

Adrienne Kama

UNEDITED REVIEW GALLEY

**THE CHRONICLES OF STELLA
RICE:
FEBRUARY**
Ménage a what?

by
Adrienne Kama

The Chronicles of Stella Rice: February

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THE STELLA RICE CHRONICLES: FEBRUARY

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CHAPTER ONE

2/1/05

8:14 p.m.

I miss Jake.

Scratch that. I hate Jake.

Jake is an arrogant ass.

But I miss him.

Argh!

It's all over between us and has been for over a week. Ann says it's unhealthy to obsess over a man I only spent one night with, and I know she's right, but it was one amazing night.

He stopped calling last week, but I can't say I'm pleased. Guess he got tired of talking to the answering machine.

You tell me. Is finding out your lover is gay grounds enough for refusing to see him again? Wait. Don't answer. Not only is Jake gay...bisexual, but his lover could very well be the sexiest man to ever walk the earth. Could I fault Jake for loving a man I found irresistible and sexy as hell?

There's the phone. Gotta run. I'm supposed to be meeting the girls at The Oak Room in about...*Argh!* I was supposed to be there ten minutes ago.

10:32 p.m.

"What you need is to go out with someone else, Ann." Meagan lifted her wine glass and held it poised for a toast. For a moment, firelight danced across the shiny surface and reflected a rosy tinge onto her café au lait skin. Her golden brown curls fell in waves over her shoulders. "To new beginnings," she said when Ann and I hefted our drinks.

We sat at our favorite table in The Oak Room having cocktails, something we did often. There was a blazing fire in the hearth a few feet from the end of our table, and the glow of soft red light overhead, casting a welcoming ambiance over the lounge. The lulling sound of the conversations going on around us blended into the background with

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the smooth sax of Kim Waters, crooning to us from speakers positioned around the room. The Oak Room was like a second home to us. Of late, however, our usual group had dwindled to a threesome—Meagan, Ann, and myself. Occasionally, Ann's on again, off again boyfriend, Gerard—the current object of derision—made an appearance. And Katarina was a no-show more times than not these days.

Our bitch-fests simply weren't the same without Katarina's voice of reason to console and calm us. Without Katarina's reassuring presence, our nights became a series of one bitch-fest after another.

"Fuck new beginnings," Ann slurred, obviously now feeling the affect of drinking four glasses of wine in an hour. "And where the hell is Katarina? She said she'd be here."

Meagan shrugged, and then took a sip from her glass. "Don't ask me. As far as I know, she's still coming."

"It's that damn Jim, again. I just know it."

"Maybe you shouldn't have anymore to drink, Ann."

Ann rounded on Meagan, eyebrows furrowed. "What you talking 'bout, Meagan?" Ann said, and then exploded with laughter.

The Gary Coleman impersonation had been funny the first time she'd done it, mildly amusing the second and third time, but the joke had gone stale by the fourth. I love Ann, but when she drinks, she's an absolute menace.

Still grinning, she took another swallow of wine. "See there. I'm perfectly fine." As if to mock her words, Ann's brown hair flared wildly about her shoulders. Her neat, semi-bang had sometime in the night decided to stand on end. With her eyes rimmed in red and her usually smooth skin blotchy and pale, Ann looked anything but fine. "Who does she think she is anyway?" Ann continued, clearly warming to her theme. "Ditching us for that damn Jim. I'd never ditch you guys for a man."

"That's 'cause you don't have a man," I offered, then mentally kicked myself.

Ann narrowed her eyes at me. "Fucker."

Meagan gave up any effort of toasting to new beginnings and glared in my direction.

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Ann. I keep forgetting."

"Fucker!" Ann said again.

Had I thought she was referring to me I might have been offended. Since I knew Gerard was the fucker in question, I took no offense.

"It won't last," I said.

"What does he see in her?" Ann wanted to know.

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“It won’t last.”

“How could he have done this to me? I hate Gerard...and I love him. But I hate him more.”

Meagan and I exchanged looks over the table. Ann had been like this since Gerard broke up with her a week ago and announced he was seeing someone else.

Seeming at a loss for what else she could do to soothe Ann, Meagan placed her arm over Ann’s shoulder and gave her a squeeze. “It’s his loss, babe.”

“I love him,” Ann blubbered again.

This was one of the annoying things about having three best friends. There I was wounded from the Jake fiasco, and I had nobody to listen to me whine about my broken heart. I was in need of some serious comfort. Meanwhile, all Ann wanted to do was talk about *her* problems. She had been going on and on about Gerard for a good forty minutes. Okay, so Ann and Gerard had been together a lot longer than Jake and me, but at least Gerard ditched Ann for a *woman*. Besides, if Gerard hadn’t dumped Ann she would have dumped him. It’s what Ann did and what Gerard expected. He simply beat her to the punch this time.

“I’m tired of talking about Gerard,” Ann declared. “Let’s talk about Katarina and how this is the second time she’s ditched us for that damn Jim.”

This seemed to animate Meagan. “He’s not even all that cute.”

“He obviously makes Katarina happy,” I said, hoping to bring the conversation around to me.

“Who cares?” Ann said. “He doesn’t make us happy. Least she could do is to pick a man we like.”

“I like Jim.”

“Speak of the devil.” Meagan eased forward on the sofa and gestured toward the door.

I had to twist around on my seat to see who she was talking about.

Arms interlocked as though their lives depended on it, Katarina and Jim strolled into The Oak Room. She let her blonde locks fall loose down her back, a look Jim preferred.

“They look like frigging Siamese twins,” Ann complained. “You think they’re attached at the hip, or is that the way they walk now?”

With their matching heads of blonde hair, lithe figures, and pale complexions, they kind of looked related. “At least she didn’t ditch us again,” I said.

“She didn’t have to bring him. I can’t believe she brought him.”

I nearly pointed out that Gerard had often came to our “girls’ night out” get-

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together, but managed to stall the words before they slipped off my tongue.

“Be nice,” I said in a low voice before Katarina and Jim reached our table.

In stark contrast to my admonition, Ann rocked forward on the sofa and glowered at Katarina as soon as she reached our table. “How very nice of you to join us,” she slurred. “We’ve only been waiting two hours.”

Knowing the signs, Katarina smiled at Ann as she settled on the sofa next to me. “They broke up again?” she whispered into my ear while simultaneously prodding me with a hip to move over and make room for Jim.

“Gerard broke up with her this time,” I confided.

Katarina raised her brows at this and pursed her lips. “I’m sorry I’m late,” she said to everyone at the table. “Jim and I had to stop by his parent’s house to—”

“I don’t care,” Ann interrupted. “I’m having a nervous breakdown.”

For the next thirty minutes we all listened while Ann described, in detail, all of Gerard’s bad qualities. When Katarina finally broke in to change the subject I was happy, until I realized her topic of choice was Jake and his refusal to stop billing her for her gym membership, even though she’d cancelled it.

In retrospect, Katarina’s idea that we could meet our future husband’s by joining Baltimore’s most popular gym seemed extremely ridiculous now. Even if I hadn’t slept with Jake, the owner of the gym and our kickboxing instructor, I probably wouldn’t have met anyone I would want to marry. As it was, Jake was the only man I’d been remotely interested in. That probably wasn’t accurate. When Jake was in a room, other men ceased to exist.

As far as Katarina and Jim—who met at the gym—we’d just have to see how long their relationship lasted.

“He won’t stop billing me,” Katarina complained.

“Did he actually say he wouldn’t stop billing you?”

“Yes. I finally got him on the phone today.”

I’d been getting billed too, but I hadn’t called the gym myself, yet. I’d been procrastinating, too, afraid I’d get Jake and be stuck having an awkward conversation with him. But maybe I should call anyway. Membership at Stay Fit wasn’t cheap.

“Don’t even think about it,” Meagan said, pulling me from my thoughts.

I looked up to see that everyone was staring at me. “What?”

“You’re not calling that man. You’re just looking for an excuse to talk to him.”

I shook my head and proceeded to lie through my teeth. “If I wanted to talk with Jake I would have done it all those times he called me.” In reality, the only reason I

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hadn't picked up the phone when he called was because my ego was bruised.

"Let Katarina handle this."

"I can't," Katarina said, "I've tried but he won't budge."

"See," I said. "And I might not have to deal to Jake. I'll go to the general manager and see if he'll help me."

Already a plan was forming in my mind. I'd go to the gym tomorrow and see what was going on.

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CHAPTER TWO

2/2/05 6:57 a.m.

I don't know what it is about having people stay over night that makes me go all domestic. I simply don't understand this phenomenon. Nevertheless, there I was, hot pink apron tied over my Tom and Jerry PJ's, flipping pancakes and frying sausages. It wasn't even seven yet and already I'd had a pot of French vanilla coffee brewed. *Fox and Friends* was on the television, the kitchen and family room were filled with the homey scent of coffee and food, and I was feeling no pain. It was uncanny.

"I feel like shit."

I whirled around and gave Ann a bright smile. "Pretty much how you look. Bet you wish you'd listened to me now."

Shuffling to the breakfast bar, she collapsed onto a stool and moaned. "Why didn't you stop me from doing those tequila shots?"

"I tried."

"Not hard enough. My head feels like a train...like two trains are racing around inside."

I piled two fluffy pancakes and two sausages onto a plate and carried it to her. "You'll feel better after you eat."

She frowned at the offering. "I cannot eat sausages. But I think I could do with some pancakes. Any tea?"

"How about coffee? I brewed a pot for us."

Ann paled. "I couldn't stomach coffee. Just give me some tea if you have it."

I filled the teakettle with water and placed it on the stove, turning the temperature to high.

"So what's the plan for today?" Ann asked after I set a steaming mug of chamomile before her.

"Dr. Chester Taylor is coming at eight thirty to have a resume and cover letter done. It's a rush job, he needs it done in a week, so we'll make a nice chunk of change off him. After that I'm going to Stay Fit to see about getting the gym billing stopped."

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“She works at Chevy Chase Bank. In Laurel.”

I’d settled at the breakfast bar beside Ann, poised to eat. At her words I looked up from my plate and stared at her. “Gerard’s new girlfriend, I presume.”

She nodded. “I just wanna see her. Just once.”

“It won’t do you any good.”

“I have to see her, Stella.”

“Why. You wanna torture yourself?”

“Hey, when you wanted to see Devlin, a.k.a. Cinder, I was right there beside you.”

I sighed. Of course she was right. But somehow seeing my lover’s boyfriend and Ann seeing her ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend didn’t seem quite the same.

It hurt knowing the man I’d been hoping to start a relationship with was in love with another man while he was sleeping with me. But I sort of preferred Jake being in love with a man instead of a woman. This way it wasn’t a slight against me. Jake may sleep with women from time to time, however he’d chosen to share his life with a man.

I nodded. “Okay. We’ll go after my eight-thirty leaves. But I have no idea what you’re gonna do once we get there.”

“I only want to see her. Just once.”

9:40 a.m.

“You mentioned dive certifications earlier,” I said to the attractive man opposite my desk in my home office. “Can you name them for me now?”

He gave me a slow smile, as though I’d offered him my body on a silver platter instead of asking for his certifications. I should have been offended, but I wasn’t. He’d been flirting with me for the last hour and I was enjoying the hell out of it.

Dr. Chester Taylor was a good-looking man. A *very* good-looking man. Not at all what I expected. While he wasn’t drop dead gorgeous like Jake, he was pretty damn close. Dressed in gray slacks that hugged his long, muscular legs, and a black ribbed turtleneck sweater, which offset his tan skin, the Dr. was an incredibly sexy man. His hair was sun bleached blonde, something I knew since he’d just arrived in Maryland from a Scuba diving trip in Hawaii. He had the kind of California good looks that would make him stand out in any crowd.

Still grinning at me, Chester said, “PADI Basic Open Water Scuba Diving, June 1999. PADI Advanced Open Water Scuba Diving, July 2000. PADI Rescue Diver, August 2000...”

As he spoke, I typed his information into the Client Information Form on my

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desktop computer. “Was it the love of history, water, or adventure?” I asked when he finished, surprising myself by giving voice to what I’d been wondering from the moment this man started talking about himself.

“Diving?” he asked, arching one bushy brow in question.

I nodded.

He eased back in the chair and crossed his legs, an ankle over one knee. With my desk between us I couldn’t see the actual movement of his legs, but I could see his knee come into view when he began to bob it up and down.

“Why do you ask?”

“Nautical archaeology. You sound like an underwater Indiana Jones. It sounds dangerous...and exciting,” I finished, hoping desperately he hadn’t heard the Indiana Jones comment. Dear God, why couldn’t I shut myself up before stupid things like that slipped out?

“All of the above,” he said with a shrug. “And I love animals. All kinds. Grew up on a farm so I’ve always had them around me.” He paused to lick his bottom lip. “Cats, dogs, cows, pigs, horses, chickens, you name it. Even tried to tame a deer once when I was twelve.” He shook his head and laughed. “Don’t have to tell you what a disaster that was.”

“The deer didn’t fancy the idea of being your pet?”

“Not one bit. See, I was twelve but I’d done some roping before. Mostly calves, so I thought I could do the same with a deer. They have those big eyes and gentle faces. They seemed harmless.”

The image of an over eager, twelve-year-old, Dr. Taylor trying to rope a deer had me chuckling. “Doesn’t sound like a very good idea to me.”

“Well see, you’re a city girl. You’d be afraid to rope a calf. When you grow up in the country your view of animals is different. Not so much fear as appreciation.”

Damn! Even as he spoke I could feel it happening. All the signs were there. Throbbing loins, a fluttering heart, and a ridiculous need to tilt my head to the left and sigh every time he did something I thought was cute. I tried to remind myself that I was taking a vacation from men. A long vacation, but somehow my mind couldn’t compute the information.

Damn it to hell, I was falling in lust with Dr. Taylor...my client.

I’d learned nothing from the Jake fiasco. Apparently I was still a glutton for punishment.

I was unstoppable and uncontrollable!

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“As far as that deer goes,” the doctor continued, “I never got a chance to use the rope I’d carried with me into the forest. Soon as I got within twenty feet, the damn thing charged me. I nearly cracked a rib trying to get away from it.”

I swallowed hard, smiled, then crossed my hands and settled them on my desk. This was my professional pose, my “let’s get down to business” pose. “Okay,” I said in my, “let’s get down to business” voice. “We’ve covered professional background, education, licenses, certifications, special skills, memberships, awards, publications, speaking engagements, references, and your objective. Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“Well Ms. Rice, I really like the idea of taking you out sometime.”

I had to bite my inner cheek hard to keep from smiling. At that moment I knew I wasn’t supposed to be with Dr. Taylor as Stella Rice the woman. At every client consultation I was there as a representative of AIR, and as such, it was my responsibility to keep this meeting professional. Least that’s what I always told Ann anytime I found her flirting with a client. It had always seemed like a reasonable request when I advised Ann. However, at the moment, keeping things on a professional level didn’t seem all that important or reasonable. After all, I could still do a kick-ass resume and cover letter for Dr. Taylor even if I went on a date with him. One date wouldn’t ruin my level of professionalism. I supposed it wouldn’t ruin Ann’s either.

“Is that so?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant, as though California type heartthrobs always tried to pick me up.

“That’s so,” he agreed. “What do you say?”

For reasons I couldn’t explain, I thought of Jake. We weren’t together and hadn’t shared anything but one night of great sex. Jake was a non-issue. Still, by going out with another man I felt that I was permanently closing the door on any possible reconciliation.

“You don’t date white men?” he asked, mistaking my silence for a refusal.

“No, it’s not that,” I began to say.

“You aren’t seeing anyone else are you?”

Damn if his Southern drawl wasn’t the cutest thing I’d ever heard. This man was downright lethal. He had “golden boy” good looks with a down to earth, Southern charm that had me near to drooling.

“No, I’m not seeing anyone. But I don’t date clients. It’s one of my rules.”

“Haven’t you ever heard that rules were made to be broken?”

“I’m not a rule breaker.” I pushed back from my desk and got to my feet, determined to end this meeting before I did something stupid. Or, God forbid, said anything more idiotic than the Indiana Jones comment.

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“Sorry to hear that,” he said, rising as well. “You’ve got the prettiest brown eyes I’ve ever seen. But just now they look like that deer’s eyes; wide and spooked. So I’ll back off, but I want you to promise me you’ll think about it.”

“Think about what?”

We both turned as Ann strolled into the office.

AIR’s office was housed in what was supposed to be my den. The room was large enough for two desks—set at opposite ends of the room—two client chairs, and a bookcase. Clinging to her third cup of tea, Ann moved behind her desk and sat. Though she hated the formality, especially on days like today when she wasn’t feeling good, she had gone into my closet and put on a blue and red pantsuit. With her short, chestnut hair pulled back and held in place by a clip at her nape and the bit of makeup she’d put on, she looked almost human again. I could barely tell she was suffering the results of an all night drinking binge.

“Going out with me,” Dr. Taylor explained before I could maneuver him out the door.

Ann depressed a button on her CPU and the motor whirled to life. She looked at me, at the good doctor, then back at me. “A date?”

“Yes,” he said at the same time I was saying no.

“I think it sounds like a good idea.”

“Nobody asked you,” I informed my turncoat of a friend.

Ann let loose with a snort. “The rule?”

Dr. Taylor nodded. “Good to know it isn’t just me.”

“Oh no, it’s not.” Ann assured him. “Stella’s a stickler for rules. I think she has a rule for everything. When to wake up, when to eat, when to take a sh—”

“In any case,” I interrupted. I placed my hand gently, but insistently on his lower back, leading him out of the office and toward my front door. “You said you need your resume in a week. I’ll have it and your cover letter done by Monday. You can pick it up Monday morning. What time is good for you?”

Though he allowed me to propel him forward, he came to a halt in the foyer. Turning, he smiled down at me.

My heart skipped and I took a step back.

This man was more than lethal. He was positively toxic.

He set his hands on his hips and shook his head. I was amazed that such a simple movement could look so sexy.

“Think about it,” he said, then pulled my front door open, stepped into the hall

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and turned to face me again. "You can tell me Monday morning at eight-thirty five, five minutes after you give me my new resume and cover letter and I pay you the remainder of your fee. Deal?"

I considered arguing the point but figured the quickest way to get rid of him was to agree. "Agreed," I said.

"Because five minutes after you give me my new resume and cover letter," he continued, "I won't be a client anymore."

I smiled. "Touché."

"See you Monday." That said, he turned and walked away.

I had to force myself to not peak into the hall and watch his progress. Instead, I shut the door, locked it, and went in search of Ann.

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CHAPTER THREE

4:47 p.m.

Why! Why! Why?

Why do I get myself into these stupid situations? Better question, why do I surround myself with loonies? All of my friends belong in loony bins. And I belong in a loony bin for associating with them.

"I just want to see her, Stella," Ann had explained. "I just want to see if she's better looking than me." And I was fool enough to believe her.

Mistake 1. Agreeing to go to Laurel to have a look at Gerard's new girlfriend.

Mistake 2. Not having a car of my own for this little expedition.

Mistake 3. Agreeing to get into a car with Ann behind the wheel.

So there I was, sitting innocently in the passenger's seat of Ann's monster SUV, wondering how bad the twenty-five mile drive back to Baltimore from Laurel would be during rush hour while Ann the Nut pulled into the Chevy Chase Bank parking lot.

Okay, the first sign of trouble was the fact that the bank wasn't the sort of bank I'd been expecting. I had envisioned something with cash machines, drive-through banking, and an interior filled with tellers who doled out cash to customers. What I got was a one-story brick building, sans the usual bank paraphernalia, and two security trucks sitting in front of the main lobby. This wasn't a customer service bank; this was the bank's corporate office.

I stared out my window, a niggling of dread forming in the pit of my stomach. "We can't go in there, Ann."

"I know, but it's almost four thirty."

The dread grew. Nevertheless, I asked, "What happens at four-thirty?"

"She gets off work. All we have to do is drive around the parking lot until we find her car, and wait."

I began gesturing out the window at the security trucks. "Drive around the

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parking lot? We can't drive around the parking lot. This place has security guards."

"Big deal. For all they know we have business here. We could be perspective employees looking for a job." She gave me a wink, a gesture clearly meant to calm me.

It didn't.

"Promise me all you want to do is look."

She raised her right hand in the air, an unmistakable sign of good faith, and proceeded to lie through her teeth. "I promise Stella," she said. "All I want is a look. There's her car. The red Jetta."

I didn't ask how she knew what Candace drove. I didn't want to know.

Five minutes later, when Ann looked solemnly at me and said, "If something bad happens, you got my back, right?" I knew I was in trouble.

I stared for a moment, unable to respond.

"Right?" she repeated.

"What could happen?"

Ann shrugged. "I don't know. Probably nothing. I'm just asking if something were to happen, you got my back."

I suddenly felt like I was in high school again, a period of my life you couldn't pay me to repeat. There were so many things I hated about high school I hardly knew where to start. But if I *had* to pick a starting point I'd say it was those days I went in knowing sometime during the day I'd be forced to fight because somebody did something to upset one of my friends. The other girl's friends would inevitably get involved which, of course, meant my girlfriends and I had to get involved. Threats would be bandied about for the better part of the day, there'd be much trash talk and posturing—I would be doing more than my share of both—while all the time I was silently praying nothing would happen.

I hated fighting. I *loathed* fighting. I simply wasn't very good at it and didn't fancy the idea of finding myself in a parking lot brawl at the age of thirty.

I supposed this was part of friendship, watching your girlfriend's back no matter how much of a nut she acted.

"Of course I have your back. That doesn't mean you should start a fight with this girl, Ann."

Ann snorted. "I'm a grown woman, Stella. This isn't high school. I don't start fights."

The sigh of relief had barely escaped my lips when, from the corner of my eye, I saw Ann throw herself at her horn. The loud *honk* seemed to echo for seconds after Ann pulled back.

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“What the hell are you doing?”

“That one there.” Ann pointed toward a statuesque blonde who’d been about to step into the Jetta. Her hair was long, swept away from her face and held in place by a pink clip. The clip was the perfect match of her high-heeled pumps and floral dress.

She was very pretty. In fact, she seemed perfect. Not a hair out of place, not a stitch of clothing rumpled. This girl was, in a word, the “Anti-Ann”.

Along with the other people who’d exited the building, this woman turned to see where the noise had come from.

Ann waved a hand at Gerard’s new girlfriend, a bright smile affixed to her face. “Come here,” she pronounced carefully, so the girl could read her lips.

“What the hell are you doing, Ann?”

“Shh.” Ann said.

The woman looked around for a moment, unsure of what to do. But when Ann waved again, motioning for her to come over, the blonde seemed to come to a decision.

Cautiously, she started for the truck. When she got to Ann’s open window, Ann offered her a shake. The bright smile remained in place.

“I’m Beverly,” Ann said.

I groaned. Whatever was about to happen, I was sure I wouldn’t like it.

“Candace,” the girl said, clasping Ann’s hand and shaking it.

“I’m sorry about this,” Ann began, “but I figured you should know.”

“Know what?” Candace asked.

“I’m Gerard’s ex.” Ann waited for a reaction. When none came she continued. “I broke up with Gerard last month because he gave me chlamydia.”

Candace, who’d been leaning into the car, abruptly straightened and took a step back. “What did you say?”

Ann nodded. “The bastard didn’t say a word about having it.”

Candace’s mouth opened, shut, and then opened again. “Who are you?”

“We were dating seven months before I found out. Anyway, I thought you should know.”

“Gerard hasn’t said anything about having a health condition.”

Ann gave Candace a condescending smile. “He goes to the block,” Ann said of Baltimore’s sex district, “and sleeps with strippers. He did it the entire seven months we were together. The bastard only admitted it to me when I confronted him about the chlamydia.”

“Gerard’s not like that.”

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“I doubt he’s changed.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Ann shrugged. “I just thought you should know. Don’t want what happened to me to happen to you. Wish somebody had told me about it before I slept with him.” Ann paused, gasped, and clutched her throat. “You haven’t slept with him, have you?”

Obviously dazed by this encounter, Candace shook her head no and took another step away from the truck.

“Good. Don’t.” Ann smiled. “Have a nice day.” Mission accomplished, Ann put the car in drive, gave Candace enough time to take another step back, then pulled out of the parking spot.

For a long time I didn’t say anything. I stared at Ann as she maneuvered the truck through the stop and go traffic on I-95 and would have remained silent had I not seen the slight quiver of her lips when she was pulling onto Pratt Street.

“She’s gorgeous,” Ann finally said.

“So are you.”

Ann snorted. “She’s perfect though. Like something out of a movie. No way Gerard’s breaking up with her.”

A lone tear slid down Ann’s cheek and plopped onto her shoulder.

“Why don’t you stay at my place again tonight. We’ll watch movies, eat junk food, and stay up all night.”

Sniffling, she nodded. “I’ll swing by my place and pick up some clothes.” She paused. “I hate feeling like this. I absolutely hate it.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

2/4/05 7:45 p.m.

I've spent the last two days avoiding the phone. Katarina has called a bazillion times about Stay Fit. I know I was supposed to go there on Wednesday, but I didn't get a chance.

After leaving the bank in Laurel and seeing Candace up close for the first time, Ann was devastated. "Why did she have to be so pretty?" She'd wanted to know. And, "Why did she have to drive a Jetta while I drive a man truck? Why did she have to have such perfect hair and such a perfect body?"

I'd spent most of the night commiserating and trying to comfort Ann. When the task seemed too much for me I'd called in reinforcements. Katarina and Meagan arrived on the scene with a stack of DVDs, ice cream, and munchies. Though the movies had helped distract Ann for a while, they weren't enough to get her feeling like her old self again.

Today I've been dodging calls from Katarina and, surprise of surprises, Gerard. He wants to know why I let Ann tell Candace he slept with strippers and had STD's. I didn't have an answer for Gerard so I let him talk to my machine.

In any case, I'm too mentally exhausted to even considered going to Stay Fit today.

Maybe tomorrow.

2/6/05 2:47 p.m.

Had I really thought Jake had it in him to be reasonable? Had I forgotten how persuasive he could be? Yes and yes!

Purposely, I waited until two in the afternoon to go to the gym. My hope was that by waiting I'd prevent a run in with Jake. I knew from experience that on a typical day, Jake showed up at five in the morning and was gone for the day by one. I left an extra hour in there for safety's sake, figuring that by two he'd be long gone.

At two p.m. sharp I sauntered through the lobby of Stay Fit, headed to the front

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desk, and asked to see the manager on duty.

The guy behind the counter, a mega-sized man, gave me a gap-toothed grin and attempted to arch a brow. It was probably then that I should've turned tail and fled. Clearly this man knew who I was. I didn't flee though. Instead, I scolded myself for being paranoid and made myself remain calm and impassive. I could handle this. I'd come prepared. I was dressed in a severe, black on black business suit, designer pumps, and showing just enough leg to titillate and tease. Decades earlier, women had mastered the art of looking professional and aloof while maintaining an in-your-face sex appeal. All women knew how off kilter this made a man, and I wasn't above using this look to my advantage.

My confidence lasted for about five seconds. The act crumpled as soon as Mega-Man said, "Ms. Rice, Jake is waiting for you. He said to bring you to his office when you got here."

My mouth fell open.

"This way." Mega-Man stepped from behind the counter and walked through the archway that led into the gym. He'd gone a good twenty feet before he'd realized I was still in the lobby. He paused, turned to look at me, and gave another go at raising his brow. "Coming?"

I considered the question then nearly told him no. I thought better of it, reasoning that sooner or later I'd have to face Jake. Baltimore wasn't the largest city in the world, and we were likely to come across one another in a restaurant or lounge one day. Either I turned tail and ran away from him today, dodge him the same way I'd dodged his calls, or I could be a woman and face him. After all, I hadn't done anything wrong. He was the one who'd slept with me knowing he was involved with someone else. He was the one who'd pursued me until I gave in. He was the one who should be ashamed and running scared, not me.

Deliberately, I held my head high and started forward.

"I'm sorry," I said to Mega-Man as he led me through a side door I hadn't noticed on my earlier visits to the gym. "I didn't call Jake to tell him I was coming so hearing he's been expecting me caught me off guard."

Mega-Man grunted. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to make of that, so I fell silent and followed him up a stairwell. As I stepped onto the first landing, I realized this would be the first time I'd get to see Jake's office. Jake had two managers and three assistant managers at Stay Fit to cover the hours of operation. I'd been in the day manager's office when I signed the Stay Fit contract, but that was down on the main level.

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The stairs led up to the second floor and ended abruptly facing a plain white wall. To my left was another white wall, but to my right was a door. Mega-Man rapped on the door three times then retreated down the stairs. He paused long enough to wink and give me another grunt.

My stomach writhed. I was about to see Jake for the first time since the night at Hammerjacks when I'd caught him locking lips with his boyfriend, Cinder, a.k.a. Devlin. How on earth could I nonchalantly demand this guy break a fitness contract with me when last month I'd been tied to his four-poster bed being paddled within an inch of my life and loving every second? I'd explored my fetishes with this man, done things with him I'd never contemplated doing with another. I had oral sex, swallowed his love juice, been made love to while I intermittently moaned and screamed his name. Dear God, my entire family would live in shame if they knew half of what I'd done, and the sad truth was, I wanted to do every one of them again. And with Jake.

That thought led me to a second realization—the true reason why I'd been avoiding Jake. My pride was wounded and I was angry, but not enough to *not* repeat past mistakes if given the chance. The only way I could be sure I wouldn't sleep with him again was to stay far away.

The door swung open, pulling me from my thoughts, and I found myself staring up and into Jake's face.

As always, his beauty stunned me. He told me during our night together that he was half Algonquin from his father and half Puerto Rican from his mother. This ethnic mix explained his exotic good looks, but not the potent affect they had on me. His emerald eyes bore into me as I stood looking at him, momentarily paralyzed to the spot. His lush, pink lips quirked into a knowing grin and he stepped back, motioning me inside his office.

I reminded myself that I had to behave with decorum and dignity. I was there with a goal. And that was the only reason I was there.

"Come in, Stella," he said, when I remained in the doorway.

The sound of his voice sent tingles of anticipation rippling down my spine. He had a sexy voice, like melted cream. It was silky and intoxicating, and brought back memories of him confessing all of the perverted things he wanted to do to me.

I could feel my face heat at the remembrance.

Staring purposely at my feet, I stepped into his office.

CHAPTER FIVE

The office was spacious and as decadently decorated as his home. A large, mahogany desk was the focal point, and it was set atop a maroon and forest green area rug. Two chairs sat opposite his desk, there was a bar in the far corner of the room, a sofa, and another door that led...I didn't know where. The wall to my left was made entirely of glass. From the gym below this entire wall appeared as one large mirror, but that was a façade. From here in his office, Jake could oversee everything that happened in Stay Fit.

Once I was inside, he closed the door. I heard the unmistakable sound of a lock slipping into place.

Goose flesh popped out along my arms.

"Have a seat," he said, from behind me.

I glanced at the sofa, then at the pair of visitor's chairs facing his desk. I opted for a chair.

As I walked across the room I felt Jake on my heels, moving so close that the scent of him completely engulfed my senses. He smelled *good*. Even after kickboxing class, sweaty and mussed from exertion, Jake had always smelled yummy.

I sat in a chair, crossed my legs, and struggled to remember why I was there. It wasn't to have sex; however, the thought was the preeminent one filling my mind.

"I knew you'd come," he said, resting his hands on my shoulders from behind me and squeezing. "Katarina's been calling every day, demanding I break her contract."

Katarina. That was it. The contract.

He'd begun to knead my shoulders. His fingers on me felt so right, so welcome that I had to stop myself from leaning into him. Instead, I slid forward, ending the contact.

"You have to break the contract, Jake," I said, proud of the resolve I heard in my voice.

"Do I, now?"

"Yes."

He stood in front of me then hiked one jean-clad hip onto the edge of his desk.

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His foot rocked back and forth and I noticed he was wearing black work boots today. They looked damn sexy on him.

“Give me one good reason why I should,” he said, easing further back on his desk, knees splayed.

Damn it to hell, he was hard. Not just hard either, but solid as a rock. His erection pressed against the crotch of his jeans so forcefully I wouldn’t have been surprised to hear the material rip and see his cock come spilling out amid a tangle of dark hair.

I forced my eyes away from his erection and swallowed hard. “Because it’s the right thing to do?” I hadn’t meant it to come out as a question, but Jake had me so unnerved, and that’s exactly what it sounded like. A question.

“I’ll tell you what,” he began, grinning insidiously at me. “You come to my place on February fourteenth—”

“Valentine’s Day?”

“Yeah, Valentine’s Day. You stay all night, same rules as last time, and I’ll break Katarina’s contract.” Then, he added as an afterthought, “And yours.”

When I managed to collect my thoughts, I got to my feet. Outrage made my voice quiver. Thrusting my finger into his chest, I accused, “You want me to spend the night with you? That’s the only way you’ll break our contracts?”

He nodded.

“I’m not a whore. I won’t sell my body for two stupid contracts.”

“You won’t be selling your body. The contracts are an excuse. You want me just as much as I want you. You can use the contracts to justify it to yourself.”

“You arrogant ass! Why the hell would I want to spend the night with you? You’re a liar and a cheat. And you’re gay.”

“I never said I wasn’t attached. You never asked. And I’m not gay, I’m bisexual.”

“With the way you came on to me I naturally assumed you were unattached.”

“If you had asked I would have told you. Did you really think all those clothes in the closet belonged to me?”

As a matter of fact, I had. “I suppose Cinder’s going out of town again and you don’t want to be alone on Valentine’s Day.”

He shook his head. “No, Dev is gonna be home.”

I frowned. “So why do you want me there?”

“Not just me, Stella. Dev wants you to spend the night too. It’ll be the three of us.”

I gulped. “Let me get this straight. You expect me to stay at your house for

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Valentine's Day? Overnight, same rules as before; the rules being that I'm your sex toy for the night?"

He nodded. "Only this time, Dev gets to play too."

"Have you lost your mind?"

He didn't answer, at least not with words. I felt the heel of his boot glide over my calf as he hooked his leg around mine. A moment later he dragged me forward into the circle of his thighs.

The kiss was slow, tentative at first, but as I relaxed into him, it deepened. His tongue moistened mine, his lips tasted sweet as honey, and I was doing precisely what I said I wouldn't do. But it felt too incredible, and I didn't want to stop.

Determined to get control over the situation, I eased my arms between us and gave Jake a shove.

Nothing happened, save Jake exerting more strength to hold onto me.

"No," I tried to say against his lips.

He pulled back and uttered, "Yes." He wrapped his legs around my waist and locked me in place. When his lips meant mine this time, I knew there was no going back.

Moaning hungrily, he drew my tongue into his mouth and sucked. A jolt of sexual awareness danced from my loins to my nipples and back down again. I rubbed against him, pressing closer, needing to feel him all over. I suddenly wanted him so much I could scarce stand on my own two feet.

"Dear God, Jake," I said when he eased me away and slid off his desk. "What are you doing to me?"

"Binding you to me," he said. His voice was hoarse, barely audible above the pounding of my heart.

He moved to stand behind me, set his hands on my waist and nudged me forward until I was pressed against his desk. "Wait a sec." He said. He retreated but returned in seconds. "Lean on this." He eased a pillow from the sofa under my hips so the angled edges of his desk wouldn't cut into me.

Thoughtful and considerate.

"Now, take off your shoes so we can get those pantyhose off," he said.

Matching words to action, he crouched while I slipped my feet free of their leather confines. He set his hands on my thighs and began to slide the pantyhose off. I'd never had a man handle me in such a way, so gently while primal hunger was evident in the way his hands shook when he touched me. It left me stunned.

Tossing the pantyhose aside, he stood to his full height and loomed over me. "Bend over, Stella," he ordered, giving me a helpful prod.

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I was chest down against his desk, cheek pressed to the cool, dark wood, hair splayed around me. He eased the skirt of my suit up around my waist.

“Do you know how bad I’ve wanted to do this?” he asked. “How many times I wanted to go to your place, kick down the door, and make you admit you want me?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t if I wanted to. I was lost in the feel of his fingers grazing my skin as he grasped my panties and drew them down just enough to give him access to my throbbing quim.

I was bare from the waist down, naked and unprotected. The warm air of his office tickled my clit as I lay waiting. I shivered.

“Do you know how many times I’ve fantasized about finding you in The Oak Room and making you come home with me? Making you submit to me again?”

“And what about Dev?” I asked, wondering what Jake’s lover would’ve thought of this.

In answer, he slid into me slow, careful not to press too fast and hurt me. “Fuck, you feel good. Dev won’t believe how tight you are. He’ll die when he feels you, Stella. He’ll die on the spot, that’s how good you feel.”

He pressed in further and I bit my lower lip. A guttural groan slid from my lips.

“How do you want it Stella?” he asked after he’d eased his cock into my core. “Slow and easy or fast and hard?”

I didn’t think I had the patience for slow and easy just now, so I told him a little hoarsely, “Fast and hard. Real hard.”

“Hold on, then.” Without saying another word, he eased back excruciatingly slow, paused, then thrust into me faster and harder than I would’ve believed humanly possible. The sudden force of the movement had me sliding along the slick surface of his desk. I was thankful he hadn’t removed my shirt and bra. Had I been naked from the waist up I didn’t doubt my breasts would’ve been brush-burned.

I didn’t have time to catch my breath before he was withdrawing from me. My insides felt sore from the sudden intrusion, unaccustomed to being so thoroughly filled. I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of my fast and hard request. After going so long without sex, slow and easy might have been the better choice.

Before I could say as much, he drove into me, sending riotous sensations surging through my body. I wasn’t entirely sure if it was pleasure or pain I was feeling, or if it was a bizarre mix of both.

As he eased back again I levered myself onto my elbows, hoping to control his thrusts.

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“Jake?” I asked, a little breathlessly.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, plunging into me a third time.

The force of his thrust made me collapse onto the desk, a low moan in my throat. All-encompassing ecstasy teased in the pit of my stomach. Tempting, even as it stayed just beyond my reach. Every time he surged deep, the delicious sensation intensified. It grew until I was shoving into him, forcing him to drive deeper.

He drew back and thrust, setting a rhythm I was powerless against. Each possession left me desperate; each withdrawal had me eager for more.

“That’s right,” he said. “Give in to me.”

Unable to form words, I sighed.

I felt around for something to cling to, something to anchor me against the jarring force of his hips moving against mine. My hands found purchase on his desk, so I gripped the edges and hung on for dear life, riding his cock all the while.

I could tell by our hunger that this wouldn’t take long. We were both too needy to take our time, too frantic for a lingering coupling.

He kept his hands on my hips, fingers digging into my flesh as he moved my hips in time with his thrusts.

On the very edge of control, hovering on the precipice of fulfilled desire, my climax danced just out of reach.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come, Stella.”

He pounded into me and pulsed. The sensations engulfed me, raged through my body at double-time, the pleasure descending too fast to control. I didn’t want to orgasm yet. I wanted more. Still, when I felt him ejaculate, the orgasm that had teased, delivered. A fierce spasm shook my body. I forced my buttocks against his hips even as he wrapped me in his arms and held tight.

He fell backward into a visitor chair, pulling me along with him into his lap.

After three more thrusts, we were both done...and well satisfied.

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“A word about Dev,” Jake said, pulling me more firmly onto his lap a few minutes later. “He’s a closet actor. He loves performing. And not just on stage for an audience.”

“I haven’t said I agree to your Valentine’s Day proposal.”

He gave me a squeeze that made the muscles in his arm ripple. “You’ll come.” And we both knew he was right. “Anyway, about Dev. He’s always dreamed of being an actor. Our closet is full of costumes he’s worn onstage with Maverick. He gets a rush out of incorporating his leather gear into sex. See what I’m getting at?”

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I stared at him. "I haven't a clue."

"Dev loves sex. Dev loves performing. But what Dev really loves is to combine his passions. Get me?"

"He sings while he has sex?"

Jake rolled his eyes. "Sex skits. He gets a rush out of thinking up wild scenarios, pretending to be a character in the situation, and fucking."

I tried not to laugh but it was difficult. "Like playing Doctor?"

"I guess you could say that. Except Dev's set-ups are much more elaborate."

"I don't know whether I should be aroused or afraid."

"Definitely aroused. Dev gets off on sex games." He watched for my reaction. When I continued to smile he went on. "Dev's a great fuck, Stella. The more turned on he is the more fun you'll have."

"What about you?"

"I'm gonna have a hard time sharing you."

9:07 p.m.

"You did what?"

Ann, Katarina, and Meagan all shared matching looks of alarm. I chugged some more Sam Adams and tried to seem nonchalant about the whole affair. All afternoon I'd been practicing my, 'I have sex on desktops all the time' face. "I had sex with Jake today," I said again. "In his office. On his desk."

"You did what?" Katarina repeated.

Had we gotten stuck in a conversational loop? It felt like we'd all somehow become broken records. I could hear the words, "*On his desk*," echoing over and over in my head, followed closely behind by, "*You did what?*"

"In his office?" Meagan eyed me up and down. "I'm impressed. I didn't think you had it in you."

Katarina shoved a blonde strand from her face and frowned. Her disapproval radiated off of her like body heat. "Well I'm not impressed. What were you thinking, Stella? You can't go around having sex in men's offices."

"Was it good?" Ann wanted to know.

A memory of my body splayed across his desk, Jake standing behind me, impaling me, flashed in my mind's eye. "I've never done anything like that before," I said, still stunned stupid by my own behavior. "It was amazing. It felt so carnal. I can't remember ever being so turned on."

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“What about my money?” Katarina wanted to know.

“Screw your money,” Ann said. “I wanna know more about the sex. Gerard and I used to have exciting sex. We did it at a concert once. Standing up, right in the middle of the auditorium. Best sex I ever had.”

“How’re you ladies doing?”

Ann grinned unabashedly at the waitress, not in the least bit embarrassed that the woman had overheard Ann telling us about another of her and Gerard’s sexual escapades.

“Another MGD,” Ann told the lady.

Katarina shook her head. “I’m meeting Jim for drinks later,” she told us. “I don’t want to be drunk before I get there.”

“I’ll have another Margarita,” Meagan said. After the waitress was out of earshot, Meagan leaned over the table, careful to keep her long curls away from the flickering candle flames, and confided, “I did it at a concert once too. It was an outdoor concert. And we did it on a blanket. It was amazing. Just me, Tim—or was it Jason—and the stars.”

“So who here besides me isn’t an exhibitionist?” Katarina wanted to know.

Okay, so I’d had sex on a desk. I didn’t think that made me an exhibitionist. “I was in a locked office. I don’t think that makes me an exhibitionist. And anyway, sex in his office isn’t the oddest thing about our meeting. The real kicker has to do with our contracts.” I paused to make sure I had everyone’s attention. And I did. Beside me, Katarina’s expression was one of trepidation. Across the table, Ann held her beer aloft, waiting to drink until I said whatever it was I had to say. Meagan simply stared. “Jake said he’d break our contracts, no questions asked, if I’d spend the night with him on Valentine’s Day. With him,” I continued, “and his boyfriend, Dev. a.k.a. Cinder.”

As expected, I’d struck another chord. For a good fifteen seconds, nobody said a word. However, there was much gasping, throat claspings, and offended grunts emanating from our section of the lounge.

Ann was the first to speak. “Do what?”

“Spend the night with them. They want a woman to share, to play with I suppose. And they’ve elected me.” I shrugged. “Go figure.”

“You said no, right?” Katarina’s manicured fingers clenched into a fist. “Tell me you kneed him in the balls.”

“The two of them!” Ann added.

Meagan gasped again, shaking her head. “Was he serious?”

“Jake doesn’t joke about sex.”

“What about you? You think this is funny? You think you’re up to having sex

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with two men at the same time.”

“I told him I’d think about it.”

Katarina’s fist came down on the table, making us all jump. She bared her teeth and curled her lip. “What’s there to think about?”

“Come on,” I said. “You guys saw Dev. The man is gorgeous. Jake is gorgeous. When will I get another chance to have sex with two men who look like that? And at the same time to boot. A Jake and Dev sandwich.”

“Dev?” Katarina repeated, incredulous. “Since when did Jake’s lover become Dev?”

“That’s what Jake calls him.”

“Ménage a Trois,” Meagan said. “If you do this, you’ll have to remember, it’s just sex. Don’t mistake it for anything else and get hurt.”

Katarina’s head swung around to face Meagan. “You can’t be serious. You’re not seriously telling Stella this is an okay thing to do.”

“It’s Stella’s choice.”

“This is crazy,” Katrina started. “Come on, Ann. Back me up on this.”

Ann downed some MGD then shook her head. “I think I’m with Meagan. As long as Stella doesn’t get emotionally involved, this could be fun. Hell, I’d do it.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” a male voice asked.

We all jumped when a cane materialized in the air above us, descended, and struck the table with a loud *whap*. The *whap* was followed by a string of curses and unflattering comments that had the blood draining from Ann’s face. Only as the spray of spittle began to dissipate was I able to identify the speaker, and only then when the tide of his anger had lessened to an extent that his words no longer resembled that of an angry chimpanzee.

“Gerard,” Ann said, once she’d composed herself sufficiently to stare down her nose at him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Why she asked him that instead of being nice to him, I’d never know. She’d only spent the last week crying and moaning about him. If this was the best she could do to win him back, I didn’t think she had a chance in hell.

“Stay away from Candace,” was his short, but passionate retort to Ann.

“Candace? Candace who?”

I tried not to snort at the ridiculousness of this question.

Gerard’s lip curled. I feared he was about to let loose with a fresh torrent of expletives. Instead, he rested his fists on the table and leaned closer. His blonde hair fell

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over his forehead, making him seem younger, more innocent, less pissed off. "I know it was you, Ann. You and Stella." I felt his eyes flash on me as he said my name.

"Hey," I said, throwing up my hands in defense, "leave me out of this.

"Stay away from Candace."

"Drop dead," Ann replied.

"If I find out you've been harassing Candace..." he paused. No doubt he was trying to think up a suitable punishment.

"Don't you dare threaten me."

Unable to come up with anything good, Gerard stood erect and said, "Stay away." Then he turned and stomped out the front doors.

We were silent, unsure if it was safe to speak yet. We knew from the last few weeks the precarious position we were in. One wrong word, one casually spoken phrase could be enough to push Ann over the edge. None of us wanted to see her attempt to drown her misery in tequila again, so we waited and tried to gauge her emotional state.

It didn't look promising. As she reached for her beer her lips had already begun to quiver. Her eyes looked moist and disbelieving and her nose was turning red.

She finished off her beer in a few gulps, raised a hand for our waitress, and ordered herself two tequila shots.

"Ann," Meagan was the first to say.

"I hate him," Ann declared.

I reached across the table and gave Ann's hand a squeeze. "Tequila won't help."

"Oh yes it will. It'll make me numb."

"Remember how awful you felt Wednesday morning after drinking all night?"

"Yeah," Meagan agreed. "Don't let Gerard do this to you."

As the waitress set Ann's tequila shots on the table, Ann nodded her thanks, hefted one shot glass, and swallowed. She didn't bother with the salt or the lime, all she cared about was the booze. "Just shut up and let me drink," she said.

And that pretty much capped off our night.

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CHAPTER SIX

2/7/05 8:35 a.m.

Oh, the tangled webs we weave.

If I had thought the doc was going to forget our conversation of last week, I was destined for disappointment. Okay, so maybe disappoint isn't the right word here because I wasn't really disappointed. I was pleased, enthusiastic, but I was not disappointed. I was feeling guilty, though. Why I should feel guilty was anybody's guess. Okay, so I'd had sex with Jake again. Big deal. It wasn't like having sex with Jake meant anything serious was happening between us. Sex with Jake was just that. Sex. Jake was involved with someone else. Our date on Valentine's Day aside, the important thing was that I owed Jake nothing and he owed me nothing. I was a free agent, able to date whomever I pleased.

Least that's what I kept telling myself.

Dr. Taylor arrived promptly at eight-thirty in black slacks and a lemon-yellow, button-up shirt. He stepped into the office behind Ann, slipped out of his coat, and waited.

All I can say is my world came to a sudden, mind-numbing stop. Here was the kind of man dreams were made of and women fantasized about. Somehow I didn't remember him looking this good. He could've stepped off the cover of a romance novel and into my office. If I didn't have such a strong grip on reality I would have thought that was exactly where he'd come from—that Ann had gone out and grabbed some erotic novel and shaken the doc loose from its pages.

He smiled, almost shy and boyish, and held out his hand when I started toward him. It took a second, but reality settled itself on me again and I lifted my own to meet his. Our palms touched and I nearly yelped in surprise. His skin was so hot, it seared. And rough from years of hands-on work.

Slipping my hand free, I nodded to Ann who quickly retreated from the room—grinning like a loon—and shut the door. The usually large office suddenly felt too small to hold the two of us.

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He brushed against me as he crossed the room, then settled in the seat opposite my desk.

When I gave him the resume and cover letter I'd spent the last few days working on, he spent exactly two minutes looking them over. He paid me the remainder of my fee, grinning as he signed the check and placed it in my hand. It was all very professional and above boards. A minute later, he said, "What about that date?"

I stared at him and considered turning him down flat, then threw that idea out the window. "I don't know," I said, knowing damn well I had every intention of saying yes.

"Come on. It'll be fun."

"When were you thinking?"

"Saturday."

"Let me check my schedule," I parried, trying to sound busy and important. "I'll call you tonight and let you know."

"Set the whole day aside. I want you from sunup to sundown."

"Little pushy, don't you think?"

"I know what I want." He stood. "I'll be waiting for your call."

I escorted him to my foyer and out the door.

Dear God, I hope I'm not making a mistake.

8:46 a.m.

Desperate to get back in Katarina's good graces after last night, I rang her the moment the doc left.

"Guess what?" I practically shouted into the phone.

Katarina, who was currently in her downtown office, probably staring out the window asked, "What?"

"I have a date. No, don't groan. It's not Jake and Dev. It's a former client. His name is Doc—"

I could almost see her perking up when she interrupted. "He's a Doctor?"

"Not the kind you're thinking of. He's a Nautical Archaeologist and *fine*."

"So when are you going out with him?"

"Saturday."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know. But he wants me to block all of Saturday for our date."

"Good for you, Stella. Let's hope the date goes so good you forget about Jake."

In all honesty, I didn't know if that was possible.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

2/9/05 10:36 a.m.

Since Gerard's departure from Ann's life, she seemed to be a permanent fixture in mine. She slept in my home, ate my food, and drank all my tea. Don't get me wrong, my home is always open to any friend or family member in need of emotional comfort. This is, of course, assuming said friend or relative is sane. At present, sane wasn't a word I'd use to describe Ann's mental state. Angry, desperate, and irrational were better descriptions. And at times, when she was guzzling my "Awake" tea and had way too much caffeine flowing through her veins, crazier than a shit-house rat.

Last night she'd sat at her desk for hours, downloading every song she could find that reminded her of Gerard. After amassing a suitable number of songs to ensure hours of heartache and despair, she burned them onto a CD, then she showed up at my bedroom door armed with it, a bottle of tequila, and time to spare.

It wasn't a good night.

This morning she'd allowed me the privilege of holding her hair while all of last night's tequila revisited her.

I can't go on this way. And Ann definitely can't go on this way. She'll kill herself with alcohol poisoning if she tried.

I have to do something!

"I'm a mess."

I looked up to see Ann walk into the office. She came around my desk and slumped in the client chair across from me. I took in her wet hair, rumpled jogging pants, and her pale face, and nodded. "You have to pull it together," I told her.

She nodded. "I have to get Gerard back."

"No, you have to forget about Gerard. Move on. Date someone else."

Ann grimaced and shook her head. "I'm not interested in anyone else."

"Then spend some time on your own. You don't need a man to complete you."

"Not any man. Gerard. I feel lost without him."

Okay, so I liked Gerard too. He was a great boyfriend whenever they were

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together. He was devoted, caring, loving, and affectionate. If I was going to be honest, this breakup wasn't Gerard's fault at all. It was Ann's. Whenever they broke up it was always her fault.

"Why?" I asked, suddenly. "You get him back, then you'll break up with him again."

Ann slumped lower. "I won't. I appreciate him more now."

"Honestly, Ann. If I was Gerard, I would've broken up with you too. After a while a person gets tired of being dumped all the time."

"Oh great! Now you're turning on me too. I can't take this any more. My life is falling in on me!"

I phased out Ann's ranting as a thought occurred to me. What if this was what Gerard wanted? Could the only reason he'd broken things off with her was to give her a taste of her own medicine?

The beginnings of an idea began to form in my head. It was risky, not a definite, but if it worked out, it might be just the thing needed for this situation.

"If you and Gerard got back together, would you dump him again for no good reason?"

"No! I'd never dump. I love him."

"Why don't you call Gerard and invite him and Candace to The Oak Room two Saturday's from today. No, don't interrupt. Just hear me out." When Ann sucked her teeth and sat back I continued. "You tell him you didn't realize breaking up would mean you would lose him as a friend. Tell him you still want to be friends and this is your way of burying the hatchet."

"Why the fuck would I say that?"

I rolled my eyes. "Your mother ever wash that mouth out with soap?"

"Hell no!"

"Anyway," I said on a sigh, "what we'll do is fix you up on a date with someone that night. Someone good looking. One of Meagan's friends. That way when Gerard gets there and—"

"And he sees me with another man he'll get jealous."

"Bingo. So what do you think?"

She didn't answer right away. I could see her tossing the idea around in her head, thinking of possible scenarios. "I say hell yeah! Let's do it."

I gave her thumbs up. "You call Gerard and I'll call Meagan."

"Oh, this is gonna be good," she said, bounding from the chair and trotting to her desk. A moment later, she had her phone pressed to lips and was saying, "Hi Gerard. It's

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me...Ann. I'm calling because I want to apologize..."

4:43 p.m.

As anticipated, "Operation Lure and Deceive" was in full force. Meagan rushed to my place as soon as she got off work. The plan was for us to go over a list of possible men with Ann. The list of Meagan's ex's was long. And she'd brought pictures.

"Gerard wouldn't feel threatened by this guy," Ann said, adding another photo to the reject stack. "Or this guy. But this one is promising. What's his name?"

Meagan smiled. "His name is Sean. He's a vet, has a house in Fells Point, and would do anything for me."

"Anything?"

"You name it."

Getting up for coffee refills, I glanced at the picture. Sean was a good-looking man. "You threw this one away?"

"He was looking to get married," Meagan explained. "I'm not ready for marriage."

Leaving them hovering over the coffee table in the family room, I grabbed their empty mugs and went into the kitchen. I was pouring cream into our mugs when the doorbell clanged.

Katarina was still at work and I didn't remember having any appointments after three today.

"I got it," Ann said, rising from the sofa and setting out for the door. Seconds later, when Ann strolled into the family room, Kool-Aid grin plastered to her face, I knew things were about to get interesting.

And they did.

Walking behind Ann was Dev.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jake's lover was at my house.

Dev was in my kitchen.

I'd only seen Dev once before and that had been at Hammerjacks in January when his band, Maverick, was doing a show. Onstage, dressed in black leather, he'd been magnificent. The leather hugged every delectable inch of his body. The pants fit like a second skin, molding to his form as he danced across the stage.

The man was a walking, talking billboard for sex.

With Dev standing in my kitchen, his hair falling in loose curls around his shoulders and a cocky grin on his lips, I'd quickly forgotten I was supposed to hate him. I didn't think any woman could hate Dev.

He sauntered (yes, sauntered) through my family room and toward the kitchen. This was a man who was positively awe-inspiring. My eyes roved up and down his body of their own accord. I was making a fool of myself, but I couldn't stop. One look simply wasn't enough. He was wearing suede today. Black suede so tight, I wondered how he could breathe. The wool turtleneck was a good touch. The royal blue was a nice contrast to the pants. The shiny, black, knee-boots he had on weren't too bad either.

I opened my mouth to speak, couldn't tell if any sound would actually come out, and shut it.

"Stella," he said.

Dear God, my name sounded amazing on his lips.

I darted a look at Ann, who shrugged. "Can I help you?" I asked.

He rounded the breakfast bar and came to stand beside me at the center island where I'd been stirring cream into our coffee mugs.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," he said.

That's when I remembered my most recent get-together with Jake. You know the one. The sex on the desktop, I want to have a ménage a trois with you, get-together.

My cheeks warmed at the memory and I hoped desperately my thoughts weren't written all over my face.

"Oh?" I said. Stupidly.

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“Oh,” he agreed, with a nod. “I’m Dev. Jake’s lover.”

“I know who you are. I saw you at Hammerjacks last month.”

His grin broadened. “Your knee to the groin didn’t do any lasting damage to Jake, but I guess you already know that.”

I swallowed. “Oh! Jake told you about *that*? About—”

“His desk,” Dev finished, tucking his thumbs into the waistband of his pants. “Jake tells me everything.” He leaned in close and whispered, “Even about the red paddle.”

I wanted the floor to open up and suck me in. This could very well be the most embarrassing moment of my life, and considering my history, that was saying a lot. Allowing Jake to paddle me last month had been one incredibly erotic experience. And it was private. Not something Jake should go around telling his friends about. Not even Dev had a right to know. After all, I didn’t want people knowing I’d let a man tie me up and swat my ass. That wasn’t the kind of thing strangers needed to know.

“What else did he tell you?”

Dev slid onto a counter and made himself at home. Brushing hair out of his face with one bejeweled hand, he informed, “Jake told me he invited you over on Valentine’s Day.”

I could hear Ann and Meagan giggling. Clearly something about this exchange was amusing to them.

“And what do you think of that?” I asked.

“That’s why I’m here. We never formally met so you don’t know how things are between Jake and me.”

“I didn’t know he was seeing anyone,” I said quickly, fearing this conversation was about to go south.

But Dev shook his head. “Hush.”

I opened my mouth to object but closed it again when he frowned. “Okay, say what you came to say.”

He looked toward the family room where Ann and Meagan were hovering. Turning back to me, he suggested, “I think you’d rather have this conversation in private.”

Considering the things Jake had told this man, I figured Dev was right. So I asked the girls, “Can you give us a minute, guys?”

Ann looked like she wanted to refuse, but at Meagan’s prods, the two exited. I had no doubt they’d gone as far as the outer wall and were listening to every word we

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said.

“Dev and I are lovers, you know that. And we’re both bisexual.” He paused. “And we’re both very domineering men.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering where he was going.

“I like to be on top, and Jake likes to be on top. Sometimes sex turns into a wrestling match, if you get my meaning.”

I didn’t. The idea of wrestling with either man was so alluring I couldn’t see a problem. But I was curious and wanted to know more so I told him, “I see.”

“Do you? You can’t have two domineering people in the bedroom. It doesn’t work. Don’t get me wrong, Jake and I have a good time, but it could be better. He shifted on the counter, sliding forward until he was poised at the edge. Eyes intent on mine, he said, “That’s where you come in.”

Having delivered the first part of his speech, Dev rested his weight on one hand and crossed his legs. For any other man, the pose would have seemed effeminate. But Dev wasn’t any other man. The muscles in his thighs flexed as he moved, his bicep bulged under the weight of his body. There was nothing effeminate about Dev. Even the way he watched me was indescribably masculine. There was a glimmer in his eyes, a mischievousness hidden just under the surface making me wonder what he was thinking. And there was something primal about his stare. A primordial hunger that said Dev might slide off the counter at any moment and advance on me.

“Why me?” I asked. “I saw you perform. There are any number of females who would gladly give themselves to you and Jake.”

“Jake doesn’t want any female. He wants *you*. He seems to have become enamored with you, Stella. Did you know that?” He eased off the counter and edged toward me. This made me uncomfortable on many levels. “He says you’re submissive as a kitten in bed. Is that true?”

My brilliant response to this was, “Huh?”

“When he told me about your night together, about the things he did to you, I was so turned on I tried to persuade him to bring me here. I wanted to meet you and see for myself if you were half as beautiful as he claimed.”

“He said I’m beautiful?”

“He told me how he bound you to the posts of our bed, naked, but for the loops of rope fastening your wrists. He taunted me, saying how fine your skin felt, how soft and welcoming it was. He says you’re the type of woman who takes care of herself. Is that true, Stella?” He moved closer.

When I didn’t respond, he continued. “Then he told me how you writhed under

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the paddle.” He paused, mere inches from me, a slow smile spreading on his lips. “You know, he’d wanted to do that to you since the first day you showed up for his kickboxing class. Is it true you’d go to class made up as though you were at a singles bar? And wearing spandex? Tight spandex? He said the moment he spotted you he’d made up his mind to have you.”

I would’ve said something had my mind been working properly. As it was, the only thing I seemed capable of doing was mumbling monosyllables. “Huh? What? Me?”

“Tell me, Stella. Is what he said that happened after he paddled you true? That you knelt between his legs and licked his cock like a starving—”

“He told you that?”

“Mmm. And right through his pants.”

“I got caught up in the moment.” Damn, Jake could sure run his mouth.

“Wanna know what Jake told me when he got home from the gym on Friday?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to know. I could only imagine.

“Jake said you agreed to spend Valentine’s Day with us. All night. I like the sound of that, Stella.” I retreated until I felt the edge of a counter digging into my lower back. “Jake says you’re so tight you feel virginal. And baby, I love the sound of that.” Dev advanced until his body was molded against mine.

I tried to breathe, an exercise that proved futile when he dipped his head low and captured my mouth.

His tongue lashed my skin, forced my lips open then delved within. The suddenness of such intimate contact with Jake’s lover sent my hormones into full alert. His tongue felt sleek within the warm confines of my mouth and his taste was sweetly intoxicating. Like berry wine, chocolate and strawberries. I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his waist and nearly losing myself in his touch.

The feel of his body, hard and unyielding against mine, made me weak in the knees. I was making out with Dev, the man I’d seen onstage at Hammerjacks last month and had been lusting forever since.

He easily lifted and set me on the edge of the counter. All the while he stroked me with his tongue. He licked my lips, nibbled, then delved deep for another taste.

In my mind’s eye I remembered the sight of Dev hooking Jake by the waistband of his pants at Hammerjacks. The moment their tongues touched I knew they were more than lovers. The two had come together with an intensity that left me scorched. They had seemed ravenous. Now, with Dev’s hands all over me, his mouth feasting on mine, the thought of Dev with Jake had my loins tightening.

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I wrapped my legs around Dev and pulled him closer, suddenly needing what he was giving me. I couldn't let go.

He trailed his fingers down my spine before finding the moons of my backside, cupping them in his large hands, and dragging me toward him. With a groan of pure male longing, he rotated his hips and ground them against me where my need was the most fevered. The move was forceful, telling me just how much he wanted me at his place on the fourteenth.

"You're so hard," I said against his lips.

He raised one hand. I felt his fingers twist into my hair as he angled my head to deepen the kiss. His tongue danced against mine, teasing, promising.

I flexed my thighs, fought to get closer. I was quite content to let him take me right there, on my kitchen counter. Hell, I wouldn't be content. I'd be thrilled.

"Oh, Stella. The things I could do to you."

"Could do?"

"Say you'll come," he said, pulling away long enough for me to catch my breath before prodding my lips wide for another taste.

I ran my hands over his back, letting my fingers play over his shoulders. When my hands fell below his waist, I cupped his ass, kneaded it and pulled him closer.

He moaned, then pushed away. "Jake was right. You're like an aphrodisiac," he said, out of breath. "If I didn't think Jake would kill me...Say you'll come, so we can finish this."

"You're stopping? You can't leave me like this."

"Jake would kill me. He refused to give me your address until I promised him I wouldn't seduce you."

His eyes were glazed, his lids heavy with lust. I knew suddenly that stopping our erotic play had pained him as much as it did me.

"He's that possessive of you?" I asked.

He grinned. "As a matter of fact, he is. But in this particular case, it's not me he's being possessive over. I don't get to have you unless Jake's present."

I sat back. "Well that's presumptuous of him. He has no claim over me."

Dev shrugged. "He says different. So what do you say, Stella?"

I wanted to. I'd never wanted to do anything more than I wanted to go to Jake and Dev's on Valentine's Day. But was it right? Would I feel guilty after? Jake was the first and only man I'd ever had casual sex with. All of my previous partners were always boyfriends. I was truly charting new territory here. Not only were Jake and I not seriously involved, but now Jake was bringing a third person into the mix.

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“I don’t know. I have a date this Saturday. I’m not sure if seeing the two of you a few days later would be right.”

“If you don’t come to our place on the fourteenth, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. Come on, Stella. Live a little.”

I knew he wasn’t being arrogant, but he was simply speaking the truth. I would regret not going to their place. I’d always wonder what I’d missed out on. So, throwing caution to the wind, I said. “Okay. I’ll be there.”

He kissed me again. Thoroughly.

“We won’t tell Jake about your date,” he said, once he’d pulled away. “Jake wouldn’t like that.”

“Why should he care?”

Dev didn’t answer the question, but instead he asked one of his own. In retrospect I don’t think it was so much a question as it was a *demand*. “You’re not going to have sex with him, are you?” His tone, the severity of his delivery didn’t seem questioning.

“No. Of course not. I don’t do that sort of thing...Except that time with Jake, but that was a one-time thing. And not including the desk time. Then, of course they’ll be the fourteenth, but that doesn’t count since I know Jake already...I don’t know you, but you know Jake and we both slept with him so I’m sure—”

I was relieved when he interrupted me. If he hadn’t I would have gone on indefinitely. “So we’ll see you on the fourteenth. Jake will give you a call before then, to let you know what time we’ll be picking you up.”

“Okay,” I squeaked, in a kind of shock that I was really going through with this.

He gave me one last, lingering kiss. “See you soon,” he said against my mouth.

When Dev was gone, Ann and Meagan came skipping into the kitchen, chortling in high-pitched voices and making lewd comments.

Shit! I’d completely forgotten about them. Damn it to hell. “How much did you hear?” I demanded.

“I thought you were gonna do it right there on the counter,” Ann laughed. “Amazing, you don’t have a rule about that.”

“A no sex on the counters rule,” Meagan agreed.

“Oh shut up,” I said.

Still giddy, Ann asked, “Hey! Why didn’t you tell us about the paddle?”

CHAPTER NINE

2/12/05 10:57 a.m.

What is it about my personality that brings athletic types to my door? Really. I wanna know. Because if it's something I'm doing, I'll stop.

The moment I opened my front door and found Chester standing in the hallway, dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and cradling a cowboy hat, I knew I was in trouble. My trepidation rose to a fever pitch when the first words out of his mouth were, "It's so nice out there today I thought we could do something a little different."

I glanced down at my stylish slacks, colorful silk blouse, and pumps and decided I would need to change before venturing out today. Good thing too. In my jeans, wool sweater, and boots I was more prepared when he announced his intentions. He didn't do this until I was safely tucked away in his car, which I might add was NICE! It was a black, sporty number with an awesome stereo, leather interior, and really amazing heated seats. I think the moment I saw his car I was in love.

The love thing lasted about twenty seconds. Like I said, once I was trapped within the confines of his car he announced his intentions.

"I've got this friend up in Carroll County—"

"Carroll County? I thought you just moved here."

"I did. Greg's a college buddy of mine. He's the one who sold me on coming to Maryland. See, he's a professor at UMBC," he said of the University of Maryland's Baltimore County campus. "He said I'd like it here. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh, yeah. Greg lives up in Carroll County. Has fifty acres up there."

Already, I didn't like the way this conversation was going. "Like a farm?" I asked terrified by the prospect of what that would mean.

"Not exactly."

"Exactly what, then?"

"He and his wife have a kitchen garden, a vegetable garden, and a few animals of the outdoor variety, and a lot of beautiful land."

I stared at him. "I think I should tell you right now that I don't like being outside. I'm more of a fine dining, art gallery, museum, or go out dancing, type of gal." A

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shudder swept through me at the prospect of spending the day out of doors. It wasn't the weather that had me worried. Chester had been right on that score. At an unseasonably warm temperature of sixty-four degrees, it was gorgeous today. What I was weary of was whatever Chester had planned for us to *do* outside.

Unperturbed, Chester gave me a sexy half-smile. "Fresh meat."

"What do you mean by that?"

The smile slid off his face, but I could see the edges of his lips tremble as he struggled to maintain his composure. "Oh, nothing."

Forty-five minutes later, we were driving up a winding stretch of road Chester said was Greg and Giselle's driveway. We passed under trees so old I guessed they'd seen generations come and go. Weeping willows hung over the road, pines blocked out much of the sun, and barren cherry trees lined the drive. When we came to a clearing, the first thing I saw was a two-story country house sitting at the end of the drive. With its wrap around porch and the porch swing swaying in the breeze a few feet from the front door, the house couldn't have been more country if it tried. Behind the house and off to the right was a group of utility buildings.

Chester pulled to a stop, got out, then walked around to my side of the car and opened my door. I took his hand and allowed him to help me from my seat.

The sun was a golden disk in the sky; its heat was a warm embrace about my body. An enticing aroma of food hung heavy in the air, making my stomach grumble for attention. The sweet smell of the forest around us was a surprisingly welcome change from the gritty city smells of automobile exhaust and smog. Maybe being outside in the country wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Isn't it beautiful here?"

I smiled and let him lead me toward the porch. "It is," I agreed.

We'd only managed a few steps when a man, whose face could have been chiseled from stone, brought us to a standstill.

"So you made it!" this new person announced.

The man wasn't what I'd call good-looking. Tall and lanky, with a mop of wild brown hair, he sort of reminded me of Shaggy from Scooby-Doo.

"Hi to you too, Greg," Chester grinned.

The man eyed his wristwatch. "Thought for sure you'd get lost. You made good time."

"Just show me to the food and the stables. I can talk to you any time."

"Stables?" I repeated. "As in horse stables? You're kidding right?" I would have

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said more had I not felt eyes boring into me. I paused, mid rant, and realized I was the object of close scrutiny.

Brows furrowed, eyes narrowed, Greg stared at me as though I were a lab specimen.

"This is Stella?" he edged closer, eyes scanning me from my booted feet to the top of my head.

"Yeah," Chester said.

Greg opened his mouth to say something else, seemed to think better of it, then settled on giving me a smile and offering his hand. The smile transformed his face. It was like seeing George Washington's face on Mount Rushmore suddenly alight with life.

"Stella," he said brightly, "Stella Rice. Welcome to my home. Come on in. Name's Greg. Greg Hendrickson. I suppose Chester told you we went to school together."

"He did," I agreed. "Nice to meet you."

He gave my hand three enthusiastic pumps, grinning at me the entire time. I felt like I'd gone from being something the cat dragged in to the status of prodigal son in the space of six seconds. His hand was callused, but his touch wasn't unpleasant. I found that I was grinning back at him. I wouldn't have been surprised if I looked as ridiculously goofy as he.

"Follow me," he said, letting my hand slip from his. "Giselle's inside fixing brunch. Said she refused to let you go wandering on an empty stomach." He paused on the steps, glanced at us over his shoulder, and then did this sort of body shudder thing.

Clearly, *something* was wrong. Whatever ease I'd felt, slid away. My abdomen clenched and a tight ball of dread formed in the pit of my stomach. I got the distinct feeling that the something was *me*.

2:22 p.m.

Thank God! I couldn't wait to get out of that house and away from that horrible woman. What the hell was Chester thinking to bring me there in the first place?

When we stepped onto their back deck and proceeded down the stairs into the yard, I couldn't wait to get far enough away from the house so I could give Chester a piece of my mind.

We were walking across the field behind the house and toward the barn, when Chester stopped and turned to face me. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You didn't tell them I'm black, did you?" His quick glance at his boots was all the answer I needed. "How could you bring me here knowing you didn't tell them?"

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Without knowing if they'd have a problem with it or not?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think it would matter."

"Didn't think it would matter? Not everyone is enlightened, Chester. And that Giselle..." I couldn't say any more. I was so furious my hands were trembling.

"Stupid. I know. I'm sorry."

I knew racism was alive and well in America, but I'd never come face to face with it as I had today. In the city, if someone held racist beliefs they simply weren't tolerated. Sure, I'd gotten stared at before, followed in a department store once, but never had I experienced the demeaning treatment I had at the Hendrickson's table. So many times I'd heard racism referred to as hatred, but I didn't think hatred was the right word for what I experienced. Disdain was better. Contempt, better still. "She didn't even want to shake my hand," I said. "She didn't want me sitting at her table or eating her food."

Chester's throat worked. His eyes were steady on my face, nearly pleading. "She's ignorant," he said, speaking in a slow, measured voice.

I nodded my agreement. "Please, take me home."

Something crushed beneath Chester's boot as he stepped closer to me. "Let me show you the horses? It's why I brought you here. I thought we could ride out to the river and sit and talk for a while. I planned to take you to dinner tonight, then dancing."

"I'm not in the mood for horses right now, Chester. Or dancing. I just want to go home."

"Five more minutes. After that we'll go. Promise."

Sighing, I let him lead me to the stables.

We walked in silence, side-by-side, close enough to touch but worlds apart mentally. Chester was a nice man. I'd talked to him enough to know there was no cruelty in him. But could he have been so naïve about his friends as to think the prospect of him dating a black woman wouldn't be an issue? Though I told him I wasn't angry with him, I was. I felt like I'd walked blindly into an ambush.

Giselle had alluded to the inferiority of minorities. She wasn't so bold as to come out and say she thought minorities were inferior intellectually and only able to succeed when given handouts by white people, but she might as well have. When asked where I'd gone to school, I told them I studied Biblical history at Johns Hopkins, to which Giselle commented how glad she was to see Affirmative Action at work. Responding to such an ignorant statement was unnecessary, and I knew it. Still, I let them know that graduating from the Johns Hopkins as Magna Cum Laude was a result of my determined work ethic, and nothing to do with Affirmative Action. I'd graduated high school with a 3.7 GPA,

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and I didn't need Affirmative Action to get me accepted into college. Not when I had a working brain, two hands, and a determination to succeed.

"You look beautiful today. Don't think I told you."

I stared into Chester's eyes and forced a smile. "You're not too bad either. Love the cowboy hat."

"Come on," he said, pulling me into the stable yard. "Let me introduce you to the horses."

When we stepped into the cool confines of a barn, it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the dim interior. Strange smells rose around me—mingled odors of hay, soil and manure. As I gazed around the barn, stared up at the beams high overhead and at the wooden partitions separating the animals, I realized this was the first time I'd ever seen horses up close.

He took me through to the opposite end of the building, naming horses as we progressed. As we passed, they whinnied and snorted. They seemed pleased by our arrival, anxious to be touched and petted. To my vast surprise I wanted to stop and touch the creatures. Even though my day had been pretty terrible, I could appreciate the beauty of these beasts.

"Have you been riding before? Did you parents ever take you when you were a little girl?" Chester asked. When we reached the far wall, he turned and led me toward the center of the room.

"No."

"You should do it at least once in your life. I think you'd like it. There's nothing like riding a horse. Not even riding a motorcycle."

That he loved horses was more than evident. It wasn't only the way he spoke of the creatures, but the way he looked at them, the absolute adoration in his eyes as he gazed into the stalls.

We paused in front of a large mare that whinnied and nodded as we moved closer. I was taken by how magnificent she was with her sleek black coat and mane of raven hair hanging over her neck. Her chocolate eyes regarded us with interest.

"Her name's Roxy," Chester said, pulling his hat off and dragging his hand through his hair. Once we were close enough, he began giving her long, loving strokes. "She loves to be rubbed."

He turned to look at me and at that moment he looked so indescribably gorgeous I nearly said, so do I. Instead, I said, "She's gorgeous."

He let his hand drop and stepped closer to me. I could smell the good clean scent of him when a stray breeze brushed passed us. His hair was a little disheveled, but I

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didn't mind. Instead of appearing messy, the tousled look of it made him seem sexily mussed as though he'd just rolled out of bed, fresh from a long, hot ride in the sack.

"You look enchanted."

I stiffened. Shit! Was I that obvious?

But I noticed his focus wasn't on me any more, but on Roxy. I nearly sighed my relief. He meant he could see the horse enchanted me. He hadn't been referring to himself.

"I am," I said. "They're all so beautiful."

"Wanna take a ride with me?"

"Are you serious?"

"Tell you what," he said. He walked a few feet away and stuck his hand into a wooden bin. He pulled three wrapped packages from within and tucked two of them into his coat pocket. Coming back he said, "I'll show you how gentle Roxy is."

I smiled despite myself. "I don't know. I don't think Giselle would like it too much if she saw me riding around on one of her horses."

Chester rolled his eyes. "They're not her horses. They belong to Greg. And Greg won't care. Greg likes you. He thinks you're pretty."

He tore into the package he'd kept out and pulled a brownish thing from inside. It wasn't very large, bigger than a dog treat, but clearly it was a sort of horse snack. When he was standing beside me he said, "A horse biscuit. Give me your hand."

I asked why even as I was lifting it.

He placed my hand beneath his own, then set the biscuit on the palm of his hand. "Watch."

When I realized what he was about to do, I snatched my hand away. He offered the biscuit to Roxy and she delicately took it and munched contentedly.

"You try," he insisted.

"Are you crazy? What if she takes my hand off?"

"Take your hand? She's gentle as a cub."

"She doesn't know me."

"Okay, watch." He stepped behind me and took my left hand in his. A shiver ran through me at the contact. His skin was warm, and the press of him against me was enticing. Something in the lower regions of my body began to uncoil and demand recognition. My vaginal lips quivered and my stomach did a flip-flop. He smelled amazing, though I knew he wasn't wearing any cologne. His musky scent was all-natural and an all man Zest soap meets Old Spice, engulfing me, making me feel a little dizzy.

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He placed the second biscuit in my palm, and then brought my hand to Roxy's mouth. She deftly removed the proffered item and munched.

"See Stella," he bent low and whispered in my ear. "She's just a baby, couldn't hurt a fly."

Unable to take another moment of this sensual torture, I stepped away from him and began brushing invisible dust from the front of my jacket.

"The river's just a mile or so past the house. Let's go for a ride. We came all the way out here. Might as well enjoy the rest of the day. We don't have to go back to the main house when we leave. Greg'll understand."

"You sure this will be okay with Greg?"

He turned, cowboy hat in hand, and gave me a smile. "Of course."

"All right then, let's do it."

He led me to the stall next to Roxy's. "This is Max," he said, referring to the horse. "He's smaller than Roxy but just as gentle. I think you can handle him."

I was thunderstruck. I didn't ride. He couldn't expect me to ride. "I don't ride." I backed away from Max. "I can't ride him."

He paused, thinking, and then brightened. "You can ride with me."

I loved that idea, and so hated it even more than the idea of riding alone. Already my hormones were on full alert. I promised myself I wouldn't have sex today and I refused to go back on my word. Problem was, I didn't know how successful I'd be if I had to ride a horse with Chester. Just the idea of it had a host of enticing possibilities running through my head. "I'm not sure about that."

"Come on," he insisted. "It'll be fun."

"Maybe we should do this another time."

"You really want to come back here?"

Okay, so he had a point there. Wild horses couldn't drag me to this house a second time. So, for the sake of experiencing all life had to offer, I agreed.

I waited while Chester got Roxy ready for a ride and led her outside. After he called me over, I let Chester place my foot in a stirrup and hoist me into the saddle.

There was one thing I quickly realized. From the ground Roxy had seemed large, however, from atop her she was positively massive. I felt like I was sitting on the edge of a rafter twenty feet off the ground. I would've slid off her back and told Chester I'd changed my mind if he hadn't started talking, distracting me.

"Stella," he said, poised to mount. "You're gonna have to take your feet out the stirrups so I can mount up behind you."

A pleasant thrill ran through me at the thought of Chester mounted behind me, his

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thighs pressed against me. His crotch against my backside. With a little slick maneuvering our little ride through the woods could become interesting. Damn! If only I'd worn a dress. It wouldn't have taken much to slide the hemline of a dress to my waist, free Chester's cock from his jeans, and lower myself on it till he was buried to my core. That would have been a horseback ride to remember. The gentle rocking of the horse beneath us as we lost ourselves in the delicious thrill of our joined bodies.

I did as I was told, and in seconds, Chester was seated securely behind me. The saddle, however, wasn't made for two people. We had to maneuver around a bit to get a comfortable fit. I had to bite my lip hard to keep from moaning. More and more I was longing for that dress. Hell, maybe if he took us deep enough into the forest I'd forgo the dress fantasy and simply take my pants off...but then again, maybe not. I'd only been with Jake a few days ago.

Stella, I told myself, get your mind out of the gutter.

"How's that?" he asked. "Does it feel good?"

Not nearly as good as it could, I thought, then took a deep breath, "Sure, it feels fine."

"Now, rest your feet on mine and hold tight to the pommel."

I gazed down at the object he was fisting and nearly fell off the horse. The pommel was part of the saddle. I knew that. But just then, buried in his clenched fist, the pommel didn't seem so much like an inanimate object as it did a very large, very hard, cock head. Dear God, was the man trying to torment me?

"I feel like I could fall at any second. I don't know about this, Chester."

"Don't worry Stella," he said, reins in hand, "I won't let you fall."

We started out at a trot, then picked up speed. I could feel the muscles in his inner thighs tighten and flex against my backside as we rode. It felt good to be there, within the hollow of his body. It felt safe. I knew if indeed I did slip, he would catch me.

"Relax Stella, you're stiff as a board," he said. His lips brushed gently against my ear, sending a jolt of sensual awareness through me.

"I am relaxed." Saying this, I forced my body to loosen and rest against him.

He released a satisfied sigh. "Mmm, that's more like it. Now let me show you what Roxy can do."

He emitted a noise that sounded like, "Yah!" and Roxy broke into a gallop.

The house and stables faded behind us, then out of sight completely. We were swallowed up into the mass of trees that surrounded the property. I would've been frightened if I didn't see the clearly marked path below us. This was a trail Roxy had

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traveled on a regular basis, and as such, she wouldn't accidentally run headlong into a tree.

I lost track of time, reveling in the experience. The wind whipped through my hair, and was cool on my skin. Made me feel as though I were a bird in flight. Short of sex with Jake, this horse ride was the most exciting thing I did this year, so far.

Then, I gave myself a mental kick. Why the hell was I thinking about Jake? What was it about that man that had gotten under my skin and stuck? Bloody hell! Here I was, with a perfectly nice man, a very attractive man, and my mind was on Jake.

"Look Stella." At the sound of Chester's voice in my ear, I started.

Before I saw where he was pointing, the sound of rushing water caught my attention. As the prickly ends of branches brushed against my jacket, and the rich, earthy smells of the forest became faint, I glanced ahead. My two-handed grip on the pommel immediately loosened. Concerns for safety were forgotten as the most magnificent vista I'd ever seen appeared before me.

"The river," I said, awed by the sight. I'd seen rivers before, of course, but none like the one at the end of the dirt lane we'd been traversing.

"Isn't it great? I knew you'd like it."

The path beneath us became jagged with rocks. Large boulders lay scattered to the left and right of us, just beyond the trail. Ahead, the path didn't end so much as it led into the water. There was a small clearing in the trees where Chester brought Roxy to a stop and dismounted.

Smiling up at me, he offered his hand then seemed to think better of it. Clasp me around the waist, he helped ease me off the horse. I slid down the length of his body, feeling every muscle in his chest ripple and flex as he lowered me. He didn't let me go immediately, but kept his hands around my waist, holding me closer than necessary. I didn't complain. I was still too enchanted by the scenery; too charmed he had thought to bring me here.

"If this was my backyard," I said, "I'd never leave my house."

He smiled, edging closer. His lips hovered inches above mine, moist and welcoming. I knew he wanted to kiss me. I wanted to kiss him too, but something inside of me rebelled.

"Do you have to tie her up?" I asked, before he could lower his head.

"No. Roxy's a good girl. She won't leave us."

"Oh." I swallowed.

He stared at my lips, blinked, then released me and stepped back. "Let's go sit by the river." As he spoke, he went to Roxy and pulled something free from the saddlebag.

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Chester offered me his free hand. “Come on. It gets pretty rocky so watch where you step.”

I took his hand, but didn’t bother with anything as mundane as watching where I placed my feet. My surroundings were too spectacular to do anything other than gaze around me.

As we neared the end of the path, the vision that had awed me from a distance left me downright stupefied.

Crystalline water rushed by us, carrying fallen branches and bits of greenery on its rapids. Larger versions of the rocks dotting the end of the trail peppered the water. Massive, gray stones jutted from the river. Some were jagged with age while others had patches of green fungus marring their surface. To my left—the direction the water flowed from—the waterway descended a series of stony plateaus, making something of a flinty waterfall. It was, in a word, gorgeous. Further up the river, where the forest brushed the water’s edge, the reflection of the vegetation—trees, clumps of shrubbery, and yellow wild flowers—shimmered in the water. The very air I breathed was saturated with the fresh scent of the river. The mere act of breathing made me feel pure, cleansed. And the sound. It reminded me of going to the beach as a child when I’d spend hours in the sand digging up the largest seashells I could find so I could put them to my ear and listen to the music they made.

Though the river wasn’t very wide, a hundred feet, perhaps a bit more, it was incredibly long. From where I stood I couldn’t see where it began or where it ended. However, poised on the water’s edge as I was, I could see that the forest continued on the other side of the water. If I stared hard I could make out the faint edges of a path leading away from the water and deep into the darkness of the trees.

“This is amazing,” I said. It was like we’d crossed a portal into another time and place, and anything that happened here was for us alone.

But I knew we hadn’t crossed a portal and this wasn’t another time or place. We were still in Maryland and I had to live with anything I did today. Even now, Jake was never far from my mind, or that only days earlier I’d been splayed over his desk, getting fucked senseless. Even surrounded by such splendor, the thought of Jake nearly undid me.

“It’s pretty here,” I said.

“I know. Greg inherited the land from his father after his parents died. Come on, let’s sit.”

He had a blanket tucked under one arm and led me to a grassy spot. We spread

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the wooly cover over the browning grass then sat down.

“Comfortable?” he wanted to know once I was settled. “It’s not the best blanket, but it was the only one that would fit in the bag.”

“The cover’s fine. But this isn’t.” Bending, I lifted my leg and pulled at my boots.

Grinning, Chester crawled around and clasped my foot in his hands. “Let me.”

Taking his time about it, Chester slid the boot off. A moment later he had my sock in hand and was tucking it inside the discarded shoe. “Are those fairies?”

I glanced proudly at my toes. I’d just had a pedicure last week. I’d felt whimsical and carefree, and had them paint fairies on my toenails. I nodded. “I think they’re cute.”

He stroked my instep, applying just enough pressure to bring a sigh of pleasure from me. “I’m a sucker for nice feet.”

Things were suddenly moving too fast. He may have been a sucker for nice feet but I was a sucker for a handsome face and talented hands. And the way he was using his hands on my feet had my hormones on full alert. Once he had my other boot off, I thought it prudent to draw my legs beneath me and change the subject. “I can’t believe it’s February. This weather is amazing.”

Chester didn’t push. Instead, he settled on the blanket beside me and stared ahead at the water. “Bet you’re glad you came now. Enjoy it while it lasts because it’s supposed to drop into the thirties tomorrow and snow on Monday.”

“Valentine’s Day?”

He nodded.

His blue eyes seemed luminescent in the afternoon sun. His smile was slow, almost shy, and I realized suddenly that I was having a nice time.

“I never would’ve known you had such a love for history,” he said after a while. “It surprises me you’re not working in that field.”

Wiggling my toes, loving the feel of the air against my skin, I shrugged. “Not enough money.”

“What era of history is your favorite?”

“My focus was on Biblical history,” I began to say.

“I know. You said that earlier. But what era is your favorite?”

“I took a class on American history and I fell in love with the Revolution era. Before that, I was something of a historical snob. I was only interested in history if the period in question was at least fifteen hundred years in the past. Anything more recent was never interesting enough...or old enough.”

“So what changed your mind about American history?”

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His focus was so intense I had to look away from him. I wasn't quite sure what was going on here, as such an anomaly had never occurred before. But it appeared that Chester was asking me questions about myself. That wasn't all, though. He was asking questions and seemed genuinely *interested* in the answers. So I told him what had drawn me to American history, shared stories about summer digs I took part in at Mount Vernon, George Washington's Potomac home, and told him of Revolution themed trips I'd taken to Philadelphia and Boston.

I had an honest to goodness conversation with this man. We talked until the sun began a languid descent into the horizon. When the air began to chill, we pulled the blanket up around ourselves and cuddled close.

When the kiss came, it was hesitant, unsure. But when I didn't push him away, it became more heated.

His tongue slid easily between my welcoming lips, probing and exploring. My body tingled under his touch, my loins cried out for more.

Eager to feel him atop me, I eased back until I was lying on the ground. Without releasing my mouth, Chester followed me down. He stretched himself over me, arms caging me.

Moaning hungrily into my mouth, he deepened the kiss.

I explored his body, touched every inch of him I could reach. My fingers stroked his back then cupped his ass. He murmured encouragement when I squeezed and urged him closer.

"Stella," he said into my mouth. "This is so good."

The plaintive, fervent sound of his voice had a sensuous effect on me, making me close my eyes in wonder. This man was a true treasure that I couldn't easily cast aside. Unlike Jake, Chester seemed to want more than a physical connection. Unlike Jake, Chester longed to know more about me than how many pushups I could do. Unlike Jake...then a thought hit me. Why the hell was I thinking about Jake when Chester was doing such wonderful things to me with that lush mouth of his?

"What's wrong?" he asked, suddenly.

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong. Why do you think something's wrong?"

"You got all stiff on me."

"Did I?"

"You do it almost every time I touch you." Chester rolled away and sat up. "Wanna tell me who he is?"

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Damn Jake to hell, I thought. Even when I was miles away from him he was screwing up my life. Sighing, I sat up. "His name is Jake. We're not in a relationship...I don't think...but we've had sex. Recently. A lot. So I don't feel right about getting intimate with you."

Chester was silent for a long while and I began to fear I'd done the wrong thing by telling him...and doing it so horribly to boot.

"So you want to take things slow?" he said, finally breaking the silence.

I nodded.

"Guess I can understand that." He paused. "I like you a lot Stella. You're different from most women. I can wait to have sex with you if time is what you need."

I stared at him, too afraid to believe what I'd heard. "You'll wait?"

"I want to be with you, but I want you to want *me*. I don't like looking in your eyes and knowing you're thinking about someone else. When we make love, I want it to be just the two of us. I don't want you thinking about another man." Saying this, he began to get to his feet. "Figure out how you feel about Jake and me. When you're ready, I'll be here."

Could this guy be for real? "I don't need time to decide who I want to be with," I said, caught up in the moment. "I want to be with you. The only thing I need to do is make Jake understand how I feel. He's sort of pushy."

That was the understatement of the year.

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CHAPTER TEN

2/13/05 8:17 a.m.

"Ann, it was amazing. It's the best date I've ever had," I told her the next morning.

"And all you did was kiss?"

I pulled the phone from my ear, stared at it, then rolled my eyes. "No, Ann," I said into the transmitter. "Haven't you heard a word I've said? We talked, we rode a horse, we ate dinner at a quaint family restaurant in Westminster, then he took me to the Inner Harbor and we walked. We walked and talked. It was amazing. I could talk to him forever. It wasn't like I was talking to a man, but like I was talking to someone who'd known me forever. Like he could see into my soul and—"

"Shit, Stella. It's not even nine yet. Could you please give me a break? It's too early for this. I mean, what the hell did this guy do to you? When did you become a Julie Andrews wannabe?"

"Mock if you will, but I had a great time. I knew I should have called Katarina. She'd appreciate this."

It was Sunday morning, well after eight, and I was still in bed and I didn't care. I'd had an amazing time with Chester yesterday and had decided I was due a reward. Today I planned to lavish myself with chocolate treats and hours of *Lifetime*. I'd been so incredibly charming last night. And I hadn't said or done anything stupid.

"Only because Katarina's head is up in la-la-land too," Ann was saying. "Not to bring you down to earth, babe, but what are gonna do about Jake?"

This was a question I'd been asking myself all night. What to do about Jake and Dev? Mentally, I wanted to stay as far away from those two as possible. My body, on the other hand, had other intentions. Even now, aglow in the memory of my wonderful date with Chester, my body tingled at the thought of Jake and Dev. Fortunately, my body wasn't in control of things. I'd made up my mind this morning. "I'm calling Jake this afternoon and canceling."

"You're turning down a Jake and Dev sandwich? Have you lost your mind?"

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"I'm a one man woman," I announced, proud of my self-control.

Ann was quiet for a moment. Then she asked, "So do you and Chester have plans for tomorrow?"

"No. He left for Virginia this morning. He'll be gone for a few days. He'll be back by the weekend. Oh, that reminds me, he's coming to The Oak Room with us on Saturday. I told him about Operation Lure and Deceive. Did Sean agree to pose as your date for the night?"

The thought of making Gerard jealous brightened Ann. "Yep. Everything's set. Gerard said he'd be there at ten-thirty so Sean and I are getting there at ten."

"Good." I was about to say goodbye when Ann started speaking again.

"Hey. Katarina's going out with Jim and Meagan has a date, of course. Wanna go to Club Blue with me tomorrow? They're having an anti-Valentine's Day ball. Everybody comes in black, as usual, and ladies get in free till nine."

I shrugged. Now that I'd decided to turn down Jake and Dev, my night was free. "Okay. Wanna meet here at eight?"

"Cool. Later, babe."

2/13/05 12:22 p.m.

"Why?" Jake asked again, despite the fact that I'd been on the phone with him for the last thirty minutes explaining that very thing. If he didn't understand by now, he never would.

"I already told you why, Jake."

"I still don't understand."

"Look. I don't doubt how much fun we'd have if I came over tomorrow night, but is a few hours of great sex reason enough to risk having a relationship with a man who wants more than sex from me? There's substance with Chester. He gives me pleasure on a level you reserve for Dev. I want more than sex, Jake. I want someone to talk with, someone who wants to talk with me."

"We talk."

"About something other than my weak body. For instance, do you know where I went to college, or what I majored in? Do you know if I have any siblings? Do you even know my last name?"

He breathed heavily into the phone for a few moments. When he began speaking again, he didn't sound amused. "Your last name is Rice. Stella Rice. I don't know where you went to school or what your major was because you've never told me."

"You never asked."

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“Look. You said Chester’s out of town, tomorrow. Are you saying you’d rather spend Valentine’s Day alone than with Dev and me?”

“No, I’m spending it with Ann at Club Blue.”

“I’m not happy, Stella.” Jake said, in a voice that made me feel like I was in his kickboxing class all over again.

“I’m sorry, but this is something I have to do.”

“It’s not nice to make promises you can’t keep.”

“Come on, Jake. Don’t make a big deal out of this. You have Dev. You guys won’t even miss me. I’ll bet...” I stopped talking when I realized I was having a conversation with a dial tone. Jake had hung up on me.

“Well isn’t that nice,” I said to no one, then replaced the phone in its cradle.

In thirty years of life, making that call to Jake had been one of the most difficult things I’d ever done.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1/14/05 9:27 p.m.

Club Blue was a mad house. Apparently, there were a lot of people who hated Valentine's Day...and every one of them were packed on the dance floor. With a strobe light making the room flicker from total darkness to neon white, and the throngs of black-garbed people thrashing around to the techno music thrumming through the club, I felt like I'd stumbled into a Nine Inch Nails concert. I doubted I'd be able to escape any time soon. From the looks of Ann with her MGD raised overhead as she bounced to the beat, she was just getting started. I'd lost much of my fervor two songs ago.

It didn't take me long to realize that dancing at a fetish club was a lot different than dancing at a top forty club. At a fetish club you didn't dance so much as you ducked and swerved out of reach of the flailing fists coming at you from every direction. This wasn't typical dancing. This was power dancing. The odd thing was that everyone seemed to be having such a good time. I'd been bumped, stepped on, and kicked. Basically, I was having the crap beaten out of me. On the positive side, I hadn't exerted enough energy to even work up a sweat, which meant my hair was intact.

Deciding I wanted to see the fantasy complex in the basement," I yelled to Ann, "Come on! Let's have a look around!"

Ann pumped one fist overhead and shook her butt. "One more song!"

"I wanna see the fantasy complex! We can dance again later!"

Ann ducked, spun, then glanced at her watch. "Shit."

I didn't hear her curse, but I could see her lips form the words. "What's wrong?"

"Stepped on!"

"You okay?"

Instead of answering, she grabbed my hand and led the way off the dance floor.

Getting away from the melee had proved far more perilous than remaining. If I managed to leave Club Blue tonight without a bruise somewhere on my body I'd count myself lucky.

"Aren't they doing a spanking scene downstairs at ten?" Ann asked when we'd escaped to the relative quiet of the back stairway leading to the basement where hard

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rock music was pumping from its depths. “I almost forgot. I want to check that out. We should go down early and find a spot to watch.”

Having been spanked, the show didn’t hold much interest for me. Still, I wanted to get a look at what else went on down there. Last time I was at the club I’d left with Jake before I had a chance to explore. This time, I planned to see exactly what went on in the fetish area of Club Blue.

“I gotta run to the bathroom,” Ann was saying. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

She didn’t give me a chance to respond because she’d already spun around and started for the bathroom. I considered going after her, maybe checking my hair in the bathroom mirror, but decided to wait. I loved being away from a crowd too much to venture back into another.

“Stick a fork in me ‘cause I’m done,” I said to myself.

“You haven’t even begun.”

I jumped at the sound of the male voice then turned to get a look at the speaker.

The sight that greeted me would have been disturbing if I wasn’t in a fetish club. As it was, the leather executioner’s mask he wore seemed in keeping with the overall theme of Club Blue. So did the leather vest, leather pants, and leather boots. From head to toe this man was dressed in leather. The only visible parts of his body were his exposed biceps—very large biceps. He looked intimidating as hell. Not a person I’d like to come across in a dark alley, or anywhere else for that matter.

Thinking I was blocking his way to the stairs, I quickly stepped to the left.

When he didn’t descend, I began to feel uneasy.

“We can do this one of two ways,” he said. The swatch of leather covering his mouth muffled his voice, but he was near enough to me that I could make out his words. “You can go easy, or you can go hard.”

I didn’t know if Ann was playing a practical joke on me or if this guy was serious. “Go?” I asked him, honestly curious. “Go where?”

“With me.”

“I think you have the wrong person. I don’t know you.”

“Easy or hard, Stella. You got three seconds.”

I stared him up and down and sucked my teeth. “How do you know my name? Oh, who cares! I’m not into the fetish scene; I’m just a visitor here. Sorry, I don’t wanna play.” I began to turn. My intention was to go to the ladies room, find Ann, and tell her I was ready to go home, fantasy complex be damned. I’d only made it to the head of the steps and already I’d met a freak.

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“Hard it is,” I heard him say.

Strong hands spun me around and took hold of me. In the space of two seconds the man lifted and cradled me as though I were a baby. Biceps flexing, his arms had closed around me, strong and sure.

If I’d been watching this happen to some Hollywood actress on the big screen I would have yelled at her to scream, kick, scratch, claw—fight. To do something other than sit there, mouth hanging open like a weakling. But I wasn’t watching it happen to someone in a movie, it was actually happening to *me*. Suddenly, I could understand why those actresses were always wide-eyed, frozen with seeming indecision. It wasn’t indecision. It was fear. Blind terror hit me with the force of a racing truck and I simply froze. I wanted to scream but couldn’t. I wanted to fight, but forgot how to move.

The shock of this stranger’s boldness barely registered before the next shock hit me. He was moving. He was descending the stairs at a jog with me in his arms!

Knowing this man could very well be a criminal with immoral intentions loosened my tongue. Even though we were the only people on the stairs, I screamed bloody murder.

He didn’t seem to care. Instead of my screaming giving him pause, he bounded down the stairs, skipping two or three of them at a time. I thought for sure he’d fall, and I was a goner more than once. When he reached the inter-floor landing I’d had no choice but to loop my arms around his neck and hold on for dear life.

The floor of the fantasy complex was painted dull black and it was littered with lipstick stained cigarette stubs, sticky bits of chewing gum, and condoms still wet with white strings of semen. A fog of smoke rose in the air and specs of orange darted the outer corridor where onlookers, high from whatever drug cocktail they had partaken of, watched the scene unfold. They stood—barely—leaning heavily against the wall and looking like dazed zombies.

Music boomed from everywhere. Moans, screams, and other sounds from people in various stages of ecstasy drifted to me from darkened corners of the room when I was carried within.

With the paralysis I’d initially felt gone, I protested in earnest. I screamed, tried to kick, even tried to punch him now that we were on level ground, but nothing fazed him.

“Let go of me!” I screeched into his ear. In desperation, I leaned into him and bit his throat as hard as I could.

That got his attention. He froze, mid step. Abruptly, his grip loosened enough for me to squirm out of his arms. I landed hard on the floor, my feet moving before I’d made contact.

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I ran, mindful of the people watching me as though my dilemma was a performance designed for their enjoyment. Seeing the uselessness of screaming, I stopped and decided it would be better to retain whatever energy I could and use it to get away from this guy. But even as I came to that conclusion, footsteps closed in behind me. I could hear him breathing and feel the heat emanating off of his body as he approached. A second later, I was jerked roughly backward as the fiend got a grip on my hair and entwined one oversized fist in it. He pulled and I lost my footing. I fell to the floor in a mass of hair, legs and flailing arms.

The pain was intense. The sharp stinging in my scalp and the throb in my knees was nearly unbearable as he pulled me forward across the rough cement floor just outside the entrance to some private room where erotic music throbbed from within. A blue strobe flashed, making the room flicker between blackness and dim, baby blue light.

"I don't want to hurt you," the fiend said, belying his words by the grip he maintained on my hair.

He was dragging me toward the back of the club. Toward the bright red exit sign.

Not good.

"Somebody help me!"

He laughed. "You think someone in this place will help you? Look around."

That's when reality hit me. I wasn't being ignored. All around me people were getting whipped, beaten, and treated roughly. That's why people went to the fantasy complex. To everyone else it must look like I was just another patron enjoying the pleasures of Club Blue.

On the floor above, where I'd just been minutes ago, the din of computer-generated guitars were muffled under the aggressive stomps of fashionable twenty and thirty-somethings releasing their pent-up frustrations of the week. I had to admit, my immediate future didn't look promising.

"Let me go."

In answer, he levered me to my feet, set an arm around my waist and lifted. He ran the remaining distance to the exit. All the while, my legs flailed uselessly in the air. He shoved his body against the exit door. It fell open, letting in a cold gust of winter air. Swirls of white powder drifted in through the open door as he carried me out into the night. The door slammed shut behind him.

"Please," I begged, seeing hope fade as he carried me down the back alley beyond the dumpsters where the reeking stench of rotting food arose from inside.

He chucked me over a shoulder. When my exposed stomach met hard muscle, the

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wind was knocked out of me with such force it left me gasping for air.

Easily, he carried me past the back of the club and out beyond the reach of the dim orange security lights, and towards a black SUV parked at the end of the alley.

The pavement was slick with slush and ice, the same slush and ice Chester had predicted on our date.

As the fiend ran, I could see the SUV moving closer and closer.

The frigid winds whipped around my bare legs and goose bumps rose on my skin. My mind raced through the possibilities of what he would do to me. Rape? Murder? I should have gone to the bathroom with Ann. What would she think when she returned to the stairway and found it empty?

His hand was on my leg, one finger wiggling under the patent leather cuff of my PVC skirt. I squirmed, and when I was finally able to breathe again, I screamed, which echoed through the night.

“Scream all you want,” he said. “Nobody’s gonna help you.”

He reached the SUV and settled me on the ground near the driver’s door. Once he had his keys in hand, he beeped the door unlocked, then pulled it open.

“Get in,” he ordered.

“No.”

I pushed away from the car, tried to twist away from him, but he was too fast and too strong. The car door was open and I was shoved inside before I could even consider how best to defend myself. He moved in behind me, forcing me into the passenger seat. A moment later I heard him shut the door.

I launched myself at the passenger door and wrestled with the handle. When nothing happened I tried slamming my fists against the glass. Still nothing. I was trapped. Fear coursing through my veins, I glared at my captor over my shoulder.

Nonchalantly, he sat in his seat, pouring some noxious substance onto a cloth. Then he looked up and studied me. It was too dark to see more than the mask, but I saw enough to know he had dark hair, dark eyes, and dark intentions.

“Come here,” he said, crooking a finger at me. “I got something for you.”

I screamed.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Later

I woke to the sound of male voices. One was deep, calm, and I knew it to be the voice of my captor. The other was deep as well, but it was raised in anger. The sound of it was harsh, blunt, and intimidating. "I didn't say to beat her bloody," this second voice was saying.

"What was I supposed to do? You didn't say she'd fight me."

"You're twice her size. You can't handle a woman?"

"She was fighting for her life. Least she thought she was."

"Is it a wonder? You dragged her across the floor by her hair. What the hell were you thinking?"

"She bit me."

"Poor baby. Where'd the little girl hurt you? Want me to kiss it better?"

"You wouldn't be so smug if you'd been the one carrying her out of that club. Soon as I got my hands on her she turned into a she-devil. I thought you said she was docile."

"She is docile. Least she is with a man who knows how to take control of a situation. If I didn't think she'd recognize my voice I would have gone. And I wouldn't have brought her home battered and bloody."

"She's not battered or bloody. She has a few tiny scrapes on her knees. She'll recover."

"You enjoyed yourself, didn't you?"

My kidnapper didn't answer immediately. When he did his voice was soft, as gentle as a purr. "What do you think?"

"I think you're a sadist."

"Maybe if you were a little more submissive I wouldn't get my rocks off..." he seemed to think better of what he was about to say. "She really fought me. She kicked and punched, and it was fucking sexy. Wish I could do it again."

By now I knew who my captors were, and I wasn't happy. I simply couldn't

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believe this was happening to me. Why me?

I peeked at them through one half-opened eye, just to assure myself that my suspicions were right. Sure enough, Jake sat at the foot of the bed. He was running a hand through the lush waves of his hair and shaking his head. I could hear him breathing. The staccato sound of his harsh exhalations told me more about his mental state than his words to Dev had. Jake was furious. He was shirtless and his shoulders rose and fell in time with his heaving breaths. I couldn't see Jake's face because he was facing Dev, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to when he was in such a state.

In stark contrast to Jake, Dev was sitting in an armchair next to the fireplace taking leisurely sips from a goblet filled with a red substance—probably wine. For a man who'd recently strolled into a nightclub and taken a woman captive, Dev looked pretty damned relaxed. Still dressed in the leather pants and vest I'd seen him in earlier, he sat, legs spread wide before him, as he listened to Jake berate him. He didn't seem overly concerned. He'd discarded the executioner's mask so his curls lay flat against his scalp and hung in limp ringlets around his shoulders. He looked like a fallen angel turned roguish imp. Dear God, Dev was one sexy man.

"I wouldn't mind doing it again," Dev said again. "I don't mind a little fight. I know you don't either. Otherwise, you wouldn't be with me."

I decided it was time for me to officially wake up. This little tête-à-tête was getting on my nerves. Docile? I'd show them docile.

The plan was to appear to wake slowly, stretching tiredly while I faked confusion. Once they came closer I'd kick them both in the balls and make my escape.

However, when I tried to stretch my arms they wouldn't budge.

Rage descended on me in the span of a millisecond and I saw red.

"Which one of you did this?" I screeched.

Jake bounced off the bed and into the air like a frightened feline. Dev dropped his glass and leapt to his feet.

"Who tied me up?" I went on, unable to stop myself. "You rotten bastards, which one of you tied me to the bed?"

Slowly, Jake and Dev approached. When both men were next to the bed, they stopped and stared.

I decided I would like to kick Jake first. Since he was the closer of the two, and because kidnapping me was more than likely his idea, I tried to pull my leg back so I could get up enough force to drive it into him. Unfortunately, my leg wouldn't move. They'd bound my legs too. I was trussed like a common criminal, tied down and spread eagle on Jake's four-poster.

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I screeched again as another insight hit me. I didn't have any clothes on. I was naked. The bastards had not only kidnapped me and tied me spread eagle to the bed, but they'd also stripped me bare.

Unperturbed, they looked at each other. Dev actually had the audacity to smile. "Docile as a kitten," he said, then went to retrieve his fallen wine glass.

"Where are my clothes?" I managed saying through my clenched teeth.

Jake waved this question off. "You won't need them."

I wanted to shake my fist at him, do some kind of damage to him. But I couldn't. I was helpless as a baby and he knew it. A fresh wave of rage descended on me. "You kidnapped me!"

Jake nodded. "I think that pretty much sums up the situation."

"Bastard!"

Head tilted inquisitively, Dev stepped beside Jake again. "She's got a mouth on her. Do you think we should beat her?"

Jake raised a brow and considered. "Maybe later," he decided.

Standing side-by-side staring at me, they seemed transfixed. Jake's thumbs were hooked in the belt loops of his black jeans, his eyes were frozen on my face, and his lips were parted into a delectable looking O. Again, I was left stunned by his beauty and speechless at the desperation I saw in his level gaze. He made no attempt to hide his desire. He seemed to wear it like a badge of honor. It was evident in the slight turning up of the corner of his mouth and in the thickening bulge between his thighs. It was intoxicating to know how much Jake wanted me. Exhilarating to know the great lengths he'd go to have me. Though I knew it was wrong, I was helpless against the rush of warmth that suffused my body as I looked at him. It had never been difficult for Jake to bend me to his will, and as I lay in his bed, naked but for the ropes binding my wrists and ankles to the posts of his four-poster, erotic need descended on me with the force of a ten foot wave. Anger was replaced with desire, and resentment at being kidnapped was replaced with bone-deep gratitude. My only saving grace was the fact that my pride remained intact. I wanted to be exactly where I was, but I wasn't about to let Jake and Dev off the hook so easily.

"Untie me," I demanded. I was nearly undone at how wispy my voice sounded.

The two men glanced at each other, then back at me again. "I don't think that's gonna happen," Dev said just as Jake was saying, "No."

"What cowards. Not only did it take the both of you to concoct this stupid plan, but the two of you have to keep me tied up? Aren't the odds in your favor enough

without the rope?"

Hands on hips, Dev surveyed me. There was a hungry gleam in his eyes as he ran them the length of my naked body. His tongue glided wetly along his lower lip. Then I noticed something peculiar about the way he was standing, and how stiff his shoulders were. He was statuesque almost like he stood in military formation and as though moving one inch would mean certain death. His arms were frozen in place, and his legs were rigid as stone. Most curiously, the tips of his fingers where they pressed into his hipbone were blanched white. I suddenly realized Dev was exerting a vast amount of energy on keeping self-control.

But this wasn't precisely right. Dev wanted to advance on me, seemingly frantic to, and he would have if had it been just the two of us in the room. But the stance of both men—Dev slightly behind Jake; Dev glancing at Jake from time to time to seek direction—spoke volumes. I knew at once that the only thing keeping Dev in check was Jake. And once Jake let loose the reins, Dev would be on me in an instant.

The other day at my place, Dev had said both of them were dominant, which I didn't doubt. But it didn't take much observation to know who the alpha was in this pack. Clearly, Jake was in charge, and both Dev and I knew it.

"Please, let me beat her," Dev said plaintively, verifying my silent musings. "I'll be gentle...sort of." The two stared at each other again, each seeming mesmerized by the other. "Come on, Jake." His tongue slid along his lower lip again and Jake grunted. "You can watch.

"No rope," Dev went on to say. "No handcuffs. Just me, you, Stella, and my whip."

Jake didn't respond immediately. He looked at me instead, his eyes lingering over every bare inch of my skin.

"Remember you told me how gorgeous she was under your paddle." Dev closed his eyes and sighed. "You said her skin glistened with a luminescent sheen. She came alive under the paddle, and even fell in love with it. Remember how you told me she writhed under every blow, and how she moaned for more. Consider how you enjoy watching her, taking pleasure as her hips roll, seeing her ass tense as your paddle struck her skin. You can watch now. You don't have to lift a finger, Jake. Just sit by the fire, I'll bring you a glass and the merlot, and you can watch."

Jake turned to look at Dev. A smile split his lips. Damn it. Jake was actually considering saying yes. Though I had enjoyed Jake's discipline, I wasn't mentally prepared for another round. And especially not with Sadistic Dev wielding a whip. I had to do something. "Hello! Hate to interrupt, but I'd like you to untie me so I can go

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home.”

Jake stared at Dev a moment longer, longing in his eyes. Then slowly, he returned his gaze to me. “You want us to untie you?”

“Yes.”

“What would that accomplish?”

“I don’t like feeling helpless,” I said, not really telling the truth, but it wasn’t a complete lie either.

Jake started toward the head of the bed. Unsure of what he was about to do, I stiffened.

He settled one knee onto the pillow beside my head and bent over me. I nearly couldn’t believe what was happening when he started undoing the knots binding me to the posts. At my ankles, Dev followed suit.

They were untying me. Setting me free. That was what I wanted, right? Okay, so why was I disappointed? Did freeing me from my bonds mean I was free to leave?

Once he undid the last knot, Jake sat up and stared down at me. He didn’t look like a man who’d just lost a battle. “So you’re loose. Now what? You’re no less helpless than you were a minute ago?”

Swallowing, I transferred my gaze from Jake to Dev, who was perched at the foot of the bed...waiting.

So they called my bluff. Big deal. In actuality the rope had been an unimportant prop.

Well, even if I couldn’t actually get away I could do something about my nakedness. I doubted they’d return my clothes, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t cover myself.

Slowly, careful to not make any sudden movements, I began to lower my arms.

“Look at me, Stella,” Jake said, voice smooth as silk.

Damn, I thought, twisting my head around to face him.

Jake didn’t seem amused or at all like a man who was about to have a good time. Eyes unreadable, mouth set, and hands fisted on his hips, he looked intimidating as hell.

“Did I say you could move your arms?” he asked.

Another wave of lust descended upon me even as, without being told what he wanted me to do, I returned my arms to their previous position; untied, but stretched over my head in a wide V.

Jake turned to face Dev. “See, Dev. Docile as a kitten.”

At the sound of those words, every fiber in my body longed to stretch out a hand

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and uppercut Jake to the gut. But I'd taken that route with Jake before and all it had gotten me was a paddle to the ass. I didn't care to have a repeat performance tonight so I bit my tongue and forced myself not to respond.

"I'm impressed," Dev said, coming around the opposite side of the bed. It dipped under his weight when he settled atop it. He sat with his hands balled into tight fists for a moment, then he took in a deep breath. "Can I touch her, Jake?"

There was a rustling of the bed sheets as Jake crouched on his knees. Leaning over me, with one hand propped on the bed to hold his weight, Jake ran the fingers of his free hand over Dev's cheek. There was such love in that simple touch, such feeling that a pang of jealousy lit through me. "She belongs to us both," Jake said. "She's ours. You don't need to ask my permission to touch her or to kiss her. I want you to enjoy her. But remember that she's a woman. She's smaller than we are, more fragile. Making love to her won't be like making love to each other. I want you to be gentle with her. Control yourself, at least until she gets accustomed to us."

Dev leaned into Jake's hand, seemed to revel in the physical contact. "No whipping I suppose," Dev said, sounding sad.

"Not for a while," Jake agreed. "You're too heavy handed."

I should have been annoyed at being the object of such a discussion, but my shock at witnessing the depth of love these men shared left me too stunned to think about myself. Jake and Dev were lovers, in every sense of the word.

When they kissed, each man bending forward to capture the other's lips, a sigh of longing escaped me. I hadn't meant to make a sound, but still, as quiet a sound as it was, it was enough to pull them from their two-person reverie. Dev looped his arm behind the back of Jake's neck, let his tongue slide hungrily over his lips, then released him.

The two settled onto the bed and refocused on me.

"I think someone's feeling left out," Dev said. "Are we excluding you, Stella?"

Though his eyes still simmered with repressed desire, playfulness was there that I hadn't seen a moment before.

I searched my mind for something witty to say, but came up empty. It was difficult to be clever when you were naked and had your arms and legs splayed for the pleasure of your companions.

"Touch her Dev," Jake prodded. "I want to see your hands on her."

"Nothing would thrill me more," Dev said.

My breath caught when Dev ran a finger over my nipple. Desire blazed through me like a streak of lightning, more powerful due the intense feminine longing that had been steadily building within me for the past ten minutes. Still, despite Jake's prodding, it

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didn't feel right to have Dev's fingers on me, touching me in such an intimate manner. I looked to Jake, hoping to gauge his response. Did his emotions match his words? If I could see what he thought of this, I could better decide how to respond.

"Don't look at him," Dev said. "Look at me."

Jake's face was as expressionless as granite. I didn't have any other choice but to do what Dev said. So I turned to face him.

"That's more like it...kitten," Dev added, teasing my nipple with the tips of his fingers.

A low moan slid from between my lips before I could stop it.

"You like that?" Dev asked, repeating the movement.

I tried hard to control my response to him but it was near to impossible. The gentle touch of his hand on my skin was incredible. How could something so simple as a touch have me so close to losing control?

"I think she's warming to me," Dev said. He punctuated his statement by giving my nipple a squeeze.

"Oh God!" I cried.

"Is that right, kitten?" Jake asked, still not touching me. "You warming to Dev?"

When I didn't answer quickly enough, Dev gave my nipple another, torturous squeeze.

"Oh, Dev," I whimpered, reaching blindly for him. I wanted to tangle my fingers in the rich chocolate that was his hair, pull him closer to me and have a taste of him. A longer taste than he had offered in my kitchen. I wanted to taste and touch until my heart was content, feel his body against me and know the full force of his desire. I wanted him to want me as much as he wanted Jake.

My fingers grazed the collar of his leather vest, but he leaned back and out of my reach before I could get a hold of him and draw him forward. My hands slid down the slick material over his chest and fell into his lap.

Dev's eyes glimmered with mischief...and pleasure. "Look at her, Jake. She wants this bad. Don't you, kitten?"

Since my hands were already in his lap, I sought the hardening mass of flesh I could see straining at the crotch of his pants. I was so near to touching it, inches from clasping his zipper and drawing it down when Jake moved forward on the bed. He clasped my wrists in one hand and levered them over my head with a quick ease that left me dazed.

"Did I say you could move your arms?" he wanted to know. He pressed my wrists

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to the mattress, pinning me there. "Move them again and I let Dev get his whip."

I glanced up at Dev who blew me a kiss. Getting to his knees, Dev splayed his hands on either side of my head and gazed at me. "Stella," he said in a low, teasing voice. "I want you to touch me. I want to feel your hands all over me."

To accent how serious he was, he stood and slipped his arms from the leather vest. He let the vest drop to the floor, forgotten, then set his knees atop the bed and leaned over me again.

"You're as gorgeous as Jake," I said, before I even considered what such a statement would sound like. But really, what woman in my position could've stopped herself? Though he was nowhere near as muscular as Jake, his body was lithe and every muscle well-defined. He could've been sculpted from marble. Fine brown hair circled pink nipples. There was a trail of curly brown hair descending from his stomach into the waistband of his pants. Suddenly, I wanted him out of those pants. Was desperate to follow that enticing path and see where it led me.

"Touch me then, kitten," he said again. "Touching is the most underrated part of lovemaking. There's so much pleasure in a simple stroke of the finger." To demonstrate what he meant, he ran his finger down the valley between my breasts, sending a riot of delicious sensations through me. "So much satisfaction in the feel of your lover, in the silk of their skin." He found my nipple again and his finger glided over it. "Touch me, kitten."

Though Jake held my wrists pinioned to the bed, I didn't doubt he'd release me if I struggled against him. Unsure of what to do since Jake's whipping warning remained fresh in my mind, I chanced a look at Jake.

Jake stared back. "Who's in control here, tonight?"

I didn't have the faintest idea anymore. Could be either of them. There was one thing I knew for sure. "Not me," I offered.

He gave my wrists a squeeze; I supposed it was to remind me just how little control I had.

"You?" I asked.

"You asking or telling?"

I stared, unsure if this was a trick question. "Telling," I decided, as the word left my lips.

Jake nodded. "And Dev. What do you think will happen if I let you go and you move your arms?"

I stared up and into Dev's brown eyes. Their predatory gleam spoke volumes. "He'll whip me," I said.

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“And love doing it,” Dev agreed. “And I think you’d love it. You’re so turned on right now I wouldn’t be surprised if the next time I touch you that you come.”

Jake studied me. “She’d better not. You hear me, Stella. You don’t climax until I give you permission.”

“But—” I tried, realizing that not only had I lost control of the decision on where to move, but I’d just lost control over when I could have an orgasm.

“If you come before I say, I’ll bend you over that chair myself and hold you down while Dev beats. Got it? Tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” I said, no less aroused. In fact, I found as I gave up control to Jake and Dev, my need for sexual release grew to inhuman proportions. I was weak with my arousal, and so turned on, I was willing to do nearly anything if it meant one of them would mount me, slide their cock inside, and ride me hard.

“She is a docile little thing, isn’t she?” Dev observed. “Kitten, I can’t wait to fuck you. I’m gonna make you feel so good you’ll never want to leave us,” Dev promised, letting his fingers dance over my stomach. “Would you like that?”

Bloody hell. I’d love that. I wanted that. Had been desperate for that from the first moment I saw him strut onto the Hammerjacks stage last month.

Jake sprawled, lengthwise, beside me. He threw one jean-clad thigh over mine, pinning my hips to the bed beneath him. With Dev crouching over me and my wrists held tight in Jake’s hand, he kept me splayed beneath him with the press of one leg,. I felt stretched, laid bare, and wonderfully helpless.

Jake cupped my other breast and the warmth of his hand radiated through my entire body. When he began to knead and stroke my nipple, my insides turned to mush.

It was a slow torture, this erotic play. Both men touched, just enough to stimulate, stroked, only to tease. I was desperate to be filled, so in need I of an orgasm I couldn’t think straight.

Dev squeezed the pebbly bud of my erect nipple again, this time punctuating the squeeze with a flick over the sensitive nub with his thumb. “Would you like that?” he asked again, reveling in his slow torture. His eyes were fixed to my face, intense and knowing. “Would you like me to take off my pants, impale that luscious pussy of yours, and fuck you hard?”

I opened my mouth, licked my lips because they felt parched, then Jake was there. His mouth closed over mine with such force it took my breath away. His tongue was hot on mine, demanding, but his lips were soft. His skin was smooth and silky, and he was indescribably delicious. I met his kiss, offered myself to him. As our mouths melded,

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demanded more of the other, Dev's lips locked onto my nipple.

I arched as soon as the slick wetness of Dev's mouth heated my skin. His tongue lashed the hot bud in long, wet licks. When he began flicking his tongue over the sensitized flesh I thought I'd go mad.

I sighed into Jake's mouth and he deepened the kiss, swallowing my whimpers. Suddenly all of this was too much. There was too much sensation, too much stimulation. Every touch drove me to a higher level of need; every stroke left me more desperate for release.

"I want her first," Dev whispered around my skin. He released my nipple with a wet, *pop*. Eyes trained on mine, he told Jake, "I want to feel that tight pussy you've been telling me about."

Before Jake could answer, Dev parted my thighs with his knee and eased himself into place. Even through the leather pants I could feel his erection. It was enormous and solid as a rock.

"Yes!" I begged. My pride had gone out the window some time ago. I writhed on the bed beneath Dev; too desperate for his cock to behave with any decorum, and too terrified this was merely another tease to truly believe Dev was going finally to take me.

I nearly screamed in protest when he retreated. The only thing that held me together was the fact that he didn't go far. He crouched between my thighs, hands on his zipper. His chocolate eyes simmered as he gazed at me. Then only sound in the room was the soft flicker of the fire, our breathing, and the sound of metal gliding over metal as Dev undid his pants and slid them low on his hips. As soon as I saw the tufts of hair between his legs and the thick erection jetting up from the curls, I let out a soft moan.

Dear God, the man was huge!

Licking his lips, Dev lowered himself even as Jake slid his thigh away to make room.

"You want this bad, don't you, kitten," Jake said.

"Oh yeah," I said.

Dev settled atop me. Already, his pale skin was slick with sweat. He felt hot and indescribably perfect. His muscled chest was hard and unyielding against my breasts. The curled edges of his hair fanned out across his wide shoulders. It struck me again how angelic he looked. But he was no angel.

Dev closed his eyes for a moment, seemed to struggle for control.

"She's tight," Jake reminded him. "Don't hurt her."

"Hurt me," I begged. I was a little surprised to hear myself give voice to the sentiment, but I cared for about a millisecond. "I don't care what you do as long as you

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do it right now.”

Dev’s lips quirked into a grin, but he said nothing.

“What a dirty little girl you’ve become,” Jake observed. Still clasping my wrists, he released my breast, slid his arm between Dev and me, and eased it between my thighs.

“You are soaking,” he informed me, unnecessarily since I could feel the moisture seeping out of my pussy even as I lay there.

Jake’s fingers trailed over my quim, brushed against the skin of my labia, before he found my numb and gave me a slow, languorous stroke.

“Oh God, help me,” I begged. “Please Dev.”

Closing finger and thumb around my clitoris, Jake stroked, teased, and prodded me to a higher plain of desire. I squirmed beneath this exquisite torture, rolled my head back and forth.

“Please Dev,” I said again. “I’m begging.”

Jake fell on me. When his lips closed over mine, when I felt his tongue against my lips, nudging them open, my world stopped. He kissed me with an aggressive eagerness that made my blood boil. I welcomed the taste of him, I breathed in the intoxicating scent of him, cried out for more.

With Jake focused on my mouth and my clit, Dev rotated his hips and positioned himself. “Want me to fuck you now, kitten?” Dev wanted to know.

“Please,” I panted against Jake’s lips, so excited I could scarce think a coherent thought.

Jake used his thumb on my clit, making tiny circles over and driving me to the brink of madness.

“Ask me nicely, then,” Dev was saying.

Dear God, he wanted me to ask nicely? “Fuck me,” I said, trying desperately to sound sweet. I knew, though, that I sounded more out of breath and needy than anything else.

He shifted his cock, eased it closer, nearer entrance. “Say, please.”

“Please! Please fuck me, Dev. Please, fuck me now.”

Dev drove into me fast and hard. The unexpected movement sent shockwaves of pleasure racing through my body. I reeled and bucked beneath both men, twisted uncontrollably when Dev eased his erection back then slid into me a second time.

“Oh God!” I cried, far beyond any self-control.

Jake leaned onto an elbow and surveyed the proceedings with obvious pleasure. As though we were his students and this joining was our final exam.

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“Oh, Dev,” I managed, as he found a rhythm and rode me as hard as he had promised. Our skin smacked, the sound sex seemed to echo off the walls.

Dev bent to me, pressed his lips to mine and kissed me. His tongue moved leisurely over mine as he took his time tasting. Still, his kisses were hungry, like those of a ravenous man. I thought he would have swallowed me whole had he been able.

I would have wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close had Jake not been holding my arms pinned to the bed over my head. I was forced to lay docile beneath Dev, completely at his mercy. All I could do was meet him thrust for thrust as he rode me into a state of complete, all-encompassing rapture.

Beside me, Jake moved. He tangled his fingers in Dev’s hair and gave him a tug. I tried to suck Dev’s tongue into my mouth, was desperate to keep him where he was, but Jake was insistent and would not be denied. Even as Dev’s mouth slid away from mine, Jake edged closer. Their tongues met in the air, danced, then Jake pulled Dev closer still and deepened the kiss.

Even as Dev moved within me, his tongue danced in Jake’s mouth. I could hear Jake panting as his arousal increased, see his fingers tighten in his lover’s hair as he angled for more access.

When the two parted, both men turned to look at me.

Lost in the thrill of Dev moving inside of me, I didn’t realize what they intended until they descended on me.

Jake’s lips touched mine first, then Dev was there, intermittently licking my lower lip and sucking the tender skin into his mouth, then doing the same to Jake. All of our tongues met, tasted, and explored. I’d never been kissed by two men before, least of all at the same time. With Dev inside of me, Jake teasing my clit, and both men within my mouth, I did all I could do not to scream.

Dev rode me hard, withdrawing till he was nearly free of my body, then thrusting forward. My body had become nothing more than a sensor of pleasure. Dev worked me until I didn’t think I could take any more, and then he drove me further. It was better than anything I’d ever experienced in thirty years of life.

Before today I didn’t think I’d take to having to submit to both men at the same time, but now I was glad they’d taken matters into their own hands and brought me here despite my refusal to join them.

Lying with Jake and Dev was pure ecstasy.

Abruptly, Jake withdrew from our joined kiss. I felt the pressure on my wrists ease. Suddenly, they were freed. I found I could lift them if I wanted to. I figured I wouldn’t press my luck. Chances were that although Jake had released my hands, he

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wanted them to remain where they were.

Next to go was the tickling sensation on my quim.

Before I could protest, Dev sprawled atop me and took over the kiss. He drove his cock into me hard, rotated his hips, and pulsed inside of me. My quim shuddered under the luscious sensations. Even as I screamed his name I could feel my insides wanting to spasm, feel them drawing an orgasm up and out of me.

“Feel good, kitten?” Dev wanted to know.

I nodded, so lost in sensation I barely noticed when Jake eased off the bed and disappeared from sight. I only saw him, a moment later, when he reappeared behind Dev because the bed dipped when he crawled back on it.

“Does my dick feel good, baby?” Dev demanded.

“Feels amazing,” I managed. I was too lost in the feel of Dev to wonder what Jake was up to. I was too close to my own release to consider anyone else but me. “Oh God Dev, I’m gonna come.”

Abruptly, Dev stilled. At the same time, Jake reasserted his presence with a dictate. “No you don’t,” he said. “We haven’t given you permission.”

I wanted to cry out my frustration, clasp Dev’s buttocks and make him move within me again. It took every bit of strength I had to remain still on the bed and wait. They weren’t looking for a she-devil—as Dev had called me—but someone more acquiescent. They wanted me pliant and submissive, not stiff and demanding.

“You don’t come...” Dev was saying, then trailed off.

Jake’s fingers closed over Dev’s hips and Jake eased closer to him, making Dev twist his head around. Glancing over his shoulder, he began to say something to Jake. The words, however, never came. Dev swung around to face me and his eyes rolled up in his head. A low moan of pure ecstasy slid from between his lips and he collapsed on top of me.

“Oh, fuck,” he muttered. “Stop Jake. I can’t concentrate if you do that. Oh, God!”

Jake didn’t stop, however. He thrust again, driving Dev forward so deliberately this time that Dev’s cock slid within me, setting off shockwaves in my body. I moaned and Dev went positively mad.

Drawing himself up onto his elbows, Dev opened his eyes and gave me an evil grin. “Now you’ve done it,” he said, finishing on a groan as Jake eased out then plunged again. “Oh, fuck! That feels good.”

I cried out, heady with the thought of release, as Dev was forced deeper into me again.

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Jake fell against Dev. He splayed his hands on both sides of my head and rested his entire body weight on Dev. I was grateful Dev had had the foresight to hold his own weight on his elbows. If not, I would have been crushed. Together, I knew they had to weigh a good four hundred pounds. Maybe more.

“Fuck Stella,” Jake ordered when Dev seemed completely unable to move under his own steam. He drove into to Dev so hard his arms nearly went out from under him. Jake didn’t withdraw this time. He pressed his lips to Dev’s ear, ran his tongue along the outer edge then began to whisper into it. “Don’t torment her, Dev. She wants this bad. Just like you want it bad.” Saying this, Jake drew back and sank into Dev again, bringing a plaintive moan from him. “Look at her, Dev.”

Both men stared at me. Jake’s expression was soft, rapturous even as Dev’s was dazed with sensation overload. Dev’s eyes began to clear though, and a moment later he eased back, his cock setting off tremors in me. When he thrust, it was deliciously hard. I cried out even as he was pulling back. He withdrew, nearly to the point of slipping free, then set his teeth and drove deep into me.

I screamed again, as pleasure descended with a force that staggered me. I bucked beneath Dev, met him thrust for thrust. I was so desperate for release, so in need to come I thought I’d lose my mind if I had to wait much longer.

Dev’s hips moved with piston like precision and strength. Every thrust sent lusciously erotic vibrations churning through my stomach, tingling up my spine, and settling in my quim. I lost all control. Every possession had me crying out for more, every withdrawal had me sucking in a breath in preparation for the next. This was pleasure unparalleled.

The tingle in my pussy quickly increased, became more demanding. I knew an orgasm was dancing on the periphery, swirling just out of reach.

“Did I say you could come?” Jake demanded, riding Dev as hard as Dev was riding me.

“Please,” I begged.

“No.”

Dev groaned, as if the “no” had not been for me but for him. That’s when I realized that there wasn’t a state of existence that could adequately describe what Dev was feeling. Even as Dev slid into me, Jake was easing out of him. As Dev withdrew, Jake was slamming himself home. I knew that what I was feeling was as close to euphoria as I figured I’d ever get. I also knew by the rapturous look on Jake’s face that he was feeling damn good, as well. But one look at Dev and I would have given my right arm to experience the sensations roiling through his body. No matter what he did, no

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matter how he moved, two people were pleasuring him. Even as I stared up at him, Dev grunted and groaned, seemed to struggle for focus.

“Too much!” Dev cried out. “I can’t hold it.”

Mercifully, Jake gave the command I’d been desperate to hear.

“Come,” he said.

As if his voice had been the trigger I needed, the orgasm spilled over me like hot milk. I bucked beneath both men, twisted and screamed as I climaxed. Above me, Dev thrust in deep and pulsed four times. Then he froze and let out a groan, I knew he was ejaculating into me and Jake into him.

When it was over, the three of us collapsed onto the bed in a heap.

I don’t remember much after that.

Exhausted and satiated, I fell fast asleep.

1/15/05 4:00 a.m.

I woke with a start, then covered my ears against the obnoxiously loud whining of an alarm clock. I didn’t use an alarm clock so I had no idea where this one had come from.

All around me was darkness—at first. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I saw the dying embers of what had once been a blazing fire. And that was when I remembered where I was.

“Go back to sleep,” a man advised.

He fumbled with the clock for a moment, then the horrible sound was gone.

“Jake?” I whispered.

A low chuckle sounded from beside me. “Sorry about that,” Jake said. “Dev sleeps right through the alarm so I didn’t think to turn it down last night.”

I was lying on my side, facing him, with something very hot, and very large curled behind me. Dev, I realized.

I reached blindly in front of me until I found Jake’s arm. “What’s going on?” I asked.

I felt him stretch, listened in the darkness as he yawned. “Work,” he said.

“Do you have to go? It’s not like anyone can fire you.”

“Do you ever blow off work?”

Sighing, I released him. “No. Sorry.” I hated it when people assumed that because I work for myself I could arbitrarily take off days whenever I pleased. Working for yourself didn’t mean you could be lax. Quite the contrary, it meant you had to be ten

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times more devoted and put ten times more of your energy and strength into your work.

Jake sat up, then eased out of bed. Immediately, I felt his absence. I wanted to reach for him and pull him back to me, but I fought the impulse.

“When will you be back?” I asked his retreating form.

“I’ll be home around one-thirty.” He stepped into the bathroom, flicked on the light, and turned to face me. “Will you wait for me to come home?”

I considered, but only for a moment. “Can’t. Have too much work to do at home.”

Nodding, he disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door. I heard the shower come on a moment later.

I was debating the merits of getting up myself and heading home when I felt Dev move behind me. With an unintelligible murmur, he slid his arms around my waist and pulled me close. The warmth that had escaped when Jake left the bed was replaced with Dev’s body heat.

“You’re not going anywhere, kitten. Not yet,” he said, as if he could read my mind.

Then he was there, the taut length of him stroking gently between my cheeks, prodding me to open my legs for him. At his touch, my body began to waken, to rouse with languid desire. Even as I leaned into him in welcome, he rocked his hips against me. He eased between my thighs, not entering me, but slowly lubricating himself with the moisture seeping from between my folds. His movements were slow, unhurried.

When I thought I couldn’t take anymore of this delicious torture, he slid into me.

I would’ve cried out if he hadn’t covered my mouth with one large hand.

“Not too loud,” he advised. “Don’t want Jake to hear?”

I wanted to know why, but my body and mind had descended into a sexual haze. Nothing mattered but the delicious sensations sweeping through me as Dev moved inside.

He cupped my breasts with his free hand, teased my nipples until I was gasping for air. The combination of the slow rocking of his hips and the gentle touch of his fingers felt too good.

He traced a path over my stomach, then between my legs. Gently, almost playfully, he tickled my clitoris.

“God, Dev,” I hissed against his palm. I wanted to scream his name, to cry out how good this felt.

He seemed to want to draw the pleasure out, to slowly ride me until I was mad with my need for release. But my body was too sensitive to his touch for a leisurely coring. I whimpered against his hand, rode his thrusts, pushing back until the full length

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of him impaled me.

“Yes,” he whispered into my ear.

He seemed to sense my need, to know I couldn’t hold on much longer. He quickened the pace, driving into me, possessing me totally, then retreating. Each penetration felt better than the last, each withdrawal left me closer to climax.

As Jake turned off the shower in the bathroom, I crested hard. The orgasm rolled over me, making me moan even as Dev spilled into me for the second time in mere hours.

When we were done, we both lay still, panting.

Jake’s soft footfalls as he moved around the bathroom were the only sounds I heard as Dev drew me onto my back and rolled onto me. The kiss that followed was slow and deep.

1/15/05 7:32 a.m.

I woke alone in the morning.

I didn’t have to search the apartment to know Dev was gone. Didn’t have to find the note on the refrigerator written in Dev’s neat script advising me to make myself at home.

I had a lot on my plate for the day, so I showered, dressed, (one of them was thoughtful enough to lay my dress on the armchair for me) then went home.

What an awesome night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1/15/05 8:32 a.m.

“What do you mean you’re not surprised?” I demanded.

We were both at our desks in the office, supposedly getting work done. The only things that had been working for the last twenty minutes were our mouths.

Ann swiveled away from her desk and faced me. “Look,” she said. “Jake called Monday morning while you were meeting with Mr. Peters. I may have mentioned something about us going to Club Blue for Valentine’s Day.”

“And,” I prodded.

“And, he got off the phone after that.” She shrugged. “I didn’t know he’d use what I told him to *kidnap* you of all things. Who the hell kidnaps a woman anyway? Jake has some serious control issues.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Are you mad?”

“If it hadn’t turned out so well I might have been.”

“You still going out with Chester?”

I sighed. “Yeah. At least one more time. It’s the only way I’ll know how I feel about him.”

2/17/05 3:03 p.m.

Still don’t know what to do about the Jake/Dev and Chester situations. I’ve spoken with all of them in the last few days. Jake and Dev want me to come over, and Chester wanted to make sure we’re still on for the weekend.

Argh! I don’t know what to do.

I can’t get Jake and Dev off my mind, yet it doesn’t feel right to end things with Chester before finding out if a relationship between us could work. Not after we had such a wonderful time together.

Chester had gotten back into town yesterday and I’ve been coming up with excuses not to see him. I’m afraid he’ll see the duplicity in my eyes. The fact that I’m with him physically, he’ll know that emotionally I’m with Jake and Dev. However, he’s

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insisting to see me on Saturday night so he can make up for missing Valentine's Day. So I agreed. As previously planned, Saturday night we'll meet at my place, then I'll take him to meet Ann, Katarina, Meagan and me at The Oak Room. We'll see how that goes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1/18/05 10:05 p.m.

The night started out fine. Perfect even. For about ten seconds. Then everything went to hell.

Chester and I arrived a little after ten. Katarina and Jim, Meagan and Peter, and Ann with her prop date, Sean, were already in residence. Everyone had been briefed as to the situation, and Operation Lure and Deceive was in progress.

The first sign of trouble was the state of near pandemonium reigning in The Oak Room. Waiters and waitresses scurried about with trays of food, drinks, and desserts balanced precariously over their heads. Sebastian, the owner, who usually greeted me with questions and conversation whenever he saw me, gave me a quick air kiss.

"It's busy tonight," he said, hardly able to stop smiling.

Unable to hide my dismay, I frowned. "I noticed."

Completely oblivious, Sebastian rattled on, "Isn't it great. Hired a PR firm last week. Expensive as hell." Head tilted to one side, Sebastian surveyed his domain. I could almost see him counting all the money he'd make tonight. "Isn't life fucking awesome!"

"Yep. And thanks for hooking us up tonight. We really appreciate it."

"Promise me you'll spend lots of money."

I raised my right hand. "Scouts honor."

"Oh, and tell Katarina that I can reserve The Tower for you girls every Saturday night for five hundred dollars. Ciao!"

I gaped at Sebastian's retreating form. When had the girls decided they wanted to rent The Tower every Saturday night? Five hundred dollars a month to reserve one frigging table? They must have lost their damned minds. I wasn't kicking in. What's one fourth of five hundred dollars...a hundred and twenty-five dollars for a table? I didn't care if it was The Tower.

And why had Sebastian hired a PR firm? Okay, so I knew *why*, but I didn't like it. The Oak Room had been a cozy hangout for locals. Now it seemed The Oak Room was *the* place to be. Seeing the hordes of beautiful people crowded at the bar, on sofas in the lounge, and in the dinning area made me long for the good old days of last week when

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The Oak Room was a secret getaway for me and my friends. There was never a crowd to elbow past, and never so much noisy chatter that a person had to yell to be heard.

This was a horrible turn of events. A disaster. My Shangri La, my Utopia was being overtaken by obnoxious twenty-something.

“Hey beautiful.”

Forcing the unfolding disaster of The Oak Room to the back of my mind, I smiled and turned to face Chester. “Hey yourself.”

Chester did look pretty amazing tonight. The thick, cream-colored sweater made his blue eyes even more luminescent than usual. There wasn’t anything outstanding about his black pants, except the way they hugged every inch of him. This was a man who looked good in everything. Jeans, suits, casual clothes. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have been able to keep my eyes off of him. Hell, I would’ve fought to keep my hands to myself, but just now, my life was anything but normal. I feared Chester could’ve appeared for our date in nothing but a G-string and a smile, and I would’ve still been spending more time than necessary thinking about Jake and Dev.

He held me at arms length and looked me over. “You get more gorgeous every time I see you.”

An hour ago, when I was slipping into the sleek, zebra print dress with its sparkly bodice, low neckline, and non-existent back, I’d worried that I was over doing it. Now, faced with a room full of women ten years my junior, I was glad I had. My black, strappy heels added a final sexy touch to my outfit. They looked killer and made my legs long and sleek, however it had been hell getting from the car to the club without stepping in snow. But then Chester carried me—actually carried me—over the bad spots.

“So do you.” Grinning at Chester, I took his hand and began to wind through the labyrinth of sofas, bodies, waitresses, and anything else that happened to cross our path.

Walking close behind me, Chester gave my hand a squeeze. “This place is packed, Stella. I don’t think there’s anyplace to sit.”

“Don’t worry. My friends reserved a table.”

“Don’t see places like this in Virginia,” he confided.

I looked at him over my shoulder, smiled at the sight of his eyes darting around the room, taking it all in. “Don’t usually see places like this in Baltimore, either, but this is a city on the rise.”

“We’re going up there?” Chester asked a moment later, when we reached the stairway to The Tower.

“Yep.”

Adrienne Kama

Named for its placement at the top of a lush, red velvet stairway, The Tower was located in a loft that overlooked The Oak Room's lounge.

We ascended the stairs, then I paused at the top to push aside the sheer gold, purple, and red curtains. As soon as Chester saw the room within, he murmured appreciation.

The Tower boasted a Mediterranean décor. It was extravagant dining at its most opulent. Instead of an ordinary eating space, it had a knee-high, oval shaped table surrounded by fat red, gold, and purple pillows. Each pillow was large enough to serve as a seat. Sheer draperies hung on the walls, the glimmering material reflecting the soft light of numerous candles positioned around the room. A mammoth fireplace was the crowning glory. It was so large, I worried that if things didn't go as planned, Ann would get drunk again and fall in.

When we entered, everyone looked up.

"Stella!" Katarina announced, as though she hadn't seen me in centuries. "You made it."

Nodding, I found two over-stuffed pillows and settled in.

After introductions were made, Katarina depressed a hidden button on the underside of the table, notifying our waitress that we needed her. Though, I had no idea why. Already they'd ordered Buffalo wings, chicken quesadilla's, lobster and artichoke dip, fried calamari, mussels, a fruit and cheese platter, and a platter of coconut shrimp. There was so much food on the table already I wondered if ordering an entrée would be necessary. The smell of all this delectable food was intoxicating. I wasn't hungry when I arrived, but the more I smelled the delicious aromas wafting up from the table, the hungrier I became.

"Why so many appetizers?" I asked.

Jim leaned forward and gave me a wink. "Nobody's eaten dinner yet. And we couldn't agree on anything, so we ordered all the appetizers on the menu."

Not only had they ordered every appetizer available, but they'd also ordered two bottles of French wine and a pitcher of beer. They also had several half empty margaritas on the table.

Jim looped an arm around Katarina and proceeded to start a discussion sure to get every man at the table fired up. "So, what do you all think of the Ravens' chances of making it to the Super Bowl next year?"

Not realizing how rabid Baltimoreans can be about the Ravens, Chester grimaced. "What chances?"

And they were off.

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Why men cared so much about football, I'll never know. But I took this opportunity to get Katarina's attention. "What's this about a monthly rental? I think our usual table is fine."

Looking more at ease with her faux date than I thought necessary, Ann leaned into him and shook her head. "We don't have to shout up here. I'd pay a hundred and twenty-five a month for that alone."

I eyed Meagan. "You agree?"

Shrugging, she gave me a half-hearted nod.

"Look," Katarina began. "Did you see the lounge when you came in? It's like a madhouse down there. And according to Sebastian, this is just the beginning. I figured we should reserve The Tower while it was still affordable."

Five hundred dollars a month on a table is affordable? "Why can't we find someplace else to hang out?"

From the melodramatic gasps and throat clutching, you would've thought I proposed we take off our clothes and walk butt-ass, naked through the streets.

"Have you no loyalty?" Katarina demanded. "Sebastian would die if we went someplace else, he'd absolutely die. He's like family now."

"I don't know about your family, Katarina, but mine doesn't charge me five hundred bucks to sit at the table."

"It's hardly the same thing," Meagan advised. "Sebastian has a business to run, and we like coming here. Personally, I prefer to socialize without being propositioned by twenty-year-old boys. How about you?"

Damn it to hell. Even as I sat with three pairs of eyes on me and three matching looks of determination pointed in my direction, I knew I was fighting a losing battle. In a last ditch effort I focused on Ann. Since I'd made her a co-owner of AIR, she didn't work for me anymore, she worked for the company. Still, I knew how much money she brought home. "You can afford this?" I asked her.

"It's an investment."

I stared up at the ceiling. Clearly I wouldn't win Ann's support. Katarina had already convinced her. Katarina was big on "investing", just not on financial investments for the future. She invested money in a gym to find a husband, she invested money on a maid, to save time, and now she was ready to invest money on The Tower to have...I wasn't sure. I didn't think she was so enamored of quiet that she'd think five hundred a month was a reasonable expense. No, it probably had more to do with the image of having a VIP table reserved just for us, one always available on a Saturday night

Adrienne Kama

whenever we wanted.

“All right, fine,” I said. “I’ll put in too. But I don’t like it.”

Katarina beamed. “You won’t regret it.”

“I already do.”

I was about to ask Ann to remind me what time Gerard said he’d show up when I heard the unmistakable sound of footfalls on the stairs.

Ann’s back went ramrod straight. Katarina’s eyes widened, Meagan bit her lower lip, and my arms broke out in gooseflesh. As one, the four of us turned to stare at the doorway.

“You rang?” our waitress asked.

“Shit!” Ann said, deflated.

“Can we have a bottle of Sam Adams,” Katarina looked at me for guidance.

“Whatever seasonal brew you have is fine,” I told the waitress.

“Stella hates mixed drinks, is particular about wine, and—”

“Thank you,” I interrupted, wondering why on earth Katarina thought she had to give the waitress an explanation of why I was ordering a Sam Adams. Then I remembered the copious amount of alcohol already on the table and understood. Katarina didn’t want the waitress to think we were drunks.

The waitress left, promising to return with my beer shortly.

“What time is it?” Ann wanted to know.

Meagan raised her wrist and squinted at her watch. “Ten thirty-seven.”

Slumping slightly in her seat, Ann gazed at her nearly empty margarita and declared forlornly, “He’s not coming. He said he’d be here at ten thirty.”

“He’s only seven minutes late,” I said. “He’ll be here.”

Sean slipped his arm around Ann and pulled her close. “I’m sure he’s coming.”

Beside me, Chester laughed. “So Stella wasn’t kidding. You guys have really set up Ann’s ex to come here and see the two of you together,” he pointed to Ann and Sean, “and get jealous?”

“Let me tell you something about Gerard,” Meagan said. “For two years, for as long as I’ve known Ann, I’ve known Gerard. And Gerard has always been in love with Ann. The only reason he’s dating Candace is to get Ann jealous.”

Chester grimaced. “Sounds confusing if you ask me.”

I shrugged, still annoyed that I’d been roped into renting a VIP table.

“You’ve never been in love?” Meagan asked.

Chester rested his elbows on the table, opened his mouth, but didn’t get a chance to speak. Another set of footsteps sounded on the stairway.

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“Can’t be the waitress this fast,” Meagan said, when she saw Ann’s back stiffen a second time. “It must be Gerard.”

The purple, gold, and red panels slid apart and a familiar figure stepped from the opening.

Sporting a wide grin, Gerard crossed the threshold into The Tower.

My mouth fell open and I did a double take. At first glance I’d assumed it was Gerard, but maybe this was some kind of Gerard-clone or something. Never in two years had I seen Gerard dressed as he was tonight.

He wore a very chic pinstripe suit, and a power tie that said, *I have money and I know how to spend it*. A brand new Rolex—I’d never seen it before—gleamed from his wrist, making me wonder when Gerard had acquired taste. His blonde hair was combed neatly away from his face, and it shimmered with platinum highlights. I’d be a monkey’s uncle if Gerard hadn’t been to the beauty salon in the last few days.

However, despite Gerard’s GQ appearance, the most noticeable thing about his arrival was that he’d come alone.

NO CANDACE!

I had no idea what Gerard was up to, but whatever it was he had the full attention of everyone.

Ann blinked. “Son of a bitch!”

I think I may have said or did something to indicate my surprise, but I don’t remember.

Beside me, Chester didn’t seem to know who to look at. I caught a glimpse of him from my peripheral vision, and it was enough for me to see his head bobbing back and forth between Ann and Gerard.

Casually, as though he had no inkling of the shock he’d caused all of us, Gerard made his way around the table to Ann. His focus was so intent on her, I wondered if he was aware of anyone else in the room.

He gave Sean a cursory glance, then crouched before Ann.

She panted, stunned silent for the first time in her life...and probably the last.

Gerard smiled, nodded, then leaned close and pressed his lips to her forehead. “Did you miss me?”

Having obviously forgotten about Sean, Ann stared into Gerard’s eyes and nodded back.

She actually looked contrite. I could just kick myself for not bringing my camera. I doubted I’d ever see such a look on Ann’s face again.

Adrienne Kama

Ann raised a hand to stroke Gerard's cheek, paused when she realized her fingers were trembling, then cupped his face in her palm. "I'm sorry for everything, Gerard. I know I'm not the easiest person to be in a relationship with."

Someone muttered, "Amen to that." I suspect it was Katarina.

Neither Gerard nor Ann seemed to hear. They were in their own world now.

"Hush, Ann. That's behind us." He fumbled in an inner pocket of his suit, showing signs of nerves for the first time since his appearance. Finding his quarry, he fisted it and took a deep breath. "There's something I want to say...that I want to ask."

Ann gazed at his closed hand for a few seconds, then into Gerard's eyes. His gaze was intense, reflecting a desperate longing that I supposed had always been there, but it was never quite as obvious as it was tonight.

"Oh shit," Ann muttered.

"I love you Ann, and I know you love me." Gerard paused to take a deep breath. "And I wanted to know..." Big breath. "...if you would do me the honor..." He twisted his fist until the object in his grasp was visible, then opened his hand. Resting neatly on his palm was a purple and cream-colored velvet box.

It was just large enough to hold a ring.

"Oh shit, Gerard," Ann said, breathlessly.

"If you would do me the honor of being my wife?"

For a moment, Ann continued gaping at him, then at the open box in his hand. The table went quiet.

One fat tear slid down Ann's face. Despite this, her lips turned up in a smile. "Of course I will." And she glided off her pillow and into Gerard's arms.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

2/19/05 2:07 a.m.

I stared at the ceiling of my bedroom, unable to fall asleep.

Ann is getting married.

Ann is getting married.

One of my best friends is getting married.

I figured if I said it enough, it would sink in.

Obviously this was a time of joy, a time to celebrate. But no matter how much I tried to be happy for Ann, I couldn't muster anything better than resignation. This didn't have anything to do with some adolescent fear that once Ann said *I do* I'd lose her to Gerard. He had always been a fixture by Ann's side. They were always a couple, nothing would change.

What was changing, however, was me. I couldn't say how or why, but somehow, when Gerard had crouched before Ann, jeweler's box in hand, my no-man vacation suddenly seemed ridiculous. It *was* possible for a man and woman to truly love each other...happily-ever-after *was* a possibility. The thing that scared me, though, was the thought that maybe it wasn't a possibility for me. What was more upsetting was I knew if I kept seeing Jake and Dev, I'd never fall in love. How could I while I was involved in a perverted sex triangle with two bisexual men? I couldn't! And I refused to delude myself into believing I could have anything meaningful with Jake and Dev. They were in love with each other, not me. I was a sort of sex toy for them. I went to their condo, we enjoyed a few hours of great sex, and I usually returned home afterward. It was sex they wanted from me and I knew it. And I had to live with knowing it. Unfortunately, regardless of the emotions involved, or not involved, I didn't want to end things with Jake and Dev. They'd sucked me into their world, seduced me, and now I was addicted.

A sudden wave of rage descended on me. It was all well and good for them to amuse themselves with me because in the end they'd always have each other. Who did I have? Chester? Hardly. I couldn't spend ten minutes with the man without thinking about Jake.

Adrienne Kama

“That son of a bitch!”

I sat up in bed, fumbled on my bedside table for the telephone. It took me a few seconds to punch in the number, but once I did, I listened to the ringing on the other end of the line, stewing in anger.

“What the fuck?” Jake said groggily into the phone.

“What do you want from me?” I sounded slightly hysterical, but I didn’t care. My future was on the line here. “Do you hear me Jake? What do you want from me?”

“Stella?”

“Answer me, Jake.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? It’s close to two-thirty in the morning.”

“You wanna know what happened to me tonight? I found out that my best friend is getting married. Married! Gerard broke up with his girlfriend because he realized Ann is the only person in the entire universe that he wants to spend the rest of his life with.”

Mutters and moans greeted this speech. In the background I could hear Dev asking Jake who was on the phone.

Finally, Jake asked, “Is everything all right, Stella?”

Argh! Had the man heard a word I’d said? “Hell no! Everything is not all right. I want to know what you want from me. If it’s just sex, tell me now and I’ll move on with my life. God knows I enjoy sex with you and Dev, but I’m thirty frigging years old. I need more than sex.”

Jake sighed. “I suppose you’re going to tell me what it is you think you need.”

“Damn straight. What I want, Jake, what I need is to be with a man who wants *me*. Someone who cares about who I am, as a person, not how tight I am or how good I feel.”

Jake cleared his throat. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes! Do you think I’d call you at two-thirty in the morning if I wasn’t?”

“Good point.” Jake put his hand over the phone so he could have a conversation with Dev. I couldn’t make out anything that was said, but figured I could put it together when Jake returned and said, “We’re on our way.”

Oh shit! I hadn’t expected that. I was in my pajamas for crying out loud, and I didn’t have on any makeup. *Argh!* And my hair was in a frumpy bun. “No!” I said into the phone, but it was too late. Jake had disconnected.

I flew out of bed and ran around my bedroom in a panic. Hair, face, clothes, I didn’t know what to attend to first. Sliding across the floor to my door on socked feet, I found the light switch and flicked it on. Then I screamed. My room was a wreck. Unfortunately, I couldn’t worry about that. There wasn’t enough time.

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I threw myself down in front of the vanity and undid my bun. My hair tumbled free to the middle of my back. I thanked God above when I saw it had maintained most of the curl I'd put into it before going out tonight. Next on the list was my face. The best I could do with mere minutes to work with was drag flesh-colored lip-gloss across my lips and line my eyes with liner.

In the next five minutes I changed out of my flannel nightgown and into a slinky, ankle-length Victoria's Secret gown. It was a delicious shade of cream with intricate lace work along the bodice and hemline. It was sexy, yet not so sexy that it would seem unlikely I'd wear it when I slept alone.

I'd begun shoving shoeboxes and articles of clothing under the bed when my doorbell rang.

They were here.

2:37 a.m.

I stared at the ceiling of my bedroom, unable to fall asleep. Dev was curled behind me, arms wrapped tight around my stomach. Though his T-shirt was soft, the texture of it, the feel of it against me was nothing like lying with him and feeling the warmth of his naked skin. I couldn't complain because Dev was with me in bed. Remaining fully clothed, it was a clear sign that maybe I was more to these two men than a sex toy.

Jake lay on his side facing me, caressing my face. "Did you ever think that maybe we want more than sex too?" he asked quietly.

"You and Dev?" I whispered back.

He gave my cheek a paternal pat then eased closer. His breath on my face was gentle. The scent of toothpaste and mouthwash was strong on him/ I wasn't the only one to clean up before this unexpected meeting.

He'd come wearing a jogging suit, which he still wore when he'd laid in bed beside me. He'd combed his hair and wore it loose just the way I like it. He looked as wonderful as ever and smelled intoxicatingly good. Especially his hair. It always smelled like apples and cinnamon.

"Me and Dev," he agreed.

"But you're already in a relationship. With each other."

Behind me, Dev shrugged. "Give us a chance."

Jake nodded. "You'll never know until you try."

"I suppose," I said. "But what will people say? What will they think? This isn't a

Adrienne Kama

normal relationship?”

“Normal according to who?” Jake asked. “I don’t care what anyone thinks of us. You shouldn’t either.”

“I know I shouldn’t. But I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Trust us Stella. Just give us a chance. Can you do that?”

I didn’t answer immediately. Instead, I thought of all the stares we were likely to receive whenever we were in public, all the comments that would be casually thrown our way from people who couldn’t understand us. And I realized something. I didn’t care either. Why on earth should I let my happiness depend on what others deemed permissible? The majority of these faceless threats were strangers. I wouldn’t live my life to please people I didn’t even know. Anyone I cared about, or anyone who cared about me, would try to understand.

So I met Jake’s gaze, smiled, and said, “I can do that.”

Behind me, Dev burrowed closer. “Good. Can we get some sleep now?”

And for the first time since I’d known Jake and Dev, we spent the night together without having sex. We slept side by side as lovers.

The Chronicles of Stella Rice: February

Bio

Having grown up with a love of telling stories, it was only natural for Adrienne to begin writing books. Known for her steamy I/R fantasy romance series, “The Nephilim War”, Adrienne looks forward to having a long career ahead of her. This CAPA award nominee writes chick lit, fantasy, and paranormal stories with domineering heroes and adventurous heroines.

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