear, "I've thought about it once or twice myself."

"Well, hot damn," he teased, scooping her up against him and slanting his mouth against hers. Whirling, he pinned her against the cold metal of the stainless steel fridge, laughing as she yelped when her heated flesh came in contact with the cold surface.

"I'm going to take my time with this," he muttered against her mouth, the laughter dying from his eyes. "Damn it, Blush, I've dreamed about this for years. I'm gonna lay you down and kiss every last inch of you—I'm going to worship this long, lovely body and you'll never want another man by the time I'm done with you."

And I'll make damn sure you love me as much as I love you before this is all over and done with. Marc knew love didn't happen overnight. But he wasn't planning on this being just one night. She had opened the door with those photographs.

He had been waiting for years for her to give him some slight indication, some window. Now that he had it, damned if he'd walk out.

Chapter Six

Valery was shaking.

Marc's words had her trembling inside and she was too worried she'd stammer if she said a damn thing, so she didn't bother. As he drew her back up against him for a soft, gentle kiss, she felt tears sting her eyes.

Who knew...who ever could have guessed that the smart-assed, wisecracking man who had tormented and driven her crazy for more than half of her life could possibly be so devastatingly tender?

The lean, strong body felt so right against hers, just like she had always imagined it would. She twined her arms around his neck, whimpering as she kissed him, feeling his cock jerk against her belly. Her pussy clenched and she shuddered. Damn it, she wanted to feel him inside her, so bad it damn near hurt.

When he pulled back, a bemused smile curved her lips as he took her hand and led her upstairs. Once inside her room, he left her standing by the bed as he opened the curtains, whispering, "I want to see the moonlight on your body, in your eyes."

That man's a damn poet, she thought, feeling her throat tighten as she watched him go around the room, opening the curtains on every last set of windows, four in all. The floor to ceiling windows soon flooded the room with the silvery light of the full moon. He went over and switched off the bedroom light, turned, and just stood by the doorway.

She heard him sigh as he murmured, "Damn it, you are beautiful."

Laughing nervously, Valery said, "I'm passably pretty. But there's nothing beautiful about me."

"I'm the observer here. You're in that body. You don't see what I see—what I've always seen," he said easily, his smile a white flash in his shadowed face as he drew

closer. She licked her lips with nervous anticipation as he drew something from his pocket. It was too dark to make it out, other than a dark color, but she already knew what it was. The red scarf.

He laid it across her shoulder, open so that it covered one breast, and then he lifted her up against him, swift and hard, her feet leaving the ground. His head swooped down and his lips closed over the tip of her lace-covered breast, sucking it roughly into his mouth, drawing it deep, releasing, draw and release, over and over again, until she was writhing in his arms and whimpering, wrapping her legs around his waist and grinding her cleft against his still covered erection.

"Hmmm," he purred with satisfaction when she was covered with sweat and trembling in his arms. "That is what I've been dying to do to you for a damned month, you know that, Blush?"

Then his hand landed on her ass with a hard *thwack* and she yelped. "And that," he finished. "You drove me damn near out of my mind, trying to figure out what you were up to."

"Ummm...sorry?" she squeaked.

He laughed as he lowered her to her feet, urging her onto the bed, leaving the damp lace of the scarf and her bra to chill around the erect nipple as he lowered his head to pay attention to her neglected breast, suckling that nipple deep, his fingers kneading the flesh skillfully.

"No, you aren't," he said agreeably, pulling back to admire how her lush body looked in the moonlight. "But since this is where it landed me, I guess it's okay."

The silvery light gleamed on the dips and planes of her body and he grinned as he caught sight of a glinting navel charm. Closer inspection revealed a tiny silver dragon. "You know the doctor in me tells me I ought to scold you for this," he teased, flicking it lightly. As he dropped to his knees and caught the charm in his teeth, tugging gently, he continued, "But it's so damn sexy, the man in me just loves the hell out of it. I'd hate to be a hypocrite — so I'll just keep my mouth shut."

With his hands at her ass, he guided her down to straddle his hips. Cuddling her against him, he groaned as she moved her hips against his cock. Damn it, she was so wet, so hot, he could feel it through his jeans. He whispered, "I want so badly to get inside you, but I know the minute I do, I'm going to come. I've waited too long for it to be over that fast."

"Well...nobody said we've only got the one time," she said, her cheeks flaming.

"Hmmm. Damn. I love that blush of yours. Never could figure out why you do it so easily, but I hope you never get over it," he murmured, his fingers grazing the pinkened flesh just above the lace of her bra where the blush started. "And I'm awfully glad to hear that you don't plan on this being a one-time occurrence—but I plan on it being a first time that you won't ever forget."

"I can pretty much guarantee that already."

Marc felt the hot flood of satisfaction raging through him as her voice quivered. That trademark blush of hers, she'd never learned to control that sign of her body's reaction. But he knew she had mastered other signs of her body's upheaval long ago, from the quickening of her breathing when she was flustered, to modulating her voice, to knowing when to use scathing sarcasm or ice-cold disdain.

She no longer had that control over her body. He had made her forget that and he loved it. Trailing the tips of his fingers along the side of her thigh, he smiled when he felt them quiver. "I love looking at your body," he whispered. "It's harder than hell when you come into the office, to act like you irritate the hell out of me, when all I want to do is salivate and worship at your feet."

Cupping her shoulders in his hands, he arched her back and pressed a line of kisses down the center of her chest. He pulled the scarf away from her breasts and let it fall in a lacy puddle to the floor, kissing along the mound of her breast with butterfly kisses, dancing away from the budded nipple, even when she fisted her hands in his hair and tugged him closer.

He kissed his way to the front clasp of her bra and there, with a twist of his teeth and a sharp jerk of his head, the clasp opened and her breasts swung free, surprising a giggle out of her. "Where did you learn to do that?" she asked.

"Practice," he said solemnly, staring up at her. "Lots and lots of practice."

"I bet," she gasped, and then she groaned when the tip of his devilish tongue snaked out, stroked her nipple and then went back to biting at the underside of her breast gently—soft, gentle little darts of sensation—as he left her nipple throbbing and aching for his attention.

Much like her weeping core.

Her clit was pulsating. Damn it, she could probably take her heartbeat just by the throbs resonating from her clit. Cream drenched her, more thoroughly, she was certain, than ever before. Valery knew she hadn't ever been this turned on.

And then he grabbed that damned scarf again. At the same time, he finally closed his teasing mouth over her nipple, drawing hard, deep and fast, he took her hands and tugged them behind her, looping the scarf around her wrists quickly and easily, securing them with the scarf and tugging it tight. Valery's breath caught when she realized she couldn't tug her hands free.

Her head jerked up and her eyes widened as she stared down at him, his lashes lying flat on his cheeks as he suckled on her diamond-hard nipple, laving it roughly, then tugging on it with his teeth before finally drawing back and staring at her with unreadable eyes.

"Should I take it off?" he asked levelly.

And Valery knew the choice was totally hers.

She could say yes...and he'd still make love to her, still bury that wonderful hard cock between her thighs. And that would be fine with him.

Or she could leave it alone, let him keep her restrained, turn her body over to him...*could she do that?* Damn it, her pussy clenched at the thought and her heart

stuttered. Damn it, there wasn't any damned thing she wanted more. She wanted to turn over everything to him.

Most especially her heart. Hopefully, he couldn't see that written so nakedly on her face. She wasn't ready to expose so much of her soul.

Her tongue slid out to wet her lips as she slowly shook her head "no". She quivered at the look that shot through his eyes, hot blue flames that seared her clear through to her soul, tightening the muscles in her belly while it made the muscles in her legs go lax. Her breath caught as he rose, swift and sudden, and spilled her onto the bed, her hands under her back, the scarf giving her just enough room that she could move her arms.

He slid his hands under her butt and grabbed her panties, sliding them over her hips, gliding the lacy scrap off, down and away. Then he just stood and watched her, his eyes dark and hungry.

She stared at him as he stood above her, his eyes roaming over her body, and she flushed. Her nipples stiffened even more, to the point of near pain, and she realized that with her arms behind her back, it made her breasts arch out even more. Her thighs were splayed, leaving her gleaming, wet pussy open and naked to his gaze.

And oh, was he ever gazing.

Hot and ravenous, feasting on her with his eyes. Reaching for the buttons of his shirt, he said quietly, his voice dark and smoky, "Sit up, Blush."

Awkwardly, she rolled to her side a little and sat up, thankful she was keeping up with that gym membership enough that she could do it without a struggle. Her shirt still hung on her shoulders and the cups of her bra fell open over her breasts as she stared up at him.

Half-undressed, her hair spilling around her shoulders, and her hands bound behind her back, she sat in front of him, staring at him with wide, nervous eyes, and she knew she hadn't ever been so hot in her entire damned life.

Marc moved behind her, crawling onto the bed. "You remember how my mom made me join the Boy Scouts?" he whispered against her neck. "I stayed in for a good five years. I insisted it was because she made me...but that was only the first year. I actually kinda liked it. They taught me all sorts of interesting things. Like be prepared."

A flash of silver flew by her eye and Valery yelped. It was a *fucking* knife. "Marc...?"

A pocket knife. But still.

He chuckled. And she felt him tugging on her neck line. "You look so pretty tied up, your breasts sticking out for me, like they are just begging for me to bite them for hours. But—I want you naked. This shirt is in the way," he murmured, biting her gently on the ear and tugging.

And then she felt a harder tug, and the sound of cloth ripping. Holy shit, he was cutting her shirt off. He moved around to the side and met her eyes, his gaze dark and hungry as he slid the tip of the knife under the inseam at her shoulder and pulled, the cold metal grazing her flesh as he started the tear before taking it away and placing the handle of the blade between his teeth and tearing the sleeve away.

He repeated it on the other side, never taking his gaze from hers.

Then he sliced the straps that held her bra on her shoulders.

The scraps of her clothes fell around her hips as he stood back and folded the knife away, sliding it into his pocket and staring at her. "That is a sight I've been dying to see for longer than you can imagine," he said huskily, his eyes dropping to study her breasts, then trailing lower, lingering on the silver dragon at her navel, before locking on the naked folds of her pussy. His eyes slid back up to her belly, up the line of her torso, lingering on her now naked breasts and he muttered, "You've got the prettiest damn tits I've ever seen in my life."

Valery felt her heart stop in her chest. How could a word that normal sound so...crass, and make her nipples ache even more? Licking her lips, she squirmed under his gaze and wondered how much more of his study she could take.

“Open your legs.”

She jumped at the raspy quality of his voice. Butterflies danced in her belly as she shifted on the bed and then spread her legs slowly, inching forward until just her buttocks rested on the edge of the bed.

“Damn, that’s pretty,” he whispered.

Her breath caught as he came to her and knelt, laying his hands on her thighs and pushing them wider, staring at her. Damn it, could he see how wet she was —

“You are so wet... I can see it...smell it. It’s driving me insane,” he said gutturally, pressing one hand against the center of her chest and urging her back onto the bed, lifting her hips in his hands, bringing her to his face, pressing his mouth to her mound and groaning as he drove his stiffened tongue into her wet folds.

Valery sobbed out his name, her bound hands clenching into fists as he shoved her higher and higher into bliss, his wicked tongue plundering her deeper than she had thought possible. He shifted and caught her clit in his teeth and she screamed, climaxing with a wet gush, tears burning her cheeks as she came.

Her belly clenched, her womb jerking as she worked her hips up and down, sobbing. Still, he stabbed at her with his tongue, worked on her sensitive clit with his teeth, and then pulled back to blow a cooling puff of air against her, over and over until a second climax was pulled from her.

His name ripped out of her and she moaned weakly when he finally lowered her hips to the bed and stood, staring down at her, his chest moving in a harsh rhythm. “I’m going to take you now,” he said softly, tearing his shirt away, ripping at the buttons on his jeans, his eyes never leaving her face. “I can’t wait any longer to feel you under me. I’ve waited too long for you already.”

Valery heard the thuds from his shoes hitting the floor and she knew his clothes were flying across the room, but all she could do was stare at him, at that muscled, tanned body, the muscled wall of his chest, his flat belly and narrow hips...damn, he was perfection...and his eyes, those beautiful eyes.

She could just lie there and stare into those dreamy blue eyes for hours. Well, maybe not, because she wanted him so badly that she hurt with it.

Damn, she loved him.

Her breath tripped out of her in a ragged sigh as he moved closer, and she moved her eyes down to study the hard muscled wall of his chest. A grin tugged at her lips and she said, "You should know...there's a health hazard involved there."

In his right nipple, a silver barbell winked.

He chuckled. "I lost a bet. And then I just got used to it." Twisting it, he smiled sensually, and Valery felt her pussy clench at the sight. "I like your dragon...maybe I'll get one."

A hot, flustered feeling filled her at that and she didn't know what to say. But she couldn't even begin to dissect that nervous feeling because he knelt on the bed and shoved her thighs apart, his eyes hot and hungry, almost brutally so. "You've no idea, Blush, how long I've been waiting for this," he grunted as he tossed something down on the bed beside her. "I'm gonna make love to you until you come again, and sob out my name like you just did...and then I'm gonna fuck you so hard you scream it."

Her breath shuddered out of her in a rush and she watched as he settled back on his knees and reached up beside her head. She licked her lips, staring at him, the muscled wall of his chest, the carved perfection of his belly, and his cock, the bulging plum-shaped head, pulsating under her stare. A thick vein ran up the underside and she was dying to touch him, to see if the skin was as silky as it looked, to see if he felt like velvet over steel, and if he would gasp or moan when she touched him.

As she watched, he tore open a rubber and unrolled it down his ruddy length, and then he covered her, staring into her eyes, as he used his hips to push her thighs farther apart.

She shifted and he moved his hands under her, rolling her weight farther back on her shoulders, taking her weight off her arms, relieving that pressure as he probed between her thighs, the blunt head of his cock caressing the naked flesh of her waxed

mound. Her eyes widened as he breached her vagina and slid in, the thick flesh cleaving through her tight folds.

Valery could feel her heart pounding, her nipples stabbing into his chest, the silk of the scarf at her wrists, the coarseness of the hair at his pubis as he slid deep inside, and the pulsating of his cock as he slid half of his thick length within her.

Everything felt super-sensitized, and she shivered as he withdrew, then he pushed deep inside again, staring at her from narrowed eyes. His hands held her ass, keeping her weight lifted off her hands as he completely impaled her this time.

Oh...hell.

She gulped in air as he pushed his cock in her to the balls, and started to pull out, his eyes locked on her face. "You feel so damn tight...so hot, you're about to burn me up, even through this damned rubber. I hate it... I've never hated them before, but I hate it now. I want to fuck you without it, to feel you with nothing between us, to feel that sweet, wet little pussy of yours as I fuck my way into you," he panted as he started to slide back inside, his eyes focused on hers.

She whimpered, staring helplessly up at him. "Marc..."

"You make me want to forget everything...damn it, you *are* everything," he rasped. "You always have been and you never knew." Another deep, slow stroke.

She arched her hips helplessly, trying to take him deeper. "Marc, please..."

"Shhh. I'll give it to you, baby, I promise. I'll give you everything," he whispered. Hunkering over her, he started to shaft her, deep and slow, hooking his arms under her knees, keeping her open...and still keeping the pressure off her arms.

So considerate, part of her thought, while the other part was babbling with pure, undiluted lust.

Her hair was tangled around her face, the diamonds at her neck and ears glittering in the silvery light. She looked like a fairy, Marc thought, dazed as he sank his cock

back into her pussy, angling his hips so that he rode against her clit with each stroke. That warning tingle was building at the base of his spine and he knew he couldn't hold off climax too much longer.

Think ear infections...think head lice...think teenage pregnancy...wrong one, boy-o.

Now he saw *Blush* pregnant, ripe with his babe, those beautiful sexy tits lush and full with a mother's milk, her long body made even riper with motherhood. And his thrusts grew harder, as hunger raged through him. And he hoped the love he felt for her wasn't naked on his face for her to see...he wasn't ready to bare his soul to her, not just yet.

"Come for me, Blush, let me feel it," he purred roughly as he felt the subtle tightening of her pussy around his cock through the rubber. "Come."

As though she had just been waiting for his words, she threw back her head and wailed, harsh shudders racking her body, spasmodic clenching in her tight little pussy holding his cock in a vise-like grip as he fucked his way deep inside her body. He exploded inside the condom, coming like a long dormant volcano, fast and furious, lowering his head and sinking his teeth into the fleshy pad of muscle atop her shoulder.

She sobbed out his name and he felt the hot splash of her tears against his face as her breath caught.

As he emptied himself inside the condom, she shuddered and bucked under him, her soft, silken little sheath milking him like a fist until he had nothing left to give. He collapsed against her, spent, and listened as she tried to catch her breath.

He lifted his head slightly and licked the reddened mark on her shoulder where he had bitten her, flushing at the sight of it. "I marked you," he said gruffly, kissing it tenderly.

She rolled her head to the side, craning a bit to see it and a soft smile lit her face. "Mmm. I'm glad. Maybe I'll put a mark on you next time," she teased.

He pulled back and lifted her up, tugging at the knots on the scarf, scowling as they didn't come free as easily as they should have. "You know, this would be quicker if you hadn't tugged so hard," he teased, dipping his head to kiss one pale, ivory shoulder.

Tongue-in-cheek, she said, "Next time, I'll try not to enjoy myself so much."

As the scarf fell free, he swatted her ass gently and said, "Hush."

Climbing from the bed, he disappeared into the bathroom for a minute, and Valery was grinning over the picture he had made walking away, the fine lines of his back, his *fine* ass, those long, strong legs...*oh, double yummy.*

Man, what a dish.

She heard water splashing for a few minutes and then he reappeared and her eyes dropped to his cock, once more naked and unencumbered. He had tossed the rubber. Her lids drooped low and she reached out as he drew closer. Closing her hand over his sex, she pumped him up and down, slowly, licking her lips, watching him from under her lashes as she leaned forward.

Sticking her tongue out, she stroked it up the length from his balls to the tip, circling it around the broad head before taking him into her mouth and sucking on him like a lollipop. The taste of water and soap clung to him, and faintly...latex, but under that...him. She wanted more of that, so she set about pumping her head thoroughly, removing the taste she didn't want, working to get just *his* taste—clean, strong, and male. His body bucked under her touch and he groaned, his hands coming up to fist in her hair, her name a rough sigh on his lips.

Try as she might, the nickname he had stuck her with was one she had never been able to outgrow, not with him, Tessa and Caleb around...and on his lips, it always sounded so erotic, especially now, a caress that raced down her spine. It tightened her nipples, sent heated streaks of lightning darting through her belly, while her clit started to tingle and throb as though he had actually stroked it, not just whispered her name.

She cupped his sac in her hand, rolling him gently between her fingers, smiling around his cock as she felt a tremor rock his body. "Pretty thing," he murmured, rocking on his heels and driving his cock harder into her mouth.

She sucked on him, harder and harder, pumping him with her hand at the same time, feeling the warning throb in the vein under her fingers. But before she could bring him to climax, he pulled her away and jerked her to her feet, covering her mouth with his, growling hungrily as he pierced her lips with his tongue and drank from her. But he had no sooner started kissing her than he stopped, lifting her away from him and reaching down, snagging a foil-covered condom from the bed and tearing it open, swearing under his breath, "stupid brain...stupid...just turn off for once..."

At least, she *thought* that was what he said. With a laugh, she moved up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her breasts flat against his back, shivering at the sensations flying through her. Laying her head against his shoulder, she laughed as he cursed shakily, his movements growing more fitful in her embrace.

"You remember what I said, Blush? That I'd make love to you until you sobbed my name?" he asked, his voice low and gentle, despite his frantic motions.

"Yes," she said, arching a brow, curious.

"Good. Then you probably remember the other part..."

And that was all the warning she got before he spun around and lifted her, backing her into the wall and driving into her with his cock with one hard quick thrust, so hard and fast she didn't even have time to scream before he was driving into her again, and then again. He slammed into her, his thick sex working over the bundle of nerves buried near the mouth of her womb, his pelvis scraping over her clit with each hungry thrust of his hips.

Valery dug her hands into the hard ridge of muscle on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips, feeling his fingers digging into her ass.

His mouth slanted across hers and his tongue pushed into her mouth, rubbing over her tongue and the inside of her cheeks, the roof of her mouth, eating her alive. Then his

finger pressed against the seam of her ass and she arched up, startled, but she couldn't even scream because he was still eating her mouth, robbing her of breath. His ravenous mouth, his greedy hands, and his cock...oh, heaven, his cock—he pumped his hips, slamming into her, harder and harder, until she could have sworn she was seeing stars with each driving thrust.

A scream was building in her throat, just as another glorious climax was building low in her belly, hot, scalding, each drive of his hips into the cradle of hers had the bulbous head of his cock caressing her G-spot in just the right way. Her body felt like it could light up the sky on the fourth of July. His hands, hot and firm on her ass, boosted her up even higher and her head fell back against the wall, away from his lips. She felt drugged and dying for air, too starved for oxygen to let that scream out.

“Scream for me, Blush,” he growled, his head swooping down to capture one nipple in his mouth, biting down gently, sucking hard, alternating between the two. With a twist of his hips, he threw her into climax, and set the scream free. It peeled through the room and bounced off the walls as Valery dipped her fingers into his hair and held on tight, her heels digging into his ass.

He released her nipple with a wet little pop and whispered, “That’s it,” as he rammed into her harder.

Her body went slack in his arms, a dazed little smile on her lips, her fingers falling down to caress his neck tenderly. He smiled at her and lowered his head to buss her lips. “Hmmm. That was nice. But I’m not done with you yet,” he said, and then reached behind and unhooked her ankles, draping her thighs over his elbows and leaning into her, his long, lean body shuddering slightly as he shoved back inside her.

“You’re tight, swollen now,” he murmured, licking his lips, his eyes hooded. “Are you getting tender?”

Slowly, Blush nodded up at him and Marc smiled at her and purred, “Good. I want you to feel every last little move I make.”

Her eyes fluttered closed and she gasped out, “It would be hard not to.”

No response, just an intent, serious look on his face as he started to move into her with slow, deep thrusts, his eyes locked on her face, gauging every move. He lowered his head, catching one nipple in his mouth, suckling it deep, moving to the other, and then kissing his way up to the bite mark he had left on her shoulder. He kissed that gently, soothingly, as he measured every flutter, every whimper, every slow, subtle clench of her pussy around his cock.

“Come again, Blush,” he whispered.

“Marc,” she sobbed.

“Blush,” he teased, lowering his head and bussing her mouth lightly. “Come for me, I have to feel it again.” He rolled his hips against hers, stroking her clit with his body and listened to her cry out, her body shuddering in his arms.

Once she started to come again that last time, he buried his face in her hair and gave in, his semen shooting into the condom, instead of her sweet depths.

Cuddling her against him, he whispered, “Will you let me stay with you tonight?”

She smiled sleepily and wrapped her arms around his neck even tighter. “Just try and leave.”

Chapter Seven

He drifted to alertness slowly, like he always did, unless there was an urgent call. And it wasn't his weekend. Thanks to the pediatric group he belonged to, he only had to take call once a month. No calls, no meetings, just the sweet smell of...

Blush...the smell of her body surrounded him and Marc's eyes flew open.

Bright sunlight poured in and he stared at the unfamiliar room as memories from the past night flooded his mind.

A smile spread across his face, one so wide it was a surprise his face didn't crack from it.

Damn it. He had spent the night with Blush.

He had spent the night making love to Blush, fucking Blush, sleeping in her bed.

Rolling over, he reached out for her – and encountered an empty bed.

His hand closed into a fist and he sighed.

Yes. He had spent the night with her, but there had been no declarations of love from her. Why should he have expected to wake up with her?

Licking his lips, he found her taste still on them.

And a bad case of morning breath, no doubt. Sitting up, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood, padding over to the bathroom he had used the night before. Hopefully she wouldn't mind him stealing her toothbrush for a few minutes.

Ten minutes later, freshly showered and teeth brushed, he snagged his jeans from the floor and tugged them on before jogging soundlessly down the stairs. He could hear Blush on the phone now, murmuring softly, her voice rising and falling. He rounded the corner and stood waiting in the door for her to notice him.

When she did, the slow rush of blood to her cheeks charmed him, just as much now as it always had. Damn it, would he ever not adore her? Not likely. Her fingers twisted nervously in the cord of the glossy white phone as she met his eyes, her tongue darting out to lick her lips.

She had pulled on a robe. It was glossy white, like her kitchen, and almost sheer enough so that he could see the shadow of her nipples through it. As he watched, they stiffened and peaked, pressing tantalizingly against the silky fabric. He pushed away from the doorjamb, his eyes darkening with intent hunger.

Catching her around the waist, he took the phone and said into it gruffly, "Blush is preoccupied. She'll have to talk to you later." And hung it up.

Then he boosted her ass onto the island and caught one of those teasing nipples in his mouth, groaning hungrily. Reaching for the tie at her waist, he opened the robe and pulled her to the edge, tearing at the buttons of his jeans with his other hand. "Fuck you now," he grunted as his cock sprang free. A glistening tear of pre-come glimmered on the end, hanging there for a second before dripping down the underside of his pulsating length.

"I wanted you in bed with me when I woke up," he rasped, covering her mouth and pushing his tongue inside. He was so starved for her taste, so hungry.

A weak "sorry" fell from her lips when he let her mouth go to kiss a line down her neck as he pushed her thighs open, stroking her clit with the head of his cock before bending his knees, angling his hips and driving inside her.

The moment the hot, wet clasp of her pussy closed around his naked cock, he swore heatedly, shakily, but before he could even think about pulling out, she whispered, "Sweet heaven, Marc...that feels...amazing..." as she slid her thighs up and locked her ankles around his hips, just above his ass.

"Blush, damn it, baby, I'm not wearing a rubber," he muttered, sweat beading his forehead. His cock pulsed and throbbed in the snug embrace of her cleft and he wanted to howl at the thought of pulling out and leaving this sweet haven.

Her eyes opened and she stared at him. "I've never been with a man without one," she whispered huskily. "And...it's the wrong time of the month for anything to happen. We should be okay."

"Medically speaking," he panted, looming over her, "that shouldn't mean a damned thing. But hell—I've never felt anything this good in my life. And I haven't fucked a woman without protection since my first time. I wouldn't ever let anything bad happen to you, Blush."

Skimming his hands over her thighs, he unhooked them, holding her legs wide and watching as he possessed her, his ruddied flesh spearing her naked folds, her cream gleaming wetly on his cock. The scent of her musk and his sex perfumed the air and the sounds of their breathing grew loud, his flesh driving into hers, his hips slamming into the cradle of her pussy, his balls slapping against the seam of her ass as he lifted her into his thrusts.

She was wet, silky and responsive—so perfect. Damn it, looking at her as she moved closer and closer to climax was too hot, too much a temptation. Tearing his eyes away from her body, he stared at the ceiling, the cords of his neck bulging as his head fell back, his hair hanging in damp waves around his face and neck.

It wasn't much help. He could still hear her soft moans, the whimpered pleas.

And even more...that soft, unbelievably silken, wet clasp of her pussy on his cock as he pulled out and sank back into her, his balls swinging forward to slap against her ass.

Lifting her higher, he cupped her ass and spread the firm round cheeks, grinning in savage satisfaction as she gasped and bucked against him, her pussy clenching tight around him.

This was insane. This was wrong...this was...bliss. The creamy, snug heat of her sex fit around his cock like she had been made for him, and she sobbed out his name as he fucked his way back inside her. One slim hand slid up her body, cupping a pale breast, her fingers pinching her nipple, milking the berry-pink nipple while her other

hand slid between her thighs, seeking her clit and stroking over it with quick, firm little circles.

"Hmmm...I like watching that," Marc whispered, staring as she played with herself, her fingers starting to gleam wetly as she stroked her clit. "That one picture—it drove me over the edge."

She smiled at him—a siren's smile—Marc thought.

"You wanted to, didn't you?" he asked, slowing his thrusts and watching as her eyes dimmed.

"Ummm..."

"Witch." And then he bent over her body and started to slide his cock in, slowly...out...slowly...while she whimpered and stroked her clit and sobbed out his name.

His control broke and he slammed into her as she started to buck under him, and that wonderful little clutching in her sheath started, her body twisting. Her spine bowed and she started to come, the muscles in her thighs jerking and holding him tight within her as she started to work herself up and down against him, short, staccato screams falling from her lips as she milked his cock and tore his orgasm from him quicker than he had wanted to come.

He erupted inside her, flooding her in wave after wave of hot milky seed. He reared forward, planting his hands on the white marble beside her head, slamming his hips harder and harder, pistoning his cock into her spasming pussy.

It seemed to last forever, and when the little tremors from her pussy finally stopped drawing on his cock, he collapsed atop her, leaning down and resting his forehead against hers.

"So...who was on the phone?" he asked, once he could breathe again.

"Huh?"

"The phone? You know, the person I hung up on?" he reminded, standing and taking her body with him, turning and bracing his hips against the marble. It was still warm from her body, he noticed, stroking one hand up and down her back.

"Ummm...hmmm...Tessa. Tessa, I think," she murmured. Lifting her head, she stared into his eyes and said, "This is kind of bizarre, you being here."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a dream come true," he said quietly, fisting his hand in her hair, reveling in the silky texture, the wild curls. "I have to be honest. I adore you." He pressed his lips to hers and crooned, "Adore you, want you...you've been my weakness for years. Hiding it has been getting harder and harder."

Her body went slack. "What?"

He laughed as he smoothed down her wild hair. "Your hearing going bad, baby? I adore you... I'm pretty sure I mentioned wanting to worship at your feet last night," he whispered against her ear, catching the lobe in his teeth and tugging, the diamonds cold on his tongue. The scent of her filled his head, made him dizzy. "It's harder than hell, feeling this way about a woman who thinks of you as an obnoxious jerk."

"Aren't all men obnoxious jerks?" she asked, her voice distracted. She pushed gently at his shoulder, licking her lips, a puzzled little line between her brows. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"As a heart attack," he teased, reaching up and stroking that line between her brows, trying to hide his nervousness. She hadn't said anything.

She wasn't laughing—so that was a good sign.

But she wasn't telling him anything either.

She moved away, her robe still hanging open. She smoothed her hands over her hair, tossing it out of her eyes as she moved around the kitchen, moved back. He could see the wet from their combined climaxes on her thighs and damned if the sight didn't turn him on even more.

“It’s kind of funny you know. I’ve had this nagging feeling for a while now, can’t stop thinking about you,” she said, a smile tilting up the corners of her lips. “You’re an annoying bastard to have in my head.”

He grinned, the relief that flooded him shooting straight to his head and almost making him dizzy. “My parents would resent that. They were married by the time I was born you know,” he drawled.

Chapter Eight

I'm sleeping with Marc Ford. No. We didn't do too much sleeping. Although the few hours she had spent wrapped in his arms had been the sweetest hours of sleep she could remember.

I'm having an affair with Marc Ford. Well, technically, that didn't work, did it? We just had one night of mind-blowing, dazzling sex. And even that didn't describe it. Affair sounded so...tawdry.

I'm fucking Marc Ford. Well, that sounded hot, dirty and basic. But not quite...enough to describe it.

None of those phrases sounded real to her.

But she knew Tessa was going to ask.

She had been dodging her best friend all week, letting her voicemail pick up, calling Tessa's voicemail when she knew Tessa was likely to be unable to answer. So when the summons came on Wednesday morning, she knew time was up.

Marc had spent two more nights with her.

Monday night he hadn't been able to, but he had called from the hospital and she had heard the sounds of soft newborn squalls and had pretty much understood why, before he even explained. The grim tension in his voice told her more than what he had been able to say.

She hoped the baby made it. She felt her throat tighten as she thought of it.

She had seen his face once or twice, on her trips to the office, when something had gone wrong. And nothing she could say, nothing anybody could say would help heal that hurt.

But so many times, everything did go right.

That was how he was able to deal with it, she supposed. And the solemn look she'd seen in his eyes on Tuesday, she'd kissed, teased, and soothed away. Because he simply wouldn't talk about it, so that was all she had been able to do.

En route to meet Tessa at the office, she rehearsed a million things in her head. Finally, she said aloud the only thing that felt right.

"I'm in love with him. I only hope he's in love with me, too."

Then she laughed derisively. "Damn it, that sounds so damned hokey." As she stopped at a stoplight, she blew out a frustrated breath and wondered, *Do men really even believe in love anymore? Do they start out believing in love or do we have to train them?*

Heaven knew she had hardly ever heard her dad tell her mom. Oh, she knew Dad had loved Mom, but he wasn't very vocal with it. Caleb was—but Caleb was an anomaly in the world of men.

He had been from the beginning. After all, how many guys knew from childhood who they were going to marry? He had come back from the Navy injured, and set about getting back on his feet and going after her.

But by the time he was through with rehab, Tessa was engaged. But he didn't just sit back and let it happen. He went about seducing her in the same way he had done everything else in his life, with calm, quiet assurance. A gift basket like none other Tessa or Valery had ever seen, and then letters and short stories.

By the time he had actually showed up, in silence, at night, Tessa had already been so head over heels with her secret admirer, the rest had been a *fait accompli*. But Valery suspected part of Tessa had known all along that it had been Caleb.

Yeah, Caleb was an anomaly. Practically born loving Tessa. She sighed as she parked, wishing she had the kind of feelings for her own secret admirer that Tessa had for hers.

But even if the man sending her the steady gifts of body lotion appeared in front of her right now with a wedding ring and the new 11-megapixel Canon 1D camera, she'd

just walk away. It would hurt, especially since that camera had a price in the five thousand dollar range.

But she'd take as many nights with Marc as she could get, instead of her ever-silent secret admirer any day.

Her belly was jumping as she climbed out of the car.

Marc wasn't going to be here.

Tessa said he had a lunch meeting with a bunch of doctors and she had sent the office staff to a training seminar. Pressing her hand to her belly, she ordered the butterflies to fly away for the winter. Or the millennium. Then she strode into the office with much more confidence than she really felt.

Tessa greeted her in the waiting room, glancing up from straightening magazines and toys, a cool smile on her face. "So...are you done dodging me?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly —"

"Oh, bullshit," Tessa said succinctly. "I've figured out Marc's part of it well enough, although he's not telling me a damn thing either. Or Caleb. And I tried that route, too. I sicced Caleb on him. And Caleb can't get a word out of him. So I'm down to you. So...what's up?"

Valery watched as Tessa settled down in a chair, crossed one silk-covered leg over the other and stared at her, her eyes patiently waiting. Valery knew she wasn't planning on going anywhere until she had some answers.

But Valery didn't have a bloody clue as to what was going on. Except that Marc had somehow figured out she was the one who had sent him the pictures, and *he wanted her*.

And even more bizarre...he had wanted her for a while.

A tiny smile canted up the corners of her mouth, and try as she might, she couldn't wipe that smug smile off her face.

"Hell, can't two adults have sex without there being a story behind it, Tessa?" she asked, moving her shoulders restlessly as her gaze roamed the room, darting from one place to another, landing everywhere but Tessa's face.

"Sure. But you've been in love with Marc all your life. And I happen to know he has feelings for you, and always has. So when it comes to you and him...no. That doesn't work," Tessa answered simply. "Do better."

* * * * *

Marc jerked his tie loose and cursed under his breath. What a fucking waste of time. If he had to go to one more meeting—hell, was there a doctor alive who didn't know how much they were being bled by insurance companies?

It didn't help that you had the problem with parents taking kids to the emergency room for a runny nose, a cold, a cough. It didn't help that a parent stopped giving their kid an antibiotic five days into the treatment, instead of finishing it out and making sure the infection was gone.

All of that was driving medical costs too damned high, and to top it off, he was spending too much money on these damn things.

He was tired of it, frustrated, and tense.

Lynn Howard had sat next to him, running her thigh up and down his the entire time, smiling at him suggestively until he had finally had enough and just cut out early, shoving out of his seat and leaving, his meal untouched, ignoring the comments from colleagues as he headed for the smoldering garage where he had parked his car.

If he hurried, he could get to his office and close the door, catch a quick thirty-minute nap before they started patients.

He was burning the midnight oil with Blush, but damned if he'd stop before he had branded himself on her.

Fearing to quit this early in the game, he was going out there every damn night that he could, and he'd keep at it, for as long as he had to.

Once he hit the exit ramp, he scrubbed his face with one hand, wondering if he could convince her to come to his house tonight. He could catch a nap while he waited. Heaven knew he needed one...and he could see if she was taking any of this even half as seriously as he was.

Hell, they hadn't even had a single date.

"How can you be talking serious?" he muttered as he went in through the employee entrance, walking up the hall.

Maybe they should go see a movie, or a play, catch dinner this weekend. And then he could start talking serious.

The sound of voices echoed quietly down the hall and he stilled.

"It's sex, Tessa. Okay? Believe it or not, I like sex and it's been a damned long time since I've had it. He's good at it, too. Aren't I entitled to enjoy it?"

Blush. His heart started to ache.

Tessa laughed and said, "Don't tell me that, Valery. I've seen you looking at him."

"Have *you* looked at him? He's fucking gorgeous. Who in the hell wouldn't want to fuck him?"

"Are you *listening* to yourself?" Tessa demanded. "Can you *hear* yourself? Damn it, pay attention to who you're talking to. This is *me*. I know you better than that."

Silence, and then Blush's soft sigh. "Look, Tessa. Not everybody can be lucky enough to have what you have."

"You're too scared to try," Tessa said softly.

Marc stepped forward. His heart felt too fucking broken to care what Blush's response was to Tessa's challenge would be. Shit. So she hadn't had a good fuck in a while. That's what this was about. "So, you needed to get laid, Blush?" he asked coldly, tucking his hands into his pockets.

Soft female gasps, and two pairs of eyes flew his way. Blush's cheeks burned bright crimson and then she paled, her mouth opening and closing, soundlessly. Her eyes were dark, almost black in her lovely face. Looking at her was like a dagger in his heart. Turning his eyes to Tessa, he swallowed, tried to think of something to say. There was simply nothing.

He had gambled.

He had lost.

"Marc —"

"Don't," he said quietly, his voice low and husky, but full of rage, all the same.

Lifting his head, he let her see all the pain and anger he was feeling before he whispered again, "Don't, Blush. Just don't."

Then he turned around and walked away.

She had never felt so shaken in her entire life.

"Well, I can say you royally fucked that up," Tessa said with mock cheerfulness. She looked torn between sympathy and anger, her eyes glittering as she listened to the door slam down the hall.

"I'm going to go talk to him," Valery said, her voice soft, her chest tight.

"I don't think that's a good idea, not just yet." Tessa moved to the waiting room door and closed it, turning to lean her back against it. "Marc's been in love with you since high school. Do you know that?"

Valery said harshly, "Don't do that. Don't say that."

"Why the hell not? It's true."

"How in the hell do you know?" Valery demanded, her eyes stinging with tears. *It can't be true. Damn it, it can't.* But something about the way he had looked at her...

Tessa smiled, a sad little smile. "Know who I'm married to, don't you? You know Caleb is one of Marc's best friends. Caleb doesn't say much, but he sure as hell knows

how to listen.” Tessa sighed, turning around and pushing her hands through her hair. She stared at the wall, her arms folded around her. “I had my suspicions for a while, but you never wanted to talk about it. And look at my track record. Until Caleb, I had messed up every relationship I’d ever been in. And Caleb came to *me*. He made the move. I’m terrible at giving advice on things. But Caleb knew. Marc’s so far gone over you, it’s not even funny. I said something about it at my wedding, and that’s when Caleb told me, but he said you two had to find each other for yourselves. Once he told me, it was so easy to see. And for a while, it was funny, watching you two around each other, but now it’s just—hell. I don’t know what it is.”

Then Tessa turned around and her cold blue eyes stared into Valery’s. “But that was just plain cruel. Blush, what in the hell is your problem? What are you so damned scared of?”

None of Tessa’s words connected. Her legs collapsed under her and she just fell onto the chair under her. “He’s not in love with me,” she murmured. “He can’t be.”

“Why not?” Tessa asked, lifting her chin.

Because if he was, I just ruined everything.

Aloud, she said, “Why do you think that? Where did you get such a fucked-up idea?”

Tessa smiled one of the rare catty smiles that ever graced her face and then she replied, “I’m sure you noticed something of an anomaly on him, a piercing? For a man who is pretty damned good about practicing what he preaches and all. He doesn’t smoke, doesn’t drink more than a beer here and there. Eats better than anybody I’ve ever met in my life. He’s the poster boy for healthy living.”

“What in the hell does that have to do with anything?” Valery demanded, reaching up and grabbing handfuls of her hair.

“Caleb told Marc years ago that you and him were meant to be together and he should ask you out. He was too chicken, according to Caleb. Marc said you’d end up married to some artistic freak or the like before you were even twenty years old and if

he was wrong, he'd get his nipple pierced. Well, Caleb came home on leave the summer you turned twenty and held him to it. Then he asked him when he was going to ask you out. Marc was going to, but you were in Ireland, then when you came home you started dating somebody, an artist. He moped for months."

Valery licked her lips. "That doesn't mean he is in love with me."

"All right. But him telling Caleb that you were the only woman he'd ever love does," Tessa snapped, starting to pace the room, her long legs scissoring back and forth, shooting her an incredulous look. "Damn it. My *wedding*. You caught the bouquet. Marc caught the garter. He was standing there turning it around and around in his hands, staring at you like he could just eat you up in three greedy bites, and you were *oblivious*. And again, Caleb asked him when he was going to do something. Marc said, '*I've been here, waiting for her to notice me for years.*' And I quote, '*The woman I've loved my whole damn life doesn't even realize I exist. It's useless.*' Damn it, Blush, I never realized you were a fool."

Valery blinked. She felt bruised. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"For crying out loud, why didn't you ever *look*?"

Valery stood up, taking a deep breath. Then she walked out the front door.

Behind her, Tessa gaped, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. "Well, why don't you just kick me next time?" she muttered, reaching up and rubbing her hand across her chest.

* * * * *

Valery stood in front of her mirror, smoothing the lotion into her skin, forcing her mind to blank. She had to, because if she thought about anything, she'd shatter.

She ached, hurt all over.

She had been so terribly wrong.

And she'd acted like some high school kid.

The refrain from a movie she'd seen years before kept echoing in her head.

Loser. Loser. Loser.

How appropriate.

She was a damned loser. She'd lost everything.

Damn it. What in the hell was wrong with her?

Was she that afraid of taking a risk?

She scowled at herself.

Yes. She was.

She stared at her hands, at the pale lavender lotion that slicked them. It was a better quality than its predecessor had been, thicker, softer, and left her skin feeling silkier. It smelled every bit as good as the original had.

Valery could still remember the shocked pleasure that had run through her when she'd opened the elegant silver box and pulled out the simple purple glass bottles of lotion that first time.

And the card... *Does this seduce you the way you've always seduced me?*

It hadn't been handwritten. The computer-generated calligraphy was always the same.

But suddenly, Valery knew exactly who it was from.

Closing her eyes, she stood there as the knowledge flooded her and tears started to build behind her closed lids. Her throat felt tight and her chest ached. *Damn it, I am not going to cry.*

So she had totally fucked up.

Crying about it wasn't going to solve it.

Doing something, on the other hand, while it may prove useless in the end, at least she was doing something.

Slathering the rest of the lotion on her body in a hurry, she strode naked out of the bathroom, and prayed she hadn't totally ruined it.

* * * * *

"Damn it, I was so mean to her," Tessa pouted, pacing the floor, her full lower lip poking out, her eyes dark and angry.

Caleb was sprawled on the bed, watching her patiently. "Darlin', this is something Valery and Marc are going to have to work out themselves. And it's long overdue, if you ask me. Just try not to worry about it." His eyes dropped to her lip and he wondered if she'd think he was trying to change the subject if he got up and bit it.

"Damn it, I should have told her how he felt about her a long time ago. I've known—"

Caleb's eyes narrowed. "Now, I told you a secret," he said, straightening his legal pad, a mess of books open in front of him. "I wasn't supposed to go sharing Marc's secrets and you don't need to go interfering. If they are supposed to be together, they'll do it on their own. They'll work it out on their own."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "I know they need to work it out on their own. But I didn't have to kick at her. She looked like a whipped puppy," Tessa wailed, moving to the chaise lounge under the window and flopping down on it dejectedly. She stared out the window over the backyard, her eyes moving over the line of rose bushes that Caleb had planted the past spring without even seeing the lovely buds. All she could see was the pain in Blush's eyes.

"Tessa—"

"Don't," she said flatly, her eyes cutting to him. "You have this odd fixation in your mind that I can do no wrong and—"

He laughed. "No, I don't. Just because I think you're a damn angel..." his voice trailed off and he laughed again. Then he sobered.

"Strawberry, I do not think you are perfect. *But* I know Blush almost as well as I know you. We all grew up together, remember? And maybe, just maybe, sweet little Tessa being mean was the kick in the ass stubborn Blush Taylor needed."

He climbed off the bed and went over to stand behind her, rubbing her shoulders. "Listen to me," he murmured, lowering his head. "Yes, you could have told her. I could have. But Marc's always known how he felt. Blush has always tried to hide from it. Hell, up until this past year, she's still been mean as a snake to him. He's tolerated it, because he adores her. But what good would it have done to tell her, if she wasn't ready to admit to herself how she felt about him?"

Tessa slid a look over her shoulder at him. "How did you get to be so smart?"

He lowered his head and caught that lip that had been tempting him to distraction, biting it just like he had been wanting to. Then he lingered to kiss her teasingly. When she sighed into his mouth, he pulled away.

"I'm going to go run you a bath. And you're going to get in there and relax while I fix supper. Lasagna, I think. Then after we eat...I'm going to tie you to the bed and fuck you silly, until you stop worrying about other people and start paying attention to me," he murmured, reaching down and cupping her breasts in his hand, nudging his cock against her back.

Tessa gasped and arched into his touch. "Ummm...that sounds...pretty good."

Chapter Nine

Valery lifted her hand to bang on Tessa's door a third time, her mouth puckered in a scowl. Damn it, she knew her friend was in there. Was she so damned mad at her she was ignoring her? Both cars were there.

Hell, they were probably twisting on the sheets. Valery felt her mouth start to tremble and a streak of jealousy shot through her. Just before she banged on the door a fourth time, it opened and Caleb was there, a rag tossed over one shoulder, a tomato in one hand, an eyebrow lifted.

When he saw her, a smile spread over his mouth and he pushed the door wider. Sympathy sparked in his dark eyes and reached out, brushing a corkscrew curl out of her eyes. "I've got Strawberry soaking in the tub," he said, cocking his head to the side. "I'm tempted to go run another bath in the spare room and put you in there. You look even sadder than she does. But I don't think I can fix what's wrong with you."

"Tessa has a key to Marc's house. I want it," she said, lifting her chin.

"No, she doesn't," Caleb said amicably, turning and walking into the kitchen, laying the tomato down and stirring the pot on the stove.

Normally, the scents on the stove would have had her salivating, but she was too frustrated, too nervous. "The hell she doesn't. You all take care of his mail, and water his garden and the houseplants when he goes out of town for conferences. I want the key. I'm not going over there to trash things. Give me the key—I'll talk to Tessa later, I promise, but I need the key," she said, reaching up and grabbing a fistful of curls, shoving them out of her face as she met his eyes and waited.

"Well, yes we have a key, but it's mine," Caleb said, crossing the room and reaching into a basket, pulling a key ring out and fishing a key off of it. He tossed it to her, his mouth canting up at one corner. "You realize, don't you, that if you do something that's

going to cause me problems, Blush, I'll never hear the end of it. That means neither will you."

She flung herself across the room at him and planted a loud smacking kiss on his lips before running out of the house without saying a single word.

Caleb licked his lips and grinned, glad Tessa wasn't in the room to see the male appreciation that lingered in his eyes for a moment.

* * * * *

The house was empty when she got there.

Good.

She did, after all, have a plan. It would be easier to get it done if she had some time before he threw her out. She stripped out of her clothes and stashed them, toting her camera equipment in, setting up her photo printer and the laptop in the spare bedroom. Judging from the looks of the dust in there, it hadn't been used since his sister had last come to visit.

Then she started with the pictures.

At the front door, on the steps, on the bed, in the shower...all the while running back and forth between her shots and the door, watching for him. Where in the hell was he? She started printing them off. And left them where she took them.

She left the final one on his bed. With a letter. She didn't exactly know what to say, so she just wrote, *You seduced me, too. But I started loving you a long time ago. Will you forgive me?*

After pacing the house naked for a while, Valery started feeling stupid, so she got dressed. It was past midnight now.

Damn it!

Where was he?

He had to work tomorrow. Had he forgotten that?

Finally, at three a.m., she gave up and left, sighing as she locked the door behind her, throwing her camera bag over her shoulder, her eyes gritty with fatigue, her heart heavy with worry and grief.

She got home at nearly four a.m. and fell face first on the couch, still clothed.

After sleeping restlessly, the phone ringing at seven woke her and she attacked it with a vengeance. "Marc?"

"No. It's Wyatt. Damn it, where have you been, sweets? We got a date today at the airport, in like four hours, remember? Scotland? Yo?"

Shit, shit, shit, shit!

"I don't know —"

"You don't know? It's a little late to back out now, darling. I'm counting on you. It's only two weeks, Val. Come on, get your fine ass out of bed, take a shower and get your passport! Get moving!"

Fuck! Calendar shoot. Haunted castles. Wyatt had gone out on a limb for her, helping to get her on this shoot. If she backed out now...*I can't*. "Look, I need to make some phone calls," she said tiredly, reaching up and rubbing her eyes.

An hour later, she was packed. But she still hadn't gotten hold of Marc. She had left numerous messages at his house. She had called Tessa, but Tessa, once she finished apologizing, didn't have a clue where he was. She did give her his pager number, but she couldn't do anything else.

"Look, I'll leave his key here."

"That's fine," Tessa said softly. "So this is big? You have to go?"

"Yeah. May not make much money, but it's big exposure. That counts for a lot," Valery said softly. "And Wyatt went out big time to get me this. I can't back out on him now. It's only two weeks. But..."

"Timing sucks," Tessa said succinctly.

“Yeah. I...I, uh, left some stuff at Marc’s. If you see him, tell him...tell him...hell. Don’t tell him anything. If he can’t figure it out, I guess there’s nothing there for us,” she said sadly, reaching up and rubbing her hand over her aching heart.

She hung up the phone and grabbed her stuff, heading out to meet the taxi just as it pulled up her long driveway. Valery slid her shades up her nose and refused to let the tears building in her eyes fall.

Chapter Ten

Marc stormed into the house, ignoring the ringing of his cell phone.

He was tired. He was heartbroken.

And he needed a shower.

He had spent the night taking call for another doctor instead of coming home and had ended up getting puked on by a squeamish new dad, then the baby started having breathing problems. Once he filched some scrubs from OR, he had crashed in the doctors' lounge and slept there, instead of coming home and dreaming of Blush.

Then he had to go to the office and dodge Tessa, cutting her off, walking into rooms to avoid talking to her, and outright ignoring her.

And several messages from Blush were on his pager.

Now, finally, he had some peace and quiet.

He could sleep —

There were pictures in his house.

Blush had been here.

He could smell her.

The soft scent of her body lingered, faintly. Very faintly. But she had been here. *Fuck*. Rubbing his gritty eyes, he walked to the stairs and studied the portrait-sized photo of her lounging naked on the stairs, staring into the camera's eye, her heart in her gaze for all the world to see. But maybe he was hoping too much to see it there.

A few steps up, there was another.

This one had a tear streaking down her face.

In the hall, she was lying on her side, her cheek pillowed on her hand, her eyes dark and shadowed — lonely eyes — and she looked every bit as hurt and lonesome as he felt.

More large prints. Every one added to the lump in his throat.

Damn it. Why in the hell hadn't he come home last night? He grabbed the phone from the clip at his waist and dialed her number. It rang and rang as he followed the trail into his bedroom.

The letter on his bed had him hanging up the phone. He'd just drive out there.

You seduced me, too. But I started loving you a long time ago. Will you forgive me?

The wording...he narrowed his eyes, thinking of something else. The gifts from the spa, in particular. The card...

Taking the note, he folded it and tucked it into his pocket as he jogged back down the stairs. He was already out the door and hadn't even glanced at his answering machine, totally unaware of the messages that had been left from the airport.

It was nearly an hour later when he got to Charlestown from Anchorage, Kentucky. Her truck was in the drive and a few lights were burning, although he didn't see anybody moving. With the key he still hadn't returned to Tessa, he let himself into the house, licking his lips nervously.

But the total stillness of the house told him within seconds she wasn't there.

With a scowl, he pulled out his phone again and buzzed her cell phone.

Out of service.

So he called Tessa and Caleb.

"Hey," he said without preamble when Caleb answered. "It's Marc. You have any idea where Blush has disappeared to?"

"Ahh...last I heard, she was disappearing to your house. That was last night," Caleb said slowly. A hidden laugh was in his voice and Marc could all but see the mirth in the man's eyes as he asked, "She didn't trash it, did she?"

"No. No...lemme talk to Tessa."

"Hello?"

"Tessa, where is Blush?" Marc demanded.

"Why, hello, Marc. I'm wonderful, and you? It was a rather demanding day, wasn't it? Yes...I enjoyed a wonderful relaxing dinner with my husband and he was in the middle of a delightful back massage when you called. And now that you mention it, it has been a few hours since I heard from Val...but no, I'm not worried. I know exactly where she is. And if you had but listened to me, you'd know where she is too!" Tessa chirped into the phone.

But Marc heard the underlying stone in her voice. He winced. Okay, so maybe he had been a little rude to her at work. "Look, Tessa, I'm sorry. I know I was rude. I apologize."

"Hmm. Well, have a good night!" And the phone slammed down in his ear.

But he wasn't about to let it go that easily. Resolutely, he dialed the number again. She pleasantly said, "You know, I tried *six times*, to tell you something about Valery. Do you know that? *Six times*! She may have been a stubborn idiot, but considering what she was dealing with, sometimes I don't blame her."

"Tess, honey, just tell me where she is," Marc pleaded, reaching up and rubbing his eyes. "I just need to see her. I need to talk to her."

Maliciously, Tessa purred, "Scotland."

Scotland.

The phone was making that annoying out of service noise in his hand by the time Tessa's words finally made sense in his head.

Scotland.

Blush was in Scotland.

Marc fell back on the couch and flung an arm over his eyes, a moan of abject misery rising in his throat.

Scotland.

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Scotland called to her. It always had. She trudged up the stairs to her room, her bag heavy on her shoulders, muffling a yawn behind her hand. A week left.

And then it was back home.

She had talked to Tessa three days ago. And Valery was proud of herself. She hadn't mentioned Marc. But damn it she had wanted to. Did he hate her? Did he still love her?

Had he forgiven her?

But Valery was the one who needed to ask him those questions. Then there was the fight that still lingered between her and Tessa. The apology had been made, but Valery had behaved badly and until she was back in the States, and could throw her arms around Tessa...well, it just felt unresolved.

And Tessa had acted...odd on the phone.

Was she still mad at her for how she had behaved toward Marc?

She slid the old-fashioned key into the lock and turned it, shoving with her hip at the same time. Oh, yeah. Her employer had really gone all out on the digs with this hotel. Actually, though, it wasn't that bad. So what if it took a little body language to get the doors to open?

And it took some more body language to get the doors to close—and then sometimes the water didn't want to come on without a lot of swearing and cursing.

And then there was the couple next door, newlyweds, who had to fuck every night. That just added to the ambiance.

But it was a decent hotel.

The rooms were bigger than normal and the beds...damn, the beds were amazing—no wonder the newlyweds couldn't control themselves—downy soft feather beds almost as big as a lake, with warm, handmade quilts, fireplaces in each room, and a Scottish breakfast every morning.

There was a traditional Scottish dinner each night, as well. But Valery had already tried haggis once, and she had no desire to ever try it again.

The claw-footed tub was calling her to the bathroom and Valery dropped her stuff in the corner, stripping out of her clothes, sighing with pleasure as she freed her hair from the braid she had confined it in.

“Well, that’s a pretty picture.”

She froze.

Slowly, she lifted her head and stared at the man standing in the far corner, cloaked in shadow.

Her lips parted soundlessly. Licking them, she whispered, “Marc?”

His grin was a white slash in his dusky face. “It took me a while to catch up with you. After a whole day spent just convincing Tessa to tell me where in Scotland you were.”

She knelt and fished her shirt out of the pile at her feet, tugging it on. “What are you doing here?” she asked gruffly, folding her arms across her chest, blinking away the stinging in her eyes.

His eyes drifted down to watch her pull the shirt on and a self-deprecating smile curved his mouth. “Well, I came looking for you,” he said quietly, kicking at the floor with a booted foot. “Can’t say that seeing you pulling clothes on in front of me does a hell of a lot for my psyche though. Not after you’ve spent several weeks getting naked in front of a camera for me.”

She flushed and looked away.

“Don’t do that,” he whispered, pushing away from the wall and moving to her. Cupping her face in his hands, he lifted her chin and kissed her slowly. “Don’t look away from me, Blush, please don’t.” Then he groaned, the sound like that of a starving man suddenly offered a feast, and he pushed his tongue into her mouth, his hand fisting in the curls at the back of her head, holding her still.

Tears leaked out from under her eyes and she whimpered, reaching up and wrapping her fingers around the wrist that still cupped her chin. The pulse under her fingers beat strong and true, and against her belly, she could feel his cock pulsing.

Slowly, he pulled away, his lips moving to lick the tears on her cheeks. "I love you," he murmured, returning to her lips to murmur that gently. "I could have told you that from the beginning, but I didn't know how. I've loved you for years."

She giggled. Then her arms came up around his neck and held tight. "Damn it, Marc. You bastard. I love you, too." She pressed her lips against his and held him, whispering roughly, "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I didn't think you'd end up loving me, didn't think you could. I was protecting myself, I guess, but I didn't mean to hurt you."

Scooping her up into his arms, he carried her over to the bed and tossed her onto it. Her squeal was lost under his lips as he joined her there seconds later and whispered, "Well, I guess you'll just have to make it up to me."

About the author:

Shiloh was born in Kentucky and has been reading avidly since she was six. At twelve, she discovered how much fun it was to write when she took a book that didn't end the way she had wanted it to and rewrote the ending. She's been writing ever since.

Shiloh now lives in southern Indiana with her husband and two children. Between her job, her two adorable and demanding children, and equally adorable and demanding husband, she crams writing in between studying and reading and sleeps when time allows.

Shiloh welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1337 Commerce Drive, #13, Stow, Ohio 44224.

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