

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Madison Hayes

Miss

October



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Miss October

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CALENDAR GIRLS:

MISS OCTOBER

Madison Hayes

Dedication

For Tina and Jaid.

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All Blacks: New Zealand Rugby Football Union, Inc.

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Chapter One

"Yeah, tell me about it," Tavia muttered. She made a face at the small video screen on the Hummer's center console. Shifting the vehicle into overdrive, she continued down the long, straight stretch of highway.

The talk show's opening topic was *The Dilemma of Being Beautiful* and Tavia was having a hard time scraping up much sympathy. A former beauty queen took the microphone to complain about the pitfalls of being gorgeous. "How's a girl like me supposed to find true love?" she lilted. "In the last three years, ten different guys have proposed to me. But when a man asks me to marry him, I don't know if he cares about me — about who I am — or if it's just the face and the figure that has him coming on."

"You're breakin' my heart," Tavia grumbled as she frowned at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Brown eyes glowered back at her as she dragged a hand impatiently through her long mass of curly chestnut hair. "You think you got problems? Look at me. In my case, the face and figure ain't exactly the issue." She snorted as she glared again at her reflection. "In my case, it's the face value and *figures* that have me questioning a man's intentions. Five million can really tip the scales in your favor when you're dating a guy."

The truth of the matter was that Tavia was too heavy to win any beauty contest. Despite this fact, she didn't think of herself as unattractive and had never lacked for male companionship — even before she had money. Although she was a big woman, she couldn't remember a single man who'd complained about her large breasts. Her bottom was large too. But then, so was her bottom line.

She was Octavia Smith, better known as Octavia October in the publishing industry. She authored three or four books a year with print runs of 500,000. Simply

put, Tavia was worth five million dollars. And every single man she'd dated in the last three years knew it.

Scowling at the small screen, Tavia swerved suddenly when she realized her SUV was drifting to the side. She tugged on the steering wheel just in time to avoid hitting a car lodged on the side of the road. The old junker was pale blue, bleached dull and lifeless by at least forty years of arid, sunny, high altitude weather. Tilted off the shoulder of the road, the car sat with its hood raised—a brief explanation for its presence on the highway's sloping shoulder.

I'm dead. Sorry.

How the decrepit old piece of junk had survived all those years to expire on the side of the road between Fort Garland and Taos was beyond her. It looked as though it should have died years ago. Tavia shook her head in disgust. Highway 159 was a notoriously long, hot, deserted stretch of blacktop. What kind of lug nut would be stupid enough to try to run the gantlet between Fort Garland and Taos in an old wreck like that?

A mile beyond the abandoned car, Tavia got her answer when she caught up with the lug nut stupid enough.

His back was turned as he scuffed down the long, dry road, his thumb out at his side. It was a broad back—with the sort of sloping shoulders that spoke of massive strength while the narrow hips and long legs hinted at agility and speed. From the back, the guy was an animal. Pure testosterone with a dash of Wrestlemania. Without even thinking, Tavia took her foot off the gas pedal, slowing the car as she approached the hitchhiker.

She felt sorry for the guy even if he *was* stupid enough. The sun was out and baking the highway. Transparent lines wiggled up off the tarry surface of the asphalt, making it look as though the world was melting. Out in the high desert midafternoon sun, it was hot enough to steam lizards. There wasn't much traffic on the empty road. The hitchhiker would be lucky if another car passed him in the next half hour. And Tavia

had driven this stretch of road often enough to know that his cell phone wasn't going to work out here any better than hers did—if he even had a cell phone. Absently, she flipped her phone open and glanced at the “no service” message.

As Tavia pulled to within a hundred feet of the hitchhiker, he turned to face her, walking backwards with his thumb extended.

She hesitated.

From the front, the big man with the huge shoulders looked no less like an animal. His features were rough and masculine. Not pretty. Not handsome. Just incredibly male with a brutally hard edge. The guy was all male. All Commando. No suggestion of sensitivity whatsoever. His hair was a brush cut gone wild, if you could imagine a brush cut about three inches too long. Lots of thick, stiff hair—mostly brown but bleached gold here and there. The cold surface of his slick, blue-mirrored sunglasses made him a blank, unreadable entity.

Reluctantly, Tavia depressed the gas pedal as she sped past him.

Watching her rearview mirror, she saw him turn and toss up his hands as he threw back his head. She was close enough to see the ugly word on his mouth. She didn't need sound to read those rugged lips. That particular word was a pretty easy one to decipher when blasted out with vehemence.

Watching him grow small in her rearview mirror, Tavia swiftly forgot about him when she felt a tug on her steering wheel. The road surface suddenly got very bumpy and the car swerved on the blacktop to a steady pace.

She had a flat.

Well, shit. That was typical.

Slowing down, Tavia pulled off onto the side of the highway. Scowling at the driver's-side rear flat, she opened the rear gate of her vehicle and retrieved the tire iron as well as the hydraulic jack. Her father had shown her how to fix a flat when she was sixteen. Loosen the nuts first then raise the car.

Jeez, it was hot out. Dragging a wrist over her upper lip, she fitted the tire iron onto one of the wheel's lug nuts then went to work. She was still trying to budge the first stubborn nut when a shadow fell across her shoulder.

Crouched against the hot, black asphalt, Tavia froze as a pair of heavy black boots scuffed into view. Reflexively, her fingers tightened on the heavy tire iron. Slowly, she lifted her eyes up a long pair of legs clad in faded blue jeans.

The jeans were incredibly worn and threadbare, pale, pale blue—almost white in places—torn across one knee, stained across the other. Other than that, they fit really well. Really well. They weren't tight across the hips. Just nice and snug. There was a hefty bulge beneath the worn, button-down fly—not like the man was hard, just like there was a lot of male equipment on call inside his jeans. And those thighs were really packed into that thin denim with *nothing* to spare.

The hitchhiker slouched with his shoulder against the rear panel of her vehicle. "Hot day," he drawled.

Squinting up at him, Tavia watched him drag the ragged hem of his white T-shirt over his damp upper lip. He had deliciously mean lips. The meanest lips she'd ever seen on a man. Set in a permanent scowl. Sweat gleamed on the flat, brown surface of his stomach where bronze hair swirled down into his jeans.

"Yeah," Octavia clipped out, dragging her eyes from his pan-flat stomach. "I noticed. I'm quick that way."

He nodded slowly as he angled those expressionless sunglasses down at her. "Yeah? Well, you didn't seem to notice when you passed me ten minutes ago."

"I don't pick up hitchhikers," Tavia grunted as she strained against the tire iron.

"There's a difference between a hitchhiker and a stranded motorist," he growled down on her.

"That your piece of junk back there on the road?"

The corner of his mouth pulled back—tight. "That's my Charger, yeah."

"I don't pick up hitchhikers," she repeated.

He hooked a thumb into the top of his jeans. "That's your bad luck. If you'd picked me up, I might have changed that flat for you."

"I can change a flat."

He snorted. "I can see that."

"I can *change* a flat."

"Maybe you could, if you could get the lug nuts off."

"*I can change a flat!*"

His muscles rippled across his chest and his shoulders rolled as he shrugged. "Hey," he said, "I'm convinced. But *I* can get the lug nuts off."

"Listen, Sir Galahad. If you're not going to offer to help, why don't you just head on up the road?"

He shifted his hip on the car and the next time she looked up at him, she saw her own cleavage reflected in his shining blue sunglasses. "I like the view right here," he murmured in a low, husky drawl. One bronze eyebrow arched over the edge of his glasses as he smiled down into her gaping blouse. At the periphery of her vision, Tavia saw the mound in his groin stir like a huge, uncoiling monster.

Dropping onto her knees, Tavia glared up at him as she very pointedly fastened the top button of her yellow cotton blouse. As she secured the button, a gruff sound of male amusement rumbled up from his chest.

"You got a cell phone that works out here?"

Tavia grimaced. "No."

"You drive a rig like this but you don't have satellite service for your phone?"

He was right. She should have invested in a better phone. But she'd been busy and just hadn't gotten around to it.

"Tell you what, lady. I'll change that flat for you if you'll give me a ride to Albuquerque in return."

"I'm not going to Albuquerque," she answered. "I live in Santa Fe. I have an appointment there at six o'clock."

The hitchhiker slouched against the Hummer's rear panel, all muscle and damp, sweaty male. "I'm in no rush."

"What does that mean?"

He shrugged again. "You can take me to Albuquerque after your appointment."

"It's not that kind of appointment," she told him acidly. "It's the kind of appointment that lasts all night."

She watched his eyebrows lift. His gaze slid down the length of the Hummer as he tilted his head thoughtfully. She knew what he was thinking. He was wondering what an ordinary-looking girl like her was doing, driving a Hummer and hurrying home for an all-night appointment.

Arrogant son of a bitch. She wished he could see her with Alex. It wasn't every woman who dated a male cover model.

"This is a nice piece of equipment," he finally said. "I'd like to own a Hummer."

"Yes, well, we can't all have everything, can we?"

"Nope," he answered. "What else do you have at home?"

"What, other vehicles?"

"Yeah, okay." He grinned. "You can tell me about your other vehicles, if you like."

"You going to change this tire while I'm telling you?"

"You going to drive me to Albuquerque?"

Tavia thought about this as she gazed down the long empty highway. Without cell phone service, she was now as stranded as he was. And those lug nuts weren't coming off for *her*. It was going to take a whole lot more muscle than *she* had to get those nuts loosened and get that wheel off. Tavia had no choice but to enlist the guy's help and give him his ride in payment.

But she was damned if she was going to cancel her date with Alex. For that matter, she wouldn't mind showing this guy what kind of men she went out with before she was shut of him. "It will have to be in the morning."

"You got a place I can stay until then?"

Tavia hesitated. Did she dare do this? It wasn't like she'd be alone in her house with the guy. Alex would be there.

Tavia nodded.

"Thought so." The large man didn't quite smile, but a hard little curl of arrogance appeared at the corner of his masculine mouth. "Give me that tire iron."

She cut a glance up at him. The heavy cross of metal was her last line of defense and she was loath to give it up to a man she didn't know. She slid her gaze down over his body. His jeans hung low on his hips. He didn't seem to have anything concealed in his pockets or his jeans—at least, nothing that could be considered a weapon. Of course, with hands like that, he probably didn't need a frickin' weapon. Jeez, the guy was a mauler.

His mouth kicked up into a sly smile as he tracked her gaze. "What are you looking at?"

"Just making sure you don't have a gun," she muttered.

He nodded, pulling his hands away from his sides and turning slowly so she could check out the pockets hanging off his backside. "Of course," he pointed out, "if I had a weapon, I'd probably have gotten it out by now. But I'll be glad to strip if it makes you feel better."

A hot bead of sweat leaked down into the crease between her breasts. It tickled and she resisted the urge to swipe it away with her fingers. Jesus. Could it get any hotter? "That won't be necessary," she told him.

That won't be necessary, she told herself firmly, regardless of the fact that it would probably make me feel a whole lot better.

"You're about to lose your cell phone," she advised him, jerking her chin to indicate his back pocket.

Reaching behind him, the hitchhiker eased his thin, silver phone from the wide hole at the bottom of his jeans' pocket. With a flick of his thick wrist, he redeposited the folding telephone into one of his front pockets. She watched his big fingers as he patted his hand over the rectangular bulge.

When he reached down for the tire iron, Tavia hesitated again. Of course, if the guy wanted to hurt her, he could probably rip the tool from her fingers and get on with it with nothing more than his bare hands. The road was deserted. It wasn't like there'd be anyone to stop him. She considered his large hand, outstretched and turned palm up. It hovered patiently between them as he waited for her to surrender the tool. She checked his face. When he smiled encouragingly, she handed him the tire iron.

She'd never seen a tire changed so quickly and neatly before in her life. While she fumbled to free the spare, he got the lug nuts loosened, the car raised and the wheel off.

"I'll get that," he told her as he joined her behind the car then brushed her aside to pull the spare tire free of its mounting. She glowered at him, feeling uselessly female. How did men do those things so fast? She slid a glance toward his large hands and his thick, strong fingers. Those hands would be a definite advantage when it came to working on a car—or a woman for that matter. Those strength-hardened arms wouldn't hurt either. Wide shoulders. Muscle-ripped chest. The whole package was just made for getting the job done.

As Tavia watched, he shouldered the spare onto the axle and hand-tightened the nuts. Releasing the hydraulic jack, he let the wheel settle back onto the ground then used the tire iron to tighten the nuts a final time.

As he stood, he dusted off his jeans. "Want me to drive?"

Her face twisted with incredulity. How chauvinistic could you get? "No!"

He shrugged his huge shoulders as he opened the driver's door for her. "Just thought it would be polite to offer." He smiled as he closed her inside the Hummer then made his way to the back of the car where he stowed the tire iron and jack.

When he was settled in the seat beside her, he slipped off his sunglasses. Although the Hummer was the biggest car Tavia had ever been in, her passenger made it feel packed, somehow.

"I'm Bolt," he announced, turning his head to smile at her. "Bolt Hardin."

"Bolt," she blurted before she could stop herself. "Your name is Bolt?"

"Short for Bolton," he explained. "My grandmother's maiden name."

Were...those eyes gold? Truly gold. Oh my god. Not brown, not yellowish brown, not brown with gold flecks. Gold. Realizing that she'd be staring if she gave those eyes one more second of her goggle-eyed attention, Tavia jerked her head in a nod.

"Do *you* have a name?" he prompted her. "Or should I just continue calling you lady?"

"Yes." She turned the key in the ignition. "I have two names, actually. My real name and the name I write under." She eased the car out onto the road.

"You're a writer?" Reaching backward, he pulled the seatbelt over his shoulder and stretched it across his hips.

She tried not to stare into his lap as she rubbed her lips together. "Mm-hmm. My real name's Octavia Smith—"

"Octavia! Who saddled you with a name like that?"

"—and I write under the name of Octavia October."

"October," he murmured. "Never heard of you. So, Miss October, what do you write?"

"Romance."

He yawned as he stretched in the soft, calfskin seat. "That explains why I've never heard of you. So, are you going to make me call you Miss October or do you have something else I can use besides Octavia?"

"You could call me Tavia if you want to."

"Sounds good," he said with a nod. "What does your husband do for a living, Tavia?"

"Why would you assume I have a husband?"

"Why would you assume I was assuming anything? Maybe I'm just fishing to find out if you're married."

She scowled through the windshield at the road ahead.

"So I take it you're not married," he said into the silence. "Divorced?"

"Why do you insist on assuming this *must be* or *must have been* my husband's car?"

"This is a man's car," he stated, rolling his shoulders. "So I'm a male chauvinist pig. So shoot me."

"If I had a gun, I would," she growled back at him. "This is *my* car," she informed him. "I'm not married and I never have been."

He shifted in his seat as he rumbled out a deep murmuring laugh. "So you do pretty well, then—writing?" He glanced around the Hummer's interior.

She gave him a curt nod. "I do okay. And what do you do for a living, Mr. Male Chauvinist Pig?"

He chuckled—a deep, rich sound of pleasure. "I work on cars."

"*You work on cars?*"

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

She flicked her gaze at him. "*Maybe* because your own car is presently broken down on the side of the road?"

"Oh that?" He shrugged the wide, sloping line of his shoulders. "I just bought the Charger. It needs some work. I have to order some parts before I can fix it."

Tavia pursed her lips. No car. No money for parts. The guy had no potential whatsoever. But, oh my god, was he hot! The air conditioner was on, circulating the air inside the car, filling her nose with the intoxicating scent of hot, golden-eyed male. She resisted the urge to take a deep breath and fill her lungs with the warm, sun-bronzed aroma of the man sitting beside her.

Tavia broke the silence several miles later. "Are you a marine or something?"

"Me? No. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering where you got that scar."

With the tip of one rough, calloused finger, he stroked the corner of his mouth. "This one?"

"Yeah."

"Car accident."

Right. "What about the one on your arm? Was that an accident too?" she put to him snidely.

"Nope. That one I got in a fight."

She shot a mean grin at him. "Looks like you lost."

He shook his head. "I won." The grin he returned was positively evil. "If you think this is bad, you should have seen the other guy."

"What did he do?"

"He lived."

Despite herself, a snort of laughter escaped Tavia's lips. "No, I mean what did he do to make you so mad?"

Bolt shrugged. "I wasn't mad. *He* threw the first punch."

"Oh. Then what did *you* do to make *him* mad?"

His mouth settled into a wicked smile. "Stole his date."

Tavia flicked her gaze to the right. "You stole the man's date?"

"I can be a bit of an asshole when it comes to something I want. I fight dirty," he translated. His eyes crinkled at the corners as an expression of pleased reminiscence fell over his face. "She was hot. She was wearing these spiked heels with...ankle straps. You know the kind I mean? I've always had a thing for those shoes with ankle straps."

Tavia's eyes widened as she realized his gaze had drifted over her black capris, down her calves, to her plain brown loafers. She jerked her chin. "Yeah, I know the kind you mean," she answered.

Jeez. The guy was checking out her feet. Tavia shook her head. But she couldn't help the smile that crept into the corners of her mouth.

Chapter Two

The sun was low on the horizon when Tavia pulled up the long, winding driveway that led to her mountain home. The large, flat space in front of her house was packed with an army of cars and trucks that had been blocking her garage doors for the past week. She was surprised when her passenger had the car door open before she'd pulled the key out of the ignition. Tavia watched as his long legs took him quickly across the concrete in front of her home.

Four men were struggling to raise a long wall on the new addition to her house. Bolt strode toward them. Joining a thick, burly man at the corner, Bolt stooped, caught the top of the wall with one large hand then heaved upward. With Bolt's help, the wooden framework of two-by-fours angled upward then settled onto the bolts spearing up through the sill plate. Someone shouted and he reached for a hammer lying on the plywood floor in front of him. The worker next to Bolt offered him a handful of nails. Shoving three of them into his mouth, he tacked the walls together at the corner.

When Tavia realized her mouth was hanging open, she pressed her lips together. For a complete loser with no potential, the man seemed incredibly...capable.

He turned and smiled at her as she joined him at the corner of the new construction.

Tavia gave him a grudging smile. "Don't you dare chew on those," she growled. "I don't want my new addition put together with bent nails."

He lifted his chin in answer then spat the remaining nails onto his palm and shoved them into his back pocket—the one that was still intact. His eyes focused behind her as he let out a long wolf whistle. "Is that your appointment?" he murmured with a supercilious grin. "Your *all-night* appointment?"

Tavia scowled at him then turned to watch Alex step out of his yellow convertible. The tall, lanky blond wore a dark blazer and gray slacks. His long froth of yellow hair

was loose and hung all the way down to the middle of his back. Turning a cold shoulder on Bolt, Tavia left the cocky bastard behind her as she hurried across the concrete drive to greet Alex.

"Tavia!" Alex started a smile that faltered a bit as he stared over her left shoulder.

"I'm Bolt," she heard a deep voice announce from behind her. Then Bolt's long, tanned arm was between her and Alex as he gripped the smaller man's hand. Alex winced and Tavia actually heard the bones in his hand crunching inside the mallet of Bolt's fist. "Bolt Hardin," he introduced himself. In his free hand, Bolt hefted the heavy, claw-head hammer he'd picked up moments earlier.

Alex grimaced a smile up at him. "I'm Alex," he offered when a stunned Tavia failed to introduce him. "Bolt," Alex repeated vaguely, his eyes switching from Tavia to the hunk of sculpted steel standing at her side.

Tavia gritted her teeth. "He's just a hitchhiker I picked up this afternoon." When she threw her elbow into Bolt's ironclad side, she almost chipped a piece of bone off her joint.

"A hitchhiker?" Alex frowned up at the man beside her.

"I helped Tavia change a flat," Bolt said easily, all smooth, unruffled confidence. He reached back and shoved the hammer's wooden grip to hook through the ragged hole in his back pocket. "She offered me a ride to Albuquerque in return," he reminded her in a cutting voice.

"Which I'll be doing at the very *earliest* possible opportunity," Tavia countered through clenched teeth.

"I'll be spending the night," Bolt translated with a lazy smile.

Alex's eyes widened as Bolt nodded down at him.

"So, what's for dinner?" Bolt asked as he locked his hands behind his head and stretched. His rugged mouth curved into a hard grin and his eyes glinted with a

predatory gleam as he regarded Alex like some huge tawny mountain lion eyeing a fluffy yellow house cat.

Tavia just stared at Bolt. God he was magnificent. In a horrible way, of course. Magnificently awful. Mouthwateringly, magnificently awful. "I think Maria's planning on steaks," she answered through flattened lips as she stepped away from the men and led the way to the front door.

Leaving Alex standing in her living room, Tavia hurried Bolt down the hall, glancing at the watch on her wrist. "I'll ask Maria to put on an extra steak. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. This is my room," she told him as she breezed through a set of double doors that opened out into the wide hall. "You can take one of the rooms at the end of the hall. Help yourself," she threw over her shoulder as she kicked off her loafers and hurried across the thick, cream-colored carpet into the tiled bathroom.

She almost screamed when he appeared in the mirror beside her. "Jesus, Bolt!"

"I need a shower," he told her.

"There's a bathroom in every bedroom," she told him with exasperation. "Take your pick."

He propped his shoulder against the bathroom doorjamb. "You got anything I can put on afterwards? These jeans are a bit..."

"Not unless you're willing to wear pink sweatpants."

"Hey," he drawled. "I look good in pink."

Pushing past him, Tavia yanked open a drawer and dragged out the first pair of sweats she found. They were gray.

He shook the sweatpants out and held them up against his legs then adjusted them lower. "Hmm," he murmured. His deep-toned drawl sounded outrageously seductive within the walls of her bedroom. "They're either going to be low on the hips or short in the ankles. Do you have a preference?"

Despite her annoyance, Tavia snorted back a sharp bark of laughter.

He grinned back at her, his golden gaze full of mischief. "So what is it? Hips or ankles?"

"I'll leave that for *you* to decide," she told him. "Now get out of here, will you?"

But her guest was staring into the long expanse of her walk-in closet. "Jesus! How many pairs of shoes do you *have*?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Fifty. Eighty, maybe. Would you get out of here so I can have a shower?"

"Yeah?" he said, as though he hadn't heard her. "Do you happen to have a pair with those...straps around the ankles?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably. Why?"

"I just like them. They're sexy."

"Okay. If I can find a black pair, I'll wear them. *Okay*?"

He stood solidly in the middle of the room. "They don't have to be black."

"If I can find a pair, I'll wear them," she almost shouted. "Now would you please get out of here?"

"Promise?"

"I promise!" Flattening her hands on his chest, Tavia gave him a shove.

The big man didn't budge. Instead his arms moved quickly to cage her there against his damp, male-scented T-shirt. "*Don't*," he said in a sharp, quiet voice. "Don't touch. Unless you mean business."

With a rough jerk, he had her tight against his hard frame. The man might have been made of iron for all the give there was to him. She could feel every bulging plane of his muscle-stacked chest as it pressed against hers. His large, flat palms slid down her back, molding her body against his, slipping over her backside where his hands clamped around the full, round globes of her bottom. "Do you know what I mean by business?" he rasped out in a growl. Although his voice was deep, the words were cut with an unexpected edge of urgency that took Tavia by surprise.

His hips moved and she felt the long, angled ridge of his erection scrape across the soft fullness of her belly. Staring up into the molten, gold heat of his eyes, Tavia swallowed hard. "I know what you mean," she forced out on a stutter. "But you and I *have* no business, Bolton. Your room is down the hall," she reminded him.

* * * * *

"Cabernet or merlot?" Alex offered a little later as Tavia joined the two men in the dining room. She'd taken a shower and had slipped into a long, swishy blue dress that buttoned down the front. Her hair was still wet but it looked good that way – a tangled mass of wet curls.

Her emotions were in a bit of a tangle as well. She had a date with Alex. She'd been looking forward to this date for several days. And now that she had him there in her dining room, all she could think about was the man she'd picked up on the side of the road a few hours earlier. What was up with that? She should have been repulsed by a guy who grabbed her ass and ground his hard-on into her belly.

She *should* have been.

She wasn't.

There was something so...primitive and male about the way he'd staked his claim on her, following her into her bedroom and snaring her in his arms while her date dallied in the living room, his hands in his pockets. The guy was all male with a keen predatory streak that set him apart from the more civilized breeds she was used to.

She tried not to stare at Bolt. He looked good wet too. His gold-brown hair was clumped together in thick spikes, adding a splash of wild animal to an already outrageously masculine appearance. He'd opted for low on the hips. The sweatpants. And those sweatpants were slung so far south she could see where his pubic hair climbed out of his groin to join the hair that swirled beneath the dent of his bellybutton.

"Merlot," Tavia answered.

"Bolt?"

"I'll have a beer if there's one to be had."

"There's a case of Miller in the fridge," Tavia told him. "Ask Maria in the kitchen." With a small wave of her hand, she indicated a swinging door leading out of the dining room.

As Alex poured the red wine into the crystal glasses set out on the table, Bolt disappeared through the door to the kitchen. Tavia smiled tensely at Alex while Bolt's deep murmuring bass rumbled from the kitchen. Her cook responded in her Spanish accent. Picking up a wineglass, Tavia emptied it in a few swallows then reached for the dark bottle and refilled the glass.

When Bolt sauntered back into the dining room, brown bottle in hand, Tavia took her seat at the rectangular table. She sat where she always sat, facing the windows, plunk in the middle of the table's long side. Normally this assured her lots of light as well as room to spread out with whatever she was reading—or writing—at the time.

After a brief instant of hesitation, Alex took the seat on her right, placing himself at the head of the table. She assumed Bolt would then take the seat on her left, at the other end of the table. She was surprised when he took the seat opposite her. Briefly. Then she realized that he'd be incredibly hard for her to ignore, seated directly in front of her. If he'd sat on her left, her attention would have been divided between the two men.

The evening was shaping up like a game of X's and O's. Appropriately, the Irish linen tablecloth was divided into a square pattern of white openwork. Tavia considered the men who shared her table.

The two men were certainly a contrast. Alex in his pricey Italian blazer and crisp pressed slacks. Bolt in nothing but a pair of low-slung sweatpants, his bare chest glowing with a splash of sun-bronzed hair, his bulging arms wrapped in a wiry network of veins. When it came to sex appeal, it was no contest. Before today, she'd thought Alex was one of the sexiest men alive. Bolt put him in his place. And that place was somewhere far, far below the predatory breed that sat across from her.

He was talking to her, she realized. "I found your laundry room in the hall," he was saying. "Threw my clothes in. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," she murmured.

When Maria put a salad in front of her broad-shouldered guest, Bolt looked up to thank her. Oh man. That smile of his really melted a lot of the hard edges on his exterior. Tavia had to tear her eyes from the gleaming white that parted his sexy lips. With her fingers wrapped tightly around the stem of her wineglass, she swigged down several more gulps of wine. The merlot was smooth. It went down easy.

Tavia had a feeling that the wine was the *only* thing that would go down easy tonight. Without having said anything, the two men were emitting so much static toward one another, you could almost see the tension crackling in the air.

Not surprisingly, the first volley came from Alex. No doubt the attractive blond felt a mite threatened.

When Bolt asked Alex whom he favored in Sunday's game, Alex smiled. It wasn't a very nice smile either. "England," he answered. When Bolt hesitated, Alex followed those words with a very patronizing, "I'm sorry. You were probably talking about American football, weren't you?"

Bolt shrugged. "Yeah," he shot back in an easy drawl. "I'd forgotten about the rugby game this weekend. But I think the All Blacks look good this year."

Touché. The guy followed international sport.

After that, the men settled down and behaved themselves for a while as they compared the Colts and the Patriots—American football. Both men wanted to see the Colts in the Super Bowl so the conversation was amicable and proceeded in an orderly manner. Which meant Tavia didn't have to referee.

Alex's next question was a loaded one, fired point blank just after Maria set the steaks out. "So, Bolt," he asked, slipping a glance in Tavia's direction, "where do you think the market is headed next?"

Tavia almost choked on her merlot. What the hell would a guy like Bolt know about—

As Tavia forced the gulp of wine down her throat, Bolt's gaze narrowed on her date. His nostrils flared and his eyes glinted with a metallic sheen. The big man knew he was being baited. "Right now," Bolt answered slowly, "I think just about everything's headed downhill for a while. At least, that's what my analysis program indicates."

"Analysis program?" Alex lifted his eyebrows. "I was thinking the same thing. Even the technology sector?" he asked sharply.

Bolt inclined his head. "Especially technology."

"What program are you using?" Alex asked with sudden interest.

Bolt shrugged but his eyes smoldered. "It's just something I wrote myself, based on integrals. I'll get a copy to you if you'd like."

"Integrals? Why integrals?"

"To smooth out the market variations so you can pick out the trends more clearly."

Tavia pressed her lips together while Alex looked stunned. The big man had to be faking it—throwing out words and phrases he'd picked up from some financial news television program. Still, she fought the urge to laugh at Alex's expression.

"What...what are you investing in then?" Alex finally coughed out.

"Nothing right now," Bolt returned. "I bought a lot of gold three years ago and I'm just holding."

"Gold? The price of gold has tripled over the past two years."

"I didn't buy it because I was smart," Bolt drawled. "Just lucky. My best friend suggested I pick some up. She's a mining engineer."

Tavia rolled her eyes at this false display of humility. If the guy sitting across from her owned any gold, it was all in his teeth! And it would be easy to know that precious

metals had skyrocketed during the last few years. So the guy had a smattering of knowledge where investment was concerned – big deal!

Alex's disgruntled expression fixed on the wall behind Bolt where a new piece of artwork hung. The blond's face relaxed as he focused on the canvas. "Is that a Dalton?" he asked Tavia. His golden eyebrow arched upward with more than a hint of superiority.

She smiled as she nodded. "My publisher has contracted him to do my next three covers. He sent that small one as a gift."

"I like his work," Alex told Bolt.

Bolt nodded. Then without even turning to look at the canvas on the wall, he added, "That's not surprising. He draws beautiful women then adds a lot of color. Since most men are a bit colorblind, they find his oil pastels refreshingly bright while women find them stunning and bold."

Okay. Now Tavia was staring. So was Alex.

Again Bolt shrugged in his lazy, self-diminishing way. "At least, that's what Dalton says."

Okay. So he'd read a magazine article about the popular pastel artist while waiting somewhere for a haircut. But. Jeez.

"But enough about art." Bolt fixed his malicious gaze on Tavia's elegantly groomed date as one bronze eyebrow winged upward in challenge. "How much can you bench press?"

Tavia laughed out loud as Bolt followed this with a cat-like grin in her direction and Alex's mouth flattened into a thin line.

When Alex steered the conversation toward politics, Bolt was carefully quiet as he finished his steak and worked his way through a large serving of apple pie and ice cream. Evidently, Alex had hit on a subject that Bolt couldn't fake – either that or the big

man preferred to keep his political opinions to himself. While Bolt demolished dessert, Tavia and Alex discussed America's foreign policy.

She was arguing with Alex when the door to the kitchen cracked open behind him. Bolt's gaze flickered that way as Tavia's Spanish-speaking cook stepped into the dining room. Unaware of Maria's presence, Alex continued, "I'm just saying that the current policy toward immi—"

The next thing Tavia knew, Bolt was nudging his beer bottle up against Alex's full glass of red wine. The glass tipped over with a sharp crack and Alex's chair scraped backwards as he jumped to his feet, cursing.

Bolt stood up with him, apologizing all over the place while gracing little Maria with the sweetest smile Tavia had ever seen on such a patently mean mouth.

"I'm sorry," the small woman faltered. "I was getting ready to leave but I couldn't get my car started. Could somebody perchance give me a jump?"

"Let me take a look at that," Bolt offered immediately, striding across the room and holding the kitchen door open for Tavia's cook. From beneath the thick fringe of his eyelashes, he shot a smiling glance back at Tavia.

Tavia stared at the door as it swung closed. *Was that what she thought it was?* In spilling the wine all over Alex, Bolt had stopped her date from making a potentially embarrassing comment in front of her Spanish-speaking cook. Had Bolt been trying to save Alex's ass or had he been acting on behalf of Maria's feelings? It had to be Maria, Tavia thought wryly. Her little cook from south of the border—while perhaps five years older than her dinner guests—was both petite and darkly attractive.

Distracted by those thoughts, Tavia herded Alex into the kitchen. The door leading outside to the driveway was open. She heard the heavy, metal creak of a car hood moving upward. "I'll get some club soda for that stain," she told Alex as she headed for the fridge, passing the large granite-topped island in the center of the kitchen.

When Bolt stepped back into the kitchen a few minutes later, Alex was grumbling about Maria while pouring club soda over the front of the pleated gray slacks he wore. "This isn't the first time she's needed a jump start," Alex complained in a tight voice.

As Bolt made his way to the kitchen sink, he frowned at the blond. "Maria's Honda should be good from here on out," he growled quietly as he soaped up his hands. "The battery posts were corroded. I cleaned them off."

Alex grunted as he surveyed the damage to his slacks. "I'm going to have to take these off long enough to run them under the tap." He cut a glaring glance in Bolt's direction as he strode from the kitchen, ostensibly making his way to one of the bathrooms down the hall.

Wiping his hands on a dishtowel, Bolt glowered at the swinging door as Tavia watched him. "I take it you don't much care for my boyfriend," she stated carefully.

"Boyfriend?" Bolt snorted as he wadded the towel into a ball and slung it at the counter. "That guy isn't interested in you."

Tavia couldn't have been more surprised if he'd slapped her. She probably couldn't have been more hurt either. It felt like somebody had punched her right in the heart.

Bastard.

"Oh yeah?" she returned icily. "I guess that's why he proposed to me last week then."

Bolt's eyes snapped to lock on hers. "He *what*? What did you tell him?"

"I told him I'd think about it."

Impatiently, Bolt rolled his eyes. "Give me a break, Tavia. That guy's more interested in me than he is in you."

"Then why'd he ask me to marry him?"

"I don't know," he cut at her. "How much are you worth?"

She felt the pain tighten around her heart. Tighten cruelly. "*Fuck you*," she snapped back at him, fighting an unexpected surge of tears. "So you think Alex is only interested

in my money. Thanks a lot, Bolt. But just because *you* think I have no sex appeal whatsoever—”

“*What?* Don’t you go putting words in my mouth, Tavia. There’s nothing wrong with your sex appeal—believe me. But that guy wouldn’t know sex appeal from apple peel.”

“What?”

“And I can prove it,” he told her in a rich, deep rumble of sound.

“You can prove it?” she demanded with as much scorn as she could muster while blinking back hot, angry tears. “How?”

For about two seconds he glowered at her. Then he took a step toward her. His thick-lashed gaze fixed on her mouth as he lingered in front of her. Dark heat rolled off his body in waves, wrapping her in his provocative male scent. “Because this is the way a man acts when he’s interested in a woman,” he growled, pushing her up against the edge of the island anchored in center of the kitchen. His body was hard and hot as he forced hers to yield beneath his. “This is the way he looks at her,” he rasped out. His eyes were half-closed as he looked down on her, his keen gaze locked on her lips as he studied her mouth with intense interest. “This is the way he touches her,” he murmured as he caught her chin in his palm. “And this is the way he kisses her.”

Chapter Three

Tavia held her breath as Bolt angled his golden gaze down over her lips. His fingertips trapped her face in an iron cage as his thumbs stroked into the corners of her mouth. Her lips responded to the tender stimulus, swelling with anticipation, parting to give him entrance as a longing wisp of sound escaped her lips.

With her face caught in the uncompromising steel of his calloused hands, Bolt handled her with surprising gentleness. Tavia had never felt so fragile, so treasured, so...feminine. She felt his other hand slide around to the back of her neck as he cupped her nape. Slowly, he lowered his mouth across hers.

He rubbed his wet mouth across hers in a slow, teasing pass. She felt his breath against her lips, warm and enticing. For an instant she caught a taste of his rough, masculine flavor. Words couldn't come close to describing what happened next. Bolt's lips crushed down on hers like an avalanche and Tavia just hung on for dear life as his mouth dominated hers with a mixture of soft and wet and overpoweringly insistent male.

His tongue took her mouth immediately, forging between her teeth and sliding in a hot, sensuous scrape against her own. Stunned beneath the dominance of his kiss, Tavia held her breath for a very long time before she finally heard him gasp and reposition his mouth over hers. She sucked in a breath at the same time. The dark heat of his mouth moved against hers in a slide of wet lips and thrusting tongue as a deep growl of hunger vibrated within his chest. His body moved against hers in a hard surging wave—slow, sensuous, suggestive and very, very demanding. She melted against him, riding a heady wave of arousal, feeling soft and pliable.

Ready.

I-want-a-man-and-I-want-him-now ready.

His open palms brushed down her arms on the way to her waist. With his hands gripping her middle, he hitched her backside up onto the edge of the island, forcing her legs to open for his hips, pressing between her legs—all without breaking the branding kiss that dominated her mouth. His blunt fingers dug into the cushion of her bottom as he held her into his groin and ground the long, thick line of his erection into the fleshy seam between her legs. She could feel his cock stiffen and grow as he shoved his sex against the pout of her parted pussy. Her sex warmed for him—softened and moistened and thrummed with a dark, eager hunger.

He broke from her suddenly, panting roughly. “Shall I go on?” His eyes narrowed on her swollen lips. As if he couldn’t resist, he leaned forward again, his lips crowding briefly against hers as he bit at her lower lip. “Shall I?” he demanded.

Dazed, she stared up at him. Without thinking, she nodded.

He growled a rough burst of laughter against her neck. His hands slid beneath her skirt and up her thighs, working the flimsy fabric up her legs. “You sure? Do you want me to show you how a man fucks a woman when he’s interested in her, Tavia? Because that’s what comes next, baby doll. Are you ready? Just let me know,” he murmured in a wash of damp heat against her ear. “Because I can get my cock out of these sweatpants before you can say ‘fuck me now’.”

Tavia heard the kitchen door creak on its hinges then stared, alarmed, into Bolt’s eyes. He focused his malicious, golden gaze on the door behind her. Beneath the thin material of her skirt, his hands tightened on her backside—a clear message that he didn’t intend to give up a single inch to the man who stood behind her.

Alex.

Bolt cleared his throat. “Sorry about the slacks, Alex. Let me know if you need help getting your car started.”

Alex’s voice was cold behind her. “Are you trying to tell me something, Hardin?”

“Yeah, I am.” Bolt laughed, low and wicked. “I don’t know what you had planned for tonight, but you might find it a bit crowded in Tavia’s bed.”

"Fuck you." Sweeping across the stone-tiled floor, Alex jerked the exterior door open. He shot a look of vehemence back at Tavia as he stood with his hand wrapped around the doorknob. "Tavia," he ground out between clenched teeth, "you don't even *know* this guy."

She stared at him blankly.

Alex stalked through the door then slammed it behind him.

As the door banged closed, Bolt's cock pulsed against Tavia's pussy – a virile, male declaration of victory, claiming the right to the space between her legs.

She burrowed her face against his shoulder as she stifled a moan of anguish. Her cheeks were burning up in shame.

Bolt's gaze was slanted toward the exterior door. "Don't go away mad," he muttered in a pleased, dark murmur.

"I can't believe you did that," Tavia moaned. "I've been going out with Alex for months."

"You wasted months on that guy?"

"I've only known *you*...Jesus. I can't believe I'm doing this."

He nuzzled his mouth against her neck, initiating a sharp shimmer of desire. The wanton sensation flashed over the surface of her skin, wrapping around her aching nipples and scraping at the nerve endings enclosed within the wet heat of her pussy.

"Come on, Tavia. You knew you were going to do this. You knew it back on the highway when you decided I could spend the night in your home."

"What?" she said slowly as Bolt dragged his teeth around the shell of her ear. "What?" she repeated in a cold, incisive word. She felt him stiffen.

He stopped mouthing her ear as he regarded her warily.

"So you just figured a girl like me would be glad to have sex with a guy like you."

"Most women are," he argued with an arrogant roll of his shoulders.

"But you figured a girl like *me* would *jump* at the chance."

Like a thin beam of molten fire, his eyes narrowed on her. "Exactly what are you getting at, Tavia?"

"You figured that because I'm big, I'd jump at the chance to have sex with you."

For several seconds he regarded her quietly. "Oh hell," he finally drawled, "you're not that big. I've laid bigger women than you."

"You have?" she blurted out.

"Yeah. I like big women. They're great to fuck. 'The more the cushion, the better the —'"

Her mouth gaped open. "You're such a *pig*."

"No kidding," he murmured against her ear.

She tried to ignore the dazzling warmth of his breath on her skin. "So you don't mind having sex with a woman my size."

His lips nipped at the flesh beneath her ear. "Nope."

"But you'd never consider marrying a woman like that. A woman like me!"

"I've got news for you, baby doll. I wouldn't consider marrying anyone."

"And I've got news for you! Alex would!"

He shoved himself away from her. "Fine!" he shouted. "So marry the guy if you can't do any better. It's no skin off my dick."

"*Can't do any better?* You are *the* most conceited, most *arrogant* man I have ever met in my lifetime."

He settled against the counter opposite her, folding his thick arms over his wide chest as he directed a lazy smile between her legs. "Get used to it."

Tavia snapped her knees together. "You're wrong," she told him point blank. "I had *no* intention of sleeping with you tonight. I had *planned* on sleeping with *Alex* tonight!"

He lifted one shoulder. "Sorry I ruined your plans," he drawled, sounding not the least bit sorry. His eyes drifted down her legs and fixed on her feet. "You going to wear those shoes for me now?"

"What?"

"You promised you'd wear the ankle-straps for me."

She shook her head in disbelief as she followed his gaze down her legs to the plain navy pumps on her feet.

He lifted his gaze slowly to connect with hers. "Are you the sort of woman who breaks her promises?"

"No, of course not, but —"

Grasping her wrist in his iron fist, he dragged her off the counter, through the kitchen door, across the dining room, living room and down the hall.

"Bolt!" she cried. "You're hurting me!"

He loosed her wrist as though he'd been stung. While he was stunned, Tavia collected the open doors of her bedroom, slipped through the doorway and slammed them shut behind her.

"Tavia! I'm sorry, Tavia. Are you all right?"

On the other side of the doors, Tavia slumped against the red-painted surface that separated her from Bolt. "I'm all right," she sighed, feeling as guilty as Bolt sounded. Although he had held her wrist firmly, he hadn't come close to hurting her. Which meant the big lug nut had probably taken special care *not* to hurt her.

His muffled voice was deep and troubled. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, Bolt. I just. It's just that...you're wrong. I didn't bring you home with me so I could sleep with you."

There was a lengthy silence on the other side of the door. "I'm sorry," he repeated in a contrite rumble. The antique glass doorknobs rattled. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Leaning against the door, Tavia's lips drooped as she watched the beveled glass doorknobs. She felt so damn sad. She *hadn't* brought Bolt home to get him into bed, despite the fact that she wasn't exactly opposed to the idea after that kiss in the kitchen.

But the man's arrogant assumption was so damn annoying. What a conceited ass. *Most women are*, she mimicked his response in her mind. *Most women are just crawling all over me begging me to fuck them.* Why did he have to rub her face in it? Why were men such pricks? Why the hell was she stuck on the wrong side of these doors?

A rumble of humor sounded on the other side of the door. "You locked the doors? I can't believe you locked the doors, Tavia. What did you hope to accomplish by that?" He laughed. "Don't you realize that a guy like me could have them down with one kick?"

"You wouldn't dare!" Tavia backed away from the glossy red doors as her eyes narrowed in apprehension.

"Of course I wouldn't," he soothed in a gruff voice. Then it got quiet.

With her head cocked to one side and her ears scanning for any sound, she held her breath as she listened to Bolt's long stride taking him down the hall. Silence followed. Enough silence that she finally decided she was safe. Slowly, she expelled a careful breath as she sank onto the white bedspread quilted with red stitches.

Seconds later, she was holding her breath again as she heard a series of faint tapping sounds. Then a few soft thumping sounds. The next thing she saw was Bolt, standing in the frame of her doorway, lifting the double doors aside. He smiled at her. "The doors open outward," he told her smugly.

He set the wide, double doors against the wall behind him. When he turned, he was swinging a hammer in one hand. He'd used the hammer and a nail to tap out the pins on the doors' brass fittings. Strolling into the room, he slid the tools onto her shabby-chic white-painted dresser that stood against the wall just inside the doorway. Then he folded his arms over his wide chest as he regarded her quietly.

With a curse of exasperation, Tavia made for the bathroom.

"That door opens outward too," he warned her as she slammed the door behind her.

Tavia pressed her shoulder against the bathroom door. "Please, Bolt. Just...just leave me alone, okay?"

"Where are the shoes?" he asked from the bedroom.

"Shoes?"

"You promised you'd wear them. Aren't you going to keep your promise?"

"Yes," she moaned. "Of course."

"Good," he answered. "Where are they?"

"I'm not sure. In the closet. Try the green and silver box. Listen, Bolt. If I wear the shoes will you let me go?"

As Tavia frowned at her troubled reflection in the bathroom mirror, she heard a single, heavy thunk. She froze, listening. Two seconds later she heard another muffled crash. Grabbing the door open, she rushed out of the bathroom to find Bolt on his knees at the end of the bed.

"Are you all right?" she asked breathlessly, trying to decide if a man falling to his knees would make that much noise. "Did you fall?"

He gave her a slow, sensuous smile. "I found the shoes."

She returned his smile warily.

"Let me help you get them on," he told her. "Come here," he commanded her firmly. "Sit down."

Tavia clenched her teeth. "Bolt," she gritted, "if I wear the shoes —"

"Come here," he repeated in iron tones.

Tavia left her navy pumps beside the bathroom door and crept toward him in her bare feet. Squeezing between the kneeling man and the hand-stitched bedspread, she sat down on the end of the bed and slipped her right foot into one of the black, patent leather high heels. As she watched, Bolt pulled the wide strap around her ankle, fumbling to close the buckle with his thick fingers. When Tavia reached out her toe for the other shoe, she felt Bolt's big hand wrap around her ankle as he guided her foot to

the pump three feet distant. When he'd finished buckling her left foot into the black ankle-straps, Tavia automatically moved to pull her legs together.

That's when she realized the shoes were nailed to the floor.

Chapter Four

Bolt knelt between her spread knees. The smile that curved his rugged mouth was just about as sinfully evil as a smugly horrible man could reasonably pull off.

"Bolt!" she yelled. "What the hell! What do you think you're doing?"

There was a supercilious glint behind the golden fire in his eyes. "I'm just giving you permission, baby doll."

"Permission? Permission to what?"

"Permission to spread your legs a bit," he told her in a low, intimate murmur. Catching the side of her neck with his big hand, he nudged his lips against her cheek. "Permission to be a bit of a slut. Every woman needs permission," he explained.

"Are you crazy? I don't need your permission to..."

His eyebrow arched upward. "To what?"

"I'm not a slut," she told him flat out.

He gave her a warm, sultry smile. "Of course you're not. That's why you're nailed to the floor."

"I'm nailed to the floor," she whispered, as the full extent of his actions finally hit her. "You nailed my shoes to the floor! Bolt! These shoes cost five hundred dollars!"

"Five hundred dollars? Really? Are you impressed?"

"Impressed with what?"

"Impressed by the fact that I have such good taste." The hard, silken texture of his lips glided along her jawline. "If you can reach them, you can take them off. 'Course I have no intention of letting you reach them, baby doll."

Tavia moaned as her back arched and her neck stretched for the touch of his lips. His mouth left a frisson of heated, crackling awareness in its wake. "Why on *earth* do you insist on calling me baby doll?"

"Why not?" he countered. "You're all...dimples. And when you're six-six," he went on, "even a tall woman's a baby doll." He put a hand in the middle of her chest. "Now lie down like a good little slut while I check out your pussy." With those words he pushed her onto her back. Immediately, Tavia struggled to sit up again but his large hand pinned her to the bed. "I'll tie you down if I have to," he warned her with a whispering growl.

Tavia was ready to scream with frustration. She'd never come across a more patently aggravating man. He was sneaky, manipulative and as crafty as demon spawn. Using illogical arguments and dirty tricks, he'd managed to get her spread open at the end of her bed with her feet pinned to the floor. She opened her mouth to darken his name with curses—but stilled when his hands curled around her ankles.

She *wanted* it and *he* knew it. She wanted him, even if he *was* the most maddening man on the face of the earth. It sounded cliché, but her chest was heaving—heaving before her eyes, rising and falling in eager waves as she watched Bolt kneeling between her legs.

She felt his hands travel slowly from her ankles to her knees. Felt the cool air on her calves and knew the skirt of her filmy dress was surfing up her legs under the glide of those large, masculine hands. With lowered eyes, she watched the frothing folds of her dress travel slowly up her hips at the same time she felt his hands sweep to the outside of her thighs.

"Tavia!" he murmured. "You're...wearing underpants." He began to chuckle. "Oh, you are *so* screwed," he advised her in a deep, provocative growl.

"What do you mean?" she asked him breathlessly.

"I mean—that the next time I ask you to wear these shoes, you'd better get rid of your panties first."

"The *next* time you — *Why?*"

He leaned over and pressed a kiss into the fabric that stretched across her belly. "Because your feet are nailed to the floor, sweetheart. And that means this underwear *isn't* coming off any time soon."

"But couldn't we just —"

"Sorry, Tavia. It's too late now. We're just going to have to work around the situation."

Still kneeling between her legs, Bolt settled his large hands on her inner thighs and urged her legs apart. She held her breath as his palms pressured her already stretched thighs even wider while his rough, calloused fingers moved slowly toward the apex of her legs. Before they reached the warm crease at the top of her thighs, she saw his head dip and felt his breath warming her mound. Her back arched and her eyes rolled back in her head as waves of humid heat washed over her pussy. Anticipation had her riding a razor-edge of passionate need as every muscle in her body tightened. When he finally graced her with the smooth touch of his mouth—full, soft and heated against the silk stretched over her pussy—Tavia choked back a tiny, telling, little sob.

Bolt breathed out a low, masculine sound of pleasure. He clucked his tongue and it smacked between her legs gently. "Red," he muttered against the heated silk. "Bright red panties with a blue dress. Who'd you wear the panties for, Tavia?"

The room was silent except for Tavia's sougning breath.

Bolt nudged his hot mouth against her pouting labia, bathing her silk-clad pussy with his warm breath. "Who'd you wear the panties for, Tavia? And you'd better not tell me Alex."

Tavia swallowed hard. "I didn't...wear them for anybody."

"Aw, now you're just hurting my feelings." His mouth opened along her slot and when he closed it, he nipped at her plump labia. He pressed the flesh firmly between his blunt teeth then opened his mouth and stroked his lips across the damp silk of her panties. The tip of his tongue crept through the seam of her sex, intruding between her

hungry lips as far as her filmy underwear would allow. "Tell me who you wore the panties for, Tavia."

When she didn't answer again, she saw his head tilt between her legs. She almost jumped when his tongue slid inside the elastic leg of her panties, lapping gently but insistently at the naked flesh of her outer labia, tugging at her thickened lips, encouraging them to part a breathless half-inch. As his tongue slid out of her panties, her flesh closed again over the folds of her sex. Then she felt the firm press of his thumbs in the crease between her legs, stretching her open on either side of her long slit. With both thumbs pulling her sex wide, Bolt drew his flattened tongue up the hot silk stretched over her open pussy.

The fine fabric of her underwear was wet and steamy as he opened his mouth over the red silk and settled his tongue over her clitoris. He gave her hungry clit a long, leisurely lick. "Tell me who you wore the panties for."

She blew out a frustrated breath. "You," she said in a short, quiet word.

"What was that?"

"You," she shouted. "I wore the red panties for you!"

"Thought so," he drawled. "Too bad I don't like underwear on a woman."

She snorted. The sound was a little bit of amusement mixed up with a lot of frustration.

"I'll let it go this time," he advised her. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Again?"

Leaning over her, he reached for the buttons of her dress, smiling into her wide-eyed gaze as his long fingers fumbled the buttons open—all the way from the scooping neckline right down to the rumpled hem. Then he spread the dress apart. Like a lick of liquid flame, his gaze traveled down her exposed body then returned to the heaving mounds of her breasts, crammed into the full cups of her red lace bra. His hands smoothed up her midriff until he held the sides of her breasts in the cradle of his large

palms. Automatically Tavia arched on the bed, pressing her lips together as Bolt handled her tits with murmuring appreciation. His voice was rough-soft as he expressed his devotion in quiet, rumbling bursts of sound. His thumbs brushed across the cups, the calloused pads catching on the fancy lace of the brassiere. When he leaned forward, his bared abdomen came into warm contact with her open pussy. His skin pressed against the slick silk. "More underwear," he complained in a taunting grumble. "Are the snaps in the back?"

"Bolt?"

"The snaps to your bra. Are they in the back?"

"I think so," she breathed.

"That's inconvenient." Delving with his fingers into the large cups of her bra, he tugged her breasts out of the red lace.

From beneath her half-closed eyelids, Tavia watched him expose her nipples as he shoved the frilly fabric under the heavy mounds of her breasts. Her bra was still fastened in the back and the wadded material was tight beneath her chest, lifting her breasts while squeezing them together.

With his thumbs riding over her nipples, his hands collected the heavy sides of her breasts into his palms. "Fuck," Bolt whispered. "These are perfect. I'd like to get my dick between these beauties on a hot day."

"On a hot day?"

"On a hot day." His voice was gravelly with lust. "When it's all damp and sweaty between your breasts. I'd like to fuck your tits and watch my cum wash into your cleavage. I'd like to use my dick to spread it over your nipples."

Tavia choked back a moaning expression of need. She ached at the thought of him thrusting between her breasts, his cum spitting from his cock head in hot surges, splattering onto her skin, coating her breasts as he rubbed his heavy, wet shaft over her needy nipples. Jeez, she wanted him. Her pussy was primed, burning with wet heat,

aching to have him wrapped up inside her, banging into her and flogging the back of her cervix with the punishing knot of his cock head.

As his thumbs rubbed over the rough, pebbled surface of her nipples, Tavia whimpered out a shivering murmur of arousal. Between her legs, the ridge of his cloth-covered shaft slid against the plump cushion of her labia. As Bolt rocked against her pussy, the thick girth of his erection slowly worked a groove between her soft, slick lips. Tavia twisted on the bed. So close—he was so close, but not goddamn close enough.

Planting his hands on either side of her chest, Bolt levered himself upward, continuing to thrust between her legs while he lowered his mouth to her nipples. His mouth was hot as he drew the hard silk of his lips over the puffy tips of her breasts. Then he turned his face and dragged the stubbled steel of his jaw over the same eager flesh. With a rough, wet tongue, he circled her areola languidly then sucked her in suddenly, drawing the whole of her full, pink areola deeply into his mouth. When the heat and suction finally diminished, her nipple was caught in the firm grip of his teeth. He held the small bud in the blunt clamp of his incisors as he lashed the captured tip with his tongue.

The sensation was utterly, deliciously evocative and a hot line of desire burned from the tips of her breasts to the deepest place in her cunt where she longed for him with a dark, insistent hunger unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She wanted him. She needed his breath, hot between her legs, pelting her wet flesh as he pulled her labia open with his fingers. She wanted him to touch her with rough intimacy. She wanted the abrasive pad of his fingertip brushing across her clit. She wanted him to play with her sex, to tease her and taunt her and take her to the edge of madness. Then she wanted him to fuck her.

She wanted him to rise over her, his weight pinning her to the bed, his skin rubbing in a hot, male slide against hers, the light hair on his chest teasing her nipples into tight knots of anguish. She wanted him to fuck her hard. Break her open with ecstasy as he

plowed into her, stretching the delicate pink of her vulva and slamming into the back of her cunt.

But those damn red panties were stretched between her legs, standing in the way of everything she wanted. With another small whimper, Tavia wondered if it was too soon to start pleading. She'd never begged for a man before. She'd never begged a man to fuck her. But then, she'd never felt like this, swamped in an aching need that lashed her body with sexual urgency and urged her to spread her thighs for the man between her legs. Spread her sex and open her pussy for the rapine touch of his fingers and the brutal caress of his cock.

Rising to his feet, Bolt hooked his thumbs in the top of the sweatpants and pushed them down his muscular thighs. His erection swung free like a huge, hungry beast, long and heavy and dark. The wide girth of his shaft was flattened along the top, giving his cock a sinfully serpentine appearance. The thin skin was stretched smooth and tight over dark veins that wrapped his length. The top of his shaft was capped by the heavy slug of his cock head, healthy and fat, engorged with lusty blood. Enthralled, Tavia watched a glimmering pearl of moisture ooze from the small creased opening in his cock head.

She licked her lips as Bolt curled his fingers around the broad root of his shaft, his eyes narrowed on the space between her legs. Falling over her, he rested his weight on his elbows.

She felt the thick, fat width of his cock head pressing against her silk-covered opening. Like a huge, blundering animal, his blunt tip surged against her barred entrance as his hips flexed and he thrust his sex at her again and again.

"Damn panties," he growled between harsh breaths. "They're always getting in the way. I don't know why women wear them."

Tavia moaned as he pounded the rounded head of his cock into the silk of her underpants. Each harsh, feral rip of his hips took him a little deeper into her vagina, but

not far enough. Never far enough. It was never going to be far enough. She needed more. More of him. More of that thickly veined cock deep inside her.

"Bolt," she finally wailed. "Don't you think those panties would come off if you gave them a good tug?"

He grunted in response. "I don't want to ruin a perfectly good pair of red panties that you *wore for me*."

She blew out a tight scream of frustration. "The panties cost seventeen-fifty. You didn't mind nailing my five hundred dollar shoes to the floor! Do me a favor, Bolt, and rip the damn panties."

The mean, thick head of his cock pounded temptingly at her entrance. "Sorry," he panted with an evil smile. "I don't do underpants. If a woman wants my cock, I reckon the least she can do is bare her pussy for me."

"Bolt," she tried hesitantly, "what if I told you I didn't wear these panties for you?"

He stilled. "You don't want to get me mad, Tavia."

She knew she was whining. "But if you got mad, maybe you'd tear them off."

He shook his head. "You *don't* want to get me mad, Tavia."

"Bolt," she shouted. "This isn't working."

"It's working for me," he told her. "A few more strokes and I'm going to come all over the front of these underpants you're wearing."

"Well, it isn't going to work for me!"

"You should have thought of that sooner. What are you doing?"

With her thumbs hooked into the tops of her panties, Tavia worked the sweat-dampened silk down her sides as far as she could reach. With a certain amount of desperate wriggling, she managed to get the damn things over her hips and under her bottom. But the panties refused to go farther. The elastic waistband bit into the flesh of her open thighs and would go *no* farther. The scarlet barrier was now a thin, tight,

highly annoying roadblock, caught just below her sex, wrenching into the flesh of her thighs.

"Please, Bolt," she begged shamelessly. "Please help me!"

As she watched, Bolt tilted his head and frowned. With his massive shaft straining in his hand, he touched the huge knot of his cock head against her pouting cleft. When he pushed his shaft down against the red barrier, the silk cut more deeply into her thighs.

"I don't think this is going to work," he drawled.

"Bolt!" she screamed.

Laughing darkly, he put a knee on the bed. "I'm sorry, baby doll, but I can't get to you with my cock. You're just going to have to settle for my tongue. Are you ready for some give and take?"

"Give and take?" she whimpered helplessly.

He nodded. "That's where I give it out and you take it. All of it."

"Give it?" She sobbed as her head tossed on the bed. "Give what?"

"Whatever I want to force on you, baby doll. You're the one with her legs spread and her feet nailed to the floor. I'm the one with his face in your pussy," he chuckled.

As Bolt stretched out beside her, his tongue slipped into her cleft and rode down the entire length of her slot in a bold stroke. A hoarse cry escaped her lips at the sheer explosive pleasure of that wet tongue sliding against her hot flesh. Tavia pressed her knees wide as she strained within the restricting bonds of those wicked shoes as well as the panties lashed around her hips.

"Do you like that?" he murmured as she tried to rock her sex into his mouth. "Let's see if I can get these panties out of my way enough to reach your cunt with my tongue."

As he pushed down on the front of her panties, the tautly stretched silk cut a cruel line across the tops of Tavia's thighs. She didn't complain. Instead, she waited with breathless anticipation for the delicious gift of his mouth, low on her sex. She moaned

with gratitude as the rough tip of his tongue slid through her folds and played around her entrance before returning to her clit.

“You want to return the favor?” Bolt put a knee over her shoulders and straddled her face. “Wrap your lips around my cock, Tavia.”

Tavia swallowed hard. The intimidating length of his cock hung before her eyes, mouthwateringly male, cunt-dampeningly attractive—wide, dark and ridden with heavy veins that pulsed with raging virility. Tavia groaned as she chewed on her bottom lip. While his penis was long, it wasn’t the length, per se, that concerned her. It was the massive girth. “Bolt,” she started apologetically, “I’m not going to be able to get much of this in my mouth.”

“Just take as much as you can, sweetheart. Just lock your lips around my cock head and suck hard. I’ll do the rest.” His hips undulated slowly as he lowered his groin to drag his shaft over her face. In a silken slide of hot, male flesh it traveled across her cheek. Reaching back with one hand, he levered his shaft downward and nudged the damp, moist head against her lips.

Tavia opened her mouth as he fed the crown into her mouth. A deep rumble of pleasure vibrated down his body as she pulled the plum-shaped head between her lips and hooked her tongue under the rim of its mushrooming hood. He froze. His wet mouth was suddenly still on her pussy as she sharpened her tongue to a point and drove it against the sensitive wrinkle of flesh caught beneath the hood of his cock head. His huge diameter gave a mighty, threatening pulse that stretched her lips wide as he groaned into her pussy flesh. Quickly, he retracted his hips, dragging his cock from her mouth. She watched his shaft stretching heavily before her face. Her saliva glimmered in a shining veil around the top of his cock and a thick drop of pre-cum welled from its tip before it dripped onto her chin. Tavia gasped in a hungry breath, full of the rich, potent scent of aroused male.

“Play fair,” he growled.

Feeling more confident, Tavia smiled as she reached for him, hooking her fingers around his shaft and drawing his cock back into her mouth. His hips moved in a rapid, brutal slide as he forced his cock to the back of her throat, embedding his shaft deep in her mouth before she had a chance to work her evil with her tongue. With small nudges, he pressed his tip against the back of her throat. Her mouth was so full of cock that she gagged an instant.

Bolt withdrew a few inches. "Take me, Tavia. Take all of me," he urged as he surged into her mouth again. She tried to shake her head but Bolt wasn't having it. "Open your throat and swallow," he commanded. "Take a breath then swallow me on my next thrust."

Tavia took a breath and swallowed as he shoved into her. Seconds later he pulled back and she drew in a sharp gasp of air then swallowed him again as he rode into her with a series of long thrusts and short retreats.

Between her legs, his wicked tongue was slashing down through her folds again. Viciously, purposefully, pitilessly, he attacked her clitoris with the wet lash of his tongue, pausing only occasionally to push a soft kiss over her tortured clit before he savaged it once more. Her legs relaxed, her knees fell wider and her hips started to jerk as her throat worked to take his cock deeper. The pressure built inside her mouth as his expanding shaft flexed in her throat and his warm, rough testicles brushed against her nose.

His tongue stabbed through her folds again in a long, delicious drive that set every pink pussy nerve ending at the edge of bliss, screaming in the searing, mind-bending pleasure that comes just before climax. Straining her hips upward, Tavia held her breath, waiting on the sharp edge of orgasm. Knowing that the next rough touch of his tongue would be the one to do it.

She was coming. She was coming right into his dark, hot, manipulative mouth.

As though he knew exactly that, Bolt dallied, the tip of his tongue prodding lightly into the nick of her cleft, warm and tempting and unbearably wet, promising

everything but halting just short of delivering the satisfaction her body now screamed for. Gently, he lapped at her clitoris while he pulled his hips back an inch, allowing her to grab a quick breath before he forged back in to fill her throat.

With his cock filling her mouth, Tavia growled as she writhed in the tight spread of the shoes fixed to the floor. Deep inside her vagina she ached for the hammer of his cock head pounding against her cervix. She longed for his wide diameter, stretching the rim of her vulva. She didn't want his tongue anymore. She wanted his cock. His huge, powerful, punishing cock seated deep inside her wet sex as he fucked her with an animal intensity that would leave the stamp of his cock head imprinted on her womb forever.

Beneath his damp mouth, she thrashed to escape him and his wicked tongue. She twisted her head, trying to expel his giant length from her mouth, but his hips shifted as he forced her to accept the presence of the shaft stretching her throat.

"Hold still," he commanded, his lips moving against the full softness of her labia. He wrapped his arms around her upper legs and his hands tightened on the sweat-dampened flesh beneath her thighs. He warned her with the hot, hard press of his tongue at the top of her cleft. Breathlessly, she stilled. Waiting for deliverance.

When it came, she shouted around his cock as his tongue drove down through her ready sex. Jerking into his mouth, she spilled over the edge of tight need into unraveling bliss, her cunt clenching on air in a long series of tight, shuddering spasms as a wet surge of heat spilled from her vagina and slid into her crease.

As she came, Bolt dragged his cock from her mouth. She felt his fine skin catch on her teeth as he retracted his long length. It hung above her, wet and pulsing, dripping a thin wash of pre-cum onto her neck. As she twisted in voluptuous need, she tasted his musky release wetting her lips. Collecting it with the sweep of her tongue, she closed her eyes and swallowed his potent discharge. "Oh my god," she murmured and praised and whispered, lifting her head to pull her worshipping tongue along the dark veins that twisted around his wet shaft, seeking out more of his unique, male flavor.

"You're not done yet," he told her in a raw voice. She felt the panties bite into her flesh more deeply as he made himself a little more room to operate between her legs. Touching his lips to the top of her labia, he kissed her gently, pushing his rugged mouth against her sex as he sucked her clit between his lips. Gently but persistently he continued to suck the little knot of flesh in the hold of his warm lips. This time there was no hint of roughness in the wet kiss he lavished between her legs. Just the warm enveloping heat of his mouth, making love to her stunned clit.

Turning her head, Tavia tried to reseat his shaft in her mouth, but he pulled away, allowing her nothing more than the occasional, languishing lick up his long, ridged length. Her folds felt thick and used. Her clit felt swollen—increasingly unsettled and unsatisfied, despite the shattering climax she'd just experienced. Slowly, she felt the tight knot of satisfaction loosen inside her vagina as her muscles relaxed and opened again—interested, eager and voraciously greedy. Hungry for a man. Ready to be filled with the huge girth of vein-rich flesh that hung before her face.

But again, the sadist denied her the gift of his brutal length. As she approached a fast meltdown, he locked the tops of three fingers into her streaming cunt. With the same three fingers spreading her labia, he pressed his middle one firmly against the whole length of her slot. With her clit crushed beneath that hard finger, Bolt's hand vibrated ruthlessly and his fingers stretched her vulva wide as she came again. Gritting her teeth, she came and she came and she came in a shockingly long sequence of contractions that continued in an endless stream of disturbing ecstasy. Every time she thought it was over, he tightened his grip along her slot and spread his fingers in her vulva, coaxing another surge of anguished delight from her cunt. She thought the pleasure would never end.

Several body-racking convulsions later, Tavia was drenched in sweat as the moisture that crept through her crease dripped from her bottom onto the hand-stitched bedspread. She felt wrung out and wrenched, strung out on pleasure. Her cunt was

totally closed. Locked up for the night. Locked up forever. Soft and achy and gloriously sated.

Then, with his finger pressed over her clit, Bolt forced her to come again. Under his merciless manipulation, her cunt opened for a brief, surprised instant as she experienced a short, tight wave of deep, searing pleasure.

"No," she sobbed, as he pushed his fingers down through her pussy to her opening and rimmed her streaming entrance with the rough, calloused pad of his fingertips. "No. Not again. Please."

"You give up?" he murmured with a tight laugh.

"I give up," she moaned.

"Learned your lesson?"

She nodded.

"No more underpants?"

Again she nodded. "Not when you're around," she surrendered with a grating moan. "Are you going to let me out of these shoes now?"

"In a minute." Turning, he straddled her hips and leaned forward. With his weight on his hands and his knees stretched wide, Bolt fed his cock between her slick, sweat-dusted breasts that were packed tightly together within the confining framework of her bra. Dragging his cock through the tight hug of her breasts, he jerked his hips as he fucked her tits. She watched his hard abdomen surge above her as he drove his hips at her time and again.

Reaching between his spread legs, Tavia wrapped her fingers gently around his balls, handling his rough testicles as she felt them harden, felt him still and felt him spill onto her chest in hot, liquid surges of spewing ejaculate that poured onto her breasts and rolled in thick rivulets toward her shoulders. With one hand wrapped around his root, Bolt grunted as he rubbed his shaft into the shining puddle between her breasts then painted Tavia's tight nipples with his slippery cum.

When Bolt finally rolled off her, he gathered Tavia's head in the cradle of his big hand and pressed her face into his damp groin. The sharp, tangy smell of Bolt's cum filled her lungs as she fell asleep with her legs spread, her feet nailed to the floor and his semen drying to a thin skin on her chest.

Chapter Five

When Tavia woke, the dark house was quiet. The light that grayed her bedroom window suggested dawn's approach. Bolt had rolled away from her in the night. He lay on his back, sprawled across the bed with the fingers of one hand tangled in her hair. Rousing herself enough to unfasten the buckles on her shoes, Tavia tucked her breasts back into the cups of her bra and pulled her dress around her.

Her stirrings had roused the animal stretched out beside her and he reached for her with one arm, snaring her into his hold, pulling her into the warmth of his chest. His lips brushed across her forehead before he fell asleep again. His breathing was long and even as she twisted in his arms. When her back was against his chest, his arms shifted to twine around her. One hand came under her arm to wrap around a lace-cupped breast, the other splayed out to claim the soft curve of her belly.

Tavia sighed. She could get used to this. Everything Bolt did seemed sexy. Even the way he cradled her belly in his large hand.

For the next hour or so, she lay quietly within the strong cage of his arms, savoring his sexy, male presence as she waited for the sky to lighten. When she figured it was close to six o'clock, she worked her way out of Bolt's embrace and headed for the bathroom where she showered. Wrapped up in a fluffy white robe, she snagged a cup of coffee in the kitchen and headed for her office where she went to work on her current story.

Although Tavia tried to concentrate on resolving her plotline, the thick heat that pooled between her legs distracted her. Her throbbing sex felt swollen and used, her clit bruised as her pulse threaded through it in a thick reminder of how she'd spent the night. Impatiently, she crossed her legs then quickly uncrossed them. When she looked up, Bolt was in the doorway, his shoulder propped against the jamb. The gray

sweatpants were gone, replaced by his faded jeans hanging low on his hips. Like a lovesick pup, her clit responded to his presence with an aching pulse of desire.

Jeez. How could she be thinking of sex? Her poor abused pussy was so battered and mauled, it probably needed a week to recover. Bolt gave her a tentative smile and her clit twinged while her vulva gulped in anticipation. She returned him a watery smile of her own.

"How do you feel this morning?" he asked in a soft, rough burr that sounded so damn...affectionate.

"Great," she answered quickly. "Great." She tugged her eyes from him and fixed them on the computer screen, feigning the utmost interest in whatever the hell it was in front of her face.

She heard the scuff of his bare feet as he sauntered into the room. He stopped when he reached her, wrapped his hand around her nape and squatted beside her rolling chair. "Hey," he murmured, "don't get all shy on me now. I'm the guy who ate you out last night."

And that didn't help. Her swollen pussy ached at the reminder then throbbed with a heavy wave of new arousal. She shook her head as the thick pad of his thumb caressed the corner of her mouth.

"I got hit with an unexpected deadline this morning. My manuscript has to be in by noon," she mumbled, averting her eyes as she wondered why she was lying to him.

Her story wasn't due for another month. She didn't know why she'd just lied. She just knew she didn't want to drive him to Albuquerque. She couldn't tell if she was reluctant to spend an hour alone with him in the car or whether she was trying to delay his departure.

He nodded.

"I...won't be able to give you that ride to Albuquerque." The hard curve of his lips kicked back into a smile. "Maybe one of the carpenters will be heading in that direction at the end of the day," she suggested falteringly.

In a long, delicious stretch of hard, male muscle, he rose to his feet. "I'll check with them," he told her. "What time does Maria get here?"

"Maria doesn't work on Thursdays."

"I'll head for the kitchen then and see what I can find for breakfast."

As soon as he was out the door, Tavia buried her face in her hands. There was a hungry, pounding ache in her vagina and an obstinate pulsing interest in her poor, ravaged clit that was beyond belief. Her traitorous body parts apparently didn't know what was good for them. Exactly how much did they think a girl could take?

For the next half hour, Tavia stared at the computer monitor, trying to focus. She had accomplished exactly nothing when Bolt reappeared carrying two plates, one of which he slid onto the desk beside her mouse pad.

"What's this?" she asked hesitantly.

"Bacon and mushroom sandwich." He pulled up a chair on the other side of her desk. He dropped into the chair then returned to his feet with a start. Reaching for his back pocket, he pulled out his hammer and laid it on the desk beside his plate.

"You can cook?"

"Don't act so surprised," he chided her.

Suddenly, she remembered her manners. "Thanks," she murmured.

"I'm the oldest of four kids," he said without looking at her. "My mother went to work fulltime after the divorce." He shrugged. "I learned to cook."

Tavia nodded and took a dainty bite of the warm sandwich. Almost immediately, she closed her eyes. "This is good!" she exclaimed.

"Thought you'd like it." He grinned, baring a wicked glimpse of gleaming white teeth. "We gotta keep your strength up so you can continue writing those best sellers."

"Who said I wrote best sellers?"

Gnawing off a huge chunk of crusty bread wrapped around crisp bacon and fried mushrooms, Bolt shrugged as he threw a glance around the room. "This house. Your car. The new addition."

"My boyfriend?" she said with a wry laugh.

His eyes shifted with a guilty gold slide of color. He shrugged. "Well, I don't trust Alex. But you're an attractive woman, Tavia."

She took another bite. "Yeah?" she said with a smile, inviting him to continue.

"Yeah." He considered the idea thoughtfully as he tore another piece out of his sandwich. Slowly, he chewed then swallowed. "I didn't notice at first," he admitted. "Although I liked your tits right off." He shrugged. "Then later on, I noticed that you were...kind of sexy. Very sexy," he corrected himself as his gaze smoldered on her.

"Later on? How much later on? You mean later on...when you discovered I had money?"

He nodded before he took another bite. His expression was deeply contemplative as he chewed. "I think that's part of it. Not just the fact that you *have* money, but that you were smart and ambitious enough to go out and make it."

This reply wasn't exactly what she'd anticipated. She had expected some sort of denial out of the big man. His response was surprisingly honest. "What on earth do you mean?"

A deep ridge formed between his tawny brows. "I mean that...your money wouldn't be as attractive if you'd inherited it, for instance." When she stared at him, he grinned. "But it wasn't just the money. When we got in the car and you started giving me shit, that's when I noticed you. When you're built like me, there aren't many people who sass you like that. There sure as hell aren't many women. I have a few friends who don't feel like they have to watch what they say. But most people are careful." Again, he shrugged. "It gets old."

Tavia nodded as she stared at him. Several seconds passed before she noticed the change in his expression.

His eyes glinted with a fierce, purely predatory gleam. "Are you naked inside that robe?" he asked in an unexpectedly husky voice.

Reacting instinctively, her hands flew to the neckline of her robe where she clutched it closed above her breasts. Unfortunately, that left her hands in the wrong place to fend off his attack when he rose from his chair, circled the desk and slid to his knees in front of her. His big hands were under the robe, sliding the soft fabric up over her knees as she protested. When the white terrycloth was puddled in her lap, he pushed her legs wide and dropped back onto his heels.

Tavia squirmed in the ensuing silence, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Oh god, yes," he rasped. "Pussy paradise."

Squeaking one eye open, Tavia caught his hungry gaze burning into the curling thatch between her legs. The man looked like a kid who'd just discovered Christmas.

When she squirmed again self-consciously, his big hands moved soothingly along her inner thighs. "Don't be shy," he whispered. "I've got you, Tavia. I've got you. I won't hurt you. I just want to watch you get wet."

A breathless moan escaped her lips as she felt her insides melt and relax and settle with a deep, ravenous hunger. "Bolt," she argued breathlessly.

"Look at this," he murmured as he tugged her forward to the edge of the chair. "Your lips are so swollen and rosy. Your bud is so ripe and full. It looks like it's ready to burst. You're either horny or hurting," he told her. "Which is it?"

"A bit of both," she confessed.

His rough hands caressed the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, back and forth, approaching and retreating as each questing foray brought his fingers inexorably closer to the crease between her legs and her sex. Finally, his thumbs ran into the crease, pulling slightly at the thick flesh of her labia. Pulling more. Pulling until she felt her lips part and felt the slightly cool touch of air on her damp folds. His thumbs settled either side of her pussy. Then his lips were against her labia, wet and hot, soft and sliding as he kissed her sex and his thumbs stroked, stretching her vulva open then allowing it to

relax while all the time his mouth moved over her sex in the most tender of kisses. "That doesn't hurt, does it?" he murmured against her open pussy.

She let loose a light moan. "Not quite. Or at least if it does, I don't care."

"That's my girl," he soothed. "This is one pretty little piece of cunt. So fragile and pink. So fuckable. Move your legs apart a bit more. That's it. Now relax. I'm just going to play with you a bit and watch you cream. I'll be careful."

He settled his mouth against her sex again and his thumbs pulled her wide as he sucked rhythmically, rolling her clit beneath his tongue, gently at first then more aggressively, scraping it beneath his teeth, sucking hungrily, fiercely. He pulled away suddenly, breathing hard and just watching her sex, open and exposed beneath his thumbs. "That's it, baby. Spill for me." Slowly he leaned forward. Softly he touched his lips to her spread sex.

As her opening shuddered beneath his mouth, Tavia fought back a moan of pleasure. The strangled sound came out somewhere between a sob and a choking whimper. Pressing her knees wide, she pushed her streaming sex into his mouth. His hands moved around to clutch her ass as he mauled her slot with his mouth, his lips everywhere, working her fragile pink folds and suckling her clitoris. Then his tongue swept low, rimming her vulva, slipping on the moisture that spilled from her cunt. He stopped with a deep, male rumble of warning. "Are you ready?" he rasped in a voice raw with lust.

When she whimpered in response, he ate into her again.

"Are you close?" he growled.

"Yes," she sobbed. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Then ask for it," he whispered against her sex. He pulled away. Then touched her. Pulled away again. His tongue nudged against her clitoris and she cried out in anguish. "You don't get it until you ask for it, baby doll."

She twisted in the chair. "Please. Please. I'm ready," she cried and moaned and whimpered.

He laughed and touched her again, taunting her clitoris with the feathering stroke of his tongue.

"Bolt!"

"I'm waiting, Tavia. Say the magic word."

"Please, Bolt."

"That's not the magic word I was looking for, Tavia."

"Bolt. Please. Please...fuck me."

"That's more like it," he growled out in a low rasp. "How do you want it, sweetheart?"

"I don't care," she whimpered.

He stilled. "*You don't care?*"

Tavia stopped breathing. She knew she was in trouble. Bolt's tone was both insulted and incredulous. She froze under the narrow heat of his gaze. "I just meant..."

He pushed away from her. "Well, hell, Tavia. If you don't care," he drawled, "I'll be damned if I'm gonna bother getting my cock out for you."

She snatched at his shoulders before he could get away. "What!" she screamed. "Oh god, Bolt, please. I'm so hot. I'm burning alive. Don't just...don't you *dare* just leave me like this."

"Are you hot?" he taunted her in a murmuring whisper. "Really hot?"

"Bolt!" she cried.

"Show me where you're hot, Tavia. Spread your sex for me with your fingers. Put your finger on your clit and show me where you're hot."

With a sobbing whimper of defeat, Tavia leaned back in the chair.

Bolt helped her widen her legs as his feral gaze strafed into her pussy. "Show me," he coaxed in a voice heavy with dark undertones.

"You're a bastard," she sobbed.

"Show me," he growled.

Her fingers hovered a moment over the thick lips of her sex. Slowly, she fingered her labia apart and exposed her small, rosy nub. Bolt sucked in a hissing breath of pleasure as she stroked her fingertip over her clit. She was so close that she shivered at the contact of her own finger. Her head dropped back on the chair and she closed her eyes as her finger slid down through her heated slot then up to her clitoris again. God, she was hot! She could feel the heat pulsing out of her pussy and wafting against her hands as she breathed.

"That's enough," he ordered abruptly. His voice was tight and strained.

She screamed when something blissfully cold pressed against her clitoris. Her eyes flew open. "Bolt. What the —"

"Does that feel good?"

"Yes, but."

"It's just the hammer, Tavia. Just the cool, smooth, metal head of the hammer. I'll stop if you ask me to."

The hammer's wide head covered her clit completely as he pressed firmly and massaged her clitoris in a circular motion. "Hold on, baby doll. Hold on. Can you get your legs a bit wider?"

"Bolt," she whimpered as she moved her legs apart—shamelessly wide, obscenely wide.

Bolt pressed the hammerhead against her clit as he watched her pussy with avaricious greed.

"Bolt," she moaned. "I'm so...close."

"Hold on," he whispered. "Hold on, Tavia. I'll tell you when."

"I don't think I can wait," she warned between panting breaths that seared her lungs.

When the hammer stopped its cool circular motion, her gaze swung wildly to his face. Waiting until he had her attention, Bolt turned the head of the hammer and drew his tongue over the flat surface of the metal, drawing her taste into his mouth and hollowing his cheeks around her flavor, obviously savoring the essence of her arousal.

"Now watch the hammer," he commanded as he returned the metal head between her legs and pressed hard on her pulse. As Tavia watched him press the hammer between the pouting lips of her sex, her vagina tightened a long instant in pleasure. When the hammer moved again, he tapped the metal head quickly and gently against the fleshy head of her clitoris. He stopped suddenly and she glanced at his face. His expression was dark and feral as he grasped first one of her ankles then the other, hurrying her feet onto the desk's edge behind him.

Kneeling between her splayed legs, he pressed the hammerhead hard again. Again, her sex clenched for him. Slowly, he rotated the hammer around her clitoris. Pressure built at the apex of her sex, deep inside her clutching vagina. Every time she thought climax was imminent, he changed the position of the cool hammerhead, sliding it down to her vulva and penetrating the rim of her wet entrance, returning it to tap maddeningly at her clit, pressing hard over the entire top of the clitoris, rotating slowly.

"Fuck," he rasped, "you're spilling all over the chair. Hold on," he whispered in a hoarse voice. "Hold on and I'll make it worth your while, Tavia. Just a little bit more and I promise I'll shaft you. I'll fill you so full of cock, you'll scream. I promise, sweetheart. Just hold on and I'll ride you so hard and so long you won't remember your name."

In the end she was begging for it. Begging for the bright relief of climax, her feet braced either side of his shoulders on the desk behind him, her knees falling wide as she twisted in the chair, one very small inch away from orgasm.

"Now," she gasped as she watched his eyes burning into her spread pussy. "Now, Bolt."

He pushed out a breathless laugh. "You are *so* easy," he stated in a voice saturated with smug, male satisfaction. "I love a woman who isn't too proud to beg for it." Leaving the hammer on the floor, he rose between her damp legs as she trembled beneath him, trembled and shivered, her sex poised at the anguished edge of need. Slowly, cruelly, he plucked at the buttons of his fly until she couldn't take any more. Reaching for the metal buttons, she tore at his fly and yanked at the waist of his jeans, helping him to loose his erection. It sprang free—hot and hard—jutting toward her face as he angled it down to her mouth, watching her worship the hooded crown with her tongue.

"Are you protected?" he asked in a rough burr.

She looked up at him as she nodded, letting her tongue slide up and down his shaft.

When he met her gaze, he lifted his chin in acknowledgement, watching her hungrily, indecision burning in the bright, liquid gold of his eyes.

"There are some condoms in the top drawer of my dresser." She ran her tongue up his length again. "In the bedroom."

He was silent a moment as his jaw tightened into a slab of hardened bronze. "And who did you buy those for?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not using a goddamn rubber you bought for Alex."

She stopped licking his cock to give him an angry glare. "I didn't buy them for Alex. I just bought them...to have them."

"For who?"

"For whoever!"

"Forget it!" he exploded with sudden violence. "I don't want to use a fucking condom anyhow. I want to fuck you naked. I want to fuck you with my bare skin sliding inside your tight, hot pussy. I want to feel your cunt—wet and burning—

sucking at my dick." He pulled in a breath heavy with tension, rough with desire. "For once in my life, I want to fuck a woman without a goddamn condom," he snarled.

"For once in your life?" Tavia hesitated. "What do you mean? Are you telling me you've never skipped using one before?"

He inclined his chin a hard fraction. His mean, curving lips were set in a determined line. His jaw was like a jutting piece of steel. But the man was holding his breath, waiting for her decision.

She gave him a tiny tilt of her chin. "I guess that would be all right then. I'm protected and...safe."

"Thought so." Some of the tension left his body in a long, rough breath. "How many times do you want to come?"

"What...do you mean?"

"How many times do you want to come?" he repeated. "I don't want to miss anything but I don't want to wear you out either."

"I don't know," she answered. "Nobody ever asked me that before."

"How many times do you usually come?"

"Usually? Once."

"Once when you're with a man?"

She gritted her teeth. "That's right."

"How many times *can* you come?"

She thought about this, hating to answer the question with all of its dirty little implications. Finally she countered with, "I came three times last night."

He grunted as though he was dissatisfied with this response. "That was different. I didn't have you on my cock," he growled. "Do you need time to build up again after the first orgasm?"

"No. After the first, the next ones are easy."

"Three it is, then."

Lowering himself, he locked his hands around the arms of her chair. His long, hard body shimmered in tension as a vibration of hunger traveled his frame. His muscles tensed, hard and defined as he hovered on the sharp edge of passion. Tavia felt his wide cock head probe through the long, silky slot of her pussy and she canted her hips to meet his thrust. The thick head pressed against her notch for an instant.

“Get those knees apart,” he grunted. “Spread them wide.” When she pressed her knees wide, he heaved his hips at her and penetrated her in one long, savage sweep.

He was huge but she was ready for him. Her cunt was burning with slippery, wet heat as he shoved into her. Her vagina closed around him as he drove to the back of her sheath where he smashed up against her sweet spot and held. For several seconds she was lost in perfect ecstasy as he shafted her, his cock head crushed into the back of her cervix as he ground his hips. His teeth were bared in a feral snarl and his eyes blazed with primal lust as he watched her orgasm, her mouth open, her eyes fixed on his. The color in his eyes shifted, glazed to hard gold as he lowered his panting mouth to hers, raping her mouth with his tongue while the walls of her vagina contracted around the hard cock that filled it.

When her sex finally settled and was quiet again, Bolt half-closed his eyes. He pushed out a small, tense laugh. “Oh god, I love that,” he rasped. “I love the feel of a woman’s cunt rippling down my length, tightening and closing and loosening again. There’s nothing like it in the world,” he said. “Well,” he added, “except for this.”

With a methodical patience bordering on obsession, Bolt began to work himself over her, pulling his hips as he slid from her heated channel then thrusting forward to fill her again. He was merciless and thorough, spearing her on the end of his cock with the long vicious sweep of his hips as he shoved into her, slowly at first but with increasing velocity and growing violence. Sweat glimmered on the golden stubble of his beard and across his broad chest as he hammered his cock between her legs. The chair rocked on its rollers as he grasped the arms and dug in with his feet to deliver blow

after blow to the back of her vagina. He grimaced as he watched her face. "You're ready to come again, aren't you?"

She nodded her head.

"When?"

She jerked against him in answer and his hips quickened as he pounded through her orgasm, the savage pummel of his hips accelerating as she sat, spread in the chair, pinned beneath his weight, his cock stretching her vulva brutally wide as he thrust against her with steady strength and mad, vicious intensity.

"Okay," he gritted as her vagina closed around his cock in small finishing surges. "One more time, Tavia. Meet me one more time and we'll both get fucked this time."

With sudden urgency, he slipped his arms under her legs, lifting her knees so he could take her at a more direct angle, so that he could stretch into her more deeply, more completely. His strokes were shorter, faster, as he plastered his groin against the cushioned mound of her sex and ground into her in hot, gritty surges. This one was for him, Tavia realized as he slammed into her. This time he was going to fuck her, pure and simple, nothing fancy. There'd be no reserve on his part, no careful timing involved. Just a man in the satisfying act of dominating a woman, claiming her for his pleasure and fucking her like an animal.

A fresh sheen of sweat burst out over his skin, gleaming on his chest as his lungs heaved. His breath roaring against her ear was a harsh testament to his need.

"Fuck," he grunted. "You're so wet and hot and soft. Take me, Tavia. Open up your tight little cunt and let me fuck you all the way. Come on me now, and my cock is yours, sweetheart."

Tavia hurried to join him in climax, winding herself up tight then letting herself loose as he expanded inside her, stretching the walls of her channel as he burst inside her cunt and filled her with his hot, steamy cum.

"Fuck!" he shouted as he came. His voice was a hoarse scrape of sound as he grunted out his stunned pleasure. "Fuck," he groaned again quietly as he pulsed and emptied inside her. His damp forehead rested against her temple.

Dragging his heated lips down the side of her cheek, he buried his face in the warm hollow of her neck as his hips continued to surge gently, milking the experience for everything he could take from it. "Tavia," he breathed in a heavily sated growl, "now...aren't you glad you weren't wearing underpants?"

Tavia's heartfelt giggle was her only response.

"They should make more women like you," he mumbled into her neck.

With her fingers caressing his hot, rough cheeks, Tavia pulled his face out of her neck and smiled softly. "And why is that?"

"Because," he told her with a deep, exhausted rumble of contentment, "if they made more women like you, I'd order myself a dozen and stay fucked all the time."

Tavia chuckled. "A dozen?"

He nodded as he pushed himself away from the chair and onto his feet. He tucked his cock inside his jeans, did up a few buttons then rubbed his palm down the faded line of his button-down fly. "A dozen. That way I wouldn't wear you out."

She cocked an accusing eyebrow at him. "You didn't hear me complaining."

He gave her a warm smile and a lazy nod. Leaning over, he stooped to nudge two fingers between her thick labia. Slowly, he drew his fingers through her hot, swollen folds. "Wait until this afternoon," he told her ominously. "By the time I'm finished with this tight little piece of pussy, you'll be screaming for backup."

When she smiled at him, he pressed a lingering kiss to her lips.

"I should let you get back to work." Slipping his plate over hers, he smiled down at her. "Guess I'll go talk to the carpenters."

"I imagine you're anxious to get away." Her voice came out lower than she'd planned.

There was a pregnant pause. "I wouldn't mind spending another night."

When Tavia lifted her eyes, he was grinning at her. Damn, he was a smug, cocky bastard.

"But right now you've got a deadline to meet and I'm not much good at doing nothing." Sweeping the hammer off the floor, he hooked it through the hole in his back pocket. "So I'll keep busy outside until...later. I saw a flatbed pull up with a load of trusses while I was in the kitchen."

"Trusses?"

He nodded. "For the roof on your new addition," he told her. "I'll see if the carpenters need any help."

"You could do the dishes," she pointed out as he sauntered toward the door.

"Don't do dishes," he threw back at her. "Don't do dishes and don't do panties."

"Chauvinist," she yelled at him.

"Get used to it," he called back.

Chapter Six

Tavia went back to work with a smile and a warm feeling of contentment. Forcing herself to concentrate on her current project, her fingers tapped on the keyboard amid the dull thump and pound of distant hammers. Eventually, she left her office to shower again and dress. Dallying in front of the huge floor-to-ceiling mirrors in the bathroom, Tavia pulled her hair back and turned her head, lifting her chin as she surveyed the smooth flesh of her neck. The soft skin was mottled with warm, scratchy pools of pink—blotches of color where Bolt had left his mark on her, the masculine evidence of his rough beard and male passion etched on her pale, feminine skin.

Humming in the closet, she selected another calf-length dress with a thin gauzy overlay of chiffon splashed with muted colors of soft peach and warm pink. After slipping on a comfortable pair of flat sandals, Tavia headed down the hall and into the kitchen to refill her coffee cup. On her way back, she made a sly detour to the living room window where she could spy on the new construction through the shielding veil of a sheer white curtain.

Bolt had made himself at home on her roof, standing on the narrow wooden wall, guiding trusses into place, toe-nailing them down then ducking through the open framework as the next truss swung up to meet his outstretched hand. Every movement he made was carried out with a leonine grace, his muscles rippling in his shoulders and across his back as he balanced on the narrow wall. Tavia was so focused on the pleasant view of Bolt working that she jumped a bit when the doorbell sounded from a few feet distant. Just before she dragged her eyes from Bolt, she saw his gaze swing into the driveway. He glared at the white van parked on the concrete in front of her house.

Tavia answered the front door.

A young man in a crisp gray uniform stood on the other side of the door, a large bouquet of yellow roses in his arm. Really large. There must have been forty blooms in the bundle. She thanked him and signed for the flowers but he stopped her before she could close the door. "There's more, ma'am," he warned her. "Lots more."

"Oh!" She glanced around the small entryway that opened into the living room. "Shall I just leave the door open then?"

"I think that would be best, ma'am."

By the time the deliveryman had emptied the van and Tavia had finally closed the door behind him, she had a dozen huge bouquets spilling across her living room into the dining area. Each bundle of color had a little white card attached. All of the flowers were from Alex. The handwritten notes varied in content but not in purpose. "We need to talk" was the main thrust of the messages. "You're making a mistake" was another recurrent theme. Tavia sank into a turn-of-the-century, straight-backed chair just inside the living room.

The front door opened soon afterward. Bolt filled the opening just before the door slammed behind him. Tavia lifted her gaze to him, a handful of fancy, ragged-edged cards in her fingers as she sat in the richly upholstered chair.

Bolt's thin, worn scrap of a T-shirt was clutched in his fist and he lifted it to press above the sweating curve of his chin. Moisture dampened the gold stubble on his jaw and more sweat gleamed across the muscles of his chest. When he rubbed the T-shirt across the broad expanse of his bronze-flecked chest, she stared at his flat, brown nipples. Jeez, he looked good in nothing but skin and nipples.

Bolt glowered as he took in the roomful of flowers. "Let me guess," he growled. "Alex?"

She nodded without speaking, returning her attention to the handful of cards.

"What the fuck is his problem?" Bolt grumbled. "Can't the man take no for an answer?"

She lifted one shoulder. "I haven't actually told him no."

"You didn't have to. I told him *for* you — last night."

She lifted her head. "His family has been asking him when they should reserve the country club...for the rehearsal dinner."

"Did you tell him two weeks after hell freezes over?"

"No," she said quietly.

A long silence ensued as his eyes narrowed into a thin line of gold. "No," he said finally. "No. You're not marrying that princess."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because...because I forbid it!"

"You forbid it?"

"Yeah, I forbid it. Jesus. He—he drives a Fiat for chrissakes." He scowled at her as though that were sufficient argument.

She folded her arms over her chest and stared back. "What do you have against Fiats?"

"Fiats are for girls."

"That's your argument?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I don't like it. I don't like arrogant, male chauvinistic pigs who feel threatened by women, girls or any man who happens to have the least bit of sensitivity."

"Threatened?" Bolt bellowed. "Do I look threatened?"

"At least his Fiat runs!" Tavia sniped at him. "Unlike your vehicle, Alex's car runs! And despite what you think, Bolt, Alex is *not* gay!"

"How would you know?"

"He told me."

"How would *he* know?"

"Stop it," she yelled. "Just stop it, Bolt!"

He pulled a hand back through his hair. "If you have to get married," he yelled suddenly, "at least pick somebody worthy of you!"

"Worthy? Of me? Alex was last year's Mr. Dream World Fantasy at the Romance Lovers Convention."

"Yeah, he's a fantasy all right," Bolt muttered. "And you're living in a dream world if you think he's anything else."

"Okay!" she shouted. "Okay, Bolt. Just who would you suggest in his place?"

"In his place?"

She waited.

"How about someone like me?"

Not me, but someone *like* me. What a complete dick!

"How *about* someone like you?" she tossed back at him with a sneer. "How *about* a guy who works in a garage and apparently isn't even very good at that! A guy who can't even keep his own vehicle running. A guy who can't afford the *parts* to keep it running! A guy *I* found hitchhiking down the road wearing a ratty old *threadbare* T-shirt with his ass hanging out of a pair of jeans that were at least as old as his car?"

Bolt looked startled for a moment then his expression went blank as his eyebrows lifted in surprise. His eyes focused on the T-shirt fisted in his hand and he frowned at the thin scrap of material as though he'd never seen it before.

"Well," he announced in slow revelation, "I guess when you put it *that* way, I don't sound like much of a prize, do I?" His eyes narrowed on her with a cold, metallic sheen. "I didn't realize you put so much store by money, Miss October. Personally, I *don't*!"

"That's *obvious*!" she screamed in frustration.

He continued to regard her coldly. "I would have thought you had enough money for both of us."

"And *I'm* not exactly surprised you *feel* that way! Believe it or not, Bolt Hardin, I've met plenty of men like you. There are *plenty* of men out there who think that *I* make enough money for two to live off."

He nodded. "Well, fuck me," he murmured, then cut a glance at her. "I was speaking figuratively."

She rolled her eyes. "Do you even know what that means?"

He looked stung, his normally arrogant expression finally reduced to something less. It didn't look right on him. Bolt didn't look good hurt. Immediately Tavia regretted the cheap shot.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah. I *figure* I have a rough idea. I *figure* it means I've wasted enough time here. *Literally* as well as *figuratively*." He turned, grasping the doorknob as she shouted at him.

"Don't try to make me the bad guy, Bolt! *You* like an ambitious woman! Maybe I feel the same way. Maybe I'm looking for a guy with an education and a career and a future!"

He turned back to face her, pointing a shaking finger at her. "You are such a fucking snob! For your information, I have a career! And I could have gone to college if I'd wanted to."

"I am *not* a snob, Bolt! But I do have standards. I *do* expect a little intelligent conversation out of a man."

He threw his hands in the air. "Fine," he bellowed. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know," she returned hotly. "Literature, maybe!"

Crossing his sun-bronzed arms over his chest, he leaned back against the door. "Fine. Fire away."

"Well..." Tavia licked her lips nervously, suddenly feeling like a bit of an ass. "What's the last book you read?"

"Conan."

"That's *exactly* what I mean."

"Have you ever read Robert E. Howard?"

"No, but..."

"Then how can you judge?"

"Okay." Tavia took a deep breath, convinced at this point that he *was*, in fact, the ass, rather than she. "What was the *best* book you ever read?"

"Best ever?"

"Yes."

"*Catcher in the Rye*," he clipped out without hesitation.

"Really?" she faltered. "That's one of my favorites too. What did you like about it?"

"Everything," he cut at her. "It was...full of true things. It was real. Most books are full of crap."

She nodded.

"Like romance," he went on. "That's all crap. There isn't an honest word in a romance novel." He stopped abruptly. "Jesus, I'm sorry, Tavia. I forgot —"

"Have you ever read a romance?" she asked frostily.

"Well, I..."

"Then how can you judge?" Standing, she threw the handful of cards at the chair and stalked out of the room then down the hall.

He levered himself away from the door. "Fuck," he muttered. "Tavia. I'm sorry." He followed her into the bedroom. "I'm sorry, but men just aren't like that. The way they act in romance novels."

"Yeah?" She spun to face him. "Well, enlighten me, Mr. Bolt Hardin. What are men really like?"

"More like me."

"Really, Bolt? Because of all the men I've ever met, I've never met anyone *remotely* like you!"

"That's just because most men are careful. Most men act...civilized."

She snorted. "So you're telling me that Alex is just pretending to be civilized."

"Hell, no! Alex is pretending to be a man!"

Her jaw dropped as she stared at him. "You're a prick, Bolt. A goddamn bigoted prick."

"Me? Bigoted? I'm not a bigot, Tavia. I don't mind guys like Alex. I think they're fucking adorable. The only problem I have with Alex is that he's a gold digger."

"And you aren't!"

His expression was stunned. "Don't be ridiculous! I didn't ask you to marry me!"

"Arrgh!" she screamed. "You're driving me crazy."

"Yeah?" he muttered, dragging the heel of his palm over his button-down fly. A wry smile fell over his features. "Well, if it helps to know, you do the same thing to me." He blew out a sigh as they stared at each other.

"You know," she told him with a tired huff, "Alex isn't exactly a poor man."

"Maybe not. But I bet you'd make him rich."

Exhausted and exasperated, she nodded as she stared at the floor. Then she lifted her head. "How rich would I make you, Bolt?"

"That's not the issue, Tavia."

"No," she agreed quietly. "That's not the issue, is it?" She slumped down to sit on edge of the bed.

"We got all the trusses up," Bolt announced into the lengthy silence.

She nodded at the floor.

"I guess I'll take a shower."

This didn't seem to require any comment.

"So. Are you going to fuck me or not?"

Amazed, she lifted her head to stare at him. "You are *such* a pig."

His defensive gaze flicked across the room then returned to hers. "Is that a yes or a no? Because I want to know before I take my shower. I don't want to waste it in the shower if there's any chance —"

"There's *no* chance," she cut in.

He stared at her a few more seconds, his eyes burning with a strange gold fire. Then he spoke. "Well, Tavia. I was hoping I wouldn't have to resort to this but you leave me no choice."

As Tavia watched, he reached back and palmed his hammer out of his back pocket. When he took a few steps toward the bed, she stood and backed away from him just to be safe. But he leaned over when he reached the end of the bed and used the clawed end of the hammer to pry the long nails from the black ankle-straps spiked into the carpet. With the shoes swinging from his long fingers, he stalked from the room.

Tavia shook her head as she watched the empty doorway. Seconds later, she heard two slamming bangs. Horrified, she rushed from the room. "Damn it, Bolt! Those are hardwood *floors!*"

Screeching to a hasty halt in the middle of the living room, Tavia stared, aghast. The shoes were spaced about three feet apart in the dining room—nailed to the polished hardwood floor. The toes were tucked beneath the edge of the dining room table, which meant that she'd be facing the table...once they were buckled around her ankles. And she didn't imagine it would be long after that before Bolt had her face down, with her cheek pressed against the curly maple veneer of the tabletop.

"No," she said in a tiny, awestruck voice as she backed away from the table, the dining room, him. She turned to run but he caught her by the hips and dragged her ass backward across the room

"You promised to wear the shoes," he told her firmly.

"I already delivered on that promise!" she yelled as she fought to free herself.

He wrestled her around to face the table. "Are you trying to renege on our agreement?" he grunted.

"I already wore the shoes!" she screamed.

She fought him every inch of the way, first pounding her fists on his chest then kicking back with her heels after he'd turned her. But with an iron-like fist manacled her ankle, he got her sandals off and got her right foot buckled into the ankle-straps. The next time she kicked out, he caught her foot and held it tightly.

"You know," he said lightly, "if I were you, I'd stop worrying about the shoes at this point and start worrying about those underpants you're wearing."

She went suddenly still. "What?" she queried in a small voice.

In answer, he guided her left foot to the shoe anchored on the floor.

"No," she screamed suddenly, tearing her dress up her legs and yanking her panties down. "No!" she screamed again.

The vicious sadist laughed as her heel caught him full in the chest.

Somehow, drawing her knee up into her chest, Tavia managed to wrestle the silk bikinis over her left foot before he grabbed her ankle again, turned her and strapped her in.

Panting, she braced her hands on the table. Her hair hung before her face in long streaming ringlets of bright chestnut. Her discarded panties were puddled around her right foot. Tavia blew out a sigh of relief then pulled in a slow breath of longing as she felt Bolt's hands pushing her dress up over her bare ass. There was a rush of cool air on her skin followed by the rough contact of his denim jeans against her bottom.

She resisted the urge to snuggle her derriere into his warm, thick groin. The arrogant bastard didn't deserve that kind of validation. It was bad enough that he'd forced her to bare herself for him. She felt his hands stroke up the back of her thighs and

over her bottom. When he shifted his hips backward, she felt his large, rough palm stroke over the full, sodden lips of her sex.

"Tavia," he murmured accusingly, "you're wet!"

She moaned in answer.

"How can you be wet again?"

"I don't know, Bolt. How can you be hard again? I see you and I just start...leaking. I'm sore as hell, my pussy's as sore as hell, and every time I see you I...just *ache* for you."

"Poor Tavia," he murmured, leaning over her and bracing his hands on the table beside hers.

For a long time he just leaned against her with his chest warm across her back, rocking his denim-covered crotch against her pussy, his fingers playing with hers as his mouth hovered at her ear, pelting her cheek with his humid breath. When he put his damp lips against her cheek, she turned her face and found his mouth with hers. He returned her kiss stroke for stroke, using the hard, flat surface of his teeth like a weapon, bruising her lips, using his tongue to probe the slick inner recesses of her mouth, twisting his stubble-edged lips into her kiss.

When he finally broke away and straightened behind her, his breath was rough and harsh. There was a pause while he unbuttoned his jeans and guided his cock out of his pants. The next thing Tavia felt was the wide head of his penis riding through her sex from the top of her vulva, through the fragile, swollen folds of pink, over the tender bud of her clitoris to settle at the top of her cleft. Drawing back again, he loitered at her entrance for several moments, rimming her opening with his crown, collecting her moisture before sliding through her folds again and prodding at her sensitive clit.

Her clit was so damn hypersensitive that any more contact would have been painful. But his velvet-skinned cock head was unbearably gentle as he played its tip over the swollen knot of her clitoris. Her belly filled with heat while her vagina filled with want. Warmth and wet slid from her opening. She felt it trickle down through her

folds until his cock head was sliding over her slippery flesh and heightening every wicked sensation he laid on between her spread legs.

Her body relaxed as her breath came in rushing pants and she resituated her bottom, shifting and wiggling until she'd guided her open vulva to the fat, cushioned head of his penis.

Bolt chuckled softly. "You ready, baby doll?"

"I'm ready," she breathed.

"Are you going to beg for it?"

She gritted her teeth. "Only if you make me, you fucking sadist."

Bolt pushed out a tense laugh. "Okay," he murmured. "This one's on me."

She felt his huge cock head pressing against her oh-so-tender entrance and she held her breath.

"Brace yourself," he warned her with a grunt. With those words, he grasped her hips tightly and shafted her.

Her sudden intake of breath was a whistling squeak. His massive cock stretched and scraped at the raw, used flesh of her swollen vagina. She whimpered, wanting to cry out, wanting him to stop, wanting him to go on. Sliding down onto the table, she laid her hot cheek against the cool surface of the polished maple, reaching for the table's edges and holding on for dear life while sweat popped to bead on every pore of her body. A wide ellipse of fog pooled on the table beside her mouth.

"Bolt," she whimpered, "Bolt...I...go easy, Bolt. Please."

She felt his big hands on her derriere, pulling apart the cheeks of her ass as he ground his way deeper. She sucked in a painful breath.

"You sore, baby doll?"

"A little. I...do you think we could do this without...without moving?"

He chuckled. "That would be hard."

She groaned. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"But not impossible," he added, reaching around in front of her leg and settling his fingertips over the top of her labia. "I won't spread you," he told her. "So you tell me when I'm in the right place."

When he moved his hand in a small circle, she moaned. "That's the right place."

"Thought so," he grunted.

His shaft was buried deep between her cheeks, thickly enclosed within the flesh cushioning his groin. His thick wrist slid down between their bodies and she felt his left hand moving against her skin, stroking his balls as he rocked gently against her backside, barely moving inside her, nudging the full tip of his cock head against the back of her vagina, delivering deep, dark ecstasy with each thumping blow.

Moments later, his right hand was slipping as he massaged the full, wet lips that sheltered her clit. The deep pounding delivery at her sweet spot moved her slowly toward climax as he bucked against her in short surges. At some point the pleasure and need for deliverance overwhelmed any discomfort Tavia was aware of. She gripped the table's edges, braced her legs and lifted her ass to him.

"Jesus," he complained as his hands gripped the flesh of her cheeks. "You shouldn't have done that, Tavia. Hold on, sweetheart. You're about to get fucked."

With these words he pulled his hips and slammed into her, groaning as he drove into her with violent urgency, stretching her channel impossibly wide as his cock expanded in his own approach to climax.

Tavia didn't hear the doorbell ring. She was orgasming when it opened several minutes later, pressing the side of her open mouth into the table's smooth surface. Behind her, Bolt pounded against her backside, flaying her with the slap of his hips, flogging her with his cock, too close to climax to stop for anything less than the end of the world.

The stunned deliveryman stared a startled instant as a bouquet of red roses slipped from his fingers and dropped to rattle against the floor. Abruptly, he backed out of the house as Bolt threw his hips at Tavia's ass three more times then stilled, coming in

blisteringly hot surges, pumping his cum into her sheath, choking back obscene phrases mixed with hard words of devotion.

Afterward, Tavia groaned. "Oh man," she panted against the table, "poor guy. I bet we gave him a scare."

Bolt's shaft pulsed inside her as he ground his groin against the cushion of her ass. He jerked his chin upward. "Either that or a hard-on," he murmured.

Tavia's breath fogged on the table as she gave a weak giggle.

Bolt drew his cock out of her hold in a long, sore slide of thick flesh. "Did you get your story finished?" he asked as he pulled her dress down to cover her exposed backside.

"Story?" she mumbled vaguely.

"You had a noon deadline," he reminded her, tucking his cock inside his pants and buttoning up.

"Yes," she lied primly as he fell to one knee and released her from first one shoe, then the other.

"What about you? Did you get a ride to Albuquerque?" she asked, holding her breath.

Bolt was a moment answering. "Not tonight," he said softly. His gaze probed hers from behind thick lashes and for several seconds Tavia gave up on breathing altogether. His expression told her that he was staying the night. That he wanted to stay the night. And that she didn't have much choice in the matter.

Once Tavia was free of the shoes, she and Bolt crept across the entry to the front door. They found more flowers on the porch. Another dozen bouquets.

Tavia didn't open the notes.

Bolt spent the night.

Chapter Seven

Tavia overslept. She'd had a busy night. She smiled, stretching in the large king-sized bed as she reminisced. She particularly liked the memory of Bolt stretched over her, lying between her spread legs, his weight on his elbows as his cock pulsed inside her and he dipped his face to kiss her mouth. *That* was a good one. Turning on the bed, she snuggled her face into the pillow beside her and drew in a breath full of the rich, masculine scent of Bolt Hardin.

It was about then that she realized he was absent from the bed. Rising swiftly, Tavia wrapped her soft white robe around her and went looking for him.

She found him in the kitchen. And immediately wished she hadn't. She knew it was unreasonable, but what she saw in the kitchen turned her around in a hot firestorm of jealousy. She was out of the kitchen in a flash, striding through the dining room and down the hall, trying to distance herself from Bolt before she cursed him to hell and back.

Why were men such pricks?

Shaking her head, Tavia tried to dislodge that image from her head. When she'd opened the swinging door to the kitchen, she'd found Bolt Hardin—biggest prick on the face of the earth—with an arm around her cook. The curvy, dark-haired little woman was tucked into his side and his lips were on her neck, behind her ear. *Behind her ear!*

"Tavia!"

Tavia heard Bolt shout behind her as she spun into her bedroom, spinning again as she realized she had no fucking doors to slam in his face—and no weapon that would separate his head from his shoulders.

"Tavia," Bolt called again just before he appeared in her doorway.

"Get out of my house," she screeched at him in a whisper, her hair flying around her face, her cheeks burning up in anger. Stabbing him with her eyes, she gave him a look that guaranteed death and danger. "Get out of my house, you *fucking* prick!"

His eyes were narrowed in awe. "Tavia, you're overreacting."

"Am I?" she shouted. "*Am I?* What did I see back there in my kitchen?"

Slowly, he edged his way toward her. "You saw me kissing Maria."

She exploded. "That's what I thought I saw!"

He inclined his chin slightly, sliding another foot toward her.

"Why the fuck were you kissing my employee?"

Bolt's gaze hugged the floor. "Cookies."

"Cookies?" Tavia echoed, stunned.

Again Bolt nodded as he crept a few more inches in her direction. "Give me a break, Tavia," he muttered. "The woman had a plateful of warm cookies. I'd have kissed Alex if he'd had a plate of warm cookies."

Tavia tilted her head in disbelief as her eyes narrowed suspiciously on his face. The man was contrite. *Way* too contrite. She wasn't buying it.

In the next instant it didn't matter whether she was buying it or not because, in a flash of gliding movement, Bolt had her plastered up against the wall, his knee between her legs and his hands inside her robe, groping her breasts.

In a mad froth of rage, Tavia twisted beneath him. Her struggles had no effect whatsoever on Bolt except to roughen the breath that rushed from his lips and pelted her hair. With a groan of defeat, she glared down at the hands that had captured her breasts. The pale mounds of flesh spilled out around the edges of his huge hands. His palms were beneath her nipples, lifting her breasts into his splayed fingers. With frustration bordering on angst she watched her nipples, traitorous little sluts that they were, peaking for him. Her mind might still be her own—raging against him. But her

body was his—lock, stock and nipple. She glowered at her breasts as his fingers moved together, squeezing her erect nipples between the scissoring vise of his thick digits.

She was on fire. From the full, hungry lips of her pussy to the tips of her hardened nipples, she was on fire for him. She was angry and taut and tense, and on fire for a man with *no* potential who would never be *anything* more than a womanizing, lying cheat.

Wanting to cry and scream and sever his balls all at the same time, Tavia watched Bolt's gaze on her misbehaving nipples as a rough, male growl rumbled from his throat. His chest expanded as he sucked up air in lusty bursts. His gold eyes glowed with carnal heat as his lips slanted over hers and his mouth crushed into hers.

He forced the kiss on her. He forced it.

And she took it. Ate it up. Drank it down. All of it—hook, line and the long, lead sinker he had pressed up against her belly. When he was done imposing his carnal will between her lips, his mouth made a wet path to her ear. "Tavia," he whispered between the huge expansions of his lungs. "I'm only going to tell you this once, so pay attention. I'm not interested in Maria."

"Then why," she ground out between her own gasping attempts to breathe, "if you're not interested in Maria, do you have such a huge, fucking *hard-on*?"

He laughed and groaned at the same time. "Don't you know, baby doll? You are so fucking hot when you're mad. Look at you." Dragging her from the wall, he turned her to face the mirror above her painted dresser. He stood behind her as she stared at her reflection. Her hair was wild, two spots of bright color burned high on her cheeks and her eyes were just about emitting sparks above her angry pouting lips.

"If you want me to kiss you the way I kissed Maria, make me a plateful of warm cookies. But if you want me to fuck you up against the wall," he murmured into her neck, "just look at me like that."

His hands crossed beneath her chest and he lifted her breasts, one in each hand as he kneaded them in his fingers and pressed his iron-hard erection into the cleft of her

ass. The scorching flame of her anger was just beginning to dampen when the spell was broken by the tinny sound of annoyingly cheery music. Bolt cursed as he reached for the cell phone in his pocket.

"Hardin," he barked into the phone. "What? Say again. You're breaking up. What? Listen. *Listen*. I'll try to call you back."

Snapping his phone closed, Bolt frowned at it for a few seconds. "I'd better make this call from a land line," he told Tavia. "Be back in a minute." He headed through her open doorway and down the hall. "We'll finish making up then."

As Tavia glared at the opening, she heard his footsteps returning. "You might want to talk to Maria," he suggested. "Make sure she knows she still has a job. She...seemed worried. Tell her it was my fault." He headed down the hall again.

This time Tavia's eyes narrowed on the empty opening. So Bolt would like her in the kitchen, would he? *Way* down the hall, across the living room, through the dining room and *in* the kitchen where she couldn't possibly overhear any of the conversation he'd be having on the phone in the other bedroom.

Tavia stalled. Angry. Suspicious. She eyed the telephone in her room. She could talk to Maria later. Despite Bolt's purported concern, Tavia wasn't about to fire her cook because of *his* bad behavior.

She heard Bolt laughing from the bedroom down the hall.

You *know*...it was funny, but that didn't sound like the sort of laugh two men shared. It sounded like the sort of laugh a man shared with a woman. Warm and deep, teasing and almost sultry. Slowly, Tavia made her way over to the bedside table and the ivory-colored phone sitting beside the lamp.

Okay. She was jumpy. She was on edge. She'd just seen Bolt pressing a kiss behind Maria's ear. Damn Bolt! Why did he have to be so sexy? Everything he did was just cut thick with sex appeal. He walked across the room and it was sexy! He stretched his arms behind his head and it was sexy! He kissed her cook and — *Jesus*.

Tavia snatched the telephone receiver out of the cradle and pressed it to her ear. She was so frustrated and angry and suspicious she didn't even *begin* to feel guilty about listening in on Bolt's conversation. Immediately, her lips twisted into a tight knot and her eyes narrowed on her reflection in the mirror across the room as she heard a female's voice.

"When are you going to be home, Bolt?"

"Soon, sweetheart."

"How soon?"

"You're not my mother, Mindy."

"Thank god," Mindy laughed. "If I were your mother, I'd have to feed you."

Bolt laughed while Tavia burned – scorched in fact – blackened around the edges to be quite honest.

"I have a surprise for you," Bolt taunted the woman on the other end of the line.

"Will I like it?"

"Oh yeah. You'll like it. It's something really big. Bigger than what I usually bring back."

"Bolt," Mindy giggled, "you're such a tease."

Tavia jumped away from the phone like it was a snake. Glaring at the receiver she'd flung on the bed, she backed away from the hateful thing.

Okay. That's it. That was flirting. That was the sound of Bolt flirting with another woman. His girlfriend. His fiancé. His wife for all she knew! *When are you going to be home, Bolt?* Tavia stared at her burning reflection. She'd cry if she wasn't so goddamn mad.

Bolt Hardin wasn't any more interested in her than he was in Maria or...or Mindy – whoever *she* was. So why the hell was he hanging around? It couldn't be sex. Evidently he could get that anywhere and everywhere.

That left money.

And he'd had the nerve to call Alex a gold digger!

Well, the good thing about being rich was...it wasn't hard to get rid of a gold digger boyfriend if you wanted to.

Stumbling out of her bedroom, Tavia crossed the hall to her office and placed herself behind the large, shielding mass of her desk. When she dropped into her chair, it finally hit her. She covered her face, fighting tooth and nail to hold back a crushing wave of tears. Somehow in the last few days she'd fallen for the great, huge, stupid enough lug nut. Despite everything. Despite the fact that she'd known from the start he was a man without drive, ambition or potential. Despite the fact that he didn't even have the wherewithal to keep his car running.

With nothing more than a sexy saunter and a low-slung pair of faded jeans, he'd wormed his way right into her unhappy heart.

Bolt's voice startled her. "You're still mad at me."

"No," she responded sharply, willing her voice not to crack as she pulled her face out of her hands. She even managed the semblance of a brave smile for the man who stood in the doorway. "It's something else. I've just received some bad news."

"Bad news?" Bolt's eyebrows crushed together in an expression of concern.

Tavia ignored his expression as she forged on. "My accountant cleaned out my bank account ten days ago," she informed him. "I've had the police on him. They just called to tell me he left the country a week ago."

Bolt just continued to frown.

"I'm broke," she told him flatly.

"You have another phone line? I didn't hear the phone ring."

"The call came in on my cell," she told him.

He nodded stiffly as though holding back a rage of emotions. "You should have told me," he finally said, tightly. "I'm sorry."

She nodded without looking at him. "It was really none of your business."

"But you can keep writing." His voice was surprisingly gentle. "It won't take long before you're back on top again."

She pushed out a bitter laugh. The guy was tenacious. Why hadn't she seen this in him before?

"Anything I make for the next several years will go to pay off the debt my accountant ran up in my name. I'll have to stop work on the house and put it on the market."

Tavia watched as his fists bunched and his eyes narrowed to frigid slits. His mean mouth settled into a stubbornly vicious line. Tavia shook her head. You'd have thought it was his money that had been lost.

Abruptly, he shook out his hands though he still glowered. "I'm sorry." He scraped a hand back through his stiff, rowdy hair. "But I was getting tired of this place anyhow."

Tavia clasped her hands together and locked them against her chin to stop it from trembling. She might have expected this from the almighty prick.

He nodded grimly. "I think you'll like my place. It's smaller and cozier." He lifted one shoulder as he forced an apologetic smile onto his mouth. "I'd like to kill the guy who did this to you, Tavia. But...it's just money. I'm sorry. I'm not a multi-millionaire but you won't starve as long as I'm around."

At this point, Tavia had to remind herself to breathe. Her heart felt like it was about to explode. The rest of her felt like she was melting. Maybe that's why all that liquid was running out of her eyes. She was melting. That was the only explanation.

"Tavia!"

The next thing she knew, Bolt was on his knees beside her. Reaching out with one hand, he cupped the side of her face as she tried to hide her tears in his hand. "Tavia, don't cry, baby doll. It's only money! You'll like my place. And...and I can't wait to introduce you to Mindy, my next-door neighbor—the mining engineer! She's been

trying to get me hooked up for years.” He glanced back at the door. “I was just on the phone, teasing her about you.”

Tavia squeezed her eyes closed and hid her face in his hand, pressing her lips together as tears flooded her eyes. She had been ready to cry. But not like this. She had been ready to cry in anger. She had been ready to shed tears of pain. But she hadn’t planned on crying because the male animal kneeling beside her was the most incredibly wonderful man on the face of the earth.

It wasn’t the money. He didn’t care about the money.

And Mindy was his best friend.

Tavia might have been the happiest woman on the planet, except for one thing.

She’d just lied to him.

And that just made her cry harder.

“Tavia,” he murmured, drawing her into his arms and rocking her in his big strong embrace. “Tavia. Don’t cry. Don’t cry, baby doll.”

“You’re...you’re just so sweet,” she sobbed.

He looked both shocked and affronted as he leaned back and held her face. His wide thumbs smoothed over her tear-streaked cheeks. “Hey, hey, hey,” he argued softly. “Don’t get all sentimental on me now. You’re scaring me. Remember me? I’m Bolt. I’m the fucking prick who kissed Maria.”

Tavia laughed. And she cried. And she buried her head in his shoulder.

* * * * *

“Are you mad at me?” Tavia asked Bolt after she’d confessed her lie.

“Hell yes, I’m mad at you. You thought I was only interested in your money. I’m not that kind of guy. You should *know* I’m not that kind of guy. It was never the money,” he growled.

Her lips twisted in regret. “I’m sorry, but what was I supposed to think?”

He stared at her. "Did it never occur to you that maybe it was just the sex?"

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Yes. No. Not really because...I reckoned you could get that anywhere."

He smiled.

Damn, he was an arrogant, smug bastard. "Was it just sex?"

"Nah," he drawled. "I told you before. I like you. I like everything you are. Ambitious, hardworking, successful. Your sense of humor. The way you don't take shit from anyone."

She took a small breath of relief. "So you're not mad at me for lying to you?"

He averted his eyes but she caught a glint of guilt in the floating gold of his gaze.

She frowned. "Bolt?"

His mouth twitched in a small, wry gesture of apology.

"Bolt?"

He kept his gaze carefully focused across the room. "Tavia," he said finally, "the fact is...that *I've* been less than honest with *you*."

"No," she said, her heart in her throat. "No. You're not going to tell me you're married. Please, Bolt. My emotions have been on a roller coaster since I rolled off the track this morning. *Please* don't tell me Mindy's your wife."

He turned his shocked expression on her. "Don't be ridiculous. It wasn't that big a lie."

"You lied to me?" she wailed. "You *lied* to me?"

He shrugged one shoulder, obviously reluctant to carry on.

"What did you lie to me about?" she asked in a hurt voice.

Again he shrugged. "Alex," he muttered.

"Alex!" she blurted, somehow relieved. "Alex...the gold digger, Alex?"

Bolt tilted his head in a guilty, sideways nod. "I might have exaggerated a bit on that score."

"On what score?"

"Alex is nuts about you."

"What?"

"He's nuts about you. Couldn't you tell?"

"But you said..."

"That I've been known to play dirty when it comes to something I want. If you'd listened more closely, you'd know that," he muttered defensively.

For several seconds she sat there with her mouth open. Then she gave him a slow, incredulous smile. "You *did* say that, didn't you? Bolton Hardin, you are *such* a dick."

A slow grin curled the edges of his deliciously mean mouth. "I am."

"So you're...so you're not going to leave me over this?"

His eyebrows winged upward. "Are you kidding?" he drawled. "You're a millionaire. Only an idiot would walk out on a woman like that!"

She punched him—hard. He deserved it.

He grinned as he pushed out a sigh. "What's today? Friday? I'd better get back to Albuquerque and get back to work."

"Why don't you just get a job here?" The words were out of her mouth before she realized what she was saying. Jeez. She was throwing herself at the big lug nut.

Bolt gave her a blank look.

"You work in a garage," she argued hesitantly. "Santa Fe has plenty of garages. Why don't you just look for a job here in Santa Fe?"

Slowly, he began to laugh. "I'm sorry, Tavia," he told her, drawing her into a hug. "I haven't explained things very well. I think you're going to have to give me that ride to Albuquerque now."

* * * * *

When Bolt offered to drive the sixty miles to Albuquerque, Tavia turned him down. What a chauvinist! Then she smiled most of the way. The big man was just itching to get behind the wheel of her Hummer. He just wouldn't admit it.

After traveling south for an hour on I-25, Bolt pointed at a green road sign up ahead. "Turn east on I-40. My house is on the edge of town."

Nodding as she ramped onto the eastbound highway, Tavia stared ahead at the mountains. "If you live on the edge of town, that's going to put you in the foothills."

"That's right," he admitted with a grin. "I live on the *steep* edge of town."

She smiled at him, unable to decide when she'd ever been so happy, unable to remember when she'd enjoyed herself so much. Every minute with Bolt was exhilaration and laughter, passion embellished with the unexpected.

Bolt was full of surprises.

Tavia was surprised when he directed her through an older neighborhood where the streets were lined with seventies architecture. The houses were...quaint and homey. His own home stood separate from his neighbors', at the back of a huge lot...with a very large garage. Tavia stared at the long, low building as she slid from the driver's seat of her Hummer. There were ten garage bay doors punctuating the long stretch of white wall.

Bolt circled the car on his way to meet her. "This is my garage," he told her a little proudly. He pulled her into the small door at the end of the long, white building. "I built it." He flipped on a light switch and Tavia gaped at over twenty vehicles. Vintage Thunderbirds. Antique Roadsters. Sleek little sports cars. "This is where I work. I rebuild vintage vehicles from the ground up. Engine. Chassis. Interior. The works! I try to get original parts whenever possible. Otherwise I have the components machined to old specs."

"Are...all of these vehicles yours?"

He shook his head. "Hell, no. I couldn't afford all these. The Chargers are mine, though. I like the old muscle cars." He pointed at a faded blue car that looked very much like the one she'd last seen stalled on the side of the road. "I had just picked up that '63 in Pueblo when I ran into you on the highway. I made a call and had it towed here the next morning." He continued with almost boyish enthusiasm. "Most of the other vehicles belong to my customers. I've worked for Jay and for Clive. Do you know Clive? He writes."

"No," she said faintly. "I haven't met him."

"I did a Triumph for Dalton too."

"Dalton?"

"Yeah. The artist who's doing your covers. My sister's married to him."

"Your sister's married to Dalton, the pastel artist?"

"That's right."

Her gaze narrowed on him suspiciously. "I thought you knew something about art. You had Alex and me convinced that you knew something about art."

Bolt smiled noncommittally.

"You don't know anything about art, do you?"

"Nothing outside of what Dalton's told me," he admitted without apology.

"*Bolt Hardin*," she told him, "you are the most arrogant, obnoxious, frustrating, exasperating, irritating man I have ever met in my lifetime!"

A mischief-made smile stole across his rugged features as he pulled her into his arms. "Hey," he answered into her neck. "Get used to it."

Chapter Eight

Tavia stopped outside the front door of her home. As she sorted through the mail she'd picked up from the mailbox at the bottom of the driveway, her glance traveled to the new addition, finished now for several months. In the middle of the concrete drive sat Bolt's pastel blue Charger, fairly gleaming with bright chrome, fresh glass and seven coats of rich, new paint. She opened the front door and stepped into the entry as she frowned at the long, sloping handwriting on one of the envelopes. "Jeez," she complained as she frowned at the pale yellow envelope. "Can't the man take no for an answer?"

From his seat at the dining room table, Bolt smiled at her over the financial section of his newspaper. "Alex again?"

She nodded at her...guest, if that's what you'd call a guy who'd spent the last ninety-odd nights with her. Every morning he drove off for Albuquerque to work in his garage. Every night he was back.

The first few weeks he had left without mentioning when she'd see him again. She hadn't pressed him. She could tell from his expression that he'd thought it might be a few days. And if he was going to say "I'll call you sometime", then Tavia didn't want to hear it. When Bolt had chased Alex off, he hadn't been offering what Alex was offering. It was obvious the man treasured his independence. But every night he had returned. Sometimes in the early afternoon, sometimes not until after midnight.

When she'd answer the door, he'd be turned toward the south, his hands jammed deep in his pockets, his huge shoulders tense. He'd turn to face her. For those first few weeks, his eyes were wild, like an unsubdued addict or an animal caged. He almost acted as though he didn't want to be there or didn't think he was *supposed* to want to be

there. As though the only reason he was there was because he just couldn't help himself.

She'd kiss him in the entry and they'd fight their way to the bedroom, tearing at each other's clothing, falling over one another in their haste and their need. The moment they'd bared the necessary places, Bolt would have her on his cock one way or another—jammed into the straight-backed chair, thrusting against the dining room table, crushed together and sweating against the wall in the hall. Then they'd fall into bed together and make long, slow love.

After the first few weeks, Bolt seemed to have grown resigned to the idea that he was going to be there every night.

Lately he seemed comfortable with it.

Lately he'd been spending the weekends with her as well, dragging himself away from his work. Tavia sighed, wondering how she could have ever thought the man lacked potential—and wondering when he was going to invite her to stay overnight at his home. She could almost wish her accountant *had* left her penniless. At least then she'd be living with Bolt...and maybe a little more certain of where their relationship was headed.

As she ripped the envelope open and scanned the letter's contents, Bolt muttered something that sounded an awful lot like "poor bastard".

"What was that?"

Bolt shrugged. "Alex. Give the poor guy a break."

Tavia smiled wryly then strolled across the room, humming. "That guilty conscience of yours giving you a hard time?"

"I don't have a conscience," he said blandly. "And if you don't shut up," he added in a pleasant growl, "I'll give *you* a hard time."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?"

He lifted a threatening eyebrow in answer.

"Because if it is, it's not a very good one."

He lowered his paper so he could give her his full scowl. "You'd like me to give you a hard time, wouldn't you?"

With a tarted-up smile, she waggled her eyebrows and gave him her best come-hither look.

He nodded to himself. "Slut," he muttered, rattling his paper and looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"Glad you think so." She dropped a kiss on his forehead. "Pig."

Lifting his gaze, he gave her a warm smile, which she returned fondly.

"You a millionaire yet?" she asked him, watching his eyes scan stock prices.

"Close," he answered. "Getting close. What about you? You finish that story yet? The one about the hitchhiker and the rich broad?"

"Uh-huh. *And* you'll be pleased to learn that I dedicated it to you."

He made a face of distaste. "Thanks."

"You don't want the dedication?"

He rolled his shoulders. "It's okay. Just as long as none of my friends find out that I have a girl's book dedicated to me."

"You have friends?" she asked with mock surprise. "More than one?"

"I have a few," he growled.

"Well, they're not likely to find out," she groused, "since I've never met any of them other than Mindy."

"You'll meet them at the wedding," he murmured idly from behind his newspaper.

"Wedding?" she echoed. "What wedding?"

Bolt lowered his newspaper and considered her thoughtfully. "That reminds me," he told her, "I have something for you."

"Big deal," she returned abruptly, refusing to be distracted. "You always have something for me. Tell me about the wedding."

"This is a little different," he informed her haughtily. "And *this* little something comes with a question."

"A question?" she asked, suddenly very keen to learn more.

He grinned as he stood then grabbed her wrist and dragged her down the hall, stopping outside the door to her office. The doorway was blocked by her huge, heavy desk which he'd dragged right up to the doorway's opening. She peered into the room, attempting to locate her computer, which she found tucked against the wall in the room's corner.

"Bolt!" She laughed. "What the hell?"

With his hands locked around her waist, Bolt lifted her to sit on the cleared desk.

She smiled at him curiously as he reached around to his back pocket and pulled out a small, square box wrapped in silver glitter. As he bounced it in one hand, Tavia watched it go up into the air then back down to meet his palm.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked her. When she shook her head he said, "Can you guess?"

Again she shook her head, her eyes wide as she followed the glittering box he tossed in the air.

The corners of his rugged, mean mouth kicked up into a satyr's grin. "It's going to be a bit of a shock—especially when you see the size of the diamond. I think maybe you should lie down before I give it to you."

"Diamond!"

His large hand slid behind her nape, cradling her head as he eased her to lie back on the desk. Then he tossed the box at her and she grappled with the shining silver cube, juggling it in mid-air as she felt Bolt lifting her legs at the knees. Finally she got the box under control.

Then she saw the shoes.

The black, ankle-strap shoes were nailed to the wall she faced, about two feet higher than the desk, one on either side of the open doorway. Her jaw dropped open as she clutched the box and Bolt guided her right foot into the shoe nailed against the wall.

“Now,” he drawled. “Here’s the question, Miss October.” He paused for effect. “What are you going to do first? Are you going to open the box with the diamond engagement ring...or are you going to get your panties off?”

It was no contest. The ring could wait. Tavia dropped the box and reached for her panties.

About the Author

I slung the heavy battery pack around my hips and cinched it tight – or tried to.

"Damn." Brian grabbed an awl. Leaning over me, he forged a new hole in the too-big belt.

"Any advice?" I asked him as I pulled the belt tight.

"Yeah. Don't reach for the ore cart until it starts moving, then jump on the back and immediately duck your head. The voltage in the overhead cable won't just kill you. It'll blow you apart."

That was my first day on my first job. Employed as an engineer, I've worked in an underground mine that went up—inside a mountain. I've swung over the Ohio River in a tiny cage suspended from a crane in the middle of an electrical storm. I've hung over the Hudson River at midnight in an aluminum boat—30 foot in the air—suspended from a floating barge at the height of a blizzard, while snowplows on the bridge overhead rained slush and salt down on my shoulders. You can't do this sort of work without developing a sense of humor, and a sense of adventure.

New to publishing, I read my first romance two years ago and started writing. Both my reading and writing habits are subject to mood and I usually have several stories going at once. When I need a really good idea for a story, I clean toilets. Now there's an activity that engenders escapism.

I was surveying when I met my husband. He was my 'rod man'. While I was trying to get my crosshairs on his stadia rod, he dropped his pants and mooned me. Next thing I know, I've got the backside of paradise in my viewfinder. So I grabbed the walkie-talkie. "That's real nice," I told him, "but would you please turn around? I'd rather see the other side."

...it was love at first sight.

Madison welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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