

LITTLE NOTHINGS



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AURORA ROSE LYNN

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Little Nothings

By

Aurora Rose Lynn

***To my husband, Michael, for his love and
encouragement.***

Chapter One

Lea McCallister fantasized about slipping into the silky negligee. Black satin against ivory skin beckoning a starving man to his passionate temptress.

She fingered the fabric of the black lace confection. Her tongue roamed over her bottom lip, moist with coral lipstick. What would it be like to wear such a seductive piece of clothing and have a man pant with desire for her? She imagined herself rising phoenix-like from the ashes of her old self. As she rose, the black silky material flowed around her in the light breeze, caressing her naked thighs, brushing her sensitized nipples. Her long dark hair lifted behind her in the slight wind and the sun shone its rays directly on her, illuminating her beauty and near-nakedness. She rose higher and higher above the earth, adored by the men at her feet. One reached out and lifted her negligee higher, and brushed her throbbing clit with hardened fingers.

“Pretty piece, isn’t it?” her boss asked, interrupting her daydreaming.

“Yes. It is.” Lea’s voice was too husky. She had to get her mind back on work, on the dull task of

tagging alluring pieces of clothing.

"All this makes it hard to work sometimes," Erica Saunders murmured. She quickly pushed red and black bustiers aside to make room for the new shipment that had arrived earlier that morning. Her black leather skirt hugged her hips, and the tips of her breasts marked the thin silk of her white blouse. Next to Erica, Lea couldn't help feeling overdressed in a peach-colored wool sweater and black gabardine pants.

She nodded, unable to think of anything to say, the daydream still vivid in her sometimes too-imaginative mind. Almost twenty-six, and she hadn't had a date in longer than she dared to admit. She busied herself ticketing clothing on the Formica counter near the cash register.

"Do you preach what you teach?" she blurted out.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do you wear these at home?"

Erica didn't blink at her bold question. "I spend all day here, looking at the new pieces, like that white lace teddy over there." She indicated with a wave towards the right of Intimates by Erica the teddy and panties a mannequin modeled. "I design these during my waking hours and in my sleep. I get hot and bothered. So, I guess the answer is yes, I wear them at home."

Lea wasn't surprised. "There's something about your designs that are very seductive."

A pencil-thin man strolled in and smoothed a two-piece teddy and panty set. He held the hanger up, fingering the scrap of silk that looked much better

covering a woman's pussy. "Does this come with any less material?" he asked in a shrill voice. He blinked as rapidly as flashing railroad-crossing lights.

Erica smiled sweetly. "Any less than that qualifies as naked."

He grimaced, placed it back on the rack and walked out.

"A few years ago, I saw there was such a lack of seductive clothing. I could whip up a satin bridal gown in no time, but that wasn't what I really wanted to be doing. I wanted to sew clothes that would make women feel pretty, feminine and powerful, clothes to cater to hot, steamy nights."

"They're beautiful." Lea's skin prickled. What was wrong with her today? Normally she worked without giving much thought to the little nothings, but today, it was as if her body's sexual nature was in hyperdrive.

"I think women should be able to strut their stuff when they're in private. To show their nipples and their pussies, to make a man think with his cock."

Lea blinked several times. She swallowed hard. Her hand paused in mid-air with the ticket machine. She had never heard Erica talk so explicitly before. "You have a point there." Did she really believe that women could look good for their men?

"Why don't you take one home with you? Try it on? Experiment? Knock the man in your life into seventh heaven when he sees you."

"I couldn't do that. It's just not me." The suggestion had a certain appeal though. Dress in a black negligee, open the drapes in her bedroom wide,

and play with herself. Her nipples pebbled.

"Honey, you try one of these on and you won't want to be you any more."

She was afraid of that. If she tried one of Erica's creations on, she'd never want to get out of it. She glanced out into the mall at a wooden-slat bench with a potted fern beside it. Her gaze fell on a mesmerizingly handsome man, dressed in a white golf shirt and black jeans. The shirt emphasized his broad shoulders. Powerfully built biceps rippled under the cotton. A twinge of some inexplicable feeling, perhaps animal-like attraction, rolled into the pit of her stomach. He bit into the burger, holding it with long elegant fingers. His pronounced Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"Oh goodness," she murmured. He made the mundane act of eating look sexy.

To her amazement, his deep gaze locked on hers. Smoky blue eyes lingered against her emerald green. Suddenly, she felt utterly feminine, utterly desirable. For the third time this week, his gaze devoured each inch of her, from the tip of her head to the soles of her feet. He gave her a slow, provocative grin. Heat pooled between her legs and in her clit. If she weren't careful, she swore she'd have an orgasm right there and then!

She blew out a huffed breath. And winked at him. The stranger turned away, his very manner oozing self-confidence.

"So that's how I got into business," Erica finished. Lea hadn't heard much of what she'd said, her attention being focused on the man outside.

Thankfully, Erica's back had been turned when Lea winked.

She blushed a pretty pink. What on earth had gotten into her? She was flirting with a stranger, an irresistibly, arousing stranger. Had he taken it as a flirtatious gesture and nothing more or had he read some deeper meaning into that eye movement? She couldn't allow herself to get involved again. One bad relationship had been one too many.

"I'm glad you started Intimates," she said, hoping she sounded as if she'd heard every word of her boss's unwitting monologue.

"I should have named it Bold and Beautiful, or even Naked and Beautiful." Erica sighed, adjusting her blouse to show a bit more cleavage. "If I had a man like that, I'd walk around naked to turn him on."

"If I had a man like that, I might splurge for one of your creations, and give him an evening he'd never forget." She imagined his roughened palms roaming over her naked body.

"You're kidding, right? That you don't have a man in your life?"

"No." She wished it wasn't the truth, and smiled wistfully. Every pore in her body yearned for a man like the stranger, someone who made her feel as if she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Erica gave a mischievous smile. "Well! It doesn't really matter. You don't need to have anyone in your life to make you feel pretty just for you."

Lea shrugged. She was a practical woman, and didn't see the need for fancy underclothes if she didn't have a man to flaunt them for. "When I have

someone to wear it for, I might invest in something nice." She turned to fan her gaze over the store she had worked in for the last six months. "So many interesting pieces to choose from." Her eye caught a lavender and lace bustier, then roamed to a pair of black stiletto heels. What would the stranger think if she wore that combination in the store tomorrow? Mercy, but she was off daydreaming again.

"Before you go home tonight, take anything you like and make a special evening for yourself. Curl your hair, paint your fingernails and your toenails, put on some make-up, and feel good about you."

She saw the wicked gleam in her boss' eyes before she strode off into the backroom. She glanced out at the bench. The stranger was gone. Feeling suddenly empty and abandoned, she ended up thinking about her mother as she moved clothes on a nearby rack to make room for the new arrivals. One night, her father had walked out on his wife and eleven-year-old daughter. He had made no attempt to contact them over the intervening years. His unexplained action had left her mother devastated.

Her troubling thoughts were interrupted by "Look at you!"

"Delores!" Lea cried out with delight, eying her friend's chic cream-colored two-piece suit. Strands of blonde hair fell coquettishly over one shoulder. "What brings you here?"

"I've got a problem. A big one."

Lea laughed. "It can't be that big. Andy loves you to pieces." Unbidden, the painful feeling her former boyfriend had left her with sneaked in on her. Brad

had made a point of sending her bouquets of roses, expensive perfumes, and lush boxes of chocolate to court her. Once she'd given him what he wanted, he had abandoned her. That hadn't ended there. A week later, she found out he had bragged about his latest virgin conquest, using disparaging language. It was as if he had written her name and phone number along with the words 'bad sex' on a restroom wall.

Delores Franklin frowned. "Are in some kind of trouble?"

"What makes you say that?" Lea countered.

"It's just for a brief moment, you looked so --so devastatingly sad. Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," Lea reassured her friend. Given time, Brad would simply be a bad memory, nothing more. "What brings you here?"

Delores leaned forward conspiratorially, her gray eyes wide and innocent. "What's the best way to get a man into bed?"

Lea huffed out a sigh. She worked in an intimate apparel shop, not a phone line offering advice on sex. She didn't have a clue as to her friend's question, but she wasn't about to give herself away. "Are you talking about Andy?" She had been a bridesmaid at their wedding and enviously watched the couple. They were so much in love. She wanted to fall in love like that too, but how was she supposed to do that when she feared commitment?

Delores slapped her shoulder playfully. "Lea! I wouldn't have thought that of you! How could you think I was having an affair?"

"I wasn't thinking anything of the sort."

"Oh! You've always been the worst one for making jokes!" Delores exclaimed.

If that were only true. Lea concentrated on answering her friend's question. "Dress sexy. Try a teddy in crimson red, or a negligee in innocent white. Guaranteed to turn on a man with his family jewels intact."

"Red or white?" Delores turned to a rose-colored teddy with matching thong panties. "Do you think this will work?"

For a second, Lea envied her friend's good fortune in finding a man who loved her unconditionally. Relationships like that weren't common today. "I'm sure it would. If I were you, I'd leave off the panties. That'll make Andy go wild."

"It's sort of for Andy, sort of for me. I had an offer, you know from Maurice, the guy at the photography studio on Elmsfurt. He wants to do a few photos of me to turn Andy on. Do you think that would work?"

Lea felt a blush creeping over her cheeks. Her pussy got wet just thinking about showing off her slim body in a black negligee. She'd never contemplated having a photographer take pictures of her almost naked to turn someone else on. It would work - if only she had a special man in her life. "That's great! Maybe he could do one of me in nothing but a black negligee?"

"You found someone!" Delores cried out, grinning. "I can just hear wedding bells! Who's going to be your matron of honor?"

Her friend's enthusiasm made Lea nervous. "Slow down. I have to find a man first."

Delores' face fell. "That doesn't sound good."

"That teddy might work. Just depends what kind of background Maurice would use," Lea hastened to change the subject.

"I'm not sure I want to do that yet. I'm having second thoughts. You know, baring myself to another man for Andy's sake. Maybe in a few months. His birthday is coming up soon." She leaned closer. "Which position do you think is the best for sex? The one that turns a man on the most?"

The question shocked Lea. She hadn't the foggiest idea how to answer. Brad had thrust her on her back for his one quickie. That, and that her body craved a wild night out was the sum total she knew about sex.

A shriek of pain forced her to look out into the mall. A toddler in a light pink dress had fallen on her stomach, screwed up her face and cried in pain. The stranger, who had returned without Lea being aware of his presence, discarded his burger in a fraction of a second, and rushed to one knee to pick up the hurt child. He spoke quietly, his demeanor and his features soothing. Moments later, the little girl burst out in laughter. Lea silently applauded his good sense with children.

Erica started to walk by but paused. Her hazel eyes had an unmistakable twinkle. "Try doggy style. Drives men nuts when they see your ass sticking in the air just waiting for a piece of action."

Lea blushed. Her boss didn't hold back any punches when it came to talking about sex.

Delores' eyebrows notched up. "You think so? Isn't that position only used in dirty movies?" she

squeaked.

Erica gave a knowing smile. "Oh no! Men love it! I have personal experience to prove it."

Lea didn't doubt she did. Erica had what the media would have deemed a full and currently unfashionable figure but she didn't seem to care. She had a way of attracting men like honey attracted a swarm of bees. What was her secret?

Delores smiled to herself, giving an almost imperceptible nod. Would she try that position out tonight--on Erica's say-so?

Erica rolled up her sleeve and checked her watch. "I'll be late." She was on the move on killer-high heels and tossed over her shoulder, "There's a lot more positions than missionary. Lea, just hold the fort down." She disappeared into the mall. Her perfume lingered heavily in the air.

"Wow!" Delores said, still looking at the place where Erica had stood. "How does she do that?"

"Do what?"

"She's so - I can't think of the right word. So sexually dynamic, I guess you'd call it. I wouldn't mind having some of that."

Lea shrugged. "I sure wish I knew." She wouldn't mind having any of that power, especially if it attracted the sexy man seated in the promenade, his knees comfortably apart, talking on a cell phone. If she knew Erica's secret, she would wriggle her finger at him in a 'come-hither' motion and give him a time he'd never forget.

* * *

Carson Ralston had to admit the woman working in Intimates by Erica had nice legs. Hell, she had nice everything, from the gold flecks in her auburn hair, to her softly rounded breasts and her shapely ass. He had to quell his urge to jump up, run into the store, and sweep her off her feet. How he was going to do exactly that, he didn't have a clue. He did know she had a powerful and devastating effect on him – just by looking at her from a distance. A rich sexual hunger consumed him.

Where in the hell had his self-control gone? He had lost count of how many lunch hours he sat on a hard and uncomfortable bench eating a cheeseburger when he could have eaten at the Country Club and been catered to hand and foot. How had he gotten so turned around by a woman he didn't even know? An exotic blend of aromatic scents from a nearby candle store assaulted his nose.

A sip of the vanilla milkshake, usually a rare favorite, had become commonplace over the last few days. He had started out with good intentions, in fact, with intentions wholly different than what they were now. Erica Saunders had placed her five stores, all named Intimates by Erica, up for sale. Savvy businessman that he was, he wanted to insure that his offering a fair price to Erica would guarantee that this acquisition made more money. The first day he sat down on the bench, it was to make an impromptu market survey. If he wandered around at different hours when the mall housing seventy-five stores was open, he would be able to speculate on the quantity of

business this location did. Instead, he got sidetracked by a wriggling ass.

Hadn't they just given each other a wholly sexually charged look? She already recognized him. He quickly sobered. Why was he encouraging her like some sheepish teenage boy thinking with his cock? If he continued, she might expect to take their fledgling, at-a-distance relationship to another level. And he wasn't ready to do that. Maybe he never would be.

He turned his mind back to business as he bit into the tasteless burger. The extra ketchup and mustard hadn't helped the bland flavor any. This location didn't do as much business as the other four did. In the other stores, there was a constant flow of people in and out with purchases stuffed in delicate pastel shopping bags. Here, he speculated, people didn't feel comfortable walking out with anything related to sex into a mass of people who might have been watching. Selling love notions shouldn't be part of a mall. The mall was a busy place, but it had a family atmosphere with its supermarket and discount chain store as its two anchor stores. A cinema completed the ambience intended for families.

The others were independent stores in relatively busy sections of the cities they were located in. Those stores also sold items other than clothing, such as videos, love potions, notions, and lotions. Diversification was the key to staying in business in today's extremely competitive market.

He pondered how he had come from a dirt-poor background, had clawed his way up in the business world and could now afford anything he wanted. He

had a good life.

"Scouting out the skirts?" a murderously smooth female voice asked.

Rather, his life had been a good one until the owner of the voice waltzed into it. Her presence did to him what fingernails against a chalkboard did. Inwardly, he cringed but didn't bother looking up. He knew he would see his ex-wife grinning and standing behind the bench. She could have been a werewolf showing off her fangs.

"Spent your money already?" he drawled. He wanted her to disappear as she had a year ago. She'd taken his heart and most of his hard-earned money with her.

"Is that the welcome I get?"

"Didn't think you deserved a red carpet."

"I bother to come over and see how you're doing and that's all you can ask?" Helen whined.

In his mind's eye, he saw her blonde hair, rather her fake blonde hair -- the true color was brunette -- and her pouting lips in a perfect oval face on a long neck, and a perfect size-six body. "Why did you bother?"

He felt her fingers with their deathly long nails painted fire-truck red on his shoulder through his golf shirt. "It's the least I could do after your generosity."

He gritted his teeth. She had lied her way through their two-year marriage, through every doggone minute, about everything from the color of her hair to the men she denied sleeping with. Although she had taken half of all he owned, a cool million, he'd been glad to give her a divorce. He could do without the

lying and the cheating. "So now you've seen how I'm doing, go on your way."

He thought he could see her lips curled in a partial snarl and her eyebrows arched. "How you talk to me! We shared a bed and now you don't have the time of day to give me."

Carson felt his fury rising. He rose gracefully and faced her. She stood exactly as he had imagined her. "Is the sex any better now that you're divorced?" he taunted. In front of her lawyer, she had told him she'd had better sex with a doorknob than with him. Her words had made him swear he would never look at another woman again.

"I was only telling the truth. As I saw it," she purred.

That didn't mean a whole lot. Her life was one big lie but thankfully, she wasn't his problem any more. "Haven't you found the right man to lie to and cheat on yet?"

"Oh dear." She feigned shocked dismay but extended her hand. Her engagement finger appeared small under the weight of a diamond ring the size of a jawbreaker. "My Enrico and I are getting married next week. I'd ask you to the wedding, but I don't think you'd fit in."

Carson's chest rose and fell. He was long past being hurt by the fleeting innuendos Helen shot at him. The woman had bled him dry and now she had the gall to imply he hadn't been good enough for her. He straightened his shoulders, refusing to allow her to goad him into ungentlemanly behavior. "I wish your new husband the best," he managed politely.

Helen's lips rounded into a hostile smile. How could he ever have thought them luscious and kissable? "I'm sure I won't be disappointed. This time." She looked to her left. An eager smile appeared, all part of her actress persona. "Here comes Enrico now."

The man, of Spanish persuasion, didn't bother looking in Carson's direction. Helen took hold of his arm and flounced off with him. As they neared the mall doors, she cast a triumphant glance over her shoulder. If looks could only kill . . .

Carson stared at his burger. The ground meat had started to congeal into globs of fat. He'd lost his appetite as soon as he heard his ex-wife's petty voice. He balled up the remainder in its wrapper and tossed it in the trash next to the bench. He wouldn't allow her to get to him. After all, she was a superb actress, deserving of an Oscar. She was only playing a part since she had no idea how to be real.

To assuage his bruised ego, he reminded himself that money was his game. That usually got him in better humor. He glanced at Intimates by Erica. The woman who had winked at him, giving his blood pressure a definite rise, was still very appealing – the same way a chocolate appealed to a choc-aholic. If she had been wearing sackcloth, his cock would still be playing a number on him. His experience with Helen had taught him women couldn't be trusted, but still his hormones kicked into overdrive. Try as he might, he couldn't convince himself that the Siren might be different in character than his ex-wife. Not every woman was an actress. Might there be just one who

didn't act to get a man into bed, who showed her honest-to-goodness self?

She pushed clothes back on a rack and placed more clothes on hangers in the empty space. Attempting to be objective, to place some emotional distance between the Siren and himself, he watched her movements, studying the heart-shaped face with its flawless complexion, and the darting looks she cast in his direction. She had a quiet self-assurance he found attractive. She could almost pass for a Mona Lisa.

Carson slapped his knee. Why on earth was he ogling a sales clerk in a ladies' intimate apparel store? He had a business strategy to plan. Despite his stern admonition, his cock stirred again. He wasn't made of unfeeling steel. He needed a soft, female presence in his bed at night.

Why was he looking for a cheap thrill when he'd never run his life that way? It wouldn't hurt to have sex with the woman. If she was willing, that is. He was unwilling to think of a relationship. The state of matrimony was for men who had more courage than he had to tangle with a clit-yielding barracuda. The woman who stole his heart and body would have to be very special. She would have to be *hot*.

Everybody lived for sex. Sex or money. Except for him. He had the money part down, but the sex part was elusive, out of his grasp. He made do with his palm, and didn't need a woman for that. She would probably lie her way into his heart before she legally robbed him blind. He had worked too hard, too many long hours. He wouldn't have become wealthy if he had stopped to ogle every pretty woman he set his

eyes on.

The noise level in the promenade increased. Teenagers from a nearby school walked by, laughing and pushing each other. He examined them with a touch of jealousy, remembering when he had been a carefree youth.

He shook himself. It hadn't been so great back then. He hadn't even had a date for his senior prom. Probably because he had been poorer than the proverbial church mouse.

His lips twisted in a grimace. Now, he couldn't keep women away from him. He had become accustomed to bold ones gaping at him. Like the petite woman passing by. She bumped into another woman and apologized profusely. Women wanted only one thing from Carson Ralston. They wanted one good fuck after a quickie justice of the peace ceremony. Then bang! They wanted a divorce.

Unable to help himself, he rested a longing gaze on the Siren again. She met his gaze and smiled with endearing hesitancy. Need and arousal, sharp and intense, collided within him. She had the most vivid emerald green eyes he had ever seen, reminding him of a meadow filled with white flowers.

She was the first to break away, flushing a pretty pink as she turned back to her work. Out of habit, he reached for his tie to straighten it. It wasn't there. He'd dressed casually today. He should have worn a suit, then he could have pulled down the jacket over his bulging erection.

The Siren had done something few people had. She had unnerved him, he thought wryly. His long

fingers reached for the tie again, then rested on his collar. She was roughly ten years younger than he was. She moved and he caught sight of her tight ass under the black fabric of her pants. Her ass was like a ripe, luscious peach, his for the taking. She was hot stuff for a man who hadn't seen any action in a while.

He pursed his lips. She was more addictive than watching porno films or girlie mags. He had to get back to his office, away from the sex appeal the Siren unintentionally bombarded him with. The world was one big business deal waiting to happen. He set his shoulders forward and strode away, hoping to dismiss his tormenting thoughts of her. He had a business acquisition to prepare for.

Chapter Two

She hadn't been able to resist. She had splurged on a crimson red negligee, cut deep at the back and low at the front. Unable to bear the thought of bare feet with such a lacy creation, she had also splurged on a pair of matching high heels that strapped around the ankles with thin satin straps.

Opening the plastic bag, she unwrapped the negligee from its bed of tissue paper, lifted it and shook it out. The material fell in soft folds to the floor. She bit her lower lip. A shiver of appreciation ran down her spine and somehow ended up tickling her pussy. Brad would never have bought anything so decadent for her, she mused. Never mind. He was out of her life now. She would make a new start, find out who she really was. The first step was to slip into the negligee and dream about the tantalizing man at the mall.

Lea pulled the pink sweater over her head and threw it on the bed. She itched to put the negligee against her bare skin. Humming softly, she walked over to the window to close the bedroom drapes. The lights of the city below twinkled in the darkness, a carpet of diamonds against a black sky. She stopped

in mid-step. Why should she bother? It was no one's business but her own what she did in her own bedroom. She smiled. This was her night to explore.

She shucked off her pants, leaving them on the floor. A car passed by on the street below. Had it been a man or a woman driving? Had they seen her?

She stretched, raising her arms over her head, rising on the balls of her shoeless feet. The breeze she made fanned her belly button, igniting the flame in her pussy. She slipped a finger between her thigh and the elastic of her panties, spread apart her sensitized pussy lips and cut a lazy trail through her juices. Her ass tightened at the sensation. She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror on the back of the closed bedroom door. Slowly she turned to face herself. The woman who looked back had long auburn hair with natural waves caressing her face. She had a pert mouth and eyes the color of emeralds glowing fiercely under the noon sun. A white bra confined her high, firm breasts and the white high-cut panties covered a bushy dark patch. Long legs stretched from her pussy down to the carpet. Lea turned from the mirror, looking forward to her solitary pleasure. She needed more to arouse her senses to a fiery pitch.

Without looking at the mirror, she reached behind her back and unclasped her bra. One at a time, she uncovered her breasts to the cool air. Her nipples puckered into tiny buds. Forgotten, the bra fell to the floor. Lea took one nipple between thumb and forefinger and lightly pinched. It stood out like a small sentinel, painfully aroused. She did the same with the other nipple, watching it extend into a stiff

point.

Lea sighed, daydreaming of the exciting stranger in the mall, who she hadn't failed to notice, had shown up every day last week and every day this week. She helped her panties to the edge of her thighs and shimmied out of them. The bed with its floral-print comforter and lace-edged pillows invited her to lie down, open her legs and play with herself. She resisted the urge. Her climax would be more powerful if she waited to finish what she had set out to do.

On the street, a horn sounded. For a brief second, reason nudged her into asking what she was doing flaunting her naked body to motorists and passersby, but she hastily pushed it aside. She wanted to feel her fingers deep within her, tormenting her body to an orgasm.

A trickle of creamy honey ran down the inside of her thigh. She was wet with hunger, and more than ready. Naked, she paced to the bed, unlaced the negligee's bodice and slipped the material over her head. The hem whispered over and around her, falling to the floor in careless folds. With trembling fingers, she laced the bodice loosely, keeping her back turned to the mirror.

She thought about the man in the mall, holding his burger with those long fingers that cried out for a female body to stroke. Lea pretended he was in the room with her. She would never have the chance to make love to him, but imagining didn't hurt anything, did it?

With her back facing the mirror, she stepped into

the high heels and bent to lace each one around her shapely ankles. Too late, she remembered the thong panties lying on the bed. A smile curved her lips. Her wet pussy demanded to be satisfied. Tonight there was no need for them.

Still without glancing at the mirror, she walked into the adjoining bathroom, the negligee rustling all around her feet. She rummaged for the right shade of lipstick. A deep red, not crimson, but one that matched the seductive shade of red she wore, a color she never wore in public. She took the time to dramatize her eyes with black eyeliner and her eyelids with a pretty cornflower blue. No need for blush, she decided. Her skin felt warm to the touch. Now she was ready.

Wobbling a bit, unaccustomed to the height of the heels, she strolled out of the bathroom. Lea stopped in front of her reflection. She could hardly believe the transformation a simple negligee made in her appearance. Turning from side to side, she examined every angle of herself. The material swished, sweeping the floor in a wide arc. Her nipples strained against the lace. Moisture beaded around her clit. It was time.

Slowly, watching her eyes and the tiny curl of her lips, she unlaced the top of the negligee. The tell-tale valley between her breasts lured her to examine the satin-soft delicacy of skin under the red satin. She sighed, moved her hand to her thigh and slid the material up, up her thigh until she glimpsed one side of her pussy. Her nerve endings tingled at the sight of a few dark hairs peeking past her fingers.

She released the fabric. It slid to the floor with a soft shush, covering her thighs. Turning her back on the mirror, but at an angle so she could clearly see her ass, she bent over her toes, smelling the new leather of her shoes. Every movement was deliberate as she lifted the material over the small of her back. The twin globes of her ass leered back at her with a tantalizing glimpse of her pussy. She spread herself wide to see the full lips and her engorged clit. She wriggled her ass enticingly and spread herself wider, wondering what the man in the mall would do with such a sight. Would he go mad with desire and take her from behind right there and then? He wouldn't be able to walk away from a sight like this. No red-blooded man could. She let her pussy relax, running her index finger between her legs, catching her juices on the tip. The material swooshed to the floor, covering her ass. She straightened. As she stuck her finger between rouged lips and licked it, she examined her face. Her juice tasted of sugar and cream.

The negligee laces dangled around her covered pussy. She hummed to music in her head, music that reminded her of the soft glow of candlelight. Her hips gyrated in ever widening circles as she pulled the fabric from one shoulder then the next. The material pooled around her waist, leaving her breasts naked and full with desire. Lea felt so beautiful, so alluring. She gave herself permission to act as the goddess of all beauty, the brazen goddess of sex. Wicked and delicious, a gourmet dish to satisfy the blue-eyed man's appetite.

Impatiently, she tugged downwards at the

negligee. It slipped to the floor, murmuring as it eddied around her feet. She admired the nakedness of the goddess in the mirror, a creature of seduction, a calculating temptress the man could not do without from now on. She ran her tongue over her suddenly parched lips.

She palmed her mound and toyed with the fine hairs, twirling the long lengths. Her body undulated in shallow circles. She opened her legs wide, felt and saw the glistening juices run down her thigh, wishing her man with the blue eyes were kneeling in front of her, lapping his tongue to catch the drops.

The tip of her left index finger drew lazy circles around her clit, drawing sounds of pleased torment from her lips. With her right hand, she plunged first one, then two fingers deep within her sheath. Oh, the torment! The delicious torment!

Her breathing became choppy. She thrust her breasts forward as her body screamed for release. Her eyes focused on the mirror image's eyes. Like a symphony building to a rousing crescendo, her body rose to the shattering climax. Against her will, she closed her eyes and tasted her explosion, wave after wave, her come spilling over her inserted fingers.

She sank against the mirror, regaining her breath, her heart thundering in her ears. If only her blue-eyed man was here to hold her.

From the street, a fierce whistle broke through her lethargy. She opened her eyes and looked at her nudity. Her breasts lay like small peaks of icing on a cake, and her fingers were wet with her seeping moisture.

She stepped out of the negligee and wobbled over to the window, no longer feeling like a goddess but merely a sated naked woman. What on earth had made her play to an audience through the open drapes? She doubted anyone had seen her. But someone might have. She closed the drapes shutting out the lights of the city. She had enjoyed playing the part of a sex goddess, a temptress to lure one man in particular to his destiny. Languorously, she untied the laces of her heels, slipped into her flannel nightgown, and lay under the covers. In her dreams her body throbbed for the stranger.

Chapter Three

For the eighth day, Lea was only too aware of the blue-eyed stranger eating his lunch outside Intimates by Erica. Since her exploration in the red negligee three nights ago, her dreams during the night had been besieged by his gentle, heated touches. He'd stripped her of her clothes and ever so tenderly, palmed her in the most intimate places. When she'd awakened, her panties had been wet with her own juices.

On arriving at work, she had hoped against hope he wouldn't show his sexy self, but no, at the lunch hour he was back again. Couldn't he find some other place to delve into his burger and sip his milkshake? Couldn't he find some other place to torture some other woman out of her wits? But then why deprive her of the pleasure of surreptitiously watching him eat as if it was an act of the most sensual nature?

She reminded herself that her job description didn't include keeping an eye on deadly handsome men outside the store. That didn't stop her from feasting her ravenous eyes on his great body. Pretending to busy herself with straightening clothing on the racks near the front, she gazed at him.

Today he wore a sapphire-blue golf shirt with black jeans. How she wished he would jump up and carry her off into the sunset to make love to her until the moon no longer cast its light on the night. How ludicrous to think that event had the remotest chance of occurring.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she observed the stranger from under lowered lids. Her nipples tightened as his lips puckered to take the red and white striped straw between them. She could almost feel him sucking on her straining nipples, nibbling on each in turn, distending them into stiff peaks of meringue-like sweets. She allowed her mind to wander, dreamed of his hands exploring along the flat of her stomach, along the butter-soft skin of her inner thighs. What would it be like to touch his cock? Would it be long and hard just for her? Her breathing quickened. A tingling sensation skittered down her nerve endings.

Sweat beaded between her breasts and on her forehead. A blush crept into her cheeks. She fantasized about a man thrusting a big cock deep within her, making her scream in ecstasy. How could she find out if the stranger had one as large or larger than the man of her dreams?

If given the chance, she vowed, she would dress up in her naughty but enticing negligee, slip into her sex goddess persona and abandon all her inhibitions. The clothes had made her feel wonderfully beguiling. When she dressed in a little nothing, there was no need for inhibitions.

She urged herself to stop thinking along that vein.

If she didn't, she would go insane from aroused hunger. The man was a stranger and unlikely to be anything closer than that. She stifled a giggle. She could always march up to him and ask, 'By the way, do you have a big cock?' What if he said 'yes'? What would she do? The only sensible thing at that stage would be to ask if he would 'please fuck her'. She couldn't continue to think about him like that. As a stranger, the man was out of bounds and that was all there was to that.

Lea tried to concentrate on something else and glanced at her wristwatch. Erica had left for lunch an hour and a half ago. She wasn't normally late, but during the last week, she had been in a mellow, laid-back mood when she returned. The food sure had to be awesome to make her so dreamy-eyed.

In a valiant attempt to dismiss both the stranger and what Erica might be eating for lunch, Lea strode into the back room and set to work with a vengeance. She lifted thong panties to eye level and shook her head. No wonder she was getting addled in the brain, thinking about the size of the stranger's cock. She worked in a store that sold little nothings that catered to sexual pleasure. Lowering the panties, she scanned the room. What didn't cater to sex here? Racks against one wall, a ticket machine and an attendant roll of paper, and some untagged merchandise. The nuts and bolts of any business.

She sighed. Even her thoughts had sexual connotations. She'd have to find another job, a place where she wouldn't have to work with dainty lacy nothings dangling in every nook and cranny,

reminding her she was a highly passionate woman without a man to make love to. She concluded she would not only have to change her job, but also find a man she could turn on.

Glancing out into the promenade, she smiled and waved on seeing Alec Forestman, her wheelchair-bound friend since the day she had started working at Intimates by Erica. If she hadn't been alone to watch the store, she would have gone out to chat with him for a few minutes. He threw up an arm in greeting and hurried on.

The chimes at the store entrance rang signaling a customer's entrance. She patted her hair into place before she darted out into the store, daring to hope it would be the stranger.

Erica's heels click-clacked on the floor. Her face was flushed with color and her eyes glowed. "I know! I know!" she exclaimed. "I'm late! Again!"

"Generously late," Lea agreed. What kind of food was giving Erica such a healthy radiance?

Erica inspected the store. "Anything exciting happen while I was gone?"

"Not much." *Except for the strikingly handsome stranger who still sat on the bench.*

"Well! If you want to go for lunch, there's no time like the present." Erica strode towards the backroom.

"I had lunch while you were gone."

"Let me guess. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

"Am I becoming that predictable?" Lea set about making a hasty inventory of the long, dangling earrings next to the cash register.

"Girl, you've got to eat healthier. Some fruit and veggies. You know? The five food groups?"

"What did you have?"

"A huge helping of cock."

"What?" Her head snapped up. Had Erica said what she thought she had? She had to get her ears checked soon if she hadn't.

Erica grabbed her arm and pulled her closer to the backroom against a shelf of neatly stacked lingerie. "A helping of cock. You know - what a man fucks with."

So she had heard right. Erica had always spoken without mincing words, but her new language shocked Lea. "Is that one of the five food groups?"

"If you're not prudish about it."

"Not in the least." If that's what she chose to have for lunch, who was Lea to step in her way? After all, not fifteen minutes had gone by since she'd thought of asking the stranger if he had a big cock. She hadn't given much consideration to the possibility that she could pleasure a man and drive him over the edge using nothing more than her tongue. She squeezed her legs together. The friction of her clit rubbing against her cotton panties almost gave her an orgasm.

"I didn't think you were. You just can't beat hunk of man for lunch. So yummy!"

"Probably beats peanut butter and jelly."

"Hands down! Or should I say hands on? He's gorgeous and he's so hot!"

"Why have you kept him such a secret?"

"You didn't ask!"

"A good answer means having the right question."

Lea chuckled.

"I suppose you're right. Jackson's an awesome lover! He's got the biggest cock a woman could ever wish for!"

"When is he going to ask you to marry him?"

Erica appeared appalled. "Why, marriage doesn't enter the equation. I've tried that route. Didn't work for me."

"For me neither."

"You've been married?"

"No. I had a relationship with a man I considered a friend and then--" Lea's eyes blurred with tears. "I had some old-fashioned notion that a man wanted a virgin in his bed on his wedding night and I was saving myself for that."

"Brad came along. He's wealthier than you can imagine. He promised me everything under the sun. He wanted to show me how much he loved me and that was the only way he could, he said. I held out but he badgered me. As soon as I slept with him, he ditched me."

"Oh, honey," Erica murmured, throwing her arms around her shoulders, hugging her tight.

"I want a man in my life who will care about me, love me for who I am, not what I can give him," Lea continued softly.

"I understand that, baby," came the soothing reply.

"Are you emotionally involved with Jackson?"

Erica drew away and canted her head to one side and pursed her lips. "I don't think so. We've got a great thing going, but I don't know where we would go if we became involved to the exclusion of everyone

else."

"How can you stand it?"

Erica's eyebrows notched up in question. "Stand what?"

"Having fun. No emotional commitment. No love."

"Oh, that. Perhaps my nature."

"Do you want to get married again?"

"Maybe if the right man came along. Life is too short for getting all hung up about relationships. Have fun and don't regret it." She nodded to herself. Her earrings caught the light.

"What ended your marriage?"

"I found Danny in bed with someone else. It hurt. End of marriage."

Lea couldn't imagine her friend finding another woman in bed with her husband. She had such a way with men. "He had good taste when he married you. Bad taste when he got involved with another woman."

"Another man. Danny was gay."

"I'm sorry. People swing both ways now."

"Honey, they always have. I just wasn't smart enough to know. Now I am and I stay away from them like the plague. I'm hot-blooded and have needs. Have to take care of them."

Lea knew all about those needs. They had been plaguing her since the stranger had walked into her life, or more accurately, since he had sat down and eaten his first burger.

"You haven't had any in a while, huh? Why don't you get yourself all spruced up and go out on a

date?"

Lea could hardly tell her that she had 'spruced herself up' a few nights ago and enjoyed the evening by herself. She didn't need a man to have fun sexually. Maybe that wasn't wholly precise. She thought about the stranger and how he affected her body like no other man had. And he hadn't said one word to her. How amazing. "With who?"

"No old high school flames?"

Lea shook her head.

"Ever tried blind dating?"

"No. Don't want to get hooked up with someone who isn't my type."

Erica smiled a secretive smile. "I might know of someone. Maybe Jackson and I could make a foursome with you."

"That would be okay."

"I mean not a foursome as in having sex." Erica turned sleepy-lidded eyes on Lea. "Although that might be different. Hell, I'm getting turned on at the mere suggestion."

"Uh-huh." A foursome? In bed? Whew! That might be rather provocative. Did that mean any of the two who paired were romantically involved or was it just a fun night out to experiment?

"Oh mercy," she whispered. She had never considered being part of a foursome. "Do the women do things to each other too?" Her questions sounded innocent.

"I think so."

Lea got the distinct impression Erica hadn't tried the foursome thing. It probably took some courage.

"Maybe we could just have one big fashion show. An orgy."

"A what?"

"A fashion show. You'd be a terrific model. We could have a few people come and see our new line..."

"Now wait a minute! Who did you say was going to do the modeling?"

Erica patted her shoulder. "You and me, of course. Men will go wild afterwards and you'll have more dates than you'll know what to do with."

"And maybe that foursome would pan out." Lea shook her head in bewilderment. When exactly had her head gone down to reside between her legs? "There's got to be other ways of finding a date."

Erica grinned. "I'm sure there is, but I haven't found it yet."

"I better get back to work. You don't pay me to yak-yak."

Erica grabbed her arm as she started to walk off. "I'll set it up. Our foursome."

Lea nodded and strode away, hoping the foursome didn't end up in bed. She wasn't ready for that yet. Heck, she didn't even know if she was ready to share one night of hot sex with a man.

Chapter Four

The night breeze played over his nude body, riffling the fine hairs on his chest. The light from the full moon shone on Carson's bed, bathing his body in a silvery glow. The scented fragrance of roses climbing a trellis outside his window made him feel he was in heaven - and purgatory. He tossed his pillows on top of each other, plumped them and rested his head against their downy softness. The position gave him a long look down his muscular torso. His cock stood rigid, its cap shiny with pre-come.

He needed the Siren. There was no doubt the woman had cast a spell of some sort on him. When their eyes had met earlier that day, he had felt a sizzle of awareness he'd never experienced before.

In his mind, he slowly unpinned her hair. Rich waves of silk spilled over her shoulders, and she smiled only for him. Carefully, he pulled the pink sweater up and over her head. Her bra, an impediment to gazing upon her lovely high breasts, was quickly unclasped and thrown to the floor. Her nipples stood erect, tiny raspberries his for the sweet taking. His cock began throbbing with an aching

need.

He imagined leaning down and sucking her nipples, teasing them, hearing a moan of pleasure erupt from her lips. He trailed feathery-light kisses down her stomach to the waistband of her pants hiding her pussy. After discarding them, he darted his tongue around her mound, down her thigh, licking and tasting as he went.

His cock grew more rigid, almost painful with unfulfilled desire. The thoughts were pure torture. He grasped his cock and slid his hand up and down his shaft. He would rather have had the Siren's pussy muscles, a dark piece of velvet heaven, clench around his shaft. He fantasized about his treasure parting her legs wide, his tongue gaining easy access to her clit.

Outside his fantasy, Carson watched the moonlight play over his stiff rod. His tongue became as parched as a dry fall leaf. He pictured his lips on her clit, licking her juices and pumped his cock up and down harder and harder. With a grunt, he exploded in climax, his come spurting up and over his hand and his flat stomach. Afterwards, spent from his fantasy, he fell into a restless sleep, his dreams haunted by the siren who whispered his name.

* * *

The next morning, Carson awoke to find the sheets underneath him soaked with sweat. His tossing and turning during the night had left him on edge and he knew the day would be filled with harsh longing for his Siren. His desire for her overwhelmed him, setting

his teeth on edge. He didn't know the first thing about her. Whether she was married or single, whether she liked beer or champagne, whether she slept dressed or nude. All he knew was that she was driving him wild with desire.

After attending to his morning ablutions, he tossed his paperwork in a briefcase and headed for the mall. Lunchtime found him yet again sinking his teeth into a cheeseburger with extra ketchup and mustard while sipping on yet another vanilla milkshake. He wouldn't have put up with days on end of tasteless burgers if it hadn't been for the Siren. He observed her from under hooded lids as she moved gracefully around Intimates by Erica, serving customers or placing merchandise back on the hangers and shelves. The sweater and plain pants were almost a uniform now. Today's choices were navy blue pants and a fuzzy white sweater.

The milkshake sweated against his broad palm. He sipped from the straw, enjoying the icy coolness slide down his throat. How could he solve his lusting after her? Surely that's all it was. When it came to business, he could solve any problem that blustered his way. When it came to his personal needs, he didn't have a hope. His shoulders slumped.

His cell phone chirped. He fished it off his belt. "Hello?"

"Carson, are you still out there?"

"Out where?" he asked. He couldn't mistake Erica's voice for any other woman's. It had a distinctive sweetness to it.

"In the mall in front of my store. The one you're

thinking of buying."

"Am I that transparent?"

"Uh-huh. Especially if you're ogling my employee that way."

"What way is that?" The woman was sharp.

"As if you have a magnifying glass trained on her."

"How are you doing?" Carson knew Erica from business school. How many years had that been? He was thirty-four, so that had been roughly fourteen years ago. Erica was a man's woman with all the curves in the right place and a matching hot attitude. Add to that the fact she was a knowledgeable businesswoman, and a man had a killer combination on his hands.

"I'm doing better than good."

The solution to his problem with Siren hit Carson as if a basketball had whopped him on the head. The idea was so simple. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Erica continued. "I've got a favor to ask."

That was even better yet. If she was in his debt, he could run his idea by her. "Speak, oh fair one," he teased, "and I'll determine if it's in my power to bestow favors on you."

"My friend, Jackson, and I would like to invite you to dinner tonight. On one condition."

Dinner and conditions? Sounded interesting. "You're an unusual woman, Erica. You know all about the way to a man's stomach."

"You've got a hard-on for Lea, right?"

He had to applaud her. She didn't mince words. "Lea?"

"My employee. The lady who is the apple of your eye."

Damn! What a beautiful name for a sexy woman. His idea gained momentum. All he had to do was find the courage to suggest it. Surely Erica would understand since she was a woman of the world. She would understand his needs.

"You're deep in thought again. I know you've been hurt deeply, but why not give her a chance?"

"My sentiments exactly."

"You have to get over Helen and move on with your life. Lea needs a date, you need a love life, so how about dinner with us tonight?"

Carson's heart leapt at the chance of meeting Lea and getting to know her over dinner. "Sure. My turn for a favor." He held his breath for a moment before he decided to plunge in.

"Already? You're awfully quick."

He hesitated. He watched Lea, her head canted to one side, listening to a female customer's questions with a thoughtful expression.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Would you let her model one of those little things for me?"

There was a sharp intake of breath from Erica's side of the cell phone. "She's my employee, not a sex object."

He waited with baited breath. It was the most foolhardy request he'd made in his whole life. There was simply no precedent for a woman modeling a piece of intimate apparel for a man she didn't know. "I promise I won't do anything to make her

uncomfortable.”

All of a sudden, like a bright light turning on in a dark room, he realized why Erica had called him out of the blue. Softly he said, “You already thought of it.”

“You’re not exactly far from Mensa level IQ, you know.”

Now that he was about to meet his Siren, his nerves tumbled into his stomach. What if she had a high-pitched voice? The leading question was what if she wanted him for his money? “Promise me something.”

“If I can.”

“Does Lea know who I am?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Promise you won’t tell her.”

There was a long pause at the other end of the line. “Why don’t you want her to know?”

“I want us to start off on the right foot. If she doesn’t know I’m wealthy, then I have an honest chance with her,” he replied uneasily

“That sounds ridiculous for a grown guy, Carson.”

“Erica, give me that chance to start again. I know I’m asking you to hide my identity but it’s all I can think of to give me a fair chance at being in love again.”

A pregnant pause followed. “Okay. I won’t tell her, and you won’t request her to wear anything too revealing. Deal?”

“Deal.” What was he getting himself into? He prided himself on his self-control but in a matter of minutes, he’d shot that all to hell. Were his raging

hormones demanding that he ask a woman he didn't know to model sexy lingerie for a man she didn't know? His cock started to get hard. What would his siren look like in a soft and feminine lacy piece of clothing?

"Oh, Carson?" Erica's voice was hard as granite. "If I find out you've hurt Lea, and believe me, it doesn't matter how you did it, I'll make sure to cut your balls off. You understand that, right?"

Ouch, but that would hurt. "You're a tough cookie, Erica."

"Never mind. Danny almost ended up without his. Just make sure you don't end up without yours."

He could just see her raising a butcher knife to his cock and balls. Not a very pretty sight.

"I'm serious."

Ice traveled down his spine. In business, he'd been threatened before but he never took it personally. He had to hand it to Erica. She was one of the most unconventional women he knew and was forced to admire both her guts and her matchmaking abilities. "I give you my word as a gentleman."

"Good. Dinner tonight at seven?"

"Fine." He pressed the END button and set the cell phone on his lap, but his mind wasn't on dinner. He felt like a kid at an ice cream stand, drooling at a chance to get two scoops.

Reason, that lurking monster, returned. If Lea consented to some adult fun, without the hassle of emotional attachments on either side, what harm would that be? He didn't want to get involved to the point of asking the 'I do' question. Helen had shown

him he wasn't cut out for lasting relationships.

He got to his feet, ready to leave. Erica hadn't imposed a day that he had to ask Lea to model. If he drummed up the courage, it might be today, but more likely tomorrow.

"How's it going, Carson?"

The gruff voice shouldn't have startled him, but he jumped a little. Alec Forestman sat in his wheelchair, his legs shrunken from disuse. The man appeared to be around fifty, but Carson suspected he looked a lot younger than his real age, which was probably closer to seventy.

He nodded agreeably. "What are you up to?"

"That should be my question to you. Have you bumped into anyone else and spilled latte all over his brand new shoes?"

He chuckled. "I'll never live that down, will I?" That little incident had happened because he'd been too engrossed in thinking about Lea.

"Not likely, but it's the stuff friendships are made of." Alec lifted his thigh with both weathered hands and repositioned his leg as if it was made of glass. "I'm not doing much. Just thought I'd come and check out the new stores."

Carson wasn't aware any new stores had opened. "Which ones?"

Alec smiled, a gap-toothed grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "It's an expression I use when I want to get out of my apartment."

"Apartments can be very confining." As his pants could be as he hankered after a woman who drove him wild with the mere thought of her presence.

“Uh-huh.”

He had to stop thinking about his conversation with Erica. How had he been so audacious to ask Lea to model and expect she would do so for a man she didn't know? He felt his cock getting stiff with suppressed longing. He was going to make a fool of himself with his tented crotch there for every passerby to see. He tried to concentrate on something else and remembered Alec mentioning his birthday a few days earlier. “What did you do for your birthday?”

The old man's eyes lost their luster and much of their former enthusiasm. “Shared a cupcake and candle with Musi.”

“A candle? Musi?”

“Musi's my cat, an independent tabby. She likes to eat candles. Candles off anything. When my kids came to visit, and bought a birthday cake, Musi jumped on the table and ate the candles. We soon got wise and left the candles off.” His expression became wistful. “Kids said they were getting too old for that birthday stuff anyway.”

“You have kids?” Carson broke his burger in half and offered it.

Alec inclined his head in thanks, and took it. “A boy and a girl. The perfectly balanced family, you'd say.”

He had never seen the man with anyone. “Your wife?” Carson queried, swallowing a bite.

“She's been gone for a long while. She passed away twenty years ago. Car accident.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

We had a good life. We were happy before the good Lord took her."

What would it be like to be happily married to the woman of his dreams? He glanced at Lea; she was talking with Erica.

"Time goes on, with or without the ones you love. Funny how it feels as if only a few days have gone by. I miss her as much as I missed her the day she died."

"There's got to be something, knowing your loved one won't ever come back again." Carson felt the old man's heartache. How could the old man stand living alone in an empty apartment with nothing more than a cat for company?

Tears glittered in Alec's rheumy eyes. "Sounds like you've been there."

"Yeah." Carson wiped his fingers in a napkin the size of a square of toilet paper. Definitely not big enough for hands as large as his. "My mother died when I was sixteen."

The old man shook his head sadly. "Did your dad take care of you, then?"

"I never knew him." Lea moved her hands in eloquent, descriptive movements.

"Sad, really sad." Alec licked the burger sauce from his lower lip. "You seem to have done good for yourself, and that's all that really matters."

Carson kept his expression neutral. He chucked the used napkin into the trash near him. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

"You bet. I'm off. Musi will be getting lonely." He was already in motion before Carson could say 'later'.

He heaved a sigh. If he thought he went home to a

house brimming with kids, laughter and a beautiful wife, he was only fooling himself. He went home to a house as empty as a children's playground after dark.

Chapter Five

The chime at the store entrance rang. Lea took a deep breath, patted her navy blue pants down along the hips, glued a welcoming smile onto her lips and hastened from the back room. Service was an important part of retail.

She froze in her tracks at the register. Her smile faded away. The sex object of her dreams was in the store!

Now what was she to do? She gulped. If Erica had been here, then she could have turned away and allowed her to serve this handsome stranger while she pretended to occupy herself with putting some stray clothing away. Her nipples hardened. She swore she felt her clit quiver in excitement. This stranger did things to her without saying one darned word. If he spoke, she'd melt all over the floor. Or worse yet, she'd throw herself at him and ask if he had a big cock. Surely, Erica would fire her for such insanity once she found out. For heaven's sake, she ran an intimate apparel store, not a brothel.

There was no help for it but to greet the man and ask him if he needed any help. Blushing outrageously, she strode forward.

His broad back confronted her. Thankfully, he hadn't witnessed her moment of indecision. She painted on what she hoped was a friendly smile and marched forward. "Can I help you, sir?" She spoke softly but not as controlled as she would have liked. It was too breathy, too urgent with desire. And why had she used the word 'sir'? She never did that - it was against her principle of equality for all men.

He didn't so much as acknowledge her presence. It was as if he hadn't heard her question. She tapped her foot impatiently. She had work to do. If the man didn't want any help, then the least he could do was say so. She forced herself to stay at the man's side for a full minute, saying nothing, although she badly wanted to tell him his mother had forgotten to teach him good manners.

She started to fume. Her patience ran out. How could she have thought he was the man of her dreams? How could she have thought of approaching him and asking him if he had a big cock? He didn't even recognize her existence. She spun on heel and headed off towards the backroom where she could keep an eye on him.

Lea hadn't gotten more than four steps when a gravelly voice asked, "Would you model this for me?"

Turning around to face him, she found his ice-blue eyes held a twinkle of amusement. She glanced at his hand and couldn't repress a gasp of surprise. He wanted her to wear the little nothing made of lavender-colored silk and white lace? There was barely a scrap of fabric in his hand. To her

astonishment, her nipples immediately pebbled under her sweater.

"I can't do that," she said, hoping she wouldn't start blushing like a pubescent teenager. His request was absolutely unheard of. She had worked for Erica for over six months and no one had ever had the temerity to ask her to model.

"Why not?" he demanded, pinning her with his gaze. The space between them was charged with sizzling electric sparks.

"It's against store policy." She looked into his face, a lump forming in her throat at how magnificently good-looking he was up close. It was a mistake to look into his eyes, such deep pools of blue, a place to swim and lose herself in. He smelled of musk and utter maleness. Her willpower was almost at zero on the response-to-sexy-men scale. She had to concentrate on business, not on how first-rate the man smelled or how strongly masculine he appeared.

"I've never heard of a store with such a prudish policy."

She imagined he hadn't heard of a whole lot of things. She wondered if her boss would support her 'no modeling' position. "We encourage our customers to try clothing on. In the changing rooms," she added.

The man fixed her with an intent gaze.

Realizing the error in her choice of words, she blushed scarlet. "Oops! I didn't mean you try it on. Bring your lady in and let her try it on." Why was this stranger wrapping her tongue up in knots? She wasn't normally tongue-tied.

"I really would like to know how it looks before I

buy it."

An idea popped into her head. "I'll try it on one of the mannequins. You'll have a chance to see then." She headed off in the direction of a dark-haired mannequin wearing a silk jumpsuit.

"That won't work."

The certainty in his voice halted her. When she came to a jarring halt and whirled around, she bumped into his chest. Promptly, she backed away. He stood a breath away, his nostrils flared and he turned a megawatt smile on her. A flaxen forelock strayed over his eye. She found herself reaching up to brush it aside, her fingers straying over his heated tanned skin.

He chuckled softly. Lea whipped back her fingers as if she had touched a zapping electric fence. Her better sense had deserted her. A sales clerk never, never touched a customer.

"Is that part of the service a customer receives?" he asked with a lingering smile.

"No, not normally." A heavy sigh settled around her. How had she dared to reach out and touch him as if he had been a long-lost friend? She took another step backwards; her back touched a rack of clothes. He haunted all her dreams at night and during the day, she couldn't stop imagining the wild possibilities. Her panties would be soaked with her juices before this encounter was over.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. "It's not as if you and I are complete strangers, Lea."

They sure weren't. Her nerve endings were strung tighter than strings on a guitar. "How do you know

my name?" she asked puzzled.

"A little bird told me," he drawled.

"Uh-huh."

"I have a very special woman in my life. I want you to try this on to check for fit."

"I don't do that kind of thing," she said, maintaining her stance. Why didn't he bring his lady friend in if he was so adamant about buying something for her? Lea would have tried on the teddy if she had been alone in her bedroom, but not for a stranger. And why was he so insistent that she try the little nothing on? She'd freeze to death in it. The request was unheard of.

Her heart sank. She wished she hadn't been so impulsive in brushing the hair from his eyes. She wasn't that desperately in need of a man that she had to throw herself at one. Or was she? Hell, she wanted a man. Her dreams and her imagination were conscious reminders of what she needed.

How dared he ask her to model? She could think of no other explanation than that he might be rich – like Brad. For wealthy men, there were no obstacles to what money could buy and that included reputations and the word 'no'.

Anger and embarrassment burned through her. She wouldn't fall for the rich man-poor girl routine. Brad had taught her only too well that those types of men couldn't be trusted. The stranger needed his head examined if he thought she would fall for him simply because he had money.

Relief washed over her as Erica came around the corner. Saved at last!

"What's going on here?" she asked, directing her question to the stranger.

Before he had the nerve to reply, Lea replied, indicating the little nothing dangling from his hand, "He wants me to try that on."

Erica pursed her lips.

Con conversationally, as if he wasn't asking anything unusual, the man said, "I'm considering purchasing this. I want her to model it for me. I don't want to buy anything that might not meet my standards."

"Meet your standards? What standards are those? You don't have any!" Lea spoke out. Where was the hostility coming from?

Both Erica and the stranger turned to face her. Erica looked horrified. The man's eyes twinkled. So he thought he was going to stir up the honey pot, did he? Lea had news for him.

"Customers can't just come in here and ask me to model--" she fought for control but knew she'd lost it, "--that! It's hardly a decent item of clothing!" She sounded so prudish. What was wrong with her?

The stranger smiled. "I disagree. On the right female, it would make her look like an angel from heaven."

An angel of sex, he meant.

Erica frowned. For the first time since Lea had known her, she thought she read dollar signs in her eyes. Why did everything in the world come down to money? If it came down to a choice between her propriety and cash for Erica's register, she was lost. She should hightail it out of here, since her boss was about to fire her and Lea wasn't ready to comply with

the stranger's request. But where would she find a job? She didn't want to languish for the rest of her life. Maybe she could clean toilets for a living until the very day she died. The thought hardly appealed to her and she didn't want her old job back. Selling car insurance had burned her out. She wanted to go to college and earn a business degree.

Erica's frown turned to a scowl. "This is highly-" she searched for the right word, "-unusual. Let me have a word with Lea and we'll be right back." She wiggled her index finger, forcing Lea to follow her into the back room.

Chapter Six

Carson watched the two women walk into the back room. What on earth had come over him? Not in his wildest dreams would he ask a woman he didn't know to model a piece of lingerie. And yet that's exactly what he'd done.

He groaned. He must really need a woman bad. Lea in particular. She had spunk. He admired that. And the body of a sexy angel meant to drive a man to madness. He fanned himself with the delicate teddy before he looked at it in bewilderment, and hung it back on the rack. Heat rose along his neck.

Her hesitancy was charming. She had a vibrant sex appeal, a seductiveness mingled with a naiveté to fascinate his cynical view of the world and especially of women. Something told him she was a vixen with the right man. And he intended to be that man.

He was becoming a dolt, thinking with his cock, not with his head. Why didn't he tell Lea he was madly in love with her? He refused to believe she wasn't interested in him. He consoled himself with the fact that most women weren't attracted to the caveman mentality he'd suddenly skulled up with.

Carson felt smothered in his golf shirt and yearned

to slip out of it. That would hardly gain points with Lea if she returned and saw him bare-chested. He scanned the backroom. He should concentrate on business while waiting for the outcome of the discussion between Erica and Lea. Sure, he would buy the stores, but that raised some questions. How would he deal with walking into the several locations of Intimates by Erica on a weekly basis with all those tempting lacy confections all around? He wasn't handling this with his normal business aplomb. Mixing business with pleasure wasn't his style, and he'd found out the hard way the two didn't mix.

Sudden realization dawned on him. His world had become constrained, all business, no pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time he had stopped to smell the proverbial flowers. He didn't want to end up like Alec, knowing that when he left home, only a cat waited for him to return home. Carson couldn't face a future like that. Instead, he'd acted with a caveman mentality he hadn't known he possessed. He had met a delectably attractive woman and asked her to model a scrap of clothing. Why couldn't he have wooed her by sending her bouquets of roses, or singing sweet love songs? The roses might work, but hardly the singing. He laughed at the preposterous thought of playing Romeo serenading Juliet.

Hold on, fool. He didn't want to marry her. What was he thinking of roses and love songs for? He didn't want another marriage of convenience. All he wanted was sex with Lea. It wasn't an admirable goal, he admitted reluctantly, but what was a man in need to do?

His cock played havoc in his pants, threatening to come to full attention against an irritating zipper. The innocent but sexy woman turned him on in a big way. She was a tigress ready to eat him up. He imagined her stroking his cock, before she took the plum-colored bulb between her delicate lips. His cock got harder, seeking an outlet from its confinement. This wasn't a good idea, standing in an intimate apparel shop with a hard-on.

He was so engrossed in contemplating the possibilities, he didn't notice a flat-chested young woman sidle up beside him, holding a crimson bustier.

"Do you work here?" she asked, her eyes expressing grave doubt. "Since when do men work in selling private wear for ladies?" Her spiked sandy-brown hair had a dark purple streak running across her forehead and her nails were painted the same shade of purple.

His mouth dropped open. If anyone encouraged second thoughts about what he was doing, she did. He shook his head.

"Huh! I just knew it. You're one of those lecherous bastards, just looking for pussy," the girl said as calmly as if she was sipping a cup of coffee. She flounced off towards the back. "What's the matter with you guys? On a coffee break again for the tenth time today? There should always be someone out here taking care of customers. It's in some rulebook or something," she called out.

Erica stuck her head out and smiled pleasantly. "Did you want to try that on?"

Had she heard a word the girl had said? He didn't believe so.

"I'd love to! I can't imagine what Derek will think of me wearing this! He loves me in black but I really want to surprise him with this. Red is so sluttish. Don't you think?"

Erica nodded, ushering the chatty girl into a changing room. He definitely didn't want to get shackled up with a woman who talked as much as that. And the purple hair didn't help his libido any, neither. For the thousandth time that day, he fell into fantasizing about Lea.

* * *

Lea whirled around to face Erica before the woman said anything. "I'm not cut out for that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"For dressing like a whore."

Erica sucked in a deep breath, then burst out in sidesplitting laughter.

Lea crossed her arms over her breasts and huffed. Was she laughing at her choice of words?

She waited for her boss to simmer down. Without too much trouble, she had become a hypocrite. A few nights earlier, she'd had no trouble playing the part of a sex goddess – for herself. Playing the part for a real man was something else.

Erica's laughter subsided. "I've known you for quite a while now but I would never have believed you could act like this."

"How's that?"

"Like an old lady dressed all in black from head to toe who wouldn't dare show her ankle."

"I won't model for that man." Why was she getting so worked up about a stupid request that should never have been made? Would any other employee put up with it? Probably not.

"Get real. It's not like you're going to fuck him!"

Lea's face turned scarlet. "Isn't that the whole idea when you get into one of those little outfits? To get, um, fucked?"

"Seems to me like you think you've got something to be ashamed of. You're pretty, you have everything in the right place. What's going on with you?"

"Not a thing."

Erica leaned forward. "Didn't you take that red negligee home with you?"

"Yes."

"Did you try it on?"

"Yes."

"How did it make you feel?"

"I didn't do that for anyone but me."

"But how did wearing it make you feel?"

She held her clenched hand at her side.

"You don't have to answer me. I know it makes me feel like I'm a woman with everything to offer a man, and I believe it made you feel like that too."

"Maybe."

"So why not strut your stuff for Carson?"

"Oh, now you're on a first name basis with him?"

Erica waved a dismissive hand. "That's neither here nor there."

Lea planted herself. "Tell me. Did this Carson pay

you something to try and persuade me?"

"He's not that kind of man."

"Why are you really asking me to do this? If you had another employee, would you ask her to?"

"Probably not, because it's *you* he finds special. He went through a bad marriage. His wife left him because she didn't think he was any good in bed. You have the potential to prove her wrong and to prove to yourself that you're wrong about not wanting a man."

"So this boils down to the conversation we had the other day."

"Yes, it does. Girl, strut your stuff. Flaunt what you've got. Make the man hungry. Tease him mercilessly. Then let him drool."

"He's not my man!"

"Don't you see how he comes every day and eats in front of the store?"

"That has nothing to do with me." She remembered how his graceful fingers fondled the burger, how his lascivious lips formed a tight "O" around the milkshake's straw. How he had delicately run his index finger along the sweating side of the milkshake, almost like thrumming strings over a harp. Her heart fluttered. Hadn't she wanted to ask him if he had a big cock? What if the moment to ask, perhaps to experiment, had arrived?

"It had everything to do with you. He's crazy about you. That burger could be made of cardboard for all he cared, as long as he can feast his eyes on you. I think he's in love with you."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Don't his good looks appeal to you?"

Lea uncrossed her arms. Hadn't she silently been begging for a hunk the other night when she was dressed in the negligee? Hadn't she left the curtains open, hoping a guy would see her and sweep her off her feet? "I can't believe this is happening."

Erica's eyes narrowed. "You're not dreaming, girl. This is the real thing."

"Not too many men lavish attention on a woman. Carson is making you the focus of his universe." Her eyes became dreamy. "It sounds like love at first sight. Oh, how romantic."

"There's no such thing," Lea protested. "I just can't imagine that."

Erica raised an eyebrow. "You're doubting you're attractive. I bet Brad had something to do with that. He made you feel less than feminine."

"Brad had nothing--" Lea stopped in mid-sentence. Her problem was she didn't think she had any sex appeal. Couldn't she find her sensual self and take it for a test drive with Carson? She stood taller, more determined. She gave herself permission to conduct an experiment in sexuality, to become a sex goddess.

A high-pitched female voice interrupted with "What's the matter, you guys? On a coffee break again for the tenth time today? There should always be someone out in the store taking care of the customers. It's in some rulebook or something."

A woman with a purple streak running through her hair rushed into view. Erica winked. "She's comfortable with herself. She wouldn't have a problem modeling." She went off to see the woman to a changing room.

Feeling comfortable with herself. That concept had been lost on Lea. She scrutinized a babydoll hanging on a rack near the back wall. Moisture beaded between her legs. What harm could there be in trying a babydoll on and letting Carson ogle? She would make it clear there was a 'look, don't touch' policy. Men weren't all like Brad, she reminded herself, making promises they had no intention of keeping. She could very easily put on her sex goddess persona. There was no harm in playing a part, was there?

Erica slipped back. She kept her voice to a bare whisper. "Do it for yourself, Lea. Feel pretty and know a man wants to see a bit more of you. Please consider that."

Lea nodded, feeling a knot loosen in her stomach and pool around her clit. She would be a sex goddess for a few minutes. It might be all she had, but she'd take it.

"Oh! I'm so thrilled! Girl, I'll fix you up to look so beautiful, you'll look like the sexiest woman alive."

She watched Erica's enthusiasm as she ran to the restroom, and listened to thumps and scrapes as she searched for her make-up tools. Lea felt a twinge of nerves, but her wet pussy said she wouldn't like anything better than to show what she had to the man waiting outside. Her nipples brushed painfully against her bra as they turned into tiny, hard points.

Chapter Seven

“**H**ow do you feel?”
Lea noted Erica hadn’t asked, “How do you think you look?” She blushed as she observed herself in the waist-length mirror beside the sink. The restroom was quite spacious by mall standards where most restrooms in stores were affairs a small person could barely squeeze into. This restroom had a rose throw rug on the floor and even a photograph of a sand-laden beach with palm trees in the near distance.

Erica had done a wonderful job of transforming her, and the result of the transformation was that she felt desirable and attractive. Not gorgeous, but attractive. Her long hair had been teased into sassy tresses to frame her face and tumble down her back to her waist. She’d artfully colored her eyelids, put on mascara to make her long eyelashes even longer, and rouged her lips with a vermilion Lea normally wouldn’t have favored. However, the transformation didn’t end at her face.

Erica stepped back to admire her handiwork. Lea looked with her at her reflection in the restroom mirror. Her little nothing hid all the right spots but

still left tantalizing bare skin revealed. The lavender babydoll barely covered her pushed-up breasts and the matching thong panties were barely hidden under a panel of the babydoll's charmeuse material. Lea stepped back, tottering on the high heels with sandal wraps tied delicately around her slim ankles. "I've never worn anything like this before," she whispered.

"I just about forgot!" Erica hurried off and came back carrying an amber perfume bottle. She gave a little spritz along the top of Lea's cleavage. "I think you're all ready."

A soft fragrance of mingled lavender and roses filled the room. Lea didn't think she was ready. How much longer could she delay modeling this little nothing? Although she felt like a goddess within its confines. The silky material of the thong rubbed her clit when she moved. She turned sideways to see her reflection and suppressed a groan. "I'm ass naked," she moaned softly. The panties did nothing at all to hide her cheeks. Nothing at all.

"That's the whole idea, girl. You have no idea how a barely covered ass can make a man horny."

"I'm getting used to the language you're using."

"I sure hope so. It's the language of raw love. Turn around one more time."

Lea spun around. The babydoll camisole flared out at her hips. She teetered dangerously on the heels.

"You'll get used to the height in no time. Men love to see how the back of a woman's hips sway back and forth. It drives them wild." Erica made one last adjustment to the babydoll and one more to Lea's hair. "Are you ready to roll?"

Lea waited for Erica to bring the stranger into the back room. If she convinced herself the babydoll was nothing less than a bathing suit, as scanty in material as a bikini, then she could face this man. Or better yet, she could use the old trick speakers used in front of large audiences. She could picture her audience naked.

She sucked in a deep breath. Her breasts rose with the motion. That was hardly a good idea under the circumstances. If he was naked, and she was near naked . . . She wouldn't let herself go there. The idea was too preposterous to consider. The man wanted nothing more from her than to see her model the little nothing. He probably had a wife or a girlfriend he dreamed of purchasing this for and wanted to know how much of the skin was left bare. She shivered and tottered back into the restroom.

She lifted her eyes to the mirror and couldn't help but stare at the transformation Erica had wrought in her. Her emerald eyes were rimmed with eyeliner; her lashes lengthened impossibly long, her mouth bold and heart-shaped. Her cheeks glistened when she turned with the light rose blush her friend had used.

The change didn't end there. The babydoll's lacy cups pushed her breasts up and together to mock her with the silky valley lying in between. The areoles nestled plump and pink against the lace. Lea enjoyed the sight – just enough revealed. The charmeuse cinched her waist to the point where she felt certain a man could span his hands around if he was so inclined. Just below the cups, the charmeuse had been

split to show more of her flesh. The thong panties curved high at the hips and dipped low against her pussy, curving again between her cheeks. Her hair fell long and sassy against her waist and curled lightly against her cheeks. On her feet, the stiletto heels were comfortable. She was forced to admit she looked appealing and sexy.

Could she really go through with this? Her stomach made a noise, reminding her why she was getting nearly naked in front of a stranger. She had to work to survive, and if the store benefited by a little modeling, then so be it.

Her perfume rose around her with her movement, a decadently arousing smell. Her nipples beaded into tightly furred rosebuds. She tried to reassure herself it was her body's reaction to the cool air, but she felt different. She envisioned herself flirting and teasing with the stranger whose long, graceful fingers and lips made her knees turn to jelly. The panties massaged her wet clit.

There was no wedding ring on his finger, and he didn't seem to be a threatening type of man. What was she becoming? Was Erica influencing her to turn as sex-crazed as she was? Lea wouldn't have done this. Not for any man and yet here she was feeling like Cinderella in little nothings.

No, it wasn't Erica turning her inside out. It was the stranger. He made her feel pretty, made her feel there could be something between them. But what if he had someone special in his life already? Lea was so envious, she could hardly stand it. She'd give anything to have a husband hold her, touch her, make

her nerve endings sizzle when he touched her. What she wouldn't give for a husband who loved her . . .

In her mind, his smoky blue eyes burned into hers. She swallowed hard. All five foot ten inches of him declared male strength, each part of his body hard and muscled. She couldn't deny how good he made her feel, even if he was toying with her. If nothing came of this, she decided, she would take whatever crumbs he held out to her. His eye-locking glances had made her feel like she never had before – beautiful beyond imagination.

Lea blew out a stream of air. When this was all over, she would go home alone as she always did. There was no man in her life, no man to make her feel wanted and loved.

She tried to console herself by looking away from the woman who looked back at her, a woman who was she, but didn't look at all like the unisexual woman she normally did. Devastating loneliness washed over her. If it weren't for her friends, she'd be alone in the world.

Lea kept her hearing tuned to the backroom but she heard nothing. Normally the high point of her week was a chance to see the children at the Children's Hospital. Their faces lit up with innocent laughter when she blew up a brightly colored balloon and shaped it into animals and flowers. She always made certain each child went back to its room with a balloon treasure. The balloons and their particular shapes always made the children smile, if not laugh. She was happy to share her gift with them. She kept it secret from the hospital nurses that there were

occasional times when she went hungry so she could buy the balloons for the kids. Her gift was something she shared with very few people at work.

Deep in her thoughts, she jumped when Erica called out from the other side of the door. "We're ready when you are, Lea

"I'm just supposed to model, right?" Lea shot back, lingering over her reflection.

"That's right. Just walk out, do a little twirl so Carson can see your ass, I mean your backside, and that's it."

Lea smiled at her friend's use of the word 'ass'. "Oh. Okay." That sounded simple enough. Just modeling. So she wouldn't go hungry and would have a job to come to in the morning. Was it too late to change her mind, tell the stranger she couldn't go through with this? She asked herself. She bit her lip, before remembering the lipstick would stick to her teeth. She grinned at herself to make sure there wasn't any stuck on the white enamel.

Her nipples stood erect like small sentinels. They would give her away if she didn't do something fast. Artfully, she arranged her tresses to cover the tiny points jutting against the charmeuse. The thong chafed against her clit and a cool breath of air sensuously caressed her bare ass.

Her skin felt heated against the silky smoothness of the fabric. Her dilemma wrapped itself around her. The sane part of herself insisted she didn't want to step out, nearly naked, in front of a man. The sex goddess part of her persisted that she was due for some fun. She had something to offer a man. Not just

any man, but she knew in her heart, she had wanted Carson from the very first day he had sat on the bench and observed her as if there were no other women nearby. This one time she wanted to know what it would feel like to be admired by a man. She gave herself permission to act the part of an alluring and seductive sex goddess.

She paused in wonder. How many women did she know of who had been invited to model lingerie by a near stranger? Not even Erica, who had that special something that made men sit up and notice her had ever been asked. That meant Carson saw something special in her, something worth looking at in more detail. The thought made Lea's lips curve up.

Boldly and with dogged determination, she wrenched the doorknob open a bit more forcefully than she had intended. The door bounced off her shoe and stubbed her baby toe across the nail. Ouch! She groaned. Some entrance she was making as a sex goddess.

She bent her knees and hovered over her offending toe, rubbing it to soothe the pain.

"Are you all right?" Carson tried to keep his tone even but it came out husky. His mouth watered at the sight of this luscious woman in the lavender and lace. The view from his height was just grand. Her breasts jiggled under the lacy lavender material holding them high and proud. Soft tresses of her lovely silky hair curled around her face and down her back. The perfume she wore was not overpowering, and allowed him to smell her musky essence. Long bare thighs teased him without mercy and her ass peeked

out at him, unclothed. The camisole's color heightened the pink of her satin-smooth flesh. Her toes were exquisitely small and dainty, each nail a small crescent moon. The spikes of her heels finished off a fetching ensemble, that made him want to raise her to her feet and grind his body against hers without mercy. She was a tempting vision and he knew without hesitation, he had never seen anyone so perfect, so enthralling.

He watched Lea examine him boldly. Her eyes roved up over his thighs, past the rapidly expanding line of his cock bulging against his trousers, and up to his face. It was as if she was committing him to memory. Her lips parted and her tongue, a ribbon of pink, darted out to moisten the lower one.

When her eyes met his, she blushed from the roots of her sassy hair to the valley between her breasts. Then she gave him a drop-dead gorgeous smile, one that lit her eyes. It made his insides grow weak, and he understood just how hungry he was for this woman's body. He knew that as soon as he reached down to help her, he was a lost man.

Like the siren of his wickedly erotic dreams, she rose to her full height, her head barely reaching his chin.

"Um, yes. I just hit my foot." He'd been so engrossed in her beauty, he'd forgotten he had spoken to her. Intensely, she bent one knee to rub the sore spot across her baby toe with rose-colored painted nails. Mesmerized, he watched the motion of her splayed fingers, innocently sensuous, driving him wild. If she didn't stop soon, he wouldn't be able to

hold himself back from making love to her right here and now. The self-control he so prided himself on, fled. He lowered himself to one knee, knowing it was futile to resist the call of the siren.

Gently, he pulled her hand away from her toe, smoothing his palm over her exquisite bare skin. She kept her eyes locked on his hand and made small, kittenish sounds. She didn't resist as he cupped her injured foot with expert ease and massaged the bruised spot.

"You're a vixen. You've been driving me out of my mind," he whispered, unable to think of anything else to say. He knew he sounded like a greeting card but couldn't help it.

The pulse at her throat quickened. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Inhaling her perfume and touching her exposed skin drove him to the brink of insanity. He wanted more. He wanted to plunge within her sheath and satisfy his starving desire for her, to hear her screams of satiated pleasure rend the air with their intensity. His eyes strayed up her ankle, her satiny thigh and to her nipples, each beaded into a tiny furred rosebud.

His cock wreaked havoc in his pants. He wanted so much more than her toe, that tiny morsel of her body. He wanted to feel his cock plunge deep within her pussy, to feel the ecstasy of two bodies uniting. Was she as innocent to the ways of the world as he thought she was? Did it matter? Her body signaled to his, with her accelerated heartbeat, the moans of need erupting from her sexy lips. He had a choice. He could spend the rest of his life holding her exquisitely

dainty foot with its tapered ankle wound around by thin black satin straps, or he could make love to her.

"Oh! That feels so good!" she burst out before clapping a hand over her mouth. Her eyes widened, then she giggled, setting her hand from her mouth to his shoulder, flexing the muscle, easing, flexing.

He smiled inwardly at his ability to affect her and he'd barely touched her. "I've wanted you from the moment I set eyes on you, sweet one. You've become an addiction to me. An addiction I can't bear to be without."

"I, uh-oh!"

"Should I stop?" he asked, raising his eyes to her lovely face. Her eyes became pools of jeweled emerald green.

In reply, she inched her hand from his shoulder, up the side of his throat, and along his jaw. Her fingers burned a trail of liquid fire that found its relentless way to his groin. The pressure in his balls was so painful. Her blush deepened.

"Has a man ever touched you like this before?" His protective instincts made him want to know. He never wanted to see such dainty delicacy hurt. He wanted to hold this seductive beauty, to comfort her, and to make passionate, earth-shattering love.

Her hair flowed around her as she shook her head in denial. His promise to Erica came to haunt him. She said she'd have his balls if he did anything to hurt Lea. Could giving her a bit of pleasure hurt her? Could he hold out being a gentleman, as he had promised?

She closed her eyes, her lashes miniature feathers

against the tenderness of her cheeks. Her breasts rose and fell with each ragged breath. He knew from some primeval instinct that she wanted him with each breath she took. How could he fight himself and the touch of her yielding skin under his hands? As of their own accord, his fingers soared from her baby toe to cup her ankle.

"I don't do this all the time," she said, her words rushing together like dry leaves on a fall breeze.

His gaze locked with hers. "You're incredibly beautiful."

She arched her throat. Her lips parted. The blush crept back into her cheeks. "Are you married?"

"No. Are you?" He held his breath waiting for her answer. Her tightened nipples jutting out at him teased him. His eyes hovered on her lips, a pouting heart in red begging him to nibble at them.

"No."

"But I do have someone very special." His libido wanted nothing else but this woman. If he'd been asked about his ex-wife, he wouldn't have known her.

"Oh! Then this isn't right!" She jerked her foot from his light grasp and jerked to her feet. Her shifting unsettled him, forcing him to rise quickly. The swiftness of her movement and the thinness of her stiletto heels caused her to overbalance and stumble. She pitched forward into his arms. "Oh! Oh!"

Carson held her, his hands on her back, pushing their bodies against each other. Her body felt delicious against his chest and his extended cock.

"This isn't right!" she exclaimed again. Her breasts

squeezed against his broad chest, her thighs against his stiffened cock. She pushed at him with her fists, but he held them lightly. If she had really wanted to, she could have torn loose.

"You're the 'someone special' in my life," he murmured.

She searched his face, then attempted to lower her gaze to the floor. Her pupils widened into dime-sized circles. "Oh, goodness, you're big!"

A tiny bubble of laughter escaped his lips when he realized her eyes had fallen on the straining bulge at his crotch. "Would you like it inside you?" he asked, not in the least disturbed by her words. It wasn't how large a man was in the department, but what he did with it that counted the most.

Her nostrils flared. "Oh yes! Please!" she said, as if she was a child begging for an ice cream. Her nipples peaked into tiny raspberries through the lace of the bra cups.

He lowered his head to her throat and trailed feathery-light kisses down the hollow of her throat and to the top of the valley between her breasts. Burning kisses through the material of her babydoll, he lapped at the nipple, circling and teasing and nibbling. Her hands crept up to his neck and to his nape, smoothing the fine hairs at the nape of his neck, sending delightful shivers down his spine. She moaned.

He surfed along the lace between her breasts, took the other nipple into his mouth and nibbled greedily. Lea squirmed against him and her breathing became ragged. Her hands fisted in his hair, tickling his scalp.

He explored her, his lips traveling unhurriedly, licking at the velvet of her flesh between the diamond shapes the babydoll's lace ties made, down the flat of her stomach to the silken bareness at the top of her thong panties. He reached under the thin strip of material, running his palm over her mound, feeling through the thickness of tight-knit curls, then between her slightly parted thighs to stroke her swollen clit.

She whimpered, her body arching seductively in response to his swirling finger. "Oh! Fuck me!" she cried out softly.

Carson stayed his finger over her clit, disbelieving his ears. Had she really asked him to fuck her? He had guessed right. Her proper appearance hid a woman made of seductive fire. "Oh, sweet one," he murmured against her thigh. Her musky essence filled his nostrils.

Reluctantly, he pulled his fingers from her pussy, stood up against her, holding her, his fingers splayed across her ass. Once again she gazed with longing at his engorged cock. He backed her up into the restroom, her breasts pressing against his chest, her mound hard against his swollen cock. He pressed her back against the wall. She gave a little gasp at what he thought must be the coolness against her bare back. Lifting her chin with an index finger, he ran his tongue over her bottom lip before he drew back. Sleepy-lidded emerald green eyes gazed back at him. "Please," she begged.

He closed the door and lifted Lea onto the vanity. She was as light as a strawberry cream pie — and as luscious. Hesitantly, yet eagerly, she reached down

and popped the button on the waistband of his pants. The trousers' zipper rasped in the near silence broken only by her panting breaths and his heart drumming in his ears.

She cupped his cock through the cotton of his black briefs, her small fingers touched and fondled lower to his balls. "You're so hard!" she whispered, running her tongue over her lower lip. The action gave her a naughty girl appearance. Carson loved it.

Audaciously exploring, she reached into the elastic waistband of his briefs, past his own thicker, coarser curls and palmed the plum-rose tip of his shaft. In return, he ran the tip of his finger over her honeyed clit, spreading his hand wide to move over her thigh, and back around to her ass. Lower to the cleavage. His fingers itched to travel downwards. "You're so wet," he murmured.

"Please, please, fuck me," she whimpered. Beads of sweat lay on her upper lip and between her breasts.

He grunted, his nerve endings in his cock sizzled, yearning to plunge deep into her pussy and satisfy his deep longing. He felt lost, knowing if he tasted her once, he would have to taste her yet again, and again, a man addicted to the sight and smell of her sweetness. He swore he would never be able to have enough.

Taking his time, he smoothed his spread-eagled hand back up over her cheeks, across her butter-soft thigh where her panties met with her heated skin. He pulled one thin elastic strap down, then the other, watching the scrap of material pool around her ankles, to hang on the tip of one heel. The sight

inflamed him. His cock would burst soon if he didn't stop himself fast. He placed Lea's index finger over the opening of his cock to stem the flow of pre-come. A little, anyway.

"Open your legs for me," he commanded, kneeling to face her, his hands now around her slim waist and the babydoll's textured fabric. Her fingers tangled in his hair, smoothing up and down, making him want to shrug out of his confining clothes. The precipitous edge of near climax spiraled into his very bones. Her nipples, a delight to his starving eyes, stood out almost half an inch poking through the lace.

She edged her thighs apart, revealing the temple housing her pearl. Unexpectedly, she slid forward to the point where her sex peeked over the edge of the vanity. She arched her back, giving him better access. With the pad of his finger, he circled her moist clit. The juices poured onto his finger and onto the vanity.

"You torture me senseless," he muttered. "Lean back against the wall."

She complied, and carefully as if her legs were made of sculpted glass, he lifted her feet up high onto the vanity, spreading her wide. She collapsed her back against the mirror and groaned. His hands slid down her waist and around to her ass, stroking and smoothing. He licked his lips, then leaned forward to catch a drop of her sweetness on his tongue. Of its own volition his tongue nipped at her clit, tasting, searching, devouring velvet heaven. She tasted of honey and exotic flowers. Her clit hardened, a tasty morsel of hard, saccharine candy.

Lea moaned and slid her thighs wider. He felt her

tension in her trembling thighs and the arch of her back and darted his tongue back and forth across her clit, lapping at her juices. He stroked her lips. His cock was about to rupture its fluids.

Her fingernails pinched into his shoulder blades, leaving him short of air. Her body coiled like a spring then with soft cries, she climaxed, riding wave after wave. Cream burst from her sheath, over his suckling lips and his mouth. She shuddered and went limp against him. Carson held her, his cock aching for release.

* * *

Lea leaned her head into his shoulder, her eyelids heavy, her body momentarily sated. His shirt smelled of sandalwood and his unique maleness. Every moment with this man made Lea's nerve endings tingle and her pussy wet with longing for more. She had never before realized that a man's hands could be so large, so gentle, his lips that of a tender tormentor.

"Oh," she murmured, remembering her words. She had asked him to fuck her. Red-hot embarrassment seared through her before she reminded herself she had given herself permission to act the part of a sex goddess. Her breathing slowed by tiny increments, and her thighs were wet with her cream.

"You blush pretty," she heard Carson say through ringing ears. "You had better get dressed." His gaze rested on her weeping pussy.

Still acting the part, she let him stare. He panted for breath.

He started to straighten but she grabbed him around the neck and brought his face next to hers. "I want more of you. I want you inside me," she whispered brazenly, her eyes lowering to the straining bulge in his briefs. The tip of his cock slipped through the waistband pointing upwards. She stroked a fingertip along its length, making him groan, wanting to lick the bead of moisture glistening at the very tip of his mushroomed shaft.

She pulled her gaze from the straining member and roved to his face, his eyes narrowed with need.

"Will you want me tomorrow?" he asked with a trace of amusement.

She didn't know what to make of his question. *Why wouldn't she want more of him tomorrow?* She nodded, not in the least embarrassed that her slit, still honeyed, lay wide open to his view.

"Meet me at Chez Pere on West Ninth at eight." He pushed his gorgeous cock in his briefs where it bulged invitingly, then zipped his trousers closed. She chewed on her index nail. "You drive me wild. If we were elsewhere, I'd let your cunt eat my cock." Hurriedly he snapped the waistband button and kissed her on the angle of her nose before he opened the door and dashed out, leaving her weak, and wanting much more of him like she had never wanted in another man.

Chapter Eight

“I want her back in my life.”
“So? Why don’t you just tell her that?”
Giorgio Blondell had long ago ceased wanting to help his friend out with his chick problems. Brad Underwood III had so damned many of them, although lately he had fixated on a chick named Lea McCallister, and that wasn’t good. When Brad’s short attention span got hooked on a woman, that could only mean trouble.

“It’s not that easy.” Brad drummed his fingers on his thigh, and watched the football game on the big screen television with unseeing eyes.

“This from a man with literally millions,” Giorgio scoffed.

“Money isn’t everything.”

His friend saw him with new eyes today. They had been friends for twenty years now, through high school, through college and through the trials and tribulations of a wealthy but aimless life. “Remember when we used to bet which of us could get to a girl first to relieve her of her cherry?” Brad still seemed to be on the cherry-stealing gig. That had gotten old fast. Giorgio was no longer into that kind of shit.

"Why harp on that? It was back in high school."

Giorgio observed his friend from lowered lids. The man had aged considerably in the last six months. His once long dirty-blond hair was thinning remarkably across his forehead, and he'd gained a beer belly even King Henry VIII of merry Olde England might be proud of.

Brad sighed. "Lea belongs to me. I won't let her ditch me."

Giorgio knew the truth. Brad had dumped her, not vice versa.

"When we graduated, how many did you have compared to mine? I think it was nine compared to your ten."

"I shouldn't have let her go so easily."

"I guess it doesn't matter. It's time to settle down, preferably with some chick who can open her legs wide."

"Girls love rich men."

"Except for Lea."

"And Helen."

Giorgio's eyebrows notched up a quarter inch. "Who?"

"The fake blonde. Ralston's ex-wife."

Giorgio shook his head, unable to remember the woman. "She must have been an airhead."

Brad snorted and hit the remote control button. Dead silence fell in the high-ceilinged living area of his spacious and elegantly furnished home. "She's a stupid bimbo. Can't think of anything but money and the next guy to suck it out of. Ralston fell for her but good."

An old memory of a blonde ditz with a mini skirt that rode her pussy surfaced. "Oh, her."

"Yeah. Oh her. She took Ralston for a ride, didn't she?" Brad held up his hand in a high five.

Giorgio slapped it and grinned. "Good going on your part."

"Can't protect yourself well enough these days from sharks."

"Especially who smell money."

"Poor girls think they can show a piece of ass to a guy in exchange for a few bucks and maybe a wedding ring."

"It was a good way to get Ralston out of my hair. Get him fucking some blonde, so she'd turn his head inside out and he'd forget about business."

"What was that about anyway?"

"I don't regret dumping her."

"Who?"

"Ralston's wife. Soon as she saw I was no longer interested, she said 'hasta la vista', baby."

"Uh-huh." Giorgio leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He didn't look that much better than Brad. He wasn't proud to admit he wasn't married. It was time to stop playing those stupid betting games and to grow up. Huh! At thirty-five! "I'm going to find myself a chick who'll give me a son. It's time to get on past this betting."

"Yeah. Soon you'll have so many brats running around, you'll wish you'd never had them."

"Isn't your old man laying the heavy on you about a heir?"

"Sure. Just he doesn't get it. I'm young yet. Don't

need no old lady to jack me off one minute and curse me the next."

Giorgio read him easily. "You mean you wished you had an old lady."

"That's not what I said."

"You miss what's-her-name? Oh, yeah. Lea, as in good old pussy."

"Don't talk about her like that."

"Sorry, man." If he wanted to be uppity about that chick, why stop him?

"She did things for me. I spent more time getting her into bed with me than I can remember doing with any other chick. I got to know what she liked, what she hated, got to know her pretty good."

"All you wanted was her cherry, and now look at you, man. She's brainwashed you or something."

"She's such a fool for turning me down."

"Why not get her back? Why not throw her over your shoulder and run off with her?" It wasn't as if his friend didn't have enough money to spirit her away to some offshore island like the Bahamas.

With a thoughtful look in his gray eyes, Brad hooked his thumb in his belt.

Giorgio saw the wheels turning and guessed not much would deter Brad Underwood III from getting what he wanted. Nothing ever did.

* * *

Lea stared at the closed door, sucking gently on her index finger. With her sex goddess act, she had seduced a hunk into making love to her. Now she

couldn't help herself. She wanted more.

The room smelled of musky sex. A cool breeze fanned the warmth between her legs spread wide and the juices seeping from her engorged folds. Triumphant at her ability to lure a man into her tiny web of sex made her laugh out loud. She was alive and well. She didn't need a man like Brad to make her feel unattractive. Her clit throbbed with a delicious sensation. Stretching out her cramped legs, she let them hang over the vanity and became conscious of the thong panties hanging by a thin elastic strap to one heel of her high shoes. She looked like a woman from a brothel but the knowledge didn't bother her one bit. Playing the part of a sex goddess gave her a feeling of power. For the first time in her life, she had been on top of the world, feminine and desirable. She had been vibrant and sexy and all the things she had ever wanted to be.

She slid to the floor and stood on trembling legs threatening to buckle underneath her. To regain her balance, she leaned against the vanity. If that was modeling, then she wanted a hell of a lot more. With her fingertips, she touched her warm cheekbone. Pleasure and fulfillment rioted within her. And the knowledge she would have more tonight.

Of course, it had been the naughty clothes that had made all this possible. If she had been stark naked for Carson, he wouldn't have wanted to tongue her most intimate possession. It had been the little nothing she wore that had turned him on, made his eyes smolder with hunger and fire. She pressed her thighs together, feeling her sticky fluids.

A sigh erupted from her moist lips. She'd just had the most mind-blowing orgasm in her whole life, not in the privacy of her bed but at work in a restroom. Of all the places she wouldn't have chosen for sex. Mercy, it was the atmosphere of tantalizing, teasing clothes that made her want sex. She was getting laid at work and getting paid for it too. What would happen if Erica found out? Surely, she would fire her. Her boss didn't pay her to bare her pussy during work hours.

"Lea? Is everything okay?" Erica called out.

"I'm fine," she responded, hoping her voice was steady. It sounded a bit too breathy, too guilty, too liberated.

"Do you need any help undressing?"

"Um, no." That was the last thing she needed—to have her boss walk in on her with her pussy hanging out all creamy from Carson's lovemaking and the room smelling of heated sex.

The tap-tap of Erica's heels faded away. Lea breathed a huge sigh of relief. She had to get dressed and get back to work. After work she could sort this all out, possibly make sense of her sex goddess persona. It was like dressing up as an enchanted fairy-tale princess but with so much more. She didn't know her body could feel quite this good.

As she washed herself with the nubby washcloth and changed into her work clothes, she wondered why Carson hadn't made love to her with his cock, which had so obviously swelled against his trousers. Maybe after dinner tonight she would feel him deep inside her.

A moment of mortification overcame her, recalling how she had begged him to fuck her. Had those words really come from her mouth? She wanted him badly, yearned for him to plunge his cock into her sheath, to feel him moving up and down.

She examined her reflection in the mirror, admiring her painted lips and the way her eyes glowed mysteriously. She took the washcloth but as she lifted it to her face to wash the make-up off, she changed her mind. She felt pretty and she no longer needed to look like Cinderella in her soot and ash stained work clothes.

As she stared into her eyes, she started to make plans for after dinner. She would wear a tiny nothing, perhaps the lacy black teddy with the plunging neckline and the inverted V-shaped opening revealing the bottom of her breasts. She saw it in her mind's eye hanging in a display she'd put up the week before. It would easily fit underneath her sweater and her skirt. Or should she wear something else? She thought of the red two-piece suit hanging in the back of her closet, mostly forgotten since Brad had bought it. With the right makeup and the black heels she wore now, she could use the fetching ensemble to lure Carson into her web.

Her plan in place, she opened the restroom door and still a little shaky, she walked out into the store, hoping Erica didn't have a clue about what went on in the restroom during work hours.

Chapter Nine

Lea tagged a black lace teddy. Her nipples felt sore from Carson's passionate nibbling. Erica came up behind her softly. "Didn't I tell you cock is better than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?"

Lea's cheeks tinged pink. So much for the hope that she didn't know about her audacious restroom activities.

"No need to blush, girl. It's one hundred percent natural when a man is attracted to a woman."

A female in her early thirties walked in and started to look around.

Erica leaned closer, her eyes curious. "Is the man's cock huge?"

Lea nodded, remembering the straining bulge in Carson's trousers and the mushroom tip escaping its confines.

"That's good. The more he has, the more you can have fun with." She wiped the back of her hand against her eyes. "You're getting me all hot and bothered just thinking about big cocks."

"I am? I thought your lunch hours did that."

"Mmm. It's time to call Jackson for another

quickie."

"Carson asked me out to dinner. At Chez Pere's of all places."

"Ritzy place. You can get these private eating areas and practically do what you like. It's outside against a backdrop of trees but all enclosed under a ceiling of glass. So romantic. Even in the rain."

"You've been there?" Lea wondered why her passionate stranger would pick such a romantic place for their first meal together. The choice of location confirmed wearing the red suit with something sexy underneath. Her panties got wet with her juices, thinking what her sex goddess act could do to turn him on and keep his cock hard.

"Of course. The four of us are going there tonight to have dinner."

"The four of us?"

Erica smiled. "Didn't I tell you I'd set us up as a foursome? That seemed like the perfect place."

"Oh." Lea hadn't thought about that. Her heart sank. She'd wanted Carson all to herself—or rather, to her sex goddess self.

The woman strolled closer, examining the racks of clothes.

"I think I better see what she'd like," Lea murmured. She asked the customer if she wanted any help as her mind lingered on Carson's moist lips pressed against her clit. How she wanted more. And now she would have to wait for an interminably long time.

* * *

Lea slid her bedroom closet door open and reached into the darkness to get her ruby-red jacket and skirt. Should she wear it tonight, knowing Erica and Jackson would be there as well and there wouldn't be any opportunity for her to seduce Carson?

She shook herself in exasperation. The reason for reaching into the darkness already forgotten, she collapsed into the rocking chair beside the bed. She was becoming nothing less than a sex-starved woman hardly able to wait a few hours to get more sex. Working with all the lingerie at Intimates by Erica was addling her brain, making her crave anything to do with sex.

She puffed out a deep breath. Now what was she doing, giving herself to an almost perfect stranger, a man who hadn't hesitated to get her by herself to satisfy his needs? But he hadn't done that, she reasoned. He'd pleased her, and everything he had done, he'd done with her sometimes *too* vocal permission. Now she was about to have dinner with him. Her nipples tightened at the thought.

All she wanted was sex. She didn't want anything else. No commitment, no being locked into a relationship where she couldn't see someone else if she wanted to. The distant past had taught her a lesson or two. Men couldn't be relied upon.

One moonless night before her eleventh birthday, her father had quietly started packing a few of his belongings.

"Dad? Where are you going?" she whispered, reaching to turn on the light.

"Leave it off."

Lea's hand fell to her side.

He looked startled, as if she'd caught him at an awkward moment. "Nowhere," he mumbled. Then more authoritatively, "Go back to bed."

"Is something wrong?" Her father had never packed in the middle of the night, and in total darkness.

"I need to make a little trip, that's all."

"Where to?"

He shook his head. "Go back to your room."

Hesitantly, and ever after regretfully, Lea inched back to her room stuffed with teddy bears and dolls. The next morning, her mother's eyes had been red and sunken as she sat at the breakfast table, her head in her hands.

"Where did Dad go?" she asked.

Her mother bit back a small cry and held her close for a very long time without answering. Lea never saw her father again.

In hindsight, he had simply walked out on them without giving a reason. As far as her mother was concerned, she was still married to him, since she hadn't received divorce papers. Rose had never been the same after that. Where once she had been energetic and bubbling with laughter, she had become forlorn and sad. She now lived in a small apartment a few blocks away with a talking parrot. Lea visited her as often as she could and helped her with errands on weekends.

Returning from her short walk in the past, she certainly didn't need commitments to complicate her

life. She didn't want to be abandoned as her mother had been. If she was so happy, then why did she crave a man?

The ringing doorbell surprised her. She wasn't expecting anyone. She had better hurry or she'd be late for dinner. It was probably some salesman making an evening call.

Uncurling her feet from under her, she stood up. Being abandoned meant a life of misery, a life of being miserable and torn up like her mother. Men didn't have the ability to do more than hurt and desert.

She opened the door to a tall man with a balding head. "Yes?"

"Miss McCallister?"

Lea nodded, wondering what the man wanted. On the street behind him was a rusted and dented Cutlass Ciera. He couldn't possibly be a salesman with a car like that.

"Miss Lea McCallister?"

"I really don't want to be rude but what do you want?"

"I'm Mike Jenkins, a private investigator. I have an envelope here from the law firm of Radisson and Hope. I've been instructed to give it to you upon proof that you're Lea Melinda McCallister."

Hearing her full name out loud, she cringed. The man made it sound as if it was an obscenity, not a pretty name. "What's this about?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know. May I see a driver's license or some ID? Then you'll have to sign that you received it."

“Wait here.” Lea got her purse and her driver’s license. What was in the envelope from a law firm she’d never heard of? She held her license up while the private investigator examined it. Moments later, after obtaining her signature, she held the envelope in her hands and the man got into his car, whistling an upbeat tune she didn’t recognize.

The envelope was thin, with possibly one sheet of paper folded in thirds. She slit the sealed paper open.

In legalese, the brief letter explained she had inherited a million dollars from her grandmother on her father’s side. If she had any questions, then she was to contact James Radisson, partner at law at Radisson and Hope.

She stared at the letter with its gold embossed letterhead. A million dollars? From a woman she’d never met? Impossible! What would she do with a million dollars? She thought of her mother and that if the news was true, then she would buy her a house in the Caribbean or wherever Rose wanted one. She could buy a store of her own, if this was true, or she could go back to school and earn a degree in Business Administration. School had been out of the question when she had turned eighteen and realized her mother was incapable of taking care of herself with much enthusiasm. The loss of her husband had simply devastated her.

Or was the million dollars a cruel hoax? It was far too late to call the law firm from which the letter had originated. With a deep sigh, she threw the letter onto the end table near the front door. It was exciting to think she had inherited that kind of money but on the

other hand, the thought chilled her. She had never met her grandmother, so why would the woman give her money after her death? The whole idea was preposterous, and something smelled wrong about the whole affair. Oh well. She wouldn't worry about that now.

A quick glance at her wristwatch showed she would be late for dinner if she didn't hurry. Her mind turned to other things. What was Erica's lover like? He certainly knew how to press Erica's hot button. She laughed out loud. She didn't need to worry about Jackson. She had a hot button of her own to push.

Chapter Ten

“Your name, Miss?” the maitre d’ asked. Lea gave it and examined her luxurious surroundings, enthralled by the smell of fresh-baked bread, flame-broiled steaks, and aromatic herbs. A few feet from the waiting area, a glass ceiling covered what appeared to be a miniature forest, with both pine trees and deciduous trees unbelievably growing near snow-white lace-covered tables. The carpet under her feet was thick and slate-colored. Her fantastical surroundings made her think of the million dollars her grandmother had purportedly left her. Would she be able to live an opulent lifestyle that included eating at upscale restaurants? A million dollars meant she didn’t have to worry about money for a long time. If she invested some portion, she might not have to work for a few years.

The maitre d’ dressed faultlessly in black jacket and trousers with a perfectly white starched shirt led the way through a maze of tables enclosed by seven-foot high pines. The earth smelled damp and the pines gave off an intoxicating outdoor scent.

She saw Carson as soon as she rounded the corner. The warmth of his smile echoed in his voice. “You look lovely tonight.” He slapped his forehead. “There

I go again, sounding like a greeting card.”

“I think it’s wonderful.”

“That I sound like a greeting card, or the sentiment?”

“The sentiment.” He stood as tall and straight as the trees surrounding them. His navy blue suit, she decided, covered the body of a tanned god. She knew she gaped like a teenage schoolgirl but she didn’t care. Powerful biceps rippled under the suit. His collar opened at the throat to reveal dark skin and his full lips were even better looking up close. Lea marveled that she had never before thought a man’s virile body could hold such fascination. Her cheeks heated with suppressed desire.

He pulled out a chair for her and respectfully stood behind it as she seated herself. The black buttons of her red two-piece suit shimmered in the late evening light. Her thong panties caught in her ass cheeks, and made her feel a welcome surge of desire. A shiver rippled up and down her spine.

“Are you cold?” Carson asked, brushing a velvet lock of hair from her shoulder. His fingers tingled against her skin. The ache between her legs increased. She pressed her thighs together.

“No, not at all,” she replied, her voice low. She was warm all over, heated from the inside out by a man whose last name she didn’t know. She caught herself examining the long elegant fingers that had done so many pleasurable things to her today, from tugging on her nipples to splaying her intimate folds apart to kiss her clit. Again a tiny shiver rattled her spine. She reminded herself to step into her sex goddess role,

where she could play at being mischievous. The scent of his male arousal assaulted her like a delicious spice.

"I'm starved," he said, seating himself with formal elegance.

He hungered for more than the food here. Her panties would definitely be wet by the time dinner was over. She wet her suddenly dry lips and looked around the unique restaurant. Pine trees infiltrated the enclosure and sporadically a white pillar stretched towards the glass ceiling. Except for the sounds of low talking, and a breeze fanning tree branches, Carson and she were alone.

"I know what will warm you up." He slid his hand under the table. She thought he would rest his hand on her thigh, but he didn't. Instead, she found herself lifting questioning eyes to his face and drinking in the sight of his five o'clock shadow. Mercy, but he looked sexy.

"There's a button under the table at your seat. If you need anything, press it, and a waiter will come." He spoke with certainty as if he ate in expensive restaurants all the time. He leaned closer, giving Lea a better view of his smoky blue eyes. "Or you can tell me what you'd like and I'll let him know."

Boy, did she want to tell him what to do. Her nipples hardened at the thought of asking him to undress and bare his bulging cock to her gaze.

A waiter startled her by appearing from one side of the pine trees three feet behind her chair. He was dressed almost identically to the maitre d' but without a jacket.

"What would you like to drink?" Carson asked, not moving his eyes from her lips. His voice held a gentle warmth.

She didn't have a clue as to what to order, since she hadn't done much social drinking in her life. Her perplexity must have shown on her face.

He took matters into his hands and decided for her. "A strawberry margarita for the lady and a scotch on the rocks for me."

The waiter inclined his head and vanished as quietly as he had come on rubber-soled shoes.

"On the rocks?" she asked puzzled, thinking of the expression 'to get his rocks off'. She shook herself. Couldn't she get her mind off sex? It didn't help that a man as wildly hot as the devil sat across from her.

He laughed as if he knew what she had been thinking. "It means 'on ice'."

"I've rarely had anyone order for me." That he had done something she was capable of outraged her before she realized he was caring for her.

"It's time to change that, then," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. A cell phone chirped. "Excuse me," he said apologetically, turning sideways. "Yes?" He listened intently. His voice, strong and husky, made her quiver all over.

She watched as the beginnings of a smile tugged at the corners of his eyes and quickly disappeared. "I'm very sorry to hear that . . . of course." He flipped the phone's lid closed and hit another button. The light in the display went out signaling he had shut it off. "That was Erica. She said they wouldn't be able to make it tonight."

"I'm sorry to hear that." If Erica and her lover were not coming, that meant she had the whole evening alone with Carson. As if her panties weren't wet enough already.

As silently as he had earlier, the waiter arrived with their drinks. "Would you like to order now, sir?"

She glanced at the menu. To her horror, the words were written in a language she assumed was French. How was she to order if she had no clue what was on the menu?

"I believe we will." Carson winked at her. "We'll both have the sole almandine."

"Very good choice, sir." The waiter moved on.

Carson's drink was a rich amber color with plenty of ice while hers was in a fluted crystal glass with a thick pinkish liquid. The glass was rimmed with a coating of either sugar or salt.

He took a small sip. "Go ahead. Try yours," he urged.

Her hazy gaze locked on his, she brought the glass to her lips. It tasted of strawberries, strong liquor, and a hint of salt from the rim of the glass that gave the drink a surprisingly sweet taste. She made a point of licking her bottom lip before caressing the upper one with her tongue.

Carson's eyes widened before they narrowed into lazy slits. A grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "Is it to your taste?"

"Quite agreeable."

White teeth flashed. "You're so forthright."

She took another sip. "My boyfriends haven't liked it much."

"I find that attractive in a woman."

Along with sucking on her clit. She blushed.

The waiter arrived with their food. The fish was artfully arranged with almonds over the top, and sliced baby green beans on the side with a garnish of curled carrot.

"I value honesty in a woman more than anything else."

The thought made her wriggle against the padded tapestry chair. She wasn't being totally candid with him. She wasn't here as Lea McCallister, boring working woman, but rather as the Sex Goddess. The role of sex goddess, if she was dressed in something scanty and sexy, came easily to her. Would it cause him some discomfort to know that? She didn't want a relationship, although it sounded as if he did. "I value the same thing," she managed, unable to feel anything but animal attraction for him. Her thong panties rubbing against her damp pussy didn't help matters much.

She canted her head to one side to watch his perfect profile as he began his dinner. The silver fork caught the light of the waning sun.

He looked around the restaurant. "This is the most interesting place I've ever been to. The trees under the glass give this place an ambience you won't find anywhere else. A man could be standing outside for all he knew."

"It's definitely the most original place I've seen." The fish was delicious, with a delicate lemon sauce.

Over dinner, they chatted about different topics, from food to music to politics.

Lea couldn't fathom why, but she felt more comfortable with Carson than she had with any other man. That was saying a lot, since she hadn't known many men intimately. Her life had been obsessed with work, and her mother's perpetual sadness.

Carson's eyes lit up with an easy smile. "I wanted to thank you for this afternoon. You're beautiful, spunky, and I want to get to know you better."

She couldn't take her eyes from his. "Spunky?" Where on earth did he get a notion like that?

"Uh-huh." He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "You took a chance on me." His eyes reflected her face, her lips parted slightly.

Relief etched her features. He'd had her thinking she had deliberately stubbed her toe in the restroom door so he could touch her. "I'd like that. I mean to get to know you better." Strictly speaking, she wanted to get to know him better for his body, to feel his cock delighting her pussy.

"I come from Los Angeles," he continued, after taking another sip of his Scotch. He reached out and loosely took hold of her fingers. "There's been times when I wonder what I'm doing living in such a rat race."

"Were you born there?" Lea asked, hardly knowing what she said. His large fingers lingered and cherished her smaller ones. Erotically, he rubbed the tips of her fingernails lightly with the pad of his thumb.

"In the inner city."

"I bet your mother is proud of you now that you've grown up," she whispered.

"I never knew her."

Her breath caught in her throat. "You didn't?"

"She died giving birth to me. My dad raised me until I was sixteen. Then I ran away from home."

"Did he hurt you?"

His eyes narrowed. "You could say that. We never agreed on anything. He drank heavily and didn't know me half the time. When he was sober, he told me he wished I had died along with my mother."

"How awful." She patted his hand, feeling the hurt in his simple words. She couldn't imagine her mother telling her she wished she had gone with her father. Rose had always tried to be there for her when Lea had needed her, even through her pain. "My dad walked out on us when I was eleven," she said, not knowing why she shared that when she'd never told anyone before. "It was the middle of the night. I begged him to stop but he sent me back to bed. I never saw him again."

"Why did he leave?"

"I don't know. Mother never volunteered that information. She never got over his walking out on us."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"No, just me."

"Me too, but I've always thought it's better that way. I'm the only who's messed up, and I don't have to watch out for a younger sister or brother and get them straightened out."

"You're not messed up." At least he didn't look that way. "If I had a sibling, it would be an older brother. All the kids at the school seemed to have

one."

"Most of the kids, I bet, had fathers too."

"I felt if I couldn't have a father, then a brother might do."

Carson smiled. "That might take some doing if you don't have a father."

She instantly liked this handsome man's sense of humor. Suddenly, she wanted to cry for Carson, and for herself when they had been children. She hadn't had any control over growing up without a father any more than he had without a mother and a drunk for a father. Instead, she would focus on the present. "What do you do? For a living?"

"This and that. Sales mostly. Of course I know what you do." His eyes twinkled. "And, I might add, you do it very well."

She fluttered her lashes. "I've thought about changing my job." The envelope on the end table reminded her of a great deal of money coming her way, if it wasn't a joke.

"Why would you want to do that?"

She shrugged. "The pressure gets to me sometimes."

"Pressure?"

"Uh-huh. Many customers think that just because you work there, you can hand out advice on sex."

He broke out in quiet laughter. "Is that true?"

The question flustered her. She took another sip of her delicious margarita. She stalled. "Is what true?"

"That you can hand out sex advice at an intimate apparel shop?"

She could hardly tell him she wasn't qualified.

Working with lacy nothings didn't qualify anyone as having a degree in sex education. Who was she kidding? Under her red suit she wore a tight-fitting, alluring teddy for his pleasure. Hopefully soon, she could get this sex goddess role acting out of her system.

"Would you like a demonstration?" She smiled playfully. Without waiting for a reply, she half stood and bent over the table, giving him an eyeful of her breasts tucked under the jacket. His eyes went smoky with desire. She licked his lower lip, nibbled on the moistness tasting of scotch and tangy lemon, before her tongue widened his willing lips and met with his hungry one in an imitation of the primeval dance of life, darting in and out.

He groaned, and she knew instinctively his cock was rigid against his trousers, as it had been in the back room earlier that day. His heated breath whispered against her cheek.

She sat back in her seat with a tiny thud. "Does that answer your question?" she asked coquettishly.

His voice was gruff. "Yeah." He glanced at her breasts.

She pushed her chair back, got to her feet, and with a lilt in her walk to make her ass wiggle from side to side, she stepped towards the pillar mere inches away.

"Is there something you need? Let the waiter get it for you."

Lea pivoted on her high heels, glanced back at him and winked. "Oh yes," she purred, "I need something. But the waiter can't help me with this."

With barely concealed satisfaction, she watched him lick his lips like a man who had been without water for more than thirty days.

She waltzed around the pillar, her left arm trailing behind her, a finger stroking the cold marble. Her tongue, slow and sensuous, passed over her lower lip. Her eyes never left Carson's.

"Do it for me, sweet baby." He sucked in a breath of air. Once again satisfaction raged through her, strumming her nerve endings. With him devouring her every move, she felt gorgeous, feminine, desirable and wanted.

She paused behind the pillar that barely shielded her with its width and unclasped the first button of her jacket, before she swirled around the column, keeping her gaze fixed on his face. With fingers that were amazingly steady, she unbuttoned another of the black circles and popped it from the buttonhole. One more left but she stayed her fingers just as it was about to open. She reached behind her as she disappeared around the pillar. She was a sex goddess. She would force Carson to unzip his pants and untether his rigid cock straining against the crotch of his trousers. He wanted every inch of her. He had shown her that in the back room.

Her nerves knotted in anticipation. For a moment, she hesitated. The clatter of cutlery against china and the low murmur of people talking filled her ears. What if a waiter watched concealed by the trees, unobtrusively waiting for a summons but able to view her even if she couldn't see them? She flicked her hair sideways. If she turned on another guy, then

all the better.

A week ago, she wouldn't have dreamed of undressing for more than one man. Today, as she played the lascivious sex goddess, she didn't have to worry about what the Lea of a week ago would have done. A man with a glorious arousal waited for her only yards away. She carried on, delighting in the wild possibility that other men might be watching as she pleased Carson.

She gave him a wicked grin and unzipped her skirt with a loud rasping sound. Another twirl around the pillar with her back to him showed a hint of the white lace teddy under the skirt, then she shook her ass for good measure. His stare lingered; he practically drooled. At the base of his throat, his pulse leaped up and down, a sign of his rapidly beating heart.

To tease him without mercy, she leaned her pelvis forward and reached under her skirt with delicate fingers to touch her clit. She couldn't help but emit a whimper of suppressed yearning and wrenched her finger away.

She swirled around the column again, opening the last jacket button, leaving her breasts and her stomach covered. Grinding her hips in imitation of a nightclub stripper, something she'd ever only seen once but remembered well, she let her skirt wriggle down her hips with excruciating slowness. The skirt rustled to the carpet in a heap around her feet. Her breath came in tight, ragged gasps. Carson let out a slow exhale. Excitement danced in his eyes, and a swirl of keen interest and anticipation sizzled around them.

With a fluid graceful movement, he rose and

extended his hands, his palm up in invitation. Fantastically hungry for what he had to offer her, she shook her head and stepped forward, stopping arm's length distance from him. Using the tips of her fingers, she pushed him back down in his chair. An appreciative moan rumbled from between his lips. She didn't want him touching her yet. If he did, she would explode, and that might end her fun.

With an arched fingertip, she ran a winding curve down his bulging crotch. "Don't do this to me, Lea," he begged, his voice tortured. He radiated heat and a musky essence all male, all his own. With an almost angry hand, he tore at his tie and loosened it.

Lea tugged on his sapphire blue silk tie, and ran the ends along her jacket buttons. He reached for her, his eyes surging with lust, his lips parted. She danced away from him, keeping herself just out of reach.

She slid one arm then the other out of the jacket's sleeves, allowing the material to rest on her shoulders for a long moment before she shrugged out of it. Her eyes gazed into his unwavering blue ones as he took her in, from her slim neck, to the tops of the lacy teddy where it barely covered her breasts, to the patch of darkness against the white of her thong panties. He rested his eyes there. His shaft lay thick and hard against his pants.

"You wanna take this off?" she whispered hoarsely in a rush of pleasure.

He swallowed hard, stifling a groan. This time she allowed him to get to his feet. He stepped forward, the flare of heat between them instant and intense. She waited with baited breath; her heart drummed in

her ears. Her plan was working. She thrilled at how her near-naked body appealed to the man before her.

Treating her as if she was made of the finest porcelain, he crooked his arm around the back of her neck, and lowered his face to hers. "I'm going to make a wish," he said gruff with want.

She sighed. A wish, at a time like this? "And what would that be?"

"That you'll be in my life for a long, long time."

"I thought you want to see me naked, big boy," she murmured, unwilling to think about what a relationship with him might mean. No matter how hardened she was to the idea, it appealed to her at a base level need. She wouldn't be alone in the world, her longing for a fantasy man would vanish, and she wouldn't have to awaken each morning on an empty bed with nothing but a plumped pillow for company.

Carson's neck muscles became rigid, taut lines. "That, too." His tongue dipped into her mouth and met hers in a mind-drugging kiss. With a sharp hitch of breath, he pulled away and traced the top of her left breast with the pad of his index finger. Her nipples strained at his touch, wanting more.

Exuding raw power, he backed her against the pillar's girth and wedged her thighs apart with his knee. "I want to make love to you, to bury myself in you."

Her body yearned to satisfy both their curiosities, to give him pleasure, and to sate the burning need raging within her. He bent his head over her breast, and flicked his tongue over the tight bud. A low guttural moan came from nearby. Shocked, she

realized the sound had come from her lips.

He rolled and flicked her nipple with short intense movements. With exquisite tenderness, he lifted the teddy's material away from her breasts and stood back, his eyes fastened on the round globes. She felt no shame or embarrassment. She was Carson's sex goddess, the woman who tempted him from rational thought.

Her arms wound around his neck, bringing his head closer to her breasts. His knee dropped but she kept her thighs spread apart, itching to relieve the burning across her clit. He suckled each nipple as if it was some treasure from the sea, a rare blue pearl. She rubbed the hair on his nape, up, down, up, down.

He tugged on the teddy hanging at her waist. It skimmed to the carpet with a little plop. She found his stiff cock and etched her nails down its full length.

"You're driving me crazy," he whispered.

She smothered her laugh against his jacket. The pleasure was all hers.

His broad palm smoothed over the twin cheeks of her ass, and his fingers traced the crack between them. In slow motion, he shimmied the elastic of her panties down her legs, leaving her willing and naked.

He began to lower himself to his knees, but she stopped him, placing her palms on each shoulder and pushing him away. He looked up at her, his brow creased in a frown. "My turn," she croaked.

She moved him to sit back in his chair with his knees apart and slid between them. His cock was stiff against his trousers. He was probably close to climax. She popped the button of his trousers, and unzipped

them with agonizing slowness. The zipper made a small grinding sound. Boldly, his unyielding cock sprang free of its confinement.

Deliberately, she examined the plum-rose tip with painstaking thoroughness. Rubbing a thumb in small tight circles across the mushroom tip, she watched the pre-come glisten under the fading setting sun. It was the perfect time to make love to him, with the shadows growing longer, with the sun casting a flushed glow over his body and over her nakedness.

She adjusted his briefs to have better access to his balls. His stomach muscles clenched. "Ooh, you're big," she murmured with appreciation. He grabbed fistfuls of her glossy hair and threaded his fingers through their lengths, his breathing harsh gasps of painful arousal.

Wrapping a slender hand around his hot shaft, she lowered her mouth over his cock and licked the tip with a darting tongue. A cool breeze wafted over her bare spine giving her an idea. She lifted her lips and gently blew over the top of his cock. Was that the sound of him gritting his teeth together? His hands fisted in her hair. She heard his labored breathing.

With a tiny smile, she looked up at his face. His eyes were closed and his lashes lightly feathered his cheeks. His lips parted.

"Does that feel good?" She didn't wait for a reply. She circled her tongue over and around the swollen hood, and sucked the pre-come from the tiny opening.

He shifted in his seat. "For God's sake, woman," he managed from between clenched teeth.

"Are you telling me to get on with it?" She thought back about that afternoon when their positions had been reversed. Her cream ran down the insides of her thighs.

"I'm not telling. I'm begging, you little vixen."

The letter declaring she had inherited a great deal of money flashed into her mind. "And you'd give me everything you owned for the pleasure?" she prompted.

"Get on with it."

"I haven't heard the magic word," she said, holding his shaft lightly as she expertly twined her hair around the rigid muscle.

She watched his face as his eyes flew open. "What magic word?"

"That's for you to find out."

"Oh no. You're fond of playing mind games," he muttered.

"A lady should always have the courtesy of the magic word," she hinted, tightening the strands of hair around his cock.

"Please," he begged.

"And you haven't answer my question yet. You wouldn't give this up for all the money in the world, would you?"

"No."

She nodded, and took the bulb of his cock into her mouth as she used her hand to vigorously pump the shaft up and down. After only a minute of sucking and gently nibbling his tender flesh, she felt his body arch and he exploded into her mouth with wave after wave of his essence. He shuddered with each spasm

and bit back low groans.

From behind her, Lea heard the sound of a strangled cough. Just in case someone was watching, she shook her ass from side to side. The faintest rustle of branches rubbing against each other filtered to her ringing ears.

Carson rested his head against her forehead, his face slicked with beads of sweat. He said nothing as he kissed her, and a rapturous sigh broke the pounding silence.

Chapter Eleven

Darkness had fallen, lit simply by candles at the table and set in the glass ceiling. Soft shadows fell on Carson's face and across his hands as he signed the credit card authorization. The smell of brewing coffee and the smoke from a steak flambé lingered around them.

Lea wished for one more thing to finish off the perfect evening. She wanted his cock inside her. Would he ask her to his place? If he did, would she go? In many ways, he was as alone as she was. His work as a salesman consumed most of his time just as her job at Intimates by Erica consumed hers. She had seen nothing but kindness from him both when he was with her and when he dealt with others.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like another cup of coffee? Or some more dessert?" he asked, enclosing her small hand in his.

She'd have to unfasten the waistband of her skirt soon if she enjoyed any more of Chez Pere's delicious food. Not only had the sole almondine been a rare treat, but also the lemon meringue pie they had ordered along with the coffee. The pie had the fluffiest meringue she had ever tasted, and the filling

itself had a strong hint of lemon that hadn't overpowered the taste to the point of bitterness. She definitely wouldn't mind eating here again. In more ways than one, she acknowledged, smiling inwardly.

Carson pushed his chair back and stood. "Are you ready to go?" he asked.

Lea rose, her stomach heavy with excellent food. "Yes. This has been a lovely evening. Thank you."

"There's no need to thank me. Actually, I'm in your debt."

Lea wrapped her hands around the crook of his arm and kissed his cheek. "The pleasure was all mine." As she had predicted before dinner, her panties were wet with her juices. She wanted him to bury his cock in her sheath, to drive her relentlessly towards climax.

He led her out through the maze of secluded tables and into the waiting area. The restaurant was mostly silent here except for the click-clack of her heels on the parquet floor. Outside, the air was cool but not cold. Silver tendrils of light from a moon past its full phase gave an eerie glow to the parked cars.

"Where's your car?"

"It's over there," she said, pointing to her right.

"I'll walk you there, make sure you get in safely."

His voice held an edge to it, but she didn't know why. Was he saddened that the evening was drifting to a close? They got to her car, an older model burgundy Toyota Camry. "When can I see you again?" he asked, holding his crooked arm still, her hands twined around the softness of his jacket.

"Oh." Lea felt the long tentacles of disappointment

bind her. He wasn't going to ask her to his house. She couldn't understand how he had been able to walk away without pleasuring himself in the backroom. Didn't he want to feel his cock in her pussy? It was sheer agony to be wound so tight that every nerve in her body was coiled tighter than a curl of hair after being permed.

"I can't let you go just yet," she blurted.

A hint of amusement, quickly concealed, washed through his expression. "What would you like to do?"

"I was hoping you would take me home with you." Mercy, she sounded like a lady of the night. She couldn't believe she was propositioning him.

A distinct uneasiness haunted his eyes. "I live far away. Could we make it another night?"

Was he refusing her advance? She pulled her hands from his arm. "Come to my place," she said quietly. In eight years, she had never been alone with a man before the back room episode. Now, she craved it.

"That's not a good idea."

"Why not?" Why was he resisting her? Didn't he want to feel her pussy gripping his cock?

"I feel if I make love to you, then I have to make a commitment to a relationship."

"I'm not asking you to do that." She brushed away nonexistent fluff from his jacket collar. "I want to make love to you," she whispered, leaning forward. Her body brushed against his hard cock. "I want to fuck you, and I think you want that, too." To emphasize her point, she outlined the bulge of his erection with the tip of her finger.

He chuckled softly. "You sure know how to turn a man on and keep him turned on." He twined his hand in her hair.

"I only do it for you."

The sound of rustling leaves made them turn towards the sound over Lea's left shoulder. Startled, she clapped a hand over her mouth.

Carson placed his arm over her shoulders and held her close. "There's nothing to worry about. Just the wind playing with a leaf or two."

That certainly hadn't sounded like the wind straying through the trees. Someone had been watching them, and made an inadvertent sound.

"Come to me place. For me," she said softly, still peering over her shoulder. She didn't see anything but that didn't mean there was no one there. Being in the restaurant and knowing she and Carson were being watched was one thing, but being in the moonlit darkness, was a frightening thought.

"Let me drive, then."

Without thinking out the consequences, she reached into her evening bag and slipped out her keys. Her action astonished her. When had she come to trust him with her whole being? She puzzled over that as he drove with easy grace through the city. Apparently he knew it well since she didn't have to give him too many instructions after she stated the street her house was on.

It was okay to trust a man, as long as she didn't get emotionally involved with him and he apparently didn't want commitment any more than she did. She watched his long fingers curved around the steering

wheel and admired his thigh muscles in the reddish glow from the light of the dashboard as he touched the brakes to slow.

Tonight, he would make love to her. She remembered Erica's words earlier that day when she had said Carson needed to know he was good-looking. Hadn't other woman shown him that? Hadn't his ex-wife seen how striking a specimen of maleness he was? She couldn't have if she had divorced him.

"How long were you married?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"Two years."

That was long enough to determine if a marriage was working or not. "What was she like?"

He braked harder than he should have and firmly pressed his lips together. Obviously he didn't want to talk about his ex-wife.

"Do you think you'll ever go back to her?"

Harsh lights from an oncoming car washed over the rigid muscles in his cheeks. "Definitely not," he said, his voice as gruff as encountering sudden gravel on a smooth road. "I told you the truth when I said I had someone special in my life. It's you, and only you."

"My house is the next one," she pointed out. Her heart warmed at his words. She was the special woman in his life.

He pulled to a stop in her driveway. "What are your neighbors going to think?" he asked with a twinkle of amusement in the blue expanse of his eyes. He shut the engine off.

She shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"Are you sure you want to invite me in? I'm insatiable and have a feeling you won't be able to get rid of me too quickly."

Lea found herself giggling, something she never did.

"Is that a yes?"

She nodded, realizing how much she wanted him. Her breasts were full and aching and her pussy was once again damp against the silk of her panties. She wanted him more than breath itself.

He rushed around the back of the Camry to help her out and returned her keys. Once in the foyer of her home, she gave a critical look at the kitchen and its dishes stacked neatly in the stainless steel sink, at the magazines strewn on the coffee table in the living room and remembered that her nylon stockings were hanging from the shower rod in the bathroom. She would have to snatch them before he saw them.

His glance followed hers. "You have a lovely home."

"It was a gift. Of sorts," she volunteered without knowing why.

"Did your mother leave it to you? Or some admirer?"

"No, she's still alive." She heard the teasing lilt in his voice but he had come awfully close to the truth. It had been one of the few expensive presents from Brad she had kept after he got what he wanted. He owed her that much. She had thrown away everything else.

She stepped closer to him, smelling the sandalwood in his aftershave and his musky arousal.

Mercy, he smelled good enough to eat. Her cheeks tinged pink. Now that she was close to getting what she wanted, how would she go about it? Thinking about Brad brought back the memories of how fast he had dumped her after he had his quickie. Maybe that's all Carson wanted from her—a quick 'wham, bam, thank you, ma'am' before he told her he didn't want to see her again. She couldn't bear the thought that she was only good for a one-night stand.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked hesitantly.

"That would be fine."

"What would you like? I have milk, orange juice and a beer."

"Beer will be nice."

She hastened off into the kitchen to find the beer buried in the back of her fridge and felt his presence directly behind her as she squatted to get the frosted bottle. Where had the sense of urgency to make love gone? As soon as he had stepped into the house, the sultry mood lingering from their meal had subtly changed.

"Your fridge looks like the barren Antarctica."

She scrambled up holding the bottle that had been clearly visible from his position. "You've eaten there before?"

"Heard it from a polar bear," he quipped. His eyes lingered on hers; a slight frown lined his forehead. "It seems to have gotten cold in here."

So she wasn't the only one feeling the change. She remembered how he soothed the fallen little girl at the mall that demonstrated he was goodhearted without being macho about it. The doubt persisted. "I

think so too."

"Is it something I've done?"

Her hair flew in a half-circle as she shook her head. Tears threatened to spill. The air was drafty since she had lost the ability to play the role of her sex goddess. She couldn't go through with having sex with a stranger because if she was honest with herself, that's what it amounted to. Nothing more than sex. She wanted love along with the sex. Why had she brought him home?

"Maybe we jumped into this too quickly and we need time to get to know each other without the sex hanging over us."

She drew back a step, away from the warm finger under her chin. He didn't want commitment, and what had she found about him to warrant this magnet-like attraction?

"Do you want me to leave?"

She reached out and touched his arm, allowed her hand to trail down the material of his jacket. It felt silky under the touch, like Brad's jacket had used to. Why was the memory of what Brad had done plaguing her so much tonight?

"No. I was thinking of the past, and how unpleasant it's been," she said in an undertone.

He nodded understandingly. "That makes two of us hurting and trying to move on. Sit down and talk to me," he urged, cradling her in his arms even as he walked her into the living room where a single light burned near the couch. He sat her on the couch. She caught the twinkle in his eyes as he knelt beside the couch and looked up at her. It seemed he had a direct

approach to solving problems.

"When I was younger," he went on, "I used to play cowboys and Indians to stop myself from thinking about how bad things were. I was almost always started out as the Indian sitting cross-legged and smoking a pipe before I turned myself into a cowboy racing around on his horse."

Despite herself, she smiled through her tears. She couldn't imagine Carson as a boy playing children's games. "I used to dress my dolls up and pretend they were at a huge wedding."

"You must have been quite the little girl, playing with them. Don't most girls dream of becoming a beautiful bride?"

"I think they do, but I exchanged the dolls early on for other things." She didn't bother hiding the tone of regret.

"What did you trade them in for?" His hand slid to the top of her knee and rubbed the skin with gentle back and forth movements.

She wasn't sure if the movement was a conscious one or not. "I guess I grew up."

"Yeah, we both did that kind of quickly. Our parents weren't around when we needed them the most so we traded in our child's games for adult ones."

Adult games like playing a sex goddess. "I promised myself that when I fell in love, it would be a forever thing, that I wouldn't end up like my mother living in the past."

His fingers and palm felt warm against her protruding knee. Without realizing it, she had sat

down with her legs under her.

"Sometimes it's hard to move on, to face your fears. Some people can't do that because it brings back the pain. Bringing back the pain means facing it, and sometimes it's just easier to pretend it's not there."

"Sounds like you've been there."

"In some respects, I still am. Sometimes when the loneliness creeps up on me, I bury myself deeper in my work rather than socializing, and perhaps going out with friends to a ball game. It's never easy to stand up after we've been bowled over."

"True." The image of bowling pins being knocked down came to mind. Unless the automatic reset or someone else came along, the pins would remain down and out. Maybe it was like that in life. If a person gave another one a chance, maybe they could get straightened out and live a productive life without constantly looking over their shoulder at the ghosts of the past.

"How long have you worked for Erica?"

"About six months. She's an, er, interesting person."

"I know she is."

"How long have you been in sales?"

She thought she saw a shadow cross his handsome face. "All my life. One thing led to another, and here I am."

"What kind of sales?"

"Pretty much everything."

That wasn't a whole lot of information. "What do you like to sell best?"

He bent his head so she couldn't see his eyes. "I don't have a favorite."

She shrugged nonchalantly. He was avoiding her leading questions. "I learned to sell insurance and worked for several years in that field, but I got burned out fast. Decided being in that type of high pressure environment wasn't for me."

A smile broke out across the seam of his lips. "Working for Erica isn't high pressure?"

"Not if I'm not giving out advice on sex."

They laughed together. His laugh was easy and carefree. The room temperature notched up a few degrees.

"Good thing Erica didn't build her business on that. She wouldn't be where she is now."

"I dare say not." She watched the light reflect off his blonde hair. Tentatively, she reached down and pulled her fingers through its short length near the nape.

He lifted his head. "Do you have any for me?"

"Any what?"

"Advice on sex?"

Erica's words about his former love life came back to her. Compassion overwhelmed Lea. Without knowing why, she wanted him to be happy. He deserved it if only for the way he had treated the child who had fallen in the mall, and for the hurt he had endured in his growing years. The need to have him bury his cock in her sheath started to take over.

In response, she leaned down and kissed the slant of his nose. She had to let go of the past, and that included Brad. She was wanted and safe with a man

who cared enough to be with her. Could there be anything better than that?

Her skirt murmured as she slid off the couch. She wanted to give Carson advice, not with her mouth, but with her body and to explore every inch of him. Her clit throbbed and her breasts ached from fullness and with need. "I want you," was all she said.

Matching her low voice, he answered with, "Fuck me."

Lea raised her eyes to his. He was teasing her about her earlier choice of words. His breathing came in ragged gasps. Her hands roamed down his back, exploring the taut muscles underneath. He shivered. "Lie down then."

He gave her a bewildered look.

"Just do as I say."

"The woman has a control problem," he mumbled.

"No, I don't. I want to pleasure you in a way you've never experienced before."

He flashed her a grin. "Have your way with me, vixen."

She stroked his cheek that was beginning to show five o'clock shadow. "I'm going to strip off all your clothes, but not the way you want me to."

"Oh?"

In a sultry, seductive voice, she said, "Pleasure is my middle name and pleasure I shall give you."

He nuzzled his warm lips against her earlobe. "Don't make me wait too long."

She rose to her full height and looked down at the man she would seduce as a sex goddess. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

In her bedroom, she chose the finest but thickest black scarf and hurried back down the stairs. On the bottom step, she called out, "Close your eyes."

"Oh boy," she heard him say quietly.

She approached him. "Are your eyes closed?"

"Tight as a shutter."

"Good." She knelt over him and used the scarf as a blindfold, tying it behind his head. "Scout's honor, you won't rip this off."

"I was never a scout."

"Promise anyway."

"Okay. I promise."

Lea smiled to herself. She was going to have fun with her man tonight. All she needed was this one night with him.

* * *

As if the mind-blowing orgasm in the restaurant hadn't been enough, Carson felt his cock harden and elongate at his crotch. He knew his lips curled in the slightest of expectant smiles. The scent of roses and lavender filled his nostrils.

He had never met a woman as sexual and willing to give as Lea before. "Can I touch you?" he queried, keeping his hands still at his sides. The carpet he lay on was soft and thick. Every muscle and nerve in his body ached to lodge his cock deep inside her.

It was strange how the loss of his eyesight heightened his senses to keening pitch. Clutching at the carpet's thin fibers yielded his fingers a soft fineness as strong as hemp rope but as supple as

woven silk. The air he had thought was still moved with a caress along his cheeks. And his erection fought the constraints of its prison.

"Can you see anything?" Lea asked.

"It's as dark as night under this thing."

She laughed softly. "That's good."

With considerable ease, she slipped his arms from his jacket but kept it under him. "Mercy, what am I going to do with you?" she asked, zig-zagging her finger down his engorged cock.

"Put me out of my misery."

"How am I to do that?"

Deliberately, she unfastened his shirt buttons. "Let me touch you."

She sat over his flat stomach. He heard the soft whoosh of material and the breeze it made around him as some part of her clothing slid to the floor.

"Do you think that's a good idea in your condition?" she teased, running her fingers through the fine hairs on his chest.

"I want to bury my cock inside you. More than I've wanted anything in my life."

Soft tendrils of her hair fell over his shoulders. "Go ahead and touch me."

If his cock got any harder, his crotch seam would rip apart. A tiny sigh escaped her. He reached up and caught a rounded breast in his palm and tweaked the distended nipple. He guessed she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He felt like crowing.

She rubbed the crotch of her panties against his exposed stomach. She was wet and ready for him. She lowered herself, her hair tickling his cheeks. He felt

naked without her above him. She skinned his pants and briefs from his legs. His shaft bounced free of its cloth prison, standing erect and proud for her delight. The tender flesh on his ass sank into the fibers of the carpet, scratching. He had never noticed how erotic being blindfolded was.

Her pulse kicked into overdrive. She stroked his bulging, full cock in her palms and chafed it. He growled. If she didn't stop soon, he would catapult into climax.

He raised his arms and cupped her face in his hands, urging her lips to his. Her lips parted above his, luring him into a seductive kiss. He kissed the bow of her bottom lip and nudged her lips apart with gentle bites. She sucked the velvet of his tongue, tangling and savoring. He trailed hot, light kisses down the hollow of her throat, nipping across her shoulder, and to her breasts. With his other hand, he pinched the nipples into tiny cherry-topped peaks. She lowered her hot pussy over his straining shaft, massaging his wet glans.

As turned on as he was, she brazenly touched her lips to his, biting them further apart. Their wild tongues met, taking, giving, nibbling, tasting. His breath mingled with hers and he smelled the tiny mint she had taken from the restaurant after dinner. Her nipples peaked higher under his touch.

She moved her fingers from her chest, down his abs, down into the thick curly hair surrounding his penis where she let them roam. In an action filled with taut anticipation she rubbed his cock against her inflamed clit.

He inched his arms around her, running his roughened hands down the elastic skin of her back, exploring her tight ass with extended fingertips. Her clit vibrated against his thigh. His harsh breathing sounded rough to his own ears.

She paused and a nanosecond later, she pushed her sheath firmly over his cock, swallowing the shaft slowly but surely. Her female scent overpowered his fragile, overloaded senses. She pressed onto him, and he slipped inside her inch by glorious inch. His guttural groan wound around them.

“Oh God, but you’re wet,” he murmured.

She shifted and came down harder, pressing his shaft against her cervix. He splayed his fingers across her ass, feeling the minute hairs between her cheeks before he walked his fingers to her clit and massaged her gently. Her body tensed, signaling him that she was about to come. Immediately, he released the pressure on the hardened pearl. His cock jerked against her clit, stone grinding against a tiny sand of sugar. She pumped up and down harder, their flesh slapping against each other.

He placed a hard palm over her mound, then a fingertip to her honey. He swirled a finger around her clit, brought it to his lips, and savored the taste of rich cream lathered over fresh strawberries. Then he repeated the motion, lifting his fingertip to her lips. “Have you ever tasted yourself?”

She shook her head, and parted her lips. He grinned at her lapping sound, but kept thrusting her hips over his. Matching her rhythm, he felt her arch her back. He gave up on rational thought as her body

tensed. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she cried out in climax. Orgasm after orgasm ripped through her innermost core.

His movements became more determined, his own body reacting to her climax. He inhaled a deep breath, and let it out slowly through barely parted lips. Lethargically she lifted her hand and trailed the smooth flesh down his bristling chin.

His heartbeat roared in his ears. His shoulder muscles became rigid, then flexed. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. The thrusts went deeper, and he knew she was going to fall again over the precipice right along with him this time.

The world spun out of control as his orgasm began as swiftly as hers did. He cried out her name, his body shuddering with one spasm after another as his come drenched her sheath. She came at the same time. Every nerve in his body reacted to the delight that was Lea.

He collapsed, his breathing choppy, his body clammy. From far away, he heard her sigh. He smiled.

"What's so funny?"

"I was thinking about all those burgers I ate."

"The ones you ate in the mall?"

"Yeah. I had to add tons of ketchup and mustard to make the pieces of cardboard more palatable, but trust me, it didn't help the taste a whole lot."

"Then why did you eat them?"

"I needed an excuse to watch you. How else could I do that without you knowing about it?"

"So you ate those burgers because of me?"

"You bet."

"Was it worth it?"

In response, he caressed the round globe of her breast and found his lips on the dusky aureole. She strained against him, grasping his half-engorged cock in her small hand. Before another minute passed, they were making love again, their bodies hot and tangled together. As the night wore on, he had second thoughts about not making a commitment to Lea McCallister.

Chapter Twelve

Lea awoke the next morning with a little sigh. The night with Carson had been one of the most memorable of her life. They had made love into the wee hours of the morning and, she congratulated herself, she didn't feel emotionally attached to him. But when he had slipped away quietly as dawn shed its light, she once again slept with nothing but a plump pillow. But, she reasoned, that wasn't because she was getting involved with the man. For goodness sake, she didn't even know his last name.

The alarm clock beside her bed read seven a.m. She stretched her arms over her head and luxuriated in the sensation of not having to hurry anywhere. After a slow cup of coffee and a peek at the daily newspaper, she would shower and get ready for work.

A feeling of something out of place niggled at her. With a start she remembered the letter she had received the day before from the law firm. Why would her grandmother will her money if she'd never met the woman?

She threw the sheets off her, swung her legs over

the side of the bed and sat up, yawning. The yawn turned into a shriek. A man sat in the chair by the window reading a newspaper. Why hadn't she heard him as he flipped the pages? She wasn't that sound a sleeper.

"I see you're up," Brad drawled.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, searching frantically for her housecoat.

"Are you looking for this?" he asked, lifting a pale blue dressing gown from the side of the chair facing away from her.

"You rat. Get out of here."

"That's no way to talk to me," he said petulantly. "I'd have thought you would want to know what I'm doing here."

"I don't care. I want you out of here." She wondered how she was going to oust him from her home. Searching for a makeshift weapon, she searched the room. The only thing that came to mind was the light on the nightstand by the bed.

He dropped the newspaper on the floor. "I want you."

If she could get her hands on that lamp, she would deck him with it. "Face it, Brad. You're a loser."

His nose turned an indelicate purple, and his pupils danced with ill-concealed irritation.

"Maybe you should take the time to grow up." She knew she was stoking the already raging fire but he'd given her enough heartache.

He seemed to ignore her taunt. "I want us to be friends, and in the very near future, for you to accept my proposal."

His words left her baffled. What kind of proposal was he talking about? "We can't be friends. You already showed you can't be a friend to anyone but yourself."

"Lea Melinda, you're hurting my feelings."

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, she heard her full Christian name. It hadn't been just her pride Brad had tossed aside. He'd promised her more times than she could count, that he wanted to marry her, that she meant the world to him. "Don't you think you hurt my feelings? You took what I gave you and you bandied it about in some jock locker room with your macho friends as if my reputation was something to be traded for a few cheap thrills. If I did, you'd plaster the night's events all over the social column you rich people obsess about. I won't ever allow it to happen again."

"I didn't mean for it to turn out that way."

She thought about Carson's gentleness, and how in the last few days he had done nothing to hurt her emotionally or physically. Brad could never be half the gentleman he was.

"That's your version of an apology?" she demanded.

"I don't need to apologize for what I do. Not to you or anyone else."

"Then why bother coming here?" Not that she would have accepted his apology. "That's the problem with you. You think you're God because you have more money than he does."

"Money has nothing to do with it-"

She cut him off. "It has everything to do with it."

Just because you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth and us poor schleps weren't, doesn't mean you can push us around."

"It comes down to that, does it? Lea, honey, the tone of voice you use to me needs a bit of work."

"My tone of voice needs work? How dare you. You break into my house, and I'd say you're the one who needs manners."

With slow, steady movements, he got to his feet. "Let's not get sidetracked, Lea. I came in the hope you'd let bygones be bygones and that we could start over again."

"You're trying to sweet talk me again so I'll change my mind like I did the last time. You took something precious from me, and then you discarded me like yesterday's newspaper."

She'd been foolish enough to believe his promises and his profession of love to sleep with him. She had found out from a female friend that she was the latest news on Brad's bulletin board. He'd told the guys she was no good in bed and so why bother making a date with her? She'd been so hurt, she'd called in sick to her job at the insurance company.

"I was mistaken. About letting you go."

"And you realize that months later? Get out!"

"I'm not leaving until you come with me."

"Did you run out of women and now you're going through the list of the ones you dumped to see which one is stupid enough to shack up with you?"

"I realized I couldn't live without you."

"You make it sound like I was in competition with dozens of others in your life. I wasn't. I'm me."

Silently she applauded herself for standing up to him. She knew he was perplexed by it since no one dared stand up to him.

"There are no other women when it comes to you. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

She stared at him. "You can't think of anyone but yourself, can you?"

"Come with me. The driver's waiting for us."

His limousine driver was waiting? How could he keep the poor man waiting for such a long time? "The day hell freezes over. I'll tell you what. Why don't you just get lost?" How could she put force behind her words? She cast a longing look at the lamp. A cleaver would be more helpful.

"All I can do is ask that you believe me. I loved you back then. Now I can't get you out of mind."

"You sure have a nasty way of telling a woman you love her."

"At least give me another chance. You won't regret it. You'll have whatever your heart desires. If you want to live in the Bahamas or the Caribbean or Europe year round, then we'll do that. If you want a kid, we can have one."

She'd heard all this before. He made promises, and as soon as he got what he wanted, he didn't remember making them. "Now where have I heard that before? Your promises don't mean anything. For men like you, life's about having fun, cruelly teasing people and when they fall down, you enjoy their pain." A glimpse at the alarm clock showed seven-thirty. "I've got to go to work. You wouldn't

understand about making a living."

"I'm a new man, Lea. I've changed. The least you could do is give me a chance to prove it."

Before she knew what she was doing, she stormed towards him, halting out of his reach. "I gave you one chance. That's all I'm going to give."

His eyes rested on her heaving breasts and traveled lower.

The hungry look sickened her. "I'm going to tell you something and I want you to listen very carefully because I'm only going to say it once."

His eyebrows notched up at her defiance.

"I want you out of my life. I don't want your money, and I definitely don't want you."

Instead of the anger she expected, he shook his head and grinned. Nonchalantly he said, "I understand you give really good head."

Her body went rigid. "Excuse me?"

"You suck cock good."

With a sinking feeling, she realized she might have played right into his hands. Last night at the restaurant he could have had her spied on – if he hadn't been there himself. She couldn't repress a red-hot blush.

"Word gets around, you know. Especially when you're hungry." He bared his teeth in a smirk.

She pulled herself together. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

He picked at one of his nails. "None at all?"

Adamantly she shook her head.

He separated the distance between them and lifted her head with a crooked finger. "Lea, Lea. Do you

know if I don't get what I want, I can ruin your life? You wouldn't be able to show your face anywhere in the world that people wouldn't talk."

She stood her ground, unable to respond to his open threat.

"Now, isn't it better if you get dressed and come with me?"

As fast as lightning, she aimed her palm at his cheek and slapped him hard. Her hand shook with the repercussion. "How dare you threaten me?"

His half-smile made her shiver. "You better be careful, little Chiquita. You come on my terms, or I'll make sure you won't be able to lift that pretty face in public." He walked out, leaving the bedroom door open.

She didn't dare breathe, fearing he might return and scoop her up against her will. A moment later, the sounds of a car's smooth engine starting and driving away, made her relax a tiny bit.

Brad was imagining his own importance if he thought she was going to pack her bags and run off with him. She sank to the floor, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed.

* * *

Half an hour later, Lea held the phone to her ear and waited as it rang. She had cried away the grief and anger. Now she needed a plan.

The phone rang again on the other end. Erica hadn't yet arrived at work or she was busy with a customer. Just as she was about to replace the receiver

in its cradle, her boss answered, projecting a smile over the line.

"Hi, Erica. I'm a little under the weather and can't come in today. I'll see how I feel at noon, and perhaps I can come in and relieve you so you can get out for lunch." She hated lying, but Erica worried about her friends to the point of butting in and actually trying to solve the problem, which wouldn't help in this case.

"Are you okay?" Muzak from the mall speakers played in the background.

Lea heard the worry in her friend's voice. "I'm sure it's just a touch of flu. I'll be fine with a little bit of rest."

"Your illness doesn't have anything to do with Carson, does it?"

"Not at all." She remembered his stiff cock sliding into her wet sheath and the pleasurable torment fractions of a second before climax overcame her.

"If you need anything, just let me know." Erica hung up.

Lea collapsed on the couch, taking deep gulps of air. How could Brad break into her house and threaten to muddy her reputation? As if he hadn't done that already. The animal wasn't normal if he thought she would return to him. He was rich and spoiled. What he wanted, he went after, relishing the means to an end. She had been unlucky enough to catch his eye, but now it was his turn to think twice about messing with her again. If she could only think of a plan to get rid of him.

She'd grown up since Brad had lied to her. Before that, she had chalked up her naiveté to being

younger, more foolish and her desperate need to believe that not all men were like her father, that there could be a happily ever after ending. She glanced at an open window ushering in a slight morning breeze from the north side. A tree against the back fence swayed with its burden of small shiny red apples.

Horror struck her. If that animal could come in once, he could come in again if the doors and windows weren't securely locked. She leapt up and flew to the back door, then the front door to make certain the locks were engaged. She'd have to get deadbolts to keep him out.

At the front door, her eyes fell on the letter from the lawyer. Had she really inherited a million dollars from her grandmother? Her breath hitched in her throat. She had never heard mention a grandmother on her father's side existed. Was someone trying to fool her into believing she was a million dollars richer? It didn't take a PhD to figure out who would want to buy her. Was it Brad's way of taking revenge on her, a revenge he had set in motion days earlier?

She drummed her fingers on the arm of the couch. She badly needed a plan. Could she go to her mother and ask for advice? Her mother was too buried in the past to help her. Who else did she know? Might Erica have some information to help? Erica was a crusader of sorts. She'd get in the melee and fight even if it wasn't her battle. That left Carson. Maybe he could suggest something to arm herself with against Brad.

Hesitation warred with the need for action. She was used to solving problems on her own, without help from her friends. This time, she needed help.

Why couldn't she think of some idea or action? The only thing that came to mind was killing the bastard but she automatically knew who would be imprisoned for a long time. Why waste a lifetime for a creep like that?

After checking the doors and windows one more time to make certain they were locked, she stripped and stepped in under the shower's hot steaming spray.

She poured a small blob of fragrant hair shampoo into her palm and froze. The idea that she needed Carson's help terrified her. What had happened to her sense of independence? Was she getting emotionally attached to him?

In wonder at her discovery, she shampooed her hair, rubbing the rich lather into the mass of wet strands. She couldn't imagine Carson doing anything to hurt anyone, especially after she had seen him pick up the crying little girl in the mall. Imagining Brad doing the same thing was impossible. And not once, last night, had he been anything but kind and solicitous of her feelings. He wasn't capable of spitefully hurting her.

After dressing casually in a navy blue skirt and white cotton blouse, she checked her appearance in the mirror. She finger brushed her hair for a sassier look thinking she'd learned a thing or two from Erica's quick make-over the day before. There were tiny dark spots under her eyes, but they glowed. Erica would probably have told her she had been fucked good during the night. Lea smiled at herself. She had enjoyed the night with Carson, but she wanted much

more.

On the way out the front door, she glanced at the letter on the table. Brad could easily have paid someone at a law firm to write up a letter, entrust the money to their bank account. Soon as she laid her hands on the vast sum of money, he had her trapped. Her simple acceptance of the money would mean she owed him – but big. She smiled ruefully. That simply wouldn't happen. Why waste the brains God had given her?

* * *

As she got into her car, Lea realized she had no idea where Carson's office was. She couldn't find it on her own since she didn't know what his last name was. Reluctantly, she walked back into her house and locked the front door, her nerves prickling. Brad could have broken into her house again behind her back. Carrying a sharp knife, she searched through the house from room to room. She found no Brad, and nothing suspicious.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she lifted the receiver to her ear and dialed Intimates by Erica. How would she broach her question about Carson's last name to her boss?

She heard the smile again in Erica's voice as she answered.

"Hi," Lea said without fanfare. "I'm hoping you have an answer to a question." She hedged before she forged ahead. "I want to send Carson something, but I don't know where to send it to. Would you have his

office address?"

Erica laughed. "Are you sending yourself, by any chance?"

"You're going to make this hard on me, aren't you?"

"Honey, I couldn't imagine doing that but I can't help feeling you're sick for no other reason than that you don't have a hard cock with you today."

Lea found her mouth watering at the idea of lowering her head to Carson's steel-like erection and listening to him squirm with the need to climax. "You have a one track mind, you know. Sex, sex, sex."

"If you can't get any at home, the office is a good place."

"That reminds me. Did you set us up last night?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you planned a foursome, but it ended up a twosome. Did you cancel on purpose?"

"Oh, honey. Jackson's car broke down. That's all."

Lea chose not to believe her. There was something in her voice that didn't give credence to her outright lie. "Did you wiggle out of your date with us so you could have a date of your own with Jackson?"

"No, I did not."

"Okay. Do you know anything about cars?" Erica was a self-sufficient woman. If she could fill her car with gas, chances were she knew a little about what went on underneath the hood. Removing a distributor cap and throwing it into the bushes guaranteed a car stayed stationary.

"I drive them. Nothing more."

"Something tells me you know enough to put one

out of action if it suits your purpose."

"Are you accusing me of tinkering with Jackson's car?" Erica sounded appalled before she started coughing.

"I was just curious."

Erica burst into ear-splitting laughter giving the lie to the fact she wasn't coughing. "In other words, you think I opened the distributor cap or disconnected the line to the battery."

"Either one sounds just like you. I believe you did some matchmaking last night." She remembered the reason behind her call. "So where is Carson's office?"

"I never said he had one."

"Erica! I want to know. Right now."

For several seconds, except for the Muzak playing over the mall speakers, there was silence on the other end of the line. "Carson works out of his home." She reeled off the address in an area of the city known for its luxurious homes and well-tended yards. "But you didn't hear it from me, right?"

"Not a word. I owe you one, Erica." She hung up. Was it her imagination playing tricks on her, or had Erica been hesitant about giving her Carson's address? Lea couldn't decide.

Chapter Thirteen

Holding his breath and shutting his eyelids tighter than a state prison didn't work. Carson couldn't keep the images of Lea's naked body in various erotic poses from bombarding him. He kept seeing her open her legs wide and invite him to ogle her pussy lips and her hardened clit. His cock refused to obey his command to settle down. The night of making love hadn't sated his need for her, but had magnified his desire with a fierce and possessive longing a thousandfold. He wanted a great deal more of her satin skin, her humor and her gentleness.

He ground his hips with mounting frustration. He had no idea how he was going to get through the day thinking of nothing else but emerging himself in Lea's pussy. She had become a constant in his life over the last two weeks. If he had to spend the coming night without her, it would be a punishment even the devil wouldn't be sadistic enough to dream up.

Tonight he planned to come clean with her by telling her who he really was. He stared unseeingly at the daily newspaper's black print and without looking, reached for his coffee mug. His hand hit the hard porcelain and he knocked the broiling hot coffee

over and onto the newspaper's business section, immediately blurring the stock market quotes. The dark brown liquid pooled over the edge of the table. He jumped up with a curse before the fluid could run over his covered cock.

He examined the mess. The newspaper was distorted and unreadable, and his gray trousers had a stain that looked like he'd peed himself. He chuckled. Hadn't he saved his cock from being boiled? What did it matter that the section of the paper he lived for every morning was all but ruined?

As he moved up the stairs to change the offending trousers, someone had the gall to interrupt with a bang of the wooden knocker on the front door. The sound caught him off guard. He wasn't expecting anyone. A quick look at his watch told him it was barely eight a.m. Maybe it was Lea. Carson glanced at his trousers and at the door, and opted to open the door how he was.

He stomped down the stairs, unable to see the visitor through the stained glass panels set in the middle of the door. The visitor knocked imperiously and impatiently several times.

"What in the hell?" Carson jerked the door open. To his disappointment, it wasn't his lover.

Underwood shoved the door open wider and inched himself in. "Not used to getting up bright and early?" he taunted. His eye lingered on the wet spot at Carson's crotch. "Did you know you pissed yourself, guy?"

Carson wasn't happy to see him. Brad was a part of the past, a man to try to forget or at the very least

remember without a great deal of fondness. "Didn't your mother teach you any manners?"

Underwood faced him, the tip of his nose lined with violet spots and his cheeks blotchy, probably from too much heavy drinking. "That's the second time this morning my mother has come up lacking."

"I'm surprised it hasn't come up more often."

Underwood didn't flinch. "Cut the shit, Ralston. I didn't come here to trade insults about my sainted mother."

"Your *sainted* mother?" In an undertone Underwood could hear, he added, "Explains why your *sainted* mother didn't crave your father's company."

Underwood's face turned apoplectic red. "By the time I leave, my sainted mother will be the least of your problems. I've got something you might be interested in."

"I'm waiting with baited breath. By the way, red doesn't do much for you." In fact the color made his skin look sallow. For all his money, Underwood had never known how to dress. Navy blue pants contrasted sharply with a bright red shirt with a golf company's logo emblazoned on the left. Red didn't suit most guys' complexions. Carson considered Lea in her little red number last night. He ran the back of his hand across his lightly sweating forehead. Why couldn't he stop thinking about how she affected him?

"Do you know anything about Miss McCallister?"

"I've never heard of her."

"You don't know her? Come on, guy, you can do

better than that."

"I don't know who you're talking about." It wouldn't be easy to forget a name as memorable as that but he was willing to bet he'd never met the woman.

"Come off it, man. You're screwing her and you don't know who she is? Give me a break."

"What's this about, Underwood? Did you get out of bed on the wrong side this morning?" Carson hated being put on the defensive.

"It's about the chick you're fucking."

The light bulb flashed on. Was Underwood talking about Lea? "Who I see is none of your goddamn business."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Underwood flipped a wallet-size photograph from his back pocket and turned it over and over. "Do you know what she really wants?"

"Don't make me throw you out." Carson had worked for Underwood when he first started out in business but hadn't stayed long. Underwood didn't know the first thing about running a company, but arrogantly lorded it over everyone he came into contact with. Sensing self-preservation was more important than being linked to a wealthy man, Carson quit and moved onto greener pastures.

"She's not so innocent as she looks. Do you really think she wants you for you?"

He admitted Lea's inexperience had lured him to her Siren call, but he found her innocence refreshing after Helen's vulgar lies. "Why go out of your way to tell me that?" he asked offhandedly.

"Women want only one thing." Underwood examined his nails with a certain fascination. "Of course, you know it can't be the sex."

Carson's stomach clenched. He knew that to be true of Helen, but of Lea? She wasn't a conniving woman. "What do you get out of this?"

Brad was still investigating his nails. "I get the satisfaction of knowing I saved you from her long tentacles."

Carson didn't care for the analogy. Underwood compared her to an octopus. "Just like you saved me from Helen's?"

Underwood lifted his eyes; a brief flicker of surprise showed.

"You think you can just walk into people's lives and order them around?"

"I'm trying to help you out, man. She wants your money. She's playing you for a fool, man."

Carson wanted to plunge a steak knife into the man's heart, but doubted he would find it. Nonetheless a tiny seed of doubt had been planted. Did Lea know who he really was? Did she display that fantastic pussy of hers to get at his money? He normally was a good judge of character. He didn't think she could con a man, but he knew darned well his head was stuck in his pants at the moment.

"You don't know anything about her, so how would you know that?"

"She fucked me too." Underwood gave him a headlong look. "That's how I know."

Carson didn't believe that. "She wouldn't have anything to do with an arrogant son of a bitch like

you."

"Want a bet?" Underwood asked, his words clipped.

"Why would I want to bet with you?"

"You'd see how wrong you are then. She was my fiancée before I figured out she was coming onto me for a cash reward for showing her bod. You know what I mean?" He started pacing back and forth. "I have to hand it to her. She's sharp and almost got me to the altar. The day before I was going to make the formal announcement of our engagement, I stopped by her place. Overheard a conversation between her and some loud-mouthed cunt who can't think about anything but getting it between her legs. Lea said in a few short months she would be the wife of a very, very wealthy man. She wouldn't have to scrimp and save to make ends meet."

"That doesn't mean anything." Naturally before their wedding, women liked to talk about the men they were about to marry.

Underwood continued pacing back and forth like a caged tiger, from one end of the foyer to the other. "That wasn't all she said. She'd give me a piece of tail for a year or two, then before I got bored with her, she'd sue for divorce and take what belonged to her for that."

"Impossible!" Carson thundered.

"You don't believe me? I figured I owed her a little something, so I gave her a million and no wedding. Hey guy, just because she has money doesn't mean she doesn't want more. Yours specifically."

Carson opened the door and walked out into the

fresh air, free of the insinuations and Underwood's thin smile. Lea couldn't possibly want him for his money. Even after the precaution he had taken, did she know who he was? He clenched his fists and admirably restrained himself from smashing them into Underwood's face.

Underwood stepped out behind him. "I'm only trying to save you from a cunt, man. But I can't blame you if you don't believe me." He strolled out onto the porch past Carson. "She's got this way about her that's deceptive, to say the least."

Had Lea really been Underwood's fiancée? Carson couldn't believe that. She wasn't the type of woman to fall for a scoundrel. He kept his face carefully neutral. "Even if she was about to marry you, that didn't give you the right to come here and tell me."

"She's leading you by your cock."

Carson wanted to punch him in the nose to wipe the flickering smile from his lips. Underwood had to be lying.

The other man sauntered past him and pivoted to stuff the photograph in Carson's breast pocket. He patted it into place. The booze on his breath overpowered Carson's nose. "Pictures are worth more than a thousand words."

Without moving a muscle, he watched Underwood stroll down the brick-paved walkway and get into his Mercedes convertible. He didn't know what to think and pulled a trembling hand through his hair. When he pulled the photograph out of his pocket, shock reverberated through his nerve endings. Underwood held Lea by the waist as they smiled cheerfully for the

camera. She wore the same red suit she had worn for him last night.

Chapter Fourteen

The sun's rays felt warm on Lea's skin, and tiny chickadees sang in the branches above her. The warm day had prompted her to park her car a couple blocks from Carson's house to enjoy the sunshine and to investigate the neighborhood. The two-story homes were spacious, often rambling for an acre or more and the landscapes were marvels of shrubs and flowery delights. The inhabitants appeared to live with the ideal that nothing, not even an overhanging branch from the towering coniferous trees, could mar the perfect cultivated beauty of the neighborhood.

She stopped at a walled house and checked the number on the neatly painted mailbox set into the concrete block wall against the unfolded paper in her hand. The numbers matched. She paused, looking up at a weeping willow standing on the other side of the wall. Carson made a good living as a salesman if he could afford a house like this. Since when had salesmen started to make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year? She shrugged the thought aside. He may have inherited the house or was simply renting although renting didn't fit the neighborhood's high-

class feeling.

Should she have slipped into a little nothing to entice Carson into making love to her again? Why had he not wanted to bring her here last night? It was less than ten minutes from Chez Pere's. Why had he told her he lived far away? The questions plagued her.

A wrought-iron gate blocked passage into the driveway and almost obscured sight of the front door of the two-story house. Intent on opening the gate, she walked up but stopped suddenly. Air whooshed out of her lungs.

A frown creased her forehead and a small cry escaped her lips. Carson stood by the door at the top of the short flight of stairs and appeared to be in earnest conversation with a man she would have known anywhere but whose back was to her.

She witnessed Brad place a thin object in the breast pocket of Carson's white dress shirt and tamp it firmly into place. Carson's face held no expression.

White-hot anger shot through her. Carson and Brad knew each other! How was she supposed to ask Carson's help against her former boyfriend if he knew the snake? Tears welled in her eyes, blurring her vision. If she had known they were friends, she would never have played her sex goddess role.

Humiliation set in. If Brad had enjoyed bragging about his sexual exploits did that mean Carson did too? How much different could they be if they were friends? Dismally, she reflected they could be talking about her.

The anger was replaced by doubt. What if the

meeting she had chanced upon was more innocent than it seemed? What if Erica had inadvertently given her the wrong address? What if Carson and Brad weren't friends but business partners? The 'what ifs' tumultuously went on and on.

She took one more look at the talking pair, and hurried away with her heart sinking into her stomach. How had she gotten herself into this mess? She wanted to throw a pillow or something to take her anger out on but there was nothing in sight. Her nails dug into the tender flesh of her palm.

Her mind whirled with possibilities as to why Carson and Brad were together. Alarmed, she halted in mid-step and stared into the distance without seeing the cul-de-sac. Had Brad set her up with Carson the same way he had with the sham million dollar inheritance? She shook her head from side to side in bewilderment. Why on earth hadn't she learned her lesson the first time around? Why did she believe any man could be different than Brad? Thinking that way only led to disillusionment.

Reaching her car, she unlocked the door and sank into the driver's seat. The car smelled of lemon air freshener. She groaned, and sank her head on her arms over the steering wheel. A sob tore at her throat. Why was she such a fool to follow her body's urges and to fall in love? How could she have fallen for yet another of Brad's tricks? Brad had put Carson up to seducing her. She was sure of it! Or was she? Carson appeared to be his own man. Didn't he do what he wanted to do? Hadn't he asked her to model a little nothing, knowing it wasn't something men normally

asked of an employee at Intimates by Erica? Was it too farfetched to think Brad had paid Carson to seduce her? Was she being unreasonable to think like that?

She reminded herself that she had told Carson she didn't want anything more than sex, and had admitted she didn't want a relationship. Then why did she feel so empty, as if the world had come to an end and no one else but she had survived the nuclear annihilation?

Understanding sunk in. Unknowingly, she had fallen in love with Carson. She wanted to be more to him than a sex goddess; she wanted to be a major part of his life. He made her feel special, cared for, feminine, and desirable. When their bodies were twined together, the act was a piece of heaven.

What had Erica told her the day she refused to model at first? "Not too many men lavish attention on a woman. Carson is making you the focus of his universe." Was this a once-in-a-lifetime chance she was throwing away because she believed Carson was too much like Brad simply on the visual evidence that they had been together? Hadn't Carson told her last night he wanted her in his life for a long, long time? Why would he say that if Brad was putting him up to it? Shouldn't she confront Carson with the fact she had seen him with Brad? What would that prove? Carson could make more promises than Brad had and she still wouldn't believe him.

Promises didn't mean much. She backhanded her tears away. She had to get away from here or else she would suffocate in the fresh air.

A glance at her wristwatch told her it was close to lunchtime. By the time she got to the law office an hour's drive away, they would have reopened from the lunch hour. She turned the key in the ignition, bringing the car to purring life. Brad could threaten her all he wanted but she wouldn't take his bribe. She was going to fight him on her own terms. Not his.

Chapter Fifteen

As soon as the lawyer finished talking, Lea intended to ream him out. How dared he take a bribe? It was unprofessional and unethical. She could easily report him to the Bar.

The lawyer, a man in his late twenties but already balding at his crown, pushed his gold-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Miss McCallister? Is something wrong?"

Lea folded her hands in her lap. This had to be a hoax. What else could it be? The lawyer had read a short note from a woman he had met a couple of times and described as a woman in her eighties with a soft-spoken, musical voice.

"Miss McCallister?" he prompted.

"I don't know what to think," she whispered. She hadn't paid much attention to his reading. Surely Brad was behind this?

"It can be quite disconcerting to inherit this amount of money. However, I'm sure you'll get used to the idea soon. Then I'll make arrangements to have it transferred to your bank account. With your authorization, of course." His forehead wrinkled as he lifted his jacket sleeve to examine his wristwatch.

"I'm really pressed for time today but if you'd like to return so we can discuss this further, perhaps tomorrow-"

"That won't be necessary." In a daze, she got to her feet. Had she truly heard right, that she was now a million dollars richer?

The lawyer lifted a white envelope from his mahogany desk "This letter is also part of your inheritance."

She took the letter and examined the spidery writing. Memories came flooding back. Her father's handwriting on her Christmas presents, his signature on a release form for a day trip. They too had been written with a similar hand. A deep sadness overwhelmed her.

"Please feel free to use my office for as long as you need to. It was nice to meet you." He said the last words in the corridor already on the run to wherever he was going.

She hardly heard him as she stared at the letters in black ink. Like a child opening a long-awaited Christmas present, she unhurriedly opened it.

"Dearest Lea,

It is with great regret that by the time you get this letter, I won't have a chance to remedy the mistake I made fifteen years ago. I beg you, please find it in your heart to forgive me.

I encouraged your father to leave your mother after they had a slight disagreement

all those years ago. Darren told me how you watched him as he packed his clothes and it tore his heart out. I discouraged him from having contact with your mother, and unfortunately, because you were with your mother, I forced him to stay away from you as well.

When Darren told me he had eloped with your mother and married her without my consent, I didn't know what to think. You see, Darren came from a wealthy background where he lacked for nothing and suddenly, he had married a woman who could give him nothing. Or so I thought. I insisted that if he married her, then he would have to make a living on his own, without his inheritance to back him.

That came as a shock to him – and your mother. Darren was of a much different background than Rose. As time went on, I'm loathe to admit, I broke up your parents' marriage believing Rose was using Darren to get at my money.

Your father was killed in a car accident on a snowy day shortly after he left you and Rose. I was driving the car that day as it went out of control on a stretch of icy road. The car hit a rock face. Darren was instantly killed. I suppose in a way it was poetic justice. I took him from your mother, and God took him away from me forever.

I'm a proud foolish old woman and didn't

have the courage to make contact with Rose or with you to tell you the truth. I know as much as I miss my son, you missed your father. I'm so sorry for having taken him away from you.

I can never atone for what I did, for wrecking a happy family, for marring your growing years. I regret hiding the truth from you all these years. In my old age, I have come to believe that money is truly the source of all evil. I believed Rose stole Darren from me to gain my money but that was a lie.

Please don't think badly of your father, Lea. He was a good man with a big heart who listened to his mother once too often. I deeply regret what I've done but will go to my grave knowing I rent a family asunder with my selfishness. I don't care if God forgives me or not but I do ask forgiveness from you and Rose.

Blessings,
Anna Marie McCallister

Lea stared at the fine script letters. She wrapped her arms around herself, searching for an iota of comfort in the letter but could find none. After fifteen years, she could tell her mother the truth – her husband hadn't left her for another woman or because he hadn't loved her. Lea had always known that if her father could have, he would have returned to them.

Lea became aware of her surroundings, the sounds of a typewriter, people chatting softly and the smell of fresh-brewed coffee. Armed with the letter, she strode from the law office. She would give her mother the letter, knowing it was an apology too little and too late.

* * *

Two days passed, during which Lea agonizingly supported her distraught mother who couldn't understand why fate had dealt her such a callous blow. The fact that her husband hadn't left her for another woman eased her suffering, but the indefinite period of waiting for him to return came to an end. Knowing she would never see her husband again blew her fragile emotions into shards.

Lea stepped in the shower. She felt for her mother, even as she was going through the dilemma of how to treat Carson and what to do to get Brad out of her life. She opted not to make contact with Carson. He couldn't be trusted if he was Brad's friend.

She had called Erica and confidentially told her friend about the letter and the inheritance. Erica had been happy for her, and jokingly said that now Lea was wealthy enough to buy Intimates by Erica.

After momentarily considering the possibility, Lea gave notice saying she was quitting her job to take her mother on a cruise, something they had never done before. In the last twenty-four hours, she had also placed her house up for sale. If they moved far enough away, her mother had a chance of meeting a

man who would sweep her off her feet.

Now, she stepped out of the shower, thinking about Carson and his broad palms roaming down her breasts, her ribcage, down the flat of her stomach to rest between her thighs, nestled between the curls of her pussy. Sighing, she bent over and towel-dried her hair. She missed their lovemaking. A sharp hurt swept through her as she caught sight of her pubic hair. She dropped the towel on the vanity and examined herself in the mirror. If only she hadn't seen Carson talking to Brad as if they were long lost friends. She would have continued with her sex goddess persona. How many more positions and ways of making love were there that they hadn't tried?

Her nipples puckered at the thought of riding him, her body damp against his and his shaft lodged deep within her pussy. She rubbed her legs together to suppress the longing. It was the wrong thing to do. Her clit was wet and demanded to be satisfied. If only Carson hadn't betrayed her.

The doorbell rang. The real estate woman was due to arrive but not for another hour yet. She was new to her profession, and an eager beaver, making it likely she was early for their appointment.

Frustrated and longing for sexual fulfillment she was beginning to think only one man could provide, she wrapped the rose-colored towel around her body and tucked the nubby material into the neckline. Women had the same body parts, so if the realtor saw her, what did that matter? She ran down the stairs and threw the door wide open.

Her mouth popped open as Carson's eyes bulged out of his head. The bouquet of soft peach roses he held trembled. "I wasn't quite expecting such a welcome," he said.

"What were you expecting?" The words came out flustered and angry. She blushed from head to toe at her very inappropriate attire.

"I want to talk to you."

"The same way Brad talks to you?" she shot back at him.

He appeared startled but recovered quickly. "That's why I came." He held out the bouquet towards her. "These are for you."

She knew she wasn't being polite but she couldn't help herself. "As some kind of bribe?" So he was admitting the two were friends. Over the last seventy-two hours, Brad had broken into her house and threatened her, she had discovered he wasn't behind the million dollar inheritance, and seen that Carson and Brad were friends. She wasn't sure she could handle any more.

A car whizzed by with its radio blaring Metallica. After the fact, she was dimly aware of a man calling out, "Yeah, baby, give it to him." Her blush deepened.

"No, not a bribe. I want to clear the air." Carson shifted from one foot to another, averting his sexy blue eyes from the top of the towel and riveting them on her lips.

His hair was neatly combed but the forelock still hung over his left eye in a manly but boyishly appealing look. He looked so damn good. If she hadn't been quite so angry with him, she could easily

have invited him in to strip his clothes off and make love to her. She glanced down at the crotch of his trousers. *Mercy, an inviting bulge nestled there.*

She had better forget about making love. He wanted to clear the air? How could he make a skunk smell like a rose? Her heated emotions got the better of her. "A friend of Brad is no friend of mine," she practically shouted.

"That's what we need to talk about," he said placatingly. "But not out here."

"Why not? Are you afraid my neighbors are going to talk behind your back? Who are you pretending to be anyway?"

His lips turned down and his eyes expressed a deep sadness she'd never have guessed was within him. "I admit to asking Erica to hide my identity, Lea, but that was—"

She wouldn't let him finish. "Because what? You wanted to see how far you could go with me while you played the rich boy-poor girl routine? Is that it? Or did Brad put you up to this?"

"I see. So you're going to play the poor-girl routine just like Brad said you would."

She frowned, wishing she were dressed in more than a towel. *What was he talking about?* How in the hell did he know about her inheritance? No one outside of Erica, the lawyer, her mother and she knew about the money. "How do you know about that?"

"Brad told me. He also gave me this." He maintained his distance as he showed her a photograph that had been taken a few nights before her rude awakening.

"He had no reason to give you that." She tried to snatch it from his hand but he drew back.

"Apparently he did."

It was as if he had slapped her across the face. Had they swapped stories about their sexual experiences with her? And she was mortified to know she stood in front of him with nothing more than a bath towel covering her nakedness.

She started to slam the door shut but he wedged his foot between the heavy wood and frame. "We have to talk."

"About what? Exchanging stories? Or lying about who we are? Is there something I've missed?"

Carson sucked in a deep breath. "That's why we need to talk. I think we're misunderstanding each other."

"I don't think so. You tricked me. You had no right to hide who you really are." Strange, but she still didn't know his name. Neither did she want to know.

"I admit to that, but I had a good reason."

"I can't imagine what it could be. Why don't you take the same road Brad did? That one over there?" Meaning the road, she nodded her head behind him. She almost succeeded in shutting the door on him.

"Have it in your heart to hear me out. If you don't believe me, then kick me out."

"We don't have anything to say to each other." With a gargantuan effort, she pushed the door closed. He gave a little yelp as it slammed in his face

"Lea, don't do this," he pleaded from the other side.

She said nothing as she sank against the door. The

wood felt cold against her back - just as her heart did on the inside. She refused to cry or make any other sound. His measured footsteps faded away. A car engine flared to life and moments later, he had sped away crunching gravel under the tires.

Feeling bereft, she sank to her knees, staring blindly at the diamond shapes in the carpet. How could she have been fooled a second time around into believing she was attractive? What had made her think she could be Carson's sex goddess? Resting her palms over her face, she sobbed.

Life wasn't fair. Why had her grandmother not faced the fact that Rose and her son were terribly in love? Why hadn't she left their love well enough alone? Instead, she had to ruin not only the lives of her son and her daughter-in-law, but also made a good start to ruining her granddaughter's. Of course, Brad had to come along and messed her up some more.

Her grandmother had given her the opportunity to start her life over again, free of Brad and Carson and the pain they had caused. She knew she had made the wisest decision in selling her house and moving as far away as she could to a place neither would think to find her. Not only would she start her life over again, but her mother also had a new lease. Perhaps Lea could encourage her to find a man who could love her for the rest of her days.

As for herself, Lea had had enough of men. She had learned an invaluable lesson. Never trust men who told you they loved you if they had plenty of money. The invisible urchin sitting on her shoulder

cried foul. Hadn't she told Carson all she wanted was sex? Then why had she fallen in love with him? She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment she had known she had fallen for him. Maybe it was the moment he lifted the child into his arms to soothe her tears away.

Quivering, she got to her feet. She had to dry her tears, and get ready for the realtor. While the house went up for sale, she would take Rose to another country and buy a house there. It might be in the Caribbean where azure sky met the glittering blue-green shore and the summer breeze could play with her hair to her heart's content.

With renewed determination that she was better off without Carson, she marched up the stairs and into the bathroom to finish readying herself for a FOR SALE sign in her front yard. It was the first step to forgetting she had met Carson.

Chapter Sixteen

Carson ended up in the park, sitting on a stone bench, watching the ducks paddle around in a pond sparsely covered with a lily pad. Weren't ducks one of the few creatures on earth who paired for life? Why was it so hard for humans to find that perfect life mate?

Lea preoccupied him, from her fiery green eyes to the swell of her breasts above the towel. He had wanted to throw her on the carpet and immerse himself in her. The musky essence of her arousal lingered, a savory smell to torment him to his dying days. His mind focused on her breasts jiggling up and down as she slid her pussy over his cock. When she had encased his engorged cock with her tight sheath, he felt they were meant for each other.

Despair hovered around him. How could he believe Brad's comments about her, that she wanted him for nothing else than his money? Why had she been so elusive over the last few days? Had she been hiding from him? The analytical questions drove him nuts.

How had Lea known about his wealth? Had she seen something in his clothes, something of his

appearance that betrayed his wealth? Had Erica told her even after she had promised she wouldn't? Carson refused to believe that. Hadn't she thought up the idea of Lea modeling before he had? Hadn't she encouraged their solitude over dinner at Chez Pere's?

Other questions without answers plagued him. How would Lea have known to get to his house at the same time Brad was there? Had Brad told her where he lived, and set up this whole charade to kill his one chance at happiness? Or did Lea really want the money and not the man?

He sank his elbows onto his knees. Why had he fallen for that trick again? All he could do was press forward and try to forget her, the sweet taste of her lips, and his elation when his cock met the innermost part of her sheath. His willpower ebbed even as he fanned the near-zero determination. His cock was already at half-mast, longing for her.

How could he carry on resolutely when he couldn't think of anything else but how she had wriggled her tight ass at him and opened her pussy lips wide to tease him at the restaurant? Would a woman who really wanted his money go to such extremes of sexual behavior? He doubted it.

The color of her eyes teased him into their depths – jewels of grass sparkling in the noon sunlight. He tasted her lips, a savory combination of cinnamon and cloves. The softness of her supple body against his hardness made him yearn to hold her. He remembered the pain etching her features when she spoke about her father leaving her at an early age. What did he really know about her?

Helen came to mind. After marrying her, he realized he'd known very little about her. He'd been dazzled by her lush body, by the valley between her breasts, the dark curls on her mound and the low sexy purr of her voice when she expressed a desire for his taut cock. She had been adept at maneuvering him into a hard-on just by showing him herself naked.

Carson leaped up, scaring the ducks into noisy flight. What was money really worth anyway? Did the dollars he made during the day comfort him when he was down, or keep him company in bed at night? He'd spent the last twenty years working so hard to accumulate wealth that it had consumed all his waking and many of his sleeping hours. Love and relationships had slipped into the chasm of nonexistence except for the brief episode with Helen. Was he so afraid of losing his money that he couldn't take a chance with Lea? He snorted derisively at himself. When he was an old man like Alec Forestman, would his money have truly enriched his life? He'd have a family to gather around him at Christmas, grandchildren to share the beauty of the world with, and a beautiful woman to be the mother of his children and the keeper of his heart.

Angered at himself, he rushed back to his car. When he reached the low convertible, he realized he had nowhere to go. Making money wasn't that important now. Not without Lea at his side. Annoyed at his own stupidity in believing a man he knew couldn't be trusted worth a damn, he shoved a hand through his hair. It didn't matter one bit even if Lea had been Brad's former girlfriend, but the guy must

have lied about Lea taking the million instead of marriage. She wasn't that kind of woman.

If he gave her a few days to cool down, she would talk to him. He mused that the principle worked when making business decisions, so it could work for personal ones. He wasn't happy with his solution, but what else could he do? She obviously didn't want to talk. Perhaps time and distance would cool her burning antagonism. As he got into his car, he couldn't help but think that giving her space was the wrong thing to do.

* * *

A week later, Lea looked around at the house she had lived in for the last year. It held both good and bitter memories, but every time she looked into the living room where the couch had been, she thought of her passion-filled night with Carson. She backhanded a threatening tear from her eye. She would always think of that narrow space between the couch and the coffee table as the place to make love, to lose herself in wild sex. Why couldn't things have turned out differently?

She went into the kitchen where she had left the answering machine plugged in during the rushed move. After a lengthy discussion with her mother, they had agreed the Bahamas was a better choice than the Caribbean and had flown there to search for a small house, which they had found close to the ocean. Rose kept her house in the city, in case she wanted to get away from a daughter who was suddenly too

wealthy. Lea saw small telltale signs, like a smile and a burst of quiet laughter, to show her that Rose was making an effort to become more outgoing like she had been when her husband had been alive.

Lea was surprised to see the answering machine was filled with messages. She hit the play button and heard Carson's gravelly voice. "Lea, please let me see you. I need you." The next message and the one after that were exactly the same. After that, the tone became that of supplicant. "Lea, this is Carson Ralston. Please don't turn away from me without giving me a chance to explain myself. I know Erica will back me up, but let me talk to you. I love you." The remainder of the messages was all in that vein.

Why should she return his calls? She blew out a huffed breath, lifting the hair against her forehead. If she allowed Carson to say his peace, surely he would con her into believing he loved her. Hadn't Brad done the same thing? She wouldn't be suckered again.

Her mind argued one way, her heart in yet another. Why was she so torn between the two? She ached for Carson to make red-hot love to her but even if they resolved the issue of trust, when would be the next time he chose to hide some vital information from her? Why take the chance?

She unplugged the answering machine and tucked it under her arm. Once in the Bahamas, she would swear off men. That's all there was to that, no matter how her body craved for one. She would always miss Carson, right to her dying days. She wouldn't even consider the possibility of a one-night fling in her sex goddess persona.

She settled into her car and stared at the steering wheel. It was the sex goddess persona that had gotten her into trouble in the first place. She sighed. Hadn't she done the same thing as Carson had – hidden her true identity behind that of her role-playing goddess? What would have happened if the shoe had been on the other foot? If he had found out that the woman making love to him hadn't really been the real Lea? She had been an actress for the sake of sex. It didn't mean she fit the role she had acted out.

Shrugging, she fit the key into the ignition and started the car. Carson would never find out about her lie. She had one more stop to make before she boarded her flight.

Chapter Seventeen

The day waned late; the sun sat low obscured in a reddish haze in the western sky. Lea wouldn't have forgiven herself if she hadn't come to say goodbye to Erica.

She knocked on the doorframe of the tiny office at the back of the store.

"Lea," she murmured, her smile not quite as bright as usual.

"I dropped in to say bye for now." Lea didn't know what else to say. "Mercy, I hate goodbyes."

Erica got to her feet and folded her arms over her chest. "If you ever get tired of being a wealthy woman and want your job back, it will be here."

Impetuously, Lea threw her arms around Erica's neck. Her friend drew back a little, after a second.

"I have a confession to make."

"Did you break up with Jackson?"

"Now, why would I do that?"

Lea shrugged.

"I hid Carson's identity for a reason."

Lea waved a dismissive hand. "He's history. I don't want to talk about him." How would she forget a man who had made her feel desirable and feminine,

the man she had fallen in love with?

"No, he's not. Honey, you have a hard time admitting to yourself he's history, why bother putting up a façade for my sake?"

"I'm not kidding you."

"Carson's crazy with worry for you. He calls almost every hour asking if I've heard anything from you and when I tell him no, he just hangs up. Honestly, he's hurting."

"You don't think I'm hurting after what he did?"

"It's partially my fault. I encouraged him to see how beautiful you are both on the inside and the outside. Please. Cut him some slack. Talk to him."

Lea frowned. This time Erica's matchmaking abilities had failed. Adamantly she shook her head, wondering why she had come. She didn't want to hear about Carson.

Who was she kidding? She missed him more than she had possibly missed her father after he walked out.

"At least hear him out, if nothing else."

"There's nothing to talk about."

Erica shook her head from side to side. "I'm reminded of our chat we had a while back. Carson is one of those rare men who will make you feel like you're the only woman in the world who matters to him. That kind of thing only happens once in a lifetime."

Lea snorted.

"I enabled him into making the mistake he did but neither of us had any intention of hurting you. In fact, I told him I'd cut his balls off if he hurt you."

"Ouch. That would hurt."

"Uh-huh. I'm sorry. I should never have agreed to hide his identity. He did ask for a good reason." She grimaced as if the telling was a painful experience. "His wife, you see, lied to him for two straight years. When she divorced him, she took his heart and dumped it in the gutter. I don't think he cared too much about the money she sued him for. But the hurt she caused him went deep. It left scars. He's learning to live with them but it takes time."

"He asked me not to reveal who he was because he wanted to feel loved for who he is, not for his money. He wanted to know that a woman could love him even if he was poor as a church mouse." Erica half-turned and absent-mindedly looked at her computer screen. "I'm sure you'll have a chance to discover the truth behind his sentiments now that you're independently wealthy. Men will chase after you, not for your kind heart or your beauty or for how you can turn their cocks hard, but because of your money. After a while, they'll use you. When you find out you've been had, you'll hurt a great deal."

"That's an unfair comparison."

Erica's eyebrows notched up. "Is it?"

"I'm not going to be taken advantage of again."

"You're as stubborn as a goat."

"For a reason." Once she set her mind on a course of action, she didn't normally budge.

"He's in love with you, Lea. For heaven's sake, don't throw it away."

Lea hadn't known that. Her heart soared at the thought that Carson's heart was hers. She clenched

her fists together at her side. How could she let herself fall for another rich man? Over and over she replayed the meeting between Brad and Carson, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't see anything innocent about the two talking together. She changed the subject. "How are you and Jackson doing?"

Erica's eyes twinkled with mischief. "We're doing great."

"Do you love him?" Lea surprised herself by asking. It must have been from curiosity.

"I'm not sure. I'd miss him if he moved on to someone else but I'm sure there's other fish in the sea. That's all I know for now."

Erica was still Erica, cheerful and optimistic of better things to come. "I hope you'll keep in touch. I'll miss you." Lea hugged her friend again, this time quickly before she changed her mind. She hadn't thought leaving everything familiar would be quite so difficult. That included the man she had fallen in love with.

Chapter Eighteen

Carson sat in the mall, not knowing what else to do. His life without Lea hadn't been worth thinking about in the last week. He knew he looked like hell with dark blue rings under his eyes. He couldn't eat. He couldn't work. His plans to acquire Intimates by Erica had been put on hold. There wasn't much left, except for a small glimmer of hope that refused to die.

He had tried calling and each time Lea's answering machine picked up, he had left a message. She hadn't returned any of his calls. He had even gone to her house numerous times. A forlorn FOR SALE sign stood in the front yard. He saw nothing to indicate she had ever lived there. When he pestered Erica with his calls, she refused to tell him where Lea had gone but consoled him by saying she would pass on his concern to Lea if she saw her. A sense of loneliness pervaded his very core, much like a tree during a drought felt the lack of water in its roots.

A male voice startled him out of his glum thoughts. "I see you miss her already."

He locked gazes with Alec Forestman. "Yeah. Probably the same way you miss your wife." He hung

his head. He had never felt so helpless before.

"It wasn't until after she died I came to realize she had given me a sense of self worth. She had such a spirit of fun and a good heart. Lea's like that. Doubtless you know she'd make a helluva good wife."

Carson gaped at the man. "You're going to marry Lea?"

"For a man who's got business smarts, you're sure dumb. I'm not marrying her. You are."

"She doesn't want me."

"Sure she does. You have to get your head out of the mud and find her."

Carson plucked at the fabric of his jeans, mesmerized by the heavy light blue threads. Alec didn't spare his words at all.

"Lea's a remarkably complex woman, Carson. She's witty, she's smart, she's independent, and beautiful. A man can't ask for more than that."

Carson shook his head. He'd lost all that with one stupid mistake. "I tried. I can't get her back."

"You haven't tried hard enough. I don't understand you. You're a respected entrepreneur and you've come to the most important spot in your life and yet you can't see past your nose."

How could he argue with that? "Yeah, you're right. So what am I supposed to do? Conjure Lea up with a magic pencil?"

"Nothing so radical. You have the resources to find her. All you have to do is tell her you love her, tell her the world and everything in it doesn't mean a damn thing without her."

"Tried that. It doesn't work."

"How did you ever get to the position you're in now?"

"I don't know," Carson murmured.

"I don't mean your personal life but your business life. Don't you need get-up-and-go to survive all your competitors?"

He perked up. "Yeah."

"So the one time you need it in your personal life, you don't have it. What's wrong with you?"

"Some jerk messed up her life. That's what."

"Are you that jerk?"

"The hell I am."

Alec nodded with satisfaction. "Did he have money?"

"Yeah."

"How have you made yourself different from him?"

Alec's question troubled him. What had he done to set himself apart from Brad? If Lea was made of fire, then why fight fire with water? Why not fight fire with fire? He didn't want anything more out of life than to make her happy. But what had he really done to make himself special to her? Not a damned thing. In fact, he had all but lied to her. "I don't know."

"Money is a necessary evil, it buys things, but it doesn't buy love. Is that what you've been doing? Buying Lea's love?"

"No!" Carson almost snarled. If anything, he'd let his cock rule his brain when he asked her to try on the little nothing. Money hadn't been an issue until Brad had told him what Lea really wanted.

The old man didn't take offense. "The answer to your problem lies in front of you, Carson. You just have to open your eyes to see that."

"You've made a great start today, taken the day away from making money to think about your relationship. Now all you need to do is to tell her you love her."

"She won't listen. She shut me out of her life." A question popped into his foggy brain. "How do you know Lea?"

"On weekends, we're both at the children's hospital. I tell tall stories, she blows up balloons and shapes them into flowers and animals. The children love her. She not only makes a difference in their lives but in mine too. You'll never know how many times she came to this old guy's rescue, taking me out to dinner, treating me like a real person, caring about me, inspiring me to live again."

He hadn't known that. In his imagination, Carson saw Lea surrounded by laughing children playing with their shaped balloons. Alec had cast her in a whole new light. She was more than a sexy woman who turned him on big time.

"Go after her before she leaves, Carson. Tell her what you should have told her already."

"You make a lot of sense, old man." Carson got to his feet, reached out, took the man's gnarled hand in his and shook it hard.

"Carson?"

He stared at the sage man's wrinkled, earnest face.

"Forget about your money when it comes to her. She's not in the least interested in it. She's the most

down-to-earth woman I know.”

Carson clapped him on the shoulder and headed off towards his car. Alec had made a great deal of sense. First, he would pay a small visit to Brad Underwood III. Then he would go all out to find the woman who had changed his life to tell her he loved her more than the universe.

Chapter Nineteen

Lea disliked airports. Their impersonal atmospheres always made her think of major transitions in life. The terminal was noisy and crowded with passengers at ticket counters, in the lounges waiting for their planes or disembarking in a flood from the concourses. She steadied her mother as they moved forward to find two seats in the lounge nearest where their plane was scheduled to depart.

Rose's lips trembled a little.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Mom," Lea tried to reassure her. "Planes land and take-off every day without mishap."

"It's not that," her mother said in silky voice. "I remembered your father wanted to be an airline pilot when he was young."

Lea patted her mother's small hand as she spotted a pair of what looked to be uncomfortable plastic bucket seats and guided her to towards them. She felt fingers pinch into her arm and spun around. Who had the audacity to hurt her like that?

A man dressed impeccably in a dark gray suit with a stark white handkerchief in the jacket's buttonhole scrutinized her. "I've got a private jet waiting," Brad

said softly, gripping her arm in a relentless hold.

"Lea?" her mother asked uneasily from beside her. "Who is he?"

The airport noises faded away. He hadn't contacted her in over a week and all of a sudden, like unexpected black voodoo magic, he stood beside her. "No one, Mom. Just ignore him."

"Why don't you tell her I'm your fiancé?"

Lea turned on him. "Haven't you figured out you can't play your dirty tricks on me?"

"Love isn't a dirty trick, is it, Mrs. McCallister?" Brad asked her mother in an all-knowing voice.

"You leave my mother out of your plotting." She seated Rose on one of the chairs. "I'll be right back."

This time her fingers pinched into his arm. From between gritted teeth, she growled, "You and I are going to have a little talk."

"I was hoping you'd say that. It's about time you came to your senses and you told me you love me."

Lea halted sharply near an unused ticket counter, suddenly glad she had made a point of wearing high heels. She wobbled on them a bit but she figured she would get used to them soon enough. "Love you? That's the farthest thing from my mind."

It didn't seem possible, but was he mentally ill? Was that why he had fixated on her like this?

"But you do love me. That's why you're leaving your mother now. To come with me. We'll be married in no time. I promise, you'll be happy."

She grasped the magnitude of his derangement. He had no doubt she loved him in his mind and would never admit to the probability that she didn't. Within

his sick mind, he wouldn't be able to handle that she wasn't a part of his life. What was she going to do?

He dragged her forward towards another section of the airport.

She was now too far away to call out to her mother for help.

"My pilot doesn't have a whole lot of patience," he said with a thin smile.

She reached up to scratch at his eyes but he blocked her movement as expertly as if he had been expecting it. "It's for own your own good, Lea. You'll soon realize I was right, so stop fighting."

"I won't let you take me anywhere," she growled, grinding her heel into the arch of his foot. He let her go and cursed. She ran, praying to see a security guard. He seized her by the hair and pulled her towards him.

"The lady probably told you to let her go, scumball."

Relief flooded through her as she recognized Carson's gravelly voice.

Brad reacted quickly. He wrapped his arm around her waist and whirled her around, forcing her back to his front. Carson pulled him away, ripping at his jacket and raised his clenched hand at his face. Lea had the good sense to duck as Carson's fist slammed into Brad's face, connecting with his nose. A bone crunched. A woman screamed. Brad sank to his knees clamping his palms over his heavily bleeding nose.

Carson reached for her and she fell into his arms, a sob breaking from her throat. "He's crazy," she told him.

He nodded. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, but he scared me."

Three security guards rushed forward.

"Where are they when you need them?" she muttered. Her cheeks were wet against Carson's navy blue jacket.

He stroked her hair. "Never around when you need them."

The guards raised Brad to his feet and took him away. He turned once and gave her a malevolent look.

Alec Forestman wheeled himself next to them. "I come to see my favorite ladies off and get here too late. Did I miss something?"

She burst into tears. Why hadn't she suspected Brad was mentally unhinged?

Carson let her cry against his chest. "Only a jerk getting his nose reshaped."

Through the haze in her mind, she heard the announcement that the plane to the Bahamas was boarding. It was the first call.

"I have to go," she whispered, looking into Carson's eyes. "You're my knight in shining armor."

"Lea, I have to tell you something before you go."

She couldn't resist her finger from sensuously outlining his strong jaw. He smelled of body soap and sandalwood and male arousal.

"I love you. I don't know how else to say that."

She smiled sadly and let her fingers drop to his shoulder. She couldn't pass up the chance at a new life awaiting her. Straining forward, she kissed his cheek. Then she turned her back on him and headed

for her plane and the Bahamas.

Carson watched her go. Her long hair swung back and forth in a silky veil and her ass swayed from side to side under the beige skirt. He collapsed into a chair when she disappeared into the concourse. It was the most painful moment of his life.

Chapter Twenty

A blush crept up her already heated cheeks. Lea had forgotten the security gate blocked her way. She had envisioned walking right up to his door, knocking, and seeing his eyes light up at the sight of her but that was far too simple. She would be as mysterious as he had been when he had hidden his identity from her.

Rose was safely on the plane to the Bahamas with Alec Forestman. Why let an empty seat go to waste? He was a little older than her mother but his brusque sense of humor and his obvious care for Rose meant they were good for each other. As for Brad Underwood, he had been committed to a mental hospital.

Belatedly, Lea bemoaned the fact she could never do things the easy way. All she really had to do was walk up to his front door in the trench coat she was wearing and ring his doorbell. Of course, she would have to wait for a few heart-thudding moments before he opened the door. Then she could open her coat and let him see her for who *she* was. She giggled. That was far too easy.

A pale crescent moon lit the awe-inspiring night.

Roses scented the darkness, like a lover embracing the hours of darkness. She eyed a tall willow tree overhanging the broad street. The tree and the darkness were her friends tonight. Musing how childhood pastimes, like tree climbing, came back to haunt her from time to time, she reached up over her head for the first branch, and gripped it with sure fingers. The branch swayed but held. Her heart pounded in her ears. She wouldn't allow herself to chicken out now.

The branch gave a little but was strong enough to get her to a thicker branch a few inches away. She heaved herself up, hand over hand, until she hung seven feet from the ground. Looking down from her perch, she eyed the house Carson lived in.

Facing the street, the rooms were dark but light streamed from the distant side of the house, casting a grayish-blue hue over well-trimmed bushes hugging the wall. She listened intently for several seconds, occasionally shaking the tree to sound out any snarling vicious brutes with fangs the size of hypodermic needles if they chanced to patrol the property.

At the last branch before the drop to the ground, she hesitated and caught the sound of the gentle strains of a violin and piano dueling in a classical piece. She made no noise as she dropped to the ground. She crouched, straining her ears. Silence reigned invisibly.

Trying to calm her nerves, she crept by the unlit windows, feeling like an unheard and unseen ghost traveling through the night. She turned the corner

and abruptly leaped back. No more than three arm lengths away, Carson sat on a large patio in what looked like a rather large white wrought-iron chair.

Carefully, so as not to make any noise to alert him, she peeked around the corner. A sharp intake of breath made her dart around the corner again. He was nude! Not only that but he was jacking himself off. He clutched his shaft with one large hand and frantically pulled up and down. His breaths came in rapid choking sounds.

She worried her lower lip. Should she surprise him and finish his orgasm with a bang? Or should she remain hidden in the shadows and watch? Her nipples stood so erect they strained painfully against the trench coat. Her decision quickly made, she untied the belt and rounded the fabric off her shoulders. The cloth slipped to the dewy grass.

With newfound confidence of her sexuality, she strolled up to her love on bare feet. "Would you like some help?"

Startled, he jumped up from his chair. "Lea," he exclaimed, his eyes traveling down her body and back up again to her face. "I thought - "

She folded him in her arms and silenced him by placing the tip of her index finger on the seam of his lips. He thought she had left him for good. "Hush."

He stood back, his arms around her waist. "I thought I'd lost you when you turned your back on me at the airport."

Her hair swirled around her shoulders as she motioned in the negative. "I came back. The Bahamas would have been empty without you."

"We can always go together."

"As long as you don't hide who you are."

"Oh? So you did fall in love with me for my money," he teased.

"Is that what you thought?"

"Underwood came to me and told me lies about you. I had no idea you had inherited money from your grandmother."

"Who told you that?"

"Erica."

"I believe you owe her a bouquet of flowers."

"At the very least. Both she and Alec would have knocked me senseless if I hadn't found you."

"Good for them."

Lea no longer wanted to think about how close she had come to abandoning him and casting aside a chance at happiness. Her pussy dripped honey down her thigh. "I want you."

"You can't accuse me of playing the rich boy-poor girl routine now, can you?"

"Yes, I can."

Earnest blue eyes seared into hers. "You can?"

"Uh-huh. I don't have a cent on me right now."

He burst into raucous laughter. "Now I know why I love you."

"It's for my pussy." The man was so handsome, she could have died on the spot.

"That too." He lowered his head and nibbled on her earlobe. "It's my turn."

She glanced up at him. "Your turn for what?"

"To make love to you in the Ralston style."

"I didn't know there was a Ralston style."

"You have a lot to learn, vixen." He chuckled, then threw her over his shoulder.

"That's not the Ralston style! That's caveman style!" Lea teasingly protested.

He marched into the house and up the carpeted stairs. They fell on the king-size bed together in a heap of arms and legs. "Sometimes I honestly can't tell the difference."

"That's what I thought." She rolled him onto his back and ran her fingers through the fine hairs on his expansive chest. "Your nipples are so erect," she murmured, taking one distended point into her mouth.

"You're torturing me, woman." He slipped his fingers between the folds of her pussy and massaged her clit, bringing her close to climax.

She moaned.

"You're all wet." He moved his fingers from her bud just as a spasm curled around her. "You forgot to say a few words."

"I'm the one with your nipple in my mouth," she said, around the dusky aureole. Why had he moved his fingertip?

"Yeah, that's right," she heard him mockingly grumble.

She sighed, feeling complete and desirable. She didn't need to act the part of a sex goddess to know that. "I know what you want me to say."

"Uh-huh." He rubbed his finger near her clit, driving her to the border of extreme frustration.

She lifted her lips from his nipple and sucked her way up the hollow of his throat, up the side of his

neck, and to his ear. "Is this what you want to hear?" She waited a moment and whispered, "Fuck me, Carson, fuck me."

"Yeah, Lea, that was it."

"Begging comes naturally in this tortured state, don't you think?"

"Um, in a high state of arousal," he murmured.

She found his rigid shaft and aimed her pussy over its hardness. Carson pummeled her breasts up and down as if he was kneading dough, then pressed them together. His lips latched onto her nipples, his tongue laved them, licked them. He drew away. She felt the cool breeze fanning the small points, arousing them even more.

Opening herself wide, she sank onto his cock half-inch by half-inch, filling herself with his length. She sighed. He grunted and started thrusting. She matched his fevered rhythm, her head thrown back to arch her spine to allow him deeper access into her. Flesh slapped against flesh. She rode him hard. His forehead sported tiny drops of sweat.

Once again she was about to climax. She bit into her lower lip, waiting for the earth-shattering moment. Abruptly, he stopped.

Her eyes flew open. Why had he stopped?

"I have a question."

"Can you hurry it up?" Her body was on fire, demanding satisfaction from his.

"Will you marry me, Lea?"

"There's no time like just before an orgasm to pop the question, is there?"

"I can withhold pleasure until I hear the right

answer.”

“In your state, I don’t believe you can.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He started pumping again. Once more Lea felt herself coming near an explosion. Every nerve ending sizzled within her. His face contorted and his neck muscles became as taut as hemp rope.

She screamed, “Yes!” as they climaxed together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aurora Rose Lynn lives in southern California with her husband and talking conure Star. She has written many short stories that have seen print in fantasy, science fiction, horror and mystery. Her mystery novel featuring private eye Cory Purchase received an Honorable Mention in the 1998 National Writer's Novel Writing Contest. She is currently at work on a paranormal romance.