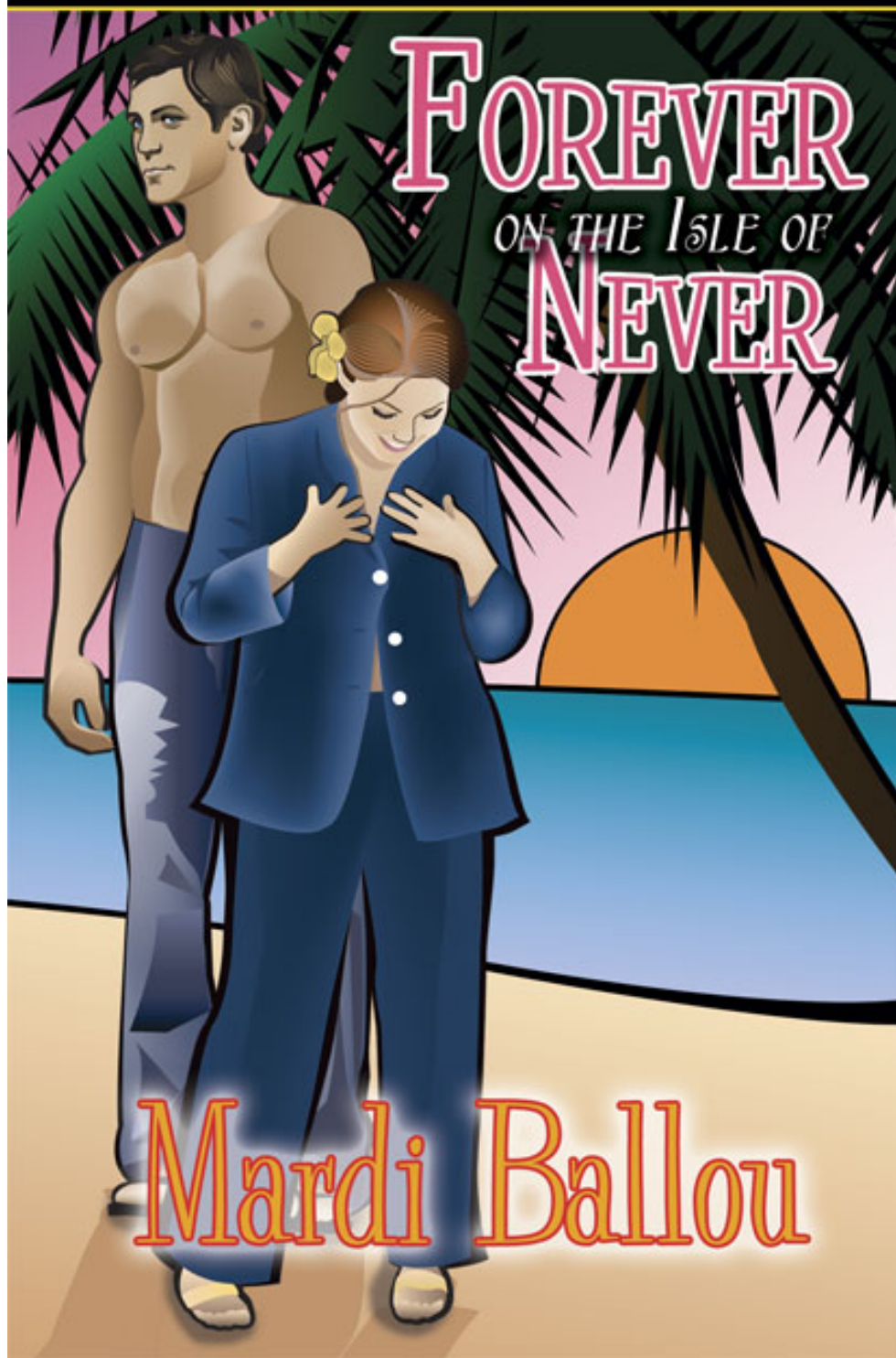


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

FOREVER *ON THE ISLE OF* NEVER

Mardi Ballou



FOREVER ON THE ISLE OF NEVER
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PANTASIA:

FOREVER ON THE ISLE OF NEVER

Mardi Ballou

Dedicated to Liz Stewart, who first revealed Pete's middle name.

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Chapter One

The Romeo wannabe in the pink Henley shirt leaned across the bar and leered. "So babe, when you gettin' off work?" Faded red hair barely camouflaged his bald spot, and a white indentation highlighted his now naked ring finger. A full-bodied beer-and-onion breath belch scored a direct hit, and Nan Sullivan recoiled.

Nan looked at her watch and then coolly at her slightly drunk admirer. "I get off in about twenty minutes. My six-foot-four, twenty-five-year-old boyfriend picks me up every night. His nickname is Gorilla."

"Gorilla, eh?" Romeo gazed at her skeptically, but Nan outstared him, daring him to call her bluff. He backed off. "Okay. So, you got a friend who might be looking for a man to have a good time with tonight?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Nan thought for a moment. "Yeah, I do. I'll call Bruce right now and let him know you're available." She grinned and fluttered her eyelashes as she reached for the phone.

Romeo made a face and, muttering under his breath, stalked off, stiffing Nan on the tip. Grateful that her shift tending bar at The Happy Flamingo, a no-frills motel bar in Miami Beach, was close to over, Nan prepared to leave. Business was quiet enough for the other bartender on duty tonight to handle alone.

Changing out of her uniform, Nan remembered the night when she'd said yes to a guy with a pick-up line—and changed her life for the better. It was a year ago May that Peter Payne, a gorgeous studmuffin of thirty, had come on to her right here at the bar. Tall, built, with eyes the blue of the Atlantic and sandy brown hair. She smiled, thinking of how nervous she'd been to go with him—nervous and excited.

Nan now thought of her life as Before Pete and After Pete. Before Pete, she'd been a repressed fifty-two-year-old divorcée who'd given up on romance and even on sex, except for the solitary kind. After Pete, even though he was a one-night stand, she began to believe in the possibility of romance and perhaps even love. As tonight's episode—hardly an isolated one—proved, sex was easy to come by. And she was horny. But after Pete, she set standards and kept them high. She wasn't about to settle for any bozo who came along and acted like he wanted to do her the big favor of a fast screw. She wanted a guy she felt good about being with—the way she'd felt with Pete. She wanted to feel special and, most of all, she wanted romance.

Looking at her reflection in the employee's room mirror, Nan felt just a moment of her old hesitation. She looked every one of her fifty-three years—tired, saggy, a victim of gravity. Wardrobe from the so-called *women's* department, if she wanted clothes that fit right. On bad days she felt like a leading candidate for one of those TV mega makeovers.

Then she lifted her chins and snapped out of it. Pete found her attractive. They'd made love numerous times that one amazing night. Afterwards, unlike the typical one-night stand, they'd stayed in touch. Even with Pete living on a distant island off South America. When her own confidence flagged, she replayed her mental memory of Pete's voice caressing her ear.

The man for her was somewhere out there. And she was more than ready to let him into her life.

* * * * *

"So what do you want to know tonight?" Peter Payne asked Lily Tiger, his partner in work and play. Together they were creating the newest of Dominic Laredo's Fantasia Resorts. They worked hard every day and looked forward to play time.

Each night, before they fell into bed, they played their version of Truth or Dare, getting to ask each other one question. He hoped hers would be simple to answer because he couldn't wait to get into her pants. Still. Even though they'd been together for over a year, almost every time with her felt brand new. He couldn't believe his good luck.

Dressed in a bit of white silk and lace, Lily sat in front of her vanity. She finished brushing her long black hair and smiled at him. "Would you believe I don't know your middle name?"

"Yeah, I'd believe it."

She pursed her lips. "You're evading my question."

"You asked if I'd believe..."

Lily rushed over to where he sat on the bed and playfully smacked him on the tush. "Give it up, Payne. Your middle name."

He put his arm around her and drew her close, burying his face in her hair, fragrant with vanilla and spice. "It's my mother's maiden name."

"Pete," Lily protested, pulling away. "Stop teasing. What's your middle name?"

Pete couldn't keep stalling. Also, he really wanted to get naked and horizontal with Lily. "Royal," he muttered.

Lily looked disbelieving. "Your middle name is *Royal*? As in Peter *Royal* Payne?"

"Told you it's my mother's family name." He flung out his hands in a what-can-I-do gesture. "Go ahead. Hit me with your worst. I've heard every joke possible."

Lily appeared to be biting her full, gorgeous, tempting lips to keep from laughing. He wanted to be nibbling on those lips, sucking and licking all her sensitive places. But they needed to get through their nightly game first. And he wanted Lily in a really good mood for what he was going to ask her later on.

Clearing her throat as if she'd swallowed a giggle, though her eyes were still laughing, Lily said, "I suppose that fits." And then she couldn't hold back. She cracked up.

Pete jumped up and went into prancing peacock mode, strutting around the room in his Superhero boxers. Superman tonight. "Hey, I'm *proud* of my name. *Royal* implies nobility, being part of the elite as opposed to a lowly member of the hoi polloi."

"If you're so proud of it, how come you keep it such a secret?" Lily sputtered, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"It's not a secret. I prefer to keep an air of mystery about myself."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Right. Mystery. Old what-you-see-is-what-you-get Pete. About as subtle and mysterious as a steamroller."

"Hey, you didn't know my middle name 'til tonight. I'd call that staying mysterious."

"Well, I like it," Lily said. "Though I have to admit, most people probably would have hesitated to combine *Royal* and *Payne* in one name."

"I told you my family's unique. I can't wait 'til you get a chance to meet them."

Pete and Lily had been living and working on the remote Isla del Oso, the Island of the Bear, off the coast of Chile since right after they'd met. Unbelievably, a whole year had gone by, and neither had met the other's family. Though maybe it wasn't so hard to believe, given that both were workaholics who refused to take a vacation. Actually, Lily was a workaholic. Pete wanted to be with Lily, which forced him to assume a quasi-workaholic status.

"Maybe we'll be able to go back to the States soon and see everyone," Lily said.

"Or maybe we'll entice some of them to come here."

"I don't know if any of them will want to come while we're still under construction," Lily pointed out. "And once we're up and running, they won't be able to afford it."

They both laughed. As Isla del Oso would be home to the newest of Dominic Laredo's exclusive Fantasia Resorts, the piece of real estate they were developing would soon be astronomically valuable. Though of course they'd always have a private place to put up visiting family and friends.

"So what's your question?" Lily asked.

"May I suck your right breast and then your left one?"

"Of course..."

Before she could say anything else, Pete lowered his lips to hers for a deep kiss.

* * * * *

In his living quarters, little better than a shack, Mike Darlin tossed and turned instead of getting the sleep he needed. As chief of construction in charge of building the newest Fantasia Resort, Mike loved his work. He loved every aspect of the construction process and knew how to do all the jobs he hired subcontractors to complete. He even loved supervising the guys actually doing the work, viewing himself as the construction equivalent of an orchestra conductor.

And he was glad to be on the remote Isla del Oso. He lived in the small shack, as far from his neighbors as he could reasonably be, at his own request. He could have had better quarters, but what the hell did he need more for? Everything was exactly the way he wanted it. No frills.

His glance fell on a photo of a gorgeous mountain vista. Right before he accepted the Isla del Oso assignment, he'd also been considering an offer to supervise the construction of a research facility high in the Andes. Talk about remote. That place made Isla del Oso look like a bustling commercial center. He'd been tempted by the job for several reasons, but he'd finally decided that site was too remote, even for him. Though, when he had hassles like the one with the potter he'd confronted today, he reconsidered the Andes job. As far as he knew, it was still open. Someplace to run.

Despite the occasional tensions, he was happy with his current job. He loved being part of the Laredo empire, meeting the challenges of building a first-class facility. Best of all, no damn women on the island except Lily Tiger and one of the cooks. Mike never saw the cook. Lily Tiger was all right—smart, hardworking, knew her stuff, and stayed out of his way. Mostly Mike dealt with the male half of the island's management team, Pete Payne. Pete appeared laid-back, not really making his muscle felt when things ran smoothly. But Mike had seen Pete exert authority when needed, like with what happened earlier that day.

Mike and the potter hired to provide input for the studio and kiln had nearly come to blows. Probably would have, if Payne hadn't intervened. Mike cringed, remembering the idiotic demands the potter had made for a huge studio that would dwarf the other facilities. He'd heard that the potter had quit and left the island on the chartered plane that delivered supplies. Though Mike liked working for Laredo and had had a hand in building several of the previous Fantasia Resorts facilities, this one was turning out to be the biggest challenge of all. Purely for personal reasons. He hated artsy-fartsy stuff in any way, shape or form. But now, he had to focus on artistic needs to build this resort to spec.

For his money, not that anyone asked, creating an arts retreat was the worst possible organizing principle for any resort. The so-called *arts* attracted the worst riffraff, like that idiot potter. Certainly not people who'd be able to pay Laredo's prices for their vacations. But Pete told him that Laredo and all the suits were firm. The resort would have an arts theme. The decision to include pottery had come about as the result of some marketing survey. Mike hated doing business by poll, but construction guys were supposed to shut up and keep their noses to the grindstone. So now Mike had to find out about pottery studios and kilns. He fumed. Normally, he didn't mind going

back to the drawing board. In fact, he usually enjoyed it. But he hated to have to do it for *art*.

Okay. So his reactions were personal. His ex-wife, the wicked witch Melinda, had been a real *art* bug. Always going to museum openings and drooling over the phonies on that circuit. The potter would have been just her cup of tea. One she'd have drunk from repeatedly.

In the wake of his disastrous marriage, Mike intended to steer clear both of women and anything connected with the arts. Figured he could take jobs in remote places and keep his life simple. Horniness be damned. He'd just passed his forty-fifth birthday, making him far too old to act like some hormone-driven adolescent. Too bad his cock wouldn't act his age. Mike shifted in his bed as his hard cock demanded attention. He tried to ignore his erection, which only made the damn thing grow bigger. With a grunt, Mike put his right hand to work.

* * * * *

After their loving, when Pete's mind began to return, he gave thought to the huge surprise he was planning to spring on her in five days, when they celebrated their first anniversary. Pete grinned at the memory of how they'd gotten together and also at how she'd react when she saw his gift for her.

A diamond. On the first anniversary of their making love, he'd get down on his knees and do the whole romantic bit. Ask her to marry him. Unlike the time he "proposed" to his former girlfriend, Gwyn, to keep her out of Dominic Laredo's clutches, this time he really meant it. He really wanted to marry Lily and spend the rest of his life with her. As in, he'd be the happiest man in the world if she said yes. She *had* to say yes.

As sleep began to overtake him, Pete remembered that he needed to talk to Lily about the fight between Mike, the construction supervisor, and the potter. Immediately after their loud argument, the potter had picked up and left the island. They'd need to find another potter to help design the studio and kiln facilities, pronto, and Pete had a great, though maybe tricky, idea about who to get.

But now Lily was asleep. He stroked her beautiful face with his fingertips. Let her sleep. Not a thing they could do 'til morning anyway. Content, he snuggled up to Lily and fell asleep.

The ringing phone woke Pete. Seeing six a.m. on the bedside clock, Pete, stretched out behind Lily, reached over to pick up the phone nestled among her guardian owls. Lily wiggled and groaned deliciously, snagging his attention.

But first he had to take care of the phone.

"Payne," he said, his voice hoarse with sleep.

"What's this about the potter quitting? I understand he didn't finish consulting about the construction plans for the studios and the kiln." The voice of Dominic Laredo, owner of Fantasia Resorts, Inc., boomed across the line.

"Not a problem." Pete struggled to come to full alertness. "You know, working with artists. Temperamental bunch. It goes with the turf when you pick an arts theme."

"I don't like surprises."

Pete already knew that about his control freak boss. With Lily at his side, Pete had been learning the art and science of handling Dominic Laredo. Considering that the two men had started off as fist-fighting rivals for Gwyn Verde, who was now Dominic's wife, they'd come a long way toward having a civil relationship. But still. Phone calls at the crack of dawn gave Pete *agita*. "We can get another potter here pronto."

"You and Lily satisfied with the construction guy, Mike Darlin?"

"Total faith in him. Does his job, keeps things going smoothly."

"Hmm. That's what I've found before. He's done a lot of work for me in the past. But people change. Maybe he's not the right man for this job."

"He's fine."

"Okay, Payne. Keep me posted on the potter."

Pete hung up and glared at the phone.

"Was that who I think it was?" Lily stretched and yawned.

"Who else? The genius of the western world who can't remember what time zone we're in."

"I needed to get up anyway," Lily said. "So what does Dominic want?"

"Every scrap of information we have about the pottery situation, the potter, the construction guy."

"Don't exaggerate, Pete. You know Dominic's fanatical about details." She stopped. "What pottery situation?"

Pete shrugged. "The pottery guy and Mike Darlin got into a disagreement yesterday. Mike won, and the pottery guy quit. At six p.m. Then he picked up all his marbles and caught a ride back to the mainland."

Lily sat up, pulled the sheet up against her, and folded her arms in front of her. "And you were going to tell me about this when?"

"I was going to mention it last night. Got sidetracked. But it was first on the agenda for this morning." He needed to get Lily's cooperation on something big, and it looked like he wasn't off to a promising start.

"I'm glad you finally got around to including me." Lily pursed her lips.

Pete got the feeling that he wouldn't gain anything by delaying, so he might as well jump in with both feet. "Well, I have an idea for fixing the situation."

"We haven't finished talking about why you didn't tell me last night."

"Would it help if I said that I didn't want to worry you and that I have a much better potter in mind?"

"Was there an apology buried in there?" Lily's lips resumed their pinch.

"Would an apology help?"

Lily humphed. "Yeah. An apology and a promise not to keep important things from me. I hate that Dominic knew about the pottery guy before me."

"Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting that you and Laredo are in a race for most detail-oriented."

Lily swatted him with a pillow. He grabbed it from her on the upswing, tossed it aside, and pulled her into a morning kiss. "I apologize and promise. Make love not war," he murmured.

"More like, I should get up and make coffee. Or is it your morning to?" Lily scooted to the edge of the bed, but Pete pulled her back.

"We don't have to get up yet," he purred, nuzzling the back of her neck.

"Mmm. I guess not yet."

Reluctantly, he broke away from her. "'Cause I really do have to talk to you. I've got a great idea, an inspiration."

Lily looked him square in the eye. "Shoot."

"What about if we also use the studio and facilities to set up a small industry? We can create a line of pottery unique to our resort, then use the products here and sell any extra to guests. We might even be able to expand sales beyond the island if all goes well."

Lily thought for a moment. "I like that, Payne."

"And the person who provides instruction for any guests who want to learn can also direct the pottery operation."

"Sounds promising. But we just lost our consultant. It'll take us weeks to do an adequate search again." She sighed. "We might as well get started. The longer we wait, the longer we'll have to delay the work on the studio and the kiln. And you know how Dominic feels about delays."

Okay, Pete thought. Here comes the tricky part. He'd need to apply all his skills of Lily handling, a growth area in which he still considered himself close to amateur status. "I know a shortcut that will work just great."

Lily looked skeptical. "Uh, Pete. Sometimes your shortcuts tend to be... Well, they end up disastrous."

"Have a little faith here, woman. I know a way to skip the search. Actually, there's someone who'd be great, not temperamental and impossible to work with like the guy who just took off."

"Okay. Having a great candidate without another search is a good thing. So why does your voice sound so funny?"

She could read him like the morning paper. He cleared his throat. "Probably because I still haven't had coffee."

"So I'll get up and make some. I think it is my morning. But even if it's not, I'm ready for a cup, too." She made another move to leave, and he once again drew her back.

"Put your head down on my chest, and let me hold your hand," Pete said.

Lily did as he asked. "You're scaring me, Pete. What's going on? Is this person currently in prison for serial murder?"

He chuckled dryly. It would be easier for him to introduce a serial killer into the upcoming conversation than to talk about Nan Sullivan. Lily had, of course, known about Pete's involvement with Gwyn Verde, but he'd never talked about any of the other women from his past. None of them had been important enough to talk about with Lily. But Nan was unique. Though he'd spent only one night with her, he felt more and more that being with her changed his life. For the better. That without Nan, he'd never have been ready for Lily when he finally met her.

Not that he had any romantic feelings for Nan now. Their bond was different. But how could he explain this in a way Lily would understand? His gut told him she'd be jealous. But his gut also told him that Nan was the woman for the pottery job. And getting her to their resort was worth spending the energy to make sure Lily would be all right.

"I'm waiting." Patience was never Lily's long suit.

Might as well go for it. He began to massage the back of her neck, touching her in the places where she held tension. "The person I have in mind is a potter from Miami Beach. Nan Sullivan." Just thinking of Nan, Pete smiled.

"A woman from Miami Beach." Lily stiffened. "Who is she? How do you know her?"

"Right," Pete said. "How do I know her?" He took a deep breath. "Actually, I've never mentioned her to you before."

"That's right. You haven't." Her voice sounded cold.

"I met Nan when I stayed overnight in Miami Beach before I flew out to the Isla del Oro." Pete knew Lily would never forget the circumstances of their meeting on the Caribbean island where Dominic Laredo and Gwyn Verde were to be wed. How he'd arrived at the resort Lily managed, determined to disrupt the wedding. Of course when he'd laid his plot, based on how close the names Isla del Oro and Isla del Oso were, he hadn't known that Lily existed or that her career depended on the wedding going well. Though it had been love at first sight for him, his first encounter with Lily had been so fraught with disaster that he'd doubted they could ever have a future together.

Meeting Nan had been his first step to becoming the kind of person who could be with Lily. That and a ton of hard labor.

"When you say you met Nan in Miami Beach. What exactly does that mean? You had a drink with her?"

"More than a drink," Pete said softly.

Lily's neck instantly tightened into one massive hard knot. Pete probed harder with his fingers, but Lily resisted relaxation. "Are you trying to tell me that you want to bring some woman you *slept with* here to the island to be part of our staff?" Her voice went up at the end, a bit more than it should have for the normal asking of a question.

"Hey, Lily. I want to be honest about what happened. Nan and I had a one-night stand. Both of us knew exactly what it was—something we both needed at that point in our lives. And that was before I met you, when my head was far from screwed on right."

Lily's neck remained stiff. She paused for several beats before she spoke. "I don't like it, Pete. You're asking a lot."

Pete extended his massage to cover a wider area of Lily's back and shoulders. "You know you have nothing to be jealous about."

"I'm not jealous," she hissed. She tried to move away from him, but he held on to her.

"My gut tells me Nan is perfect for us. She's a great gal, smart, wise, and a talented potter."

"That may be, but I don't feel good about having to deal with her. And it's not like there's only one potter out there. Even if we do have to conduct a search to find the next one."

Pete continued to stroke Lily's neck and back, but now he added the butterfly kisses and nibbles that he knew curled her toes. "Trust me on this, Lily. She'll be great. And you'll end up being crazy about her."

Lily moaned. "I doubt that."

Pete moved his hands around to Lily's breasts, and she leaned back against him. Her nipples budded into the palms of his hands. "Do this for me," he whispered. "Let's invite her out for a trial visit. If you don't want her after you meet her, I won't say a word. Just give it a try." He kissed her, then stretched out behind her.

"I don't know, Pete." Her voice didn't sound convinced.

"We did a two-month search last fall and only came up with that one guy, who turned out to be a disaster. Now here's someone who's got all the qualities we started off looking for and never found in one person."

"I say forget about it." As she melted into his embrace, her objection didn't sound quite convincing to either of them.

Chapter Two

They'd stayed in bed longer than usual. "Thank you," Pete murmured.

"For what?" Lily asked.

"For saying yes to inviting Nan out. That wasn't a dream I had, was it?"

She sat up in bed and shook her head. "No. But I'll tell you this, Peter Royal Payne. Your idea better not turn out to be a nightmare."

"It won't. First thing this morning, I'll e-mail her."

"Okay. Speaking of which, we'd better get started." She moved away from him to climb out of the bed.

Pete followed her. "Right. One more thing. Isn't it time to change the name of the island so we can register the new name before we start publicizing the resort?"

Lily pulled on a white silk robe. "Yes, I suppose we should do that soon. So Pete, what name has your brain come up with?"

"I'm glad you asked."

"I bet you are."

He grinned. "Seeing as how Peter Pan is our favorite story, and we want to use that story to enhance our resort's arts theme, how about if we adapt the name Neverland?"

She nodded. "That's just what I was thinking. But since this is an island that currently has a Spanish name, how about if we call it the Isla de Nunca Nunca?"

Pete, whose Spanish was lame to nonexistent, said, "Isla de Nookie Nookie?"

Lily laughed, then repeated slowly, "Isla de Nun-ca Nun-ca. Let's run it past Dominic. I have a feeling he'll approve."

"Okay," Pete said, "but I like Nookie Nookie better."

Lily rolled her eyes. "You would. Come on, Payne. Work beckons. Let's get some coffee."

* * * * *

Peter Payne had loads of excellent qualities, but even though he was a computer geek, he was not great about e-mailing Nan or responding quickly to messages she sent. So Pete's message in her inbox caught her by surprise—even more so when she read the contents.

Not believing what she'd seen, she read it again. And then a third time. At which point she finally began to believe she wasn't in the throes of hysterical hallucination.

Pete and his girlfriend-partner Lily were inviting her out, on a trial visit, to explore becoming the resident potter at the latest of Dominic Laredo's resorts. They planned to set up the Isla de Nunca Nunca resort as a kind of arts retreat. And to start a small pottery industry, creating works for use and sale, both on and, eventually, off the island.

This message sounded like something out of her fantasies. Working full-time as a potter, and not just for a bare survival salary. Nan couldn't believe the salary and benefits package that went with the job offer.

She reread the message yet again. Oh yeah, their invitation included a first-class, round-trip plane ticket. An all-expenses-paid opportunity to check out a remote tropical island and a chance to do the work of her dreams. At worst, she'd have a free vacation.

So why was she even hesitating? Why wasn't she jumping up and down, within the available limits for a fifty-three-year-old woman who found it wise to avoid sudden vertical movements? Deep inside Nan an emotional debate raged, frothed, and foamed.

Though she'd been about to give notice at her day job at the souvenir shop and hoped and prayed she could survive on what she made tending bar several nights a week and selling pottery, Nan suddenly began viewing her current life situation as comfortable and safe. The Isla de Nunca Nunca, off the coast of Chile, loomed before her like a gaping black hole primed to suck her up. Geography never having been her strong point, she didn't even really know where the heck Chile was, other than somewhere in South America. Like a million miles away.

Nan had never been outside the good old U S of A. In fact, 'til her divorce, she'd been outside of Minnesota only twice. Once to San Diego, on her honeymoon. And once to Chicago, when she and old What's-His-Name won a weekend trip in a raffle.

After What's-His-Name's midlife crisis, complete with a divorce from Nan and marriage to a new young wife, Nan went on a great—for her—adventure. She'd pulled up stakes and moved to Miami Beach to be near one of her children, Helen. She'd been here two years and worked at her two jobs and, when she could find the time, her pottery. Saw her daughter and grandkids once a week or so. Otherwise, her social life was a big fat zero. But at least she had a modicum of security here. Pete and Lily were asking her to give all that up to fly thousands of miles away to a remote, unknown place, so she could do the work of her dreams.

They had some nerve.

On the other hand, if everything worked out, she'd be not only happy in her work, but well on her way to financial security.

If. A big *if*. Nan being Nan, anxiety kicked in. Was she good enough? Did she deserve such happiness?

But dang it all, she didn't have to shoot herself in the foot with the parade of insecurities. Not anymore. She'd done it long enough. Too long.

Parched, Nan went to get some iced tea. What was she going to do?

Ironically, she wished she could call Pete and ask for his advice. Of course she knew any advice he gave her on this matter would hardly be unbiased. So who should she call?

Her kids. Of course. Starting with her daughter Helen, right here in Miami Beach. Helen was her oldest child, her justification for moving down here. She'd confided a bit in Helen, told her of her worries and dreams. Helen had invited Nan to move in with her family, which Nan resisted. She valued her independence.

When Nan called, Helen sharply reminded her mother that it was dinnertime, and she was busy. Sometimes, living alone, Nan lost track of the normal schedule most of the civilized world lived by. This was both a perk and a drawback of a solitary life. After she apologized, Nan got Helen to agree to call her back later.

Dinner. She might as well eat. This was one of Nan's nights off from the bar, and she'd planned to spend it taking care of paperwork and noodling with some designs she wanted to try out in clay.

Now having Pete's offer to deal with, all Nan's plans flew from her head. A bowl of oatmeal and some fruit and yogurt was about the limit of what she could organize for dinner. She must have reread the e-mail fourteen hundred times while she ate. She finished, cleaned up, and stared at the phone.

Finally, Helen called. "What's up, Mom?"

"Oh, Helen. I've received the most amazing offer."

"Offer? What kind of offer? I hope you don't mean one of those e-mails where someone in Africa wants you to deposit money in a bank account so you'll get back millions."

Nan frowned at the phone. "I don't mean one of those scams, no." She hated it when her kids treated her like an idiot.

"So tell me. What? I've got to go help Tommy with his homework, so I can't stay on the line too long."

"Sorry. I've been offered a position as head potter, supervising production and design and teaching."

"Head potter? Who's offering you a job like that?"

"The people building the newest of Dominic Laredo's Fantasia Resorts. On the Isla de Nunca Nunca, off the coast of Chile."

"What?" Helen's voice rose unattractively. "Why would Dominic Laredo's people want you to be part of one of their resorts?" Helen didn't know anything about Pete.

"That's a long story," Nan started to say.

"And I'm sorry I don't have time to listen right now. But what's this about an island off the coast of Chile?"

"That's where they're building the resort," Nan said in a little voice.

"Do you have any idea how far away that is?"

"Not completely."

"That's what I thought. Even if this is a legitimate job offer, I can't begin to understand why you've been offered it."

"Legitimate job offer?"

"Who knows? Maybe this is an elaborate scheme to kidnap you. Ever think of that?"

Really, this was too absurd. "I know the person who made the offer. He's hardly a kidnapper."

"You can't be too careful these days, Mother. I can't believe you called me because you got this cockamamie message from someone you barely know. And it's not even April Fools' Day. I need to hang up. I'll talk to you later."

And that was that. Nan snorted. So much for advice from kids. She strongly suspected all of her kids would have reactions similar to Helen's.

Which meant she was on her own to make this very large decision.

Her heart told her she should accept Pete's invitation and not even look back. But her head was another matter. Her head came up with a gazillion reasons why the Isla de Nunca Nunca was a terrible idea.

And Nan had always been a girl to follow her head.

* * * * *

"I don't like the delay," Mike Darlin growled, looking up from the plans he'd been reviewing with Pete Payne.

"I know. But we really can't proceed with building our studio and our kiln 'til we get final approval from our resident potter," Peter Payne answered.

"So *get it*, man. Holdups like this are going to be expensive, and Laredo does not appreciate when projects come in over budget. Let me tell you, if that happens, I'm going to leave you in charge of getting all the paperwork complete and down to him."

"He's already signed off on a budget override."

"Yeah, well, you can remind him of that when he squawks about the figures."

"I'll handle it." Pete glanced at his watch. "It's way past quitting time. Why don't you come over to the house for a drink and we can talk some more?"

Mike looked down at his hands. "I'm not cleaned up or anything. My clothes are all full of construction stuff."

"Lily won't mind, and I sure don't. You can wash up at our place, if that'll make you feel more comfortable."

"Maybe just a quick drink."

Pete led the way. He liked the testy construction foreman, who, according to his records, was forty-five. Pete thought the tall, rugged-looking Mike, who reminded him of the Marlboro man, appeared and acted far younger. Pete couldn't blame him for his wariness about deviating from the original plans. Dominic was a stickler for being involved and informed about all that went on. But they'd decided they wanted the potter in place early in the process of setting up the operation. And, as of today, Nan still hadn't responded to their offer. Definitely uncharacteristic for her to delay in answering any message. Usually she had a formal thank-you note back to him in the return mail if he just dropped her a casual card. He wondered what was going on with her. He'd been so sure she'd be on the first plane down.

He'd hate to give up on Nan and have to launch a search elsewhere to fill the position. But if they didn't get an indication of her interest by tomorrow, they'd have to do exactly that. Pete had figured the worst would be to persuade Lily to invite Nan on board. Now it turned out that convincing Nan might be the harder job. There was no help for it. He'd have to phone Nan that night.

When they got to the cottage he and Lily shared, Pete showed Mike where he could wash up. Then he invited him to sit down in one of the chairs in the living room. Lily evidently wasn't home yet. He asked for a beer, which Pete was happy to join him for. He sat opposite Mike and opened his own bottle.

"I don't like having to work with artists," Mike said without preamble after he took a slug of his beer.

"What do you mean?"

Mike shrugged. "They're a temperamental, unreliable lot. Whenever you get mixed up with them, things get screwed up."

"What things get screwed up?" Lily asked, coming in to the living room. Pete got up and gave her a big hug and kiss.

"Mike's talking about our pottery project."

Lily frowned. "Has something else gone wrong with that?"

"Not yet, if you don't count our delay," Mike said. "But the screwups are bound to get worse if we have to deal with an artist."

Lily poured herself a glass of red wine and sat down near Pete. "Have you heard from Nan, Pete?"

"Not yet."

"Who's Nan?" Mike asked.

"She's the potter Pete wants for the project," Lily said. "Try saying that three times quickly after you drink several beers," she added, half to herself. "Pete, I think we might have to start contacting some other potters. Nan appears unavailable."

"But she's perfect. I'll give her a call tonight, see why she hasn't been in touch. There must be a good reason."

"I say if we haven't heard from her by noon tomorrow, we open up the search."

"No chance you'll give up on this whole pottery shtick?" Mike asked. "I swear it's more trouble than it's worth."

"No chance," Pete said. "Peter's Pottery is on the drawing board already for part of the Isla de Nunca Nunca resort."

"The Isla de Nookie Nookie?" Mike asked, then flushed as he caught sight of Lily. "Sorry about that, ma'am. But I thought this place was the Isla del Oso."

"No problem, Mike. We're changing the name to reflect the Peter Pan theme for our resort. The place where grown-ups can get in touch with their inner lost boys and girls."

"I still don't get the Nookie Nookie part," Mike said.

"It's Nunca Nunca. Spanish for Never Never," Lily explained.

"I get it. Neat. Though Nookie Nookie might attract more visitors."

"Dominic's resorts never have a problem doing that, no matter what they're called," Lily said.

"Ain't that the truth?" Mike said. "Well, we have about a week's leeway before we really have to commit to how we'll build the studio and the kiln. So if you're serious about getting your artist on board for that, you'd better have her here then."

Pete drained his beer. "Why wait? I'll get on the phone to her right now." He looked at his watch. "On second thought, it's early enough that she's probably still tending bar. I don't want to leave her a message. If I wait 'til later, she'll be home to answer. Then we'll know what's going on."

Mike stayed for an informal dinner, then thanked them both for the hospitality and headed off to his own shack.

Not only an artist, but a female. *Bah, humbug.*

* * * * *

The phone rang at eleven. Just on a night when Nan managed to get to bed early and actually fall asleep. Her heart jumped up to her throat as consciousness returned, and she realized it could only be bad news coming at this hour. One of the kids or one of the grandkids...

"Hello," she muttered, struggling to sound awake and alert.

"Nan. Geez, what time is it there?" a male voice she couldn't place asked.

She frowned. Some joker was calling her for a time update? She nearly slammed the phone down and then remembered that whoever it was had called her by name.

"Too late for phone calls," she barked, her voice sounding hoarse.

"Did I wake you?"

"Who the hell is this?" Her heartbeat slowed down to normal after she realized it wasn't any emergency related to her family.

"Pete," he said. "Pete Payne."

Nan's emotions scrambled. "Where the heck are you?" she asked as she tried to get alert and intelligent.

He laughed, and the sound of his voice got her all goose bumpy. Nan shivered. "I'm here on the island. I need to talk to you."

By now Nan was sitting up and reasonably awake. She toyed with the idea of getting out of bed and making some coffee but rejected it. If she drank coffee now, she'd probably be up all night. "I'm happy to talk, but can we make this short?"

He chuckled again. "Just get to the essentials. Ah, Nan, I love your honesty. Listen, did you get my e-mail? About a possible job out here on the island?"

Now Nan inhaled sharply. She should have at least sent him some sort of reply. "I did," she said warily.

"And?" he prompted. "What do you think? I expected you'd be on the first plane down here."

Nan shook her head, then realized he couldn't see her gesture. "Pete, a person can't just drop everything and take off like that."

"Why not?"

"That's a big change you proposed. And the island is so far away."

"The offer includes a plane ticket and accommodations."

"I know. But I have a life here."

He didn't say anything for a moment. "You finally find a good guy? One that deserves you?"

She rolled her eyes. It was nice having a one-man fan club. "No. Same old, same old in that part of my life," she grudgingly admitted.

"Okay. Must mean then that your job situation has really improved. That you're finally making enough from the pottery so you can quit your day jobs."

"That's not it either, Pete." She sighed.

"Ok. I'm missing something here. Where are you working these days? You're still at the bar, right?"

"Yes. And the shop. Though my pottery's becoming more popular and selling somewhat better than before, I don't make nearly enough yet to live on. And both jobs want me to increase my hours, which would mean less time for the pottery. Though I've been toying with taking a chance on quitting the shop."

"Then I don't understand. Why don't you get yourself down here, pronto? Doesn't sound like there's a whole lot of good stuff going on up there. And I can guarantee we have a full-time position for a great potter who's also a great person."

Helen's voice of reason flew into her mind. "I just can't pick up and go."

"What would it take for me to get you here?"

Nan wished the prospect of going to the island didn't scare her so much. Kind of like standing at the edge of a cliff and knowing the only way forward was to close her eyes and jump. Normally she didn't take those kinds of risks. Heck, most of her adult life she'd been a white-bread wife and mother in Minnesota.

But she'd jumped off a little cliff when she said yes to Pete's come-on. Hadn't regretted that for a moment.

"Pete, I don't know." Nan cringed. Her voice sound whiny to her own ears. "I can't make a huge decision like this in a rush."

"Let me tell you what's going on down here," Pete said. "First of all, it's flaming gorgeous. In addition to this being a lush and lovely island, we benefit from ocean currents and have an amazing climate. Second, we're building a great resort. Third, we're going to encourage the visual arts. Fourth, we've got to make some decisions, like yesterday. We need our pottery person on-site so we can develop our 'clay and play' program. We're on the verge of getting into some expensive delays. My gut tells me that you're the best person to do this. But Lily, my whip-cracking partner, says we need to have our potter on-site by the end of the week. And if you don't agree to be that person, we have to find someone else. Pronto. So, much as I'd like to, I can't give you lots of time to think on this, Nan."

That just might have been the longest speech ever uttered by Peter Payne. Now he had her attention. Was it just the sound of Pete's voice that tugged at her heart? No. Being honest with herself, she knew she wanted what he was offering. She would have said yes if the position were here in Florida. Or even in one of the states close by. But all the way to Chile and beyond? "I've never gone so far..." she started to say.

"Great chance to start," he said. "Come on, Nan. Please. I *know* you're the best person for the job. And I'd love to have you here."

He'd love to have her there. Nan couldn't think of anyone else who would use the word *love* to talk about having her around. "W-w-when would I need to be there?" Nan asked. Darn. That hadn't been her intention. She was going to say an out-and-out, impossible to misinterpret, unambiguous *no*. But she couldn't get her lips to form the words, couldn't turn Pete down so firmly.

"How fast can you pack your bag and get on a plane?"

Sure she must have crossed the line into insanity, Nan said, "Give me one day to pack and say my goodbyes."

"How about if I get you on the plane down to Santiago tomorrow night?"

Nan swallowed hard. "Tomorrow night?" she echoed.

"Yes. Just think, by this time tomorrow, you can be trying to sleep on a plane instead of in your bed."

Nan's head began to spin. Luckily her ex had always insisted that they both have passports. Hers was still valid, even if it did list her home address as Minnesota and she no longer looked like the photo. She'd have to quit her jobs with no notice. Maybe she could just ask for leave. After all, a person never knew. And the kids and grandkids.

Well, it wasn't like she was heading off for six months in Antarctica. Nan couldn't come up with any more objections. "Okay," she said shakily.

"We'll have your reservations waiting at check-in in the airport. Just show them your passport and you'll be set."

"Okay."

They worked out several more details. "You won't regret this," Pete said. And she was sure he meant it.

After she hung up, Nan set the alarm for six, lay down, and tried to get to sleep. But now she was too excited at the prospect of the trip she'd just agreed to take.

That Pete. She never could say no to him.

* * * * *

"She's coming," Pete said as he got into bed with Lily. Every night he thanked his lucky stars that this beautiful, fantastic woman continued to welcome him into her bed.

Tonight Lily was wearing a little silk and lace number that Pete couldn't wait to divest her of. Though she looked fantastic in it. Better than any Victoria's Secret model. He of course was wearing his preferred bed garment—nothing. She grinned at him. "So how'd you get her to agree?"

"Just used the old Payne charm."

"Yeah, but how'd you get her to agree?"

Pete lightly tapped Lily's *derrière* and she wiggled on closer to him. "I told Nan what my whip-cracking partner told me. For her to be a serious candidate for the job, she has to get down here pronto."

"Whip-cracking?" Lily raised one of her perfectly arched brows.

Pete pulled her close, and Lily wrapped her legs around his. His erection nudged up against her mound and Pete rubbed himself against her.

"Speaking of whips," Lily said, easing herself away from Pete, "I have a little surprise."

Pete groaned at the separation. Slightly slow in his processing when his focus moved south, Pete responded several beats late. "Whips? What kind of surprise?"

Lily propped herself up on her elbow. "You call me a whip-cracker so often, I thought I'd live up to the name."

Pete sat up and looked at her in mystification. "That's supposed to be a joke," he said.

"You know what they say. There are no coincidences and all. I figure you talk about whips so much, you must be curious."

"Well, yeah. Kind of the same way I'm interested in space travel and extreme mountain climbing. In the abstract."

Lily had climbed out of bed, crossed the room, and was now opening one of her drawers. She pulled out a cardboard box of the plain brown variety. "Remember the mail order that came yesterday?"

"Yeah," Pete said.

"Well, I got some new toys."

Despite himself, Pete's cock throbbed. "I just thought you got some more owls to add to your collection and a new application for your PDA."

"I got those, too. But something else caught my eye. From one of my *other* catalogs."

From the way Lily put her hand in the box, Pete could tell she'd opened it up previously. Lily always kept him guessing. But in his wildest imaginings, he wouldn't have dreamt she'd pull what looked like a small whip out. His balls contracted in pleasurable anticipation, and his cock grew harder. "What exactly is that?"

"It's called a fringe whip." Lily approached him holding the implement out.

"A fringe whip?" he echoed, his voice barely a whisper. "Fringe as in far-out, kinky?"

She threw back her head and laughed throatily. Then she stood before him, her luscious breasts at his eye level. He could see her dusky nipples standing up at attention underneath the black silk and lace, and he longed to nibble on those hard nubs as he suckled her. But she stood just beyond his reach. "Fringe as in a whip made solely for pleasure," she whispered.

"Pleasure?" he repeated.

"It's called the whip for beginners. And we are beginners with this. Or at least I am. How about you, Pete?"

"Beginner? Yeah, I have to say I am. A definite beginner."

"Good," she said. "We can learn together."

Chapter Three

After Pete's phone call, Nan could not get to sleep—hardly unusual, even after a minor disruption. These days, she was a crummy sleeper. She'd read that poor sleep was a common complaint for women at her time of life. There were positive parts about becoming a crone, but good and abundant sleep wasn't one.

Her night with Pete had included some of the best sleep she'd had in forever. Not to mention the hot sex. Nan smiled to herself at the memory. If anyone had ever predicted she'd have a one-night stand with a studmuffin like Pete, she'd have laughed. Pete, amazingly, had found her attractive. *He'd come on to her.*

Pete looked good enough to be in the movies. He sort of reminded her of Peter Pan, one of her favorite story characters. No thought of him being young enough to be her son. That didn't even factor into the equation. There was a strange equality between the two of them. Despite his good looks, Pete had turned out to have some insecurities about being with women. He'd been dumped by a girlfriend and taken it hard. To her astonishment, Nan found out that Pete actually felt she'd helped him deal with his doubts.

Lord, what he'd done for her. Starting with a massive infusion of self-confidence. For that alone, she'd be grateful to him forever. And so she suspended all her hesitations to go off to his island to see if she could work things out there. Maybe this would turn out to be a good thing.

As she thought of Pete, trying to conjure up his face and image in her mind, Nan ran her hands down her sides. She remembered fondly that Pete had seemed as turned on by her body as by her company.

He'd been so eager with her. Practically jumped out of his clothes, and then slowed down when she had an attack of nerves. He'd touched her and gently kissed her everywhere, his mouth hot and excited as he moved on her. Remembering, Nan fingered her nipples and felt them spring to life. She closed her eyes as a wave of pleasure rippled across her soft belly. She felt a tightening in her clit and a hunger in her pussy. For just a moment she wished she'd gone with one of the bozos who tried to pick her up tonight. At least she wouldn't be alone, trying to cope with her needs without the tools that would bring her to satisfaction.

But no, the price was too high. One night she'd said yes to a pick-up and brought him back here. He'd ended up getting too drunk to do anything more than weep about his crummy home life. In the middle of the night he'd gotten up, gone to the bathroom, and peed in her wastebasket.

She didn't need a repeat performance like that. But she definitely needed something. Someone. Pete had been wonderful, but he wasn't the one for her. Not to

mention, it sounded like he had a great lady in his life already. One Pete was fully committed to. Nan tried to imagine the man for her. Though she could almost feel and taste his hard body, his face remained in shadow.

Her thoughts meandered to a favorite fantasy, from one of the best movies ever, *Ghost*. When she'd seen that movie in the early nineties, it made a huge impact on her life. That scene where the potter was fashioning a vase at her wheel when her lover came up behind her and hugged her... Amazingly erotic. Seeing that had inspired Nan to study pottery.

The only part of the scene that she could duplicate at that time was to study the art. But the part where a man would come up and embrace her while she worked, pressing his hands over her breasts while her hands molded the clay... Well, maybe some day she'd live that one. She certainly hadn't with the man in her life at the time, her husband Jerry.

A frustrated artist for most of her life, Nan quickly discovered her talent and passion for working with clay. Far from her pottery leading to any hot scenes, Jerry always made fun of her work. Accused her of being a dabbler.

She sighed. Another of her potter fantasies was to make a mold of her lover's erection. Her dream man would be lying flat on a bed, hard as a rock for her. She'd tease him with her fingers, get him even harder, smooth a fine condom over his cock, and then carefully apply the clay. Of course he'd probably get even bigger and harder as she played him with her fingers. Even as she feverishly worked to get the clay just right and thrilled at her power over him, his face stubbornly remained hidden away from her. Who was he?

She might not be able to visualize his face, but right now her clear vision of his erection made her mouth dry—unlike her pussy. Once she had him there in the flesh, she would make the mold exact, catching every vein and ridge in his beautiful cock. After all, she was most meticulous in her work. And this mold would be special—for her to enjoy when they were apart. The sensuous feel of the clay would combine with the pleasure of her touch on him, and he would moan with his need. Music to her ears. Music to work by. He'd begin to move his hips, begging for her to finish up so that he could put that erection exactly where they both most wanted it.

Nan's pussy clenched and warmth spread through her. She ran her hands over her breasts and allowed herself to enjoy the sensation. But she had more urgent call for those hands elsewhere. Her pussy was moist with her need. She put a hand over her mound and then began to explore her pussy lips and her clit. She laughed at herself, thinking of all the years of her life when she'd have died rather than put her hand "down there" for any but the most utilitarian of reasons.

She pressed herself against her fingers, put a finger inside herself. Pleasant. Felt good. But it wasn't enough. She touched herself and pretended the man of her dreams was stroking her with his long, sensitive fingers. As careful with her as she'd need to be to remove the mold from his cock so it could harden into a work of art.

She needed more, now. And then she got a bright idea. Open her legs and slip a pillow between them just as she'd open them to welcome her lover. She gave an experimental little slide. *Oh yeah.* She clutched that pillow tight between her legs like she'd clutch him. And then she began to move, sliding, molding the pillow so that all the pressure was exactly where she wanted it—between her slick folds, and right on her clit.

She moved harder, feeling herself start to clench and whirl toward a climax that she wanted so much her teeth were practically chattering. Mmm, delicious sensations radiated out from the core of her pussy as her hands and the pillow touched her everywhere, exactly right. And her phantom lover was there, loving her, bringing her all these powerful sensations. With a catch in her voice, she screamed out her relief as she finally began to let go with a throbbing climax. She clutched the pillow tightly to her and fantasized it was her dream man in her fierce embrace.

* * * * *

Mike Darlin slammed down the phone. His damn ex-wife calling with more demands. She wanted him to increase his monthly alimony payments, which weren't sufficient to maintain the lifestyle she claimed she deserved. The alimony was supposed to be only a temporary measure, to tide her over for a short time after the divorce. Mike refrained from pointing out that, under court orders, he'd have to pay her for only two more months. He'd tried to be polite as he suggested she look for a job. The way she acted, a person might think he'd told her to rob a bank.

The irony of it all. The only female in his life these days, and it was her. Mike poured himself a bourbon and stretched out on his bed. At least Melinda's phone call had served one useful purpose. He was no longer horny.

Mike took a long sip of his drink. Not good. Drinking alone was not good. That was supposed to be one of the signs of a slippery downward slide. Of course on a place like the Isla del Oso, now called the Isla de Nunca Nunca, there weren't a whole lot of drinking buddies available. And virtually no females for...companionship. Which was mostly okay.

Melinda had always hated his working in remote places. Refused to join him in any. That was one of the reasons why, she said, she ended up looking for male companionship outside the marital bed, so to speak. Always blamed it on him. Blamed everything on him. He took another sip.

Tomorrow, Payne would tell him final details about how they'd move ahead with the studio and the kiln. Mike also understood that a woman would be coming out. His cock did that "perking up to gather information" move, and he wriggled in an effort to ignore it.

Well, forewarned was forearmed. A woman artist-type would be invading his turf. Chances were excellent she'd be another massive pain in the ass, an obstacle to his getting his work done the way he wanted. Mike drained his drink. Still totally sober, none of the hard edges softened. Poured himself another—this time with much less liquor. Drank it off, got into bed.

Tried to go to sleep, but by now he had to admit his hard-on would not just go away. Bad enough waking up with one every morning and getting them in the middle of the night when he had particularly vivid dreams, but did he have to whack away at one so he could get to sleep?

Realizing the answer to that question was yes, Mike put his hand around his cock and began to stroke. He needed his sleep.

Okay, so as long as he was doing the old hand-job thing, he might as well let his mind wander. Mike had a few preferred fantasies to help the process along. Usually they involved generously proportioned actresses whose sole purpose for being was to wrap their luscious red lips 'round his cock and suck and lick him. Yeah. As his fingers moved more swiftly, Sophia, or whatever the hell her name really was, got into what she was doing. Moaning about how big and hard and delicious he was.

Mike felt himself grow even harder as he gave Sophia everything she wanted. Yeah. Touching himself in all the right places, the sensitive points on the head and along the underside, with just the right pressure. He was going to come, and Sophia was more than ready for him. Just one more nibble... One more rub... One more stroke, a squeeze on his balls, and he was there, coming like a steaming locomotive, filling Sophia with his cum. Which she then licked off her lips before disappearing into the night.

Too bad fantasies about Sophia would never be enough for him. If fantasies were enough, he probably would have taken that job up in the Andes. Too bad it couldn't be just that easy, Mike thought as he began to drift off to sleep.

* * * * *

Nan woke up happier than she'd felt in a long time. At first, she merely floated on the tide of her good feelings, not analyzing just why she felt so good. And then the memory of last night's phone call and her promise to Pete hit her. She was supposed to be getting on a plane to Chile tonight! She had maybe five million things that she had to accomplish between now and tonight.

Icy panic began to rise, easily supplanting the rosy glow of her first few waking moments. Nan sat bolt upright then flew out of bed. Coffee. She needed a massive infusion of caffeine if she was to have a prayer of getting through the day with everything she needed to get done.

Nan got her vanilla-hazelnut full-octane brew going. Normally, she shied away from any coffee other than decaf. The real-deal beans occupied space in her freezer for

company use only. But this morning was extraordinary – really, as the cliché went, the first morning of the rest of her life. Nan’s hand trembled as the full impact of her commitment to go to Pete’s island hit her.

When the aroma of the coffee began to revive her, Nan’s brain lurched to full awareness. She needed to make a list of everything she had to do, everyone she had to speak to today. And then everything she had to arrange. And what she needed to take with her. And then...a list of lists.

At last the coffee was drinkable. With her first sip, Nan both perked up and began to calm down. She got out the notebook for lists and began to write. First she needed to talk to her bosses, tell them she had an out-of-town emergency. Okay, so that was slightly misleading. But an out-of-town job opportunity would probably not evoke too much goodwill. Or a shot at a temporary leave of absence. And she’d have to let the people at the studios with her pottery know. Nan almost purred at the prospect of being able to work at her pottery full-time.

She’d talk to Helen, the kid she had the most contact with. That would be interesting. Lately, Helen had acted more like her mother than her daughter, always offering opinions – usually negative – about the way Nan conducted her life. She’d try to reach the three other kids, talk to them rather than their voice mail. But with how busy everyone’s life was these days, she’d be lucky if she managed to connect.

Then she’d need to arrange her mail. Any bills coming due in the next few days? She had no idea how long she’d be on the *Isla de Nunca Nunca*. Pete hadn’t said. Maybe she should just have her mail forwarded to Helen, who’d be able to take care of any pressing matters. Helen would love having an opportunity to meddle.

Nan toasted half an English muffin to go with her coffee. Drank some orange juice. She was going about this morning totally backwards, not a good sign. She took a deep, calming breath. Juice, muffin, coffee. Her muffin was dry. Spread on some no-sugar imitation marmalade.

By the time Nan finished her breakfast, including her third cup of coffee, she’d written three lists.

Her phone rang. An airline agent informed her she had an eight p.m. reservation, which meant she should be at the airport by six.

Six! That gave her less than eight hours to do everything she had to. Good thing she had the coffee speeding her up.

First things first. Helen. Nan reached her daughter at work. “Sullivan,” Helen answered.

“Helen, I’m going to the island off Chile tonight. Remember I told you about it?”

“Mom?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah.”

“What are you talking about?”

Nan took a deep breath. She'd never told Helen about Pete or the sorts of feelings he'd awoken in her. "Last night. I told you. I've been invited to help with the design of a new pottery studio."

"In Chile? The one in South America?"

"That's the one. Actually, an island off the coast of Chile."

"Mom, have you been hitting the cooking sherry?"

Nan made a face at the receiver. "It's barely nine a.m."

"That's what has me worried. What are you talking about?" Helen's voice had that exasperated tone Nan had grown to resent.

Nan took a deep breath. "A great opportunity for me to do what I want. A chance to be in on the design and planning for a pottery studio that will be part of the newest Fantasia Resorts group."

"But I don't understand. How do they even know about you, Mom? It's not like you're some world-famous potter."

"You don't think my work is good enough to get this kind of attention?"

"It's not that." Nan was gratified to hear Helen carefully choosing her words. "But, let's face it. Your pottery, beautiful as it is, hasn't reached a wide audience yet. So how do they know about you? Did you apply for this position?"

Nan would not go into details about Pete. Helen would never understand. Instead, she said, "Let's just say that I met a person involved in the resort development while I was bartending."

Helen shrieked. "At that crummy bar in the motel?"

Even though Nan agreed with Helen's assessment, she bristled at the putdown. One of many. "So maybe he was slumming that night. Point is, he was impressed enough to offer me this chance."

"What did you do to make such a strong impression?" Helen asked, her voice heavy with insinuation.

"Just wowed him with my scintillating personality and obvious work ethic." Nan wondered why it was so difficult to impress one's own children. "Charming as it is talking with you, I have a million things to do today. I have to be at the airport at six. So I just want you to know where I'll be."

"Tonight? At six? I can't take you to the airport."

"Somehow, I think I'll manage." Getting to the airport was never a problem in a tourist mecca like Miami Beach.

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, Mom. And I don't like you just taking off like this, not discussing anything with any of us beforehand."

Nan sighed. "It might seem impulsive. But actually, I've been waiting for this all my life." As she said the words, Nan realized they were true. For the first time since her phone call with Pete, she began feeling completely good about what she was doing.

"How long are you going to be gone? And what is the name of the place?"

"I don't know how long I'll be there. Maybe I'll hate it and just turn around and come right back. But even if I decide to accept the position, I'll need to return to arrange whatever's needed here. And say goodbye to everyone."

"Isn't it expensive to fly all the way down there? Like you said, Mom, you might hate it and want to come back immediately."

"Didn't I tell you? I have an all-expense paid roundtrip. First class."

"Now I'm impressed. What did you say the name of the island is?"

Nan consulted her notes. "They've just changed it from the Isla del Oso to the Isla de Nunca Nunca." She could hear Helen typing the information at her end.

"Do you have a phone number where I'll be able to reach you there?"

Nan realized she didn't.

"How will I be able to stay in touch?"

"Don't worry. They have e-mail, phone, probably even smoke signals."

"All right, Mom. I have to go. Call as soon as you get there."

"I will. Helen, I feel really good about this."

"Well, okay. Good luck. And Mom, I love you."

Nan choked up. "I love you, too," she managed to say. "I'll call you tomorrow from the Isla de Nunca Nunca."

Nan couldn't remember the last time Helen had said she loved her. Maybe it was worth going away just to hear those words.

Nan checked calling Helen off her list and decided to postpone the calls to her other kids 'til later. Next she'd call her bosses. To Nan's surprise, Edna Kale, owner of the tourist shop, answered on the second ring. "Why aren't you here already?" She sounded put-out.

"I have an out-of-town emergency and won't be able to come in for the next few days." Nan waited for a question, an expression of concern.

"How can you leave me shorthanded like this?" Edna complained.

"Life or death situation. No choice," Nan said. She was beginning to think that was the truth. Not much of a choice, at any rate. Working at Edna's shop came in a poor second to just about anything else.

"Well, don't expect me to hold your job long."

"I'll take my chances. And I'll call when I get back."

Despite the insecurity of her future in Edna's employ, Nan felt lighter when she hung up. After several more calls, most of which connected her to voice mail, Nan had left her information with her other children, her boss at the motel, and the places where she'd been showing pieces successfully. Each call left her feeling more and more excited about her leap off the cliff.

Nan spent what was left of the morning getting things ready to pack. What was the climate on the Isla de Nunca Nunca? Cold, hot, moderate, rainy, dry? Here in Miami Beach in May, they were headed toward the intense heat and humidity of summer. She didn't have a clue as to what to pack. After a fast check on the Internet, she knew she'd need to be ready for a greater variety of weather than she'd gotten used to. Since she'd disposed of most of her cold weather gear when she moved from Minnesota, that meant she'd have to do some fast shopping before she packed.

Another consult of the lists. While she ran around this afternoon she'd stop at the post office to get her mail forwarded. She'd give her perishables to old Mrs. Gowan next door. Luckily, she'd been about to hit the supermarket, so her food supply was pretty meager.

When hunger struck, Nan stopped and treated herself to a quick pizza lunch, continuing to check items off her list while she ate. She finished what she needed to, got home, and collapsed at her kitchen table. Two o'clock. Her message light was flashing.

First call was from her son Matt, out in California. "Mom, just want to wish you luck. Sounds like a great adventure. Keep us posted." Nan smiled. Matt always knew exactly what to say.

The second message came from Lily Tiger, Pete's girlfriend and work partner. "Spoke to Pete and understand he gave you zero information about the Isla." Nan nodded. "I'm looking forward to meeting you. We get a varied climate here. Bring your warm weather clothes but also whatever you'll need for cold and wet, because we sure get that too. But don't worry too much if you find you need things when you get here. We have a pretty good supply of basics for visitors, and we're not that far from civilization if you need to order anything.

"Pete's said so many wonderful things about you. I can't wait to meet you."

Lily sounded terrific. Nan couldn't help wondering exactly how much Pete had told her about them. From the sound of her voice and what she said, Lily didn't seem jealous. Not that she had anything to be jealous of, but still. Now more than ever, Nan was curious to meet the woman who'd snagged Pete. Feeling optimistic, Nan packed. The shuttle would pick her up at 4:45, and it was already three. She took out the practically brand-new suitcases she'd bought for her trip to Miami Beach and used only once. Clothes, toiletries, a few books. Her vitamins. She didn't have to strain too hard to get her luggage ready. A magazine and book to read on the plane. She was far too excited to be able to sleep.

And then she took her suitcases out to the curb and waited for the shuttle. Thank goodness it arrived on time, and her trip to the airport was uneventful.

The airport turned out to be a lot of hurry up and wait. As Pete had promised, all Nan had had to do was present her passport to get her boarding pass. Clearing security wasn't too much of a drag. Nan, who hadn't eaten anything since her quick lunch, grabbed a tuna sandwich and salad at one of the restaurants lining the international departure lounge.

Restless and raring to go, Nan forced herself to sit down with her sandwich and a copy of *People*. The sandwich was surprisingly good. She wolfed down her bag of chips and the salad, then looked around for dessert. Helen had warned her to keep hydrated. A big glass of iced tea took care of that. Nan treated herself to a huge ice cream cone, two dips. Nice of the airport to have Ben 'n Jerry's. Cherry Garcia and Chunky Monkey. Finally, her flight to Santiago was announced. She was on her way.

Chapter Four

By the time Nan arrived at the Isla de Nunca Nunca, she'd been on a large airplane for close to nine hours, at the airport in Santiago for four, and on the small chartered aircraft that took her to the island for one and a half more. She was not a big fan of small airplanes, no matter how cutting-edge. Despite the relative smoothness of the trips, she was ready not to see the inside of another airport or airplane for the next ten years or so. Which was one incentive not to turn around and go home if she didn't like the island at first glance.

After landing on the small airstrip, Nan looked around. So this was the place Pete and his Lily were developing. Nan knew that when they first arrived, all that had been here was the airstrip and a large warehouse. At first sight, it didn't look like there was much more yet. Before she could explore further, she heard a loud male voice calling her name and her body went into instant alert. Pete was racing toward her, holding his arms out.

"Nan!" he called, grinning irresistibly. "You're finally here." Despite her fatigue and the strangeness of being where she was, Nan couldn't not smile back. She walked over to meet him.

He snatched her up in a big hug that left Nan breathless. And a big kiss. Such affection. As if there was more between them than just a one-night stand.

Coming up behind Pete was an amazingly beautiful young woman, brunette, dark-eyed, flawlessly made-up, dressed in a white pantsuit that shouted serious professional. Must be Lily.

"Nan, come here. Meet Lily." Pete looked proudly from one woman to the other.

Nan, instantly feeling this woman was good for her friend, held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you at last."

Though Lily shook Nan's hand and smiled, Nan sensed a hesitation in her. "Welcome to the Isla de Nunca Nunca. We're so glad you're here." Nan thought the words sounded right, but the tone was off. Was she being paranoid, or was Lily less than thrilled to have her on the island?

"I'm glad to be here at last." Nan was. Even if all she got from the trip was to see Pete again and judge for herself how his new relationship was working out, it was worth the trip.

"How were your flights?" Lily asked, acting like the perfect hostess.

"Long," Nan said, and they all laughed.

"You must be exhausted. Let's get you back to our place so you can freshen up, have a drink," Lily said.

Nan still sensed an undercurrent of tension. "That sounds great." Nan followed them to where they'd parked their Jeep.

Both of them insisted that Nan climb into the front seat, next to Pete. He got in after loading her baggage in the trunk. "Though the island's not that big, we're not going to take you everywhere right now. But we figured we'd give you a mini-tour of everything between the airstrip and our place as your first taste."

"Unless you're so beat you just want to steer clear of any more vehicles today," Lily added.

Much as she would have liked to just get to their place, change, and have that drink, Nan didn't want to disappoint Pete and Lily. They seemed so excited to show her *their* island. And she wanted to assure Lily from the first that she really wasn't in any way a threat to her and Pete.

"You want to be tour guide or should I?" Pete asked.

"You start, I'll take over later...and correct any mistakes," Lily said from the back.

"As if I ever make any mistakes." Despite the laughter that remark inspired, Pete started on his spiel. "The Isla de Nookie Nookie, formerly the Isla del Oso—"

"Pete," Lily protested. "It's the Isla de Nunca Nunca. Now don't go giving Nan weird ideas."

"Isla de Nunca Nunca," Nan repeated carefully.

"I like mine better."

"Pete, one of these days you'll say that to the wrong person."

Nan jumped into the middle of this one. "Why the name change?"

"We want the island's name to be compatible with our vision for the resort. When Fantasia Resorts, Inc. became the sole owner of the island, we acquired the right to rename," Lily said.

"What does the name mean?" Nan asked.

"Actually, the Island of Never Never. We wanted the name to pertain to the Peter Pan theme of the resort," Pete said.

"How are you going to do all that?"

"Well, we'll have a lagoon for people to get lost in, a pirate ship moored near the beach for gambling, dinner, and dancing. And lots more."

"The island itself has a diameter of four and a half miles," Lily pointed out. "We plan to build in the center and leave a periphery of undeveloped beaches."

"Sounds great." Nan took in the scenery as they drove along. "How soon do you expect the resort to be built?"

"Good question. We're lucky to have a great guy in charge of construction," Pete shouted over the strong breezes swaying the palm trees.

"The strong, silent type," Lily half-shouted from the back. "The guy's practically a hermit. I think that's why he chose to come work here."

"We're not hermits," Pete protested.

"We're here together," Lily pointed out. Nan couldn't possibly ignore Lily's message.

"Makes it lots more fun. But you're going to scare Nan off."

Nan shook her head, figuring she might as well start to let Lily know where she stood. "I'm not here for a social life. I figure I'll get my work world organized first. Later, I can start to look for company." Actually, she wouldn't have minded having it all happen at once. But reality and the experiences of the past few months convinced her it would be a hell of a lot easier to get her work in a good place than to drum up a love life. Might as well pretend that was what she wanted.

"Lord knows, there's lots of work here," Pete said. "And that will continue to be the case."

"What exactly are your plans for the pottery?" Nan asked. She hadn't intended to get into work issues quite so quickly, but the conversation led so naturally in that direction that she might as well jump in.

"Though we decided early on to have an arts theme at this resort, we hadn't specifically thought about pottery. More like studios where people could take advantage of the fantastic light here and paint or work in other media," Lily explained. "But our focus group surveys indicate that pottery would make the island especially attractive. Our pottery program will be twofold. First will be as one of the arts for our guests. Second will be to develop a distinctive Nunca Nunca pottery line for use at the resort and possibly for sale beyond."

"That's quite ambitious." Nan was divided between taking in the passing scenery and listening to Lily. Though Lily's voice grew excited when she talked about business plans, Nan still sensed an undercurrent of coolness. Not unnatural. Nan would have been more surprised if Lily greeted her with open arms and no hesitation. She wanted everyone comfortable, so she'd talk to Lily to clear the air. As soon as possible.

As for the island, even as it was now, with construction at various stages and the necessary machinery and vehicles intruding on the scenery, Nan was keenly aware of the lush loveliness around her. Once everything was complete, the resort would be magnificent. Nan's heart soared at the thought of being part of all this, though she'd leave in a heartbeat if she thought her presence would hurt Pete. "How do you see my possible role?"

Pete took over. "First of all, we want your expert opinion on the total setup here for pottery. That means using your ideas for designing the studio, the kiln, and working with our construction guy from step one. Whatever is needed."

Nan's fingers itched to dig into the project and, most especially, into some clay. Now, despite her enjoyment of the passing scenery, she became anxious to reach Pete's place, unwind enough to get her self set for work, and clear the air with Lily.

"Look who's turned up," Pete said. "There he is now. Our construction guy, Mike Darlin." The Jeep bumped and lurched uncomfortably as Pete pulled off the road and began to drive toward a man squinting at the sun.

Nan opened her mouth to protest. Really, she was not in the mood for any more delays en route to Pete's. But before she could say a word, Pete had stopped the Jeep and was calling to the man. As Nan watched, a tall, well-muscled, dark-haired man in jeans and a T-shirt turned around to face them. In moments, he'd come over to the Jeep. He had the most amazing, startling blue eyes sparkling against his deep tan. Looked to be thirty-five or forty. Way too young for her. Still, despite her fatigue and a case of jet lag, Nan responded to his physical attractiveness and his woodsy, musky scent. An uncomfortable jolt of warmth formed in the pit of her belly and radiated outward. Her instant thought was that this was the man of her dreams. She could see his face at last.

Now stop that, she chided herself. Despite her foray with Pete, she'd definitely decided she was not in the market for younger men. She would have needed a far stronger ego than hers to let herself in for that sort of involvement. And this guy was definitely too young for her. Movie star handsome in the rugged Sean Connery sense—but far younger—and way more attractive than she was on every level. A lady killer. Probably knew it, too. Nan tried to divert her focus away from her pussy to the business she was supposed to transact with the man Pete and Lily were bringing over to introduce. *Act your age*, she reminded herself. It was almost as effective as carrying her mother and Helen around in her head.

"Mike Darlin is our chief of construction, so you'll be working closely with him." Mike reached out for a handshake. Nan's heart snagged on the word *closely*. She swallowed hard and wished she'd fixed her hair and the remnants of her makeup before getting into the Jeep. She held out her hand.

"Mike, Nan Sullivan is going to give us some preliminary ideas about the pottery studio and kiln, how best to set up. If we're lucky, we'll convince her to stay on permanently."

Nan thought she saw a funny spark in Mike's eyes when Pete made his introduction. She wasn't sure what that meant. Or if it had really been there.

"So you're the artist." Mike took her hand in his large warm one and squeezed it. Nan's pussy throbbed at the touch of his fingers, but she didn't miss the sarcastic undertone to his voice on the word *artist*. He said it like he meant *leper* or *convicted felon out on a technicality*. Why, the man practically sneered at her. She stood up straighter. Being an artist was an aspect of herself that she felt especially proud about.

"That's right. And I'm very excited to be in on the ground floor with the setup and design of the pottery studio."

Darlin pursed his very full, very kissable-looking lips. "Just as long as you remember that construction needs take precedence over artsy frou-frou." He waved his powerful-looking hands in the air.

Nan backed off and looked at him in amazement. *Artsy frou-frou?* Did anybody really talk like that anymore? Despite his hot body and leading man handsome face, Mike Darlin was obviously not the man of her dreams. It figured. Well, with personality defects like his, maybe he wouldn't be so hard to resist after all. Which gave her a pang of regret.

Lily looked from one to the other and said, "I'm sure the two of you will find an effective way to work together. But in the meantime, guys, this poor woman's been traveling for too many hours. We promised her we'd get her to our place so she can relax and renew. Mike, why don't you come and join us for a drink when you're done here? If you don't have any other plans, maybe stay for dinner."

Nan wanted to squelch that idea, but Lily didn't ask her opinion. And Nan wasn't used to blurting out her thoughts without thinking. So she decided to keep her mouth shut and let Lily and Pete steer her back to the Jeep. Suddenly the full weight of her exhaustion hit her. She desperately needed to have a shower and a change of clothes. Then she'd be human again and ready to take on whatever her pottery project would involve. Even dealing with Mike Darlin.

She hoped.

* * * * *

Mike watched as Payne and company drove off, raising a cloud of dust. Damn. The first interesting-looking woman who got his juices going, and he had to act like a backwoods idiot. Nan Sullivan. When he got one look at her brown eyes, the color of fine chocolate, and caught a whiff of her scent, kind of like roses, Mike nearly fell to his knees and begged her to let him take her home. Drag her home. Over his shoulder, caveman style. Damn. He was a sucker for big, tender eyes. For a woman who was round and looked soft to the touch, not angular like he'd cut himself against her sharp edges. The way he'd cut himself with Melinda.

Nan looked like a woman who knew how to have a good time. One who could enjoy a good meal without moaning and groaning about some infernal diet. Best of all, one who knew how to give and receive pleasure in bed. His radar had gone on high alert when his hand held Nan's, and his cock twitched at the memory. And he suspected the lady had felt a jolt or two also.

But damn, he had rules about not fooling around with women he met in work situations. He also had rules about not getting involved with artists. So Nan, being an artist he was supposed to work with, had a double whammy against her. Aargghh. Mike gritted his teeth. Not that he was a super-rigid type who'd make his own rules and then be compulsive about sticking to them. Talk about rigid. His cock was now tenting out his jeans. Good thing nobody else was around. He walked to his pickup

truck. Lucky he'd finished everything he planned to today. He'd go home, shower and change, before he went to Pete's place. A long, cold shower.

Well, to satisfy his libido, he'd been hoping the female population on the island would increase. Nan Sullivan was a great addition. But Mike's gut told him getting involved with her would not be a simple matter. Maybe the getting involved would be simple, but whatever it led to would undoubtedly be very complicated. And he was a man who liked to keep his life free from complications.

He'd have to be the one who ran the show. And made sure the two of them stayed uninvolved. Permanently.

* * * * *

Pete and Lily's cottage turned out to be larger than Nan expected. A white stucco, two-story building, it included a main sitting room, large kitchen, offices for each of them, and two bedrooms with en suite bathrooms. The furniture, a lot of bamboo and light, flowered cloth, felt exactly right to Nan. Pete carried Nan's baggage up to the guest bedroom, and Lily walked Nan up.

"I hope it's okay that we invited Mike for a drink," Lily asked, rather after the fact.

Nan couldn't remain annoyed with her or Pete, for that matter. "No problem. I'm sure you all will understand if I end up pooping out on you and just calling it an early night."

"Of course. Whatever feels comfortable for you."

"I'll see how I feel after I take my shower and get out of these clothes," Nan said, feeling grubby.

"Mike will probably be here in an hour," Lily said. "But follow your own schedule. We'll have a drink, decide what to do about dinner."

"You don't mean going out to a restaurant, do you?" Nan asked, daunted by that prospect.

Lily laughed, a sound like crystal lightly pinging. "Afraid there aren't any restaurants here yet. Not even the friendly Arches. When I talk about dinner, I mean we decide which of our freezer entities to base a meal around. Pete's pretty handy with the barbecue. Steaks, chicken, burgers. And there's always a selection of pizza."

Nan, who prided herself on being a pretty good cook, restrained her impulse to raise her eyebrows at the meager possibilities. Well, she certainly wasn't going to volunteer to put a meal together her first night on the island. That could come later. For now, she'd concentrate on being a good and helpful guest. "It all sounds fine."

Lily didn't look convinced. "I'll leave you to your shower." She briskly showed Nan around the room and bath, pointing out towels and toiletries, a selection of books and

magazines, the remote and DVD player for the small TV, where to store her things. "Call me if there's anything you need or want."

"It looks like everything I could possibly want is here," Nan said. "But I would like to take a few minutes to talk to you first."

"What is it?" Lily appeared wary.

"Let's sit down." Nan and Lily both perched on the edge of the bed.

After several moments of silence, Nan began. "First of all, I want to tell you how much I appreciate your invitation to the island—and the great job offer."

Lily nodded. "Pete is convinced you'll do a great job."

Still no warmth in her words. "I especially appreciate *your* having me here. I imagine that many women would not want invite someone who had any involvement with her man..."

Lily stiffened. "Pete said whatever there was between you is over." Her eyes bored into Nan.

Nan pursed her lips and nodded. How strange for her to even think that she could induce any feelings of insecurity in the beautiful young woman sitting next to her. "And he's totally right in the usual sense. There was one night when we each could provide what the other needed. *For one night*. And then we could both move on and be more ready and sure about what we really wanted."

"Sounds...unusual," Lily said.

"I'm sure it was, at that. Unusual and very, very lucky." Nan thought for a moment. "When I think how much better my life became after my night with Pete...I'm grateful. Also grateful that he and I have become friends, and that I have the chance to meet you, the wonderful woman who *is* right for Pete."

Lily blinked several times and seemed to relax. "You really mean it, don't you?"

"With all my heart and soul."

"Thank you for telling me this." Nan could sense Lily's resistance crumbling.

"Thank you for having me here."

Lily nodded. "And now I guess I should really let you get that shower."

The two women hugged, and Nan at last felt welcome. After Lily went out and closed the door, Nan took a few more minutes to acclimate herself to her temporary home. The room had large windows, and in the distance Nan could see the ocean. The sound of the sea soothed Nan, refreshing her from her fatigue. She appreciated the vase of fresh flowers standing in front of the large mirror over the bureau, along with a pitcher of water and a glass. The room sparkled with the light of the island and with the evidence of her hosts' hospitality. *Duh*. Pete and Lily were in the business of creating a resort. Hospitality was what they were all about. But still. It felt great being on the receiving end of somebody actually thinking ahead of her comfort.

Nan quickly unpacked and put her things away. Then she was more than ready for a shower. What should she wear tonight? Maybe the flowered gown she'd treated

herself to last year and never worn. A long linen column in black with white flowers. It made her feel tall and voluptuous, which would be a good way to feel the next time she met Mike Darlin.

Nan mentally slapped herself. She was not about to make any plans based on the possible presence, absence, or interest of Mike Darlin. Whatever she wore, whatever makeup she put on, would be solely for herself.

* * * * *

"Did you notice a spark of electricity in the air when Nan and Mike met?" Lily asked Pete. The two of them had decided chicken would be a safe bet to barbecue for dinner.

Pete rolled his eyes. "Lily, don't tell me you've got the matchmaking bug."

Lily put her hands on her hips and stamped her foot. "It's not like I go around *trying* to match people up. But sometimes two people find each other when you're around, and it's kind of hard not to help that along. And Pete, I really like Nan."

"So she's gotten to you, has she?" Pete asked.

"She's a very special lady."

"Agreed." Pete shook his head. "But they're both adults, Lily. If they want to be together, they'll figure out a way to do it. *Without* your assistance." He counted out pieces of chicken and got them ready to defrost in the microwave. "What should we have with the chicken?"

Lily shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe some of those fries would be good. And we still have that coleslaw in the fridge, don't we?"

"Yeah, but not enough for everybody. Got some frozen string beans. Those and the coleslaw and the fries should be enough. Also some little rolls we can defrost. Ice cream for dessert."

"A feast. Shipment from the mainland comes tomorrow, right?"

"Two days, I think," Pete said. "But we've got enough to last 'til then. Though not too fancy. We should have planned better for Nan's arrival."

"I think we're okay."

"So what else do you think of her?" Pete asked. He was glad to see Lily smile. It would be beyond horrible if the two of them hated each other on sight.

"Oh, I think she's very likable. She's older than I expected."

"I'm not sure what you were expecting."

Lily shrugged. "Neither am I." She paused. "Would it bother you if Nan and Mike got together?"

He shrugged. "Why should it bother me?"

"Because... I have to ask you something." Lily looked almost wary.

Pete didn't like the tone of her voice. But he figured he'd better get whatever was bothering her over with. Part of relationship building with Lily included dealing with matters from the get go instead of letting things fester and become problems. "What's up, Lily?"

"Do you still, uh, have feelings for Nan?"

Pete nearly sagged with relief at the question. First he wanted to grab Lily in his arms and hug her and tell her she was the only woman for him. But he restrained himself and took Lily's hand in his. "Do you mean romantic feelings?" He looked her full in the face and his heart melted.

She nodded.

Now he hugged her hard and kissed her, burying his lips in her lovely hair before moving across her face to engulf her mouth with his. He kissed her long and hard, showing with his tongue and teeth and lips all his love for her. Now he wished they didn't have company, that they could just take this discussion to the bedroom and love away any doubts either of them might have. But they had to be grown-ups tonight.

"You're the only woman for me," he whispered when they'd broken away from each other. "Nan is a very good friend. I won't say like an older sister, but way more in that category than anything else. You know, it was only after being with her that I started to feel ready for the kind of relationship we have. And it helped me to see Gwyn in a whole new light, not just as someone who'd unfairly dumped me. Made me realize I have responsibilities to the woman in my life."

"Sounds like I should be grateful to her."

"We both should." He thought for a moment. "But romantic feelings for Nan? No. Was that why you asked me if I'd mind seeing Nan and Mike get together?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't. Not in any way, shape, or form. Unless he hurt her."

Lily stroked his head with her hand, watching him so closely. "I believe you," she said softly. "And that goes with what she told me."

"She talked to you about the two of us?"

Lily nodded. "And I believed her. But I wanted to hear if your story and hers were the same. They are."

He kissed her again.

Lily broke the kiss this time. "There's someone here."

Nan, looking refreshed and happy, stood on the other side of the kitchen. She blushed. "I could go out and come back in."

"Don't do that," Pete said softly.

Lily blushed too. "We're just getting set up for dinner. So how do you feel about barbecued chicken?"

"Sounds great." Nan came toward them. "Anything I can do to help?"

"What an offer. We might take you up on it, but not tonight," Lily said. "Tonight you're our guest of honor. That means you sit and let us take care of you."

* * * * *

This was supposed to be work, but Nan felt totally on vacation. "Sounds like an offer I can't refuse."

"Speaking of offers you can't refuse," Pete said, "we promised you a drink. We've got the bar set up in the sitting room. Why don't you and I go there while Lily finishes getting things ready? Then I'll fire up the barbecue, and we'll be in business."

Pete led Nan into the large, airy sitting room and installed her in a bamboo armchair with green and lavender polished cotton cushions.

"So what's your poison?" Pete got behind the well-supplied bar.

Nan allowed herself a moment to savor the irony of Pete playing bartender to her. "White wine would be lovely."

"Okay," Pete said. "Though I have to tell you, I mix up a mean margarita."

"I bet I could beat you at that."

"What do you mean?" Pete's lips curled in a skeptical smile.

"You forget I'm not only a great potter but also a well above average bartender. As in, I have tons of experience. You have any good tequila and some limes?"

"You're on, lady."

Nan stepped behind the bar. "Now I'll show you what a margarita should look, smell, and most of all, taste like."

Pete watched in admiration as Nan quickly and competently put together one hell of a tempting-looking drink. When she finished, she poured some out for both of them and for Lily. He proposed a toast. "To success and friendship."

"I'll drink to both." They clinked glasses and each took a swallow.

Pete made short work of putting out small bowls of pretzels and peanuts.

Nan felt hungry and wondered about the wisdom of imbibing on an empty stomach. She helped herself to some munchies.

Watching her, Pete said, "You must be starved. I'm going to go and light the barbecue so we can eat dinner soon."

Nan wanted to tell him to take his time, but her hunger asserted itself. "That sounds good. Want me to come with you?"

Pete held out his hands indicating she should stay where she was. "Just relax. Watch the ocean, the sunset. Put your feet up and chill."

With the pretzels next to her cup, Nan did just as Pete suggested. She slipped her shoes off and put her bare feet up on the ottoman in front of the loveseat where she sat comfortably ensconced.

From the kitchen, she could hear the sounds of Pete and Lily bustling to prepare the meal. Good, homey, domestic sounds against an exotic backdrop. Hearing Pete at work grounded her. She took another sip of her margarita, put her glass down, and nibbled several pretzels.

As the setting sun filled the room with colorful rays and the ocean waves lulled her, Nan felt her eyelids begin to flutter. She was about three-quarters asleep when a knock on the front door startled her awake. Guest that she was, she fully expected her genial hosts to open the door to whoever was out there. When whoever it was knocked again, Nan realized Pete and Lily must be outdoors and probably couldn't hear the sound. With a bit of a shudder she pulled herself awake and slid out of her chair. A third knock convinced her the visitor was growing impatient. She really shouldn't take the time to put on her abandoned sandals.

"Coming," she muttered. She raced over to the door as fast as her long, slim dress would allow. When she opened the door, the guest was poised to knock a fourth time. He looked as startled as she did as his fist froze in midair.

Seeing him brought her fully awake. Mike Darlin, the churlish but drop-dead gorgeous builder. He'd cleaned up and looked even hotter than before. Still wearing jeans, but nicer ones. They fit him just right, encasing his slim hips and long legs. Nan would just bet he had an amazing butt. She had to fight the impulse to ask him to turn around so she could see.

"Pete and Lily are out on the patio, barbecuing. Come on in," she said as coolly as she could manage. At least now, in her hostess gown, showered and wearing full makeup, she felt like they were almost on a level playing field.

As if.

Chapter Five

Mike Darlin did not expect the newly arrived artist to open Pete and Lily's door. Nor did he expect the lurch to his system when she looked up at him with her big chocolate-brown eyes. He was going to have to watch himself around her.

"Guess I'll head back there, see if I can help Pete with anything." He walked past Nan toward the back door to the patio, where he could see Pete fiddling with the barbecue.

Shit. Was there something he was supposed to say to her? She looked so damn pretty in that dress. His cock saluted, and he rolled his eyes. He'd have to make sure he hid his attraction, or this Nan Sullivan would be impossible to work with. If he showed any little weakness, she'd be all over him to get him to modify his plans, alter his schedule to suit her artistic whims. He'd been there and done that with diva types before.

"How's it goin'?" he greeted Pete, who was now frowning at the barbecue.

"Mike. Grab yourself a beer while I get this thing fired up." Pete poked at the coals.

"Anything I can help with?"

"Nah." Pete pointed over to a cooler. "Beer's in there. Unless you'd rather have something else?"

Yeah. He'd like a long, tall drink of Nan Sullivan. Mike shook his head to clear that thought away. "Beer's great." He reached into the cooler, pulled out a bottle, and popped the cap. He chugged a big swallow, then straddled one of the white plastic chairs at the table.

Pete gave a triumphant cry as the fire caught and the flames began to rise. "Now we can get started. I'll go get the chicken."

Mike took another drink of his beer, then put the bottle down on the table and drummed his fingers on the white plastic surface. Was tonight supposed to be business or pleasure?

He heard the squeal of the sliding glass door and watched as Nan Sullivan came out, carrying a margarita. Shit. The two of them would have to be alone together to talk, or something, while Pete and Lily were busy. He'd have to figure out something to say that had nothing to do with putting his cock in her pussy... He took another drink and was surprised to see he'd finished the bottle. Great. One less prop for him to play with.

"They'll both be out in a moment with the food," she said. Her voice sounded musical to him, like she was crooning her words. "I asked if I could help, but they insist that I take it easy tonight."

He grunted something unintelligible even to him.

"All right if I sit down?" She angled herself into a chair near him.

He wanted to tell her to keep away but couldn't figure out a way to do that without sounding like a total Neanderthal. So instead he just moved over a bit and resisted the impulse to put his arm around her shoulders.

"Truce tonight?" She lifted her margarita glass to him in a mock toast.

His mouth twisted into a smile, and he held his bottle up to her. "Truce," he said. "But don't take that to mean it's any more than what it is." *Babble, babble.*

"And what is that?" She sounded as if she were about to laugh at him.

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "One-night deal."

"One-night stand." She blushed as the words came out, and, despite himself, Mike chuckled. Maybe, even though she was an artist, Nan had a sense of humor. Didn't take herself as all-fired serious as so many of them did.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," she protested, glaring at her glass. "Guess when you're jet-lagged, even one little ol' margarita can turn you into a blathering idiot."

He snorted. "I can promise that whatever happens tonight is a one-night stand."

Now Nan blushed seventeen shades of red, and Mike felt something break loose inside him. He couldn't remember Melinda ever blushing. "Let's see how much more trouble I can get myself into tonight," Nan complained. Her smile as she said the words told Mike she wasn't taking anything very seriously. Good.

"Oh, can I watch?" Despite his reservations, Mike was beginning to enjoy himself.

"What are you going to watch?" Pete asked as he came out to the patio bearing a huge platter of raw chicken.

Nan shook her head at Mike as if they were coconspirators with a huge secret to protect.

Mike winked at her. "Being as you won't let me do anything productive, I'm going to watch how you barbecue that chicken. Maybe I can pick up some tips."

Pete didn't look entirely convinced. Still, he said, "It's all in the flick of the wrist. And turning the meat at precisely the right time."

"Herbs and good barbecue sauce help a lot," Lily chimed in, coming from the house with another huge tray loaded down.

Mike sprang up to take the tray from her. Lily thanked him and returned inside for yet more.

Waving off Pete and Lily's orders to relax, Nan helped Mike sort out the various foods and condiments. As he worked, Mike observed Nan being domestic, setting out bowls of salad. Fat black olives gleamed in a simple white dish. Bright red tomato slices contrasted sharply with a sunny yellow dish. Just from the way Nan arranged the plates, glasses, and cutlery, Mike could tell what a talented artist she must be. He shook his head, trying to dislodge any awareness that would soften him toward her in their

professional dealings. He had about as much luck convincing himself to ignore Nan the artist as he did getting his hormones to settle down.

* * * * *

Pete may not have been the sharpest blade in the knife block when it came to sensing undercurrents, but even he couldn't remain oblivious to the chemistry building between Nan and Mike. Lily had been right. He owed her one.

Nan and Mike. Offhand, he couldn't think of much to object to in the two of them getting together. His one-night stand with Nan hadn't left either of them feeling possessive or jealous of the other. Nan seemed genuinely pleased that things were working out so great for him and Lily. He'd be glad to see Nan with the kind of guy she deserved.

There was the kicker. He didn't know much about Mike outside of his work. Pete liked Mike as a worker, and would hate to have to revise his good opinion of him by learning he was a creep in his personal life. Pete felt a shiver of misgiving when he remembered how Mike and the previous potter had fought. Mike's ornery attitude toward artists could become a problem.

If Mike did anything to hurt Nan the artist or Nan the woman, Pete would string him up by the balls.

Just thinking of this possibility, Pete practically incinerated the chicken. Lily came over and asked if something was wrong. Realizing that he was the only one out of line right now, Pete focused on the task at hand. After all, nothing might come of the sparks crackling between Mike and Nan.

And Nan was a big girl who would probably resent the hell out of him trying to protect her.

So he'd finish barbecuing the chicken and keep an eye on them. He'd stay out of Nan and Mike's way. But he'd have a baseball bat ready just in case Mike did the wrong thing.

* * * * *

Nan felt like she was back in her awkward period, which had lasted from about age eight to eighteen. Ah hell, probably lasted from age eight 'til *now*. A forty-five year awkward period. That had to be some sort of record no one would envy her for.

Suddenly Nan became very aware of the fact that she would have to eat a meal with Mike, Lily, and Pete—each of whom she felt nervous about impressing for different reasons. And of all the luck, they'd be eating chicken. Nothing easy, like burgers in

buns. She never was sure with chicken how much to eat cutting from the bone. When was it okay to pick up the piece in her fingers? She'd watch the others, take a cue from them as to whether to eat with her fingers.

While she and Mike waited for Pete and Lily to bring the chicken to the table, Nan caught sight of Mike's hands. His large, rough hands, with calluses on the long fingers would bring her to the edge of ecstasy when he stroked her tender skin, up, down, around. She bit her lip and avoided making eye contact with him. She also resisted fanning herself and used all her self-discipline to sit perfectly still despite the dampness pooling between her legs.

The more she had time for pottery, the rougher her own hands became. Rough but sensitive. She'd be able to pick up his energy when she touched him. Mike had amazingly well-shaped fingers, artist's fingers—even with all their bumps and bruises. Nan had always been a sucker for men with beautiful hands and long, sensitive fingers. Not that Mike in any way seemed a likely candidate to be called *sensitive*. The insight that his fingers revealed hidden depths about him grabbed hold of her imagination and wouldn't let go.

How would those fingers feel on her breasts? Nan's nipples grew taut as she imagined Mike running them lightly over her breasts, taking time to play with her there. Getting her nipples hard, making them jut out to meet his touch. Great. She could just picture what a goofy smile she probably had on her face. Blushing, she forced herself to look anywhere but at Mike. *Hope he isn't a mind reader.*

Pete carried a huge platter filled with way too much chicken over to the table, set it down in the middle, and sat down. Lily sat down opposite him. "Our secret to making our guests think we're great cooks is..." he started.

"To starve them before we feed them," Lily finished.

They all laughed, and Nan tried to pretend she was breathing normally.

"Looks wonderful," Nan said, determined to distract herself from her libidinous thoughts.

Everyone loaded up their plates and began to eat, falling into the dinner silence when people are too busy with food to talk.

Nan ate unusually slowly. She did not want to drop any food in her lap or spill anything. This hyper awareness made the meal about as comfortable as being cross-examined by a tough prosecutor when on trial for murdering his best friend. But she wasn't about comfort tonight. This was the first major step in her career building. She remembered the old advice that it was wise to eat with a person before hiring him or her. This was a catered job interview.

So what if her pussy was moist and twitching with need, her panties soaked? She crossed her legs. So what if her eyes kept following Mike as he ate? He had amazingly good table manners, which was a relief. Though if he ate like a slob, it would be enough of a turnoff to defuse the attraction. Under Nan's watchful gaze, which didn't seem to shake him at all, Mike neatly sliced a piece of chicken, brought the fork to his lips, and

took the flesh into his lips. His large, sensuous, kissable lips. Well-shaped, like all his features. He had white, even teeth.

Then Mike picked up a drumstick and took a bite, and Nan nearly lost it. What was it about the way he ate that drumstick that made her picture his head between her legs, his teeth and tongue teasing her clit with the same gusto? Nan swallowed hard and tightened her legs. Now her pussy was nearly crying out in need. She wanted to yell out to him, "The heck with the chicken. I've got something better, hotter, and more delicious for you to eat. Me." She groaned with the effort of keeping her mouth and legs shut, and Mike grinned at her. Nan couldn't help it. She blushed a deeper red than the sliced tomatoes.

"Nan," Lily said, "anything wrong? You haven't eaten anything?"

Busted, and for the wrong thing. "Everything's delicious, Lily. I've eaten way more than you probably realize." She hadn't. She needed to concentrate, remember how to eat like a normal person. "What kind of sauce do you have on the chicken?"

Pete and Lily looked at each other. "Should we reveal our secret recipe?" Pete asked.

Lily laughed. "Yeah, our secret that we share with several million Americans. We mix bottled barbecue sauce with bottled salsa."

"As recipes go, that's as creative as we get," Pete said.

"Hey, it's very tasty," Nan said. "And that's what counts."

Once everyone had eaten enough to take away the first edge of hunger, Pete said, "I know we're having a social evening. And even though I'm usually the one telling Lily to chill out and relax a bit, keep business and pleasure separate, which ain't easy with us living on the island, maybe we can talk a little business tonight."

Lily nodded. "I approve. Unless Nan's really too beat and would prefer to wait until tomorrow."

That was her cue. Now she prayed that appropriate words would come out when she opened her mouth. "I think that it's fabulous to be including an artist's ideas about the studio and kiln before you start construction."

"Your ideas," Pete said.

Nan shrugged. "I don't want to take anything for granted. There's no commitment on either side yet."

"You're being cautious," Lily said. "That's never a bad idea. For argument's sake, though, let's assume that you're the artist who will have final say."

From your mouth to God's ear. "Thank you. Well, my first idea is to get a good look at the site and then start planning the studio with the concrete reality firmly in mind."

"Sounds great," Lily said.

"Thing is," Mike growled, looking from one to the other of his table companions, "that planning has to happen fast. Like yesterday. You all know how Laredo is with sticking to time schedules and budgets."

"Nan doesn't know," Pete said.

Mike looked hard at her. "Well, if she doesn't know yet, she'd better inform herself real quickly. Or we need to. Lady, here it is in a nutshell. Dominic Laredo runs a tight ship. He does not take it well when plans deviate from his understanding of them. Requires all sorts of additional paperwork, and so on. Aside from my commitment to doing my job right, I despise doing paperwork. Which is only part of why I do not want to be the guy on the receiving end of making Laredo dissatisfied."

Pete was making a face. Nan remembered that he'd had "issues" with his boss, and she wondered if those issues were still a factor.

"I just got here," Nan started to say by way of explanation. Though she was always more than willing to accept responsibility for when she'd done wrong or fallen short on, she wasn't clairvoyant.

"You've been here a whole what? Two, three hours? What do you have to show for that time?" Mike asked.

Nan looked at him in bemusement. He couldn't be serious.

"Dominic's not that bad," Lily said. "Don't let him scare you, Nan. Come on, Mike. Give Nan a chance to catch her breath."

"Okay, for tonight. But first thing tomorrow, I want to get started. So Nan, I'll pick you up here at eight to take you out to the proposed pottery site." He looked at her as if challenging her to say no. "Or is that too early for someone of your artistic sensibilities?"

Grrr. Mike couldn't have known it, but *artistic sensibilities* was one of the phrases her ex-husband had used to push her buttons. Despite how sexy and attractive Mike was, the guy was obviously an obnoxious jerk. Which was a relief. Would make her less twitchy and needy around him. "I'll be ready at eight," she said through gritted teeth.

"Good," Mike said, looking as if he didn't believe her.

She'd show him. She'd be up and ready at eight. The consummate professional businesswoman. So sharp he'd get a paper cut just looking at her. She couldn't believe she'd let him throw her so badly earlier. With a glint of determination in her eye, Nan picked up a chicken leg and began to gnaw.

"Why the rush now?" Pete asked. "I didn't think we were anywhere near being in danger of going overtime or over budget."

Mike said, "We're not, as far as I know. At least not at my end of things. But I got an e-mail today. One of Laredo's men from the home office is coming to the island to check on the construction projects. My impression is they don't usually come out unless they sense things are going wrong."

"On the other hand, we all know how careful Dominic is," Lily pointed out. "This might be normal operating procedure. Must be the same guy who's coming to check our records."

"Well, I just want to be sure everything's up to specs so this guy's visit or inspection or whatever the hell it is, goes smoothly."

"I'm with you on this," Pete said. "Looks like he'll be here later this week, right Lily?"

"Yes."

"Oh, by then Nan will be practically a native. And the plans for the studio should be well in progress."

Nan fervently hoped Pete's confidence would turn out to be an accurate predictor of how things went. She took a sip of her margarita, trying to bolster her own usual optimism.

* * * * *

As soon after dinner as he could politely leave, Mike excused himself and headed home. With the island so small, even though both he and Pete and Lily lived a bit away from everyone else, they weren't all that far apart. So he'd walked over earlier. Now it felt good to walk home in the cool evening, having a chance to think before he headed to his lonely, solitary bed. A place he could have maybe been sharing with Nan if he hadn't acted like such a horse's behind. Here he'd just spent the past few hours with the most attractive, desirable woman he'd met since he'd finally thrown in the towel with Melinda, and all Mike could think to do was pick at her. What was it about him that made him put his foot in his mouth and screw up any possible chance of getting a woman into his life?

Geez. Maybe Melinda had a point besides the one at the top of her head. Maybe he really was a disaster area as far as the opposite sex was concerned. Maybe he'd be smart to take a vow of celibacy and pretend he really meant it.

Worst of all was that Nan hadn't done a thing to deserve his acting like such a flaming asshole. Okay, so she was an artist. Nan wasn't another Melinda, or anything like Melinda's useless friends. He had no good reason for treating her like she was.

Mike let himself into his house. Couldn't think of a thing more to do, so he headed to the bedroom. He had to pick Nan up at eight tomorrow, and he had a few things to do in the morning before he left to get her. So he'd better get a decent night's sleep.

He brushed his teeth, tossed his clothes into the hamper, and stretched out naked on his mattress. With the window open and the ceiling fan going, he had a nice, comfortable breeze blowing across the room. Which did little to keep him cool when he began to think about Nan. Even though he couldn't seem to keep from attacking her verbally, he looked forward to seeing her again in the morning. Maybe this time, he'd be able to get off on the right foot with her.

He groaned, thinking about getting off in *any* way with her. His cock, which had been ready to spring into action through much of the evening, rose full and ready at the

thought of Nan. Mike licked his lips, remembering how sexy she'd looked biting into a chicken leg. With just a little nudge, he could imagine her lips on his cock, licking and sucking, nibbling, the way she had on the chicken leg. He visualized her bending over his erection, her auburn hair fanning out around her as she lowered herself to take him into her hot mouth.

He moaned and stroked himself harder. Her pretty pink tongue would caress him, lick him up and down, and her sweet ass, pointing upward, would sway with her movements. His fingers itched to sink into her hair, to touch her softness. Just the thought got him hot and writhing, wanting so much more than the movement of his own hand.

* * * * *

Despite her exhaustion, Nan barely slept. Just like when she'd been a little girl before the first day of school, she stayed awake from nerves. Even though she had a perfectly good alarm set for 6:30, to give her plenty of time to be ready for Mike Darlin by eight a.m., she couldn't fall into more than a restless doze.

Anxiety about being on time wasn't all that kept her awake. Try as she might, she couldn't banish the image of Mike Darlin. She replayed his words and the touch of his hand on hers. Toss, toss, turn, turn. Check out the clock again. The time crawled by 'til the alarm at last signaled the official end of the night.

Nan groaned. She got herself out of bed and lurched to the pretty bath next to her room. Maybe her shower would perform magic and turn her from an exhausted troll into a competent, alert—*dare she hope attractive?*—woman set to take charge of the day. A lot to wish for, but Nan believed in the power of optimism.

The shower felt great—reviving, renewing, rejuvenating. As streams of hot water vaporized around her, Nan, to her surprise, began to sing. For some reason, a song about a woman being tough and surviving no matter what some slob did to her sprang to her lips. Hoping the cottage had great soundproofing, and that the shower masked her voice, Nan belted out the song. She segued from that to Aretha's hymn to respect, dancing in time to the words.

Heck, she was probably using up the entire hot water supply. With a sigh, Nan wound down her act, shampooed and conditioned her hair, and washed thoroughly. She dressed in a navy pantsuit, businesslike and serious. Lily had warned her about mud and dirt at the site, so she rejected her navy pumps in favor of sneakers.

By seven, she was set. Drawn by the aroma of coffee brewing, Nan wandered into the kitchen. She poured herself a cup, helped herself to milk, and sat at the round white wooden table. Propped against a vase of red and yellow flowers in the center was a note for her from Pete.

Sorry we had to run off this morning before breakfast. Usual crisis. Not to mention getting ready for the guy from the home office. Help yourself to breakfast. Cereal in cabinet over fridge. Good luck today. Call my cell after you finish with Mike and we'll arrange for lunch. We hope.

Nan sat back and savored her drink. Quite strong and full octane. She probably needed exactly that this morning to get her in gear. After she finished her coffee, Nan helped herself to a bowl of cereal and another cup. Then she sat down with her notebook and started listing essential points of a studio and a kiln. Before she knew it, the hour flew by and a horn honking repeatedly interrupted her work.

* * * * *

Out in his Jeep, Mike impatiently honked. Just as he'd predicted, the prima donna artist was making him wait.

Nan stepped out of Pete's house and looked around at the morning scene before glaring at him. "Stop that noise," she hollered, scowling. "I'm coming as fast as I can." Carrying a huge black- and white-striped canvas tote in which she had God knew what, Nan walked quickly to the car.

The sun lit up Nan's auburn hair, highlighting it with warm streaks. She wore some ridiculous-looking big-city suit, one of those that made Mike think of women trying to look like men. Despite its severe lines, the suit did little to disguise Nan's curves, her generous roundness and softness. Though Mike had perfunctorily taken care of his morning erection, his cock reacted to the sight of Nan. He'd have to keep his mind alert and hope his cock went into hibernation, or it would be a real long day.

Mike reached over to unlock the passenger's seat door for Nan. She stepped in, and his car was filled with the scent of roses. Mike swallowed hard. He was glad to see that at least she'd had the good sense to wear sneakers. Her damned suit would probably need to go to the cleaners after an hour on the site, and he didn't want to have to put up with her bitching about that.

"You'll be sorry about that suit," he said by way of greeting. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

She paused in the act of putting on gold-framed sunglasses. "Good morning to you, too."

Mike snorted. "This is no social get-together."

"That doesn't mean we can't be polite. You know, exchange a hello here or there. Can't imagine how that would detract from business."

He cleared his throat and drove off. Damn woman was wearing some sort of perfume that threatened to distract him. "Not a good idea to wear fancy perfume in the field. Might attract some insects that think you're a flower."

She sniffed. "Since many people are allergic, I no longer wear perfume."

He gripped the steering wheel tighter. Triple damn. She smelled that good naturally. His cock, maybe turning into a critter that thought she was a flower, responded to the scent. Mike felt a sheen of sweat begin to coat his brow, and he hadn't even begun working. *Shit.*

"Tell me more about the site we're going to." Even though she addressed the question to him, Nan looked out her window at the passing scenery.

Mike commanded his disordered thoughts to unjumble themselves so he could come up with an answer to her perfectly reasonable request. "Let's see. Right now there's just dirt. Evidently lots of silicates in it, so it'll make good clay. The first potter they had out here wanted to build pottery facilities four times larger than what we can handle. I can imagine whoever hired him will be up shit creek when Laredo gets the full picture."

"Laredo sounds awful to work for."

Mike considered that. "I'd say he goes after what he wants. He wants the people who work for him to live up to his standards, which are high. They either give it their all or find themselves out on their keister. I've never heard anyone call Laredo unfair. He's just not real forgiving of screwups."

"Maybe I should reconsider."

Mike shrugged. "Your call. I admire Laredo and consider him a great boss. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to be in the shoes of anyone who screws up."

"Sounds like working for him is a challenge."

"I guess for those people who don't like to take responsibility for their work."

He turned on the radio to listen to the news and to discourage any more conversation. They arrived at the site in another ten minutes. Mike parked his Jeep at the perimeter, grabbed two hard hats from the backseat, and hopped out. By the time he got around to the passenger side, Nan was already closing her door.

"Where are the workers?" Nan asked, looking around.

"They're at another site this morning. Assigned elsewhere 'til we get squared away with our plans for this one." He handed Nan a bright canary-yellow hard hat and put on his own.

"What's this for?" She frowned as she took it from him.

"Required at all construction sites. Put it on."

"There's nobody working here," she protested, not making a move to put the hat on.

He counted to ten. "Even when there's no obvious activity, you should get used to wearing a hard hat on site."

"Sounds stupid to me." Nan still held the hard plastic helmet in her hand.

"Thank you for your opinion. I'll be sure to forward it to Laredo in my next e-mail. It's his rule in addition to being standard operating procedure at construction sites.

And, until you put yours on, we're not going anywhere." He looked at his watch. "You artist types might have time to waste, but I don't."

Giving him a drop-dead look, Nan slipped the hard hat over her curls. With her sunglasses still in place, she looked like a Martian. A beautiful, soft Martian. "I never have time to waste," she said through gritted teeth.

Mike bit back his laughter and coughed. "We can start the tour over here." Nan held her tote bag in front her chest.

"Do you really need to lug that thing with you?" Mike pointed to the tote.

"Yeah. It has supplies that I need."

"Looks heavy. I don't want to end up having to carry it for you when you get tired."

She pursed her lips. "You won't."

Mike put his hand on the small of her back to steer her to the deposits and felt a charge of warmth engulf him from head to toe, with a special concentration on his aching cock and balls. At the touch of his hand, Nan stiffened and shrugged him off. "I can move under my own power," she muttered and began to walk ahead.

In the wrong direction. "The site is this way," Mike said, very careful to avoid touching her again. He pointed with his head. Nan looked at everything as they walked along in silence.

"Here we are." Mike went ahead of Nan when they got to the deposit of earth made primarily of hydrated silicates of aluminum, now marked off with a red flag.

Nan sank down to her knees and ran her fingers through the earth. Mike's cock twitched at the thought of her doing the same across his chest, down his belly, to his hard shaft. Mike shifted his erection and bit back a moan. Fortunately, Nan appeared oblivious to his distress.

She turned her face and smiled radiantly at him. "This has great potential. Where can I get some water to make an actual clay sample?"

He saluted her. "Right away." Relieved to be able to move out of her sight with his raging erection, Mike scooted off to the site trailer for water. He briefly considered the possibility of dousing his hard-on with a cold shower, and rejected the notion because a huge wet spot would be even harder to hide.

Slightly subsided, he returned to Nan with a small plastic container of water.

"Fabulous. Can I use this to mix some clay in?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. But we don't have much time to play, so let's move it."

She took the container from him, poured off some of the water, put in several handfuls of earth, and began to mix.

"How long is that going to take?" Mike once again looked at his watch.

"Not much longer. Do you want to try mixing?" She held the container out to him.

He scowled, trying to figure out how to end this particular torture. "I stopped playing with that crap in grade school. Come on. Let's just get on with it."

Nan didn't say anything. She continued kneading and mixing, hefting small balls of the clay in her hands. Mike could no longer hide his hard-on. He turned partially away from Nan. "You have two more minutes, and then we have to move on."

"I'm done now."

He turned back to her just in time to get a gob of cold, wet clay smeared down the middle of his face.

* * * * *

Nan couldn't believe she'd just spread a handful of fresh clay down Mike Darlin's smug, impatient, gorgeous, *surprised* face. The moment she zapped him, Nan wanted to jump back and distance herself from the wild and crazy woman who'd just taken possession of her. A classic case of "the devil made me do it".

If anything, he appeared even more startled than she. Almost by reflex, he picked up a gob of clay and smeared it slowly and carefully down her forehead, nose, and chin. The clay felt smooth and cold, in contrast to the heat rising within her at the touch of his callused fingers on her skin.

What a time to be getting a hot flash—because that surely was what just hit her along with the cold clay. Right?

She jumped back.

"What the hell are you doing?" he growled, his flashing eyes now inches from hers. He flung off his hard hat.

Like she could explain. *Temporary insanity, Your Honor*. Before she could open her mouth to try, he pulled off her hard hat, drew her to him and engulfed her lips with his hot mouth. *What the...?* Nan's rational thoughts flew away, and she gave herself up to the heady sensation of Mike Darlin kissing her senseless. He was so much taller than her, she had to turn her face up and he had to reach down for their mouths to mesh. Nan shivered when she felt Mike's large, firm erection jut into her belly. Her panties grew moist in anticipation.

Mike broke the kiss. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "I've never done anything this unprofessional before."

Like she had. In several brisk strokes, she wiped the clay off her face and flung it aside. "Neither have I," she snapped. She couldn't have said, at that point, whether she was referring to the clay or the kiss—or both. Then she cleaned the clay from his face.

"Right," Mike said. "Well, this is the place. And the clay. So what do you think?"

She'd missed a bit of the clay that stuck right next to his nose. Nan bit her lip to keep from laughing. The big, handsome construction guy seemed tongue-tied and

uncomfortable as well as having clay on his face. She didn't know where to look first, at his face or his erection. He wanted to know what she was thinking? As if she was thinking. "You still have some clay on..."

She reached up to wipe away the clay at just the moment he put his hand on his face. Her clay fantasy flashed through Nan's mind. The force of the jolt that shot through her nearly knocked Nan off her feet. Mike grunted and drew her into his arms again. This time, their kiss was deeper, hotter, harder than the first time. Mike ground his erection into her belly, and she clutched him tighter.

Once again he apologized. "Don't," Nan replied when she was able to catch her breath. Then she put her arms up around his strong neck, and pulled him down for another kiss. Their tongues met, and they breathed into each other. He tasted like cinnamon and spice as she nibbled his luscious lips.

Mike groaned from somewhere deep inside him, and the sound vibrated through Nan like a summons she couldn't ignore. Suddenly nothing in the universe mattered more than satisfying her hunger for this man, here, now. The two of them locked together tightly in an embrace, they slid to the soft, rich earth. Nan wanted to feel everything about this moment, but she wore way too many clothes to experience the intimacy she craved. As did Mike. Impulsive and insane as it was, they were about to make love here in the earth.

They broke apart for a moment, to strip off their obtrusive clothes as fast as possible. Nan fumbled as she tried to get her sneakers off, now cursing the practical impulse that she'd followed when she chose to wear them this morning. Mike, already gloriously naked, seemed to sense her frustration and made short work of pulling the untied sneakers off her. He flung them aside and massaged her feet with his powerful hands. Mmm, she wanted more of that, but not now. More fundamental needs called.

Still on the ground, she unzipped her pants, wriggled out of them, and tossed them aside, along with her jacket. She shivered for a moment before rising heat engulfed her. Now she lay in the crumbly earth in her bra and panties. The ground caressed her skin, filling her with a sense of wellbeing. Mike leaned over her, his erection nudging her hip.

Nan lay with her arms and legs open in invitation to Mike, to the future. She opened her eyes and drank in the sight of his magnificent cock, a drop of pre-cum on the tip pearling in the sunshine.

"You're beautiful," Mike murmured. "May I?" He reached under her to unhook her bra.

"Oh, yes." She wanted to be naked with him, and she loved that he would perform the final steps of the striptease for her. Once he had her bra off, Mike laid his head between her breasts and took one in each hand. Nan quivered at his touch, and she closed her eyes again. Mike slowly traced the contours of her breasts with his fingers, raising goose bumps of pleasure wherever he touched. So much better than her imagination. Nan felt torn between wanting him to move quickly and wanting him to

take all the time in the world. With his fingertips he teased her nipples, which grew large and stiff from his attentions.

"It's been a long time for me," Nan said.

He raised his head from his perch between her breasts. "Me, too. I don't know how long I can wait..."

Knowing how ready she was, she shook her head. "I don't know how long I can either."

He growled and lowered his head to suckle her breast. Nan shivered with pleasure at the feel of his tongue and lips on her sensitive areola.

As he licked and sucked, Mike put his hand over her pussy, and Nan gasped at his touch. She was so hot and wet, she practically sizzled. With his finger he wedged the silk of her panties into her mound, and she couldn't help herself, couldn't hold back. She rode his finger, surrounding him with silken moistness. Sparks of ecstasy flared inside her.

Never breaking his kiss, Mike tugged at the elastic of her panties and quickly pulled them down. And then he lay down on top of her, with his cock at the mouth of her pussy. He looked at her with a question in his eyes.

She replied by grabbing onto his firm, tight ass, wiggling her pussy so that his cock was where she wanted it, and pulling him into her. In a moment, he filled her completely. She let out the breath she'd been holding and wrapped her legs around him.

With a groan, Mike lowered his mouth to hers for a kiss. He fell into her with his tongue moving slowly, so slowly, in a dance of exploration with hers.

She wanted to hold him just where he was and never budge from this spot. Her pussy sheathed him tightly, and she could feel her sleek surfaces bond with the velvet of his cock. Mike slowly began to move his hips up, but Nan just wanted him to stay still for a bit longer, if he could. So she held him tight where he was, and he shuddered against her.

"Just a few more moments," she whispered to him. "Let me hold you here for just a bit more." He nodded and rubbed his face against hers. Though his face was smooth from his morning shave, the remnants of his beard rasped her skin, forming a trail of sensation.

"I'll stay just as long as I can," he whispered back. "But that ain't gonna be too much longer. I've got to move, or I may die."

"I wouldn't want that." She gave his cock a squeeze with her pussy muscles, and Mike groaned.

"I'll make it as slow as I can," he promised.

She nibbled on his lower lip.

They may have been virtual strangers just a short while before, but now their bodies fell into a rhythm so perfect, it was like they'd known each other forever. Mike

began by lifting his ass so that his cock almost slid out of Nan's pussy, but he returned quickly to fill her.

All Nan's horniness and hunger rose to the fore, and she began to move her hips to maximize her pleasure and Mike's. She angled so that Mike rubbed and stroked her clit, raising her level of pleasure to a shattering intensity that set her nerve endings to tingling.

"Nan," Mike gasped, "where do you want me? What do you want me to do?"

"Just what you're doing," she said. "Harder and faster."

It was like a dam broke for Mike. With a whoop he began to piston his hips, rising and falling, filling her with his cock as he touched her everywhere. With the earth below her and the blue sky and sunshine above, Nan began to feel the pleasure that surrounded her combine and culminate in her long-desired release.

As her orgasm began to build, Nan shook with the intensity of the feeling in her pussy, in her heart, and the excitement streaming through her body like an infusion of energy. "Oh, Mike." She wanted him to know what was happening in her, all the feelings he awakened, all the sensations of pleasure.

"What is it, darling?" he asked.

She moaned. "I'm starting to come."

If anything, he began to hold her tighter. Now he petted her, murmuring soft words as he slid in and out of her, his cock growing bigger and harder. On her bed of earth, Nan thrashed with the power of her building climax. "Oh, oh, *oh*," she murmured. The colors and sounds of the universe came together in a swirl of wildness as she gave herself up to the sensations radiating out from her pussy.

And then she was there. With a jolt she shattered and came together again, much better than before. Then Mike embedded himself deeper in her. She stroked his ass, and he shouted, a primeval sound. And then he came, spurting his cum deep inside her in waves.

After a last shudder, he collapsed on top of her, both of them safe and warm in their earthen bed.

Chapter Six

Stretched out on Nan in the middle of the work site, Mike felt like he couldn't stop shaking. God, she was more delicious in reality than all his fantasies. He'd taken her like some slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am bucko, not a lover who cared about pleasuring his woman.

For two cents, he'd never move from where they lay entwined.

And then his brain kicked in. What the hell did he just do? Aside from having the best sex in years, maybe his whole life, what had he just done? Fucking a work colleague he barely knew at his work site? *No, making love to her.* Just the ticket to get his ass canned. He needed to get away from her and start damage control quickly.

But being here with her was too delicious to end.

But what the hell was he supposed to say to her now? *Thank you very much for getting my rocks off, now please remove yourself from my life?* He couldn't let what happened become any more important than it already felt to him. He had to draw a line now. How was he supposed to act with her?

Besides which, much as he hated to break the amazing connection between them, he had to get moving. He really did have other obligations this morning. Shit, he probably would be late.

But, geez, being with her was beyond fabulous. How could he stay away from her, now that he knew how great they were together? Hell, once he got into her pussy, he felt like he'd arrived in his goddamn home. More so than he ever had in his so-called marriage to Melinda.

Shit. He couldn't let his mind get trapped in all this stuff. He started to lift off Nan so that they could both get dressed. She put her hand on the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

He couldn't say no to one more kiss. Lord knew it would be a long time 'til he gave in to this particular impulse again. Summoning up all his strength, he broke the kiss and rose up. She looked at him with those big brown eyes, and some of the ice around his heart began to melt.

But he needed that ice just where it was. With a pang of regret, he pulled himself away from her, rolled over in the earth, and sat up.

She continued to lie where she was, her legs still spread, her pussy gleaming with the fluid of their lovemaking. In the rush to get into her, he hadn't properly looked at her beautiful body, spread out now before him like an offering.

He wanted to run his hands over her, commit the tactile memory of her skin to whatever part of the brain stored such sensations. But there lay madness. "I need to get

going,” he said. His voice sounded cold to him. Exactly the way he wanted it to, needed it to, in order to begin the necessary separation process.

She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at him, a new softness on her face. Her beautiful breasts fell to each side, and her nipples remained erect. He wanted to take them in his mouth and suckle all day. Well, for as long as he could before he’d need to get his cock deep inside her. She held her head to one side as if in question. “Where are you going?”

“I have other appointments this morning. I’ll be late. Get dressed, and I’ll drop you off at Pete’s.”

He held out his hand to help her get up, but she waved him away. *Suit yourself*, he thought. He raced around, gathering up his clothes and throwing them on. Jesus Christ, he couldn’t go anywhere the way he was, with earth falling out of his clothes whenever he moved. He’d have to go home and shower.

Still looking puzzled, she rose. “When are we going to talk about the plans for the pottery studio and the kiln?”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Some other time. Maybe I’ll call you and we can have a phone conference tonight. After all, you’ve seen the site now. And felt the earth...” His voice trailed off.

Nan blushed. A full-body blush. His cock began to stir again. He couldn’t believe that his penis was good to go again so soon after the best, most mind-blowing sex he’d had in forever. Maybe he’d talk to the doctor about getting the opposite of Viagra, or something.

He needed to get her covered up. As she didn’t seem in any hurry to get dressed, he began to race around, gathering her clothes so she’d take the hint.

He handed her the pile of clothes and turned away as she began to dress.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’ve seen the site and felt the earth...move. I thought you did, too.”

Oh, crap. Not that. She wanted to talk about it. What was it about women that made them want to ruin excellent sex with a blow-by-blow analysis? “We need to hurry. Why don’t you finish dressing and meet me at the Jeep?”

Before she could answer, he strode down to the Jeep. He walked, but all he could think of was running. His mind was racing in circles, throwing up red flags that screamed “Danger”. All he could understand was that he felt scared shitless—and he needed to distance himself from the most mind-blowing experience of the last decade or more. Only he couldn’t let her know how scared he was, how close she was coming to breaking down walls he wanted to keep in place.

He started the engine and wished he had a key he could use to turn off his feelings.

* * * * *

Nan tried to fight back the cold numbness that threatened to engulf her. Was she crazy, or had they not just made love? It had to be as fantastic for him as it was for her, right? So why did he jump up immediately afterwards and run off?

Weird. Nan wanted to extend their closeness for as long as possible. Just the two of them, cradled together in all that rich earth. She felt, in a strange way, like she and Mike had just consecrated the land for the project, as if their making love here resembled an ancient fertility rite, long forgotten by man.

Yeah, it had been really impulsive of her to start the clay fight with Mike. The clay fight that led them to fall into each other's arms. Almost as impulsive as her whole trip here to the island.

She zipped up her pants, put on her jacket, and tried her best to brush off the earth still clinging to her clothes with her hands. Not very effective. Lastly, she put back on the sneakers and tied them. Then she walked over to the Jeep, where Mike was gunning the motor.

Still unsure what had just gone wrong between them after so much was right, Nan got into the Jeep. Mike turned on the radio and started driving.

Nan, frustrated at this silent treatment, turned off the radio.

Mike growled, "I was listening." He reached out to turn it on again, but she put her hand on his to stop him.

"Aren't we even going to talk about what just happened between us?" Despite her resolve to stay calm, her voice cracked on the last word.

Mike mumbled something under his breath. "That should never have happened," he said at last.

"What? Why?" Nan's lip trembled, and she felt angry tears begin to prick right below the surface.

"Oh good Christ, do I have to spell it out?"

"Yes. I don't understand." Nan still managed to contain her tears and keep her voice on an even keel.

"I don't believe in shitting where I eat."

"What?" Nan's voice rose. How could he say something so ugly? She felt baffled and repelled.

"Look. I make it my policy not to mix work and play. It's just a bad idea. Hey, it was good for me. I'm not denying that. That's what you want to hear, right? But it ain't gonna happen again. Ever. I'm going to drop you off at Pete's and get on with my day."

"But...but what about the work on the kiln and the studio?" she sputtered. She couldn't find the words to ask him what she really wanted to. Why the hell was he breaking off what had just begun for them? She couldn't have been imagining how great it was, could she? Could she really be fooling herself that completely?

"We can do it all by e-mail, phone and fax." His voice sounded like a glacier.

"So you're saying you don't want to see me again." She tried to sound as cold as he did, but didn't get anywhere close.

"You got it in one, lady."

Nan couldn't believe her ears. She hadn't felt this shocked since her so-called husband walked into their living room and pulled the plug on their forever marriage. She tried to find a response, but her mind turned into a perfect blank.

He pulled up to Pete's cottage. "We're here."

She'd expected at least a peck on the cheek when they took leave of each other. Nothing. He didn't even look at her.

What the hell was going on here? They'd just made love, and now he wouldn't even look her in the eyes? It felt like déjà vu all over again. Nan started to see red and wished she had something at hand that she could hurl at this unresponsive lump of a man. Lacking that, she chose words as her weapons. "Obviously you're having second thoughts about what just happened between us. Well, buddy, so am I. I learn from my mistakes. Namely, I never repeat them. I suggest we both forget the last half hour."

He looked at her with a brief spark of something in his eyes, but kept his mouth clamped shut.

Like she needed another non-communicator. With the last of her resolve, Nan picked up her tote. She let herself out of the Jeep and slammed the door. Without looking back, she somehow got to the door.

Stunned, furious, and approaching meltdown, Nan let herself into Pete's cottage. It was only the middle of the first morning of the rest of her life, and she'd already screwed up royally. She crumpled in a heap on the floor in the kitchen and began to weep.

* * * * *

Mike felt like an asshole when he drove away and left Nan looking...vulnerable. As soon as he turned the corner, he wanted to go back and apologize. He actually stopped the car and turned around. But then the voice of reason took hold. Going back to her would be so wrong. It would just extend the mistake and the misery.

Okay, so he didn't want to get involved with her. One tumble in the hay – or, in this case, the mud – did not a relationship make. But geez, women always made mountains out of molehills. One morning of lovemaking... Okay he'd call it that, concede it was more than just a tumble. Granted it was amazing, teeth-shattering lovemaking, but still just one time, and a woman was off to order invitations to the wedding. More like invitations to the beheading.

He sure as hell knew he didn't want that. But still, he could have handled the whole departure better. Fuck, he'd behaved like a prick. At times like this, he remembered how shitty he felt when Melinda dumped on him. He hated to think he was treating anyone as badly as Melinda treated him. Especially a lady like Nan.

Maybe he should try to make it up to Nan... Maybe he could find the words to explain to her how scared he felt, how much he didn't want to hurt again. He could pick up the phone, not even have to see her in person. Just talk. Nah, the damage was done. He pulled himself up straight in the seat and focused ahead. It wasn't pretty, but he'd managed to nip whatever was starting in the bud. The smartest thing he could do was just keep driving and get on with his day and his life. Let her do the same.

Just the way he liked things. Simple. With any luck, Nan would get the hell out of Dodge. Decide she didn't like the climate on the island and head the fuck back to wherever in the States she came from.

Nothing really was any different than it had been when he rolled out of bed this morning.

So how come he felt like such a shit?

* * * * *

"How'd the tour of the future pottery site go?" Pete asked Nan. He and Lily had made a point of going back to the cottage for a lunch break with their guest instead of scarfing down their usual sandwich or whatever they could scrounge up on the job.

"We didn't get too far," Nan said. She looked awful, her eyes swollen. Like she hadn't slept well or maybe she was allergic to something on the island.

Lily poured iced tea all around. Lunch today was pizza, straight from the freezer to the microwave. In just moments, the main and only course would be ready. "Didn't Mike pick you up and take you to the site?"

"He did." Nan appeared to stiffen. Pete looked at Lily, who raised an eyebrow. He wondered if she was getting the same bad vibes he was.

"Look, Nan. I apologize if I'm being pushy here, but I get the feeling all did not go well this morning."

Nan bit her lip and looked like she was on the verge of tears. The microwave bell dinged, signaling that their pizza was ready. Lily went to the kitchen to retrieve it.

Nan sniffed. "I'm sure acting like a sharp, cutting-edge professional, aren't I?"

Pete waved a hand dismissively. "We really are friends here. If Mike did something wrong or out of line, tell me."

She shook her head. "Nothing like that. We just didn't get very far in discussing any plans for a studio or kiln."

"Did he give you a hard time again about being an artist? Because if he pulled any more of that crap, so help me, great construction guy or not, he is so out of here."

"Oh, please. Don't even think about anything like that. I'd hate it if..."

Lily came back with the pizza and put it down on the table. For once Pete, starving as usual, didn't make a lunge for the food. Hell, Nan's unhappiness took his appetite away. He suspected Nan didn't have much an appetite either.

"Please, Nan. Be honest with us so we know how to proceed." Lily put a hand on Nan's arm. Nan pulled a tissue from the pocket of her slacks and blew her nose.

"Even if I do have personal issues with Mike, and I'm not saying I do, I don't want those to be a factor in anything. Promise?" She looked from Pete to Lily.

Pete looked at Lily, who nodded slightly. They agreed. Get Nan to tell them what happened before they started thinking of consequences for anybody. "Agreed," he said for both of them.

Nan sighed. "The earth looks fantastic for clay. It's very rich in silicates, and potters using it should be able to produce a very satisfactory product."

"Sounds like a professional report to me," Lily said.

"That's all I have to say right now," Nan said. She appeared to have run out of whatever had animated her before.

"Well, it's a start," Pete said. "We really need to get going on the plans for building a kiln and a studio devoted to pottery. Did you and Darlin discuss any of that at all?"

Nan shook her head. And then she appeared to remember something. "He did say he'd phone later. We could discuss those plans on the phone."

"Hmm." Pete rubbed his chin in thought. "Why would he want to confer by phone instead of face-to-face when you're both here on the island? I thought he was a strange bird before, but this..."

Lily had that look in her eye. That wise woman look, that meant she knew something Pete didn't. Okay, that happened a lot. He looked at her inquiringly, but she didn't do anything other than offer to serve pizza to everyone. Later, when they were alone, she'd tell him what was going on in that smart and pretty head. For now he sensed it might just be best to change the subject. When he began to talk about his morning's communication with the home office, both Nan and Lily looked relieved.

"I got another e-mail from Paul Pendleton, the guy who's coming from the home office to check our progress on the entire project," Pete said. "I keep wondering why he's making the trip here. I think we could handle everything online. Lily, do you know anything about him? Like why he's coming here?"

"Only know him by reputation." Lily nibbled her lower lip. "He's a dedicated number cruncher. One of the top men." She shook her head. "Pete, I think the reason he's coming is to go over all our records with a magnifying glass. I hope this doesn't mean that Dominic's displeased or worried."

Pete, who'd certainly had his own problems with Laredo over the years, couldn't imagine why the big boss could have any worries about the operation. Not with Lily in charge along with him. "You know Laredo better than I do," he said.

"Yes I do. Well, if he were really worried, he'd come himself. This might just be routine after all."

"Right." Pete hoped so. He had too much riding on their success to even consider any other possibility for their project on this island.

"We'd better start reviewing all our paperwork, pronto." Lily turned to Nan. "I'm sorry but we're probably going to be tied up through dinner. Probably just grab something at the office."

"Oh, dear," Nan said. "Sounds very serious."

Lily nodded. "When the home office cracks the whip, it's as serious as a Category Four hurricane. Maybe more so. We'll be tied up every night 'til Pendleton arrives."

"Maybe after, too," Pete added.

"So you're on your own for dinners 'til we're through this. Just help yourself to whatever's in the freezer. Our kitchen is yours," Lily said.

Pete got a bright idea. "Maybe you can invite Darlin over for dinner, make your plans together that way."

"Or not." Lily rolled her eyes. "Don't listen to Pete when he's having a less than brilliant idea."

Pete looked at her in question. "What'd I do now?"

Lily took him by the hand. "Come on and I'll tell you. Nan, just make yourself at home. And work things out with Darlin in the way that suits you best."

Still clueless as to what was bugging Lily, aside from Pendleton's upcoming visit, Pete waved goodbye to Nan as Lily dragged him out of the room.

* * * * *

Nan got through lunch. She even managed to choke down a few bites of pizza, washing them down with the iced tea.

This was *so* not working out for her. She'd landed in an impossible situation, and, from what Pete and Lily said, things were about to get worse. Nan didn't think much could rattle Lily, but the upcoming visit of Paul Pendleton appeared to have exactly that effect.

The smartest thing she could do would be to turn around and go back home. The thought of another long plane trip did little to cheer her up. And then she'd be returning to Florida, her tail between her legs, to Helen's I-told-you-so welcome. To her dead-end jobs and the ragtag time she'd get for her pottery. To the drunk Don Juans who tried to pick her up as they passed through the motel bar.

Not to mention how she would disappoint Pete and Lily, who were being so nice to her. Who'd paid for her to come down, and here she was throwing in the towel after not even one full day. Because of some jerk who hated artists but wasn't afraid to use them for his own enjoyment. That hurt, even if his lovemaking had made her body sing.

Nan went up to her bedroom to get her suitcase and begin packing, then stopped herself in mid-stride. She'd never before been a quitter, and this was no time to start. Maybe Mike had one right idea lurking in his weird thought processes. They'd just communicate by phone. Keep everything between them professional and definitely hands off.

If he thought he could scare her away or get her to desert her friends just by making fabulous love to her and then acting like a supreme jerk, well, he had another think coming. And she was just the woman to show him.

The phone rang. Nan stared at it. Pete and Lily must have an answering machine. She should probably just ignore it. But what if they were phoning her and needed her to do something for them? It stopped ringing before she could resolve the debate but started up again five seconds later.

If the call wasn't for her, she'd take a message. She picked up.

"Nan?"

Oh crap, it was Mike. Her knees trembled at the sound of his voice and she said nothing.

"Nan?" he repeated.

"Sullivan here." She sounded clipped, professional. She hoped.

"Darlin here. Look, is this a good time to talk about those construction plans?"

She couldn't believe him. The man must have been part-robot disguised to look human. Well, two could play at that game. "I'm busy now, Mike."

"When are you available?"

"I'm not sure."

"Nan, I haven't got all day."

"Well, according to my schedule, neither do I. We can make an appointment."

He muttered something under his breath. "Have it your way. When are you free?"

"For you? Never." That felt good.

More muttering. "Look, I don't like this any better than you do. But we've gotta talk so I can get the work scheduled. How about tonight? This is only your first full day on the island. You can't be busy tonight. How about I call you at eight?"

"That will probably work. Call me then." With that, she hung up.

Then she sat down with a sketchbook and pencils and began to draw her ideas for the perfect studio and kiln. She'd manage to communicate it all to Mike Darlin and still maintain distance. Like a million miles worth of distance. Maybe she'd make the sketches and slip them under the door of his cottage.

No, it would be better to drop them off at his office.

No, even that would be too much contact. Maybe she'd just mail the papers to him. She chuckled at the thought. Worthwhile, even if the post office was farther away than his cottage or his office.

If there even was a post office on the island. She might have to put the papers on a plane or a boat to the mainland. Unfortunately, fooling around like that would hurt Pete and Lily far more than Mike. So she'd just have to deal with him. Her pencil flew while she planned all the ways to keep her distance from the man and do her best for Pete and Lily.

* * * * *

His day began great but went rapidly downhill. Making love with Nan was actually the best thing that had happened to him in months, maybe years. For a moment, life started looking better. 'Til he got nervous and realized he'd better preserve his space. Pronto.

Mike's phone rang. He picked up, hoping Nan was calling. Instead, he heard Melinda's strident voice. Speak of the devil.

"I need more money."

"Uh, who's this?" As if he couldn't recognize the voice of his nightmares.

"Melinda. You know, your wife?"

"My *ex*-wife." She only called herself his wife when she wanted something badly.

"Yeah, whatever. I need more money, and you'd better send it."

Mike scowled at the phone. "You didn't get my alimony check?"

She snorted. "Yeah, the piddly payment arrived. But it's not enough, Mike. I can't live on that."

"Read the agreement again. The one that says my last payment is in two months."

"You can't be serious."

"We both signed. In blood, if I remember correctly."

"Geez, Mike. I can't live on what you're sending me *now*. I'll be out on the street."

Right. "Alimony was transitional. 'Til you got on your feet and found a job. It's been five years."

"You're really going to stick to that crap?"

"Start checking the want ads." Tired of hearing her squawk, he hung up. When the phone rang a minute later, he ignored it. Later, he might just erase his messages without listening. He'd reached his limit, which didn't take long when it came to Melinda's bitching.

But in a way, he felt grateful to her. His ex-wife's strident voice reminded him of what a sucker he could be when it came to women.

Mike got around to all the construction sites. Everything seemed to be going well, on track. His mood started to lift. But when he went back to his office he had another e-mail from Paul Pendleton, the suit from Laredo's home office in England who'd be arriving in three days. Pendleton said he expected to go over all the construction, both complete, in progress and planned. Mike gritted his teeth as a major headache staked its claim. Mike kept reasonable records, but he had his own style. Now he'd have to scramble to get all his books and files in order for Pendleton, rumored to be a stiff, hard-ass perfectionist who wanted all the records in triplicate, following strict Laredo company format.

Mike hated paperwork. And he hated having to spend his time with some stuffed shirt who'd report in to Laredo every three minutes. Not that Mike minded people inspecting his work. He ran a clean, tight ship and could justify every penny of his expenses. But to have to go over everything with an accountant type? Well, it was enough to ruin a guy's day.

First, he'd have to patch things up with Nan, or he'd have to explain in triplicate to the accountant why he didn't have any plans for the kiln or the studio. Which would complicate his life.

The thought of being with her again made him ache with need and desire. Especially now that he knew how good the two of them were together. But he couldn't let any of that cloud his vision again. From now on, he needed to be on a strictly professional footing with Nan Sullivan. So where was a good set of blinders when a guy needed them? And maybe full-body dose of novocaine? It would probably take all that and more to help him stay focused.

* * * * *

Nan sketched for several hours before she had to stop and stretch to relieve her stiffness. She looked at the clock and couldn't believe it was already past four. Where was the day going?

She got up to pour herself some iced tea when the phone rang. Before she could internally debate whether or not to answer, she picked up.

"Nan, it's Mike. Don't hang up."

Crap. Just when she was getting her head together and feeling good about her work, he had to call. "What do you want?"

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened before."

What was he sorry about? The lovemaking or his acting like a jerk. "And?"

"Can I get a second chance here? In view of the fact that we have to work together?"

Despite her better judgment, Nan found herself reacting to the man. As in wanting to be with him, wanting to touch him and feel his wonderful hands on her. But he spelled danger in so many ways. And the last thing on earth she needed right now was to get hurt. *Again*. "I've been sketching some of my ideas. Which I could certainly mail you."

"Mail me?" he asked, his voice incredulous. "Uh, isn't that a bit counterproductive?"

"A lot less counterproductive than letting you fling your baggage at me."

"Ouch! Nan, I promise to keep our interactions focused on business, if you'll do the same."

"Me?" she protested. Like *she'd* been the one who derailed them before. Mike reminded her of her ex-husband, who'd blamed her for everything that ever went wrong. She wasn't about to put up with that crap again. "*That* is exactly why I want to mail my sketches to you."

"Okay, truce. Look, do you know that a guy from the home office in England is due here in three days?"

"Yes. Paul something?"

"Pendleton. Paul Pendleton."

"That's the name. I know that Pete and Lily are concerned."

"Which is an intelligent response. Everybody needs to be worried and working their asses off to get ready. Including you and me."

"I haven't even accepted the job offer yet," Nan said. "I can leave the island and forget all the insanity here."

"But you're not going to leave."

"I'm not?" She chuckled dryly, going for a sophisticated sound. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because you're a smart lady and you realize two important truths. First, it's a great gig for an artsy-fartsy type."

She pursed her lips. "I'd love it if you could lose the word 'artsy-fartsy' from your otherwise reasonable vocabulary. The 'arts' don't necessarily imply 'farts'."

"Point taken."

"Good. What's the second important truth?"

"*I'm* here. I hear that good men are hard to find."

Nan bit her lip to keep from making the kind of sound that would accurately express her opinion of his swelled head. When she'd counted to ten, she said, "Well, you're batting five hundred—it *is* a great gig."

"You don't yet appreciate what a good man I am?"

"I see you don't suffer from any attacks of modesty."

"I told you I'm telling the truth now. Modesty is for those who...have something to be modest about."

Nan struggled not to laugh and to hold on to her determination not to let him get to her again. "Bottom line time here. Why did you phone?"

"Seeing as how Pete and Lily will probably be working 'til late tonight, I figured you and I could get together over dinner to review your plans."

"You must think I'm a real glutton for punishment. No way."

"Come on, Nan. You don't seem like the kind of gal who'd condemn a guy without giving him a second chance. Let me make it up to you by preparing your dinner. I mean, you are planning to eat tonight, aren't you?"

"Yes. I thought I'd work through dinner like Pete and Lily."

"So do it with me. You'll kill two birds with one stone. I promise, we'll talk about work, eat, and I'll take you home. With any luck, one session will be enough. And then I'll stay out of your way."

He was starting to wear her down. Nan had some questions about her plans, and she had to admit that meeting with him with the sketches in hand would be the easiest way to complete their needed interactions. "All right, Mike. Plans and dinner, and then you bring me back here."

"I promise. And Nan?"

"What?"

"Thank you for this second chance. You won't be sorry. I'll pick you up at six."

* * * * *

After hanging up, Mike scrambled back home from his office. He opened the door and tried to look at the place like an objective observer seeing it for the first time. His shack looked like a busy bachelor used it as a food and clothing drop, en route to the more important areas of his life. Not that anything was dirty exactly. It was just that the pile of laundry to be done and the pile to be put away didn't exactly enhance the chair and loveseat that constituted his living room.

And he'd promised to feed her dinner. What the hell, he had a freezer full of food. Did Nan look more like she'd prefer the frozen selection of Italian favorites or Mexican? Spaghetti or a burrito?

He decided on the burrito dinners and took them out to defrost. He looked through his cabinets and his fridge for beverages. He had beer and, oh yeah, more beer. Thought he had some tequila and margarita mix, but damned if he could find either now. Well, beer would have to do. Or iced tea. Or maybe some of his dwindling supply of bourbon, though she didn't look like that was her drink.

He vacuumed, scooped up his laundry and stuffed it into his closet. Was about to toss all his clothes, clean or not, onto the bed. Then the thought struck him. Despite the conversation he just had with Nan, in the course of the evening, they might just find some use for the bed. Not that he had any plans to seduce her. But things happened. They sure did, if this morning was any indication.

Mike's cock throbbed as he thought about how fabulous loving Nan had been. Geez, if he kept this up, he'd need to take a cold shower before he picked her up. Shower. Maybe she'd need to use the bathroom, and would probably be grossed out if he didn't at least wipe down some surfaces. He knew that he had some of those cleaning wipes somewhere...

Women got funny about sheets. So he changed the ones on his bed. Couldn't actually remember the last time he'd done it. Wouldn't want Nan to get weirded out at a crucial moment because of his grungy sheets.

Not that he was expecting anything to happen. He just wouldn't mind if it did.

After running around and cleaning what he could, hiding what he couldn't, Mike checked the clock. He'd be picking Nan up in twenty minutes. Just enough time to take a quick shower before he left for the short trip to Pete's cottage.

Chapter Seven

Though Nan told herself she wasn't going to any extra fuss to dress for her business meeting with Mike tonight, she chose her most flattering jeans and an ivory sweater that looked great with her coloring. Okay, so she paid a little extra attention to her makeup.

Most important, she had some great sketches in her large tote. Even though she thought with a pang of this morning's lovemaking, she wasn't about to fall into the same trap again. Business and dinner. She expected it to be a very early night.

The doorbell rang at exactly six. Mike, looking great in jeans and a denim shirt, open at the neck, stood in the doorway.

"Let's go," Nan said, brushing past him after she carefully locked the cottage door.

Nan let herself into Mike's Jeep, put down her tote, and buckled her seat belt. Mike slid in next to her.

"I hope you like burritos," he said by way of greeting.

She shrugged. "Whatever. I'm not going to your house for the cuisine or the company. It's just a working dinner."

"Right." They drove the short distance in silence, which suited Nan just fine. In a matter of minutes, they stopped and parked. "Is this your place?"

"It is," Mike said, hopping out of the car.

"You really do live close by." She let herself out before Mike could come around to open the door.

"All of us do, though my place is the most isolated. I like my privacy. I'd prefer to be farther away from everyone else, but this is about as much space as the initial construction makes possible. If you stay here on the island, you'll probably take one of the empty cottages close to everyone else. Pete and Lily are the only ones besides me who live a bit apart."

Nan hadn't thought at all about where she'd live, assuming she took the position. "Are there a lot of people here?"

"My construction crew and a few of the support staff. Some of the initial planners have been here and left already. We'll have more people coming out as the project moves along."

"And more leaving." She looked pointedly at him.

"The humble abode." Mike, whose hand hovered, but didn't quite touch the small of her back, steered her to the front door and invited her in.

"Don't you lock your door?"

"What for?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Don't you have anything worth stealing?"

"Why? Are you casing the joint?"

She frowned.

He chuckled dryly. "The only place I lock up is my office. Well, that and my truck. Only thing anyone could steal from here is laundry and some frozen dinners. Can't see anyone knocking themselves out for either."

The living room looked undistinguished, with barely more personality than a motel room.

"I'll nuke the burritos. Come in to the kitchen and have a seat."

Mike's kitchen included all the basics and no frills. A small brown Formica table and two generic kitchen chairs occupied the center. "Have a seat." He gestured toward the chairs.

She had to bite her lip to keep from offering to help. In short order, Mike set the table with two paper plates, some ancient-looking stainless cutlery, paper towels in lieu of napkins, and two glasses. Within moments, he brought over a plastic tray with two burrito dinners in white cardboard dishes. Hmm, burritos and beans.

Mike plopped down a jar of salsa and a bag of chips. "You want iced tea? I could spike the tea with some bourbon."

"Iced tea, please. No bourbon." With a meal like this, and such elegant service before her, Nan had a real difficult time holding on to her anger at Mike. Damn it, he'd probably counted on charming her with his primitive attempt at entertaining. But she wouldn't let her amusement show. Let him sweat a bit more.

"You made burritos and beans. I'm impressed by your cooking," Nan said.

Mike looked at her like she had a few screws loose. "Uh, these are frozen dinners. Three for ten bucks in the grocery order. Got a freezer full of them." He looked at her, and Nan could see him reading her face. "You knew that, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Mike. I'm just pulling your leg."

"Right. Eat hearty." He toasted her with his beer, and she held up her iced tea in response. "So, tell me about your plans."

"I have some sketches to show you, after we finish eating and clean up. I have some ideas that I think will work real well."

"What are the requirements for the kiln? How big does it have to be?" He took a sip of beer.

Nan swallowed a mouthful of food before responding. "Funny. Much as I've used kilns myself, I never looked into the technical aspects before. I checked on the Web."

"Same as I could do."

"Yeah, anybody could. But I incorporated the information I found into the sketches I made today. Actually, I have several ideas. What are you looking for?"

He shrugged. "I need to make sure the designs for the kiln and the studio, like everything else here, make the best and most efficient use of space and also that we'll have enough power for the heater. As this is for Dominic Laredo, everything also has to be 'aesthetically compatible' with the site."

"I hope you'll find that my designs fit the bill. I didn't know how many people the studio should accommodate..."

"The structure is to be broken down into individual modules, so that it can be adjusted for the number of people the resort intends to accommodate."

"Right. Well, each potter needs a wheel to work with, as well as space for drying pieces."

"Great. I'll check it out when we finish. Are your burritos okay?"

"Delicious," Nan said. To her surprise, the food was pretty good. Or was it that she enjoyed being with Mike again? Even though they weren't touching, she felt as if they were in close contact just sitting across from each other. There was also something intimate about their working together on this exciting project. Nan tried to reconcile the mean, dismissive man who'd hurt her earlier with the tempting hunk so close to her. Could she only have imagined that he was so mean to her? Why was he being so nice now? Just because he had to consult with her for their business?

Despite her earlier resolve to remain stiff and aloof, Nan found herself warming to Mike. Since he remained devastatingly attractive, she regretted that the wisest course for them to take would be that of a formal business relationship. And her hormones refused to stay put. She wanted to put her arms around him and lay her head down on his chest. Aw hell, she wanted to make love with him again. And, as she'd never been much of a poker player, she hoped he couldn't read her desire on her face.

On the other hand, it wasn't easy just to forgive and forget. After he'd made love to her, he'd walked away like it was nothing. No thought for her feelings. Like he galloped in to town on his horse, poked the schoolmarm, and rode off into the sunset. Definitely not her scene.

Nan felt like her head and her heart were being batted about, as if she were caught in the middle of a tennis game gone wild.

Dinner didn't take very long. Mike made instant coffee and gave Nan her choice of desserts. "You want chocolate chip or Oreo?"

"I'll take one of each," Nan said.

"Good choice."

Mike insisted on clearing the dishes and doing whatever cleanup he had to, while Nan went into the living room and spread her plans out on the coffee table. Mike joined her there in a very short time and sat down in the chair.

As the coffee table was fairly small, Nan didn't have much surface for her papers. "Maybe these would be easier to see on the floor," she said.

Mike indicated she should spread the papers out. The floor wasn't large enough for all Nan's sketches at once. "Maybe I'd just be better off putting out the kiln sketches first." She bent over to spread those out, then realized Mike was getting a full panoramic view of her butt. Fighting an urge to bolt upright, she turned just enough to see if he was looking where she didn't want him to. Oh yeah, Mike appeared to be memorizing the contours of her ass. From the expression on his face, he more than liked what he saw. Instead of jumping up, Nan convinced herself to take a deep breath and let him feast his eyes. She could feel his hunger for her trace a hot path between them. Her pussy grew moist and she gave her butt a delicious wiggle before she slowly stood up and stacked the other sketches on the couch.

She could feel Mike's gaze, and she liked the sensation. For the first time ever, she could sense how models and movie stars, the glamorous women felt. But she really wasn't going to let him know. Not yet. "So what do you think?"

Mike got down on the floor near her, and her nerve endings went wild. Too bad. He looked at her as if he knew how hot and wet her pussy had become. She looked away. "The sketches?"

He pursed his lips and redirected his attention. After studying her drawings for several moments, he mumbled, "These are quite good." Nan wouldn't let the surprise in his voice hurt her. "Why do you have several different sketches?"

Good. They'd redirected the energy to business. "I wanted to show the configurations for different size kilns and studios. So part of the question is, how large a kiln are you expecting to build? Obviously, a larger kiln can process a greater number of pieces."

"I have to go back to Pete and Lily to see how many potters they plan to accommodate at any given time." Mike wrote himself a note in a small notebook he pulled out of his chest pocket.

"Okay. The same question applies to the studio space." Nan pointed to the pages on the couch.

"Let's take a look at those anyway. This may be a stupid question, but do the kiln and the studio need to be in close proximity?"

"No such thing as a stupid question. And yes, they should be close, so that potters can easily take their work over for firing. But not close enough for the high heat to cause discomfort when the weather turns hot."

"Okay. That makes sense."

Nan smiled. "I'm so glad. Yeah, the closer the kiln is to the studio, the more convenient it will be for the potters. The happier the potters will be."

"Can I keep your sketches?" Mike asked. "Or at least borrow them? I need to know more from the big bosses before we can proceed with the plans. And getting their attention these next few days is not going to be easy. I'll just have to remind them that the pottery project will be right up there on Pendleton's agenda when he gets here."

Nan started to get up. She figured this would be the time to leave, before she found herself getting cozier with Mike again. Up 'til now he'd been a perfect gentleman. And she'd certainly done a good job of acting the lady. No reason to test the limits—for either of them.

Mike gave her a hand up. "Thanks," she said, blushing at the thought of his hand touching her most sensitive places. She brushed off the top of her jeans. "I guess that does it for tonight. Please take me back to Pete's."

Mike looked at her with melting, puppy-dog eyes. "It's still early. Why don't you stay a little longer?"

Take a deep breath. "Don't you have a ton of work, like Pete and Lily?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I do. But the work can wait. I know I said this would be all business, but that and the magnificent gourmet dinner I gave you were just to get you here. I was hoping we could maybe talk."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Nan heard the quiver in her voice and realized he probably did too.

"Come on, Nan. Why do you have to go back to the cottage alone? Pete and Lily won't be back for hours. What are you going to do all by yourself? Watch TV?" His voice sounded husky, sexy. She wanted him to whisper his invitation in her ear so she could feel his breath hot on her skin. She shivered. He reached for her, but she put up her hands like a barrier.

Then, drawing on strength she didn't know she had, Nan pulled herself up to her full height. "What I do tonight is not your concern or your business." Her voice dripped icicles. "Please take me home now."

He looked bemused, almost disbelieving. After chewing on his bottom lip, which she wished she could be doing, he said, "Tell you what. You sit down here on the couch, and I'll sit here in the chair. We can just talk. Just talk, okay?"

She wanted nothing more than to stay longer, talk to him. Well, talk while he held her and did some of the same delicious things they'd shared earlier that day... Hell, she could identify with the need for someone to talk to. And, Lord help her, the rest. Especially the rest. Hunger for him whisked through her. But she couldn't just let him dictate the terms of whatever went on between them without any thought to her needs. She'd been there and done that already. "Not okay. I really want to go home now." Her voice grew stronger with each word. She wished she could say the same for herself.

He pursed his lips. She half wished he'd ignore her words and grab her. But she wouldn't give in to that impulse. And she would stand her ground.

"Fine," he said. Was that a flash of regret she saw in his eyes? Or anger? She had to bite her lips to keep from saying she'd changed her mind.

"Let's go." He opened the door. She walked through and he followed her to his Jeep in silence. The silence continued for the short trip back to the cottage.

Mike broke it. "Another time," he said. It almost sounded like a question.

"We'll see." Nan's voice sounded a lot cooler to her ears than she felt. Without looking back, she rushed over to the cottage. Mike evidently watched her unlock the door. She didn't hear him drive off.

* * * * *

Mike sat in his Jeep and stared at Pete and Lily's cottage long after Nan disappeared inside. Such a short distance separated them. A short distance in space but it might as well have been a thousand miles. He sensed that Nan wanted to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her, but she'd demand too much for the pleasure of her company. Far more than he was willing to give. Or able?

He started up the Jeep and drove back to his place. Hell, he was used to being alone. So why did his home feel unbearably quiet, surrounding him like an unwelcome mist?

Mike poured himself a few fingers of bourbon. As he sat drinking, his eye caught the photo of the building site in the Andes. For just a moment, he wished himself there. At a place like that, he'd know exactly which end was up. All the time. No complicated feelings to mess up his life. Maybe he'd chosen wrong when he'd turned that assignment down. As far as he knew, the option to go there still existed.

He turned his glass, sloshing the last of his drink. Then he stood up, crossed the room. He could always do some work, but his heart wasn't in it. Nothing much on TV, wasn't in the mood to watch a video.

Might as well call it a night.

Mike's bed felt exceptionally cold. He reached out across the expanse and realized he'd imagined Nan would spend the night with him. Jumped to some unwarranted conclusions.

Had he blown it with her totally? He couldn't let himself believe that. Tomorrow, he'd try again. Really work at getting it right with Nan.

Tomorrow. Now he had to get through tonight...

* * * * *

Pete and Lily weren't home yet. Well, they'd warned her about their long hours. She knew they tried to keep the cottage a "work-free" zone, to separate their work space from their living space. Just as well that she was alone. She didn't feel in the mood to be social.

Nan figured it wouldn't hurt to get a good night's sleep. She reviewed the day and, though she'd felt miserable before, now she could feel good about herself. Lonely,

horny, but good about herself. She'd started off thinking herself lucky to have the attention of a man like Mike Darlin. Not only was he younger, he was hot. Remembered pleasure rippled through her.

But the luck went both ways. She had a lot to offer a man, too. Mike Darlin should be feeling lucky also. And if he didn't realize that, if he felt he could treat her any old way without considering her feelings... Well, she wasn't going to let him get away with that.

She figured they were both on the same page professionally, as far as being committed to building the best possible pottery facility for the resort. No way she would ever let herself be party to hurting Pete and Lily by messing around with that. And she sensed that Mike Darlin was as serious about doing a great job as they were.

Maybe she'd be better off keeping everything between them on the professional level. Not go in for any repeats of their lovemaking ever. Though he'd be hard to resist if he kept coming on to her the way he had tonight. But she wasn't about to say yes to any more than a work relationship. Not unless Mike showed he had a lot more to offer than his hot body. Delicious as that was.

She was strong. She was resolved. And, Nan realized, for the first time since her night with Pete, she felt fully alive.

* * * * *

After a restless night filled with dreams that left him hard and frustrated, Mike got out of bed determined to follow through with Nan. He eyed the photo of the work site in the Andes. Maybe it wasn't too late for him to head there...

Yeah, but if he went, he'd be leaving Pete and Lily in the lurch. He could recommend a decent guy to take over. Of course he'd probably never work for Dominic Laredo again. But he was good at what he did. Always had more job offers than he could accept.

So professionally, he could leave. Tell Pete and Lily that it wasn't working out for him.

But he could only bamboozle himself so much. It wasn't the job that had him contemplating escape. It was Nan Sullivan. She may have scared him shitless, but he had to deal with what was happening. Because being with her made him feel too good to turn his back. And it wasn't just the sex.

His rock-hard erection reminded him that, at the moment, sex was nothing to sneer at. He put his hand on his cock and groaned. It could have been her hand. He wished it was hers. He could fantasize about her here with him, but nothing came close to the reality of what she did for him, with him, *to* him.

So he'd struck out with Melinda. He wasn't about to let that mistake cost him more than it already had.

He'd do everything he could to mend fences with Nan. The thought of her made his cock surge in his hand. It'd be difficult to date a woman here on this island. Well, he was always a man who met challenges head-on.

As soon as it was a decent hour for a phone call, he'd contact her. Arrange for them to get together to talk about the studio and kiln. Figure out a way to invite her to his house so they could get to know each other more.

He squeezed his cock and remembered how luscious her pussy had been. More than anything, he hoped they'd make love again. And again. And again.

But, if she turned him down, the Andes job remained an option. He groaned again and gave his cock a hard tug.

* * * * *

By the time Nan padded her way down to the kitchen, Pete and Lily were gone. With a start she registered it was already nine a.m. Though still fairly early, Nan disliked feeling that the day was getting away from her. Her status, somewhere between being a guest and an employee, might have given her some latitude for getting a slow start. But she hated to feel she was taking advantage of her hosts' generosity or hospitality. Time to start pulling her weight. Especially because she'd decided to stay on and take the job. She realized that the island had hooked her heart, not to mention Mike Darlin...

While breakfasting on coffee and toast, Nan scribbled some notes to herself. When the phone rang, she automatically picked up.

"Nan, Mike Darlin. Let's get together for lunch."

She liked the way his voice sounded, setting off tingles in some interesting places. Which she wasn't about to tell him. "Good morning to you, too."

"Right. Good morning. I can pick you up at twelve-thirty. Company cook can pack us some sandwiches. We can eat out on the beach and talk. What do you say?"

Hmm. A picnic for two on a tropical beach. Not too shabby in the romance department. Should she give him a hard time or accept?

"Got another call I've got to take. I'll pick you up at twelve-thirty."

"Okay." She got her agreement out before he hung up.

Now she had the morning to get ready and to write up the exact specifications for her dream facility.

Things were looking up.

* * * * *

Nan stepped out the front door of the cottage just after Mike pulled up, right before he was going to honk the horn. He got out of the Jeep and opened the door for Nan. She was wearing a long dress with big blue flowers splashed on a white background. A blue band pulled her hair back away from her face. She carried her tote bag.

In the full midday sun, she looked incredibly good to him. Fresh as a sea breeze. His heart gave a lurch and his cock twitched in anticipation of her company. *Focus*, Mike reminded himself. They had work to accomplish together. And it would be better not to rush anything.

"Ready to get some work done?" he asked by way of greeting.

She looked at him, her brown eyes twinkling. "Great thank you, and you?"

He rolled his eyes, more at himself than her. Why did women always feel a need to remind him of social skills? They had agreed it was going to be a *work* session, hadn't they?

She pulled sunglasses out of her tote and put them on, then climbed in and fastened her seat belt.

Following her lead, he made small talk on the short drive to the beach. It wasn't as hard as he'd expected.

He carried the lunch and his notebook to the solitary picnic table where people occasionally took a meal break. He'd signed up for the table earlier that morning. Looked like they had the beach to themselves. Just the way he wanted it. She looked so tempting, he wanted to pull her to him and taste all of her.

Nan took the meal package from him and started to pull out what the cook had packed. "What do you have here?"

Mike shrugged. "Just told her to make some sandwiches and stuff."

"So lunch will be a surprise for both of us." She smiled. Mike liked her smile, liked that he had something to do with putting it on her face. "*Four* sandwiches?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry. Didn't know how much you like to eat. I figured two each."

Nan laughed. "You can make that three for you and one for me. I haven't been working at a building site all morning."

"Oh, right. So what'd she pack?"

"Now you're curious?" Nan examined the sandwiches. "Looks like she marked them. H and C. Ham and cheese?"

"Sounds right."

"TF. I'd guess tuna fish," Nan said.

"Yeah."

"Another H and C and another TF. What do you want first, Mike?"

"Lady's choice."

Nan appeared to think for a moment. "I'll go for one of the TFs. How about you?"

"Give me one of those H and Cs."

She did as he asked. Their fingers touched for just a moment, and Mike felt an electric jolt of contact. No doubt now. He hadn't just imagined how her touch felt.

Nan blushed slightly, and Mike suspected she felt the same charge he had. "What do we have to drink?" she asked.

"Your choice of basic cans. There's iced tea or soda."

"I'll go for the iced tea."

They both ate and drank in silence broken only by the waves crashing onto the shore and the occasional call of a bird.

After he'd wolfed down two sandwiches and two drinks and she'd daintily eaten and drunk one of each, they discussed the studio and kiln. Mike was pleasantly surprised at what a great grip Nan had on practical matters, for an artist. Which he mentioned to her as they both put away their paperwork.

He'd thought it was a compliment. But Nan's face got quite red, and she looked ready to spit nails. "What exactly do you mean by that?" she hissed.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything bad. I thought you'd be flattered. I really meant what I said as praise."

She looked at him as if he'd sprouted a head of green hair. "Flattered? By your saying that you expected me to sound like an idiot?"

Mike squirmed. Not exactly the conversation opener he'd hoped for. "Seeing as how you're an artist-type, I figured..." *What?* What had he figured? Had his brain kicked in and begun to function at all? Or was it only his cock that had kicked into gear?

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "What is it with you and artists? Why do you think all of us are idiots? Or artsy-fartsy people?"

So now he had to answer her question. "I don't hate artsy-fartsy people, per se," he said in an attempt at defense.

She raised one of her beautiful eyebrows. She had the greatest eyes, so full of feeling. "That sure sounds like hostility."

"It's not you." He thought for a moment, tried to put his ideas in reasonable order. "It all has to do with my ex-wife, Melinda."

"Oh. Is she an artist?"

He shook his head. "Melinda? No way. More like a wannabe. No, maybe not even that. After all, artists work." He winced at the heavy sarcasm in his voice.

"So you hate artists because your wife wanted to be one and never made the grade?" Nan pursed her lips. "Makes perfect sense to me."

Geez, when she put it that way, it made him sound like a real asshole. "No, let me explain. You see, Melinda had all these worthless friends, people who were a bunch of phonies like her. All of them always acted like their shit didn't smell, you know? Like everyone else, especially some construction guy who worked with his hands, was garbage to be used and thrown away."

"And you think those people are typical of artists?"

He thought about that for a few moments. "Yeah, I guess so."

She snorted. "Sounds to me like she fell in with a bunch of creeps who used art as a pretext for acting crummy. Not to mention, most artists work with their hands. You know, painting, drawing. Surely you haven't forgotten the feel of the clay." She blushed again.

A light went on for Mike. "I never knew any other kind of artists, so I just figured that Melinda's bunch was typical."

She shook her head, looking real sad. "They're not. Artists are like everybody else. Takes all kinds. Just like construction bosses." She stood up. "Now that we've got that settled, please take me home."

"Okay." Mike started to get up. Though he knew he should get back to work soon, he wanted to extend their time together. His mind scrambled for ways to keep her here with him. Not to mention, he hadn't yet made his move. "Just one more thing, though. What's your story? How come a great gal like you is free to pick up and come to a remote island?"

"You really want to know?"

"That's why I asked."

She sat down again. Her eyes looked sad. "Okay, I'll give you the condensed version, and then I really do have to leave. I've got stuff to do this afternoon, preferably before Pete and Lily come home."

"Got it."

She sighed. "I'm from a small town in Minnesota. Was married for close to thirty years to my high school sweetheart, Jerry. Our wedding was the day after I graduated. He was a year ahead of me, already working in the family business. We had four kids together—and now have three grandchildren with a fourth on the way."

"That's quite a family." For a moment he regretted that he'd never have a big family like that. "What kind of work did your husband do?"

She smiled at him wryly. "Would you believe construction?"

"Oh."

"Yeah. Small world, right? Building was the family business. As he got older, he spent a lot more time in the office than working at sites."

"What happened to him?"

She laughed, but it was a cold, hollow sound, not a warm one. "Life as we knew it ended five years ago. He had the typical midlife crisis. Found his way through it by climbing into the sack with his twenty-three-year-old secretary. Maybe she was the reason for him spending so much time at the office."

"He left you for some young bimbo?" Mike's voice rose in surprise.

"That's the short version. He and the bimbo are now the proud parents of twin boys. He's doing diaper duty." She snorted. "His new wife must be quite a woman if she got him to do that. I sure couldn't."

Mike hated stories like that. Decent people getting dumped because their spouses went bananas and couldn't appreciate what they had. So much pain. Mike took Nan's hand. He couldn't let her just continue to hurt because of one idiot's behavior.

"Jerry sounds like a first-class jerk." Man, he'd do anything right now to ease her pain.

Her hands felt so warm in his. He stroked her fingers, savoring the sensation of skin to skin. "More like third or fourth-class," Nan murmured. She leaned closer to him, which Mike interpreted as an invitation.

"Not all construction guys are such bastards. Most of us pride ourselves on how we treat our women," he whispered hoarsely.

"Sexist, Darlin. Construction people can also be women. I know, from marrying into a family of builders." She squeezed his hand tighter. For a moment, he took that as a signal that she was going to stand up and leave, and he tensed up. But she didn't appear to be getting up and going anywhere immediately.

"I stand corrected." With the thumb of his right hand, Mike traced around Nan's lovely lips. Lips he wanted to kiss. Soon. "How could anyone leave a beautiful, loving woman like you? He must have been nuts."

She closed her eyes. "I like to think so. That feels good, what you're doing with your finger."

Mike skimmed his finger lightly over her face, barely touching her. But even with the slight separation between her face and his thumb, Mike could still feel Nan's energy.

"What about you, Mike? You said you were married. Any kids?"

"No." He laughed dryly. "I couldn't imagine having kids with Melinda. She'd have had to grow up first." He shook his head.

"What went wrong for you two?"

He shrugged. "I always traveled a lot for my work. Melinda hated that. She kept hanging around with losers, moochers. When she went through her artistic phase, the losers were artists. But she hung around with lots of different types, depending on her mood. Or maybe the phase of the moon."

"Where is she now?"

"Wherever her latest guy is. Melinda went into a country club phase. Ran off with the tennis pro to the Bahamas. They've been moving around South America. All I know is I send her alimony checks wherever she directs me to. This from the woman who complained that *I* traveled too much."

"Doesn't sound like the brightest of women."

"Bingo." He had to kiss her. A kiss to thank her for being so perceptive.

Their lips mingled in their new recognition of each other. An appreciation of the scars each bore. An acknowledgement that they were together now. They'd both weathered destroying storms and come through them. To this place now, where they could be together.

Mike's kiss started off tentative. In moments, Nan put her hand on the back of his neck and drew him closer.

Yesterday might have gone downhill, but today was looking up.

Chapter Eight

After their lovemaking in the soil, Nan could easily visualize Mike and her on the beach, locked together in the sand. She'd always had a fantasy of making love on a beach by the ocean, something that had seemed like an impossible dream for a Midwesterner like herself.

Being with Mike was an even bigger fantasy come true. His mouth claimed hers in invitation, and she wanted to say yes. With every ounce of her being, she wanted to let the kiss turn into more.

He was cherishing her breasts with his hands, and she felt her nipples pebble. Though caution warned her to hold back, she pressed forward, savoring his touch.

"You're so delicious," he murmured. "I can't resist you."

Like she could resist him. She moaned her response.

He rose and pulled her up to her feet, then took her in his arms. His erection butted against her, and all she could think was how much she wanted to open her legs and feel him deep in her.

In moments they were down on the sand, clinging to each other like a life raft in a squall.

Nan felt like all her senses were magnified. The warmth of the sun, the smell of salt filling the air, the grit of the pale sand around her, trickling into her clothes. But Mike dwarfed all else. The solid bulk of his body, his strength, his scent of musk and citrus. Her pussy grew moist with anticipation.

The sound of him unzipping his fly hit her like a cold shower, though she wanted her hand to be where his was. Summoning up all her strength, she inched away from him. Now that sense was forcing its way into her head, the sand irritated her. The feel of the grains in her bra and panties was certainly not part of her fantasy. She shook her head to get rid of the cobwebs and of the sand she was sure would have her washing her hair the moment she got back to the cottage.

Mike looked at Nan in confusion and disappointment. "What is it?" he asked softly.

Nan exhaled hard and sat up. "I can't do this." She shook her head. She wanted him, but the red flags were flying and she couldn't ignore their warning.

Mike looked hard at her. "Your call."

It would have been so much easier to walk away if he'd argued. But what he said put the ball in her court. Her call. She could have him if she wanted him.

She wanted him. But. There was the *but*. Much as she desired him, she couldn't leave herself vulnerable again to him pulling back the way he had the day before. "I'd better go back to the cottage now."

He rose silently and held his hand out to her. She took it and got up. Sand poured off her, and she shook herself to shed whatever would come loose easily.

The silence continued while they cleaned up and got into the Jeep.

Mike turned on the ignition. "Have I totally blown it with you, Nan?"

She wasn't used to this much honesty. "What do you mean, Mike?"

"I'm so bad with words," he muttered. "Aw, hell. Did I screw things up so badly that there's no way you can forgive me?"

"You mean, how can you get back in my pants?"

He swallowed hard. "I won't deny that's exactly where I want to be right now. But I mean more than that. I want to be with you. Making love is part of that."

Talk about making her an offer she couldn't refuse. Still, a little protective armor was needed. "Things happened too fast before, and I got hurt. Fast may be okay, but any time I end up hurt isn't okay. And until I'm sure you have more to offer than fun and games with a nasty side of pain, I'm going to slow down and hold back."

He grinned. "I always did admire a smart woman. Especially when she looks like you."

"Flattery might get you to some interesting places..."

"How about dinner tonight, my place? Only this time, I'll get the cook to make us something special."

She'd managed to hold him off. Now, after they'd had a chance to talk, she really did want to get to know him. "Okay. I'm willing to give that a try."

He leaned over, gave her a quick kiss. Before it could turn to anything more, Nan got out of the car.

"Pick you up at seven." He waved and drove off.

* * * * *

Mike was able to cajole the cook into making a real meal to serve Nan. Roast beef, mashed potatoes. Green beans with some fancy sauce and nuts. Strawberry shortcake. A bottle of red wine. Mike figured he'd owe the cook forever. But if he could use the dinner to dig himself out of the hole he'd sunk in, it would be worth it. The cook even promised to deliver the goods and have instructions on how to have everything ready to serve.

Once Mike got home, he looked around to see what else he should do. The place still looked pretty good from his cleanup the day before. Food was a done deal. What else? *Romance*. Women like Nan appreciated romance. Shit. He sucked at romance. That's what Melinda always told him. Hell, she told him and everyone else they knew. She even told strangers on the street. But according to Melinda, he sucked at just about everything except breathing.

Mike forced himself to stop thinking about Melinda and all her negative judgments. He was much better off—and happier—focusing on Nan. What in this house constituted romance for a woman like Nan? He scratched his head and thought. Music, yeah. He had three CDs that Melinda hadn't taken with her. Christmas carols from some choir. That wouldn't do for a little romantic dancing. The song of the humpbacked whale. He didn't even know they had that one. Looked like he was going to strike out. Then his hand touched a Barbra Streisand CD. A start.

What else went with romance? Flowers. Forget that. No flowers in his house. Candy. Ditto. Candles. Yeah, he had some utilitarian ones for power shortages. No holders. Well, damn, what would he do if the lights went out? He needed some friggin' holders. In the meantime, he'd improvise. He took out two Pyrex dishes, lit a candle, and melted enough wax in the bottom of each to hold the candles upright.

Okay. Candles and music. He'd zing her with both when they sat down for dinner.

Mike took a shower, shaved, put on fresh clothing and went to pick her up.

* * * * *

When Nan stepped into Mike's cottage, she saw that he had the lights turned way down and two candles burning. Nan smiled to herself. Seemed like he was trying to create a romantic atmosphere. Her heart swelled at the notion of him coming up with candlelight. From the look of his makeshift holders, she felt reasonably sure that lighting candles wasn't something he did often—or ever.

"Make yourself comfy," Mike said. "I don't know about you, but I like to walk around barefoot at home."

It didn't take much convincing from him to get her to shed her sandals.

Dinner by the improvised candlelight dazzled Nan. She couldn't remember any time in her life when any man, let alone a hunk like Mike, had gone to such effort to impress her. Heck, she couldn't imagine a time that any man had gone to any effort to impress her. Felt like the shoe had always been on the other foot. She sat back and enjoyed being served.

"So where'd you learn to cook?" she asked. Mike Darlin was evidently a man of many talents.

"I didn't." *Okay*, so cooking wasn't one of his talents.

"So who made the roast? It's delicious."

"Same cook who made our lunch. You know, Laredo hires only the best."

So she was finding out. It made Nan feel even more amazed and thrilled to be included in the ranks of people in this organization. What a stroke of luck that she'd let Pete Payne into her life.

"My compliments to the chef, and to the people who hired her."

"I'll be sure to tell her. Or maybe you can yourself, as soon as you meet."

"I feel like I have so many people to sort out, so much to learn." Nan had decided to accept Pete and Lily's offer. Heck, she'd probably made up her mind about three minutes after stepping onto this beautiful island.

"Be sure to save room for dessert," Mike said.

"My favorite course." She smiled at Mike. "Thanks so much for inviting me tonight. This is a lovely dinner."

He looked deep into her eyes. "And the night is still young."

Something warm began to uncoil deep inside her. Should she blame it on the excellent wine and food? She suspected both could go only so far in explaining the feelings beginning to take shape deep in her heart. Mike could have served her franks and beans, and she probably would have felt the same tenderness enveloping her. It wasn't the food. It was the company. She took another sip of wine and felt the room spin pleasantly.

"I'd like to take you to one of those places where they have dinner and dancing. Unfortunately, it'll probably be close to a year 'til we have a place like that on the island, and I want you in my arms tonight."

She felt her face crease into a goofy grin. "What a sweet thing to say." She nearly rolled her eyes at the insipidness of her comment. Was that the sappiest thing anyone had ever said?

"Do you like to dance?" he asked, his voice a little quivery on the last word.

"Yes." She adored dancing and couldn't remember the last time she'd done it. Well, yeah, she could. But her cousin Bertha's retirement bash, which was the last party she'd ever attended with Jerry, didn't rate very high on the romance scale. And heck, she'd enjoyed even that, though her pleasure had come despite her being with Jerry.

"I just have one CD suitable for dancing. Do you like Barbra Streisand?" He whispered.

"I adore her." Nan rose.

"Then let's give it a go." Mike turned on his CD player, and Barbra began to sing about the way she and her lover had once been.

Mike raised his arms and invited Nan in. "I'm not very good at this," he warned.

"You're doing great." She squeezed his hand. Shuffling around the small floor in time to Barbra's song in the candlelit dark of his living room felt like a new fantasy, one she'd never imagined. Her heart soared, and she could feel defenses in place since the Jerry debacle begin to crumble.

Mike stepped on her foot. "Shit." He stopped dancing.

"It's okay," Nan said. "No big deal. Neither of us is wearing shoes. Wouldn't be a big deal even if we were. Come on, Mike. Let's dance some more."

"I suck at this."

Nan picked up her foot and stomped as hard as she could on his foot. He threw back his head and laughed. "Okay, okay. Actually, Nan, that felt good. Put your foot on mine again."

"What are you, some kind of masochist?" She chuckled.

"I never thought so before. You don't have to stomp. Just put your foot on mine."

She complied. Both of them liked the sensation so much, soon she had both feet on his.

As Barbra moved from song to song—thank goodness it was an album filled with romantic ballads—Nan drew closer to Mike. She leaned her head against his chest, and he pressed his erection into the softness of her belly.

Soon, wonderful as the dancing was, they both wanted more from each other than they could get being upright and dressed. "Come to my bedroom with me," he whispered.

"Yes."

He kissed her, then scooped her up and carried her to his bed and kissed her some more.

Nan needed to turn off the chatter in her mind. The voice that kept repeating she was turning into a pushover in her old age. What was it they called women who readily fell into bed with guys? Round-heeled? Mike was turning her into a round-heeled woman. She told the voice to shut up and thanked Mike with all her heart.

His lips felt soft, yet insistent, savoring her like she was a precious goddess. Part of her could have stayed dancing with him all night. Giving themselves over to long, slow kisses, careful explorations with tongue and teeth, nibbles and shared breath, while they swayed to the rhythm pressed tightly together. Heck, she could have just stayed in his arms, holding onto him for dear life.

But much as she loved the dance and the feel of his strong arms supporting her now, she wanted more. Nan had to get closer to Mike, to feel his broad, strong chest crushing her breasts. She wanted to touch his skin, to feast all her senses on every inch of his body.

Mike broke the kiss and looked deep into her eyes. Her pussy, which had begun to tingle the moment he'd picked her up that night, now started to throb with urgency.

Mike deposited her on her feet. The momentary separation startled her. "Let's get naked," he growled.

Clothes were protection. Camouflage. The reality of shedding that protection was always a stumbling block for Nan. Despite her boldness the day before, she'd never felt comfortable or secure enough about her body to shed her clothes without a thought. But he was looking at her with such desire, such lust in his eyes. And something deeper. As though he really cared for her, about her feelings. Nan sensed that for him, right now, she was beautiful. She swallowed hard. All she had to do was to keep remembering the

look in his eyes, keep reminding herself of it. *Piece of cake. I am beautiful, I am beautiful.* Her new mantra.

Mike already stood before her, gloriously naked. His erection jutted out from his body full, proud, and all for her. They were the only two people in the world.

Nan licked her lips, tossed her head back, and unzipped. The further she went, the less her fingers trembled. Looking Mike in the eye, she went into striptease mode. He growled again. Fast striptease mode. In seconds, she had her clothes tossed in a pile across the floor from Mike's double bed.

"Come here," he whispered.

Nan went to him, no barriers between them. Mike drank her in with his eyes, then took her in his arms and bent down to kiss her. He was so much taller that his gorgeous cock jammed into her belly above her waist. Her pussy grew moist, and she swallowed hard, totally ready to accept him. To take him into her most intimate core.

Still locked in their kiss, Mike grabbed Nan's butt and hoisted her up so that her legs opened around him. No thoughts now of cellulite thighs. Only gratitude that her legs could fasten around him and bring the two of them so close. Claspng her tightly to him, he carried her to the bed, laid her down, and sank down next to her.

Nan's heart was hammering so hard she could scarcely breathe. The two of them lying face to face, body to body, skin to skin, Mike drew her tight for another kiss. Nan adored the sensation of his hard body against her softness. She pressed her breasts into his chest, and he groaned. With both hands, he touched her breasts, gently, tenderly. She wanted more, and harder.

She closed her eyes at the feel of his hand. Soon, Mike's hands grew firmer, circling her breasts. With his fingertips, Mike teased her nipples, plying them into hard points of excitement and desire.

She wanted him. To her amazement, she said those words out loud, and then hoped he didn't hear. She moaned to disguise the words, but he'd heard. He raised his face for one moment and laughed out loud with triumph.

And then he lowered his head to her breast, and Nan expected she'd go right through the ceiling at the sheer pleasure of the touch of his tongue. He circled her nipple, teasing it before he engulfed her in his mouth.

Mike turned Nan on her back so he could suckle her breasts, first one, then the other. Nan's pussy creamed at the closeness of Mike, his cock just inches away from the entrance to her core. With her hands she sought the prize, his beautiful hard cock. When she touched him, Mike hissed, releasing a rush of air along Nan's breast.

Nan played with Mike's cock, running her fingers along the soft velvet skin that covered his iron hardness. Mike was so much larger than her husband had been. She'd be sure to tell him that. But now, she just reveled in the glorious sensation that such a strong, potent man would want to be with her.

Her fingers formed a ring, which she slowly moved up and down his cock. Mike put his hand over hers in a gesture of thanks, telling her without words how much he

enjoyed what she was doing. That made two of them. As she played with him, Mike grew even harder.

Gently disengaging himself from her hold, he kissed his way down to her pussy, and Nan forgot to breathe. He raised her arousal everywhere he touched her, his tongue had hundreds of little massaging activators. And she was all surface, all receptors longing for his touch.

And then his tongue began to part her pussy lips, and Nan nearly swooned with delight. She put her hands on his head to guide him. Nan's legs fell wide open to allow Mike greater access. He began to taste and nibble her pussy, and Nan groaned.

With his tongue and teeth, Mike played with Nan's folds. He tasted her clit, at first gingerly. Nan pressed her clit against his lips. *More.* She wanted more. Following her directions, he kissed her more firmly, and she began to see stars and firecrackers. Like the Fourth of July — her personal Independence Day.

"Do you have any idea how delicious you are?" Mike mumbled, her juices glistening around his mouth.

Nan gazed at him. Next thing she knew, he stretched out on her body and kissed her, his tongue darting into her mouth so she could taste herself on him. He lay with his cock poised at the mouth of her pussy. Nan wanted to reach out and draw him into her. She thrust upward and he downward, and they were joined.

Nan gasped with wonder. She'd made love to him before, but it felt like the first time. He filled her completely, with his cock touching every surface of her hot, wet sheath. Nan wanted him here, delighting her with his touch. With her arms and legs around him, she began to clench and unclench her pussy muscles. She loved how he responded, with the movement of his cock within her.

He began to move. Supersensitive, she felt every nuance of his movement in her, and loved that he was moving so slowly. "Mmm."

He lowered his face and nuzzled her neck, awakening a whole new set of sensations there. Every part of her was coming alive. The musk of Mike's arousal filled Nan, along with the scent of citrus, pine, and man. He intoxicated her with his taste, with the sounds he made as he so slowly and thoroughly explored her.

But such delicious slowness had its limits. Nan thrust herself up harder, speeding up both her motions and his in response. Once, when Mike reached the top of his upward thrust, she quickly darted her hand down under him to grab his balls and give them a good squeeze.

"Wanton," he moaned, collapsing on her and crushing her arm between them. Much as she wanted to keep her hand where it was, she wanted him close to her even more.

"I've been '*wantin*' this for a long time," she whispered, playing a word game.

"Well, we'll have to see about taking care of that," Mike murmured against her chin, tickling her delectably with his hot breath.

Nan went into her best vixen mode, lowering her lids and licking her lips. He caught her tongue with his lips, and together they fell into the same in and out rhythm with their mouths.

"Great start," she panted when he rose and looked down at her.

"Where have you been all my life?" he asked.

"I'm here right now." She put her hands on his ass to pull him tighter. He obliged. Nan could feel herself climbing, feel the rhythm of their lovemaking accelerate, taking her irrevocably to her climax. With one foot she explored the crack in Mike's ass, running up and down the space between his two tight, strong cheeks. Mike groaned, wiggling his ass to maximize her pressure on him. Now they were both so tightly entwined, moving relentlessly to the peak of their pleasure.

"Oh, baby," Mike moaned. Nan could feel him grow larger and tighter in her. Like her, he'd come soon. She bit him on his shoulder, and then arched her head and gasped as the waves of her orgasm shook her entire body and soul. Talk about the earth moving.

Nan's climax seemed to push Mike over the edge. He clutched her tight, buried his head in the niche between her head and shoulder, and howled out his release. Nan shivered as Mike spurted deep inside her and then collapsed.

She held him in a profound hug and wanted never to let go. When her mind cleared, though, she wondered if Mike would continue to be with her as he was now. Or was his climax a signal for him to turn into the rude brute he'd become before?

* * * * *

Mike and Nan lay together in the growing darkness of his room. She seemed to have dozed off. Mike did too, at first, but then he awoke. His first impulse when he became fully cognizant of his situation was to jump up and bolt. He began to pant, almost as if he was headed for a panic attack or something equally embarrassing.

Despite all the pleasure he felt with Nan, the old fight or flight instinct kicked in. He wasn't about to fight, which left flight. As in heading off to the Andes, which he sure as hell didn't want to do right now. Not when he lay warm and *content* with this woman in his bed. This amazing woman. But he shouldn't be here with her. The woman could do him damage, big time. Both personally and professionally. And shit, if he messed up his work life, what would he have left? After all, he was used to having his personal life in shambles. But never before had a relationship affected his work life.

He wriggled away from Nan. She sighed and turned a bit, but didn't wake up. Now that they'd both come, he could just go into his boor act again. That would be real neat after she'd made a point of keeping her distance until he'd convinced her he wouldn't run again. Yeah, Nan would probably think him a lunatic, but then she'd build her defenses even higher than before. Probably permanently. Maybe even leave the island

and the position as potter that she really seemed to want. If she left, it would sure make his life easier. And he liked his life easy, simple.

But. But he really liked her. He didn't want to hurt her, to screw up her life. Hell, he didn't even want to be responsible for her having to turn down the job here. And, somehow, amazingly, she seemed to like him, too. She'd just given him a second chance, something no one else had ever done for him. Nan sure gave texture to his life, turning it from a black and white newsreel to a full-color blockbuster. Yeah, lately he'd been lonely. He hated that word. Made him sound like some weak-kneed sissy. Real men didn't get lonely. He was sure he'd read that somewhere.

Bullshit. Lonely was exactly the word that described him. With Nan, he didn't feel lonely.

And, even though she was an *artist*, she didn't seem like Melinda or any of her loser friends. Hell, Nan was a potter. An artist, yeah, but she worked with her hands. Like him. Dug them in the clay. He smiled at the memory of the two of them that first morning with the clay.

He couldn't blow his second chance. He needed to show her he was worth putting up with, even if she scared the shit out of him.

They sure were great in bed together, but that wouldn't be enough for Nan. Great as it was, it wasn't even enough for him. Not anymore. If he wanted her to stick around, he'd need to figure out what else would keep her interested. Along the way, he'd have to figure out the same for himself.

* * * * *

Nan couldn't believe she'd fallen asleep so soundly in Mike's bed. Must still be the effects of jet lag. Or maybe the sheer torpor of climaxing like a speeding freight train.

But when she got up, she was alone in a strange place. Disoriented. When she realized Mike was gone, she got a flash of *déjà vu*. Was he going to abandon her, physically and emotionally, the way he had before?

A little voice inside her said, *what else do you expect? He's a good-looking guy, younger than you, hot. And look at you. Talk about going to seed and looking over the hill. Why the heck would you assume that any man who has anything going for him would put any effort into taking care of you? Isn't it enough that he screwed you twice?*

Shut up, she told the mean and nasty voice, which sounded a whole lot like Jerry, her ex. Even though she practiced positive self-talk and refused to accept being treated badly, the reality was that her stomach still clenched at the thought that she deserved less than the best.

Nan sat up and was contemplating getting out of bed when Mike came in to the room. For a moment she stiffened, fearing that he was going to repeat his previous behavior and put distance between them. Not easy when they were both naked in his

bed, but not impossible. To her relief and surprise, he sat down on the bed next to her and kissed her on the forehead. Okay, a reasonable start. She relaxed a bit.

"Did you have a nice rest?"

Nan loved how low-pitched his voice was, especially when he spoke softly just to her.

Okay. That didn't sound like he was gearing up to turn ornery. She stretched. "Yes. How long was I asleep?"

"Not very." He took her by the hand and drew her off the bed. "Let's go to the living room."

"Okay," she said, curious as to what he planned next and on alert for the situation to take a turn for the worse. She was going to throw on some clothes, but Mike was naked. She would be too.

Chapter Nine

New candles glowed and Barbra sang again.

"What's this?" Nan asked.

"We didn't finish dancing to the whole CD before," Mike said. "There's one song I really love, and we didn't get to it."

Nan's face quirked into a smile that melted him. "What song is that?" she asked. Her voice quivered, and for a moment, Mike thought he saw a tear in her eye. *Shit*. What had he done to make her cry? He was about to ask when he saw a smile light up her face, and his gut told him the glittery tear was not about sadness.

"The one about people needing people," he said, his words sounding gruff to him.

Without a word, Nan melted into his arms. When Barbra began to sing about people, Mike and Nan were standing in one spot, barely moving to the music. When the song ended, Mike hugged Nan to him. Words were not necessary.

Mike couldn't have explained why, but he felt like his heart was full to overflowing. He couldn't believe he was hard again. Talk about like being back in his teen years — only a million times better. Now he had a hard-on and also a beautiful woman to make love to. They'd just shared a magic moment, one unlike anything he'd known with any other woman. Ever. As if they'd become one in sharing the dance and the music. She seemed to understand everything going on inside him. On totally uncharted terrain, he had to make sure he didn't do anything to blow what was developing between them.

"I want to please you," he whispered to Nan as they returned to his bed.

"You do," she whispered back. His heart began to pump harder. He didn't know what all to do for her, she just made him feel so terrific.

Now that he wasn't as frantic as he'd been before, he could take his time more, get to explore her in ways he hadn't earlier. "What's your favorite position?" he asked.

"With you."

"Good answer. But enough talking." He wanted to kiss her everywhere. So lying next to her, face-to-face, he began to kiss her at the top of her forehead, using his lips and teeth and tongue to work his way down her beautiful face. As he kissed her, he massaged her back, making large and small circles with his hands.

Naturally, he paused in the progress of his kisses when he got to her lips, for she demanded the chance to kiss him back. Their mouths fit together so well. He couldn't resist grinding his erection against her belly as they kissed, and she thrust her hips so beguilingly, he nearly abandoned his planned itinerary and climbed on her. But he managed to pull away from her lips, and to pull his cock away from her pussy, which emitted almost irresistible heat. He'd savor the wait. The longer he could postpone

entering her, the sweeter it would be...

Her breasts. Delicious as her neck and chin were, he'd managed to glide on by. But her breasts demanded his attention and focus. She held his head and moaned her pleasure as he laved and suckled her nipples.

Now Mike gently rolled Nan on her back to complete his excursion down her belly, tonguing her navel and the sensitive skin leading to her pussy. When he got there, he plunged his tongue into Nan's plump pink folds, and she began to twitch. "Mike," she called, her fingers entwined in his hair.

"Yes, love," he said, not even flinching as the word passed his lips.

She thrust her pussy up to him for more of the same. She tasted so delicious, peaches and spice, her own special musk. All for him. She'd been wet before he put his tongue to her. He tongued her clit, and she clutched his head tighter in her arousal. His tongue darted between her entrance and her clit, and he brought his fingers into play. Nan bucked against him, and he could feel she was fully caught up in the rapture of his lips in her most intimate place.

When Mike began to suck her pussy, he fully intended to continue on to kiss her legs and feet. Now he clearly saw this plan would have to cede to a more urgent detour. Nan rode the two fingers he inserted in her hot, tight sheath while he continued to nibble on her folds and her clit. Nan's movements grew larger, wilder, more emphatic. Mike realized she was going to come, but he wanted her to experience more first. *He* wanted more first. So he teasingly pulled back, and Nan whimpered with need. Good. He wanted her to need him, to show him all the places she wanted him to be.

Nan thrust her hips to him so that her pussy was full on his lips. His own breath hot, he blew on her glistening folds, and she wiggled. She pressed his head tighter to her, and he could no longer deny her. When his tongue tickled her clit, she moaned and thrashed from side to side. She pressed herself harder, so that his tongue and fingers went deeper, faster.

His cock straining for release, he followed her lead, pressing harder, faster, riding with her through the crest of her climax. She shuddered and gave it up, and his cock throbbed in communication. When she relaxed her grip on him, he slowly withdrew his fingers and his mouth.

Nan propped herself up against the pillows. She looked so mellow, her eyes soft, her lips puffy. "Now it's your turn," she announced.

"My turn?"

"Yes, turnabout's fair play. Bring that big gorgeous cock on over here." She patted the spot next to her head.

Mike's cock sprang up higher at the invitation. He'd intended this to be all about Nan. But he'd promised to please her. Which meant doing what she wanted. He scooted around in the bed so his cock would go where she directed.

* * * * *

At one point in her marriage, when Nan had thought she and Jerry needed some spicing up in the bedroom, she'd gone for marriage advice. Her counselor had said to be different in the bedroom, be daring. Do new things to make it exciting again. This included her first attempts at fellatio with Jerry. She'd hated it, Jerry didn't seem either excited or impressed, and the damn thing had sunk like a lead balloon.

But now, here with Mike, she wanted to take him into her mouth. She *wanted* to give him pleasure in this way after he'd pleased her. But, most of all, she wanted his big cock in her mouth. She wanted to be intimate with Mike in every way possible. She'd practiced on enough bananas. It was time for the real thing.

With him in the sixty-nine position, Nan looked at his cock for several moments before touching him. She loved to see how he reacted to her touch, the way his cock twitched from side to side. The drop of pre-cum on the tip gleamed like a neon light saying, "Drink me! Drink me!" When she reached out her tongue and licked it up, Mike exhaled hard.

Enough foreplay. She opened her mouth and surrounded Mike's cock with her lips, her tongue. A few exploratory nibbles before she began to suck him, alternating sucks with licks. Mike, who held her head in his hands, thrust his hips slowly back and forth. She heard his breathing, heavy with groans, inhaled and tasted his musky scent.

While her tongue and lips kept moving, Nan's fingers also kept busy. With one hand, she squeezed Mike's balls, getting a kick out of his extreme responsiveness. With the other, she caressed the crack of his ass. He pressed down hard against her, showing her how much he loved what she was doing. Nan got off on the pleasure she was creating for Mike, with him. How amazing that she could have such an effect on a man like this.

Soon, too soon, he signaled that they needed to stop. "I don't want to come in your mouth, and I will if we don't stop," he said. Nan wanted more and found it hard to stop.

Maybe next time he'd come in her mouth. She felt confident there would be another time. Maybe many. But now she wanted him in her pussy, too. She broke away from his cock, and Mike flipped over onto his back.

"How about you climb on me?" he invited.

Sounded great to her. Nan straddled Mike, opening her legs wide to give her purchase on top of him.

Sitting on Mike's lower belly, Nan could see her breasts flopping down. For just a moment, she lost her courage, thinking how awful she must look. But then she gazed down at Mike and saw the adoration in his eyes. He sure wasn't judging her breasts or anything about her, other than the way she was here with him tonight.

Soaking wet, hot, and more than ready, Nan positioned the mouth of her pussy at the tip of Mike's cock. Exquisite. She began to contract the moment she felt him start to penetrate her. *Gimme, gimme, gimme*, her pussy seemed to be crying out.

With a gasp, Nan lowered her pussy and engulfed Mike's cock fully. Much as she loved having him on top of her, this was great, too, because she was in such control. She sped up and slowed down as the fancy hit her. She loved the way Mike filled her and stimulated her clit. He thrust up in response to her movements, following her lead.

When she craved more skin to skin contact, Nan lowered herself so that her breasts brushed his chest. Her nipples grazed his, and Nan watched his two flat little buds have mini-erections. Now that she was lying on top of Mike, she could kiss his mouth. Each of them could taste the other in their kiss, a joining of immense intimacy.

Mike had his hands around her butt, which gave her a beat or two of insecurity. She gave a fleeting thought to cellulite and a few other, not so friendly words. But his hand caressed her, patting her butt before going to play in her crack. Ooh, she loved the feeling of his fingers there. He ran his fingers along the crack, then lingered on her opening. It almost felt like he was trying to put his finger in. She wasn't so sure about that. He didn't push, just kind of played. That was okay.

The combination of sensations, front and back, grew nearly unbearable. Once again, Nan realized she was going to come. Come big, even though she'd just climaxed from Mike's licking and sucking. Now she felt the mysterious and familiar swirling of her senses, the movement up to the stars, up to the heavens. She couldn't resist, and she didn't want to. In just a moment, she'd explode around Mike's cock and begin her dance in outer space.

She wanted him to know. "I'm coming," she sang out, only it sounded more like a shout than a song. "I'm coming." And she did, with a rush of overwhelming sensation.

Mike appeared to feed on her orgasm, his own excitement building to a fevered pitch. "Oh, Nan," he cried out before he let go and spurted his climax into her.

Both of them collapsed, slick with sweat. Nan went from amazement to amazement with Mike, reaching heights she'd never before thought she would.

She wanted this moment to last forever. They cuddled and whispered words with no profound meaning to each other before they dozed off in each other's arms.

But reality intruded when Mike's light snore roused her. She realized where she was. "Mike, it must be late. I need to get back to Pete's place."

He opened one eye at first, then came awake. "Stay here with me, Nan."

She sat up, trying to find see the clock radio. She squinted and made out that it was past midnight. "I really have to go."

"Why?" he asked, sitting up and taking her hand.

"Because," she said.

"Because what?"

In the dark she could feel herself blush. "Because if I don't, both Pete and Lily will know I stayed with you all night."

"And?"

That stopped her. And what? They'd think badly of her?

After a lifetime of being the quintessential “good girl”, concerned about the opinion of others, Nan realized at last that there was really only one person whose opinion mattered here – hers.

She sighed. “And nothing. Thank you, Mike. I’d love to stay.”

He kissed her, sealing the bargain.

* * * * *

Mike didn’t know if he could have explained why he wanted Nan to stay with him that night. He hadn’t spent an entire night with a woman since Melinda. He’d had some one-night stands, but those were actually more like one-hour stands, lasting only long enough for the meaningless sex.

Now with Nan, he didn’t want her here just for the possibility of more sex. He wanted her by his side, for sleeping, for waking. For something more.

Both ravenous and still naked, they went to his kitchen to see if they could dig anything up. Nan managed to find a forgotten quart of rocky road ice cream in the depths of his freezer. They crumbled some cookies for topping and helped themselves to huge bowls. As they ate, they played footsie under the table.

“I want to hear more about you,” Nan said from across the small table.

Geez, she wanted him to talk. Mike wasn’t one to talk. Especially because he’d already told her so much about himself. More than anyone else on the island knew. Which he mumbled, inviting her to talk instead.

She shook her head. “I want to know about your marriage, and especially after.”

Ooh, a topic he preferred to avoid. This was why he didn’t like getting involved. Women always wanted to talk, to probe wounds where the scab was barely in place. He took a big mouthful of the ice cream, which tasted fabulous, to avoid having to answer.

“Why did you marry her? What’d you say her name was?”

He swallowed hard. “Melinda.”

“Why did you marry Melinda?”

“Good question. I ask myself the same thing a lot. Let’s see. I didn’t get married ‘til I was thirty-eight.”

“First marriage?”

“First and only. You see, like I said, I’ve always traveled for my work.”

“Why?”

“I began in construction right after the Army. Got a taste for traveling and living in different places in the Army, and I was glad to find jobs that let me continue that.”

“You must be good at what you do.”

He smiled. "You make it a challenge to stay modest, but yeah. I know what I'm doing. I build well and get the jobs done, come in on budget, or have a damn good reason why not. Been working for Laredo since he started his empire, and Laredo doesn't tolerate anyone who doesn't meet his standards."

"So I'm finding out. Fascinating as I find this, let's see if we can get back to your marriage to Melinda."

"Right. Well, before I turned around, I was thirty-eight. Figured it was time to settle down, as far as having a home base, maybe start to have a family." He shook his head, thinking now how impossible those dreams turned out to be. "I didn't intend to stop doing my work, but thought maybe I'd travel less. I've made enough money so that I can take time off between jobs."

"How did you meet Melinda?"

He shrugged. "She was the receptionist at the home office of one of the companies I worked for. She always seemed so bright and friendly."

"Was she pretty?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Of course. She was a knockout. Still is."

"Oh." Nan looked disappointed.

"Yeah, she seemed to have it all. Most important, she was willing to go out with me even though I wasn't around much. I figured that was one of the acid tests. I needed a woman who could put up with my job, adjust to it. Melinda swore she could. We got married three months after that first date."

"A whirlwind courtship." Nan continued slowly eating her ice cream.

"More like 'marry in haste, repent at leisure'. Melinda quit her job right after we got married. We certainly didn't need the money she made, but I wanted her to continue working so she wouldn't get bored while I was away. I had a contract and had to leave for the Middle East the week after our honeymoon.

"I bought a house, and Melinda spent the first few months decorating it. Once she had that done, she started looking around for friends. Mostly of the mooching variety."

"Oh."

"Yeah. The first gang she ran around with were the artsy-fartsies. Claimed she was developing her heretofore undiscovered ability and desire to paint. When I came home and met her friends, I told her they were a bunch of phonies sponging off her. Off us. They'd live in the house for weeks on end, eat our food... She called me small-minded and petty."

"How awful for you."

"Yeah, it wasn't too flattering. Here I'd come home from a job, thinking I'd have another honeymoon with my wife. And I found the house full of her so-called friends."

"No wonder you're down on artists." Nan shook her head.

"Dumb, huh? Letting Melinda continue to poison me and my outlook."

"Easier to see than to stop doing."

"I could have put up with a lot, until I found out where one of her artist friends was dipping his brush."

Nan gasped. "You mean—?"

"Oh, yeah. They were sleeping together—in my bedroom. In my bed."

"How horrible for you." Nan glowered and looked sympathetic at the same time.

He laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah. I threw him out. He threatened to sue me for bodily damage. I told him to go ahead. Still haven't heard from his lawyer, and it's been seven years."

"I expect you won't."

"Yeah. Probably hit the statute of limitations on that one. After that, I realized there was no way Melinda and I would ever have a family together. But worst of all, she convinced me it was my fault that she was screwing around. Tears, drama queen stuff. Cripes, I felt like we were living in a soap opera. She went on about how she couldn't stand being alone so much. Like that was a surprise to her, right?"

"Humph. She was lucky you gave her a second chance." Nan shook her head.

"Yeah. I turned out to be a real chump on that. Melinda kept her nose clean for the next two years. I wouldn't say we were happy together, but it was a tolerable situation. I tried to convince her to get a job or do something with her time other than spend money. But she wouldn't hear of it. I was glad to see her when I'd get home from a job. But then I found myself wanting to leave before I had to."

"So what finally happened?"

"She joined a country club and became fanatical about tennis. I thought that was at least a slightly better outlet than her previous ones. But actually, she was fanatical about the tennis pro. She left me for him when I was heading a construction project in China."

"Mike, I'm sorry." Nan put her hand on his arm.

He shrugged. "I didn't love her by then. Don't know if I ever did. But you want to talk about busted pride? It was clear to me that all she married me for was my money, not that I'm a millionaire. But she used me for security, and when it suited her, she dumped me."

"And she's the reason why you're so distrustful and afraid of women."

Bull's-eye. "I figure I've got rotten taste in women, no judgment."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

Mike shook his head. "Present company excluded. You've got more class in your pinky than Melinda has in her whole being."

Nan shook her head. "But I'm not pretty. Not now. Don't know if I ever was. I don't have that to offer you."

Mike gazed at her. "You look great to me, Nan. I don't care about your past and what's changed about you. Just who you are today. And that you're here with me."

"Thank you." Her eyes looked misty.

"But, Nan. Just one thing. I need to go slow with this relationship stuff, you know? It's like doing some new exercise and using muscles that are out of practice."

"Slow is great for me. No need to rush anywhere, anyhow. Hell, I've got all the time in the world. And I still haven't completely made up my mind if I'm going to accept the position here or not. Though I'm really tempted to."

"You haven't committed yet? Really?"

"Before I make a move like this, I have to be sure it's going to be good for me. After all, I'm about a million miles from my family and everything that's familiar."

He shook his head. "I can't understand why that would stop you. Me, I'm always looking for a new place to work, to explore."

"You don't like putting down roots in one place?"

He considered that for a moment. "More like I'm afraid I'll grow mold if I stay put for too long."

"Mold?"

"As in, a rolling stone gathers no...?"

"Isn't that *moss*?" Nan's mouth quirked up at the corners.

Mike waved dismissively. "Mold, moss, whatever. Disgusting green stuff that forms when a person stays in one place for too long."

"Interesting perspective. So you never want to settle down in one place?"

"I wanted a home base. Tried that with Melinda. Turned out to be a disaster." He bit his lip. "Sometimes I wonder if I've just been on the road too long ever to stay put in one place for long. But this isn't about me, pretty lady. It's about you." He stroked her cheek. "Want my take on if you should accept the job and stay here?"

She put her hand over his and grinned. "I'm all ears."

"Not *all* ears." He grinned.

She stuck out her tongue at him.

"Seriously. You'd be nuts not to accept. Even though Laredo can make you crazy when he gets a bug up his ass, mostly he's a great guy to work for. And once people see Fantasia Resorts, Inc., on your résumé, you're good as gold anywhere you go."

"Speaking of going, I really need to get some sleep." Nan's eyelids fluttered.

"Sleep, huh?" Mike gobbled down the last of his ice cream. He insisted that Nan leave the dishes 'til morning and led her back to his bed.

Eventually they fell asleep in each other's arms. And after a morning quickie, each headed off for the day's work.

Chapter Ten

By the time Paul Pendleton arrived on the island, Pete was ready for a long stay at an asylum. Though he and Lily had worked practically around the clock to get ready for this visit, they still didn't feel ready.

The chartered flight carrying Pendleton arrived at precisely nine a.m. local time. Pete didn't know exactly what he expected, but Paul Pendleton turned out to be a bit of a surprise. Instead of a neat bald man in his fifties wearing a pinstriped suit and bowler hat, carrying an umbrella and an adding machine, Pendleton turned out to have a thick head of black hair, no hat. Trendy glasses. Wore a smart three-piece suit, carried a briefcase. At least they'd guessed his age right.

"Mr. Pendleton?"

"In person." The man's smile was friendly and his handshake firm.

"On behalf of myself and Lily Tiger, who's back at our office, welcome to the Isla de Nunca Nunca."

"Always a pleasure to come to a place where I can catch some sunshine. Though I should have saved this island for a winter call, eh?"

At this point, Pete would have been glad not to have him come at all, but he figured that wouldn't be the smartest thing to say.

He led Pendleton, who rolled his suitcase behind him, to the Jeep. Pete unlocked the door. They loaded the suitcase in the trunk, got in, and started off. "Unless you'd like to stop for anything on the way, we'll go straight to our office."

"No need to stop."

"So Mr. Pendleton, can you give me an idea of what you're looking for on this trip?"

"You can call me Paul."

"Paul? Okay. So, Paul, what is it you're especially looking for?"

"Oh, just the usual. To review the figures and plans to date. Make sure everything is on schedule according to the master plan. See if there are any discrepancies, anything that needs to be fixed before it turns into a major roadblock."

"But was there something particular that triggered this visit? I mean, no offense, but you have come a long way."

Pendleton shrugged. "Standard operating procedure for the boss. I'm surprised he hasn't sent someone out here before." He looked out at the passing landscape.

Not a word he'd said eased any of Pete's nerves.

* * * * *

Nan couldn't believe she'd been on the island only five days. Five magical days that had turned her life around.

Though the voices in her head warned her she was moving way too fast—as in she was really falling for Mike—she hushed them up.

In the past few days, she'd spent every possible moment with Mike. Like Pete and Lily, he'd been super busy getting ready for the guy coming from the home office. Today, he'd finally arrived. Everyone except her was tied up in meetings with him. Nan would meet him later, but her part in the discussions would be almost insignificant in comparison with the others'.

Actually, her fingers were itching to get into some clay—and not just to play with Mike. She had a naughty vision of fulfilling her *Ghost* fantasy and using the clay to make a mold around Mike's erect cock, and her pussy clenched. But that wasn't the only project on her mind, just the most exciting one.

Now she really missed not having a potter's wheel and a kiln on the island yet. She wanted to start working on designs for the resort pottery, to come up with a signature piece they could feature. She'd fiddle with some drawings 'til she could translate her ideas into clay, but paper was never her best medium.

As Nan picked up her pencils, the thought hit her. She'd really committed to this place. This was home now. As for Mike...

Despite how great everything was between them, she couldn't get rid of the niggling suspicion that Mike had turned to her because he didn't have many other options on the island. In fact, he didn't have *any* other options as the only two other women on the island were committed. But he was a great-looking younger man with everything going for him. What would happen if a younger, hotter female turned up and wiggled her butt in his direction? Close as they were, she still couldn't feel secure about him. Though he told her she was beautiful to him, she recognized blarney when she heard it. Tender as she felt toward him, she had to hold back some of her feelings—for self-protection. After all, she'd been betrayed before. It wasn't pretty, especially for the unprepared.

* * * * *

As Pete expected, Lily was frantic by the time he arrived at their office with Pendleton. Like always, Lily looked and acted the quintessential professional. But Pete could tell she was seething with nerves underneath the gorgeous, polished exterior.

"We expected you'd want to start the day here in the main office. Once we finish with our books here, we'll take you over to Mike Darlin's office to go over the construction figures." Lily took a breath and smiled. "Of course, we can take a lunch break some time in there." She paused. "A short break, of course."

Pendleton looked at her. Despite his poker face, Pete sensed Lily's efficiency impressed him favorably. His gut began to unclench. After all, they'd searched with a fine-toothed comb for anything that might snag the auditor's attention. Neither he nor Lily had come up with anything that looked questionable.

Now he hoped Pendleton concluded the same thing.

* * * * *

"Darlin," Mike barked into his phone. He'd left the house early, Nan warm in his bed, to put the final touches on his paperwork.

"Tiger here. Just wanted to let you know the home office man arrived."

No surprise. "How's it going?" Though Mike was positive his paperwork was clean as a whistle and thorough—after years of working for Laredo, he knew what was expected—he still felt a flicker of nerves. This was the part of the job that he hated, paperwork. But he respected Laredo for demanding that his managers take it very seriously.

"So far, all he's done is to barricade himself in the conference room with our books, papers, and computer files. He just arrived fifteen minutes ago. I don't know if he's going to ask us questions as they come up or wait 'til the end."

"I guess you'll find out soon enough. What's he like?"

"Different than I expected. About fifty-five according to what Pete and I read about him on the Web, but he seems younger."

Mike chuckled. "Fifty-five ain't that old."

"Ouch. Point taken."

"How long will he be on the island?"

"Not clear."

"I was hoping to get this over with today."

"It's still possible, though I expect jet lag will hit him at some point. And after such a long trip, I'd expect him to stay a few days. But I just don't know. I recommend that you do whatever would be normal for the day. I'll call you on your cell when we're headed your way."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Oh and Mike, are you and Nan available for dinner tonight? We figured we could all get together. Conduct business or not, as it shakes out, at our place. I'd hate for him to be stuck alone."

Mike frowned at the phone. His first response was to bristle at Lily's apparent assumption that he and Nan were enough of a couple for him to commit both of them

for evening plans. Keeping his voice level he said, "I can get there. I don't know about Nan. Maybe you can call her."

"Okay," Lily said. He hoped she got his message.

After Mike hung up, he took a last quick look at his stuff before heading off to the site where his crew was constructing the residence units. Ultimately there would be fifty separate cottage-like facilities for the guests clustered around a central dining area composed of three different restaurants, a main one and two smaller ones. The second cluster of buildings would constitute the arts center, the third and smallest, offices for the staff.

In addition to the buildings, there'd be tennis courts, several different swimming pools, a gym, and a spa. Mike's crew would tear down a primitive warehouse near the airstrip for planes, build a new warehouse and small but elegantly appointed airport. Last but not least would be the Lost Boys' Lagoon. Mike wasn't exactly sure what that would entail, but he'd find out soon. So far, they'd broken ground for the clusters of buildings and begun to lay foundations.

Mike headed off for the residence cluster first.

* * * * *

Nan felt pleased with two of her ideas for the Isla de Nunca Nunca pottery line. Two out of forty-seven. She'd balled up a lot of sketches and discarded them.

She held the two survivors up and studied them. Each had its pluses and minuses. Well, she'd show them to Pete and Lily. Get some other opinions. And she'd have to see how each design looked in a finished product. She really needed to get her hands on a wheel and a kiln.

Nan started when the cell phone Pete had given her rang. "It's Lily."

"How are things going?"

Lily sighed. Nan felt a pang of guilt that she hadn't spent much time with her since Mike came along... "Well, we have the man from the home office here, so I can't take long. I just wanted to check with you to see if you're available to come to dinner at our place tonight."

"Of course. When?"

"Can't tell you yet. Depends when our visiting Brit wants to break. Great invitation, right?" Lily laughed.

"That's all right. Say, Lily, would it help if I call Mike and tell him?"

Lily didn't respond right away. Finally, she said, "Actually, Mike already knows. He's coming."

"Oh." That felt strange. Why hadn't Mike just told her about it? After all, they'd planned to be together again tonight. Oh, well, she couldn't brood about that on the phone with Lily. "Just let me know when you want me there."

"Will do."

Once Nan hung up, despite her best intentions, she did begin to brood. Why hadn't Mike contacted her about dinner instead of Lily? A niggling suspicion began to gnaw at her. Probably including her in his response to Lily's invitation made him feel too much like they were a couple. Two steps forward and three back, that's what building a relationship with Mike Darlin felt like. One more reason to start distancing herself from him a little bit. Even though being with Mike was beyond wonderful, she was beginning to sense subtle signals from him along the lines of "Back off" and "Don't fence me in".

She'd have preferred some fencing in. But that was a perfect way to get hurt.

Maybe she should stay at Pete's house tonight instead of spending another night in Mike's bed. She pursed her lips. Tonight was when she'd planned to bring some clay with her. To try out her fantasy about making a model of his erection... But maybe she should hold back on even going to his place. Maybe she needed to show him that she was just as good as he at setting up boundaries that would separate them.

Though in her heart she knew she wasn't good at it. Not at all.

* * * * *

After spending hours poring over their materials, Paul Pendleton had surprisingly few questions for Pete and Lily. They were able to respond to all his questions and concerns in under a half hour.

"I must compliment you on your record-keeping and your projected plans," he said.

For the first time since they'd found out he was coming, Lily appeared to relax. "Thank you," she said.

Pete grinned. "Are you sure you're part of the Laredo organization?" Lily glared at him.

Luckily, Paul had a sense of humor and seemed to get the joke. "Oh, you mean because of Dominic's reputation for being such a ballbuster?" he chuckled.

Pete swallowed hard. This guy was full of surprises. "Well, yeah. We expected that you'd go over everything with a magnifying glass."

"Oh, I did. And you passed with flying colors. Dominic demands perfection, as you know. He also can't abide wasting time, which is why I'll need to finish my work here and leave as quickly as possible. If I manufactured questions just to give you a hard time, he'd be as displeased as if you kept shoddy records."

"We appreciate your stamp of approval and your time pressures," Lily said. "Would you like to take a lunch break—or tea break—or something before we take you to Mike Darlin's office?"

"The sandwich and soda you provided earlier will serve just fine for now." He rubbed his hands together. "We should soldier on to Darlin's office."

"I'll phone him to meet us there." Pete pressed the correct button on his cell.

"Assuming that you can complete what you need to for today on Mike's stuff, we plan to gather for dinner at our place before it gets too late."

"Brilliant."

* * * * *

Mike was waiting at his office when Pete and Lily arrived with Pendleton. Despite their warning to him, he was surprised to meet Pendleton and see how different he was from his expectations. Though he couldn't have explained why, something about the guy rubbed him the wrong way.

Mike didn't have a separate room to put Pendleton in. Once he got the man settled with his paperwork, the most intelligent thing seemed for the three of them to leave him alone in his office. "Will you want to see the actual construction sites?" Mike asked.

"Of course." Paul looked at his watch. "But that will surely have to wait 'til tomorrow."

Well that answered any question they had about his visit lasting only one day. Mike knew he'd have more home office stuff to contend with tomorrow. Even though he'd been through his share of Laredo audits in the past, Mike still couldn't bring himself to relax. Realistically, he knew he had nothing to worry about. But nobody could predict the outcome of an audit with one hundred percent confidence.

"Why don't we all go to our place?" Lily asked.

Though Mike knew there were a hundred other things he could do now, he felt too distracted to concentrate. So he agreed to the plan.

When they got to Pete and Lily's house, Nan sat out front with a glass of iced tea and a pile of papers.

Seeing how beautiful she looked, Mike's heart lurched, and he wished he could steal her away for some R 'n' R before they had to face the ordeal of dinner.

His eyes locked with hers. To his dismay, a moment later she turned away and refused to make eye contact with him again. In fact, she looked annoyed. Maybe even pissed.

What the hell had he done now?

* * * * *

When everyone decided to go to the living room to chat, Nan left her papers and went with them.

"So how are things going with Mr. Pendleton?" Nan asked Pete.

"He likes to be called Paul. Actually, he seems like a reasonable guy, way better than I expected out of Laredo's office." Pete sat down in one of the loveseats next to Lily.

"Face it, Pete," Lily said. "You were expecting the guy to be a combination of Jack the Ripper and Attila the Hun with an abacus."

Pete agreed. "That sounds about right for the kind of employees Laredo surrounds himself with."

"Pete has issues with Laredo," Lily explained.

"Not as much as I used to," Pete admitted. Nan was proud of Pete for being able to admit this. Sometimes he'd complain about Laredo, but it mostly seemed to be residual bluster from the past. Pete had confided to Nan that even though he'd lost his girlfriend to Dominic, it was also because of him that Pete met Lily—and was now developing a great new resort with her. Though he grumbled, Pete appeared to realize he owed a lot to Dominic Laredo. And, Nan knew, in his own way, he was as loyal to the boss as Lily and Mike were.

"To answer your question, Nan, after a thorough examination of all our materials, Paul just asked us a few questions. And said we look real good." Lily beamed.

"I hope he gets through my part of the exam with similar results," Mike muttered before settling into a chair. He was still trying to catch Nan's eye, but she looked everywhere except at him.

"Are you nervous, Mike?" Lily asked.

Mike shrugged. "I've been through a lot of these audits. Any boss worth his salt is going to keep tabs, and Laredo certainly falls into that category. If I thought there was anything in my records that would snag Pendleton's attention, I'd have fixed it. Don't want to tempt fate here, but everything should be all right. With any luck, he'll finish with my paperwork today, and then we can just move on to the sites tomorrow."

Mike didn't sound completely confident. Nan's stomach clenched as she picked up on his tension. How much of it had to do with her? Close as she felt she'd grown to Mike, she didn't feel at all comfortable asking him.

"Pete, why don't you come help me in the kitchen?" Lily asked. Before Pete had a chance to respond, she dragged him off. Nan watched with admiration. Now there was a woman who knew how to get her man to behave.

Suddenly Nan realized that with Pete and Lily gone, she'd be alone with Mike. Though the brave part of her wanted to confront him and clear the air, her chicken self won out. "I'll come with you, too. After all your hard work today, you shouldn't be stuck with making dinner for us all."

It took all her strength, but Nan resisted watching to see how Mike reacted. She was starting to protect herself. Better late than never.

* * * * *

As soon as Mike saw Pendleton come into the living room, he could sense something was wrong. *Shit*. He'd felt uncomfortable when Pendleton seemed to take forever going over his paperwork. Now the way he looked at him confirmed something was out of whack. What could he possibly have found wrong in Mike's paperwork? And how difficult was it going to be for him to fix whatever was wrong?

Mike decided to take the bull by the horns. He finished his beer and went over to Pendleton. "So what's the verdict?" he asked.

The other man turned to him. "I want to discuss a few things before we close the books," he murmured distractedly.

"You have questions?" Mike bristled.

Pendleton nodded. "Just a few."

Mike had heard that the most usual follow-up to an auditor's *questions* asked in a certain tone of voice was the sack. "What are they?"

Pendleton shrugged. "We'll discuss them tomorrow when you take me around to the construction sites. Work for today is done."

Not for him, it wasn't. Mike opened his mouth to press the point, but realized, anxious as he felt, why antagonize the guy?

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught sight of Nan going to the kitchen to help Pete and Lily.

Mike thought he should catch up with her. Maybe he'd help get the food ready to keep her company.

The moment he stepped into the kitchen, he caught Nan saying, "...So I want to stay here at the cottage with you tonight, and from now on. I hope that's okay."

"Of course it's okay," Pete said. "But we thought you were spending time with Mike."

"I was, but I've decided I'll be more comfortable back here." Nan's voice sounded flinty to him.

What the hell was that about? Should he acknowledge what he'd heard, ask Nan, or pretend he hadn't heard anything and just act like he expected her to go home with him tonight?

He cleared his throat so that they'd know he was here in the kitchen.

Nan looked over at him, her expression cool. "Oh, Mike," she said. "I need to talk to you."

Pete put down a platter of steaks and went into the living room to keep their guest company.

Lily continued slicing tomatoes. "What's up, Nan?" Mike asked.

She regarded him coolly. "I won't be going back to your place tonight. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll help Lily with dinner."

He grabbed her arm just as she went to turn away. "Whoa," he said softly. "Nan, what's going on? Did I do something wrong?"

She sighed and pulled her arm from his grasp. "No. I just realize that things are happening too fast between us. I want to slow them down. And I think this is the best way to make it happen."

Shit. He'd been counting on having her with him tonight. Between his stress over Pendleton's findings and, especially, his getting used to her company filling the lonely spots, Mike didn't relish the prospect of returning home alone to his empty cottage. "I wish you'd reconsider."

"Yeah, well. I wish you'd do a lot of things, too. So I guess we're even."

She turned away. Damn woman. How the hell was he supposed to know what she meant by that? He racked his brain, but he couldn't come up with a clue as to what had happened.

He offered again to help, figuring that would be a way to stay near her, but Lily practically ordered him to go back to the living room with the other men. Nicely but firmly.

* * * * *

Nan plunged fully into helping Lily get dinner together. Not that preparing steak, salad, and potatoes involved much. But there were always the little details to distract a person.

Lily looked up from pulling lettuce leaves apart. "Do you want to talk about what's going on with you and Mike?"

Nan smiled gratefully. Lily really was a gem, and Nan was so glad Pete and she seemed to be working things out. Unlike her and Mike. "Thanks, Lily. That's really sweet. But you've got enough on your mind now."

Lily shrugged. "Never too much to talk to a friend. Any time you want to talk, I'm available."

The two women made short work of preparing all they needed to. Pete barbecued the steaks to everyone's taste.

Only when they sat down at the table and began eating did Nan register what a great-looking guy Paul Pendleton was. As he spoke, Nan realized he had everything going for him. Unlike the big lug she'd given her heart to.

"So Nan, I understand you're a newcomer to the island." Paul Pendleton had a great smile. Nan couldn't help smiling back at him.

"Been here less than a week. But the place has already gotten to me. I'm excited to have the opportunity to work here."

"Brilliant. Pete and Lily here tell me you've got some great ideas for the pottery facility."

Nan felt herself blush. "I find this island inspirational."

Paul nodded in Mike's direction. "I understand there have been some delays in getting the construction under way."

Much as she was enjoying Paul's attention, she didn't want it at the expense of Mike being unfairly blamed. "A combination of factors. But I'm confident we'll be able to catch up and have a great setup for guests to do pottery."

"With a teacher like you, I'd try my hand at it," Paul said.

"I'd be happy to teach you. *Any* time." Sheesh, was she actually *flirting* with Paul Pendleton? And, even more amazing, was he flirting right back at her?

"A pity I won't be able to stay long enough to take advantage of that offer this time around."

Mike made some sort of noise. Like he was choking on his steak.

Nan ignored him some more. All Paul Pendleton represented was an evening's fun flirt. Heck, Nan was enjoying herself. Paul Pendleton was higher on the food chain than ninety percent of the men who came on to her when she tended bar. Who knows? She might have gotten interested in him if Mike weren't around. "Maybe you'll be able to come for vacation once we're up and running."

His eyes glittered. "You have such a lovely glow and warm manner. Maybe you'd be able to visit the home office in England. I imagine several of us would want to take lessons."

She found herself blushing at his outrageous offer. Enjoying the heck out of it. Imagine her, Nan Sullivan, with two studs interested in her at the same time. Despite her earlier worries about what was going on with her and Mike, tonight ranked as the most fun she'd had in years. Maybe her whole life.

* * * * *

Though he didn't envy Mike, whose face looked pea green over dinner, Pete enjoyed watching Nan and Paul Pendleton flirt. It felt great to see Nan blossom and start to take off. Even if she was more than twenty years older than him, he regarded her as a sort of protégée. Well, okay. They had helped each other.

Earlier he'd worried about Mike hurting Nan. But now he could see that Nan was holding her own. He figured Mike Darlin had better figure out how to shape up to be the man for Nan. Or Nan would probably make sure he shipped out.

As much fun as dinner was, Pete was glad when the evening wound down. After all their hard work over the past few days, he was more than ready for some quiet time with his lady. Not to mention, he had plans for the night.

Pete gratefully closed the door and watched the men leave. With Nan there, he could excuse himself from kitchen duty. He figured he'd get the bedroom set up. Maybe he could pull off the proposal tonight after all.

* * * * *

Mike felt foul. He hadn't been able to get Nan alone, partly because of the night's logistics, partly because Nan seemed to be avoiding him. Hell, mostly because she was lapping up everything Pendleton spouted like she was on a desert dying of thirst and he had the map to the oasis.

Though Mike wanted to punch the guy out, unlike Pendleton, he forced himself to remain professional, cool and calm all night. Even though he could barely choke down the food set in front of him. When Mike drove Pendleton back to his quarters for the night, he once again asked for some hint as to what was wrong with his paperwork. Pendleton laid his head back on the seat and said they'd talk in the morning. It took just a few minutes for Mike to drive over to the men's dorm and drop him off.

When Mike got home, his place felt oppressively empty. He couldn't stand it. For two cents, he'd have gone back to Pete's and dragged Nan home with him, caveman-style. He smiled at the image. Much as he enjoyed the fantasy, Mike realized he'd need to do something else to open communications with Nan. Geez, he sucked at that shit. Melinda'd certainly told him that often enough. He didn't know his ass from his elbow when it came to women and relationships.

Mike climbed into bed and, of course, couldn't fall asleep. What the hell would get his message through to Nan? He picked up a magazine from his night table and idly leafed through the pages. An ad for a florist caught his eye. Women loved getting flowers, right? He was sure Nan would just melt if he sent her some flowers. But where would he get a flower delivery on the island?

And then he remembered that a delivery plane was coming from the mainland tomorrow. Though he, like everyone else, had put in his order days ago, he knew the owner welcomed last-minute orders. Charged a premium for them. Before he'd completely formed the thought, Mike dialed the dispatcher.

"You want two dozen, long-stemmed red roses?" he repeated.

"Yeah."

"You must have it bad. Those'll cost you."

"Worth it," Mike barked.

"If I can't get the red roses, are substitutes okay?"

"Yeah. But try to get them."

"What message do you want on the card?"

Geez, so many questions. "Message?"

"Yeah, you know, where you write what you want the lady to know? Like who's sending her the flowers."

"Oh, right. Let's see. 'To Nan.' Uh..."

"Good start," the voice said sarcastically.

Mike didn't need this grief. "Just say 'To Nan. Sitting at my desk and thinking of you and me. On my desk.' No, scratch that last sentence. Just the first one."

"Okay, Romeo. And how should I sign it?"

"Mike."

"Love, Mike?"

"No. Just Mike. Got it?"

"Yeah. Okay, Just Mike, it'll be on tomorrow's plane."

"And somebody will deliver it to Nan at Pete Payne's cottage?"

"Yeah, along with the groceries and everything else."

"Thanks."

After that, Mike felt better. Nan would see the flowers, know he was trying. Maybe she'd come to his office. The thought of the two of them making love on his desk got his cock up.

Missing her more than ever, he turned his attention to his aroused cock. His right hand was definitely a poor second choice.

Chapter Eleven

Pete surveyed the bedroom. Maybe he should have proposed to Lily at a fancy restaurant, with strolling violinists. Like such a place existed yet on the island. And the both of them hadn't left since arriving almost a year before. Not that they were compulsive about their work or anything.

Pete started setting up candles and put the sexy sax CD in the player. And then he stopped. The bedroom was so not the place for this to happen. He knew this as clearly as he knew his own name. For luck and support, he took Olivia Owl, a small, white marble owl, currently Lily's favorite of her whole collection, with him.

He ran down the hall to the kitchen just as the women were finishing the cleanup.

"Perfect timing, Payne," Lily said. His heart began to hammer at the realization that she might really not be in the mood for this to be the most important night of their lives. But by the grin on her face, he knew she was kidding.

He linked arms with her. "Such a beautiful night. Full moon. How about you and I go for a walk on the beach?"

"Sounds great. Nan, want to join us?"

"No!" he shouted. The two women looked at him. "I want this to be just you and me this time. Some other time, okay, Nan?"

Lily looked surprised.

"Fine with me," Nan said, yawning. "I want to turn in early."

"Okay. I'll just run up and change." Lily was still wearing her white linen business suit. Pete had changed into jeans and a sweater.

"Good idea," Pete said. "But hurry."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

True to her word, she returned in about two minutes wearing jeans and a big white sweater, almost his twin, and rubber flip-flops on her feet. Perfect.

The two walked the short distance out to the shoreline in silence. A cool breeze fanned the palm trees and brought the salt tang of the ocean briskly to them. "Thanks for suggesting this tonight, Pete." She shivered deliciously. "It really is perfect out here."

"A perfect night for a perfect lady." His voice wobbled. Ah hell, he was going to string things out, but he couldn't wait, not another moment. Pete took Lily's hand in his and got to his knees in the soft white sand.

"Pete," Lily asked, a laugh in her voice. "What's going on?"

He took the owl from his back pocket. "I asked Olivia to come along tonight," he said, handing her the small owl.

"You brought Olivia? Now I'm really mystified."

"Lily Tiger, will you marry me?" Pete wanted to say more, but he was holding his breath.

Lily gasped. Was that good or bad? How come she wasn't answering?

Next thing he knew, she put Olivia down carefully in the sand and knelt right in front of him. Then she threw her arms around him and covered his lips with a big kiss.

Did that mean yes?

When they both came up for air, he looked at her. "Will you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes!" Lily said. She grabbed his hands, pulled him up, and began an impromptu dance across the beach.

Pete hugged her to him. "I heard you. So did Olivia, and the ocean, and the sky, the stars, and the moon. You said yes!"

"Oh, Pete. Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Didn't want to count my chickens..." At the mention of chickens—hundreds of which he'd had to pluck in order to mend fences with Lily when they first got together—they both whooped.

And then Pete scooped Lily up and went into a crazy dance holding her, kissing her.

They both collapsed, laughing, in the sand.

"Oh, shit, I almost forgot." He must be brain dead tonight. From his other pocket, he took the box with the ring. "This is for you."

With fingers as steady as he could keep them, he slipped the two-carat square-cut diamond on Lily's ring finger. Holding up her hand, she gasped. "It's perfect, Pete."

She liked it. Pete began to relax as the wonder of the moment took seed in his heart and flowed through him.

Lily leaned her face against his chest. "Pete, this is such a surprise. You never said anything, and here you planned everything. But why tonight?"

"It's the one-year anniversary of our getting together."

She stopped and thought for a moment. "So it is. You're absolutely right. What a great way you found to celebrate it."

"I figure this is a way to have one anniversary for two dynamite days in my life."

He took her in his arms and kissed her, the woman he'd share his life with. Talk about being the luckiest guy in the universe.

Even after a year with Lily, the lovemaking just kept getting better, deeper, more intense. Crazy as he was to have her when they met, he could swear he wanted her even more now. As their kiss deepened, here on the sand with the gentle sound of the

sea lapping the shore, under the darkest, most star-filled of skies, Pete wanted her. His hunger for Lily heated him like hot coals streaming through his blood.

Still kissing, the two of them lay down in the sand. Pete's cock sprang fully erect, and he groaned with the awakened need to have her.

Lily broke the kiss, got on her back, and pulled him on top of her. Pete sank against her body, pressing his cock into her belly. Lily put her face alongside Pete's and reached her hands under his sweater. He loved it when she stroked his back, alternately kneading and massaging the muscles and scratching circles around his shoulder blades with her long red nails. Sometimes Pete joked and said he wished they could spend hours like that, with her scratching his back. Except after mere minutes he'd be so hard, her finger play led them elsewhere.

Delicious as the scratching was, Pete rolled the two of them around so Lily would be on top of him. He loved feeling her over him, her breasts jutting against his chest, her pussy flirting with his cock. Lily opened her legs and straddled him, which left her with her pussy poised over his erection. Pete couldn't keep from thrusting up. Even between two pair of jeans and assorted underwear, he felt her heat and could easily conjure up his woman's wetness. He knew she'd be slick and lovely, so ready for him. In the meantime, the divine friction of her pussy rubbing over his cock had him panting.

With her legs locked around him, Pete rolled again, this time savoring the feel of Lily around him in every position of their turn. Now he was on top, and then she, as they rolled across the beach clenched tightly together.

And then Pete stopped. He needed to be in her, to feel her skin touching his. "Clothes," he moaned.

He sat up and pulled off his sweater, kicked off his sandals, and stood up to jump out of his jeans. In the moonlight his cock jutted out from him, large, throbbing, and homing in on her.

Lily stood gloriously naked before him. He scooped her up for a kiss, and then he could wait no longer. He lay down on his back and pulled her to him. In moments, she straddled him again and sucked his cock right up into her core.

"Mmmm," she called out as she rode him.

Pete clutched her ass with both hands, and held her to him. Her sheath was tight and hot, massaging him with satin fingers that raised his arousal to a fever pitch. She fingered his balls, and he thought he'd explode right there.

Guiding her hips with his hands, Pete lengthened his arc in and out of her. He pulled himself out to her beautiful lips, and then slowly plunged back into her. Big and hard as he was when he entered her, Pete felt his cock engorge more, filled to beyond any limit he'd ever known.

Lily was so into it. Pete looked up at his beautiful lady. Her breasts stood firm and full, her nipples, the nipples he longed to suckle and lick, budded tightly in the evening breeze. He took one hand from Lily's ass and stroked first one nipple, than the other. Lily bucked and whimpered her pleasure. He saw her lick her lips, her little pink

tongue lapping teasingly at her sweet mouth. Her eyes remained closed as she turned her head from side to side.

He wished he had ten hands. So much to touch. But now he put his hands on her back and gently prodded her to stretch out on him.

They kissed, their tongues darting in and out as they began to accelerate toward their climax. Lily had her legs around his hips. Her hard nipples dug into him, and he could feel her heart hammer the beat of her excitement.

Lily shuddered, and Pete knew she was about to come. She did, loudly, clutching his cock faster and harder as she thrust her hips to meet her need. And then he was there. His cock tightened, and now he sped up as his climax took him over. With a cry and a thrust, he let it all go, so deep in her.

Now, she really was his.

Pete and Lily lay on the beach together 'til both grew cold and sleepy. Reluctantly, they agreed to get dressed and go back home. Pete carefully brushed the sand off Olivia.

"Of course. I want to tell everyone our news," Lily whispered to Pete as they walked back.

"I think it might have to wait 'til morning," Pete whispered. "It's very late. Besides, I like that the two of us are the only ones who know right now."

"I love you," Lily said.

Pete grinned from head to foot.

After showering off the sand, which had lodged in many surprising places, Pete and Lily went to bed, made love, and slept entwined in each other's arms all night.

* * * * *

Mike did not sleep at all well. In fact, he didn't sleep. Between not having Nan there—and he'd gotten used to her in his bed real fast—and having to face day two of his audit, Mike felt less than satisfied with life. Not to mention the performance Nan and Pendleton had put on that night. Mike's gut burned.

But Mike's philosophy was to pull the bandage off fast. If something was going to hurt, he might as well get it over with, ASAP. He'd racked his brain during the long night and still hadn't managed to come up with any trouble points. Finally, he figured that anything he'd done wrong must have been out of ignorance, which would be his defense. He supposed Laredo might not sack him if he promised to learn whatever he needed to so he wouldn't repeat the error.

When he arrived at the dorm to pick Pendleton up, the auditor was just finishing his coffee. He had a laptop, a small recorder, and a calculator prepared for the morning's inspections.

Once in his truck, Mike finally brought up what had been bothering him since yesterday. "While we're driving, maybe you can give me some hint of your concerns."

Pendleton waved his hand dismissively. "Let's go around to the construction sites first."

Mike tried to ignore the gnawing feeling in his stomach. Today he had men working only on the residences. He figured he'd save that site for last to give his crew a chance to get up to full speed. At each stop, after Mike showed him around and explained what was going on and what the plans were, Pendleton would speak into his recorder. Back in the truck he'd take a few minutes on his laptop and his calculator. He didn't ask anything or make any comments, which irritated Mike's nerves.

At least everything at each site looked as good as possible. Mike, who considered himself as detail-oriented as Laredo about his jobs, could have sworn there was nothing off at any of the sites. After their inspection of the last one, including Pendleton's on-site interviews with workers, Mike knew they couldn't postpone the final accounting any more.

In the truck en route back to Mike's office, he asked, "What are your concerns? From yesterday and from today?"

Pendleton asked a few questions, mostly to clarify some points. He typed on his laptop, punched more numbers on his calculator, and recorded something. Then he turned off his machinery.

Mike still didn't feel like he knew any more than he had before. "Your concerns, Pendleton?"

"I really wish you'd call me Paul."

"Very well. *Paul*. Your concerns?"

The other man shrugged. "Great operation. Looks like you're right on target. Kudos."

That was it? Once Pendleton's words sank in, Mike should have relaxed. He was in the clear. No problems. But all he could think of was a night's sleep that didn't happen and a lot of nerves. Pendleton appeared clueless.

He was about to tell Pendleton all this, when the other man continued, "I'm hoping to extend my time on the island for a bit. Maybe take a spot of holiday."

"I don't think this is exactly a holiday destination yet," Mike pointed out.

"Perhaps. But the delightful Nan Sullivan is here. I'd love to get to know her before I need to return to England."

Mike's hackles rose. He wanted to tell Pendleton to back off. On the other hand, after the way Nan acted last night, he wasn't sure where he stood any more. "Where can I drop you?"

"Pete and Lily's."

Mike dropped Pendleton off. With any luck, Nan would receive the flowers soon. Then, with some more luck, she'd contact him. Maybe even come to his office... And

then all this nonsense with Pendleton would be history, and they could carry on as they had been.

* * * * *

Nan had some new ideas about her designs this morning. After breakfast and a long walk on the beach, Nan sat down in her room to work. She'd gotten really engrossed when a knock on her door interrupted her.

Rats. She hated anybody bothering her when she was working, but she couldn't be impolite.

"Yes?" Her door opened.

"Sorry to bother you," Lily, who was taking the morning off, said. "But these came. I thought you'd want them right away." She held up a large bouquet of beautiful red roses.

Nan, who'd been a sucker for flowers all her life and never before received a delivery, gasped. She put down her work and jumped up. "Are you sure those are for me?"

Lily held up a card. "'Nan Sullivan'. That's you, right?"

"Yes, that's me." Nan took the bouquet and the card from her. "Thank you for bringing them."

Lily offered to get a vase.

When she was gone, Nan, still holding the flowers and enjoying their heady fragrance, carefully opened the card and read the message. Her hand shook. Who could they be from? Mike? Her heart hammered at the thought. Or maybe Paul Pendleton.

They were from Mike. "Just Mike", according to the note, which she held against her heart. He was extending his hand out to her in a gesture. She could continue to harden herself away from him or she could follow her heart and soften. He was in his office. She could go there, and extend her hand out to him also.

With his flowers, Mike was telling her a lot. That he valued her enough to try to let her know. That even as she was, fifty-three, lumps, bumps, warts, and all, he found her worthy of roses.

She'd call him right now and thank him. Yeah, she'd be willing to see him again. Probably even to stay with him again...

But she was getting ahead of herself. She picked up the phone, then put it down.

She'd go to his office right now to thank him.

* * * * *

Pete felt so great. He and Lily, the queen of his universe, were *engaged*. The ring, which she adored, looked perfect on her finger. Gorgeous as the diamond was, Lily's glow outshone it.

Pete and Lily decided to wait 'til dinner to announce their engagement to their friends on the island.

Now that the push to get ready for Paul was behind them, Pete and Lily could spend the day catching up on what they'd let slide.

"I'm on cloud nine," Lily said. "I don't know how I'll get any work done."

He looked at her in surprise. "Is this my fiancée the workaholic, who considers thirty hours a day of work a start?"

"I've never been engaged before." She grinned dreamily.

"And you never will be again. This is it, for both of us." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Mmm. Sounds good."

"So, Lily, when should we get married?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Uh, we just got engaged."

"Yeah. The two usually go together."

"Let's enjoy this before we move on to the next phase, okay, Pete?"

"Your wish is my command. But how about we call our families back in the States to tell them?"

"Great. That feels like about all I'm capable of doing this morning."

"Hey, it's an important job." Pete dialed home and prepared to accept congratulations.

Just then Pendleton arrived. Pete put down the phone, looked at Lily, and realized it was a workday after all.

* * * * *

Mike managed to shuffle some papers on his desk. He could waste time more effectively at some of the sites, but he wanted to stay in his office in case Nan tried to contact him.

Of course she'd contact him. As soon as the damned flowers arrived. She was too polite not to.

Mike heard a noise at his door and perked up. He hadn't expected Nan this early, but he'd take her whenever she arrived.

Mike sprang up, raced across the floor, and opened the door.

There stood Melinda, her hair long and flaming red now. Tanned, wearing skintight

capri pants, sky-high heels, and a halter top that left nothing to the imagination, she looked good. If a man didn't know better.

Why the hell was she here?

"Melinda. What are you doing here?"

"Aren't you glad to see me? Do you think it was easy, making friends with the guys who fly the supply charters?" She held her arms out wide as if she expected the two of them to have a major clinch. *As if.*

She looked at him with surprise when he stood aloof. "Mike. Is that a greeting for your wife who's managed to get out here to this godforsaken piece of rock in the middle of the friggin' ocean just to see you?"

"Ex-wife." Mike folded his arms in front of him and wouldn't let Melinda pass through the doorway to come into his space.

She shrugged. "Technicality." She stepped closer to him, and he backed away. She reached out her well-manicured hands and began to run her fingers across the top of his chest. He shrugged her off.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"I understand vampires can't invade a person's space without an invitation, so no."

She actually pouted. "I can't believe you're talking so mean to me. Especially after I've come all this way just to be with you."

"I don't want you here. So you can turn around and go back to wherever the hell you came from."

She stamped her foot, which must have been painful in her killer heels. "You don't mean that, Mike. Not any more than you mean those nasty lawyer letters that say you're cutting my payments."

"Read my lips, Melinda. I mean every word. So does my expensive lawyer. Now why are you here?" He looked at his watch. "I'll give you two minutes to say your piece before I close the door. With you outside."

She clucked and seemed to sag. "I don't know where this unfriendly attitude comes from. Okay, Mike. If you must know, Armando's gone."

"Who the hell is Armando?"

"You know. Armando is the guy I made the mistake of..."

Mike got it. "The tennis pro dumped you?"

"You don't have to look so happy. I'd think you'd feel a little sorry for poor little me, abandoned..."

"Right. About as much sympathy as I have for a cobra about to strike. There's not a thing I can do for you. I do intend to stick to our agreement, which means I will pay you for another two months, and then I'm done. Lady, you'll be on your own."

"You don't mean it."

"I've never meant anything more in my life." He held out his hand. "Hasta la vista,

baby. It's been real. Don't let the door hit your derrière on the way out."

Melinda's eyes flashed as she took his outstretched hand – and pulled him into a full-body clinch, her big red mouth trying to devour him.

Mike struggled to get free without physically pushing Melinda off him.

At that precise moment, he heard a loud gasp. There in his doorway stood Nan. *Oh, shit.* She ran away before he could dispose of Melinda.

Courtesy at an end, he finally pulled himself away from her, ran out the door, and looked both ways. Nan was gone.

Melinda was gazing into a pocket mirror and reapplying her lipstick. "Who are you looking for?"

"Like that's any of your business."

She sniffed. "Got yourself a girlfriend?" She looked at her nails. "I bet she's not as hot as me."

He glared at her. "Get out of here. Just get out of here. If you're not out by the time I count to five, I won't even pay you the remaining alimony. Got that?"

"When did you turn so grumpy?" she whined.

"You mean, when did I finally get smart about you? Just get out of my face."

"Be like that. So where do they hide the rest of the men on this island? There have to be some live ones."

He shook his head. "Just leave, or I'll do what I said."

Melinda must have realized he meant it because she turned and sashayed out of sight.

Mike couldn't believe it. Of all the possible times for Nan to show up, it had to be precisely then, when Melinda had him in her clutches.

Mike tried Nan's cell. She didn't answer. Where would she have gone? He'd have to try to find her. To explain.

Maybe she'd gone back to Pete's. He'd go there. Surely Nan would listen to him and understand.

Or maybe he should face reality – that when it came to him and women, he was operating under a fatal curse.

* * * * *

By the time Nan returned to Pete's cottage, she'd given in to her tears and progressed to anger, fury, and extreme disappointment. Why had Mike even bothered sending her those roses? He'd wasted no time in getting a floozy to come to his office. And here he'd made such a big deal about how he thought she was beautiful. Well, if his taste ran to redheaded sluts with long legs and surgically enhanced boobs that were

huge and perky, he'd just been laughing at her.

What was it about her that made men betray her? Did she have a big L for "Loser" on her forehead or a sign that said "Kick Me" on her back?

Worst of all, she'd have to see Mike again. The island was too small for both of them to be here and not run into each other.

Oh, rats. She had to leave. Hop on the next plane or boat out of here and go back to Miami Beach. She hated leaving the pottery position, and she especially hated disappointing Pete and Lily. For a while, she'd thought life here would really work out.

On the other hand, there was Paul Pendleton...

Who was she fooling? They'd just been playing last night. Besides which, she wasn't about to look for one man to help her out of a jam with another.

No, she had to straighten things out with Mike before she'd ever think about another man. And that included healing her broken heart. Which right now didn't feel like it would ever happen.

Fool, fool, fool. She rushed into the house and flew up the stairs. Mike's roses sat in a crystal vase Lily had found, jutting up from Nan's bedside table like accusatory fingers. Ooh, she wanted to take those roses and toss them in the trash, breaking each and every stem first. She wished she could dump them on Mike's head, thorn sides out.

But before she'd give herself that pleasure, she pulled a suitcase down from the shelf in the closet and began to pack. Oh but no, first she should phone around and arrange to get off the island. No way she'd ever be able to pull herself together her on the Isla de Nunca Nunca.

Loud footsteps clomped up the stairs followed by a lighter pair.

"You can't go in there," Lily said. "Nan wants to be alone."

"I have to talk to her now," Mike growled.

Nan bit her lip, trying not to burst into tears again. She would not let that man see her cry.

Before she could barricade her door, he crashed it open. Lily stood in the hallway looking fierce. Mike slammed the door shut then took a deep breath. "Nan, let me explain."

"*Explain?*" she asked. She wanted to say more, but if she said another word, she risked breaking into sobs.

He pointed to her open suitcase. "Where do you think you're going?"

As if it was his business. She sniffed and refused to answer. She just put the few items she'd already taken out of the closet in the suitcase. She couldn't get any more because he stood in her way. She couldn't tell him to get out of the way or she'd cry.

"Nan, for Pete's sake, will you sit down and listen?"

Nan shook her head and looked away.

"Do you know who that woman you saw me with in the office was?"

Oh, so now he wanted to play Twenty Questions. "No, I don't know who your slut du jour was and I don't care. I'm leaving."

"Won't you even listen?"

"I've had it with listening," she hissed. At that moment, Mike became confused with Jerry in her head, and the pain of rejection spiraled its poison through her. "Why don't you just leave?" She picked up the roses, dripping water, and jammed them into his belly. His reflexes must have been real sharp because he managed to grab them before they slid to the floor.

He got very stiff. "These are for you. I never take things back, just like I never lie." He replaced the roses, somewhat the worse for wear, in the vase. "Nan, you don't have to go anywhere. I see the handwriting on the wall here. I've had it with women. I'm going to where none of you will bug me anymore. A nice, sane construction job in a remote village in the Andes."

With that, he turned on his heel and left.

For just a moment, a glimmer of possibility that Mike was innocent in this situation flared across Nan's inner vision.

She stomped on that glimmer, sat down on her bed, and cried a lot more.

* * * * *

"So Pete, all set for our festive dinner?" Lily asked when he came into the kitchen for lunch.

"Hmm, depends what we can dredge up from the freezer." A light bulb went on in his head. "Wait a minute, didn't a new order come through today?"

"Yes." Lily looked smug. "I actually ordered a five-course meal for two from a French restaurant."

"It was like you knew." He kissed her.

"We have champagne we can chill," Lily said. "Now how will we extend our five-course meal for two to feed five?"

"Piece of cake," Pete said.

"We have cake, too. This will be great."

Pendleton, who'd been on his cell phone, followed Pete into the kitchen. For once, the guy looked miserable.

"Paul, is something wrong?" Lily asked.

"I need to get back to England immediately. And I was hoping to have a bit of a holiday here, get to know Nan. Looks like that's not going to happen."

"But at least you'll be able to join us for our celebration dinner," Lily said.

"Celebration dinner?" Paul looked about as up for a celebration dinner as a frontal

lobotomy with no anesthetic.

Pete would not let someone else's bad mood dampen his. He took Lily's hand in his and held it out for Paul's examination. "We just got engaged last night."

"My word. Congratulations are indeed in order." Paul said the words but lacked the appropriate emotion. "What time is this dinner?"

"Seven."

"Great. I'll be there. Maybe you can ask Mike to pick me up again? I need to pack."

Right after he left, Mike stormed in. "Pete, Lily, I'm sorry to spring this on you." He sounded out of breath.

Pete and Lily looked at each other. "What's up?"

"I have to leave. Immediately. Dobbs knows everything. You can put him in charge."

Pete shook his head. Mike was going so fast, he couldn't follow. "Slow down. Where are you going? Why?"

Mike made a face. "An assignment in the Andes I've decided to accept. No one will be able to reach me there, but once a week I'll try to find a phone or e-mail so I can keep in touch that way. As to why, well, that's personal. Please forgive me. I wouldn't do it like this if I didn't have to. But I'm heading for the airstrip. I'm going to hop the first flight I can to the mainland."

"But, Mike, what about your stuff?"

He just waved dismissively. "I'll be in touch later on and let you know where to send it."

He stormed out of the office.

"We're losing our celebrants here. I get the feeling that the dinner will be more than enough to feed whoever's still here," Lily said.

"Weird." Pete was not used to being the one with the sanest life.

Chapter Twelve

As celebration dinners went, Pete had to admit the one they had to announce their engagement ranked among the most dismal. Mike was gone, Paul distracted, Nan chewed her lip and tried not to weep. Neither of them appeared inclined to continue the previous night's flirtation.

Nan and Paul, of course, congratulated the happy couple. While they seemed thrilled for them, neither seemed particularly happy.

With Mike gone, Pete had picked Paul up. "Who was that redheaded woman at the dorm?" Pete asked. "I don't remember us having any female workers. And this isn't one of the holidays when we invite the men's wives and girlfriends in."

Paul actually rolled her eyes. "Did she bother you, too?"

"What do you mean, too?" Pete looked nervously at Lily. He didn't know how Lily would react to hearing that a woman many men would consider sexy came on to him. He, of course, as a newly engaged man, had been totally immune to her blatant invitation. Which didn't stop his curiosity as to who she was and what she was doing on the island.

"She propositioned every man in the dorm," Paul said.

"What?" Lily's face got very red and her eyes blazed. She jumped up. "I'm going to that dorm right now. Pete, book a private plane to get her off the island."

"I already did," Pete said. He looked at his watch. "She should be leaving in about an hour."

Lily sat back down. "Good. We can't have that kind of thing going on at the dorm. Must have been some sort of hooker."

"Actually," Paul said, "she identified herself as Melinda Darlin. Formerly Mrs. Michael Darlin. According to her sob story, she came over to the island to reconcile with her ex-husband. And he rudely threw her out of his office, threatening to cut off all means of support to her."

Now Nan gasped and jumped up. "That's who was in his office," she sobbed out. Then she excused herself from the table and ran off.

Everyone at the table looked at each other. "That woman seems to have some sort of connection to Nan's bad mood," Pete said.

"Maybe someone should go after her," Lily said.

Pete started to get up, but then realized that Lily would do a much better job. "I nominate you." She got up, kissed him, and went to Nan.

* * * * *

Nan sat on her bed and wept. She'd been so sure Mike was pulling another Jerry on her, she hadn't even let him explain. Now she realized that, despite how awful it looked, he really had been innocent. His ex-wife had tried to ensnare him. Nan just walked in at the wrong moment.

Worst of all, she hadn't trusted Mike enough to listen. She'd been so insecure about his feelings about her, about her own worth, that she pushed him away with both arms. She'd messed up, big time.

A knock at her door. She really didn't want to see anyone.

"May I come in?" Lily. Miss Perfect. Not the person she wanted right now. She actually didn't want anyone right now.

"I wish you wouldn't," Nan said.

Lily ignored her. "Maybe I can help."

"I doubt it."

Lily sat down next to Nan on the bed. "Can you tell me what's going on?" Lily asked.

She sounded so sympathetic, Nan began to weep again. When she could talk, she choked out, "I saw them together."

"Who?"

"Mike and that Melinda. At his office. In a lip-lock."

"Oh. That must have been painful." Lily pursed her lips.

"Like an attack of *E. coli* and PMS, all at once."

"Ouch. What happened then?"

"I came home and started to pack. Mike came here and tried to explain, but I wouldn't listen." She blew her nose. "Then he said I didn't have to go anywhere, he'd go." Nan's tears recommenced.

"And then he left," she managed to choke out.

Lily looked sad for her, and Nan felt sorry about that. After all, here Lily was, newly engaged. She shouldn't have to deal with another person's relationship mess.

"Nan, what do you want to have happen?"

Nan snuffled hard. "I wish I could erase the last few hours, to right before I saw them in his office. When I was going to thank him for the beautiful roses he sent me."

"He sent you the roses?"

Nan nodded.

"I'm so impressed. I imagine sending roses is a big step forward for a guy like Mike Darlin. Listen, Nan. I have some advice for you. You may not know it, but I banished Pete from my life forever when I found out he'd lied to me."

"No. I guess I don't know too much about how the two of you got together."

"Trust me, it was rocky. He came to the resort I was managing under totally false pretenses. Saying he wanted to help me, and all the time he'd put together a plot to wreck Dominic Laredo's wedding. The wedding my career depended on."

Nan shook her head. This was a side of Pete she'd never known about. Still, it showed that good people were capable of messing up. Unlike what Jerry did, some people tried to atone for their mistakes. "Sounds horrible. How did you ever forgive him?"

"It wasn't easy. Actually, I was feeling about as desperate as you seem to be now. Gwyn, Dominic's wife, came to me after the wedding. You see, she'd been Pete's girlfriend when she met Dominic. Which was why Pete wanted to wreck the wedding. Revenge."

"Sounds complicated," Nan said. "But the wedding worked out?"

"Oh, it was beautiful. After we met, Pete changed his tune and tried to undo the damage." Lily chuckled. "He wasn't able to. We pulled off the wedding in spite of his plot succeeding. He ended up having to work his tail off to make that happen. But I was still furious when I found out that everything that went wrong was his fault."

Nan shook her head. "I don't blame you."

"But after Gwyn talked to me, I realized I could forgive Pete. And I wanted to. Because I really wanted to be with him. So that's the question. Do you want to be with Mike?" Lily thought for a moment. "Last night, I got the feeling you might be interested in Paul Pendleton."

Nan waved her hand dismissively. "I couldn't resist flirting, especially because Mike and I were going through a rough patch. But no, he's not the one for me. I do want to be with Mike. But when he needed me to, I didn't trust him. Do you think he can ever forgive me?"

"I think so." Lily smiled. "But there's only one way to find out. If he wants to get off the island, he might very well be on the same plane that's going to take his ex-wife off."

"What?" Nan sprang up. "When's the plane leaving?"

"Pretty soon."

"I'd better get there to talk to him." She caught a look at her face in the mirror. "Time for some repairs. And then I'm out of here." She put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Lily, I'm so sorry for wrecking your dinner."

"Don't even give it a thought. We'll have other chances to celebrate. Go do what you have to. We'll take you to the airstrip."

Nan headed for the bathroom, then stopped. "Lily, do you think he'll forgive me? What if he doesn't?"

"If you don't try at all, you'll never know."

"Right." Nan was already scrubbing at her red, swollen eyes.

* * * * *

In five minutes, Lily and Nan came out of her room. "Pete, we're going to the airstrip," Lily said. "Nan's going to talk to Mike before his plane takes off."

Paul snapped to attention. "Do you think I'll be able to get a seat on that plane?"

"Maybe Mike won't use his place, which will free up a seat," Lily pointed out.

With their dinner uneaten, the entire party piled into Pete's Jeep, and, motivated by thoughts of Nan's future happiness, Pete burned rubber.

* * * * *

Of all the shitty luck. Mike couldn't believe he'd be stuck on the same plane as Melinda. The good news was the flight took only a little over an hour. The bad news was that he'd be on a small plane with Melinda. Even five minutes would be too long.

"I can't wait to get off this unfriendly rock," Melinda grumped. "What do they do, give all the men some libido-killer herb?"

"Couldn't find any victims?" Mike could have bitten his lip. Why did he let her push his buttons? Oh hell. When it came to women, he never learned. Maybe if the Andes didn't work out, he could find a construction job in a monastery somewhere.

Five minutes before boarding, there was a commotion outside the hangar. Great. He'd hoped the flight wouldn't be delayed.

And then, hurtling like a rocket, Nan burst into the space before him and launched herself at him. "Don't go," she gasped, out of breath.

"Nan, what's going on?" he asked.

"Who's this?" Melinda asked, dismissing Nan with a flicker of her lids.

Mike got up and tried to find a private spot to talk to Nan.

That became difficult because Paul, followed by Lily and Pete, ran in immediately after Nan.

"I need to get on this plane!" Paul raced over to the pilot.

"What is going on here?" Mike asked again. Confusion might have reigned on the airstrip, but one fact shone blatantly clear to him. He couldn't believe how beautiful Nan looked, vulnerable and warm. Though he'd never have admitted it, he was glad to see her one more time. Even if it was only to say goodbye.

Nan gazed pleadingly at him. "Mike, can you forgive me for not trusting you?"

"Oh. Where'd that come from?" Much as he wanted to throw himself at her and say yes, he needed to know why she'd come now with this question.

"I know what I saw in your office... Well, it wasn't your fault."

"Oh, so now you realize you condemned an innocent man."

She looked sheepish. "I found out what happened, who that woman was."

Though he felt good hearing her words, he wasn't about to let her off the hook all that easily. "How'd you find out it was Melinda who trapped me?"

Nan blushed. "Paul told us. It turns out she was coming on to all the men in the dorm."

Mike felt disgusted. "That's my ex."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I," Mike said. "But I have to tell you, Nan, it really hurts when someone you're close to accuses you of lying and betraying them."

"I know." Her eyes misted up, and he wanted to touch her face and soothe away her pain. Still, he didn't want to get his fingers burned. Again. "But Mike, it wasn't just you I didn't trust. It was also me. You see, I didn't trust myself to deserve a great guy like you. And maybe I don't, but not because I'm getting older and don't look like a gorgeous young thing. It's because my trust has grown so little, and it needs to be big enough to hold both of us."

Mike's heart was breaking. "Oh, Nan." He took her hands. "I accept your apology. And I apologize to you for not believing that a real great lady like you could really want to be with me."

And he couldn't resist anymore. He drew her to him.

"Please don't go," she said.

"I'm not going anywhere but back with you."

They fell into a deep kiss that they didn't break 'til they heard the applause surrounding them.

* * * * *

Now that Lily had said a permanent yes to him, Pete was a happy man. They'd just passed an audit from the home office with flying colors. And they were not about to lose one of the key supervisors who would make the resort a success. Mike would not only be staying, he'd come home with them for their celebration dinner. Which they would still have, in some form or another.

By the time they got back to the cottage, the five-course French meal looked wilted and unappetizing. Definitely not the fare of choice for a huge celebration.

Pete checked out the freezer. "How about some hot dogs?" he asked the assembled group.

"They go great with champagne," Lily pointed out.

"Hot dogs, it is."

With their hot dogs, champagne, and French apple tart, everyone toasted the future

and began to make plans.

Epilogue

Just one short week before the formal debut of the Isla de Nunca Nunca Fantasia resort, everyone was running around, trying to get the final details in place. The guest list for the opening included Dominic Laredo and his heavily pregnant wife, Gwyn.

"I've got the tickets right here for our honeymoon flight." Pete waved an envelope in front of Lily, who sat at her desk.

Lily looked up from a pile of papers and shook her head. "No way, Pete. Look at all this." She gestured at her crammed inbox and overflowing desktop. "We can't even *think* about a honeymoon for about the next six months. Why did we ever plan our wedding to be the kickoff event for the resort?"

"No honeymoon?" Pete's voice cracked.

"You have to go." Nan, their resident potter, didn't seem embarrassed to have heard the tail end of their conversation as she sailed into Lily's office. "It's illegal to skip a honeymoon."

Lily raised an eyebrow.

"Illegal and immoral," Mike, Nan's new fiancé, added.

Mike and Nan looked at each other and grinned.

"That's why, as our wedding gift to you, we're going to wear your managerial hats while you head off to your mystery destination," Nan said.

"But..." Lily started.

"Three against one," Pete, Nan, and Mike chorused.

"Make that four and a half against one," a voice called from the doorway. Gwyn, looking perilously close to delivering the Laredo heir, waddled into the office. "And that will be five and a half as soon as Dominic arrives."

Lily looked at all of them. "I guess I'm outvoted."

Pete took her hands in his and brought her to her feet. "That's right. In fact, as of now, you're on pre-honeymoon time. Which means away from the desk and doing whatever you have to do to get ready for the wedding tomorrow."

To emphasize their point, Nan and Mike commandeered Lily's desk. Gwyn took her by the arm to walk her out, and Pete followed.

Nan picked up the mug Lily had been drinking from. Bearing the resort's logo, Lily's mug had been the prototype for the many pieces produced in the pottery studio this year.

"You do good work," Mike said softly.

She put her arms around him, the man she still couldn't believe was hers. "You

ain't seen nothing yet."

"Show me."

She did.

About the author

Exploring the erotic side of romance keeps Mardi Ballou chained to her computer – and inspires some amazing research. Mardi's a Jersey girl, now living in Northern California with her hero husband – the love of her life – who's also her tech maven and first reader. Her days and nights are filled with books to read and write, chocolate, and the pursuit of romantic dreams. A Scorpio by birth and temperament, Mardi believes in living life with Passion, Intensity, and Lots of Laughs (this last from her moon in Sagittarius). Published in different genres under different names, Mardi is thrilled to be part of the Ellora's Cave Team Romantica.

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