

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

KIMBERLY
DEAN

FEVER

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FEVER

Kimberly Dean

Chapter One

"Man, Delia. Did you get the license plate of the Mack truck that ran over you?"

Delia Jenkins slowly lowered the cold glass of water she'd been rubbing against her burning forehead and glowered at her coworker. The grimace she found on his face killed any delusions she might have had about feeling worse than she looked. Her shoulders slumped. So much for the concealing powers of makeup.

"You silver-tongued devil, Rob," she said tiredly. "Now I know why you get all the girls."

"Oh, come on. You know what I meant." He threw her a lopsided smile that probably did bring all the girls running. The smile dimmed, though, as he stared into her face. Reaching out, he caught her chin. "You shouldn't be here, hon. You're sick. I can feel how overheated you are."

"I'm fine." Delia squirmed in her seat as the lie crossed her dry lips. His touch made her body temperature creep up another two degrees and although normally she would have enjoyed the reaction, she just couldn't take it now. She was already boiling over as it was. "It's just warm in here."

Trying to act casual, she pulled away and took a quick sip of water. Squinting, she tried to concentrate on the spreadsheet that took up most of her desk. She had to blink twice before the numbers came into focus.

"Nice try," Rob said as he leaned closer. "Now tell me the truth. What did the doctor say?"

She should have known. He wasn't going to let it drop. She set down her glass and looked at his handsome face again. Even it was starting to blur, which was a shame. A darn shame.

She let out a heavy sigh. She never should have told him about her appointment. It was just... Well, shoot, he'd invited her to lunch, and she hadn't wanted him to think that she was blowing him off. She'd waited a long time for that invitation; she wanted him to ask again. "Dr. Mosely said there's a bug going around. Nothing too serious. It's usually gone within a day or two."

"A day or two? You don't look like you'll last that long. Did he prescribe anything?"

She couldn't help but glance longingly at the drawer where she kept her purse.

"You haven't taken it?" For as much as Rob played up the carefree, GQ routine, there was an astute brain behind those dark eyes. "Delia."

She raked a hand through her hair and accidentally dislodged the pencil she'd tucked behind her ear. She bent over to pick it up off the floor, but a wave of heat moved with her. Dizzy, she sat still until her internal gyroscope righted itself.

Damn this fever!

She could feel it burning inside her, trying to escape through her very pores. With every degree her temperature rose, her anxiety level cranked up right along with it. She couldn't be sick now. She just couldn't!

"The doctor said the medication might make me groggy," she explained, "And I've got to finish doing the budget for this bid. Mr. Lloyd wants to look over it before we submit it tomorrow."

Rob slapped his hand down in the middle of her precious spreadsheet, fingers spread wide. "That's what's keeping you here? The bid? We've already got the job, Del. It's in the bag."

Sure it was. Delia rested her weary head in the palm of her hand and looked at the man who'd so casually perched on the edge of her desk. He practically oozed confidence. And why shouldn't he? He was good-looking, friendly, and outgoing—all the traits of a natural-born salesman. If he said that the Berkshire Hotel deal was in the bag, it probably was.

But contracts couldn't be signed without an official bid—and they certainly wouldn't be signed with a budget that didn't add up.

"Your part of the sales job may be done, Rob, but mine isn't," she said, trying to make him understand. "Please, just let me concentrate on this."

Determinedly, she stared down at the spreadsheet, but nerves made the muscles at the back of her neck pull tight. There was an error in here somewhere; she knew it. She just couldn't find it! She hadn't been able to see it on her wavering computer screen, and the printout wasn't any better. If she got all doped up on medication, she'd never track it down.

And there would go her job.

The thought made her feel even worse, and she hurriedly pushed it aside. She couldn't think like that. She had until her four o'clock meeting with Mr. Lloyd to fix things. She'd just have to do a low simmer for the next three, long, slow ticking hours.

Rob drummed his fingers on her desktop. "I'm not going to leave you when you're feeling like this."

"Rob, please. It's not that bad. Really."

Wearily, she wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. She was surprised when it came away dry. How was that possible when her brain felt like it was frying? Shouldn't she be sweating? She glanced again at her desk drawer. She hoped the antibiotics would work. The moment she got home, she was going to do battle with that childproof cap. Until then, though, she had numbers to crunch.

"Go home," Rob pressed.

"I can't."

She couldn't risk it. She'd only been with Lloyd Security Systems for two months. She needed this job. The market for bookkeepers wasn't exactly hopping; she knew that from personal experience. She'd been unemployed for six months before Jackson Lloyd

had hired her. There was no way she was going back on that unemployment line. Not for a little hot flash.

Okay, a burning inferno. She could manage.

"That's it," Rob declared. Suddenly, he pushed himself to his feet. The wheels of Delia's chair squeaked as she instinctively pushed herself back, but he rounded the desk and caught her by the arm before she could roll to safety.

She looked down at the unyielding grip. His hand was big, and his strength surprised her. His touch was cool compared to her hot flesh, and her belly squeezed. There were other, more needy places that would welcome that cool touch. "That's what?" she said distractedly.

"The end of my patience. You're going home if I have to strap you to that chair with duct tape and roll you there."

Her belly squeezed even tighter. Bondage? Ooh. She shook her head and laughed off his outrageous suggestion. "You wouldn't dare."

"No?" Still keeping his clutch on her, he rolled her to the supply cabinet a few feet away.

"Wait!" she sputtered when he found a roll of gray tape. She scrambled out of the chair and held up her hands to ward him off. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking care of you. Somebody needs to."

Delia rolled her eyes and summoned her patience. "Listen, Rob. I appreciate your concern, but you're not my boss. You can't send me home, and I don't want to go. I want to finish my job."

"You have finished your job—at least as much as you can. Stop worrying about big, bad Jackson Lloyd. I've got an in with him. If I say you need to go home, he won't have a problem with it."

Right. Maybe in Rob's dreamland. Not hers.

She let out a long, calming breath. It was time to compromise. A determined look had settled onto her coworker's face—one that told her he meant business. She'd seen that look before when he'd set his sights on the new computer services gal.

The pretty blonde had been in his bed before the weekend had rolled around.

Delia's lips flattened as the usual feeling of jealousy nipped at her. She'd been waiting for Rob's look to be focused on her, but not after he'd just told her she looked like roadkill. "I'm almost finished. Just let me double-check the numbers. Then I'll go."

He shook his head.

"I hate to show you this, but you're off your game today, Del." He walked her back to her desk and pointed at the spreadsheet. "Two plus two is four. Not twenty-two. You're going home."

Her jaw dropped in horror. "You're lying. I didn't do that."

She bumped him out of the way and leaned down to see better.

"I just sat there and watched you."

"Where?" She picked up her pencil and began searching for the unforgivable error. If only the numbers would stop dancing!

"Uh-uh. Come on." He plucked the pencil from her fingertips and dropped it on the desk. "Let's go."

"But—"

"No 'buts'."

"But Mr. Lloyd—"

"Jack won't care. If he was here, he'd be telling you to get your shapely little butt home."

Delia gaped at her coworker. He couldn't be talking about the same Jackson Lloyd she knew. First off, her boss probably had no opinion whatsoever on her backside, but more to the point, since when had he not cared about something? She'd never met a

man more focused, more intense. And when a job was up for bid? Forget about it. "He'll fire me."

"No, he won't. To tell you the truth, he'd be more pissed if you screwed up the numbers because your brain overheated." Taking charge, Rob pulled open her desk drawer and grabbed her purse. He slid the strap over her shoulder and nearly scooped her up into a fireman's carry before Delia yelped and backed away. Her shapely little butt promptly bumped up against the corner of her desk, and his eyebrows lifted in challenge. "Are you going to go willingly?"

She froze as her nerves flared once again. Was he right? Was she doing more harm than good if she stayed? She didn't know which was worse, leaving when she didn't have any sick leave time accrued or doing a poor job.

He never gave her time to decide. He grabbed their coats from the rack, swung an arm about her shoulders, and started to usher her out of the office.

Delia glanced fretfully over her shoulder at her desk. She never left it that messy – and she never left before ferreting out a misbalance. It would drive her crazy all night. "Shouldn't we call Jackson? Or at least leave a note?"

"I'll tell him."

The door swung open just before they got there, and Delia came up short when her foot landed hard on the toe of a sharply polished shoe. Strong hands latched onto her waist before the top of her head could clip a man's chin. She came to an abrupt stop and found herself staring at a familiar tie and a well-shaped Adam's apple. Her heart lodged in her throat. Oh, God. "Mr. Lloyd!"

"Whoa," he said. "Where's the fire?"

Burning inside her chest. Delia felt a twinge of panic. Why couldn't she have fended off Rob for five seconds more? Just five teeny seconds would have saved her from this...this embarrassment. For heaven's sake, she'd nearly mowed her boss down. She did everything she could to make herself seem professional, efficient, and indispensable

to the man, and here she was scuffing up his shiny loafer — caught as she tried to sneak out.

The shoe was the easiest problem to fix. “Your shoe.”

She immediately started to bend down. To do what, she didn’t know. Spit-shine it? His hands tightened, though, and her spine snapped straight.

“I’m so sorry,” she said emphatically. “I didn’t see you there.”

“That’s obvious,” he said.

For a second, neither of them moved. They stayed together, only inches apart, in a near embrace. Delia had to remind herself to breathe. She inhaled shakily, and his tangy aftershave filled her senses. His big hands nearly spanned her waist, and the heat radiating through her thin, silk blouse branded her.

She’d thought she’d felt warm before.

His touch had her smoking.

The moment was swiftly gone. A glance from her to Rob had the expression on Jackson’s face going hard. Delia sucked in her breath when he lifted her off his foot and set her firmly away from him. She teetered, though, and latched onto his forearms for balance. The strength hidden by his suit jacket stunned her, and she looked up quickly. She could have sworn she saw a muscle flinch in his firm jaw.

“You two going somewhere?” he asked.

Flames colored her cheekbones and, for the first time all day, the fever wasn’t to blame. Meekly, she shuffled backwards. His disturbing touch dropped.

The way he was looking at her made her uneasy. His lips were flat in displeasure. His jaw was tight, and his eyes were...flinty. There was no other way to describe it.

Rob looked at Jackson for a long moment. Then his arm smoothly re-encircled her shoulders. Protectively. Almost possessively. “Ease up, Jack.”

Her boss’s demeanor went so icy, even Delia could feel it slicing through the shimmering haze of her fever. What in the world? She was too intimidated to look at

him straight out, but she glanced at him through the curtain of her lashes. Understanding hit her like a lightning bolt.

Oh, dear Lord! Not only did he think two of his employees were cutting out on the day before a bid; he thought they were heading out for a quickie! She felt faint and reached out for the door handle. This couldn't be happening. She needed this job!

"Delia's feeling under the weather," Rob said smiling, oblivious to the undercurrents. "I'm taking her home to bed."

Jackson's dark eyes narrowed, and Delia wished the ground would open up and take her. Why? Why had Rob felt inclined to mention her bed? Was he trying to make matters worse?

"Mr. Lloyd," she said anxiously. "I don't think you understand."

"I understand plenty." His piercing gaze swung over to her. "Are you finished with the budget?"

She flinched at the harsh tone.

"Almost," she said weakly. She knew she shouldn't have listened to Rob. The troublemaking hottie. She turned on her heel, even though the sudden move made the room spin. "I'll have it finished by our four o'clock meeting."

Rob latched onto her shoulder before she could get anywhere. "Uh-uh. Doctor's orders. She's going home."

Jackson's jaw hardened as he looked at the familiar touch, and he reached up halfway before stopping and letting his hand drop.

"Fine. Go home." He began loosening his tie. "I've done budgets on my own before. I'm sure I'll do them again."

Delia went dead still when he walked past her without another look. What did he mean he'd "do them again"? Without her? She turned to follow him, but Rob caught her by the arm and held her back.

She'd be damned if she'd go down without a fight. She'd worked those numbers until they were engraved on the back of her brain. "There's a problem somewhere in the materials and supplies," she said quickly. "I think it happened when we upgraded to the new motion detectors. Everything else balances."

Jackson didn't even look at her. "I'll find it. Go."

Delia dug in her heels when Rob tugged at her. "I'll be back tomorrow morning before the deadline."

Her boss ran a hand through his hair and sat down at her desk. The spreadsheet was already taking up more of his attention than her. "We'll talk about that later," he said gruffly.

Her eyes rounded. Had she just been let go? She nearly dove back to her desk, but Rob was already pulling her out the door.

Delia looked miserably over her shoulder. It wasn't as if she hadn't done anything! She'd had everything polished and ready to go three days ago until Jackson had found out that the motion detectors they'd been planning to use were in short supply. That meant not only new sensors, but new wiring, a new power system, and new mounting braces. Somewhere, somehow things had gotten entered wrong. If she could just look at the page for over five seconds without it blurring, she'd find the error. Her spine stiffened when she saw her boss plant his hands on her desk and start analyzing the calculations on her spreadsheet.

"Come on, Del," Rob said as the door swung shut, effectively blocking her view. He actually had the audacity to chuckle. "You'll feel better once you take your medicine and relax."

Relax? Was he nuts? How could she relax after what had just happened?

Suddenly, Delia felt deflated. Without a word, she let Rob lead her to the elevator. Why fight it? She wanted to go home so badly she could cry and, for all she knew, there wasn't a job left for her back in that office. Still, she couldn't let go of the picture of Jackson Lloyd brooding over her unfinished budget.

"Did I really put down twenty-two instead of four?" she moaned as the elevator doors closed. Talk about a bookkeeper's personal version of hell. And hell was certainly where she felt like she was. With fires raging all around her. She lifted her hair off the nape of her neck. Why wasn't she sweating? Why couldn't she get rid of this insufferable heat inside her?

"Don't worry," Rob said as he forced her into her winter coat before putting on his own. "Jackson always gets grumpy when we get this close to a new job. His mind is on a million things right now. Your leaving will only be a blip on his radar screen."

It hadn't seemed like a blip. It had definitely been more like a big, fat, never-ending bleep. Delia closed her eyes in defeat. Her boss hadn't approved of her leaving. He'd made that perfectly clear.

"Would you go back and talk to him?" she asked.

"Let it go. You're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Please?" The elevator finally arrived on the first floor, but Delia didn't budge. She turned her best puppy dog look on Rob, silently begging him.

"Oh, hell," he said, caving in. "Sure. If it will ease your mind, I'll go back and talk with Mr. Cranky. Just let me drive you home first."

"No, no." She stepped out of the elevator onto the main floor, but nudged him back inside for the ride up. "Go back now."

"And let you drive yourself?" He stepped out of the way of a harried deliveryman and grabbed her hand. "With the way your brain isn't working? I don't think so."

"Rob, *don't make me beg.*"

He threw her one of his patented smiles as he opened the front door of the building for her. "Jack really shakes you up, doesn't he?"

"Of course, he does. Can you blame me? You saw the look on his face."

"Yeah. I saw it." The winter wind whipped Rob's tie into the air as he walked by her side. Concern for her knotted his brow, though, as he looked down at her. Gently,

he brushed her hair back and hooked it behind her ear. "How about a compromise? I'll go back and fix things if you take a cab."

"Deal!" she said, quickly agreeing. "Oh, thank you, Rob. I'll owe you one."

"Yes, you will," he said with a wink. Taking her arm, he led her away from the parking lot to the street.

Delia felt her face get warm all over again. He was looking at her differently – almost mischievously. A mixture of surprise and uneasiness settled in her chest. Had Jackson been right? Had Rob had more in mind than just driving her home?

Maybe she'd declined his offer too quickly.

And maybe she'd made her only good decision of the day. She couldn't imagine that she looked very sexy with glazed eyes, flushed skin, and chapped lips. Turning her back to the brisk wind, she signaled for a cab. "Go back to work, Rob. I don't want you to get fired, too."

He moved suddenly and caught her face with both hands. "Delia, you're not fired. I promise."

She went still. The unexpected touch chilled her inflamed cheeks. Stunned, she looked up into Rob's handsome face. He was watching her in fascination, almost as if he'd figured out a little secret. Her little secret. Delia's pulse jumped as, almost in slow motion, his head dropped. His lips brushed across hers, and her stomach gave a little leap. The kiss felt...nice. Soothing, even.

She gaped at him with wide eyes. When he saw her acceptance, he leaned in again. This time, his lips pressed more firmly and his arms wrapped around her waist to pull her close. Delia didn't know if it was the fever or arousal, but her body melted against his like butter.

His mouth ate at hers until her fingers clenched the back of his coat. When her knees started to buckle, he slowly backed away. "I'll drop by your apartment later to check on you. Okay?"

She smiled softly in wonder. "Okay."

Gently, he turned her around. Delia was surprised to find a taxi waiting curbside. She hadn't even heard it pull up.

He helped her into the car with a self-assured smile on his face. "Feel better."

"I will," she promised as she pulled on her seatbelt.

In fact, she already did.

The cab pulled out into traffic, but she craned her neck to watch Rob until he disappeared from view. Now, that was what she called a kiss! No wonder he had such a ladies' man reputation. The guy had moves.

And he'd used them on her!

Delia felt delightfully giddy until she walked into her apartment and reality poked its ugly head back up. She stared across the living room into her bedroom, and all she could think of was Jackson's reaction to Rob's outlandish declaration.

I'm taking her home to bed.

"You're not giddy; you're delirious," she berated herself.

She dropped her purse onto the kitchen table with a thud. How could she be excited about a few innocent kisses when she might have just found herself back on the unemployment line? She couldn't pay her bills with hormones.

Or hot flashes.

Good God, there was another one.

"Where's that stupid medicine?" she snapped. She yanked the tiny brown bottle out of her purse and began cranking on the white lid.

A sudden thought had her head snapping up. Had Jackson been looking out the window as she and his salesman had groped each other in the parking lot? Oh, hell. If he didn't give her a pink slip for leaving during the middle of a campaign, there was always inappropriate office behavior to fall back on.

Great. Just great.

He'd assumed that she and Rob were having a fling and she'd gone ahead and added fuel to the fire. "Good move, Delia. Superb."

There were no two ways about it. She'd just messed up a good thing.

"Ugh!" she grunted. The stubborn childproof cap refused to open. Turning, she yanked open her junk drawer and pulled out a pair of pliers.

Hope still niggled at her, though. Maybe she was worrying about nothing. Rob did have some pull with their boss. He and Jackson were more than just employer and employee. From what she'd been able to gather, the two men went way back. She wasn't certain, but she thought she'd heard Rob once say that they'd been college roommates.

That must have been quite the combination—outgoing party-guy Rob living with the quietly contained Jackson.

Her battle with the medicine bottle stopped as she tried to see the picture in her head. It never became clear. She just couldn't blend a young Jackson Lloyd with the man she knew. He was too brooding to have ever been a kid. Too intense. Dominant. Powerful.

A heat flare went off inside her, and she shook her head. Whatever tack Rob chose to take, she hoped he wouldn't make things worse.

She wiped her hand across her brow. For all the trouble he'd caused her, she just couldn't stay angry with him. He hadn't meant any harm, and he was such a fun, likeable sort. And sexy. She smiled self-consciously when she remembered his kiss. That had definitely been the most pleasant part of her very unpleasant day.

At least somebody thought of her as more than a calculating machine.

"But why did he have to pick the day I feel like a convection oven? Damn it."

The childproof cap suddenly popped open and pills spilled out. Delia gasped and pressed her stomach tight against the edge of the counter before half of them could roll

off onto the floor. She sighed as she scooped up all but two and put them back into the bottle.

“And damn you, too, Jackson,” she said as she held a glass under the water faucet. She threw the medicine to the back of her throat and washed the pills down.

With any other boss, she would have calmly explained the situation—with calm being the operative word. She just couldn’t relax around the man. He put her on edge. It had started on the first day she’d interviewed, and it hadn’t gotten any better. She couldn’t point to anything in particular he’d ever said or done to disturb her. It was just his essence, the aura of the man.

He was so focused. So wickedly smart. So scarily quiet. She could never tell what he was thinking behind those dark, limpid eyes.

Except for today. He’d been angry with her.

Or Rob, she hadn’t been able to tell which.

Delia felt fatigue sweep through her system. *Oh, just admit it. The man intimidates the hell out of you.* She turned toward the bathroom before she could run out of energy. Clothes hit the floor as she walked down the hallway.

Jackson was usually very adept at keeping his emotions to himself, but he hadn’t been able to hide his displeasure today. She shivered as she stepped into the shower, but it wasn’t due to the cold water slapping against her overheated body. The look in his eyes when he’d seen her and Rob together—it still made her insides quiver. He’d quickly made the assumption that his salesman was the one playing doctor, and she hadn’t been able to get a word in edgewise to clear up the misunderstanding.

Get a word in? Who was she kidding? She’d hardly been able to talk at all.

He’d held her.

His hands had clapped onto her, and her muddled brain had ceased to function.

Hadn't he been able to feel the heat radiating off of her? Swirling around them? Between them? She hadn't been lying to him. How could he have automatically jumped to the wrong conclusion like that?

She gritted her teeth at the unfairness of it all. "Well, that's his problem, not mine."

She turned off the shower so abruptly the pipes rattled. Whipping back the shower curtain, she stepped out of the tub—only to grab the towel rack when she nearly did a face-plant on her bathroom floor.

Whoa.

She took a deep breath, but the steam-filled air in the bathroom only made her feel more lightheaded. She went still. Either that medicine kicked in fast or she was getting worse. She closed her eyes and held on, concentrating on inhaling and exhaling. At last, her head cleared.

Carefully, she let go of the rack and caught a towel. That was it. She was through feeling guilty. She'd nearly fainted. For heaven's sake, she wasn't a robot. She'd been a model employee ever since she'd started working for Lloyd Security Systems, but Rob was right. She was too sick to work today. Twenty-two! Her brain had overcooked. Jackson would just have to deal with it.

And Lord help her, so would she.

She felt like she was going to spontaneously combust.

Still feeling unsteady, she opened the bathroom door to let some cool air in. It swept in with a rush, but the relief was gone much too quickly. Delia nearly whimpered when she lifted the heavy towel to dry her shoulders. The friction of the terrycloth against her skin only fed the fire building inside her body.

The fever was rapidly consuming her.

Bed. She forced herself to focus on her destination. She had to get to bed.

Carefully putting one foot in front of the other, she headed to her bedroom. She opened the top drawer of her dresser and grabbed a pair of panties. She put them on

slowly, making sure not to lose her balance. Opening the second drawer, she looked for a nightgown. She pulled a lightweight, summer chemise out from the bottom of the stack, but could barely stand the satin as it slithered down her body.

“This medicine better work,” she said, wincing. The doctor had warned her that the antibiotics were strong, but right now, the fever seemed to be winning the battle. She raked her hands through her damp hair. Even the red strands felt warm.

Gingerly, she walked to the bed. It took her last bit of strength to pull back the covers and lie down. Sunlight streamed in the windows. It was still early afternoon, but her heavy eyelids drooped. She couldn’t ever remember being so tired in her life.

Still, that wavering spreadsheet pulled at her.

“I hope you’re up looking for that error all night, Jackson,” she whispered as she snuggled into her pillow. It would only serve him right. She was the best bookkeeper that company was going to find. If he couldn’t see what he’d be missing without her, it wasn’t her fault.

She’d done everything she could.

Chapter Two

"Delia?"

A low voice seeped through the darkness. It nudged at Delia's senses, urging her to wake. To listen. She fought the intrusion. She was so tired. Oh, so very tired and uncomfortable.

"Delia, are you okay?"

The voice was insistent. Smoky and intimate. The timbre was familiar, yet out of place. She pushed through the thick layers of drowsiness and tried to think.

It was just so hot. She kicked at the sheets tangled around her legs. Her pillow lay on the floor, and the comforter sat in a lump on the mattress beside her. Even the brush of the heavy fabric against her skin was too much. She pushed it away, trying to find some relief.

"Hey. Come on. Look at me."

"Hot." So hot. The heat was consuming her.

The mattress shifted, and the back of a hand gently touched her forehead. "Ah hell. You're burning up."

Delia squirmed restlessly and looked up at the man who'd appeared so suddenly in her bedroom. He hovered over her, big and dark. Shadows hid his features, but moonlight lit the hand that still brushed against her face. In the recesses of her mind, she knew she should be frightened—or at least surprised—but his presence comforted her. She didn't want to be alone. Not while the fires of hell were ravaging her from the inside out.

But why was he here?

He shouldn't be here. Or should he? She vaguely remembered a promise to check on her.

It took too much energy to think. She pushed her hair away from her face and off her shoulder. Even it felt too oppressive. Her arm dropped to her side, and her hand bumped against a hard thigh.

The man. He was sitting close.

How had he gotten in again? Hadn't she locked the door?

She couldn't remember. Didn't care.

She closed her eyes and started to drift away.

Callused fingertips patted her cheek. "No, no. Stay with me. Open those pretty green eyes."

The firm tone made her obey. She rolled her head toward the voice and forced her eyelids open a slit. A light from the hallway shimmered around the silhouette of the man's body. He moved so the light no longer glared in her eyes, and she could see him better.

Dark hair. Dark eyes. Concern knotting his brow.

He'd come.

Relief made her sag against the mattress. He'd know how to fight this. He always knew how to take charge.

"Make it better," she begged.

His hand cupped her cheek, and a distinct curse passed through his lips. Quickly, he reached out and clicked on her bedside lamp. The glare of the light made her close her eyes tightly. "No," she winced. "Too bright."

"Sorry." He turned the lamp down to its lowest setting. "Look at me, Delia. Please."

She didn't want to, but he asked so nicely.

"There you go." His thumb swept gently across her cheekbone. "Ah, damn. Your eyes are glazed. Your pupils are dilated, and you're way too warm. Why didn't you call someone?"

"Sleeping...the medicine."

"Medicine?" He nudged her when she began to nod off. "What did you take? Delia, this is important."

"Mm." She liked having him close, but the heat of their bodies was mingling. She wriggled away and covered her eyes with her hand. Too hot. Too bright.

He refused to let her be. "Where's your medicine, Delia?"

She tried to roll away.

He caught her shoulder and pressed her flat on her back. "Tell me, and I'll let you sleep."

Even through her daze, she heard the lie in his voice. She was too tempted to heed the warning. Sleep. She wanted to sleep. "Kitchen."

He was gone before she could say any more. The light was still too bright, but she didn't have the energy to lift her arm to turn it off. Instead she rolled away and curled into a ball.

That was a mistake. The heat only intensified as she folded into herself. With a whimper, she kicked the comforter onto the floor and stretched her legs out. She heard a rattling sound as he came back into her room.

"When was the last time you took a pill?"

She groaned. She'd known he was lying. He wasn't going to let her rest.

The mattress bowed as he sat down next to her again. He brushed her hair away from her temple. "How long ago since you took anything?" he asked.

Her forehead scrunched. Why was he asking so many hard questions? She couldn't focus. Couldn't concentrate. Oh, yes. The pills... She remembered them spilling onto the counter. "When I got home from work."

He turned his wrist to look at his watch. "Five—no six hours ago."

The bottle rattled again as he searched for the directions. "No wonder. It's worn off. You're supposed to take two every four hours. Stay here. I'll get you a glass of water."

Delia rolled onto her back when he left. Water. The idea was so appealing, she nearly crawled after him. Nearly. Just thinking about crawling was too much of an effort. Instead, she stayed still, trying to be patient, but the heat...

Oh, God. The heat. The mattress beneath her was absorbing her warmth and reflecting it back upon her, doubling her discomfort. She squirmed on the wrinkled sheets, but the fervor built until her back felt like it was on fire.

"Ahhh!" she hissed. She couldn't stand it anymore!

Lurching upright, she tugged off her chemise and threw it across the room. She lay back down, but even her panties felt too stifling. She grabbed the waistband and nearly rent the fabric in two as she shimmied her hips and pushed the material down. The silk clung to her legs until she managed to kick it off.

"You shouldn't have been here by yourself. You—" Footsteps from the bathroom came to an abrupt halt near the bed. "Hel-lo."

Water. He'd promised her water. She reached for it, swinging her arm wide.

She heard him inhale sharply, but then he was sitting down beside her and passing her the glass. "Here you go. Easy now."

Water sloshed over the side, wetting the bed as she swallowed almost convulsively. The moisture felt so good as it rolled down her dry throat.

"Wait. Don't forget to take the pills."

He shoved two into her hand and held the water away from her until she put them in her mouth. She groped for the glass and took a big gulp. The medicine stuck in her throat, but she forced it down. Anything to abate this damned heat. Anything! She settled back on the bed, and he picked her pillow off of the floor. Carefully, he tucked it under her head.

She murmured, but kicked at the sheet when he tried to pull it over her nakedness.
“No. I’m baking.”

“All right. Relax and let the medicine go to work.”

“It didn’t help before,” she said miserably.

He went quiet – almost dangerously so. She looked up at him, her vision blurring around the edges. Time seemed to slow, and the air in the room thickened. “You’ve been like this all day?” he finally asked.

“The fever,” she said weakly. “It won’t stop.”

His jaw went tight. A muscle near his cheekbone ticked once, then twice, before an all-too-familiar look of determination settled onto his face. “Yes, it will. You just leave it to me.”

Suddenly, he was gone. Delia started to call after him, but hesitated when she saw him moving back to the bathroom. She sighed when she heard water splashing in the sink again. Water. Yes. More water was good. The faucet shut off, and she licked her lips. His shadow cast over when he came back to her bedside. She reached up for the glass, but he didn’t give it to her.

“How does this feel?” he asked.

Instead of giving her something to drink, he lay something cool and wonderful against her forehead. It wasn’t what she’d expected. It was *better*. Her tight muscles released, and for the first time in hours, her anxiety lessened. Oh, that felt heavenly.

“Good?”

“Mm.” She reached up for the compress. She pressed it lightly and water ran into her hair, cooling the roots. She sighed with pleasure.

“Want more?”

Her eyes fluttered open. Their gazes connected, and that heavy feeling came into the air again.

He held another dripping washrag in his hand.

Her pulse skipped a beat. She stared at the cloth, lost in a dreamlike haze. She wanted its cooling effects.

She wanted his touch even more.

She always had.

"Lie back," he said softly.

Arousal suddenly swirled through her veins, riding along with the tide of heat. As delirious as she was, she knew what he intended to do—and she knew what line of intimacy it crossed. It was a line she'd shied away from. She'd been afraid to even approach it, but now, with him standing over her, it didn't even occur to her to say "no".

He'd promised to make it better.

Wide-eyed, she settled back against the pillow, willfully putting herself in his hands. The never-ending heat looped around her. It spiraled out to him, and something fierce and hungry flashed in his eyes. The emotion was quickly subdued—

But not before she'd seen it.

Determinedly, he took a step forward.

Delia shuddered when he touched her. The cloth brushed against her jawline, impersonal and businesslike. It didn't matter. The flame inside her retreated—

Only to gather and regroup deep in her very core.

The intensity of it made her clench her thighs together. Oh, God. It had been playing with her before. Toying with her.

"Too cold?" he asked, hesitating.

She fought back a groan. "Too hot," she whispered.

In so many ways.

His breath whistled out between his lips, but that was the only reaction he allowed her to see. Like an automaton, he slid the soothing cloth down her neck. She tilted her head, already a slave to the pleasure. He was being so careful. So attentive. The cooling

moisture swept over her shoulder and down her arm. He pressed the damp ball of material into her palm, and her fingers curled around it. Rivulets of water slid down her forearm.

"Ohhh," she gasped.

"Are you always this sensitive?" he asked, his voice rough.

"No...yes." She didn't know.

She was today. Despite his efforts to comfort her, the unexpected heat in her belly was blooming. Its power was concentrated—double that of anything she'd fought all day.

And it was growing.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

Pleasure. Pain. It was getting harder to tell one from the other. "Good. It feels good."

"Then we'll try this for a while and see if we can knock that fever down."

For a while?

Heaven help her. She knew what he was like when he put his focus on something.

He set about his mission, and Delia was lost. Sensation buffeted her. Touch dominated, but all her senses were heightened. She could feel the damp terrycloth as it slid, rough and wet, against her skin. She could hear his deep breaths. Feel his undivided attention. Taste her own need.

Her vision narrowed until it was just the two of them.

But the fever fought back.

Deep inside her, a white-hot battle blazed. She began to squirm on the mattress, silently begging him as he stroked her. He was avoiding those parts of her that needed his ministrations the most. Time and again, he sponged down her arms, her belly, and her legs. Always careful in his touch. Always avoiding where the heat was burning brightest.

"More," she whispered.

"I know, hot stuff, I know," he crooned. Her toes curled as he wiped the arch of her foot. "Go back to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

He didn't know. He couldn't know. If he knew, he wouldn't be tormenting her like this.

Any self-consciousness that Delia had left slipped away. Her nipples peaked, and her hips tilted. Her pussy was on fire. She let her thighs drop open. The air in the room felt cool as it puffed against her tender flesh.

He stopped momentarily and cleared his throat. Hard. "I know you're warm, but maybe we should cover you up."

She lashed out at the sheet. She couldn't bear it. Her fingers wrapped around his wrist and pulled his hand until it lay nestled between her aching breasts. His fist tightened and water rolled down her abdomen. It crept along the crease of her leg, down to the vee hidden by auburn curls. Ah, that was what she needed. "There," she whispered.

Silence. "You're killing me here, babe."

"Please." She opened her eyelids enough to see his dark eyes glittering down at her. He stared at her for a long moment before his gaze shifted to her breasts. The ache in them intensified as he studied her. She was ready to ask him again—to *beg* him—when she felt his first touch.

"Ahhh," she sighed.

"So perfect," he murmured.

His hand moved in small circles, carefully avoiding her nipple. Her demanding flesh refused to be ignored. She could feel her nipple tightening, stiffening. It looked almost tawdry as it stood straight up in the air, itching for the terrycloth that lurked so nearby. As she watched, his thumb snaked out and rubbed the rough material firmly against the red areola. She arched on the bed and let out a cry.

He pulled back sharply.

She caught his wrist. "Don't stop," she said breathlessly.

"I'm not sure about this, Delia."

"Don't stop."

She pulled his hand back to her breast and whimpered when his fingers spread round her, capturing her.

God, she needed this.

He squeezed, and the heat inside her spiked. She'd been secretly waiting for this for so long. He was touching her. Intimately. Fondling and coaxing. The rush inside her head was dizzying. *This*. This was what she needed. It was the only thing that was going to ease her distress.

She let her legs spread apart. "Hot," she panted. "Burning up."

His hand stilled. "Oh, God. Don't push me."

"Help me."

He started to pull away. "We can't do this."

She clung to him. "Please."

"No. It wouldn't be right. I'm supposed to be taking care of you, not taking advantage of you."

She looked at him beseechingly. He couldn't stop now. He'd reduced her to a writhing, needy mess. If he left her, she'd be a pile of smoldering ashes by morning.

"I need it." She needed it more than her next breath. Needed him. She'd trusted him to fight this battle with her, but if he couldn't...

She caught the washcloth. "I'll do it myself."

His head snapped back, and he jerked the washcloth away. "The hell you will."

"Please!" she cried as his weight lifted abruptly from the bed. She reached for him, but he stood just out of her reach, looking down at her and breathing heavily. Suddenly,

he turned. She propped herself up onto her elbows to watch him as he walked away into the haze.

He couldn't leave her like this!

She heard water running again, and her head dropped back. No. No more. She couldn't take any more teasing.

Silence bounced off the walls when he came back to the side of the bed. Water dripped from his hand onto the carpet as she waited in tense anticipation.

"For me," she whispered.

He stood still, almost as if fighting some internal struggle, but then moved fast. She collapsed back against the pillow when his hand dove between her legs and cupped her. Her hips thrust off the bed, half in an attempt to press harder against his touch and half in an effort to shove him away. The washcloth was colder than the others had been. It felt like ice against her tender skin.

"Is this what you need, hot stuff?"

She gyrated on the sheets. "Yessss."

"And this?"

His hand began to move. She bit her lip and closed her eyes so tightly, stars danced behind her eyelids.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," he said in a strained voice. He found his place at her side. "You better not regret this, Delia."

She forced her eyelids open enough to see his hand playing between her legs. The vision was blisteringly erotic. The fire in her body all radiated from her core. If he could ease her suffering there, she'd do anything.

Anything.

"Here?" he asked.

Her breath caught when the terrycloth pressed directly against her clit.

"Or here?"

A little cry left the back of her throat when his fingers burrowed between her swollen lips and found her opening.

“Or maybe there?”

Her hips left the bed entirely until her weight was balanced on her shoulder blades and her heels. He’d pushed the terrycloth up inside her using not one, but two fingers. His hands were big, but the added bulk of the washcloth made him feel huge. His fingers squirmed deeper and deeper until they were lodged inside her.

Then they began to twist.

“Oh, God!” Delia’s body contorted, still balanced midair, as his devilish fingers curled inside her.

He wasn’t teasing her anymore.

“Hurry,” she begged.

Flames danced inside her belly, and tears pressed at her eyes. The need was so fervent, it was almost cruel.

She cried out loudly when his bare thumb found her clit. Just a few nudges had her spiraling out of control.

“Oh, oh!”

Reaching out, she caught his thigh, which was pressed hard against her hip. Her fingers dug into the taut muscles as the first wave hit her. His fingers pumped in and out until her pussy clenched down on him like a vise. Even then, his thumb played mercilessly with her clitoris.

Her head twisted back and forth on the pillow. He drew out her pleasure, holding her at the peak until he finally let her go over. At last, she fell back against the bed.

He gently brushed her hair away from her face, but she felt his hand shake. “Sleep,” he ordered.

Delia could feel the tension in him, but darkness pulled at her. She didn’t want to leave him. Not now. Not just when she’d realized how much time she’d wasted being

timid. Unfortunately, fatigue wouldn't let her indulge any further. It overwhelmed her. For the first time in hours, the relentless heat had been banked. Her body needed sleep to fight the demon inside her.

"Let go," he whispered.

He'd promised he'd be here when she awoke. Feeling safe and cared for, she let herself slip away.

* * * * *

"She's burning up, Doc. I don't know if the medication is doing its job or not."

Delia snuggled into her pillow and wished for quiet. She didn't want to wake up. Not yet. Her sleep had been fitful. Too light and full of dreams. Dreams of fire. Dreams of demons. Dreams of sex.

She kicked at the covers that had once again found their way on top of her. His doing, no doubt. She tried to blot out the soft conversation on the other side of the room, but she was too attuned to his voice. It invaded the recesses of her consciousness. Made her take notice.

"Last time she took it? About two hours ago."

She drifted in and out, catching only bits and pieces of the discussion that was surely about her. Two hours? She felt like she'd been asleep for two minutes.

"Hold on. Let me look." There was a short pause followed by a ruffling sound. "Yeah, here's one on the nightstand."

"You want me to do *what?*"

The raised tone of voice startled her, and she clumsily slapped a hand over her ear. Her senses were honed to too sharp of a point. He was too loud. The light from the bedside lamp was too bright. Her skin was too raw.

The damnable heat was back.

Delia felt her distress return. She'd thought they'd beaten it, but there it was smoldering deep down inside her.

Why wouldn't it leave her alone?

The muffled voice didn't go away. "All right, doc, if you say so. Give me a minute."

She heard the phone settle onto the nightstand, but was surprised when strong hands caught her by the waist. She looked at her caretaker blearily. He shouldn't touch her. Not now. Things happened when he touched her. Wonderful, scary, exhausting things. She groaned when he rolled her onto her stomach.

"Shh," he crooned. "I didn't mean to wake you."

She sagged onto the pillow. Whatever the doctor had given her was powerful. Her brain was filled with haze, but the heat that prickled her body was still winning the fight. Her skin felt tender. Everywhere he touched her burned.

Her waist. Her back.

Her butt.

Her head snapped off the pillow when his touch slid down to the curves of her backside. *Did he really think it was shapely?* She wasn't given time to ask, because her thoughts scattered when he parted her cheeks.

"What?" She jerked when a wet finger rubbed intimately against the tight bud of her anus. "No!"

"Easy," he murmured. He licked his finger and moistened her carefully. "Doctor Mosely wants me to check your temperature. You haven't cooled down at all."

Her brain couldn't sort out his words. He shouldn't. She shouldn't let him. She reached back to clutch at his wrist, but his touch was firm.

"Relax."

She couldn't relax. Alarm bells screamed inside her clouded head when something cool and hard pressed against her. Instinct told her it was wrong. She fought the

intimate intrusion, but he was insistent. The hard, cool thermometer determinedly sought entrance – and finally gained it.

“Ahhh!” Her fingers bit into the pillowcase as the device slid up inside her rectum. It was small. It provided only the slightest physical discomfort, but with it, the driving heat returned.

And the need.

Only this time, it was raging.

“Not again,” she whispered tightly.

The power of the desire scared her. There was no buildup this time. It hit her straight on at full force.

Delia squeezed her eyes tight, trying to fight the wildness inside her.

What was wrong with her? She never lost control like this. It required too much trust. In *him*, a man she barely knew, yet whose respect she wanted deeply. How could he respect her if she behaved so outrageously?

“That’s a good girl,” he said behind her. He settled his hot palm against her bottom and left the thermometer buried deep.

She groaned. She needed him again. Needed him more than her inhibitions could hide. She tried to remain still, but her hips had a mind of their own. They rolled to the side, trying to get his touch where she wanted it the most. He pressed her back down against the mattress.

“It will only take a moment,” he said. “Hold still.”

Hold still? It was like asking her not to breathe. She ground her forehead into the pillow. She didn’t need a temperature measurement to know her body was on fire.

“Delia,” he said warningly. “Stop it. The doctor is still on the phone.”

The caress of his hand was in direct contrast to the firm tone of his voice. If the touch was meant to soothe, it had precisely the opposite effect. Her fervor cranked up a notch. He felt her muscles tense, and his fingers spread wide to try to hold her down.

This time, she didn't let him. Drawing her knees to her chest, she lifted her hips high into the air. She heard his sharp intake of breath, and she pressed her face more tightly into the pillow.

"Fuck," he said in a low, tight voice.

Yes, fuck. She wanted to fuck.

She wanted it enough to relinquish control to him. Enough to put herself into his hands and trust him to take care of her. She rocked her hips, making him stroke her. Respect her or not, he had to help her. If he didn't, the fire would rage unrestrained and only cinders would be left.

"Uh, Doc?" His voice cracked. "Are there any side effects of this medication I should know about?"

"What kind? Um...*sexual*?"

Delia reached up and grabbed the headboard. The heat was building. "Hurry," she moaned.

"It's the fever?" He cleared his throat. "What would you recommend I do?"

There was a long, heavy pause.

"Yeah, I heard you," he said gruffly. "Are you sure?"

His fingers brushed against her clenched butt cheek, and Delia cried out. Her pussy throbbed, and she felt dampness drip against her thighs.

He muffled the phone against his shoulder. "Wait 'til I get off the phone, hot stuff. And hold still!"

Her back arched when she felt his touch drift toward her most private place. His fingers brushed against her pursed opening, and she shuddered uncontrollably when the thermometer moved.

"Oooh," she groaned.

"Christ, Delia."

She couldn't help it. It felt too sinfully good. She had to bite her lip as he slowly pulled the thermometer out of her.

"Damn it, you're at 104. She's at 104, Doc."

Numbers meant nothing. Need did. Her hips swung determinedly toward him.

His hand clapped onto her backside, and his fingers bit into her overheated flesh. "You're sick, baby," he hissed. "I'm not going to do this."

His touch didn't move, though. If anything, his fingers dipped deeper into the crevice between her butt cheeks. Delia's hips craned higher to meet him. She turned her face on the pillow, and their gazes collided.

A muscle pulsed along his jaw, but he kept his concentration on the phone call. "Right. Keep up with the medication, cold packs, and...ease her distress." He nodded. "Sorry about the late call, Dr. Mosely. I'll keep you updated."

He dropped the phone noisily into its cradle, and Delia couldn't wait anymore.

"I *need*," she whispered. It was such a mild word for the fire licking through her veins.

"No," he said firmly. "Not like this. After you feel better."

"Don't leave me like this," she begged. "The doctor said —"

"I know what the doctor said," he replied sharply.

He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. It was a habit she'd noticed from him at the office. He only did it when he got stressed — and that wasn't very often.

"You don't know what you're doing," he said.

She knew what felt good and what didn't. "Please. It's the only thing that helps."

He shook his head. "You'd hate me when you snap out of this."

She rubbed her butt against his hand like a cat begging to be petted. She couldn't think that far ahead. All that mattered was now. "I'll hate you if you make me suffer."

He made a soft sound and looked away.

"I'm suffering," she whispered.

"Damn it, Delia. That's not fair."

His voice was so gruff; it momentarily drew her away from her obsession. Oh God, had she read him that wrong? The possibility made her heart ache. Hesitantly, she glanced over her shoulder. "Don't you... Don't you *want* to?"

His gaze flashed to hers. "You know I do," he said hoarsely.

"Then why?"

"I'm trying to do the right thing here. I'm trying to put you first." He rolled his shoulders again. "Ah, fuck it!"

"I'll go to hell for this," he muttered as he reared back and began to tear at his clothes. They fell onto the floor next to hers, and his belt lashed against the wall before dropping with a thud. Delia inhaled deeply when he pushed down his jeans and shorts in one smooth motion.

He wanted her.

For a moment, she hadn't been sure and it had scared her more than the fever. Now, she knew for certain.

And it excited her even more.

The room wavered about him, but his body was starkly defined by the light still shining from the bed stand. She couldn't tear her gaze from him. His muscles were sleek and taut. She hadn't had a clue what lay under those dark suits he wore. Power radiated from his body, yet he'd been so tender with her.

She glanced down and licked her dry lips.

His cock was thick and hard. It strained upward toward his six-pack abs, and his balls were already drawn up tight. He was big and, from the purplish-red color, she knew he was hot.

Not as hot as she was.

She was at 104 and climbing.

She wiggled her hips shamelessly as he climbed onto the bed behind her. The mattress dipped as his knees bumped against the inside of hers, spreading her wider. A thrill ran through her at the surreality of it all. Earlier today, a simple kiss had pleased her. Now, she was lifting her pussy, begging for penetration.

Things between them were going so far so fast.

She pressed her forehead against the pillow and wrapped her arms around it. Still, her hips jumped when his thumbs touched her. She'd never felt so acutely aware of her body in her life.

He spread her distended lips wide, and the tip of his erection found its place. "Are you sure?" he grunted.

Of him? Or herself?

"Do it," she moaned.

Her air left her lungs in a sudden whoosh when he thrust into her. He pushed in hard and long, entering her to the hilt with one roll of his hips. Delia's lungs immediately forgot how to function. She went without air for interminable seconds until they began to fill and expand rapidly.

"Ahhhhh," she cried.

The one, little sound was like a starting pistol. His hips began to swing back and forth, and her fingernails raked along the cotton sheets. Oh God, she hadn't known it would be like this. He felt huge inside her. His thrusts were hard and jagged, increasing the friction until she thought she'd go up in flames.

"You're like a furnace in there," he groaned.

His arms wrapped around her, and his hands caught her breasts. Twin points of fire burned in Delia's nipples when he pinched them. Her air rasped hard in her throat. He wanted more than the fever to submit.

He wanted her.

"Oh, God!" she choked out when he used his hold to pull her to an upright position.

He was pounding straight up into her as she straddled his lap, and his hands were everywhere. One stayed at her breast, but the other slid down her stomach to delve between her legs. She felt surrounded by strength. She could feel the muscles in his thighs and arms clenching as he held her. Inside her, his cock felt invincible. He touched the place where it was plowing away, and white-hot heat suffused her.

Her warrior. Her protector. She'd known he'd fight this for her.

Reaching back, she threaded her fingers through his soft hair. She craned her neck around and pulled him down for a kiss. His tongue batted around inside her mouth with as much gusto as his thickness pumped in and out of her below. She broke the kiss and pressed her head back against his shoulder as her body began to strain toward completion.

"I've wanted to do this for the past two months," he growled into her ear.

She rubbed the forearm against her belly and reached back to catch his hip. They were moving together now in a rough, sexual dance. She could feel every brush of the crisp hair on his chest against her back, every bump of his balls against her bottom. "Why didn't you?" she managed to ask.

"It's called sexual harassment."

"Harass me harder."

He groaned and the remainder of his gentleness fled. His hands bit into her flesh as his hips surged. Delia closed her eyes tightly. He was working deeply now, not even bothering to pull down more than few centimeters before hammering right back up into her furthest reaches.

She bounced on his lap. His breaths hit her ear and dampened her neck. Her senses narrowed to two points—the breast caught in his hand and the very heart of her being so thoroughly ravaged. Her teeth ground together as they went higher, hotter, harder.

Suddenly, she crested.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream. Heat lashed through her body until her muscles went limp. He kept her upright on his lap until she felt him shoot inside her. After a long, poignant moment, he collapsed onto the bed with her still caught in his arms.

"Hell's waiting, but what a way to go," he said behind her. He fought to catch his breath. "You nearly burned my cock off, hot stuff."

Hot stuff. She stirred against the pillow. She'd been called a lot of things because of her red hair, but never "hot stuff". She liked it. It made her feel sexy.

He made her feel sexy.

And sated. The fever had finally retreated.

"I... I didn't know it would be like that," she said in awe. No matter how many fantasies she'd had, she'd never dreamed she'd actually make love with him—or that her fantasies would pale in comparison. "I didn't know it could."

"Good," he said, satisfaction clear in his tone.

He pulled her closer and settled them into a more comfortable position, but made no effort to pull his softened erection out of her. Delia gently squeezed her inner muscles to hold him in place and was rewarded with a soft grumble in her ear.

"And don't even begin to think that's because of your damned fever," he said, his lips brushing against the shell of her ear. He nipped her earlobe softly. "Because it's not. Not by a long shot."

Chapter Three

Delia's eyes fluttered open sometime later. She didn't know what had awoken her; the night was still deep and quiet. So was her room. The light on the bed stand that had bothered her for so long was finally extinguished. Settling against her pillow, she looked at the sky outside her bedroom window. The curtains framed a constellation of stars, but she couldn't judge the time.

All she knew was that it was late. Late and apparently cold outside the apartment building. Moonlight reflected off newly fallen snow, making the night take on a serene luminescence.

Lying still, she mentally took stock. The heat inside her—it wasn't gone, but it was bearable. Her body slumped in relief. It had been so bad before, she'd thought she'd implode.

And she had.

Her comfortable stillness took on an edge. Before... Snippets of erotic memories floated through her head. The heat. The wanting.

The man.

She listened hard and heard breaths joining hers, echoing softly throughout the room. Slowly, she rolled onto her back and looked to the other side of the bed—the side that was normally empty.

Tonight, it was definitely filled. With six feet of pure masculinity.

She sucked in a quick breath. He was still here.

Just like he'd promised.

She could see him sleeping in the hazy moonlight. He looked like a worn-out child, lying flat on his belly with his legs spread wide. Self-conscious, she felt her face flush. He had good reason to be tired. Her demands had wrung them both dry.

For the first time, she could see why.

Oh, my.

Her body hummed in appreciation. She'd been so consumed before, she hadn't taken time to appreciate the details. And the beauty of his form was definitely in the details. He was luscious—all muscle, sinew, and smooth, male skin. Her gaze drifted hungrily down his body. He surpassed all the secret fantasies she'd held about him.

Every last one.

Slowly, she propped herself up on her elbow to get a better view. She'd never expected this to happen, but now that it had, she wanted to imprint the memory on her brain. Even relaxed in sleep, the muscles of his body were clearly defined. He was well-built, but not brawny. How did a man get a body like that? Weights? Running? Boxing? Her body melted. He had the body of a fighter.

Her fighter. Her defender.

Her fingers itched to run through his dark, rumpled hair. There hadn't been time to touch him before. It had all been him touching her...everywhere. Even now, one of his hands was stretched out toward her as if ready to protect her. Goose bumps sprang up on her skin. She wanted to return the favor. Desperately.

She wanted to kiss him again. She wanted to nibble and suck. She wanted to brush her tongue against his and lap up his dark taste.

She wanted to take him inside her again.

Only this time, she wanted to take it slow and easy.

Arousal pulled at her, and her hand sneaked out of its own volition. She watched curiously as it slid down his back. How had she managed to keep herself from pouncing on him for so long?

"Keep looking at me like that, and I'll be on you whether your fever needs it or not."

Startled, she snatched her hand back. "You're awake."

"And so are you." He stretched like a jungle cat and wrapped his arms around the pillow under his head. His dark eyes focused on her, lazy, yet alert even in the dim light of the room. "You were supposed to stay asleep this time. Aren't you feeling well?"

His drowsy gaze trailed along her figure, and awareness shimmered down Delia's spine. She was naked. Stark, buck naked. She hadn't cared before. She'd hardly realized it, even with all the lights blazing. Here in the intimacy of the darkness, though, she suddenly felt vulnerable. A chill ran through her, and she shivered. She reached for the sheet, but it had been ripped off the bed and was now securely wrapped around his hips.

She tried ineffectually to cover herself with her hands. "Would you —"

"Now she gets shy," he muttered underneath his breath.

Apparently, he wasn't acquainted with the feeling. He rolled to loosen the covers, and her eyes widened when she saw the shadow of dark hair and the swelling between his legs. She knew that swelling intimately. She'd felt it spreading her, filling her.

Her pussy clenched with remembered pleasure, and she couldn't help but stare.

He fluffed the sheet before pulling it up over the both of them. She gratefully tucked the fabric up to her chin, but was surprised when he caught her and pulled her across the bed. Her nipples stiffened when they bumped against his rock-hard chest.

"Oh," she gasped. The chill was chased away. Suddenly, she found herself wrapped up, face-to-face with him in a crowded cocoon.

His dark gaze was steady on hers. "How do you feel?" he asked.

The intimate question made her cunt throb. She could only think of one answer with his body caressing hers and him looking at her like that.

But that wasn't what he meant.

She shifted nervously. This sudden familiarity between them was unsettling, especially considering how distant they behaved at the office. Their relationship was quickly becoming more personal than she was ready to deal with. More emotional. Somehow, the raw, physical closeness they'd experienced earlier had been easier.

"Delia?"

Shadows pressed all around them, and she didn't know what to say. Her head still hadn't cleared. She felt confused, wary, uninhibited, and needy. Definitely needy. His legs brushed against hers, and it was all she could do not to wrap her thigh around his hips.

His hand swept down her back. "You feel a little cooler."

She didn't know about that. Shivers followed his touch down her spine, and she could feel warmth starting to unfurl in her veins. She bit her lip anxiously. It was like that with him. Every time he got close, her body roused. Yet if he stayed away, she hurt.

He gave her a soft shake. "Hot stuff, tell me you're okay."

"I'm fine," she said. She fought the reverie that was trying to pull her under. "Better."

He watched her closely as his hand slid down further, and Delia snapped to attention when his fingers nudged between her legs to cup her from behind. The position forced her bottom to spread to accommodate him. His thick wrist snuggled into the tight crevice and pressed firmly against the puckered bud of her anus. The touch was like a match to her flame. Her body jolted as fire suffused her nerve endings.

"Sore?" he asked softly.

She glanced away and tried to contain the craze surging inside her. How could he expect her to talk when he was touching her like that? "A little."

He bent his head so he could look into her face. His mouth flattened. "Regrets?"

"No," she whispered. Her body lay rigid against his as she fought her basic urges. Her hands were flat on his chest, but she kept them stiff so they wouldn't wander. She

didn't regret what she'd done; she couldn't. The need had been ferocious. She'd had no control over it. She remembered, because she was starting to lose her grip all over again.

"Frightened," she admitted.

His brow furrowed. "Of me?"

Yes. Of him. Of the situation. Of the demon swirling inside her. She saw the glimmer of hurt in his eyes and opened her hand over his heart. She let her fingertips caress him as they were dying to do. "Of myself," she said shakily. "I don't usually act this way. I don't beg men to...do...you know."

She rocked her hips, and they both became acutely aware of where his hand was.

The lines on his forehead smoothed, and he cupped her possessively. "I know."

Did he? Even after the way she'd behaved today?

"The heat," she tried to explain. "It's inside me, and it wants to get out. I have no power over it."

"Don't try. It's exhausting you, baby. I can see it." He stroked her face, and her lashes fluttered when his fingers caressed the pulse throbbing in her temple. "Just let go. I'll take care of things."

She took an unsteady breath even as her hips rocked against the cradle of his more intimately placed hand. She'd never admit it, but she *was* frightened of him. Not physically. No, she knew instinctively that he'd never hurt her. It was this sudden turn in their relationship that unnerved her. She was out of her comfort zone. Maybe even out of her league.

"I'll take care of you, Delia." His lips brushed across her forehead. "Any way you need."

He emphasized his point by strumming his thumb along the sensitive folds between her legs. She flinched, and her breath heaved in her lungs.

"You can't be surprised," he said, reading her reaction. His voice growled close to her ear. "We've been circling each other like two hungry tigers ever since you started working at Lloyd."

She shuddered. They had. The glances. The absent brushes of hands over paperwork. The deep inhales of each other's scent. Her belly clenched.

Unbidden, her hands circled around to his back. Her fingers scraped down the hard planes of his shoulder blades. The muscles contracted, and her nails bit into him. "But you never said anything. Never did anything... Until today."

"Yeah, today," he rumbled. His hand fisted in her hair. "Today pushed me past my limits."

She knew all about being pushed past her limits. The fever inside her was starting to rage all over again, and with it, her reticence was fading fast. It was so easy to lean on him, to let him be the strong one. She snuggled closer and brushed her lips down his collarbone. "Why today?"

His grip on her tightened. "It doesn't matter," he said gruffly. "Just know I'm ready to stake my claim."

So was she.

She pushed her mental and emotional concerns aside. It was easier that way. Tonight was about the physical, and she needed it so badly.

She wanted to touch all of him at once. Her body rubbed against his as her hands and mouth wandered. She dipped her head down and boldly licked his nipple. "I've been waiting for you."

He groaned aloud when her hand slid between their tightly pressed bodies and wrapped around his stiff cock. "Delia," he groaned.

She stroked him eagerly, pumping her hand up and down as he became thicker and hotter. Two months was a long time to wait. She couldn't wait any more. She swung her

thigh over his hip, and their hands batted against each other in their impatience to position him.

Slow and easy be damned. It wasn't going to happen this time.

"It's starting again," she said anxiously. The heat was right there at its pinnacle. She let out a whimper when his broad tip found her notch.

"I know, hot stuff." His voice was rough, but his hand was gentle it slid around to cup her bottom. "I can feel it, too."

"I need you!"

The hand on her backside anchored her as he thrust into her. Her neck arched as stars exploded behind her eyelids. The heat began to seep out of her core into her extremities. Her fingertips blazed across his skin as she touched him everywhere she could reach. "Oh, God. Yes!"

"Damn," he groaned. "You're on fire again."

He lifted her leg higher around his waist and began to pound into her, fast and hard. Passion was already overwhelming Delia's senses. Fire had even entered her lungs; she felt it with every breath she drew. She slid her hand away from his neck and down to his hip. Her fingers clenched.

"The flames..."

"Hold onto me, baby." His breaths were hot against her ear. "I'll put them out or we'll go down in them together."

* * * * *

And so the night went. Delia couldn't count the number of times she woke in feverish need that only he could douse. From the front, from behind, with his hands, with his mouth—his stamina kept pace with her the entire night. The fire reduced her inhibitions to ashes. Anything that would bank the blaze was acceptable.

Beyond acceptable. *Craved*.

After four hours had passed, he fed her more antibiotics. Her temperature refused to abate. Time and again, he rolled her onto her stomach and slid the thermometer deep into her ass. Each time, he swore when he read the result. Cold compresses were constantly swept down her overheated body. Twice, he stood her under a cool shower, and when that didn't work, he resorted to calling the doctor again.

"Come on, hot stuff," he said as he hung up the phone. "It's time we got serious about this."

Delia looked at him weakly. The past few hours had drained her strength. The fever was winning. She squirmed on the bedsheets, trying to find relief, but there was none. Even the curtain of her hair falling over her shoulder was too much. She spread the long strands across the pillow away from her skin and covered her eyes with the cold compress he'd given her.

"Doctor Mosely said we need to bring your temperature down *now*." He took the compress from her eyes and tossed it toward the bathroom. It landed on the floor with a *splotch*. "You need to be comfortable enough to sleep—and not for these little fifteen minute patches you've been taking. Your body's restorative powers need time to work."

"Can't sleep," she said tiredly. "The sheets are blistering my skin."

"I know, baby." He rubbed her shoulder gently before standing. It took some searching, but he found his jeans and pulled them on. He looked at her determinedly as he stepped into his shoes. "We're going to fix that."

His voice had taken on an edge. It was one she'd heard before, but not tonight. Her eyebrows drew together when he swept a blanket off of the floor and came toward her. She tried to back away, but he caught her and pulled her across the sheets. She struggled when he wrapped the blanket around her and plucked her up into his arms. "No," she said. "It's suffocating me."

"You'll want it soon enough."

"What do you mean? What are you doing?" She clutched at his shoulders when he carried her out of the bedroom. She looked around in confusion when he took her down the hallway and headed straight for the front door of her apartment. What was he thinking? "We can't leave! I'm not dressed. Neither are you!"

"It's four o'clock in the morning, babe. Everyone else is asleep." He juggled her into a more secure position and grabbed her keys as he walked by the kitchen table.

Was he out of his mind? It was winter. She might be baking, but she'd seen the crystal stillness outside her window. She knew what it meant. It was freezing out there. He didn't have a shirt on and all she had was a blanket. This was crazy. "Let me put some clothes on first! I don't want to go to the hospital *naked*," she hissed.

His jaw remained firm.

"We're not going to the hospital. At least not yet."

Security conscious even in the middle of the night, he locked her apartment door and started down the hallway. Delia looked around nervously. It was late, but she had neighbors. Mrs. Sneed, in particular, liked to keep close tabs on her. They were being quiet, but knowing the old lady, she'd wake up and want to know what was going on.

Delia would like to know that herself. She pushed the blanket away from her face and neck. Between it and his body heat, she was about ready to pass out. She shook her head to stay alert. "Tell me where we're going."

He jabbed the down button for the elevator. "The doctor had one more idea."

She kicked the blanket until at least her feet were bare. Another idea? Finally! "Anything," she said. "The heat's driving me mad."

His arms tightened protectively. "Be careful what you wish for."

She glanced at him sharply, and his profile wavered. She waited, but he steadfastly refused to return her look. It made her nervous. Nervous enough to flinch when the elevator dinged, and the door slid open. "Tell me," she said.

He carried her onto the elevator and used his elbow to hit the button for the ground floor. A muscle worked in his jaw as he leaned back against the elevator wall. She almost thought he wasn't going to answer until he started talking.

"If I took you to the hospital now, they'd put you in an ice bath," he said quietly. "Your temperature had come down three degrees, but now it's back up. It's been too high for too long."

An ice bath? Uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach.

His dark gaze finally locked onto hers. "The hospital staff could take care of you, but they wouldn't let me help you. Not the way that you need."

Her eyes widened when his meaning became clear. The fever had reduced her to her most primal needs. Together, they'd only found one way to slake them. If he wasn't there... Even if they did let him in the room with her... She couldn't have the whole world seeing her like that!

The bell rang, and the elevator door opened ominously. His hands tightened on her, but he didn't move. "It's your choice," he said gruffly. "The hospital or me?"

She knew what he intended to do, and it wasn't a choice at all.

Still, he'd said he'd take care of her, and that's exactly what he'd done all night. He'd nursed her, showing a gentle side she hadn't known he had. He'd coerced her into taking her pills, betraying the assertive side she knew all too well. He'd held her, he'd bathed her, and he'd made love to her. She had to trust him in this. "You," she whispered.

A soft sound escaped from the back of his throat, but his eyes darkened. His face hardened in determination, and he strode out into the main lobby like a man on a mission.

Delia braced herself as they neared the plate glass windows. It looked like a postcard outside. Puffy white snow clung to tree limbs. Moonlight reflected off the layer of powder that blanketed the earth. Everything looked so pretty and inviting.

She knew better.

She knew how the wind could whistle, the snow could bite, and the air could pinch. She cringed even though her body was scorching. It just might be too much. "What's the temperature out there?" she whispered.

His lips brushed against her temple. "You don't want to know."

He wouldn't tell her; that could only mean one thing. It was going to hurt. Second thoughts assailed her. "I don't know about this."

He stood poised in front of the door that led to the apartment complex courtyard. "We have to do it, Delia. You've been running a high-grade temperature for hours. Your body's going to start turning on itself."

His voice became strained, and he cuddled her closer. "We can't mess with this piece of wonder."

Her heart pounded against her chest, and she felt his thudding against her side. She'd never heard him so serious. It scared her, but not as much as going to the hospital and having to do this without him. She needed his steadfastness. She needed his support. She needed him.

She summoned what little strength she had. "What do I have to do?"

"Just hold on to me."

Done. She was already holding him so tightly her fingernails had left half-moon indentations on his shoulders. She heard the door open. Scared, she pressed her face against his neck. The cold night air swept through her hair. It felt good yet dreadful at the same time.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, sharing her heat with him. Why hadn't he gotten dressed? He didn't need to come out here like this. He wasn't proving anything to her. "You stupid he-man. You're going to get sick, too."

"Then you can return the favor."

Snow scrunched under his feet. Fear swamped her when he stopped walking. He'd carried her to a shadowed area beneath a tree in the courtyard. Watching her intently, he let her feet drop into the mound of snow.

Delia gasped from the pain. It felt like she'd just stepped on a bunch of little daggers. "Aiiieee!"

"I'm sorry, baby," he said gruffly. His callused hands shook as he cupped her face. "I hate doing this to you."

"Then don't," she said through clenched teeth. The pain was sharper than she'd prepared herself for. Her entire body began to quake. He was right about the blanket. She clung to it, wrapping it around her as tightly as it would go. What had they been thinking? "I don't want to do this. It isn't going to work."

"Try to remember it's for your own good."

"Don't say that." Her feet danced awkwardly in and out of the icy snow. Puddles were forming around her toes, but the prickle was just as sharp. "Things that are good for you taste bad, make you uncomfortable...or *hurt*. This hurts!"

"I know, but it will only be for a little while. I swear. Just focus on me."

She shook her head. "I can't. Take me back inside."

"Try to hold on."

"It's too cold. Give me the keys."

"No."

She held out her hand. He could be a taskmaster, but he wasn't cruel.

"No!" A shuttered look came over his face. "Goddamnit, if you want me to be the bad guy, I will."

She gasped when he suddenly fisted his hand in the blanket between her breasts and yanked it off of her. Without ceremony, he dropped it behind him, leaving her naked to the elements and anybody who might be looking out a window into the courtyard.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Give that back to me!"

"Later." He stepped in front of her to block her way when she tried to reach for it. "We do this first."

She looked at him in shock. He stared right back.

Delia didn't know what to do. The night air brushed her body intimately. It scraped against her nipples and prodded between her legs. Heat and shivers alternately racked her. The contrast was too much. *She needed that blanket!*

She tried to go around him, but he was quick. Every way she turned, he was there. As a last-ditch effort, she lunged at him. Breathing hard, she climbed him and wrapped her legs around his waist to get her throbbing feet out of the snow. "Enough," she said firmly. "I've changed my mind."

"I haven't."

She felt tears press at her eyes. He'd given her everything she'd wanted tonight. Why couldn't he give her this?

His cool hands swept down her back and encircled her hips. He was going to push her away. She prepared to fight him—but then his head dipped. The kiss he planted on her lips was hard and tumultuous.

Passion tore through Delia, diverting all other thoughts.

"Don't let go," he growled when he came up for air.

Her eyes widened in panic, but then he was kissing her again. The skyline tilted behind his shoulders, and her arms and legs constricted around him. He didn't drop her, and he didn't let her go. Holding her as if she were the most precious thing in the world, he went down into the snowbank with her.

And pinned her there.

Delia shrieked when the cold hit her back, her neck, and the curves of her bottom. The snow felt like needles piercing her sensitive skin. She lurched upright, but his

heavy weight bore down on her, trapping her. His lips came down hard again, swallowing her gasps and pleas.

She tore her mouth away and writhed in distress. She tried to dislodge him, but his strength more than doubled hers. Those muscled arms that had held her so tenderly all night were now holding her down. "It hurts," she sobbed.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, but his face remained set in stone.

"Just a few more minutes, hot stuff," he said in a ragged voice. "Come on, now. Do this for me."

She could finally see what lurked in his dark eyes. Concern. Anguish. And resolve.

His head dipped, but this time his mouth caught her breast. He sucked her nipple deep. The heat of his mouth was at such odds with the cold underneath her, Delia was stunned motionless. His mouth tugged insistently, suckling and nipping. She closed her eyes and moaned. The sensations were too intense. Her body wasn't built to withstand this dual assault.

"Oh, I can't do this. Not now."

"You can and you will. Stay with me, baby," he crooned.

His kiss drifted lower and skimmed across her belly. His tongue dipped into her belly button, and her lungs heaved. He'd made love to her all night, but not like this. He was dominating her, making her respond, forcing her to pay more attention to him than the cold. His teeth raked across her skin, low on her abdomen, and her body jolted.

She couldn't fight him and the fever at the same time. She had to submit to one.

"Look at me," he ordered.

Her eyelids felt heavy as she strained to open them. He'd leveraged himself up onto his knees to straddle her. She looked up at him, bleary-eyed. He looked like a dark devil as he loomed over her. She didn't understand the edge to his voice until he scooped up two handfuls of snow from beside her.

"We've got to get you cooled down one way or the other," he said, his voice almost fierce.

Before she could comprehend what he meant, he turned his palms and ground the crisp white crystals onto her breasts. The chill flayed her.

"Ah!" Her back arched, and her cry rent the air. She tore at his hands, but he cupped her tenaciously as the snow melted into icy water. Streams ran over her body, seeking crevices and finding them. She lurched, but he kept fondling her aggressively, working the cold into the very tips of her nipples.

"Stop!" she gasped.

His mouth came down hot on her belly, and his tongue was wicked. He licked up the excess water, causing heat bolts to shoot through her system, but the ice stream had started to run through her veins. "It's too much," she whined.

He'd gone too far.

Her fingers threaded through his hair and bit into his scalp. He was trying to help. Her frantic brain comprehended that much, but it didn't stop her from fighting him. She squirmed in the melting snow, trying to buck him off, roll him over, or just *escape*.

One hand left her breast, and she thought she'd been given a reprieve. All conscious thought left her, though, when he scooped up another handful of snow. He braced his other hand against her breastbone to keep her from moving. Her heart thudded against his palm. Their gazes locked, hers showing trepidation, his lit with a combination of regret and desire.

"Open your legs," he demanded. One denim-covered knee pressed insistently between her thighs.

"No!" she gasped. She couldn't take that. Not that!

She clawed at him, trying to find a way to make him stop. He wouldn't. She could see it in his eyes. She whimpered when the pressure increased and her thighs gave way. Before she could recover, both his knees were inside hers, spreading her wide.

Suddenly, he moved up over her. Delia flinched, but then he was kissing her with white-hot intensity. It clashed with the glacial shock that tore through her system when he shoved the handful of snow against her cunt.

Her body went rigid.

He was cupping the cold powder against the part of her that burned the hottest.

And the brightest. Her sensitive nerve endings screamed.

Her mouth opened in a silent cry, and his tongue dove deep. Shudders of pleasure and distress rocked her body as his cold, wet fingers began to probe.

"I'll make it better," he promised. His voice sounded tight. "I swear. We'll get through this together."

His fingers were persistent. Delia bucked and swayed, but she couldn't shake him. He lodged his fingers deep and began to draw out her own, hot moisture.

She cried out when she felt the demon rise inside her again.

"Turn it loose, hot stuff. Let me at it." He moved until he hovered over her way down low and dipped his head. Her fingernails bit into his shoulders when she felt warm puffs of air caress her inflamed pussy.

"Stop this," she cried. "Get off of me!"

"Shh." Still curling his fingers inside her, he let his mouth touch her. Her thigh muscles clenched. Opening his mouth, he used his tongue. He laved it over her, licking at her swollen tissues and delving into the sensitive dips.

"Ooh! What are you...? Oh, God."

"Tell me what feels good, Delia. Tell me what you need."

"I don't need this."

"Yes, you do. We both know you do."

He replaced his fingers with his tongue, and her discomfort swiftly morphed into pleasure. "Oh, damn you. Yes! Right there."

"Like this?"

"Yessss."

Suddenly, it didn't matter that icy water was pooling between her breasts and under her body. The fever was back at fighting strength, but he was there to take it on. He spread her legs wider to give himself more room, and snow worked its way into the crease of her bottom. Her body roiled, but he just snuffled at her with more intent.

"Ahhh!" Her fingers clawed at him, leaving scratch marks on his shoulders and the back of his neck.

Curtains fluttered when she cried out, but Delia didn't care.

Her lover did.

His head swung towards Mrs. Sneed's window, and he let out a curse. Quickly, he grabbed the blanket. He swung it around his bare shoulders and up over his head, hiding the private interlude from the old woman's prying eyes.

Delia felt waves of heat and cold alternately roll through her body. It was too powerful to last long. He ate at her, drawing out her wet juices and driving her upward. He settled down deeper into the vee of her legs. With the blanket over him, she couldn't see him. Couldn't prepare herself.

She jerked when his mouth latched onto her clit. The suction was tight and hot. She felt herself climbing. Her head rocked back and forth, grinding into the snow until her hair was sopping. The wet tendrils lashed against her shoulders, but he still didn't stop.

He grabbed more handfuls of snow. They hit her torso in soft splashes, making her squirm. Her hips pumped steadily against his mouth.

"I can't," she whimpered. "No more. Make it end."

He urged her legs back toward her chest, and soft smacking sounds echoed from between her legs. She reached under the blanket and cupped the back of his head.

"Please, I can't take it."

"Just this," he said. "Take this."

Suddenly, she felt a handful of snow rub against her lifted bottom. Unhurriedly, he scraped his thumbnail against the top of the crack of her ass. Burrowing between her cheeks, he trailed the cold snow all the way down to her anus.

The icy pad of his thumb pressed against her there hard.

He nipped at her clit at the same time, and Delia came.

She came with a rush. Opening her eyes, she felt herself catapulting toward the stars. She clung to him as the swells hit her, one after the other. It went on for a long, long time. When the quakes turned to tremors, she fell back into the snow, not caring about the cold, the wet, or the muck.

She was replete.

"God, hot stuff," he said, breathing heavily. "You just went off like a fucking volcano."

He braced his hands against his thighs as he fought to get himself under control. Finally, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Now we can go back inside. Let's get you cleaned up."

With unsteady hands, he wrapped the blanket around her and swept her into his arms. He pushed himself to his feet and adjusted her until his grip was sure. The look on his face was so severe it should have frightened her, but Delia just curled her body toward his.

He didn't intimidate her anymore. She was a strong, independent woman, and his protective instincts turned her to mush.

"What about you?" she said softly into his ear as he walked swiftly toward the building. His stiff erection was bumping hard against her hip, but she was suddenly more concerned when she felt the shudders running through him. He'd been half-naked out there, too.

"This wasn't about sex," he grunted as he let them in with her key. The lobby door swooshed shut behind them. He pushed the up button for the elevator and tucked the

blanket around her more closely as they waited. "I don't think your fever broke, but you're not so flushed. How do you feel? Tell me you're better."

She looked at him, stunned.

It hadn't been about sex – and he actually meant that.

Her heart squeezed. Feeling incredibly humbled, she opened the blanket and wrapped him inside with her. She pressed her breasts against his rippled chest. She had body heat to spare, and he needed it. "I'm better."

His stern countenance disintegrated, and he pressed his face hard into her neck. "I'm so sorry I had to put you through that."

"You made it a lot more pleasant than it could have been." She wove her fingers through his soft hair and kissed the sensitive spot behind his ear. "Thank you for not taking me to the hospital."

He took a deep breath, but didn't lift his head. "If this doesn't work, that's where we're going."

She caressed the tense muscles at the nape of his neck. "It worked," she whispered.

She threw one last look out the window over his shoulder and saw the lewd snow angel they'd left under the tree. His treatment had been unorthodox, but it was something she'd never forget – both for the sexual revelations and for the depth of the caring it had exposed. She'd never dreamed she'd find that in him.

She nuzzled his ear as the elevator door opened. "It worked," she whispered. "Now, take me back to bed. It's time I took care of you."

Chapter Four

Delia slept. She slept for hours in a deep sleep, never once budging from the spot on the bed on which he laid her. It was only the morning sunlight pouring through the window that finally roused her. She woke with a groan. She didn't feel rested. Her head was still foggy, and her body felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds. Why had she woken?

She squinted as the sun nearly blinded her. It was bright. It filled the corners of the room, reflected off the white sheets—

And stoked the ever-present fire inside her.

Her hand instinctively went to her belly. That was why. Anxiousness threatened to overwhelm her. The low burn was still there, simmering deep in her core. She could feel it. It was controlled for now, but she knew the signs. She knew where they would lead.

She rolled onto her back and restlessly kicked off the sheets. Had that dip in the snow been for nothing?

She'd told him it had worked.

And it had—but only for a while.

She couldn't ignore her fear any longer. This fever had taken her by surprise, and she didn't have the strength to fight it on her own anymore. Not even with his help. She was ready to go to the doctor.

But not like this.

She squirmed on the bed and tried to ease the throbbing that had started between her legs. It wasn't simmering any longer. It was as if she'd kicked the embers and fed it the oxygen it needed. The hunger was roaring back to life.

Feebly, she looked across the rumpled bed to her lover. He'd been up with her all night, but sleep had taken him down for the count. His strength needed replenishing, too. He looked as if he wouldn't wake for hours.

And she needed him.

Her gaze drifted over him longingly. His hair was still tousled, but this time it was of her doing...as were the scratches on his shoulders and the faint hickey on his neck. She watched as his chest rose and fell. A dark shadow of whiskers had appeared along his jawline, and she pressed her legs together tightly. She could imagine how that prickly hair would feel along the tender skin of her inner thighs.

The quickening set upon her again. Hard.

Her gaze slid down the canvas of muscles until she saw the part of him that could ease her ache. Even after such a never-ending night, a morning erection still rose. Desire made her shiver, and she glanced up at his face again. She hated to wake him.

Yet she had to do something.

Her body tingled when realization set in. There was only one option. She was going to have to handle it herself.

Nerves assailed her.

Could she do it? With him lying so nearby?

The fire inside her told her she had to. She couldn't wait any longer.

Lying back, she took a deep breath. It didn't have the calming effect she wished for. Excitement and trepidation sizzled through her veins.

She stared blindly at the ceiling, unable to watch what she was doing. Slowly, she slid the hand on her stomach lower. Her fingers came across the tangle of red hair that he'd found so fascinating. Her muscles quivered, but she didn't stop. Spreading her legs, she let her fingers explore. Hesitantly, they slid through the tender, wet folds of her pussy.

She winced softly. Their sexual marathon had left her sore, but the tenderness didn't matter. Her need outweighed it a thousand times over.

Anticipation made hurry. She reached deeper and bit her lower lip as two fingers slid into her damp channel. Her heels dug into the mattress, and her body bowed.

It was good, but it wasn't the same. Her hands weren't as big as his – or as sure. She wiggled her fingers and timidly began to pump. She closed her eyes tightly as her thumb nudged her clit.

"Need some help with that?"

The rumble of the low voice made her eyelids fly open. Her head jerked to the side, and she found him watching her. Caught! She felt her face flush with embarrassment. The mattress shifted as he rolled onto his side and propped his head into his hand. His actions were lazy, but his eyes were alert.

So was his cock. He'd lengthened and thickened in the short time since she'd last stolen a peek at him.

She jerked her hand away from her crotch, but he caught her wrist and pressed it tight against her curls. "Don't let me stop you."

"I can't," she whispered. "Not in front of you."

"Why not? We've done just about everything else there is to do." Weaving his fingers through hers, he gently wedged their joined hands back between her legs. He'd barely begun to teach her the movement when his dark gaze flew up to her face. "Damn it, Delia. You're on fire again. Why didn't you wake me?"

She groaned as her hips rolled up to meet their combined touch. "You needed your sleep."

"I've dealt with less sleep before and lived. For God's sake, you're the one I'm worried about." He let her fingers go and penetrated her deeply, examining her for himself. The lines of his face drew tight. "Come here."

She gasped when he rolled onto his back and took her with him. His strength still surprised her. He lifted her as if she were light as a feather and settled her over his hips. She straddled him uncertainly as he let her weight come down onto her knees.

"There," he said. "Use me."

She spread her fingers wide on the muscled chest beneath her. Why argue with him? He was what she really wanted. Really needed.

Reaching down, she wrapped her fist around his thick erection. He grunted at her soft touch. A ghost of a smile lit her lips as she looked into his eyes. She'd been shy with herself; with him, it felt natural. Gradually, she impaled herself. It wasn't as easy as it had been last night. He'd ridden her hard, and she was swollen.

His neck arched as she took him to the hilt. "God, you're like a blowtorch."

"Help me put the fire out."

His fingers bit into her waist. "One time," he said, breathing hard. "One time and then I'm taking you to the emergency room."

Delia's head fell back, and her hair brushed against the small of her back. She savored the connection between them. She couldn't get enough of the feel of his cock stretching her. She loved how his fingers clutched at her. Her ears craved his grunts of satisfaction. She began to move and a moan of delight left the back of her throat.

"Christ," he hissed. His rough hands came up to cup her breasts possessively. "You are so beautiful."

After hours of moonlight loving, the sun was glaring. It left nowhere to hide. Everything was out in the open and brilliantly displayed. Emotion mixed with the heat burning inside Delia's chest, and she went a little crazy. Her hair swung wildly about her shoulders as she shagged him in quick, rough movements. Her breasts bounced in his hands, and her bottom slapped against his hips. The fever inside her roared, and the tingle at the back of her neck told her she was close.

She was going to come, and she'd hardly gotten started.

One, two... On the third pump, her muscles clenched. Her thighs gripped his hips as she ground herself onto him. Shimmering waves of heat and satisfaction swept through her. She went lightheaded and felt herself break out in a sweat. Suddenly, her body was coated with moisture. Droplets ran down her temples, and she shivered at the river running down her back.

"Yes!" he barked beneath her. His hips slammed up so hard, her knees left the bed. "That damned fever has finally broken."

Delia's eyes flew open. The constant haze that had filled her head finally cleared. Her mind focused on his voice. His familiar, authoritative voice. Her gaze snapped to his face.

"Mr. Lloyd!"

Shock hit her, and she nearly fell off him.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise, but understanding made his features turn hard.

"Oh, no, you don't," he growled. He caught her in his arms and rolled until she was flat on her back beneath him.

Delia's breaths went short in her chest. Jackson Lloyd was in her bed. In her bed? He was in her, buried about as deep as he could go. They were connected as a man and woman, and it mortified her. She was taking her boss—a man she could barely talk to on the best of days. When she thought of the things they'd done...

"Damn it. Don't back away. You're not going to do this to me. To us."

She couldn't respond. Oh, God. What must he think of her?

His face took on a ferocious cast.

"Spread wider," he demanded. His hands caught the insides of her thighs and pushed her legs outwards until she had no defenses left. She lay open and vulnerable to his intimate thrusts, and he drew them out to make sure she knew exactly what they were doing together.

"Don't look at me that way," he said. "You knew it was me. Goddamnit. You knew it was me!"

Words couldn't escape her tight throat. Conflicting emotions rocked her. Had she known it was him? She'd known she was safe. She'd known she was wanted. That was as far as her clouded brain had gotten.

"You thought I was Rob."

The skin at his cheekbones pulled tight. His teeth ground together as his head dropped in defeat. His hips, though, weren't giving up.

Delia didn't know what to say. The look in his eyes had captured her. He was angry, but there was also hurt in those dark depths. Deep, cutting hurt. She lay still, accepting his thrusts, but remained uncertain as to what she should do.

"No," she said, finally finding her voice. "I didn't think you were Rob."

He lodged deep inside her and stared at her face. The tension in the room skyrocketed. "Then what did you think?"

She couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

Last night, she'd been confused. The fever had affected her thinking processes.

But never once had she thought she was making love with Rob.

"I wasn't thinking at all," she admitted in a tiny voice. She squirmed beneath him uncomfortably. "My head... I think I was delirious."

His hips rolled. "So I was convenient? It didn't matter who I was as long as I kept the fire in your pussy banked?"

She shrank back from his harsh words, but he had her pinned against the mattress. Nailed was a better description. He was hard, thick, and determined. If anything, he'd sunk into her even deeper.

"No," she said on a soft cry. Oh, God. He was nudging against her very cervix. Her head rolled on the pillow. "It wasn't like that."

Any old stud wouldn't have done. She hadn't needed *servicing*. She'd needed him. Even now, knowing who he was, her body was still heating, straining to meet his.

He caught her face in both hands and made her look at him. "Then why are you so surprised? Why are you so upset? Christ, Delia. Is it really that hard for you to be with me?"

"Yes!"

Her dream lover was Jackson Lloyd! Before, her instincts had always told her to run whenever he'd gotten close... And she suddenly realized why. He'd been right. They'd been quietly circling each other for months. She'd flirted with Rob, but that had been because he was safe. Safe and harmless.

Jackson was anything but.

"You scare me," she whispered.

He snapped back as if she'd just hit him. The look on his face was stunned. Crestfallen. "I'd never hurt you," he said hoarsely. "You've got to know that."

"I do." Oh, why had she said anything? She didn't want to get into this. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

The tone of his voice made her shiver. He wasn't going to let it go. She'd thought he'd been intense at the office; in bed, he was overpowering.

"You... You make me feel things that I shouldn't. I don't know how to act when I'm around you." Reaching up, she covered her face with her hands. "You make me lose control enough as it is, but after last night... Now you know."

She felt his tense body relax and then he was coaxing her hands to the side. "Is that all? Hell, hot stuff, you're not the only one who went wild last night. You should have warning signs posted on you. Don't you know you scare the shit out of me, too?"

Hesitantly, she peeked at him. "I do?"

"Fuck, yeah, but I'm not going to let that stop me." He looked her dead in the eye. "Are you?"

Slowly, he wedged his hand between their bodies. Watching her closely, he flicked her clit. The sensation brought her need back with a rush. It percolated out of her core and bubbled through her veins. Her thighs tightened around his hips, but he refused to move. His lungs worked like a bellows as he braced himself over her, watching her face. Assessing her.

"Look at me," he said. He fingered her again, and she groaned. "We're good together. You can't deny it."

She couldn't. Not with the way her body was betraying her. She ran her hands down his back, trying to encourage him to move. To thrust.

He shuddered, but stayed stock-still. "You've got to make the choice, Delia. Do you want some unknown dream lover or me?"

She wrapped her legs around his hips.

"What do you want, baby?" he growled.

She couldn't fight it anymore.

"I want you." She caught his shoulders as her back bowed. "*Jackson!*"

His control snapped, and he began to pound into her.

Delia clung to him like a life raft in a storm. Her need had been strong all night, but now it threatened to incinerate her. The heat was blinding. Her teeth scraped along his shoulder, and she held on for dear life. "What's wrong with me? Why won't it stop?"

"You're in heat, baby," he growled. He thrust so hard and so fast, the headboard rattled against the wall. "I don't care about the doctor's diagnosis. You needed to mate."

Mate. The word was enough to make her come. The orgasm slammed into her hard, and he wasn't far behind. He thrust one more time, nearly sending the headboard through the wall into Mrs. Sneed's apartment, and his body stiffened. He spurted into her for what seemed like forever before he sagged onto her.

They lay there together, his weight pressing her into the mattress as the urgency dissipated.

Delia went quiet.

Jackson Lloyd was her lover. The whole man. Every side of him.

Timidly, she ran her fingers down his spine. It was going to take some adjusting to, but he was still the same man he'd been in the darkness. Sexy. Bold. Caring. He'd be good to her. He'd be good for her. There was no reason to be nervous.

Other than the fact that he held her livelihood in his hands.

Her eyes widened. The day was already half over. "The bid!"

"Rob's taking care of it," he murmured tiredly. He nuzzled the side of her neck, and she felt her cheeks flame as he slowly disconnected their bodies.

The budget. That was probably the reason he'd come here in the first place. He'd needed clarification on something—the sensor quotes, her spreadsheet...

Her thoughts came to a screeching halt. Oh, God. Her spreadsheet.

He'd found the error and had come here to fire her.

"Rob's terrible with numbers!" She pushed at Jackson's shoulders. "Let me up. I'll go in and make sure everything's ready. We've still got some time."

He moved to her side so she could breathe more easily, but kept one leg thrown securely over her hips. His dark eyes were alert, but he seemed more curious than angry. "It's ready. I cleaned up your spreadsheet last night and gave him the final numbers before I came here. Don't worry about it."

"But... I don't understand. If you didn't come here about the budget..."

"Are you asking me why I showed up at your apartment in the middle of the night?"

She hesitantly nodded.

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Twenty-two."

Her eyebrows drew together. It wasn't what she'd expected to hear. "What?"

"Twenty-two. I knew you were sick when I found that error. You never make mistakes like that." His fingers brushed across her cheekbone, and the look on his face sobered. "That's when I knew it was serious. I got over my jealousy real fast."

"You were jealous?" she choked out. "About what?"

He actually looked embarrassed. "You caught me by surprise when you left work so suddenly, and when I saw Rob with his arm around you..."

"I knew you got the wrong impression!"

"What was I supposed to think when you two started sucking face on a public sidewalk? You want to talk about envy? That old green monster took a huge bite out of my ass."

The kiss. Delia was horrified. She hadn't known he was watching. She never would have let Rob kiss her if she'd known.

The realization made her come up short. She never would have let Rob touch her. A flirty little kiss or two was okay, but if he'd asked for anything more?

She would have been tempted, but Jackson was the one. They'd been gearing up for this for two months. It was he that made her feet stumble, her words clumsy, and her heart slam against her rib cage.

She looked at him in wonder. "I thought Rob was your best friend."

"He is – the little prick. He staged that whole thing and thought it was funny, too."

"He did what?"

For once, Jackson was the one who acted uncomfortable. He let out a long breath and ran his hand through his hair. "He knew how I felt about you," he said quietly. "Hell, he's known since the first day I interviewed you, and he's been goading me to do something about it ever since. Yesterday, though, he kicked his plan into high gear."

"But... I don't understand."

"Let's just say we had a man-to-man talk when he got back to the office."

"Oh, no." Delia didn't like the sound of that. "You two didn't. I never meant to come between the two of you."

"Relax. That pretty boy face of his is just fine." Jackson reached out and began to toy with her hair. He seemed entranced with the way the red strands wrapped around his fingers. "You'll find a receipt for a new trash can, though, when you get back to the office."

Delia couldn't help it. The thought of Jackson Lloyd losing his legendary control—and over her—made her feel all warm inside. It wasn't the feverish heat she'd felt over the course of the night, but a warmth that went deep into her being and wouldn't go away. She finally understood what that mischievous smile on Rob's face had been about. "He told you to come check on me last night."

"It's the only thing that saved his puny butt. That, plus the fact that he kept his hands to himself." Jackson glanced at her uncertainly. "Are you disappointed?"

She lifted her head and shyly kissed the mark her teeth had left on his shoulder. "No."

He cupped the back of her head and held her look. "Somebody needed to take care of you—and it was going to be me."

"I'm glad it was," she murmured. Finding him in her bed had been a surprise, but it was turning out to be a good one. It was just going to take her a while to merge her night lover with her day boss. Still, knowing what she did about him... His power, his compassion, his mouthwatering body, his unblinking focus... Ooh, the possibilities were endless.

A thought occurred to her, one that had bothered her even in her delirium. "But how did you get in?"

He pulled back and looked at her with one eyebrow lifted.

"Oh, that's right," she said with embarrassment. He was a security expert.

"That's it." He pushed himself off of her and hovered above her on all fours. "It's time to take you in for that checkup."

Delia protested when he gathered her up in his arms and carried her to the bathroom. "You're not still taking me to the doctor."

He set her on her feet and reached out to turn on the shower. "The hell I'm not."

For some reason, standing upright beside him totally naked brought back her shyness. She knew she was being silly, but she grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around herself. "But... I'm better. I swear."

He looked at the towel with a scowl on his face. "You had a rough night, hot stuff. I want to make sure you're okay."

She reached out and caught his arm, surprising herself when it felt natural to do so. "But Jackson... Dr. Mosely knows."

"Knows what?" The hard look on his face softened. "That you've been horny as a mink?"

Her cheeks flamed, and she looked away. There was no ignoring him, though, when he caught her towel and tossed it aside. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. Her breasts flattened against his chest, and Delia felt her heart thud when she looked up into his face.

Jackson Lloyd.

Her lover.

He looked at her languidly, and she recognized the gleam in his eyes.

"So let old Doc be jealous," he said. "I'm the one who got to play firefighter."

Her breath caught when he lifted her and entered her in one smooth motion.

He groaned at the tight clasp of her body. "And, baby, I'm not giving up the job."

He stepped under the spray of water and pushed her up hard against the shower wall. He looked deep into her eyes as water sluiced down their hot, sticky skin. "I want

to fuck you again, Delia," he whispered. "I want your eyes open and your mind clear, so you know exactly who's doing you."

Her fingers dug into his shoulders, and she brazenly swiveled her hips. She had a lot to learn about the man, but this was one side of him she knew well. "I thought you said 'one time'."

He laughed – yet another uncharacteristic reaction that she was going to have to get used to. She didn't think it would be too hard.

"Your fever hadn't broken then," he said with a grin. He thrust slowly, and the grin slipped into a groan. "We'll make it two."

She locked her ankles around his back and arched into him. She could hardly believe it, but it was even better now that the heated fog had left her brain.

"Or maybe twenty-two," she said breathlessly. "It depends on how you do the math."

Epilogue

"Heads up! Check out Camera 1 in the lobby."

"Whoa. Look at those legs."

"And that hair." The man behind the monitor sighed dramatically. "I've always had a thing for redheads. Wonder what room she's in."

"*Mine,*" Jackson said firmly. He pushed himself away from the wall against which he'd been leaning, and the Berkshire security team suddenly became all-business. To make sure they stayed that way, he planted himself behind them and crossed his arms over his chest. "That camera's slightly off-center. Try adjusting it five degrees to the right. I should be able to see both the front door and the main desk when it's in stationary mode."

Keyboard keys began clicking furiously, and the sound made him ease up a bit. The hotel team was doing one last training run on their new camera system. He had confidence it would live up to their expectations; he just felt it best to make sure none of these computer geeks eyed his woman too closely.

He stole another look for himself. Rob and Delia were now in center frame. Really, he couldn't blame the security guys. Although they had an important job watching out for the safety of the hotel's guests and employees, the routine could get monotonous. When a looker like Delia came onscreen, she was bound to draw attention.

He knew. He'd spotted her the moment she'd stepped inside the front door.

"Adjust the focus," he instructed.

He'd been going crazy waiting for her. He'd spent the last three days working at the hotel to smooth out the inevitable kinks that always seemed to pop up whenever a project was supposed to finish. He didn't mind the long days. It was the long nights that had nearly killed him.

He'd made the mistake of taking a room without her.

The two nights alone had been two nights too many. They hadn't slept apart since her bout with that damned fever, and they wouldn't ever again if he had anything to say about it.

He watched as Rob and Delia showed their identification to the front desk and obtained their temporary security passes. Delia said something to Rob, but he just waved her on. The cute Asian concierge had captured his attention. Jack snorted. One of these days that boy was going to go down for the count, and when he did, he was going to fall hard.

Jackson knew how that felt.

"Keep running through the checklist," he instructed the team. "I'll be back."

Trying not to act too anxious, he headed out of the secured room and down the empty hallway. This was the part of the hotel that guests never saw. The walls were stark white, the floors were concrete, and pipes ran exposed along the ceiling. It was in this secluded world that the heart of hotel operations beat. For clearance reasons, this would be Delia's first visit.

He couldn't wait to show her what they'd accomplished.

He waited impatiently for the elevator to arrive. When it did, it was well worth the wait. Delia stood inside looking fresh and gorgeous. God, she was a sight for sore eyes. "Hey, hot stuff," he said gruffly.

She smiled at him softly. "Hi, boss."

Suddenly, Jackson found it hard to breathe. He'd never grow immune to that intimate grin. It had taken him a long time to ease her into feeling comfortable around him. Coaxing her out of her shyness had had its upsides, but things were definitely better now.

She was his.

And he was hers, through and through.

"Get over here," he said, catching her about the waist.

She flinched when he pounced so suddenly, but quickly softened against him. Jackson knew he was being rough, but he couldn't help it. He'd had no idea how hard it would be to be away from her. The kiss he gave her was hot, deep, and raunchy, but she didn't shy away. She felt the urgency, too.

"I missed you," he growled against her lips.

The torment in Jackson's voice made Delia want to melt.

"I missed you more," she said. She truly had. She'd been aching for his touch for days. It had gotten so bad, she'd taken to wearing one of his shirts to bed. Two nights alone had seemed like forever. She didn't ever want to go through that again. Feeling bold despite the cameras she knew were in this hallway, she swiveled her hips against him. "Can't you tell?"

He groaned. "Damn, you should have stayed here with me."

She nuzzled against his neck. "You were busy. We both were. Besides, I didn't want to get in your way. You had a job to do."

His hands bit into her waist. "You're never in the way."

She smiled at him tolerantly. "Right. Just like you're never in my way when you bring me receipts two weeks late."

He looked pained, and she kissed his cheek. It was hard to remember back to when he'd intimidated her so. She patted her hands on his shoulders placatingly. There were people watching, she knew. "Now, what about that tour you promised me?"

With curiosity, she looked down the hallway. She'd wanted to see where he'd spent so much of his time. It was different than she'd expected. The glossy façade of hotels was all she'd even seen. "Is that really Command Central down there?"

Jackson looked over his shoulder down the barren hallway, and she could see the wheels turning in his head. She knew he'd gotten special permission for her to come up

here. He'd liked it when she'd indicated interest in more than just the number side of the business.

"We'll do that later," he said abruptly. Reaching behind her, he jabbed the up button for the elevator. "Right now, we need to go to my room."

"Jack!" Delia gasped. The doors opened, and he started nudging her inside. She tripped over her heels and caught his shoulders as he backed her up against the wall. "What are you doing?"

"The security boys can wait." His eyes took on a gleam that she recognized. "*I can't.*"

She couldn't either, but this was so unlike him. Where was his focus? His sense of responsibility? They had a job to finish. As much as she wanted to be with him, they needed to fulfill their obligations first.

Jackson seemed more interested in nibbling on her ear. She pushed at his shoulders. "We can't run off like this," she said, trying to convince herself as much as him. "You have to be there for the final walk through."

He punched the button for the 7th floor with relish. "Berkshire hotel management signed off on the project an hour ago."

Her jaw dropped in surprise. They'd signed off early? That was unheard of. "Are you saying we're done? We've completed all our contractual work?"

"Done, completed, finished, crossed-off and double-checked." He pulled back and looked at her with that penetrating gaze of his. "I wasn't going to spend another night without you."

"Oh, Jackson." Her fingers bit into his broad shoulders. The project had been a major undertaking for the whole company. It had taken months, and they'd had more than a few setbacks. To hear that they were really and truly done stunned her.

It also made her a little uneasy.

His look didn't waver. "This is a big milestone for us, Delia."

"I know," she said, her throat going tight. In a way, she'd tried not to think about it. They'd gotten together on the night before the bid—but now the project was over. "What happens next?" she asked hesitantly.

"We celebrate," he said, firmly squashing any doubts about their future.

The elevator doors opened, and he grabbed her hand. Delia followed happily as he led her through the maze of stark, utilitarian hallways. Just when she was completely turned around, he opened a door and they walked into another world. The lush surroundings of the guest portion of the hotel were disconcerting, but Jackson knew exactly where he was going.

"I figure two more days in this hotel room should take the edge off." He stopped in front of Room 715—the room she'd called repeatedly just to hear the sound of his voice. He pulled her into his arms for another quick kiss. "Then I thought we'd go on vacation."

"Vacation?" She blinked. She hadn't been on vacation for years. Unemployment tended to do that to a gal.

"Anywhere you want to go. Hawaii, Florida, the Caribbean—somewhere I can get you into a bikini. Preferably with a thong."

Delia couldn't help it. She blushed. She'd asked him once if he thought her backside was shapely.

He did.

Jackson's eyebrows drew together. "What's the matter? Don't you want to go away with me?"

"I do," she said. She moved closer and brazenly rubbed her hand against his crotch. "I was just thinking that somewhere with snow might be fun."

He made a strangled sound and jabbed his key card at the door lock. It took him three tries before he got it open. "Stupid security," he grumbled.

She nipped at his earlobe. "That security will be paying for my thong."

“Good point.” He tugged her inside and slammed the door behind them. “Get out of those clothes.”

Delia laughed and reached for the tie at the side of her dress. She’d come prepared. She pulled on the belt, and the wraparound dress gaped open to reveal the sexy lingerie she’d bought just for him.

He nearly went down on his knees before her. “Oh, baby.”

He grabbed her, and they tumbled onto the bed together. Delia moved underneath Jackson as his hands roamed eagerly. She’d missed the feel of his weight pressing her into the mattress. She’d missed the sound of his breaths as he slept beside her. She’d missed the breakfasts he made her.

She’d missed him.

“You feel warm,” he said as he undid the front closure of her bra. He cupped her breast, and she bit her lip in pleasure. Her nipple was already prodding the center of his palm.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked abruptly. The look he shot her was concerned and suspicious at once.

Delia sighed. He looked over her like a mother hen. She couldn’t sneeze without him wanting to call Dr. Mosely. “I’m fine,” she said. “It’s ninety-two degrees outside. Of course, I’m hot.”

His lips slowly curled up in a sly smile. “You can say that again.”

She felt her heart flip. God, she loved this side of him. More and more, he was loosening up that rigid personality of his. Every day, he let her see inside him just a little bit more.

She cocked her head as she looked up at him. “Don’t you ever get sick?”

“Nah.” He watched as her nipple perked up under the coaxing of his thumb. “I’m too mean to get sick.”

She caught his face with both hands and made him look at her. "Don't you want to? *Get sick*, I mean?"

He finally got the message. She knew, because his entire body went rigid atop her.

He cleared his throat. "Well, now that you say something, it is getting awfully hot in here."

She stroked her hands down his chest. His muscles were taut as steel. "Need me to take care of you?"

With a shuddering breath, he leaned his forehead against hers. "Hot stuff, I need all the TLC you've got."

About the author:

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