

IN HIS BROTHER'S PLACE

by

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Dedication

For Edwina and Miriam

Chapter 1

Rick was dead. And it was all her fault.

Pain and confusion coursed through Dana Lewis, making her heart ache. She could always imagine what might have been, but now, she'd never know.

Shifting the flimsy gown to better cover her exposed back, she sat up in the hospital bed. Dizziness blurred her vision, causing her to swoon, followed by nausea that made her stomach lurch. She moved trembling fingers to the side of the bed and searched for the call button. But she overcompensated, reaching too far, unable to stop her forward momentum until she saw the floor crashing up toward her...

No!

Strong hands saved her, grabbing her midfall, easing her sagging body back into the bed.

"What are you doing, Dana?" Josh's rich baritone jolted her out of her dizziness.

She bit her lip, opened her eyes and attempted to steady herself. Sitting back against the pillows, she tried her best to smile. Her lips trembled when she saw the concern on Josh's face. He wasn't fooled at all.

He reached out and tipped her chin up to get a better look. "Dana?"

"I'm so sorry, Josh." She wished she could say more, that she could summon the words to make his pain go away, but her head, still bruised and battered from the accident, wasn't working properly. *What could she say to the man whose brother she had killed?*

"It wasn't your fault."

But to Dana, the anger in his jade-green eyes belied his gentle words. They were bloodshot and slightly moist, a testament to his all-night hospital stint, and perhaps, to his tears. His jaw was rigid, causing his already chiseled features to take on a stonelike quality. His broadly muscled shoulders were washboard straight, almost as if he was afraid that relaxing his stance would lead to being carried away by emotion.

"I asked him to take me home so I could change clothes. If I hadn't, Rick might still be alive." *Please forgive me. My vanity killed your brother.*

"Rick died because an idiot plowed through a stop sign. It's that simple." He ran a hand through his sandy brown hair, testing its unruly thickness. A stray lock fell over one impossibly green eye, making him look more like a male model than the CEO of one of Silver Spring's fastest growing travel and tourism empires. "If you're feeling guilty, don't. I already miss my kid brother like crazy, but I'm really glad you're alive."

As much as she didn't want to think about it, she realized how lucky she was. The car that had hit them had careened directly into the driver's side. From the bits and pieces she had been able to catch from whispering doctors, Rick had had to be cut from the car. The other driver had died on impact. She'd managed to escape with a concussion and light bruising. It worried her that she had so little memory of the accident, but the doctors had claimed this was normal. In fact, it was probably for the best.

Josh's eyes latched on to hers. "I hear you might be going home soon. Is there someone there who can take care of you?"

"Take care of me?"

"Yes. I know you live alone, but do you have anyone who could look in on you? Do your parents live nearby?"

Her parents. Two more people she'd lost. Snuffed out by an accident similar to the one that had taken Rick's life.

She'd been eleven. Her Grandma Charlotte, a kind woman with a sweet tooth, had taken her into her South Baltimore row

house, despite being ill with diabetes, stiffened by arthritis and on a strict budget. She'd been scarcely equipped to care for her growing granddaughter and by the time she'd passed away, not quite six years later, Dana had become the primary caretaker. Since then, Dana had been all alone.

"I'll be fine."

Her eyes ached, keeping rhythm with her throbbing head, and her muscles were sore from the trauma of being thrown around the wrecked car. She yearned to close her eyes again, but she knew sleep was no way to make the pain go away. She'd dreamt about Rick all last night and had awakened several times to a horrible reality. She'd never see Rick Chancellor again.

Except in her dreams.

Would she ever be able sleep through the night?

Rick had been the first person she'd allowed to get close since her parents had died and she'd gone to live with her grandmother. Always shy, she'd never had many friends, but after the accident, she'd escaped into her own private world. In fact, she had actively avoided relationships and all other entanglements because they only brought hurt in the end.

While she had considered Rick a friend, she'd always suspected that he wanted more. Right before his car was hit, she had considered taking their friendship to another level. He hadn't been her dream man—she'd considered him more like a brother—but Rick had been kind, attentive and sweet. He would never break her heart, never make her feel like a conquest. And now he was gone.

Poor Josh. She'd met him only once before the accident, when she'd nervously accepted Rick's invitation to attend a company barbecue sponsored by *On The Go*, one of Josh's travel magazines. She'd felt guilty about her instant attraction to the tall, sandy-haired hunk who was so different from his younger brother. Josh, at thirty-three, was a full nine years older than she and Rick, his influence more paternal than brotherly. She'd blushed when she'd noticed him watching her as she and Rick mingled with his magazine staff.

She hadn't been able to take her eyes off him. He moved with purpose, every step confident and sure. His face, which had a hint of five o'clock shadow, was freshly tanned due to a recent jaunt to Hawaii. She'd spent the whole day trying not to watch his progress around the backyard, but it had been a losing battle.

Eyeing him from across the expanse of the pool, she'd sipped her lemonade, her mouth dry as her mind conjured images of their bodies intertwined. Even as Rick chatted about the movie they'd seen the night before, Dana's face had flushed with excitement as thoughts of Josh ravishing her seared her blood to a steady boil. *What she'd really wanted to do was milk the tall drink of water dry.*

She remembered attempting to blend into the surroundings that day, hoping her thrift store jeans and department store tennis shoes weren't that noticeable among the designer clothes and expensive loafers worn by the other partygoers. Before the barbecue, she'd had no clue just how wealthy the Chancellor brothers were.

When she'd brought it up to Rick, he'd grinned and brushed her off. "Josh is the rich one, not me. He just lets me live with him."

And live they did! The fourteen-room house was a marvel of brick, stone and marble, including four bedrooms with attached bathrooms, two kitchens, a huge library and an entertainment room. When Rick gave her a quick tour, she'd been captivated by the winding, circular staircase and the shiny hardwood floors. The tour hadn't lasted long, however. He hadn't wanted Dana to think he was stuck up.

"Do you have help—a whole troop of servants?" she'd asked a blushing Rick.

"No, nothing like that. Mrs. Coombs, our housekeeper, comes by three days a week. Other than that, we fend for ourselves."

When they'd gone back to sit by the pool, Josh's gaze had trailed their every move. Unable to take her eyes off him, she'd looked right back.

That was three months ago. She would be lying if she claimed not to have thought about the rugged but brainy travel journalist, his hard green eyes piercing through her emotional suit of armor. She'd thought of him so often, that she'd felt badly about encouraging Rick's crush on her. When she'd met the younger Chancellor brother at her job at a childcare center, she'd been taken by his openness and love of children. He'd recently received his degree in childhood education and had, despite his youth and inexperience, landed a job at her center as an education resident, where he spent most of the day teaching advanced three year olds to read.

"You'll be fine?" Josh questioned, his eyes narrowing. "Does that mean you have someone to help you get around?"

"My injuries aren't that bad, Josh," she said, trying to ignore her throbbing head. "I just need to get out of this depressing place. Get a decent meal." Her lips trembled when she spoke again. "Maybe help you with the funeral arrangements."

His face tightened, a pain-filled mask settling over his handsome features. "What day is it, Dana?"

"What?"

He stepped forward, looking deep into her brown eyes. "What day is it?"

Her head pounded in tune with her racing heart as she tried to make sense of his question. Why wouldn't she know what day it was? "It's Tuesday."

Dismay etched itself over his strong face and his shoulders sank. He reached out for what she'd failed to get earlier—the call bell.

"Why'd you do that?" Her eyes were wide now, damp, fluttering in her anxiety. "What's going on?"

"Today's Saturday, Dana. You've been in and out of consciousness for five days." His large hand shot out and pushed wavy black curls from her forehead. "Rick's funeral was yesterday morning."

"That can't be true." She choked out the words, her voice cracking with the effort. Suddenly, her world swam in and out of

focus as she attempted to absorb Josh's statement. Why would he say such a thing? It couldn't be true. Could it? She searched her memory, but the more she tried to recall the circumstances of the accident, the foggier her mind became. She had been so sure that the accident had happened the night before. That she'd heard the doctors whispering about Rick's death and her injuries only hours earlier. Could it be possible that whole *days* had passed?

Josh sat on the edge of the bed, breaking the distance between them. "I'm sorry, Dana. I thought you knew."

"Was I in a coma?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing like that. But you weren't really with us much, either. I've been by every day to check on you. Today's the first time you've been awake." Absently, his hand moved to her cheek to rub away at her confusion.

She blushed, overwhelmed by the troubling news and by the feel of his limber fingers against her skin. She'd missed Rick's funeral.

Just then, a well-rounded nurse padded into the room. The thin line of her mouth puckered into a smile when she saw her patient sitting up in bed. "You're finally up, I see."

Josh grimaced, seemingly put off by the interruption. "I caught her trying to break out of here."

Dana grinned at his joke. "I might have broken something if he hadn't caught me in time."

"I'm Nurse Chadwick," the older woman said before picking up the chart that was fastened to the foot of the bed. "You gave us quite a scare, Miss Lewis. Your concussion was a minor one, so we couldn't understand why you seemed to have a hard time waking up." She marked something on the chart and returned it to its place. "I'll contact Dr. Goldfarb so he can speak with you."

When the nurse was gone, Josh stood. The concern that had been on his face was now replaced by something else... but for the life of her, Dana couldn't tell what that emotion might be.

His jaw had tightened again, and his eyes were veiled, hiding whatever he might be feeling.

Caught off-guard by another dizzy spell, she sank back into the pillows and looked at the ceiling. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I've missed a week of work. And my rent was due on Wednesday." She ticked off a list of chores and unmet responsibilities-

ties, more for her own recollection than for Josh's benefit. "I was supposed to sign up for night classes at the community college. And my car is in the shop..."

"I can't help you on most of those counts, but Middle Spring Childcare Center knows about the accident." He pointed across the room at the windowsill where a bouquet of wilting tulips sat. "They sent those on Tuesday afternoon. A couple of your coworkers have even been by to see you—" He stopped suddenly, his hands fisting at his sides. "Your boss attended Rick's funeral yesterday."

"Miss Dobson went?" She hadn't even noticed the flowers. In fact, her head hurt so badly, she hadn't looked around the room at all. Besides, since he'd stopped her from tumbling to the floor, she'd only had eyes for Josh. Looking over at the desk beside her bed, she saw half a dozen *get well* cards fighting for space. They barely had room, though, because of another bouquet sitting in the center. White lilies. Who were they from?

As if he'd read her mind, Josh cleared his throat. "Those are from me. I thought they might help you feel better."

She gasped. "You brought me flowers? If anything, I should be the one—"

"Don't start that again, Dana. I know how special you were to my brother and he would have wanted me to make sure you're okay."

Special. Did Josh think that she and Rick had been an item? Was that why he was checking on her so fervently? Her insides clenched, a wave of nausea fighting to the surface again. Oh. Well, of course, he was there because she was his brother's friend. What other reason would he have?

She smiled at him again and this time, she was certain it looked real enough to fool him. "Thanks for everything, Josh. You've been so kind. Is there anything I can do for you?"

His gaze scanned her face, making her all too aware of how terrible she must look. She had been in that hospital bed for days, her face scrubbed clean and her long black waves a halo around her head. "Like what?"

His tone was defensive; she couldn't understand what she'd said to make him angry. Even during their first meeting, she could tell this man was very different from his younger brother—quieter, less fun-loving, almost brooding. "When I get out, I could help...with Rick's things." As she made the offer, her eyes watered.

His fists bunched again, digging at his sides. His nostrils flared and, for a moment, she feared he might lash out at her. But his next words were gentle, almost pleading. "Would you? Frankly, I didn't know how I would manage."

She nodded, glad to be able to help him. Rick had told her about their rough childhood, about how their father had run out on them when he was four and Josh was thirteen. Josh had effectively become the man of the house, taking on odd jobs to help pay rent on their roach-infested apartment. Their mother, who had never quite recovered from the breakup of her marriage, had fallen into an alcoholic stupor that eventually eroded her liver and ended her life when Rick was only fourteen. Twenty-two year old Josh, fresh from a stint in the army, had moved his younger brother into his tiny apartment, got him off to school each day and made sure he got good grades.

To Rick, Josh had been more than just a brother. He was his savior and best friend.

A smile touched his sun-bronzed face, revealing straight white teeth that shone under the faint lighting of the hospital room. "I can see why Rick loved you so much."

She felt her face grow hot under his tight scrutiny. "I loved him a lot, too."

"He said you were real people—smart, funny and sweet. A really good person."

A deep sadness descended upon her then, because those were words she would have used to describe Rick. He'd been so genuine and optimistic. He'd loved his job and the kids he taught each day. They'd been crazy about him, too. Her lips trembled as she thought of what it would feel like now that she wouldn't be able to see her friend every day. Heart thudding in her chest,

she willed the tears to stay inside. Falling apart now wouldn't bring him back.

"I'll miss him so much," she choked out, cursing her loss of control. The dam broke and the tears she'd battled coursed down her face. Finally unleashed, they came in a tidal wave, dissolving none of the guilt and pain, but laying vent to these emotions, making them even more palpable.

"I miss him, too." He sat beside her, pulling her into his arms, where he rocked her through her torrent of emotion. She gasped at his closeness, but held on, comforted by his strength and the warm, woodsy smell of his body. Her head on his powerful chest, they cried together, their anguished sobs mixing to a sad crescendo.

She wept for her own loss, but also for Josh. The last of his family was gone. She knew how that felt, understood what it was like to be alone in the world, with no real family or ties. Rick had said that Josh worked so much of the time—building his company, traveling to far-off and offbeat places for material, that he had no time for a family of his own. His hectic schedule didn't allow him to establish long-term relationships, despite his good looks and eligibility. Rick had been Josh's one outlet. Camping, biking, movies, they'd done all those things together and more when Josh had free time. What on earth would he do now that Rick was gone?

She clung to Josh, and he to her, for an interminable amount of time, engulfed by a haze of sadness. When Josh finally did pull away and looked into her tear-stained face, Dana's heart sank. The moment was over. And the look in his eyes told her that he regretted it.

"The doctor will be in to see you tonight, so I'll call in the morning to check on you."

She wiped her face and tried to clamp down any remaining tears. "You don't have to do that."

His brows shot up. "I want to, Dana. It's the least I can do."

Why was he treating her like a charity case? Did he think he owed her something because of her friendship with Rick? If

anything, she was the one who should be taking care of him. He was a big man, independent and used to getting his own way, but that didn't make his pain any less real. Besides, she knew for a fact that he didn't take care of himself properly. Rick had told her as much. Sixteen hour days, inadequate meals and frequent trips were enough to exhaust anyone. As soon as she got out of the hospital, she would make sure all of that changed. Rick would want it that way.

"Okay," she said awkwardly. "That would be nice." If he was determined to check up on her, she'd let him have his way. When she was finally healthy enough to get around again, she'd return the favor.

"What are you thinking?"

Dana's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. But something just happened—a thought or a feeling crossed over your face and I saw it. I don't know you that well, but that look on your face says determination to me..."

Determination. She liked that word and thought it fitting for her plans. She was determined to make up for what her immaturity had cost Josh. She would make herself available for as long as it took to help him get through this. Something told her it would be unwise to tell him this, however. A man like him, so used to going it alone, would surely resist any attempts she made to help him. "I'm determined to get out of here."

"Good." He lowered his voice, his next question one of a personal nature. "I hope you don't mind, but after the accident, I had the secretary at your job look through your files to find your next of kin."

Her breath caught, but she kept her composure. When she'd first moved to Silver Spring, she'd listed an old high school buddy as her in-case-of-emergency contact. That was three years ago, and they'd since fallen out of touch. "I don't have any family."

His deep green eyes softened. "I guessed that. The number listed had been changed. And no one at the center could remember you talking about any friends or family."

"My parents died when I was young." Her voice cracked when she spoke. She decided not to tell him how they had died. "My grandmother raised me until she passed away when I was seventeen."

"You've been alone all this time?"

Seven years. It didn't seem that long. It felt longer. "Yes, but it hasn't been that bad." She knew it was a lie, but she said it anyway, for fear that he'd feel even sorrier for her than he did already. How could she tell him that all her attempts at relationships had backfired? That the only reason her first love had dated her was to conquer her, take her virginity and leave her a laughing stock? That women had always made her feel unlikable, had gossiped about her or felt threatened by her? No. Being alone was fine. She knew how to take care of herself.

He pushed his hands into his jean pockets and rocked back on the heels of his tan, steel-toed boots. "If Rick had had his way, you wouldn't have been alone ever again."

Her eyes fluttered at the shock of the words. "What do you mean?"

Josh's face was pained; she could see a vein pulsing beneath his forehead. "A few days before he died, he told me you were the one."

Her heart sped to a gallop, her mouth lost its moisture and her eyes were wide as saucers. She'd always suspected that Rick had a crush on her, but this was too much. *Love?* Had her good buddy loved her? Had he thought they had a romantic future together? Guilt gnawed at her insides, eating away at her, draining her. She hadn't meant to lead him on, if that was what she had done. Memories of movie dates, casual dinners and bowling raced through her mind. During those fun, carefree moments, she'd happily been spending time with a friend. Rick must have seen it all differently.

She bit her lip, trying to figure out a suitable response. Rick was gone and the pain that gave his brother seemed unbearable. She wouldn't make it worse by contradicting him. "He was special to me, too."

Josh moved toward the door. "I have to go now, Dana."

"Thanks for stopping by."

"I'll call you in the morning." He opened the door and walked out into the ward. Suddenly, he stopped and looked back at her. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to call."

A shiver ran down her spine. "I won't." When he was gone, she drew her legs up close and rocked in tune to the pounding of her heart.

Chapter 2

"Am I always going to have this headache?" Dana perched on the edge of her hospital bed and stared warily at Dr. Goldfarb. Her hand massaged the back of her head, and her stomach knotted like a fist. Though the doctor swore she'd be okay, she wasn't so sure.

The older man peered through his thick spectacles, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I understand your fears, Dana. However, they're unjustified. You're fine."

"My tests were okay?"

"Your tests were fine. We found no internal damage, no tumors, and no abrasions. You should be feeling better."

"Then why don't I?" She felt badly about losing her patience, but nothing she'd tried—eight dollar aspirin, heat compresses and head massage—had eased her headache. She had another reason for feeling grouchy—Josh Chancellor. Three days ago, he'd sworn he would call her to see how she was feeling. But she hadn't heard from him.

"Perhaps it's psychosomatic?"

Her stomach clenched. "You're saying...you're saying that I don't really have a headache? That I'm crazy?"

"I would never call anyone crazy. What I will say is this, your headaches may very well be stress-induced."

She gulped and digested the news. *Stress?* "But I had a concussion."

"Over a week ago, and a pretty mild one at that." The older man closed her chart and placed it on her bedside table. His voice softened. "Dana, you've had quite a shock. You were in a

terrible car accident and lost your boyfriend. Wouldn't you say that you're feeling a little stressed?"

"I guess I am."

"You must know, Dana, that you'll probably feel the shock of this incident for a long time. You're physically healthy, but emotionally, you still have a long way to go. Don't be so hard on yourself. I'll give you a prescription for the pain and I'll make an appointment for you to see me in a few weeks."

She nodded, somewhat relieved. She would be fine. So why did she still feel so awful? The doctor had said it was stress, so she would have to believe him. Yet part of her still felt like something was wrong...

Dr. Goldfarb handed her a prescription and an appointment card. "I'm going to sign off on your release now, Dana. I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

She could finally leave.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for the shopping bag that Kathy, one of her coworkers, had brought over yesterday. In it was a pair of jeans, a blue t-shirt and her favorite white tennis shoes—the shoes she'd planned to wear on the night of the accident. She bit her lip to stave off the tears. If she'd been less rushed that morning, more organized, Rick never would have had to drive her home that afternoon. She usually threw them into her bag, changing into them at the end of each workday.

After dressing, she pulled out the comb Nurse Chadwick brought to her and ran it through her wavy black hair. The hospital shampoo had done nothing for it, and its usual shine was faded and dull. She couldn't wait to go home for a proper shower.

She looked at all the cards lining her bedside table and smiled to herself. She'd had no idea that her coworkers cared so much. Except for Rick, she had no real friends at her job, though she got along with everyone. Kathy, a woman a few years older than her, had stopped by the day before and sat with her for

several hours. The tiny blonde seemed so genuine and her visit had been a wonderful surprise.

But what was more surprising was Josh's disappearance.

She blushed brightly as she thought of him, his sexy green eyes and broad shoulders foremost in her imaginings. It had been silly to think they would become friends. That they could help each other. Now that she was okay, he'd forget all about her. And she could do the same.

Sighing, she picked up the telephone to call a taxi service.

* * * *

He was running late, dammit.

Josh ground his teeth as he turned his black Jeep into the hospital parking lot. The last couple days at Chancellor Travel had been a whirlwind of activity. He'd been confronted with one problem after another—missing freelancers, printing problems, tour cancellations. He'd only taken three days off following Rick's death, but it might as well have been three months. By the time he'd gone back into his offices, nothing seemed to be working properly.

Then he'd had to take a last-minute flight to Seattle to profile a new bed-and-breakfast. Artie Milch, the guy he'd hired for the job, had dropped out of sight and hadn't returned any of his calls or emails.

Meanwhile, he'd asked an intern to call Dana with his apologies. He'd come by as soon as he was back in town, probably in enough time to drive her home.

He'd thought about her constantly since their last meeting and wondered if she was feeling any better. She would most certainly heal physically, but her emotional scars went much deeper. Her deep brown eyes had been so sad, and it had ripped at his heart to see someone else suffering as much as he was.

Josh cut the engine and strode out, making a sharp right turn toward the main entrance.

And saw Dana.

She sat on a bench, reading a magazine. Her lush, dark hair was pulled away from her porcelain-smooth face into a ponytail.

She looked so small, fragile and younger than her twenty-four years. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought he was looking at a teenager. She was just so damned pretty. He'd thought so upon their first meeting, He'd even joked with his little brother about what a fine woman he'd snagged. *Lucky Rick. He's dating a modern day Snow White.*

"Dana?"

Her eyes widened. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't you get my message? I had one of my people call to say I'd be here to give you a ride home."

Her brow knotted and her lips were tight. "I didn't hear from you. I thought...I thought you'd forgotten about me."

Anger boiled to the surface, making it hard for him to see straight. He picked up the shopping bag that lay at her feet. "I had to go away for a business trip." He paused, choosing his words carefully so that she wouldn't feel the rage that bubbled inside him. "I left strict instructions for someone to contact you."

Dana's lips parted. "Really?"

"Really."

"Well, I've already called a taxi." She shrugged, concern etched in her brow, like she didn't want to put anyone out.

He sat next to her, studying her face, knowing it would be dangerous to stare at the raven-haired beauty for too long. Though she put on a brave front, he could see she was whittled away with exhaustion. His voice took on a husky quality when he was finally able to answer. "When the taxi pulls up, I'll pay for it. But you're coming with me."

"You don't have to do that, Josh."

"Yeah, I do." He'd do whatever it took to make Dana Lewis comfortable. Rick had loved this woman, and now that he was gone, it was up to him to make sure she got along all right. Had Rick lived, surely this beautiful girl with the doe eyes would have become his wife—and Josh's sister-in-law. Yes, that's how he would learn to think of her, how he would treat her.

"How are you holding up, Josh?" Her gaze was searching, scorching deep into his soul. This was what Rick had loved about

her so much; she really cared about the people in her life. Being around someone so beautiful and loving could become an addiction.

But he couldn't allow himself to think that way. Despite the feelings she stirred in him, feelings he'd thought long dead, there was no way he would sink low enough to take advantage of her vulnerability. She was his dead brother's girlfriend, the light of Rick's life. Rick had talked about her so much, he felt like he already knew her. Dana had survived so much already. She was an orphan, on her own, with no real ties—until Rick.

"I'm doing the best I can under the circumstances. One day at a time."

She nodded, then reached out and clasped his hand into hers. Startled by the pleasantness of her soft flesh, his breath quickened, as did his heartbeat. Dammit, why was he feeling this way? What was it about her that made him want to pull her into his arms? He wanted to make her safe, to care for her.

It had to be some weird transference. That was it. Now that his brother was gone, he'd grabbed on to the closest thing—Rick's girlfriend. He knew he was on dangerous ground where she was concerned, had known it when he'd visited her on the night of the accident. Dana had flitted in and out of consciousness, her fair skin flushed as she battled the shock of what had happened. He'd watched her for hours, not knowing what else to do. When he'd asked around her workplace about her family, he realized she was as alone in the world as he was.

On the day she'd awakened, and her anguished tears erupted, he'd been right there with her, letting out the pain for the first time. She understood about loss, had experienced it many times before, and he'd known they could help each other through this difficult time. Selfish. He was being selfish because the pain was unbearable. If he could take care of her—make her world a gentler place—he'd do it. For Rick's sake. And for his own.

The red-topped taxi drew up to the curb and Josh grinned. "I'll be right back."

After negotiating the fare, he approached his ward, preparing to tell her to hold tight, he'd bring the car around. Yet when he got back to the bench, his heart hammered in his chest.

Dana's head lay prone on the bench's arm. A look of peaceful relaxation clung to her face. Her long, black lashes fanned against her fair cheeks, making her appear like a doll. His blood ignited, sparking a guilty lust to bubble deep within his loins. Turning away to compose himself, he cursed, angry that he could be so tempted.

You can't have her, Chancellor, so keep it together.

Steely determination trumped rising passion, and he was finally able to look at the sleeping beauty again. In one swift movement, he swept up the slim woman, nestling her face into the crook of one muscular arm.

Though he moved gently, his stride was swift, and he worried that she might wake before he'd had a chance to fasten her seatbelt. Yet even as he placed the belt around her flat belly, being very sure to avoid the soft curves of her breasts, she didn't stir. With one last, guilty, passion-filled look, one he was glad she was unable to see, Josh drove east toward Dana's apartment complex.

* * * *

Dana winced when she saw the paper affixed to her apartment door, hoping there was some kind of mistake. *Notice of Eviction*. She had thirty days to vacate the property!

"I have to talk to Mr. Raintree."

Josh gripped her shoulder. "Is this because you were late with your rent this month? I had your office call your landlord; he knows you were in the hospital."

Her stomach bunched in a knot and she took long breaths to keep panic at bay. "It's more than just about *this* month, Josh. In the last year, I've been late with the rent too many times. Mr. Raintree's always tried to be nice about it, but I guess he's had enough."

His eyes briefly scanned the notice before coming back to her. "Why aren't you able to pay your rent on time, Dana?"

Trembling in embarrassment, she wondered if she should tell this man the truth without coming off like an irresponsible flake. He'd already been so nice to her, and she was determined that he not feel sorry for her again. Too late, she saw a look in his eyes that she remembered all too well from her youth. *Pity*.

Her heart thumped madly in her chest as she fought with herself. Why was she still so embarrassed about her stupidity? It had all happened so long ago, but it still kept her up at night. She'd never shared this humiliating situation with anyone—not even her creditors. Not that it would have helped. It wasn't their job to care about silly young schoolgirls or the boys who'd duped them.

"Dana?" Josh's jade green eyes fastened onto hers, demanding answers.

"Credit card debt. I've been paying it off in installments, but it's never enough."

Dismayed, she watched his jaw harden and his body grow rigid. Yep, he thought she was irresponsible and weak. A cold sweat touched her brow and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying in shame. She and Josh had started out in similar circumstances—poor, fending for themselves in a tough world—but he'd pulled himself together and had a booming business to show for it. She was a loser. There was no way someone like him could understand.

"How much do you owe?" His tone was curious, gentle, but the way he looked at her wasn't. His eyes bore into her, appraising her from head to toe. Despite her embarrassment, his gaze awakened something inside her, a yearning for him to do more than just look. God help her, she wanted him to touch her. To soothe. To make the past go away. But that would never happen. Could never happen.

What must he think of her? What sort of woman couldn't keep up payments on a cheap apartment on the edge of the city? She couldn't tell him about Trent Peters and the way he'd conned her. The thought of admitting her gullibility was almost too much to bear. The only man she'd ever allowed herself to

love had stolen from her. He'd taken the little she had to live on after her grandmother's death and left town. Leaving her a laughingstock.

She fumbled through her purse, looking for her keys. "It'll be all right, Josh. I'm just so sorry you had to see this."

He stepped forward and grabbed her arm, turning her to face him. "How much, dammit?"

Humiliation reddened her cheeks. "Several thousand dollars!" She flinched away from his grip, desperate to get away from his accusing eyes. "I barely get by. I've been looking for another job—waitressing, answering phones, anything—to make ends meet. What I make at the center just isn't enough. Mr. Raintree has given me so many extensions over the past couple of years... I guess this time, he decided it wasn't worth the hassle."

She shrank against the cracked wood of her door and her head rubbed against the eviction notice. Drained, she allowed the tears to pour over her cheeks, not caring anymore that Josh would see her distress, or about what he might think. The eviction notice said it all. She hadn't been able to keep up her responsibility, so she'd pay up anyway—probably by becoming homeless.

"I can help you, Dana."

"No!" Her stomach knotted at the sound of his words. "I don't need your charity, Josh."

He frowned and shoved a hand through his hair. "Who says that it's charity? I like you, Dana. I want to see you comfortable. I know that's what Rick would have wanted."

Heat touched her face again, but this time, embarrassment played no part. He was going out of his way to help her because he thought she and Rick had been an item. There was no way she could allow Josh to go on thinking this, despite the happiness it seemed to bring him. She had only gone along with his misapprehension because she assumed it wouldn't hurt, that in a way, it actually made him feel better. Yet now that she saw how

serious he was taking his assumed responsibility, she'd have to put a stop to it.

"There's something I have to tell you about Rick and me."

His brow shot up and his stance relaxed. "I already know all I need to, Dana. My brother loved you and that's good enough for me. He would have wanted you to be taken care of."

"I can't accept your help, Josh!"

"Why not?" He stood in front of her, closing the distance between them, making her painfully aware of his manliness.

"Why won't you let me help, dammit?"

Because I was never in love with your brother. Because I don't deserve your help. Because whenever I'm around you, I feel guilty. Her soul cried out all these things, but all her mouth said was "It's complicated, Josh."

"Not to me, it isn't." Strong hands gently caressed her shoulders, wrenching an audible gasp out of her. When his gaze burned into hers, she was immediately lost, swimming in the depths of a building attraction. He was just so handsome and rugged, the type of man she'd dreamed of marrying when she was a little girl, back when she still had those types of dreams. But she was a woman now, and she knew better than to put her faith in any man, at least in a sexual way. That's why her friendship with Rick had meant so much to her. She had always trusted him to be honorable, to do the right thing, in spite of his crush.

Could she trust Rick's brother to do the same? His words said yes, but his penetrating eyes, a brilliant, deep green, spoke of the dangers inherent within the man. He was honorable, but passionate, and even as his large hands gripped her shoulders, she could feel the floodgates of his control breaking, seeking to escape, perhaps to engulf her.

Mesmerized, she melted into the safe strength of his hard body, allowing herself to be enveloped by his heat. Her heart flip-flopped in her chest, and she was surprised to feel his do the same. "Thank you, Josh."

Her words of gratitude seemed to break the spell. He stepped away quickly, like he'd caught fire, and trained his eyes on her apartment door. "Go in and pack a bag. You're coming with me."

Panic. What did he mean? "I can't, Josh—"

"Woman, why on earth are you so stubborn?"

Her lips trembled as she tried to find words to explain her position. "It's just that you don't know me—"

"Rick did. That's all I care about. Plus, I've got more room than I can use." He turned and walked down the pathway. When he spoke to her again, his voice was commanding. "I'll be waiting by the car, Dana. You've got twenty minutes to grab a few things. I'll arrange to have the heavy stuff taken care of later this week."

Realizing she was in no position to argue, Dana smiled and let herself into the apartment.

* * * *

He tapped at the door. No answer. He hadn't seen her since he'd shown her into the guest bedroom an hour before. "Dana?" She'd looked worn and tired when they left her apartment building. God, she must be exhausted. Between last week's accident, Rick's death and her eviction, she'd been through a rough time.

Ducking his head inside, his heart immediately raced to a gallop. She was curled up beneath the covers, her curly, jet-black hair peeking just above the quilt. The shape of her small, curvy body was clearly outlined, an image that stirred his loins into action.

Leaving as quietly as he'd gone in, Josh moved down the hall to his own bedroom. Once inside, he opened his cell phone.

"James Berkley," the roughened voice on the other end answered.

"Hey, Berk, it's Josh." He sat on his king-size bed, his hand absently rubbing at the soft weave of the black, five hundred thread-count sheets. For a brief moment, he wondered how Dana might look snuggled between them.

“What’s up, man?”

“I need you to get me some information on a woman my brother dated.”

The man whistled. “Checking up on Rick’s woman? What’s she done?”

Josh cleared his throat in preparation for what was to come. James Berkley had done some work for his company over the years—mostly snooping out ticket scams and bogus locales. Since that time, the men had become friendly, sometimes having a drink or a meal. The large man with the five hundred watt grin had liked Rick, too, and was devastated to hear about the accident. Berk had stood beside him as his baby brother’s casket was lowered into the ground.

Though his voice remained steady, Josh struggled with emotions—afraid they would choke him and render him speechless. But he pulled through. Before things could go any further with Dana Lewis, he wanted to find out all he could about her. Now.

“Rick was seeing a woman he worked with,” he began. “I don’t know much about her, except that’s she’s gorgeous and has money problems.”

“And was she trying to get money out of you? Was Rick helping her out?”

His voice sounded tight to his own ears. “There was an eviction notice on her door today. I got her to admit to having money problems—serious credit card debt.” Even as he relayed the information, he felt like a snake.

Though he wanted to help, had wanted to from the moment he’d watched her lying so small and helpless in that hospital bed, he’d realized how little he knew about the delicate beauty who’d so captured his kid brother’s heart. It pained him to think about it, but he’d wondered why such a gorgeous girl had latched onto his sweet, but goofy brother. Had she viewed Rick as a mark? If he had lived, would he be the one bailing her out?

Berk listened and took notes until Josh was too weary to go on. "I'm sorry about your brother, man. He was a good kid."

"I know. Now, I need to make sure this lady's on the up and up."

"Don't worry, Josh. If there's anything worth knowing about Dana Lewis, you'll hear about it in a couple days."

His stomach knotted as he set down the phone. What he was doing was underhanded, and maybe even a little cruel, but he would sleep better knowing the truth about the woman his brother had loved. She'd seemed so afraid, even scared, when confronted by the eviction notice. Yet something else in her eyes, a certain resignation, had caught him off-guard. It was almost as if she'd expected to be evicted. Perhaps her apparent reluctance to accept his help had been an act.

Had she planned it all along? Was she some sort of scam artist? If so, she wouldn't be the first to drift into his life. Dozens of women had attempted entry into Chancellor Manor, dollar signs imprinted upon their twinkling eyes. While he would never call himself rich, his business had grown so much in the past seven years, that he led a comfortable life. One he'd loved sharing with his brother. Rick had wanted to share their easy comfort with Dana, too.

As guilty as he felt about his actions, he felt it was the only way to find out the truth. He closed his eyes and thought of Rick. *Please let this young woman be on the level.* It tore him apart to think otherwise.

Chapter 3

Dana woke with a start. At first, she was confused. Was she still in the hospital? No, that wasn't right. She sat up in the plush, queen-sized bed and breathed in her surroundings. *Josh's house*. Yesterday's events flooded over her, making her mouth dry. She looked at the bedside clock. It was nearing four in the morning, but she wasn't a bit tired. And why would she be? She'd slept nearly twelve full hours—a black, dreamless sleep.

She padded over to her small suitcase and rifled through it, cursing under her breath. In her rush to vacate her apartment, she'd forgotten to pack her slippers and a robe. She had, however, brought her toothbrush.

Inside the bathroom, she took in the deep navy décor and the gold finishing on the fixtures and toilet. The bathmats were thick, springing easily beneath her toes and the multi-level light fixtures allowed her to bathe the bathroom in crisp, florescent light, or spotlight only the shower if she wanted.

Vaguely, she wondered if Josh had chosen the layout and design himself, or if he'd had help. Soon enough, her thoughts about her dead friend's brother took on another shade—purplish, pulsing thoughts that caused her insides to melt into a hot mush. She'd have to find a new apartment, and soon. Otherwise, being so near her devastatingly attractive host would drive her crazy.

Brushing her teeth seemed to dry her mouth even more. She decided to head downstairs into the huge kitchen—over half the size of her little apartment—and get a glass of water. Tiptoeing down the hall, she passed Josh's bedroom and a tingle

went down her spine. He was only feet away, so close, yet still too far away for her to touch. Not that touching him was at all possible.

Moments later, Dana eyes closed as she drew an ice-filled glass to her parched lips. She stood by the sink, the long, red and black basketball jersey she slept in sitting just above her alabaster knees as she absently clicked her nails against the porcelain. The taste of the water was so refreshing that she poured another glass, gulping it down like a woman stranded in the desert.

"So you're finally awake."

She turned suddenly and was shocked by the sight of Josh standing in the doorway. He was shirtless, his muscular chest bronzed and perfect, his nipples hardening under her gaze. Her hand shook and she felt the glass leaving her grip. She fumbled for the glass, but it was too late. The crashing sound it made as it hit the hard stone floor reverberated around the kitchen. "Shit. I'm so clumsy." She bent to clean the mess.

"Don't move!" Josh growled. It was more of an order than a request. "You'll cut yourself."

"I'll be okay," she started, advancing forward. "Just tell me where to find a broom—ow!" She stopped, her right foot stinging and her head swimming when she saw the blood already beginning to pool among the shards of broken glass.

"Dammit, Dana. I said don't move!" Josh quickly headed to the rear of the modern kitchen, toward the pantry, disappearing inside. When he came out, he held a broom and a dustpan. "I'm going to sweep around you." When she nodded, his eyes softened.

He moved towards her, sidestepping the larger hunks of glass, his own feet in no danger because of the heavy, black moccasins he wore. When his strong hands circled her waist, Dana gasped against him, her dark eyes wide. "Don't worry. I'm just going to hoist you onto the counter to get the glass out."

She shook her head, allowing her dark tresses to fall into her face. "Clean up the glass, first. My foot can wait."

"But it can't, Dana. I need to take care of you right now."

The words struck a cord in her. *I need to take care of you right now.* And God, how she wanted him to...to what, exactly? She bit her lips as her bottom was raised along the sink's edge. When one of his hands slipped beneath the tail of her jersey, burning into her skin, she had to fight to remain in control. When he was certain that her position was secure, he let go, gesturing for her to scoot down a few inches until her rear was firmly planted on the countertop.

Josh reached into the metallic cabinet over her head and brought down supplies. She smiled as he opened a bottle of peroxide, cotton balls, tweezers and a package of gauze. "Why do you keep first aid stuff in the kitchen?" she asked, laughter in her voice.

"You're not the only one who's clumsy," he admitted. "I like to cook—or at least try to—but I'm accident-prone."

"You can't possibly be as bad as me."

"Look at this," he said, turning sideways and showing his forearm. Dana's eyes ran over a deep scar, years old, but obviously serious. It was paler than the rest of his skin, slightly shiny and raised.

"How'd you do that?" Her voice cracked as she choked out the question, and she quickly turned away from the sight of his powerful upper body.

"Trying to fry a pan of chicken," he said, his face perfectly composed. "Things got out of hand, I guess. I had the flame too high. Next thing I knew, I was in a hailstorm of grease." He laughed. "Serves me right. I should leave the cooking to Mrs. Coombs."

"You have a maid?"

"She's our—my housekeeper," he corrected. "She's been with me for four years now, after I first moved into this house. She only comes in a few days a week, mostly to prepare a few meals and do laundry." He sighed. "I'm pretty neat; plus I'm not home much anyway. But she was always after Rick to pick up his clothes, place lids on correctly and stop leaving food out all night."

She chuckled lightly, trying to keep the conversation light, but her breath immediately caught when his hand descended onto her bleeding foot. She tensed, willing herself to not cry out, or tremble at the feel of his warm hand at the base of her foot. He stood only inches from her face and she could smell him, the scent of his maleness surging forth through hints of soap and shampoo. Despite their obvious strength, his hands moved tenderly across her flesh, almost as if he were touching a child.

As he ran the tweezers along the underside of her foot, testing the sensitive skin, she closed her eyes, losing herself in the sensation. Soon, she felt it, the tug of the metal as it withdrew a thin piece of glass. Though she'd tried to relax herself, she was still lightheaded. Her eyes fluttered open, but they closed again when her eyes took in the slick, sharp edge that had been embedded in her foot. Before she knew it, her breath caught in her throat and she was pitching forward.

"Whoa, little lady," he smiled as her body barreled into his. "Let's not go repeating that day in the hospital. Remember?"

Embarrassed, she tried to smile along with him, but it didn't take. "I hate the sight of blood," she admitted. "Especially my own."

He looked at her for a long time, his strong jaw working. But instead of speaking again, he dabbed a cotton swab with peroxide and ran it along her cut. The spot was a little red, but no real harm had been done, she saw. Deciding that a piece of gauze might be too cumbersome, he fished out a bandage and attached it to the cut. "You should be fine," he said finally. He looked down then and his light brown hair brushed against Dana's chin. "Let me get this glass up."

She watched quietly as he swept the jagged pieces into the dustpan. His strong arms flexed each time he moved, and the lines of his well-muscled form appeared to call out to her under the dim light of the kitchen. *He's so hot.* Perfect in every way. Why did he have to be Rick's brother? Could she go on with this farce—pretending to be something she wasn't? Should she?

After he'd deposited the glass into a plastic bag, Dana jumped from the counter. Despite the water she'd consumed, her mouth felt like it was filled with cotton. "I guess I'll see you later," she said, trying not to look at his naked chest.

"Breakfast is at eight," he said. "I'm making waffles."

She grinned. "Should I bring a fire extinguisher?"

He tossed his head back and roared. "Not this time. Just bring your appetite."

* * * *

Josh had to run out for a meeting soon after breakfast, but he'd rushed back home. He'd knocked at her bedroom door and realized she wasn't there. Neither was she in the kitchen, living room or entertainment lounge. Now, as his swift stride took him outside to the pool, his heart thumped in anticipation.

Why was he so nervous, jittery about seeing Dana? She belonged to his brother. It didn't matter that Rick was gone, he had to reign himself in, he decided. Yet even as he walked through the French doors, already hearing the light splash of the pool, his pulse accelerated. He could tell himself to behave all he wanted, but his body seemed to have a mind of its own.

He stood in the shadows, behind the giant, twin cacti he'd had flown in from Mexico especially for the pool deck, and watched as Dana glided up and down the pool. Her movements were leisurely, languid, but sharp, and his body filled with electricity when his eyes were able to make out the faint lines of the white bikini she wore. When she turned to backstroke, her rounded breasts jutted out of the crisp water, causing him to harden.

The thud of his erection against his taut belly shocked him; it was that instantaneous. No woman had ever had that kind of power over him. Just looking at her, without her doing a thing, was making him crazy. Ashamed of his throbbing need, he stepped back, intent on backing into the house. A nice, cold shower would be just the thing to soothe him. But what he really wanted was to remove all his clothes and take a dip in the pool. And into Dana Lewis.

Just before he was able to make his escape, though, the dark-haired beauty turned suddenly and fixed her eyes on him. "Hi, Josh. When did you get back?"

Feeling like a criminal, he slunk out of the shadows, but not too far. If she saw what she'd done to him, she'd think he was perverted. "A few minutes ago," he replied. "I'm glad to see you like the pool."

She blushed, the rosy hue of her cheeks making his breath quicken. She swam to the pool's edge, her black hair trailing after her like a silky wave. When she boosted herself up, he noted how her hands flew over her breasts to protect them from his fervent gaze. *She caught me staring at her, dammit. Great.* Yet despite his certainty that she'd seen him lusting after her, he could not look away.

Her legs were lean, milky in color and toned. Her white skin, flushed with her effort, seemed to call out to him. He wanted to feel that skin beneath his hands, to stroke her until she begged him to stop...

"Do you want to swim?" she asked, looking nervous. His stomach knotted as she ran a peach bath towel through her hair before using it to dry off. When she was done, she tied it around her waist like a sarong.

"I don't think so, Dana," he answered, though his body begged him to tell the truth. *I'd love to swim with you, Dana.* "I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, if you don't mind."

Her eyes were downcast. "What about? Did I do something wrong?"

God help him, she'd done everything right. That was the problem! "No, not at all. I just think it's time we start thinking about arrangements for you. Since you're being evicted, we're going to have to find you a new place to live."

"It's okay, Josh," she said, her eyes moist. "I've already checked the classifieds today. I'm hoping to be able to get something by next week. It probably won't be very nice, given my credit history."

He saw the tears in her eyes and realized he'd probably pushed too far. It had only been a week since Rick had gone, she was getting evicted from her apartment, and here he was, trying to get her to make plans. "Look, Dana, I'm sorry—"

"Don't apologize." Her words were icy, short. "You're right. I shouldn't be getting too comfortable here. I'll try to move out as soon as possible." She had to go past him to get inside the house, but he blocked her path. "I'd like to go inside now."

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded, Dana."

"It's not a big deal. Really."

But the look in her pretty, brown eyes told him differently. His next move surprised even him. He bent down, clasp her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Stay as long as you want." His voice was low, roughened with passion.

Tears she tried to check slid down her cheeks. "No, you're right, Josh. I don't belong here. You don't owe me anything."

His hand was still on her chin and he seized the moment. Circumstances be damned—he wanted to kiss this woman. When his lips clamped down on hers, an audible gasp escaped her and he half expected her to fight. Yet only seconds later, he felt her relax against him, and his hardness raged out of control when she melded into him.

She was still damp from her swim, and as they melted into the forbidden kiss, his hands caught in the wetness of her hair, pulling her closer, grinding her into his hardness. Yet the guilt of what they were doing—and what he wanted to do—descended blackly over him. He pulled away, his lips still burning from the sweetness of her mouth. "I'm sorry, Dana."

She leaned against him, and he was startled to feel her heartbeat coming in great bursts against his lower chest. Was she as excited as he was? *No. I probably scared her to death.* He apologized again.

He thought she said something, but it was so low and garbled, that he couldn't make it out. "What, Dana?"

"I'm scared," she repeated. "So much has happened so fast and now I feel like my life has been turned upside down...."

He silenced her with another kiss, this one softer, less desperate than the first. "I'll help you. Haven't I told you that? I won't let anything happen to you. I'll take care of you as well as Rick would have."

She pulled away, wrenching violently from his grasp. "Please stop saying that!"

"Saying what?" He was confused. "Don't you believe me?"

"That's the problem," she said, turning away from him, training her eyes on the pool. "Everything you're doing for me is for Rick's sake."

"Of course," he said, relieved to feel his erection subsiding. "My baby brother loved you very much; making sure you're okay is the least I can do."

She turned back to him then, but her eyes had a faraway look. "I understand," she said simply, taking the opportunity to step past him.

He wanted to press on, to find out what was bothering the beautiful girl whom his brother had so loved, but she had flown up the stairs as if the devil himself were on her tail.

* * * *

Dana stayed in her room in the hours following what happened beside the pool. She was so embarrassed, so afraid that she might see Josh, that she'd decided steering clear of him was her best bet. When he'd knocked at her door a couple hours before, she'd even refused his offer of dinner, claiming to have a headache. Of course, Josh had wanted to call in a doctor, but she'd begged off, assuring him that her headache was not life threatening. In fact, she'd felt better since she'd woken up that morning—more like her normal self. Except for the gnawing desire Josh stirred up in her. That wasn't normal at all. Sometimes, when he looked at her, she wanted to throw herself at his feet and beg him to make love to her.

As the blue skies outside her window darkened into night, however, she grew restless. Normally, when she was bored,

she'd call Rick and they'd chat a bit, or go out for a bite to eat. She sighed pitifully as she realized those days were way behind her. Once again, she was on her own, no matter what the well-meaning Josh Chancellor said. Hell, he'd come right out that afternoon and told her he wanted her out of his house.

Thinking of Rick made her curious. She knew his room was only a few doors down from hers—and only a few doors away from Josh's—directly across the curving hallway. Pulling on her tennis shoes, she stuck her head out and looked up and down the circular path, craning her neck so that she could see the gleaming mahogany door that opened into Rick's bedroom. She heard no sound, not even the distant chatter of a television set. Easing down the broad hall, careful not to trip over the royal blue runner, or crash into the slim vase that leaned against the corner, she moved briskly to the other side of the staircase. She reached her destination easily enough, yet she stopped as soon as her hand touched the heavy brass of the door's handle.

Dana was sure she'd heard something or someone inside, but the sound was so faint, she couldn't be sure. She scolded herself as her mind raced through possibilities—Rick's restless spirit puttering about being first and foremost—but she knew the sound she heard had not been otherworldly at all. Instead, it was the anguished cry of a human being. It was real, gut-wrenching, floating through the air and stabbing into her heart.

"Josh?" She turned the door handle and stepped inside, preparing herself to be rebuffed. She was crashing in on him during a private moment, she was sure, but she couldn't allow him to be alone. "Are you all right?"

Josh sat at the foot of his younger brother's bed, a CD in his hands. He didn't answer.

"I'm sorry," she choked out. "I'll talk to you later." She raced back up the hall, back to the safe confines of the guest bedroom. But a moment later, she heard a knock at the door. Wiping the errant tears that had streaked down her face, she called out, "Come in."

He stood in the doorway, his black t-shirt molded to his body almost as if it were made for him. His deep-rinse blue jeans clung to his muscular thighs, outlining his male beauty in all its glory. "Sorry about that," he whispered, not trying to hide his anguish. "I left a CD in Rick's room a couple weeks ago. I went in to get it..." He stopped. "No, that's just an excuse, I guess. I just needed some time, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry I burst in on you like that, but when I heard you in so much pain, I couldn't help it."

"It's fine, Dana," he said thoughtfully. "I wasn't surprised to see you."

"No?"

"No. I figured you'd want to see Rick's room, see what it was like."

A lump formed in her throat, one she tried to swallow against. The guilt surged through her again, and she felt like kicking herself for being such a coward. She needed to tell him about her relationship with Rick. It was time for him to hear the truth. "Josh?"

"Yeah."

She wrung her hands, willing the words to come. "I loved your brother very much."

His jade eyes misted over. "I know that, Dana. I'm glad about that."

She shook her head. "Please let me finish." But before she could, a storm of fresh tears tore through her. Her shoulders slumped and before she knew it, Josh stood over her, his strong hands resting at the back of her neck.

"Shhh, baby. It'll be okay."

"No, it won't be," she wept. "Rick and I weren't what you think, Josh. We weren't getting married."

His brow furrowed. "Were you guys having problems?"

"Nothing like that. It's just that I wasn't ready for the type of relationship he wanted." She shook as she admitted this. Surely he'd throw her out on her butt now. She had nowhere

else to go, but she was tired of leading him on. He had to know the truth.

He sunk down beside her and turned her so that she faced him. "Rick told me things were moving a lot slower than he would have liked, Dana. But that's all right. You were both so young. I told him that, at twenty-four, of course you're going to want to take your time before jumping into a marriage!"

Dana cried harder. Either she wasn't explaining herself properly, or Josh was determined to believe that she and his brother were altar-bound. Her stomach clenched as she resolved to change the subject to something less painful. *Coward. Will I ever be able to get up the courage to break this man's heart?*

She looked at him then and was taken with the immensity of his pain. It shone clearly from the depths of his deep green eyes, calling out to her, almost aloud. She leaned over to offer comfort, as he had only moments before. But, just as it had earlier that day on the pool deck, his nearness sparked something in her. This time, it was she who initiated the kiss, pressing her mouth into the searing moistness of his lips, willing him to push her away, to stop this madness.

Josh's lips parted, and his tongue licked into her mouth, seeking out hers, playing a lovely game of cat and mouse. Shivering against him, she gasped as his fingers dug into the thickness of her hair, pulling her closer; this time, there would be no escaping. The familiar ache of her femaleness throbbed within the confines of her jeans and her sensitive nipples peaked as her breasts rubbed against the light fabric of his shirt.

"God help me, Dana, I want you," he mumbled into her mouth. "I'm sorry." He swore, but his grip did not loosen. It only grew stronger as he swept her up into his lap, handling her like she weighed next to nothing. "Please forgive me for what I'm about to do." His voice was thick, guttural with his need.

A strangled "Yes," was all she managed to get out. She was afraid to say more in case her voice betrayed how much she really wanted, no, needed him, to make love to her. She knew that what was going to happen would just be a release for him,

comfort to get him through the rough waters of his painful loss. Yet she'd cherish the time they spent together, no matter how brief, or what the reasons.

Her assent seemed to break something in him, something he'd been holding back for a long time, and Dana shook as his hands tore through the buttons on her blouse. As each button hit the floor one by one, she grew fearful with the intensity of his hands. At the sight of her lacy, white bra, Josh's face reddened, and his lips swept across the ivory of her flesh, burning her with kisses of flame and fire.

Soon, he wanted more of her. He unsnapped her bra, allowing it to drop to the floor before ravaging her breasts. She arched her back at the sweetness of his attack and bucked upon his lap without embarrassment. "God, your breasts are perfect." He groaned, then his mouth traced across them. He fondled her swelling orbs, feeling their comfortable weight, delighting in how her passion-reddened flesh spilled over his fingers.

He looked into her eyes then, daring her to look away, using the laserlike accuracy that had so shaken her the first time they met. Bravely, she returned his gaze, determined to have all of him, even if it were only for one night. Easily, he picked her up from the growing ridge in his lap and set her, upright, on the floor. He stood, too, quickly removing his t-shirt.

Dana immediately went to him, peppering his powerful upper body with kisses, thrilling at the feel of his hot flesh beneath her fingertips. By now, her blood was boiling, and even through the heavy cloth of his jeans, she could feel his arousal, its thickness poking at her abdomen with relish.

He bent to kiss the hollow of her neck, then slid lower, moving his hands to her waist and pulling her pants down to her ankles. She stepped out of them, her body vibrating with the feel of his touch. Her panties, moistened with the evidence of her deep yearning, soon followed. She blushed when he stood back to gaze openly at her nakedness.

"You're so pretty," he said tenderly. "Do you know how perfect you are?"

She looked down at the floor, blushing all the more when she saw her discarded clothes strewn around her feet. "I'm not."

"You're crazy. And beautiful." Josh pulled her hands into his and squeezed, directing them to the waistband of his jeans. Together, they pulled them down and Dana was delighted to see that he wore no underwear beneath. His manhood flexed up against his flat stomach, its head purple and pulsing with its need for release.

Slowly, almost tentatively, she reached out to stroke it, and her skin tingled as she felt his quivering response. He inhaled sharply as she manipulated his rigid flesh, massaging it into a raging, ramrod being. Suddenly, he reached out for her, and she felt herself being lifted from her feet. Josh sat upon the bed and, without delay, drove his throbbing hardness into her silky, hot opening, stroking up and down, filling her to the hilt with the measure of his manhood.

A moan that seemed to come from her toes escaped her desire-moistened lips, and she quivered and shook as she rode him, bucking unashamedly as she thrust down to receive every inch he had to offer. Her body was out of her control, and she wrapped her small hands across the broad expanse of his neck to better allow him to surge into her body.

Their bodies melded harmoniously, fixed like perfectly matched puzzle pieces. His hands reached for her buttocks, spreading them far apart so that he could touch every part of her, caress her slick tightness more deeply. When Dana felt her desire rising, it hit her like a fist, sending her over the edge of reason. She cried out her pleasure, clawing his neck and back, grinding her orgasm out against the stiffness of his shaft. She gasped for breath, still stroking upon his insatiable hardness.

Her orgasm rocked both of them as Josh nipped playfully at her neck, still thrusting her up and down upon his durable length. When his own toe-curling release came, he pulled her to him, mouthing her name upon her lips, shivering as his seed filled her. Dana nearly left her body as she felt herself caught up

into yet another heart-pounding orgasm, this one more satisfying than the first.

Hours later, after they'd made love three more times, she lay in Josh's arms, listening to his light breathing. As her heart somersaulted in her chest, she realized she had to get out of there, and away from Josh Chancellor, as soon as possible.

There was no way she could stay much longer now. Not with the way she was feeling.

Chapter 4

Dana's whole body ached in ways it hadn't since her aborted attempt at becoming a gym bunny. Of course, her personal trainer had never worked her out like this.

It was Tuesday; three days after Josh had picked her up from the hospital. After he'd knocked at her door on her second night there, they'd been inseparable—making love for hours on end and only stopping for quick meals or for romps in the pool.

Josh had risen early to go into his office that morning, though he promised he'd be back around two to finish what they'd started. Neither seemed to be able to get enough of the fierce, but easy passion that flowed between them, and Dana had pouted a bit as she watched him dress.

"Do you really have to go?"

"Come on, Dana. I've already missed enough days as it is." He pushed the hair out of her still-sleepy face. "I promise I'll be back as fast as I can."

"You do that."

After he had gone, she snuggled into the rich, Egyptian-cotton sheets and turned on the television. She laughed at the seventyish talk show vet who just couldn't seem to corral his much younger co-host. Later, she watched a well-known psychic with freakish fingernails explain the world of the dead to a stunned studio audience.

Quickly tiring of daytime TV, she emerged from the bed just after eleven and headed downstairs to grab a quick bite. After a bowl of cereal, she picked up the phone and called the auto repair shop where'd she'd left her Dodge Aries the day

before the accident. Told that her car was ready, she set up a date to pick it up. Moving on to other business, she phoned her job.

“How are you, honey?” Pauline, the front desk clerk, said.

Dana smiled, remembering the smiley-faced card the mousy brunette had sent to the hospital. She’d even visited, but Dana had been so out of it, that she hadn’t realized the other woman had been there. “I’m feeling a lot better. Missing Rick, though.”

Pauline was sympathetic. “Me, too. It’s such a shame when anyone dies, but when it’s someone so young, it really gets to you.” Her tone was low, careful. The office supervisor must be nearby, Dana thought. “We’re all just so happy that you’re all right, though. I understand that the car was completely destroyed; you were lucky that you only got banged up a little.”

She hated the sound of the words, but appreciated the sentiment. It still amazed her that she was the one who survived. Even as she’d drifted off to sleep in Josh’s strong arms, she’d thought about how strange life could be. She had also wondered how it could often seem so unfair. Rick was a good guy, one whose humanitarian outlook and optimism could have changed the world. Meanwhile, she was as pessimistic as they came, self-concerned and cynical. And yet, she’d been the one who lived. What kind of justice was that? She just didn’t get it.

She understood all too well, however, that no one would want to hear those words coming from a survivor. Everyone who knew about the accident expected her to feel lucky to be alive—to be on her knees each day thanking her lucky stars. If only they knew how lost she’d felt since waking up in that hospital bed. They would probably think she was ungrateful. Or just plain crazy.

“I’m glad to be alive, Pauline,” she said, her voice as sunny as she could make it. “I think about how lucky I am every day.”

“Will you be coming back to work soon?”

“That’s why I’m calling. I need to talk with Carla in Human Resources to let her know I’ll be back next week.”

“That sounds great, Dana. I’ll put you through.” Before putting her on hold, Pauline said, “We can’t wait to see you.”

Fifteen minutes later, Dana had a return-date. She’d be back at work on Monday morning.

Walking lazily up the winding staircase, her heart was heavy with trepidation. She didn’t want to go back! Why would she? She hated her job. All she did each day was update files, type letters and hound parents for late payments. Rick had been the only reason she’d looked forward to going to work. Now that he was gone, the monotony of the job would descend over her, suck out her personality and turn her into a robot.

Thinking about work made her wonder about her living situation. Where in the world would she go? As she climbed back into Josh’s bed—unconsciously sinking her nose into his pillow to breathe in his scent—she closed her eyes and imagined what it might be like to be homeless. When her fantasy had her toothless, eating in a soup kitchen and sleeping in bus terminals, she quickly cut off that line of thought; though she knew she’d probably revisit it during a more dramatic moment.

No matter what she did, or where she went, she knew she wouldn’t be able to stay with Josh much longer. She was getting way too comfortable in his house, and in his bed. Just being near him unloaded her inhibitions, causing her to jump on him every chance she got.

A guilty smile played across her lush mouth and she basked in the glow from the first bit of naughtiness she’d had in years. Not since high school had she allowed herself to be so free with someone, so open and spontaneous. Yet she wouldn’t become too dependent, expecting the hard-bodied man with the piercing eyes to always be around. Once the shock of losing Rick began to ebb, surely Josh would want to move on with his life. And Dana was sure there was no place in it for her.

* * * *

He’d gotten home later than he’d expected—much later—but that was always one of the cons of running a successful business. Even though he was the boss and able to make his own

hours, those hours were usually long and hard. But Josh didn't mind; it was what kept his business afloat. It was what kept him sane.

Keeping his head all day had proved trying, however, because from the time he woke up, he'd had one thing on his mind—Dana Lewis. It hadn't helped that she had begged him to not leave. More than anything in the world, he'd wanted to spend the day with her long legs wrapped around him.

They'd had so much fun the last couple of days, he was beginning to feel guilty. While the first time they'd landed in bed together could have been called an accident, the other twenty-plus times had all been calculated flights of ecstasy.

Christ, but she fit his body perfectly, and when they moved together, he knew he was experiencing physical pleasure of the highest order. Since they'd come together that first night, all thoughts of other women had ceased entirely. He'd never known such complete satisfaction, and now that he had it in his arms every night, he wasn't willing to do anything that might mess it up.

Except for hiring Berk to track down some info on her. Why was he doing that again? Oh, yeah, as hot as Dana was, something about her money was definitely funny. Though he hadn't been inside her apartment yet, the outside of the weathered, three-story row house told him the building wasn't much. Plus, he knew a little about the rents in that part of town, they were pretty cheap. Dana had a steady job and a car and wasn't into extravagant dressing; so why on earth was she being evicted?

While nothing Berk found out would surprise him—hell, she might have a bookie, for all he knew—Josh just wanted to know exactly who and what he was dealing with.

He knew he was in danger of letting his attraction to the black-haired lovely lead him into something stupid. But other than her eviction, he couldn't think of any reason to believe she might be trying to get over on him. Except...what was she doing hanging out with Rick?

In His Brother's Place

He remembered the day he first saw her. It was at a party he'd thrown for his staff. She'd stood at the other side of the pool drinking a glass of lemonade, looking gorgeous with her windswept jet-black hair. A look passed between them, and he'd

felt himself respond instantly. He'd wanted her at that moment, and had known with a certainty that she'd desired him right back.

His kid brother was his best friend, but Josh was objective enough to know that Rick was no ladies' man. He'd always had girlfriends—women loved his sense of humor, quick wit and ability to have fun. Yet none of the women he'd seen his brother with had ever been of Dana's caliber. The first time he saw her, not only had Josh desired the curvy girl with the full bust and chocolate eyes, he had also wondered what her angle was. Between Berk's findings and their budding relationship, he was sure he'd be able to figure it out.

Stepping into his bedroom just after six, he searched the room for Dana, and was disappointed not to find her in bed waiting for him.

For a moment, he panicked. Maybe she was feeling poorly again and had to go back to the hospital? No. She would have contacted his office. But he'd called for her downstairs and she hadn't answered. Where could she be?

Setting down his briefcase, he went to the bed and ran his hand over the sheets. Dana's side was still warm, which meant she was nearby. His ears pricked up to hear a noise coming from the bathroom. The sound of water briskly hitting tile finally gave her away.

Josh stepped out of his shoes, removed his suit jacket, blue dress shirt and his favorite pair of tattered jeans. After sliding his briefs down his tightly-muscled hips, he opened the door.

From the doorway, he could see Dana's curvy, white body in silhouette, the shower a spotlight on her heavenly form. Leaning against the door, he watched her for a while, his breath showing up in the steam that was beginning to fill the room.

When he'd first got home, his plan had been to spirit her away to an expensive dinner in D.C., maybe even get a hotel room for the night. But as he watched her busily soaping her body and hair, totally unaware of his presence, his mind drifted away from dinner and landed right into his bed.

Not able to hold back any longer, he moved through the steamy dimness and grabbed the shower's gold door handle. "Getting started without me?"

Dana lurched at the sound of his voice, grabbing the shower door to keep from stumbling. "Geez! You're finally back? I was starting to think you forgot about me."

She looked so damned sexy standing there soaking wet that Josh felt his nature rising. "I could never forget you. Sorry I'm late. How about you let me come inside to make it up to you?"

She pouted. "What's in it for me?"

"Woman, if I have to tell you, it means I haven't been doing something right!"

"Well, I wouldn't want you to think that," she said before stepping back to allow him entry.

"That's a good girl," he joked, immediately pulling her slippery body close to his. His lips locked onto hers and they shared a kiss that seemed to make the water pressure shoot up. When Dana reached out to stroke him, he shuddered. "That's a *really* good girl."

She opened the shampoo, rubbed a bit in her hands and reached up to soak his ginger-colored hair. "I aim to please."

"And what about my aim?"

She laughed. "Always on target."

"Well, let's just see..." Surprising her, he spun her wet body away from his and placed her hands against the far wall. "Assume the position."

She giggled and her skin warmed to a florid pink under his touch. "Yes, sir."

Rubbing her from behind, his hands explored the exquisite curve of her back and ass, kneading as if it were fresh dough. Already, his erection punched against his stomach like a fist, and his breath came in ragged starts as his excitement grew.

Dana leaned against the wall, spreading her arms and legs wide to allow him full access. Delicately lifting her rear for better stroking, Josh knew immediately when he'd hit the right spot, her ass moving violently against the slickness of his hand.

Winding a section of her dark hair through his fist, he urged her to bend forward, and she did so willingly, moaning her pleasure. Crouching low to meet her creamy, pink opening, he positioned his glistening cock against the hole and tunneled in.

"Oh, Josh, yes!" she called out to him, rocking back to meet his thrusts. Though her position under the water was precarious at best, she moved with abandon. One of his large hands gripped her hair; the other held her waist. She was in no danger of slipping. Rutting in heat, she pushed up her ass, lifting it as high as it would go so he could stroke stronger, longer, hit every secret spot.

He closed his eyes and pounded into her supple, welcoming flesh, thrilling at the way he fit into her honeyed slot. He loved how she took him hungrily, unafraid of his girth, despite her delicate tightness. Her insides clung to him, milking his shaft raw, making him want to bury himself as far inside as he could go.

"Take it," he commanded, his thrusts jack hammering out of control. "Take it all." He went at her hard, loving the sound of her nasty, rabid moaning, and the feel of her gripping his meat as it sweltered in the juicy sweetness of her moist, hot orifice.

"Oh, shit, I'm gonna come," he growled, embarrassment welling up in him. *Why was this happening?* He liked to make sure his woman was completely satisfied and had always withheld his orgasm until he'd wrung her dry. But that night, he just couldn't wait.

Upon hearing his words, Dana pulled away from him, causing him to slide out with an audible pop. Josh's eyes bulged as he watched her carefully bend to her knees, positioning herself on the shower mat.

Groaning loud enough to wake the dead, he rubbed at his rigid, veiny lust, whacking it soundly across his hand before positioning it in the luscious, wet mouth offered to him.

As soon as her lips touched him, he spasmed and his stomach knotted into a ball. A heated howl escaped his lips as his hot juices shot down onto the Dana's rounded breasts, drowning

her with the evidence of his extreme satisfaction. He'd never come so hard or so much in his life, it seemed to him, not with anyone. Every time he played into Dana Lewis' wide-eyed look, she surprised him, waylaying him with animalistic passion. The woman gave as good as she got; and for that, he was grateful.

* * * *

Hours later, Dana spread her round thighs at Josh's request. "Whatcha doing, Mister?" she teased, running a hand over the soft pink of her budding flesh.

"Somehow, I forgot to eat dinner," he said, matter-of-factly. "I guess I'm going to have to make myself a midnight snack."

"Yeah? What's on the menu?"

"You." Josh leaned over and kissed her belly.

She blushed. "You plan to eat *me*?"

"I can't think of a more nutritious meal," he said, running a hand over the dark triangle covering her sex. "Do you have any objections?"

She pretended to ponder his question, placing a hand under her chin. Actually, she could think of nothing better than having this stud make a meal out of her. When his lips had first touched her budding passion during their first heated session, she'd moaned herself hoarse. He seemed to have been down there for hours, his heavenly mouth sucking and kissing until she'd ground against his face with abandon. At one point, she'd gotten so excited that she'd come in a huge, gushing wave. Josh had laughed at her embarrassment, expressing his pride that he'd been able to make her "go the distance."

"Well," she said finally, her grin wide, "if you're really all that hungry..."

"I'm starved."

"Then, I suppose I'll let you have a taste."

He wasted no time in burying himself into her moist center, his lips exploring the tender skin with relish. Not for the first time that evening, Dana's eyes fluttered shut and her heart skipped several beats before returning to normal.

Despite all the pleasure shooting through her lower region, however, she couldn't seem to turn off her brain, which weakened the experience. Even while frolicking in orgasmic pleasure the last few days, she'd worried the whole time about the one thing that might ruin their bonding. Though she was loathe admitting this to anyone, she wasn't as experienced as her dirty talk and teases portrayed her to be. Josh was only the second man she'd been with sexually. And he was the first to perform oral sex on her.

As his tongue worked at her silky mound, causing it to thicken and drip with pleasure, she ran her hands through his fine, light brown hair. Even when she felt her womb fluttering with the first signs of her impending climax, she worried that her response wasn't what it was supposed to be. Were her moans too loud? Not loud enough? Was she pulling his hair too tightly? And what about him? Did he like her taste? Her smell?

"No..." She felt herself become overtaken by the power of the first mind-blowing quake and her body seemed to bolt against his face of its own accord. "Yes! Yesss..."

Josh lifted his head, and she paled when she saw her juices upon his cheeks, lips and nose.

She'd climaxed so hard that she'd bit her lip, drawing blood. Instead of getting out his trusty first aid kit, Josh dabbed at the small break with a tissue, and then surprised her by kissing her deeply. "Josh!"

"What? I know you're not worried about *that*. If either of us has anything worth spreading then we both have it now." He wrinkled his nose. "We *haven't* been as careful as we should be."

"Oh, gosh! I'm so foolish. I hadn't even thought about that!" Dana couldn't believe her own stupidity. "What if..."

"I was tested four months ago before I went to Africa to shoot a piece for *On the Go*," he offered. "I had to get so many shots and immunizations, that I figured why not check everything? Anyway, I have my papers. I'm as clean as a whistle." He looked at her expectantly.

"I've never been tested," she admitted. "But I've been with so few people. And I'm on the pill to regulate my cycle."

He shrugged. "Well, even if you're relatively certain you're okay, it's always a good idea to get checked out, Dana. Take care of yourself, and your lover."

She tingled at the sound of that. *Take care of your lover.*

The mood had waned a little bit before Josh made another suggestion. "I'm going to run downstairs to make us some sandwiches. But rest up. After you eat, I plan on having you for dessert."

"But I want to come with you!"

"Can't I have a moment of peace, woman?"

"The only piece you can have is of me," Dana replied brightly. When he groaned at her unfortunate play on words, she threw a pillow at him. "Come on. I make a mean ham and cheese."

He grabbed her hand. "Well, since you put it that way, Chef Lewis, lead the way!"

Naked, they entered the kitchen hand-in-hand and set about making a post-coitus meal that would be the envy of new lovers everywhere. After Josh pointed her to the breadbasket, Dana found a fresh loaf of French bread. She sectioned the loaf into halves before digging through the giant, silver refrigerator in search of condiments.

"I take mayo," Josh said. He reached into a cabinet and grinned. "This is a guilty pleasure of mine." She was surprised to see him produce two large bottles of Hawaiian Punch!

"How old are you again?" she teased.

"Old enough to appreciate the sugary goodness of a legendary juice product," he said dryly. "Besides, I will not be judged by a woman who puts mayonnaise *and* mustard on her sandwich!"

"Don't knock it 'til you try it, food snob."

"One doesn't have to be a food snob to know good taste," he said, his Julia Child impression pitch-perfect.

Dana cracked up as she piled on the meats. The man had everything! She chose between deli-sliced morsels of roast beef, ham, salami, bologna, corned beef, and a couple meats she had never seen before. Then there were the cheeses. She would have been happy with yellow American cheese, but Josh's fridge-cum-deli housed the likes of Swiss, Provolone, Gouda and a few more besides.

By the time she'd outfitted the sandwiches, adding lettuce, tomatoes, and jalapeno peppers for spice, both sandwiches were near bursting. "I hope you enjoy my handiwork," she bragged.

"Actually, I'm just really looking forward to watching you eat that thing. You gonna put away that whole sandwich?"

"That's the plan." She pretended to flex her muscles and Josh almost fell down from laughing so hard. When she'd flexed, her large breasts sprang up at her face, making it look like she'd slapped herself.

"Very funny, Josh. So, I'm guessing you're no more than twelve."

"And a half," he agreed. A second later, his demeanor changed and his voice became deeper, almost solemn. "Anyone ever tell you you're a lot of fun?"

Dana grabbed the plates that held their sandwiches. "Think I'm fun now? Wait until you see what I can do with a bag of corn chips."

Josh grabbed a bag from the pantry before following her back upstairs.

Chapter 5

He woke with the taste of her still on his lips. *Dana.*

Josh looked over at her sleeping form, guilty pleasure washing over him even as he bent to wake her. He wound his hands through her lush mane, its silky blackness fanning against the white of the pillowcase, like midnight overtaking daylight. Her skin shone with a faint blush and her lips, pink and full, were parted, as if a promise lay just beyond their depths.

How could he have done this? What on earth had made him think it was okay to make love to his dead brother's girlfriend—even if she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen?

Pulling back, he decided to let Dana alone. The last few days, though achingly perfect, might have been a mistake. They were both in so much pain; missing Rick had obviously driven them to find a distraction. And what a distraction it was!

He kept expecting her to wake from her grief-induced haze and run as fast as her marvelous legs could carry her. Not that he would have blamed her. He'd crossed the line the moment he'd kissed her by the pool. But after they'd made love that first time, it seemed like there was no going back.

As hard as he tried, Josh knew he'd never forget the silky touch of her thighs as they rode him, or the way her insides clutched and heaved in response to his sex. She'd dripped freely against him, her femininity wafting through the air like some spicy, fragrant flower. And how would he ever forget the way she opened to him, budding against his lips as he used his mouth to orally pleasure her? She'd cried out and bucked like a heated mare, her juices wetting his face with impunity.

He stood and quickly drew his jeans over his muscular thighs. Throwing the sleeping woman one last longing glance, he tiptoed out of the room, cursing his erection even as the door shut behind him. Looking at her had that effect on him. The slope of her neck, her ripe, firm breasts were all he needed to get aroused again.

Back in his bedroom, he flipped open his iBook and checked through the more than two-dozen emails he'd received since yesterday. *I really should try to go in to work today. At least try to put in half a day.* But the thought of being away from Dana for even a couple hours made his stomach ache. Besides, his editorial staff and management team were good at their jobs. He ran his tired gaze over his most recent emails, which told him everything was running on schedule.

But then he noted an email address that didn't end with his company's dot com. The subject read: *From Berk.* Breathing deeply, Josh opened it.

Hey, Josh.

A full report of my findings is being sent by messenger to your office.

Here are the major points about Dana Lewis:

Orphaned at age eleven.

Lived in Baltimore with her paternal grandmother, who died when Dana was seventeen.

Ran up twelve thousand dollars on a credit card.

Finished high school; some college courses, no degree.

Worked odd, low-paying jobs the last few years.

Not much in her bank account.

No criminal record.

Only known boyfriend was some high school jock.

No marriages or pregnancies listed in her medical files.

Clean bill of health.

Josh smiled in spite of himself. Dana Lewis was all she appeared to be. He still couldn't help but wonder how a levelheaded young woman like Dana had gone through twelve thousand dollars in a matter of months, even if it had happened

when she was seventeen. Give a seventeen year old unrestricted access to a credit card and bad things were bound to happen, he supposed.

A knock on the door startled him out of his thoughts. Grinning, he said, "Come on in."

The door swung open, and there she was, a vision wrapped in a blue comforter. Her face was flushed, like she'd been crying. "You weren't there when I woke up," she said simply.

He stared at her hard, daring himself to remain under control. Finally, he said "I wasn't sure if I should stay. What's been going on between us—"

"Did you hate it?" Her eyes were wide.

"It's not that at all, Dana. It's just that I feel like I've taken advantage of you somehow." The guilt began eating at his stomach, but it didn't stop the desire building in his loins.

She leaned against the door, her pert lips parted, moist. "You didn't take advantage of me, Josh. I'm a grown woman; I can take care of myself. Let's not feel bad about needing each other." With that, she unwound the comforter from her curvy frame. His eyes were riveted to her ample breasts, as her nakedness was unveiled. Once again, the painful hardness that had driven him to make love to her the first night stretched at his jeans, making him groan.

"Come here," he commanded.

She walked slowly toward him, her peach-tipped nipples already at attention.

Standing in front of him now, her dark eyes captured his, stating her desire in ways words never could. When she bent to touch a kiss upon his hairline, Josh stiffened.

Immediately, his hands were on her, gathering her up into his thick arms, pulling her close for a searing kiss. She cried out as her high-set breasts brushed at the light hairs upon his chest. Surrendering totally, she closed her eyes.

He placed her on his lap, maneuvering her long, milky thighs apart to better apply pressure to the sweet fruit that lie within. She tensed and threw back her head in response to his

limber fingers as they caressed her moist opening into a yawning, clutching frenzy.

Josh's eyes ran the length of her pretty face, taking in the strong cheekbones and the bow-shaped mouth while she quivered and wrenched against his patient hand. With rhythmic strokes, he rocked her, using his index and middle fingers to test her wet tightness. When she tensed and drove down the length of his hand, he knew she was ready to receive him.

But he wouldn't let her off the hook that easily.

"Why'd you stop?" She wanted to know, her voice as tight as her clutching femaleness.

"Go to the bed," he said.

Dana looked at him, her mouth open, as if she was prepared to refuse. Yet her eyes flashed with knowledge. She did as she was told, moving over to the bed. The insides of her thighs dripped with evidence of her pleasure, and she stood with them parted, an invitation.

"Get on the bed," he growled. His hands moved to pull down the jeans that threatened to suffocate him. He'd never felt so huge before, so enormous with wanting. His phallus pulsed, its thick head throbbing, crying out to be stroked into submission. Despite the calm he demonstrated, his emotions were in turmoil. He'd never wanted a woman this badly in all his life. And there had been many pretty damsels who'd willingly spread their legs to test his charms. But this woman, with her soft, feminine curves and innocent, dark good looks, drove him to distraction. His manhood thumped with hardy enthusiasm every time she drew close to him.

Dana sat upon the bed, her eyes bright with passion, waiting for her next instruction.

"Turn around; I want to see you from behind."

She did, unselfconsciously climbing to her knees to give him a better view. His breath caught in his throat, and his body, already on edge with sweet tension, came more alive. He was so hard, it hurt him, but the pain was manageable, for he knew it wouldn't last. Naked now, he stroked himself as he gazed at the

smooth crevice of her backside, its tempting curve hinting at the succulent pinkness just inside.

“Open yourself up. I want to see all of you, Dana.”

She didn't hesitate. Her small hands reached around to her rear, clutching the cheeks before spreading them apart. His eyes glazed over when he was finally granted a view of the great prize. She kneeled there, prone, her head bent low, completely trusting. She could not see him, nor would she know when he would choose to attack. Yet she undoubtedly understood the vulnerability of her position.

Standing painfully, he drew closer until his member was only inches away from the opening of her sex. “Tell me what you want, Dana. Tell me what you want me to do.”

Her whole body shone pink under the faint light the window blinds allowed to peek in, and her body convulsed as she responded. “I want you inside me. Hard. Fill me up; break me. I'm so tired of hurting, of thinking. I just want to forget.”

When she said the words, the pain in her voice shook him and he realized that he wanted the same thing. The sweet friction of his body against hers forged the fruits of forgetfulness. It was why his body ached for hers so frequently, and likely, hers for his... She, like him, had to be trying to forget the deep-seated pain caused by Rick's death.

As he drove his length into her, he grabbed a handful of her hair, reigning her in as she bucked against his entry. Her hot opening clamped down upon him, laying claim to his thrusting urgency, as he pounded away the painful circumstances that had brought her to him. He filled her as she'd asked, tearing into her inch by inch, ripping into her flesh, stabbing at her soul. Beneath his battering ramlike assault, she cried out and whimpered; her devastation raw, thorough. Her writhing climaxes, two in quick succession, stroked him to the edge of his control.

She spent the whole morning in his bed, cloaked in his desire, her mewling cries echoing throughout the house.

* * * *

When she awoke, Josh was gone again, but Dana wasn't afraid this time. While the passion of the first night might have been born of sadness and loss, the days that followed had been different. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. His words and actions had told her so.

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, she stretched and wondered where Josh might be. The bathroom door was open; so he wasn't in there. Maybe he'd gone down to kitchen to prepare a meal for them.

Her naked body still flushed with the excitement the last few hours had brought, she stood and tried to figure out what to do next. Should she put her on clothes and go down to meet him? Or maybe he was on his way back up and expected her to be naked and ready for him.

Smiling to herself, she walked over to Josh's laptop to study it. She'd always wanted one like this, but she'd never be able to afford it. Not while she was still trying to pay off Trent's debt.

She sat in Josh's comfy, leather computer chair and looked at the screen. What she saw there made everything that happened the past few days seem dirty, false and regrettable.

Her lips trembled as she read the words. Over and over again, her dark eyes flashed across the screen, hoping she had made some mistake. The email couldn't be about her, could it? But it clearly was. Her name and her life history were all over it.

With her heart pounding loud enough for her to hear it, she jumped out of the chair. *Josh hired someone to investigate me*, her brain trilled. *But why?* She just couldn't figure it out. Not that it made any difference. He'd proved to be the same as all men—untrustworthy.

Dana checked the tears that threatened to fall down her face. *No, not this time*. There would be no more crying. Not for Josh, not for herself. She was through playing the fool.

Thoughts of sex and fun forgotten, she slammed out of his bedroom, her naked body inflamed and red with anger.

Dana packed at top speed, not stopping to think about the consequences of her actions. She wanted out of this house, to get

away from the man she'd allowed to break through the barriers she'd erected so long ago. The barriers that she would be building back up and sealing tightly. Barriers that she would never let any men get through again.

Pulling out her cell phone, she hesitated. Her car was still in the shop; she'd have to get a taxi. But where would she go? Did she really want to go back to her apartment building and risk seeing the man who was evicting her? Dana bit her lip, her anxiety at an all-time high. She really had nowhere else to go, but she'd be damned if she stayed there.

Suddenly, she thought about someone who'd been friendly and welcoming in her time of need. Making her decision, Dana smiled and dialed the number, hoping this person's offer of friendship had been genuine.

* * * *

"How long will she be staying?" Mrs. Coombs quizzed as she scanned the living room, clucking at the mess he'd made. The housekeeper hadn't been to work in over a week, and except for a brief consolatory moment at Rick's funeral a few days earlier, he hadn't spoken with her since then. "Don't tell me she's moving in for good, because that would be inappropriate."

Josh grinned, always happy when Mrs. Coombs displayed her motherly, protective side. "I don't know," he reflected. "We haven't exactly talked about it. Believe me, her staying here was completely unplanned. Neither of us knew it would happen."

Her gaze ran over him, her sharp blue eyes barely hiding her disapproval. "I'll just bet. Well, I'll need to meet her, I suppose."

"Of course. She might be sleeping right now—"

"It's nearly noon, son. Why would a young girl still be in bed?" Josh's mind wandered back to the memory of why Dana was still in bed and, by the look on Mrs. Coombs face, he could tell she had read his thoughts. She cleared her throat. "I suppose I'll meet her when she gets up, then."

"I suppose you will, Mrs. Coombs," he smirked, biting back the laughter threatening to peel forth. "I'm sure you'll want to get acquainted."

The sharp housekeeper bustled into the kitchen to survey the damage there, leaving Josh in the living room. He stood in front of the fireplace, his gaze roving across the photos upon the mantle. A picture of Rick and him during their trip to Mexico caught his eye. When the picture was taken, poor Rick had barely been able to stand, having had more than his fair share of tequila over the last few hours. Josh had grasped his brother around the neck, hugging and holding him up, posing for the older man they'd asked to snap the shot. Rick's eyes were glazed and reddened, while Josh, who'd consumed far more tequila, looked as steady as ever.

Running a finger over the photo, Josh found himself tearing up. *This was all wrong. Things weren't supposed to happen like this. Rick wasn't supposed to die so young.*

Hurriedly, he wiped his face. He loved and missed his brother, but he was through beating himself up for taking comfort in the arms of the angel lying in his bed. He never would have touched Dana had Rick lived. He knew that down to the marrow in his bones. But now that Rick was gone, he couldn't help but hope he had his little brother's blessing.

The ringing of the doorbell startled him out of his thoughts. Hearing the clack of Mrs. Coombs' footsteps, Josh called out, "Don't worry. I've got it."

He opened the door to see a tiny blonde in a bright yellow sundress and matching sandals. The smile on her face was uncertain, almost as if she thought she had the wrong house. "What can I do for you, miss?"

Her hazel eyes raked over him curiously. "My name is Kathy Armstrong. I'm here to pick up Dana."

Now it was Josh's turn to look uncertain. "I didn't know Dana was going anywhere." Remembering his manners, he stepped back, allowing her entry. "Is something wrong?"

She hesitated. "Um, all Dana said was that she wanted to get out of here." The slight drawl he'd detected in her voice came out fully now, enhanced by what seemed to be nervousness. She hadn't grown up in Maryland, Josh was sure. She sounded like a North Carolina girl.

"Please take a seat, Miss Armstrong," he said, rubbing a hand across the light stubble shadowing his jaw. He hadn't had a chance to shave yet, hadn't had a chance to do anything much that day, besides make love to Dana. And now she was leaving? "I'll go get her. I don't understand what's going on."

But before he could head up the stairs to the guest bedroom, Dana's voice, cold and dry, hit him like a nasty burst of wind.

"Thanks so much for coming, Kathy." Though Josh's eyes locked on her, she refused to glance his way. "I'm ready." The small, dark suitcase she'd brought with her hung at her side.

The petite blonde stood and moved forward, but backed off as soon as Josh held up a hand. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me what's running you off." His voice was hard, but there was a pained quality beneath it. "Dammit, Dana," he said, his confusion boiling to the surface. "What happened?"

Her face reddened as she looked from Josh to her friend. "Why don't you ask your P.I. friend?" Her voice was shrill, almost shrewish. "Anything you want to know about me from now on, Josh, why don't you just ask him?"

His chest tightened. Geez, he hadn't logged out of his email account; she must have seen the message from Berk. As he tried to figure out how to explain himself, his eyes ran over her appreciatively. Even in simple blue jeans and a red t-shirt, she was the sexiest woman he'd ever seen. He wanted to close the distance between them, grab up a handful of her thick, black hair and kiss her lush lips until she begged. But the look in her eyes, wounded and distrustful, told him this wouldn't be the tact to take.

He turned and smiled at Kathy Armstrong, who by then, was sitting in stunned embarrassment upon the sofa. "Kathy," he

said, deliberating catching her big eyes. "Dana and I need a few minutes to sort things out. I don't mean to be rude, but could you wait outside for a bit?"

A blush crept across her cheeks and she stood to obey, her yellow sundress rustling. "Sure thing—"

"You and I have nothing to talk about, Josh!" Dana spat, though her eyes looked beseechingly at her friend. "I'm going."

"No, you're not, Dana."

"Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?"

"The man who made love to you all last night, and the night before," he said easily, not missing a beat. His jaw worked as he watched Kathy shift from foot to foot, her shock and curiosity evident. Turning his gaze back to his target, he said, "Kathy's going out to her car so we can talk." He wasn't surprised to hear the door open a moment later or the light click it made as it closed shut.

"I don't want to talk to you!" Her eyes were wild and blazing. "You're a liar and a jerk and I don't ever want to see you again!"

Now that Kathy was gone, Josh felt free to take the situation in hand. Three quick steps were all it took to reach her. With little trouble, he plucked the suitcase from her hand and slammed it to the floor. "You have to let me explain why I did what I did."

"I know why you did it! You wanted to spy on me. Well, now you know everything there is about my pitiful, little life. Satisfied?"

"Yep," he said. "I'm satisfied. With you. With us. With the way things have gone the last few days." He lost his patience when she turned away from him and had to hold back an urge to wrench her to him. "I had Berk check you out to make sure you were on the up-and-up, Dana. I wasn't trying to hurt you, baby. I swear."

His stomach balled in a knot as he watched the torrent of emotions at play upon her lovely face. It sickened him that something he had done had made her look so sad and angry. But

he wasn't about to let her leave without first having his say. "Just let me go, Josh," she whispered, her voice strained.

"You don't really want that."

"Don't tell me what I want, okay? You don't know me; you don't know a thing about me, other than what that detective told you!" With that, she bent and grabbed her suitcase. "I'm getting out of here and if you try to stop me, I swear, I'll call the police."

Every atom in his body screamed at him to stop her, to make her listen. He knew it would only take a few minutes—if he could break through her pain, he could make her understand. But the rigid edge of her jaw told him she was serious about calling the police if he tried to block her path.

Helplessly, he stood back to let her pass. She scurried to the door, her sneaker-clad feet moving so swiftly, they echoed over the tan welcome mat.

He stood dumbly, his mouth slack. Before he could process all that happened, he realized he had company.

"I like her," Mrs. Coombs said, peeking into the living room. "She's feisty."

"You heard?"

"How could I not? She's got a powerful pair of pipes on her." Shaking her head, the older woman lectured him. "What you did was disgraceful, you know. You're lucky she didn't belt you, Josh. I would have."

"Yeah?" He smiled wanly, even though he wanted to do anything but. He missed her so much, his chest hurt.

After Dana slammed out, however, Josh's plan had already begun to come together. He'd messed up badly, no doubt, but that didn't mean he had lost. He would get her back, make her want and need him the way he did her. And he knew just the way to do it.

* * * *

During the drive to Kathy's Tacoma Park apartment, Dana could feel the other woman's gaze on her. She kept her own gaze fixed firmly on the passenger side window, her mouth clamped

shut. It wasn't even dinnertime yet, and already the day had been full of humiliations for her. First, she'd found out Josh had hired someone to snoop on her. Then, when she'd decided to leave, he'd made a scene! *Who did he think he was?* Even as he'd made love to her, someone had been spying into her background, gathering information about her past and present. Someone had handed her life to him; to the man she'd fooled herself into thinking might be special.

She tried closing her eyes against the pain of it all, but each time she did, she was confronted with visions of Josh's hard body, its glistening tautness teasing her into unwanted arousal. Even now, she couldn't rid herself of his scent, a clean, unmasked manliness that drove her hormones into overdrive. Her insides tingled with unbidden memories of his mastery over her body, and she shifted away from Kathy's curious glances, hoping the other woman couldn't see what she was thinking.

But as angry as she was at Josh's betrayal, Dana realized she was angrier with herself. It was like she was cursed. The only two men she'd ever given herself to sexually had duped her. When Trent Peters had stolen her credit card—something Dana hadn't found out until it was much too late—she'd been devastated, but had tried to see it as a learning experience. She had, after all, been only seventeen, and admittedly, much too trusting. Yet, here she was, seven years later, and she still hadn't learned her lesson. She'd played the gullible little girl again, and oh, so easily, too. She must be an easy mark to the Trent Peters and Josh Chancellors of the world. She bit back the tears that threatened to display her embarrassment and shook them away. No, she promised herself. There would be no more crying for any man, especially one as dishonest and despicable as Josh.

She'd seen the last of him and his phony overtures of concern. She was done with him. *And good riddance.*

Chapter 6

The old man licked his thin lips incessantly, running gnarled hands over his tattered overalls each time he spoke. His apparent distaste dripped from every word that came out of his cracked, dry mouth.

“Listen here, I don’t appreciate you coming down here and flaunting your money, son. You best just turn ’round in those expensive shoes of yours and head back to where you came from before you make me mad.”

Josh thought hard about what he would say next. The crabby old landlord had taken an immediate dislike to him, and he didn’t want him to shoot down the deal before it had even gotten off the ground. With that in mind, he grinned and looked down at the expensive shoes of his; a nonthreatening posture was best. “Sorry, sir. I don’t mean to come off as disrespectful. In fact, the deal I’m offering would be to your advantage, as well as helpful to Miss Lewis.”

“Is that so?”

“I’d like to think so. You wouldn’t have to worry about your rent, and neither would she. Further, I wouldn’t have to worry about her living arrangements.”

“Oh. I see now, son.” The man sat back in his black, motorized massage chair and turned a button, his posture more relaxed. “She’s your girl, huh? Yep, I could certainly see that. In my day, we would have called her a hot number.”

“Miss Lewis is my friend, Mr. Raintree.” It was all Josh was willing to disclose. “As her friend, I want to make sure she’s comfortable.”

"I'll bet."

Josh grinned, stealing looks around what Raintree had called his den. Everything in the surprising room came in shocking shades of greens and yellows, no doubt to accent the hundreds of frog and toad figurines, paintings and photos that cluttered the space. Frogs even hung from the door; chimes that actually croaked when someone entered or exited the room.

The man was a little strange, but seemed harmless. Josh just hoped he'd cooperate. "When I called this morning, you sounded open to negotiating. I hope that hasn't changed. Will you accept my offer, Mr. Raintree?" He looked at his watch, inferring that time was of the essence.

"This is real important to you, huh? Does the lady know about this?" Josh could feel the man's gaze search his as he picked his teeth with a matchbook and waited.

"Does it really matter?" His eyes were hard.

The old man stared right back. Finally, he shrugged. "I just don't want any problems with the girl. Even though she has money problems, she's a good girl, mostly." He drifted off a bit. "She does have a problem getting her trash out on time, though. Would you talk to her about that? When Josh nodded, the landlord seemed satisfied. "Then I don't have a problem with it. But I'll need the money, now."

Josh pulled a check from his breast pocket. He unfolded it, displaying the amount to the old man. Raintree picked up a magnifying glass from the arm of his chair and leaned forward to inspect the check before nodding. "You can drop it right there," he said, pointing to the shiny, green stool at his side. Josh did, placing it squarely on the feet of a crystal frog-lamp positioned there. "You want a receipt?"

"That won't be necessary. I trust you." He stood and extended a hand. The old man just looked at it. "I'll show myself out."

"You do that, Mr. Chancellor. It's been a pleasure doing business with you!"

For Josh, it was one of the most *unpleasant* business transactions of his life. Despite this, he left satisfied because he'd been able to help Dana. However, something told him she'd be less than thrilled.

Later, as he picked at a slice of pizza he barely tasted, he wondered how much time would pass before he heard from Dana again. She'd certainly call him to...to what exactly? To tell him to stay out of her life? Check one. And he was sure she'd throw in a "mind your own business." If she really had a fire under her, he knew he'd hear something like, "And stay the hell out of my life!"

Yeah, she would throw a tantrum, no doubt, but he was ready for it. What he would explain was that he wasn't trying to be a hero, just responsible. Since she was presently unable to make good on her debts, he would take care of them. And she'd accept it, dammit.

Not only had Rick caught himself a real beauty, but she had a temper, too, as well as a strong sense of pride. The woman with the wild, black waves didn't go much for people trying to bail her out, and Josh could definitely respect that. But she'd have to learn to accept his help, because he didn't see himself letting go of her in the near future.

Josh Chancellor had a lot of pride, too. He certainly had too much pride to allow what he'd started to go unfinished.

* * * *

"You sure you don't want to sleep with me? My bed's big enough; I'm no cover-hog."

"I'll be fine." Dana and Kathy sat on her bed, Jay Leno's monologue echoing from the television set. Since leaving Josh's house the day before, both women had pointedly avoided talking about Rick's studly brother. Dana would have loved for the tense silence to continue; she just didn't feel like explaining all that had happened. But Kathy had a nose for drama, and she would not be put off for long.

"Will you at least call him? He doesn't know where you are."

"I'm sure his detective could hunt me down," Dana spat. Her eyes were slits. "What's it matter anyway? I don't want anything to do with him."

Kathy ran a brush through her thick, blonde curls before snapping her hair into a ponytail. "Why'd he hire a detective to get information about you? You got some secret life I don't know about?"

"That's funny." Dana stared at the television to keep from looking directly at the other woman. She was beyond embarrassed about what Kathy had heard. She was mortified. "I'm boring. I barely have a life, much less a secret one."

"That hottie sure seems to think otherwise. He's got a dossier on you. It's like something on TV!"

"It's insane. What was he trying to find out about me? It's weird. If he'd have asked, I would have told him whatever it was."

Kathy grinned wisely. "Maybe he's smart enough to know that getting the truth out of people isn't usually that simple. We lie all the time, and for silly stuff, too. Sounds like your boy knows that."

"He's not my boy!" Dana hissed a bit too loudly before recovering. "Besides, I have nothing to be dishonest about." Her hands shook a little as she said the words because she knew they weren't entirely honest. She'd just lied about lying!

She yearned to tell Kathy everything. Oh, what a load that would have taken off her shoulders! But Dana knew she would never understand. She barely understood her own actions. Like why she was allowing Josh Chancellor to think she and his dead brother had been in love.

Funny, but she wasn't all that surprised by Josh's out-of-left-field deception. Why should she be? With every word she'd uttered about Rick, she'd dug herself deeper. She had done nothing to dissuade Josh from thinking she was Rick's girlfriend and, instead, had encouraged him. Even after she'd quivered from his touch, she'd gone on with the lie, giving it power. She had been too afraid to break his heart; or at least that's what

she'd told herself. Now, she knew the real reason. She liked having the gorgeous hunk dote on her, watching out for her. If anyone's heart were to be broken, it would be hers.

That's why it was good that she'd discovered his treachery so quickly; she hadn't had a chance to fall as hard as she might have otherwise. So why was her stomach heavy with the battered pieces of her heart?

She hadn't slept last night, and knew she wouldn't tonight, because it would be too much to go back to starving after having had a feast. She'd never sleep as soundly if she weren't secured in Josh Chancellor's powerful arms, so why should she even try?

After she and Kathy said goodnight, she tossed and turned on the couch, images of Josh keeping her reckless and wet with longing. Too polite to consider touching herself in another person's home, Dana rubbed her legs together, creating a friction that only served to exacerbate the ache building between her legs. Straining to scratch an itch only Josh could make go away, she moved her thighs rhythmically, pressing her heated flesh together until she clamped her teeth shut against the fierce orgasm that tore through her.

Crying silently, she gazed at the ceiling and wondered what to do next. Her life was a mess, and though she couldn't blame Josh for that fact; having him in the picture certainly hadn't helped matters. In a couple weeks' time, she'd gone from being a hopeless, debt-ridden, self-proclaimed loner who was satisfied with the developing friendship she had with a sweet guy, to a hopeless, debt-ridden, loner who'd lost her only friend. And then slept with his brother.

No, Josh couldn't be blamed entirely for her downward spiral, but the sexy man with the deep, green eyes and the nectar-soaked lips had certainly helped to make the hole she'd dug for herself much deeper.

All cried out, she closed her eyes with a stinging realization spinning her world off its axis. *She loved the bastard.*

* * * *

Josh glanced at his bedside clock before answering the phone. *One-thirty*. Whoever it was had better be dead or dying.

"Yeah?" The voice on the line purred at him, ripping him completely from his slumber. He bolted upright, his taut stomach stiffening. "Dana?"

"Who's Dana?" the voice demanded.

Josh rolled his eyes and sank back into his pillows, pillows that still smelled of Dana's perfume. "What do you want, Sarah?"

"Whatcha got?" The randy blonde's voice caressed his nerve endings. "I seem to remember you having a lot to offer."

He closed his eyes, silently counting to ten. He'd ended his relationship with Sarah Wilkes several months ago, though that hadn't stopped him from stopping by for an occasional midnight snack. But even those biweekly trysts had stopped when she'd become possessive of his time and body. She was certainly a tempting morsel, with her wide mouth and capable hands, but now that he'd experienced Dana's silken touch, Sarah didn't stand a chance.

"It's late, Sarah. Can I call you back tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow won't be tonight, Josh. I need to see you, now."

"That's just it," he explained, all pretenses of good will evaporating. "I don't want to see you."

The hot blonde snorted. "Oh. But if I'd been this Dana chick, you'd be all over me right now, huh?"

Josh didn't hesitate. "You have no idea, Sarah. Goodnight. And don't call again." He clicked off and sank back into his cold bed. As soon as he did, he was hard; but it had nothing to do with Sarah's desperate call. The invitation to sex had made him think of the one person he wanted to be with but could not have.

Taking himself in hand, he stroked at his need, Dana's face a beautiful mirage emerging and evaporating in his mind's eye. In no time, he was dribbling pitifully into his palm, his erection deflating like a sad balloon. He smiled to himself, knowing that the Sarahs of the world would reconsider their late-night calls if they could only see him in the throes of masturbatory passion.

He was definitely a man who needed a good woman to hit on all cylinders. Alone, he was mirthless, almost like a virgin in his rapid stroking. But when he was in the hands of a lovely lady, he'd go all night to quench both their thirsts and sate the hunger that drove them to animalistic heights of ecstasy.

His climax did not induce the sleep he wanted, so he stood and stepped into his jeans. Moments later, he was inside his brother's room, looking through the closet that he and Dana had never quite gotten around to cleaning out. But hadn't that been something unspoken between them?

Entering Rick's room would bring up all the reasons he and Dana had come together and—all the reasons they shouldn't have. He could never have sorted through Rick's things with her, just as if all was fine and dandy, then carry her into his room and make love to her. He knew Dana would have felt the same. So Rick's room had sat untouched.

As he sifted through the dozens of t-shirts and nearly identical pairs of tan dress slacks, it occurred to him that things could stay exactly as they were. He didn't like the idea of throwing away his brother's belongings, nor did the thought of donating his things to a charity leave a pleasant taste in his mouth.

And then there was the fact that he and Dana had never properly discussed what to do with Rick's stuff. Though she had only been Rick's girlfriend and not his wife, Josh felt the need to include her when it became time to make decisions about such things. He owed her that. He owed Rick, too.

Josh had never expected for things to get so out of control. When he'd visited Dana in the hospital, his snap decision to take care of her had been made with Rick in mind. Or so he'd told himself dozens of times. If her wavy, dark hair and incomparably soft skin also had been factors, could anyone have blamed him?

Back in the chilly confines of his own room, once again, beneath torturously cold sheets, he thought about the way she'd left things. He would allow her a few more days to simmer

down before jumping back into her life. *But only a few days.* If he waited much longer, he would explode.

* * * *

"Come on," Kathy coaxed. "Try this on."

Dana wrinkled her nose as the other woman danced around her. She stood in front of the boutique's dressing mirror, eyeing the blue silk dress her friend had picked for her. She hated shopping more than anything. Mostly because she could never afford what she really wanted, so she did it only when necessary. Kathy had deemed it necessary since Dana would be returning to work the next day.

"Come on. You're not that hard-up for cash. I know what you make, girlfriend, because I make it, too!"

"Nobody cares what we wear in that boring office, Kathy. Besides, it's just the three of us in there, and Miss Dobson's not exactly a fashion plate herself!"

"Who says it has to be for work, Dana? Buy yourself something pretty just because you deserve it."

"But I don't."

Kathy sighed. "Geez, you're a hard nut to crack." She placed her hands against her small hips. "Okay. You won't buy it for work, or just because. Fine. So how about you buy it for that fine piece of man who's been burning up my phone?"

Dana's face went red. "If I *did* buy this dress, it certainly wouldn't be for *him*." She leaned against the door and watched Kathy model a low-cut blouse in her favorite color, canary yellow. "Thanks for telling him I wasn't there," she said, her voice a whisper.

"Not a problem. Even though I just know he could tell I was lying! The man is persistent; I'll give him that. He's not giving up on you at all."

"There's no *us* to give up on," she corrected, hating how her voice grated over the words. "And I wish you'd stop saying there was."

"Whatever, Dana. Your denials are wearing thin, you know that? You're acting like a fool, the biggest kind of fool. A fool who's so in love, you can barely walk straight."

"I'm not a fool and I'm not denying anything."

"Except for the most thrilling, manliest, hottest thing walking," she corrected. "And that's big denial, Dana. Huge. Enormous."

Dana laughed. Even when she was driving her nuts, Kathy had a way with words that always seemed to bring her out of any funk. But in this case, she was happy to remain unconvinced. She knew that Kathy couldn't see the forest for Josh's hulking, treelike arms. "You always have sex on the brain."

"Probably because I haven't had any in so long." She laughed. "What they say is true, those who are getting it don't talk about it. And you, hot stuff, must have gotten it good, because you haven't made a peep about it!"

Dana blushed. "What do you want to know?"

"Are you serious, Dana? Come on! Was he good? No, strike that. Of course he's good, by the look on your face." Kathy mock-fanned herself. "You lucky bitch."

"Luck doesn't have a thing to do with it," Dana pronounced, sounding bold. "When you fit, you fit, I guess. But that's just body parts."

"Body parts, my ass, girl! It takes more than just plugging a cord into a socket for things to be electric. You have to be in each other's heads, you know? In sync."

"Like the band?"

"Ha, ha. No. More like the sugary, sweet love songs they sang before Justin went solo." Dana frowned, but Kathy waved her off, clearly warming to her analogy. "I know. Most of those silly love songs promise the undeliverable, the type of love and loving men don't even know about, much less deliver on. But when you find one who does know, I'd imagine it's heaven, Dana. But that's just it. All I can do is imagine! So why don't you throw a starving woman a bone?"

Dana grabbed her handbag in disgust. "I'll be at the food court," she said, effectively closing the topic. "If I get chicken, I'll throw all the bones I have at you."

"And she's dramatic, too!" Kathy whispered, animation brightening her face. "You think going to lunch is gonna shut me up? Oh, that's right, you don't know me all that well, do you? That'll change."

Kathy didn't lie. As they ate, she quizzed Dana mercilessly, eyeing her hard at her evasiveness. "He's big, right?"

"Kathy!" Dana picked at her Greek salad, wishing she'd stuck to her word and had chicken for lunch. She'd have been able to throw a whole plate of bones at her friend. "I will not talk about that with you."

"That's a yes." When a hungry family of five sat behind them, she lowered her voice. "Does he do...everything?"

"I said—"

"I know what you said, Dana. But you have to help me out a little. I admit it. I'm nosy, always have been. But I don't mean any harm, and you don't have to worry about me blabbing this stuff. It's just that the two of you seemed so, I don't know, *hot* together. Watching you was better than a soap any day!"

Dana sighed, speaking reluctantly. "It does feel that way, sometimes. I've never met anyone who pushes my buttons the way he does. He really knows how to get under my skin. In every way." Her eyes shined as she continued. "But whatever might have been is over now. And if you don't mind, I'd really like to change the subject."

Kathy smiled and bit a hunk out of the chicken breast Dana had avoided. "Cool. I'm kind of worn down anyway. But mark my words, Dana. You haven't seen the last of Captain Hunky. And when he comes back around, don't even try putting me off. If one of us is getting some, the least the other could do is share the naughty bits."

Chapter 7

James Berkley sat across from Josh and shook his head. “I had no idea that email would cause you so much trouble, man.”

The two men sat in a trendy Mexican restaurant, where they shared a nacho platter and picked at their quesadilla entrées. Josh threw back his second scotch and soda, signaling the waiter for another. “How could you have known? Hell, I’m the one who didn’t kill the email screen.” His deep green eyes were hard. “And she’s right for being mad, Berk. I *didn’t* trust her. That’s why I put you on her trail.”

Berk sipped daintily at his vodka tonic, his massive frame and shiny bald head seemingly at odds with his manners and fastidiousness. His voice, a deep, throbbing bass, vibrated through the room, even when he whispered. “Well, I’m sorry if my message messed things up with your new friend.” He smiled. Josh hadn’t come right out and said it, but he could tell that Berk knew he was already way over his head where Dana was concerned.

Josh thanked the waiter who’d arrived with his fresh drink. He swallowed heartily, but didn’t gulp, leaving the rest to swim around the glass. Comfortable now that he didn’t have to speak in code, he warmed to the subject of Dana. She’d left three days earlier, and though he’d tried like hell, he couldn’t get a hold of her. Her phone had rung every time he’d called, not even a voicemail recording clicked on to tell him to fuck off.

After he managed to sweet-talk Kathy Armstrong’s phone number out of one of the receptionists at Middle Spring Child Care, he’d called her house, too. Kathy had sworn Dana wasn’t

there, but he knew better. After several more calls, he'd finally given up, leaving only the message: "Tell her I know I made a mistake, but I'd still like another chance."

Relieved to have another masculine point of view, he turned his attention to the powerful man who was eating his quesadilla so carefully. "So what do I do about it? She left so damn fast that I didn't get a chance to tell her why I had her investigated."

"No matter how smooth you are, it's going to be hard to explain, Josh."

"Yeah, but she's gotta listen." His hand played across the top of the glass and he fought to keep his composure as thoughts of Dana's glorious nakedness assaulted his senses. "When I'm with her...I can't explain it, other than to say I've never felt this way about any woman before. As it stands, it looks like things are over before they really had a chance to start."

The burly private investigator finished his entrée and delicately wiped his hands over a napkin. "So what are you doing here looking at me for?" He grinned, his teeth gleaming whitely in contrast to his dark face. "I know I'm pretty, all the ladies say so, but I know I can't be as comely as Miss Lewis. It's been a couple of days, Josh. Find her, talk to her, and get her back."

"You make it sound easy."

Berk grinned. "While you may not be in my league, I've had the opportunity to see a lady or two swoon over you. I doubt you'll have a problem."

Josh slapped his hand on this thigh and laughed heartily. "And I thought I was confident," he teased. "You sure like yourself, man."

"About as much as you like that girl."

Josh looked at him long and hard before finishing the rest of his drink. "Well, I've certainly got enough liquid courage swimming through me to get the job done. I guess I could head over to her job and see if she'll talk to me."

Berk gestured at the waiter for their check. "I've got this, Josh," he said, his inquisitive eyes contemplative. "You've been

through a lot lately, losing Rick and all. You ever think that this girl is just a part of that?"

"I did at first," he said thoughtfully. "When I first saw her lying in that hospital bed the night Rick died, I felt a need to be near her. Then, there was the fact that she's gorgeous; I can't deny that." He bent his head, ashamed at the emotion starting in his voice, but he pressed on. "After we talked more and other things happened between us, I knew it was more than that. Sure, I want her. But I feel like I really want to be with her."

"You going to tell her about the help you've thrown her way?"

Josh's eyes darkened. "Nah, not yet, anyway. Knowing her, it might just make her angrier. I want to get her back on my side, first; make her see that I'm on hers."

"Well, then get going, Chancellor. Time's a-wasting."

* * * *

She hunched over her desk, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she input thousands of pieces of data into the computer. Though she'd been back at work for three days, Dana was still far from caught up on her duties. Her supervisor, Kerry Dobson, while understanding about the accident, needed the school's records updated on time, and since Dana had come back to work, she was expected to work at as rapid a pace as ever.

Every once in a while, she'd glance up and see Kathy smiling at her from across the room. The three women shared an office, their desks crammed along the walls to allow room for the fax machines, printers and a monstrous color copier. The blue and white room had two windows positioned at the rear, where, if one of them felt like squeezing past hundreds of papers and files, she could look out at the playground.

Miss Dobson, who was old enough to be their mother, or a spinster aunt, ran a tight ship. But she was fair. She didn't mind if Dana and Kathy had light conversation while performing their duties, as long as they got their work done. Dana sighed. Now that Rick would no longer be coming in to chat during his

breaks, she knew her supervisor would expect their output to skyrocket.

Her own rhythmic typing lulling her into a haze, she was startled to see her instant messaging light flash. She'd turned the sound down on her computer months earlier after getting one too many evil eyes from Miss Dobson when she'd heard the telltale ding of an email or instant message. Since she always kept the message screen closed while she worked, she could see the blink of a new transmission.

She smiled when she saw Kathy's screen name and opened the message. *I know you're a bit sensitive about the hunk, but I'm dying to know what you're gonna do about him! He's so hot. We'll talk at lunch, chickie. And I want details!*

Dana grinned over her computer. Kathy was such a trip. Before Rick's death, they'd chatted and even had lunch together on a few occasions, but she'd never really thought that she and the cute blonde would develop a friendship outside the office. Since the accident, though, Kathy had shown herself to be kind, sweet and loyal to a fault, if a bit nosy. Yet she was starting to realize that girlfriends talked about personal stuff, that it could be good to share important aspects of her life with someone.

Though she'd been closer to Rick than to anyone else, she'd never really shared her desires or insecurities with him. Not that she could have, even if he was still alive. How could she? All she would have talked about was his brother.

On the day she and Kathy had gone shopping, she'd been so embarrassed by the talkative blonde's probing and far too blunt questions. She hadn't known how to react. There was also the fear that anything she shared might get out to other people, making her look all the more foolish. She felt stupid enough already. If anyone else found out about her situation, she'd die of shame.

Dana typed back, *Okay. See you for Chinese*. Settled back into her work, she was surprised by the receptionist's voice sounding over the intercom. "Dana? There's a Josh Chancellor here for you."

Her mouth dropped open and she stared in horror as Kathy fanned herself. Miss Dobson, who'd been buried in her own paperwork, lifted her head. "Dana, you know you're not allowed to have visitors during business hours." Her straight nose scrunched. "Is there some kind of emergency I need to know about?"

She shook her head, her face red with shock. "No, Miss Dobson. I'll ask Pauline to have him leave a message."

"You do that, Dana." The woman's voice softened. "I know you've been through a rough time lately. We all miss Rick; he was a lovely fellow. But you can't neglect your duties, dear."

"Of course not, Miss Dobson." Dana buzzed Pauline at the reception desk. "Hi. Will you please tell Mr. Chancellor that I'll contact him at a more appropriate time?"

"Sure thing, Dana." But then a moment later, Pauline buzzed again. Her voice sounded strange, softer, huskier. "Mr. Chancellor says he must see you right now, Dana. He says it's life and death."

"Dammit," Dana threw up her hands, exasperation surging through her. "Whatever he has to say can wait—"

"I'm afraid it can't, Dana." Josh strode into the room, a blushing Pauline trailing behind him. Kathy chuckled as she noticed the normally shy receptionist eyeing the hunky visitor up and down.

"Hi, Josh," Kathy beamed, making Dana glare at her. *Traitor!* "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Kathy. You're looking well," he said. With that, he carried himself to Dana's desk. "I need to talk to you."

"This isn't the time or place," she said through gritted teeth. "I'll call you later. Or we can schedule an appointment." She looked at her supervisor apologetically before turning away from him. To Dana, the matter was closed.

* * * *

Josh had been prepared for this reaction; she wasn't about to fly into his arms after what had happened. What he hadn't expected was how ravishing she would look when she pouted.

Dana sat rigid, her anger coming off her in waves. He bent down, placing his forearms over the paperwork strewn over her small, corner desk. "I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

"I don't have time, Josh!" she hissed. "You're making me look bad."

He looked around the office then, bemused to see the expression on Kathy's face, as well as that of the fortyish, greying woman who watched tentatively through the small opening of her half-cubicle. She was probably Dana's boss. With that in mind, he strode over to her, ignoring Dana's frantic whisper.

"Get back here."

But it was too late. He'd already addressed his prey. "My name is Josh Chancellor," he explained, letting his voice drop to a conspiratorial tone. "I know you all are busy, and I apologize for busting in the way I have. But if you could see clear to allowing me a few minutes to speak with Dana, Mrs..."

"Miss Dobson," she corrected, her eyes wide as she took in the tall, well-muscled hunk in her line of vision. Her voice softened and she ran a hand over her freshly permed head. "It's quite all right, Mr. Chancellor. Go on and talk; just don't keep her away too long." She finished with a grin, one Josh returned winningly.

"That's mighty nice of you, Miss Dobson. I promise I won't keep her away too long." Satisfied, he turned back to Dana, whose dark eyes were wide as saucers and filled with enough venom to put down a fifty pound king cobra. She looked as mad at him as he was at her. *Good.*

Dana stood from her desk, smoothing down her knee-length black skirt. Her pink mouth puckered in anxiety. "I'm sorry, Miss Dobson. I'll just have Mr. Chancellor leave and I'll contact him—"

"Nonsense, Dana," the older woman smiled, waving off her words. "Seems that whatever your friend needs to talk about is pretty important. I'll let you take your break early."

Josh turned back to Dana's boss and flashed her a sexy grin. It grew wider when he saw the effect it had on the prim and proper school administrator. If he'd outright laughed, someone would have had to peel her off the floor. Walking past Kathy, who'd been smirking at her desk during the entire exchange, he winked. She was rooting for them; he could tell. Deep green eyes back on his intended, he shrugged. "You ready?"

He could tell she didn't want to, but she followed him anyway. He clasped her hand firmly in his and led her out of the stuffy office, certain that the two women who remained inside were watching his every move.

Outside, they stood beside his black Jeep Cherokee and Dana cast her eyes to the pavement. "Make it quick," she ordered, not giving him an inch. "Miss Dobson's not easy to work for. I'm probably in deep trouble right now."

"She seemed pretty reasonable to me," he pointed out. "She was very accommodating."

She snorted, her high cheekbones turning red with the effort. "She's always accommodating with men. Especially the handsome ones..." she trailed off.

"She thinks I'm handsome?" he joked.

"Give me a break, Josh," she scolded, not in a joking mood. "Just state your case so I can get back to work."

He measured her words for a moment, realizing that this would be harder than he had thought. She was so angry, so dismissive of him that it seemed nothing he could say or do would placate her. And why would it? He'd put a private investigator on her trail, had paid someone to dig into her private life. Josh knew he'd be mad as hell if someone had done that to him. But if that someone were as stunning as Dana Lewis, with the same dark, penetrating eyes and curvy, heavy breasts, he would have certainly forgiven her.

His glance traveled the length of her business attire, and his stomach bunched when he saw the long, black skirt caressing the lovely whiteness of her knees. In no time, he was hard, for he knew what hid beneath the matronly disguise. *Warm, plush and*

pink. He stared right through the clothes that covered her taut body, his nerve endings tingling with the knowledge of what he was about to do.

"Get in," he barked. "We can talk better inside."

She shook her head vigorously. Josh felt his erection enlarge as the wavy darkness of her hair moved across her neck.

"Whatever you have to say, you can say it out here."

But he couldn't, could he? That was the problem. He knew no words could satiate her anger, nothing he uttered would bring about her forgiveness. Actions spoke louder than words, he decided. Leaning in so close, she was forced to move her gaze to his, he captured her into a fierce embrace, locking their lips together.

At first, she struggled, trying to break free, but the power of his touch and the arousal it inspired made her go limp in his arms. When he finally withdrew from the kiss, she was breathless. She shuddered, her heartbeat fluttering and visible beneath the white silk of her blouse, and she collapsed into him.

"Get in, Dana," he whispered into her ear, his throat constricting with the effort it took for him not to growl an order for her complete obedience. "Please get in."

* * * *

Though the Jeep was parked in the far distant corner of the lot, under tall redwoods that overshadowed the dark-windowed vehicle, Dana still couldn't get it out of her mind that they would somehow be caught. Even as she bent for him, ashamed and helpless to deny his touch, she pressed her face against the glass of the backseat, her eyes alert.

She was turned away from him, her wetness dripping down her exposed flesh. Josh's hands ran up and down her nude stockings, his fingers moving between the straps of the garter that secured them. "Look at me, Dana," he whispered. "No one will see. So, look at me, now."

"We can't do this," she said, passion deepening her voice. "People will wonder where I am." She gasped haltingly at the feel of his large finger probing her tight wetness.

His strong hands pulled her waist to him, depositing her onto his lap. His massive erection jutted from his legs. When she slipped onto his shaft, he ground his groin upward, filling her to the hilt. She slipped onto him easily, her moist center gladly accepting his girth. Her body stiffened upon first contact, her muscles contracting to stroke the invading cock, before opening to the sweet friction of his slow, upward thrusts.

"Just like that..." she moaned, spreading her legs wider across his thighs, making room for his thickness. "Please, please, please," she gasped, grinding down in lunging dips, taking all of him into her. "Josh..." She had no choice but to moan his name. As he pumped her open, carefully fitting himself into the glove of her body, she squeezed her muscles to better milk him.

His hands worked at her back, spreading her delectable ass cheeks to better drive himself home. Sweat glistened at his light brow, and his open eyes caught hers, scorching her with their intensity. With open eyes, he pressed his lips to hers, her tongue licking his heatedly in a most sensuous swordfight. Dana nipped lightly at his firm lips, and he reciprocated, nibbling gamely on hers.

The sounds of her riding him echoed throughout the car, the soft slaps of skin on skin, the pounding of burning flesh igniting a rush of fire. Every time he pushed up, she pushed down. She was locked to him in a synchronistic merging of nerve endings. Josh grunted through his pleasure as he filled her; the whistling sound of his breath coming in ragged, staccato bursts. Dana concentrated on her building climax, her own breathing quick and shallow as she drove him deeper inside, caressing the hard muscle that fit so perfectly there.

She despised him; but his touch made her scream, and she drove him to the brink with her angry lunges. She distrusted him; but she rode him as if he held her life in his hands. She feared him; but she controlled the flow and force of their mutual pleasure with each stroke she made.

Soon, her head fell back, her eyes closed and the world stilled. The orgasm tore through her body, starting in her

womb, climbing upward into the pit of her stomach before exploding outward to capture her whole being. She tightened, drawing a roar of pleasure from him that led into his own pulsating release. Dana cried out, biting her lips as another powerful wave hit her.

Pulling away, she readjusted her clothes and pushed her reasonable flats back onto her feet. "I have to go," she muttered, her hand on the door handle. "Let me out," she said. The car was electronically controlled. She wouldn't be able to get out unless Josh let her. "Now," she huffed.

His jade eyes were narrow, and she was sure that she'd seen a fleeting look of hurt in them. "Just like that? After what happened, what we just did?"

"That's right. The sex was great, Josh, you know that. But it doesn't change the fact that I never want to see you again."

He looked ready to argue, but stopped, his jaw rigid. "Fine. Have it your way." He reached for the remote control and pressed a button. The door's lock sprang up.

Dana jumped down, throwing Josh one last look back. "We're done. This can't happen again. Leave me alone, Josh. I mean it. Just stay the hell out of my life."

But even as she rushed back to her office, the smell of Josh's sex and sweat mingling beneath her nose, she hoped she had the strength to back up the heated words.

As soon as she sat back at her desk, her instant messaging window flashed. Grimacing, she opened it, knowing exactly what she'd find. *Was it good?* Kathy demanded.

Blushing, Dana began typing a response, something she would have hesitated to do even a month earlier. *He's built like a stallion and fucks like one.* As an afterthought, she typed, *But I'm done with him. I guess I just needed one last taste.*

From her cubicle, Kathy grinned as if she'd been the one who'd had a midmorning romp. *I don't believe a word of it! You'll drop those panties anytime he shows up! I'm so jealous, I can barely think straight!*

Dana looked over at Miss Dobson whose head was buried in a manual. Sticking her tongue out at Kathy, she wrote, *Please erase these IMs; I wouldn't want us to lose our jobs for sending pornographic materials over school computers!*

Kathy nodded, but before logging out, she typed one, last dig. *You're some lucky slut, Dana. I wish I was that lucky...*

Dana smiled, knowing her pal didn't realize how good she had it. She wasn't the one who had to swallow her feelings for the dangerous man with the hard-powering body, or figure out ways to stop thinking about him. She wasn't tortured by the memory of his hands on her flesh, or by the all-too-real dreams of his warm, yet hard gaze. Yep, Kathy Armstrong, though single and hating it, had it damned good.

* * * *

Josh walked into his state-of-the-art kitchen and found good old-fashioned things a-brewing. "What smells so good?"

Mrs. Coombs frowned and wiped her hand on her apron. "Joshua Chancellor, I know you have better manners than that! No hello, how are you, or how do you do, Mrs. Coombs?"

"How do you do, Mrs. Coombs?" He set down his briefcase and went around to the six-burner stove.

"Smart ass."

"I'm sorry, it's just it's been a really long day. I never had a chance to eat, despite buying lunch for the whole office." He didn't mention stopping at Dana's job. The old housekeeper was perceptive and she might have torn the truth about what had happened out of him!

"Doesn't mean you have to be a smart ass." The older woman's smile made her deadpan delivery seem less threatening, and Josh bowed his head in respect. "I'm cooking for the whole week, so you won't have to worry. There's a meatloaf in the upper oven, a pot roast in the lower, and I just put away a tin of fried chicken."

"Sounds good, Mrs. Coombs."

"You know it is." She smiled sweetly, pride in her cooking tingeing her voice. "I know you don't eat enough vegetables, but

try some, okay? There's carrots, corn on the cob, sprouts—" she stopped and leaned against the long, wooden table, careful not to place her hands upon its recently refinished surface. "Oh, that's right; I also made a chef salad, so make sure to eat that first."

He pulled her into his arms and, tickled by the genuine shock on her face, dipped her until she begged to be let up.

"You're dangerous, kid," she barked, though her sharp eyes shined at him.

"If you only knew," he teased, ready to spring again.

"Boy, I've taken shits larger than you." This time, it was Josh's turn to be shocked. She laughed hard, holding her chest, and stamping her good foot, the left one. She moved to the stove to stir a pot of rice. "I'm surprised to see you in such good spirits. After the girl left, I thought I'd have to scrape you off the floor."

"What can I say? I guess I'm resilient." But that wasn't exactly true, at least not in this case. He just hadn't accepted the fact that Dana was totally out of his life. She had every right to be angry at him, but he'd make it up to her, whether she liked it or not. Besides, they'd played well together that afternoon—too damn well. There was no way he'd roll over without a fight. "I'll be fine."

"Uh-huh. You'll be fine the minute you see that pretty, little girl again, and not a moment before."

He cast his gaze down. If she looked at him, she'd surely know that he had already made contact. "Is it that obvious, Mrs. Coombs?"

She hushed him. "You young people, all of you think you created love. I'll tell you something, Joshua. There ain't nothing new under the sun."

He liked the expression. "That's catchy."

"It oughta be. It's in the Bible." Placing a lid over the rice, she fixed him with the keen eyes he so feared. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm doing the best—"

"Don't hand me the bullshit you shovel at other people. How are you?" She folded her arms across her middle-aged bosom and waited. She'd always known when Josh was pretending everything was fine. And she always called him on his crap. "Well?"

Shit, he'd known Mrs. Coombs would get him eventually. But that's one of the reasons he loved her. "Some days are easier than others, I guess. I was fine today, but I can't say how I'll feel tomorrow."

"Did the pretty, little girl help?"

"What do you mean?"

She twisted her mouth and shook her finger at him. "You know *exactly* what I mean!"

Shocked by her implication, he finally shrugged. "Yeah. Having her around was fun. We both know what it's like to miss him." He grinned at his housekeeper, and his voice dropped. "Since there's nothing new under the sun, I take it that you understand what a comfort she was to me."

"I can only guess, Josh, but I will say this, she was your brother's girl, so tread carefully. Both of y'all are sick with losing him right now, and it's good to be there for each other. Just make sure nobody gets hurt in the bargain. Okay?"

He smiled weakly. "Sure." But could he really make good on that promise? "Nobody's getting hurt."

"That sounded weak, Joshua. I mean really, what do you take me for?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her gaze bored into his and Josh felt his breath quicken. "It's already too late, I guess." She moved to get something from the pantry.

"What's too late, Mrs. Coombs?" he called out to her retreating form.

Stopping to look back at her employer, the old woman snickered. "You're already in love with her, you little numbskull."

Chapter 8

On Saturday, Kathy drove Dana to Forest Glen, where she picked up her car. The mechanic shrugged as he explained that her 1986 Dodge was on its last legs, but he'd patched it up as well as he could. She had maybe another ten thousand miles to go before it conked out totally. "Don't even try to fix her again, she's a goner, Miss Lewis, but I patched her up as well as I could." Dana thanked him and started the car.

As soon as she pulled out, she tuned her radio to her favorite station and the head-bopping began. She loved driving. Being the lord and master of a two ton beast had always made her a little giddy. Twenty minutes later, she turned onto I-495 and headed south to her apartment building. She hadn't been inside her place since Josh dropped her off the week before, and though she'd been staying with Kathy, she really needed a few things.

Dana sighed as she idled into a space across the street and shut the engine. She'd been searching for a suitable rental, but nothing had come up yet. She knew Kathy didn't mind having her around, but Dana had grown tired and sore on her new friend's leather sofa. Despite the sheets and a fine quilt she placed over it every night for covering, she still managed to toss and turn the covers away and usually woke up soaking wet and sticky with sweat.

Her heart fell when she saw Mr. Raintree, his blue work overalls hanging on his scrawny frame, sweeping the sidewalk in front of the tan and red-brick row house. Putting on her

brightest expression, she greeted him. "How are you, Mr. Raintree?"

He turned, his narrow face cracking in an approximation of a smile. "I was wondering when you'd be back here. I haven't seen you in a while, since before your accident."

Dana's mouth was dry. "I've been staying with a friend, Mr. Raintree."

"I gathered that." He set his broom aside and pulled a pack of Marlboro Reds from his front pocket. "When are you coming back?"

"Well, I'll probably get my things out a few days before the eviction."

"Why would you do that? Seeing as you're all paid up into next year, I figured you'd stay awhile."

Dana couldn't believe her ears. What on earth was her landlord talking about? Had he forgotten the eviction? She cleared her throat, uncomfortable with what she was about to say. "The eviction notice, Mr. Raintree, remember? It said I had to leave in thirty days."

He waved her off, pulling on his cigarette before explaining himself. "Now, I told your friend that your balance was zero, didn't he pass on the word? He even threw in three more months to give you some breathing room." His sharp eyes roamed over her and he shook his head. Maybe she'd taken a worse licking in that car accident than she'd realized, his expression said.

"My friend?" The news caught Dana off-guard. "What friend?"

"The young man I spoke to a few days back." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Look, I've already cashed his check, missy, no refunds. If you don't want to stay in the apartment, that's fine, but it's yours for the rest of the year if you want it or not."

Her hand trembled and she leaned against the building's stone exterior for balance. Clutching a hand to her chest, she worked through what the older man had said. *It's yours for the rest*

of the year if you want it or not. Her rent was paid up, and not just for the month. She didn't have to leave! A shock of relief overwhelmed her, but the feeling didn't last long because of another troublesome emotion, anger.

Though she already knew the answer, she had to ask the question now gnawing away at her. "The man who paid my rent, was his name Josh Chancellor?"

Mr. Raintree's brownish teeth glinted dingily in the sunlight. "Who the hell else would it have been? Don't think I didn't hear about you all coming by here last week; Beatrice saw you. He's your gentleman friend, right?"

Dana's vision blurred. Anger welled inside, her rage driving her blind. "That bastard."

* * * *

Josh sat back in his office chair and went through the messages on his cell phone. The first three were business related; he filed the information away in his head and reminded himself to contact each individual personally. The fourth message, however, was wholly personal. He chuckled as he heard the enraged voice blasting at him.

"You sure have a lot of nerve, Josh Chancellor! Did I ask you to pay my rent? What am I to you, some kind of whore?" Dana's rage-filled message rambled on for several minutes before ending with a loud click. She'd found out about the check he'd given to her landlord, and she wasn't happy about it.

She was so damned stubborn, he thought as he closed his phone. What could he do to make her see that he'd done it to help her, to get close to her? Admittedly, hiring Berk to snoop into her life had been a mistake, a faux pas of the worst kind. But now that he knew she was who she claimed to be, Josh felt freer to take care of her. Why couldn't Dana just swallow her pride and see that?

It didn't help matters that he was going crazy with missing her. Though he hadn't seen her since the day they'd made love in the parking lot of her job, to him, it might as well have happened a few minutes ago. He was in a perpetual state of hardness—

thinking of her soft, fair skin as it glazed over his body, or the way her hair, black as midnight, hung to her shoulders in wild waves. Before he'd experienced her totally, he'd been able to pretend those things didn't drive him mad with desire. Now that he'd had a few tastes, he knew he'd always be a slave to her soft touch and the startled gasps of pleasure that emanated from her lips whenever he thrust into her.

He'd thought so much about the situation, about Dana's anger and distress and the fact that he'd caused them. Each time he'd formulated a plan, he kept coming back to one conclusion. To win back Dana Lewis, he'd have to put an end to the part of the relationship that had brought them so much pleasure, the sexual part. Before they'd taken such sweet comfort in each other's arms, they'd been friendly, and had seemed to be forging a true bond. As much as it pained him—his stomach knotted in a ball of pain every time he realized he might never get to touch her again—he realized this drastic step might be the best for both of them.

Why hadn't he thought of this before? he wondered as he scanned the papers on his desk without really seeing them. Though their passion had been fierce, it was easy to see that Dana's reticence had more to do with Rick than with him. After all, what woman wouldn't feel guilty after sleeping with her deceased boyfriend's brother? And what kind of guy was he to think that pursuing a relationship under those circumstances was appropriate?

His jaw clenched as he reaffirmed to himself what he had to do, or not do. There would be no more heated sex, either in his bed or in the backseat of his SUV. As good as she made him feel, he knew that their closeness had terrified the still-grieving woman, perhaps driving her farther away. To bring her back into his life, he would have to prove that he was trustworthy, that he could take care of her without having his way with her.

But could he do these things without grabbing her up in his arms and kissing her lips until she begged for mercy?

* * * *

"No, no, no!" Dana screamed at her failing car, slamming her hands against the steering wheel. "Not on the interstate. Shit!"

Managing to steer the slowing car onto the shoulder, she sat for a moment, listening to the whir of the traffic happily coasting past. Seeing that she had more than enough gas, she pumped at the brakes. When that didn't work, she cut the engine, and counted to ten before restarting. Or tried to restart, because the damn thing wouldn't turn over!

"Come on!" She repeated the steps again, only to get the same result. Nothing. Nada. Her car was dead for good this time. Not only had the money she'd scraped up to give the mechanic been a waste, but his prediction of another ten thousand miles had been a lie.

Reaching for her phone, she dialed Kathy's number and got her voice mail. After explaining her plight, giving her location and begging for assistance, she clicked off. Thank goodness today is Saturday, she mused. If this had happened on a weekday, she probably would have broken down on her way to work. As it happened, Dana had only been heading to the supermarket to restock her empty refrigerator and cabinets. At least her car hadn't chosen to break down *after* she'd completed her shopping. She'd planned to buy a pint of butter pecan ice cream, and it would have melted everywhere!

Ten minutes passed before her cell phone rang.

"Kathy, thank goodness. I need you to come pick me up."

"I'm in Virginia this weekend, Dana. Charlottesville, remember?"

She closed her eyes before placing her head onto the steering wheel. "I forgot, Kathy. I'm stuck out here, though, and I don't know what to do." She bit her lip before adding, "I'm probably gonna have to get this hunk of junk towed."

"Could you call AAA?" Kathy suggested.

"I don't have AAA."

"Well, how about a car service?"

"Would a car service be willing to pick up a passenger on the shoulder of a busy highway? I'm not so sure."

"Well, I could come to pick you up, but you'd have to wait three hours."

Dana groaned. "Very funny. What are my other options?"

"A gorgeous man with sparkling green eyes and a body made for sin," the horny woman said, her voice deepening. "I'm sure he'd come to get you if you asked nicely."

"Kathy..."

"Stop being so stubborn, Dana! If a man like him were willing to give me the time of day, and the clothes off his beautiful back, I'd jump at the chance to be near him. But I guess you're too stubborn to see what a good catch he is."

"I don't have time for this, Kathy," she huffed. "I've been sitting on this shoulder for nearly half an hour. How's talking about Josh going to help me out of his situation?"

"Ah, talking *to* him would probably help," Kathy said, a sarcastic bent to her voice. "Call him, Dana. Stop being so stubborn and get that man down there. You know he'll come running." Leaving her words to sting, Kathy hung up.

Dana stared at the tiny silver cell phone in disbelief. This was the reason she'd never had a girlfriend before; instead of providing a shoulder to lean on, Kathy sent her running right into the arms of the enemy!

Cursing her luck, she decided to swallow her pride. She dialed Josh's phone and prayed he would answer. While his phone rang, she was startled to see the sky turn grey and clouds appear out of nowhere. Moments later, she was forced to roll up her windows as huge drops of rain began beating down.

"You've reached Josh Chancellor's phone. I'm not around to talk right now, so leave a message."

As lightening exploded overhead, turning the dark skies momentarily orange, she shrieked and hunched down in her seat. Her hesitation forgotten, she said into the phone, "Josh, I really, really need your help."

After leaving her message, she opened her purse and fished out the number for the towing company. Only, when she dialed the number and tried to send, nothing happened. Her teeth on edge, she scanned the signal meter in the upper corner of the phone. Instead of the five clear bars that had been apparent moments earlier, only one flashed, and it was getting weaker by the minute. *Great.*

She scrunched down in her seat and wearily looked out her rain-drenched windows. The rain was really coming down, causing traffic to slow and drivers to lay on their horns. The pouring rain had caused the temperature to drop dramatically, making the light linen jacket Dana wore useless.

Shivering, she sank back in the driver's seat and kept an eye on her phone, praying that enough bars would show up so she could make the call to get her out of this mess.

* * * *

Josh's phone beeped during his meeting with Sheila Boothe and Ryan Lee, the executive editors of *On the Go*, but they had a few details to hammer out before he could answer.

"The *Border Line* issue really needs to have a sense of fun and a light touch," he said, scanning the pictures on his desk. "Like this, Sheila. The *Lucha Libres* angle, I really like this. I took in a couple of wrestling matches while visiting Mexico City and these shots show the wildness and excitement that the crowd feels. These stay in."

Together, the three of them outlined the cover for the summer issue, including the sisterhood between Laredo, Texas and its Nuevo Laredo, Mexico neighbor, profiles of interesting hotels, tourist areas and foods, and the best places to shop. "This is going to be a great issue," Ryan said, pride gleaming in his eyes.

Josh agreed. "Now get out of here and make it happen, folks."

It was only after his team was gone that it occurred to him to see who'd left the message. Curious to see the familiar number on his caller ID, he played the message. Before it was

over, he'd already put on his dress jacket and grabbed an umbrella.

As he headed down the highway to get Dana, he remembered the promise he'd made to himself earlier. No funny business. He was going to pick her up because she was stranded, that was all. He'd learn to control himself when she was around and make her see that his interest in her was still as high as ever. He wouldn't let her down again.

Ten minutes later, he slowed his Jeep when he saw Dana's small, blue car sitting on the shoulder. Stopping behind her, he got out. Going around to the driver's seat, he peeked inside and his stomach lurched when he saw her sitting there, helpless. He knocked at the window and smiled when she jumped. "You called, madam?"

Dana's eyes were wide and wild. It took her a moment to register his face, but when she did, she opened the door and sailed right into his arms. Josh held on for as long as he dared before gently pushing her away.

Pulling off his navy suit jacket, he slid it over Dana's slender shoulders. Gratefully, she took it and leaned once more against him. He stiffened as he felt her tremble against him. "I'm so glad you're here. I thought I'd never get out of here!"

"I came as soon as I got your message. And don't worry; a tow truck is also on the way."

"Thanks, Josh."

"Didn't you just get this thing out of the shop?"

"The mechanic told me I had a while before this would happen!" she fumed as she followed him back to his vehicle. He opened the passenger side door and she thanked him before settling into the seat. "He allowed me to drive that piece of junk home and it almost killed me."

Josh got in beside her, holding his tongue all the while. His first reaction had been to offer to buy her a new car, something bright and sporty to match her personality. But he knew Dana well enough now to understand that those words might have started a new fight altogether. All she wanted was a ride, and

dammit, he'd give it to her. "You want me to drop you off at Kathy's house?"

Her voice was tense as she answered. "Actually, I've moved back into my apartment."

"Before or after you mouthed off into my cell phone?"

Dana kept her eyes firmly on the wet road. "I'll figure out a way to pay you back."

"That's not why I did it," he tried to explain.

"Then why did you, Josh? I told you I didn't want anything to do with you anymore, and still, you do this. Did you ever stop to think that I might have been happy to leave that rundown dump?"

Before he could answer, the tow truck drove up. Dana got out to give the driver her stats and, moments later, her car was lifted onto the back of the truck and on its way to the great garbage dump in the sky.

Josh didn't say anything for a while, instead concentrating on keeping his vehicle steady on the rain-slicked road. Besides, anything he could say—and he wanted to say a lot—would doubtlessly lead to an argument. And despite being as thrilled as ever to be in Dana's company, Josh realized he just wasn't in the mood. His head ached and his throat felt raw.

He finally spoke again when he drew about a block away from her apartment. "I was just trying to help you out. But it's done now, and whether you like it or not, I was happy to do it."

Dana turned to him then, her eyes flashing in the darkness. "I know I must sound ungrateful. You must think I'm a jerk for reacting the way I have." She stopped to weigh her words before pressing on. "It's just that I've never had anyone do these types of things for me before, Josh. I don't know how to react." She reached out to run a soft hand over Josh's wrist, which was locked on the steering wheel. Her expression changed. "You're awfully warm."

"Yeah, I'm not feeling so hot." With that, he parked across the street from her house and cut the engine. Dana's touch blazed through him, fighting a battle with the sudden heat that

threatened to engulf his body. Without warning, his throat constricted and his stomach began to cramp. "I think I've caught a bug."

"Maybe." Dana's nose wrinkled. "You're hot, Josh, like beyond a normal fever. How long have you been feeling this way?"

"When I woke up today, my throat hurt and I thought my glands felt swollen," he said, before being interrupted by a cough. "I guess coming out in this rain didn't help."

"Let's trade seats," she said, reaching for the keys. "I'll drive you to the emergency room."

"What for?" Although he was glad she was worried about him, it occurred to him that she might be exaggerating the depth of his illness. "Who goes to the hospital for a fever?"

Josh's breath caught in his throat as Dana leaned over to stroke his brow. That one touch made him grow rigid, his cock swelling to poke at his tan trousers. Anger flashed through him, and he moved his head away, unsure of why her concern rang false to him. "Let me drive you to the hospital," she said softly.

"I'll be fine. I just need to get some sleep and maybe a proper meal inside me." He turned back to her and allowed his gaze to caress her curvy form. "I'll be all right."

Dana, who still had his jacket wrapped around her shoulders, pulled it off and handed it to him. "You need it more than I do," she grinned. "But since you won't let professionals look you over, I've got a compromise for you. Come inside."

His eyebrows shot up. "Are you going to help me feel better, Doctor Lewis?" he laughed, despite the soreness in his throat. "I'll bet you have just the right remedy!"

She rolled her dark eyes at him, but she couldn't help but allow a small snicker to escape her lips. "I've got tea, honey and aspirin. How's that for a remedy?"

* * * *

Dana was a little embarrassed to have him in her tiny one-bedroom apartment, with its natty carpeting and chipped, faded paint. But Josh looked so terrible, that she wondered if he'd

even notice that she lived in less than luxurious digs. Upon opening the door, she grabbed one of his hot hands and led him to her bedroom.

Josh stopped when he saw where they were headed. "Dana, I don't think that is such a great idea."

"You're too big for my little sofa-bed," she said icily. "I'm just going to have you lie down for a bit. Trust me, if you decide to stay, I'll sleep out in the living room."

She looked up at him thoughtfully, confused and somewhat angered by the relief in his eyes. Since when didn't he want her? Sure, he was a liar and a sneak, two things she'd probably never forgive him for. But his desire for her had been something she counted on, something she knew to be real.

Or had it been? Her heart sank as she realized that Josh might not have really wanted her at all, that his passion for her had been all about... What exactly? She still didn't know why he'd felt the need to have a detective check up on her, and it was eating away at her.

But first things first, she had to bring his fever down. Inside her bedroom, she led him to the soft, maroon quilt that covered her bed. Though tattered and a little linty, it was one of her prized possessions because Grandma Charlotte had made it herself and placed it on Dana's bed the night she moved in. It was one of the only things she'd taken from her grandmother's house when she'd left.

"Lie back," she commanded. He followed her instructions and she noted that his normally tanned face seemed sallow. *Poor baby. He's really not feeling well.*

Josh looked around her room for a minute, digesting the modest space, his eyes lingering on the three small photos on her dressing table. One was of an elderly woman he guessed to be her grandmother knitting in her garden. Another showed a dark-haired couple smiling happily for the camera, their love apparent for all to see. The last photo was of a tall, thin fellow Dana's age, his blonde hair hanging in his eyes. He stared into the camera

unsmiling, though the look on his face was one of easy contentment.

Emotion stabbed through her when Josh plopped down onto her bed, his green eyes misting over.

"That's a great picture of Rick," he said, finally turning to look at her. "Did you take it?"

She nodded. "A few months ago, at a school function. I'll have a copy made for you if you'd like."

"Yeah, I would like," he said. "Definitely."

"Glad to do it." She stood by the door and looked down at him. "Hold tight. I'm just going to get the tea started and bring in some stuff to help you knock out that fever."

"It's really not all that bad, Dana."

"You wouldn't say that if you could see what I do. You look like hell, Josh, something I'm sure a guy like you isn't used to hearing."

He laughed. "I'm sure you love being able to say it. Why are you so mean to me?" Though he posed the question as a joke, Dana knew he really wanted an answer.

"I'm doing a good deed for you right now," she said evenly. "You saved my ass. Now, I'll save yours."

She left him to mull over those words and went into the kitchen. Although she'd kept things light and casual between them, her body was ablaze with the need to be close to him. He was only a few feet away, and it was like she could feel his heartbeat, smell his wonderful scent and feel his large, but gentle hands caressing her entire body.

Putting on the tea, she stood by the stove, wondering if she'd made a mistake. Maybe she *had* exaggerated a little. His fever was by no means life threatening, though it was noticeable. She shook her head. No, it was a high fever; she'd use her thermometer to see how high. That was the only reason Josh was lying in her bed looking better than any man had a right to, even when he was sick as a dog. Any other motivation on her part would have been psychotic.

When she went back into her bedroom, the sight of a shirtless Josh shook her to the core. Her mouth dropped open comically, and when she realized she was staring, she set down the tray she carried on the end of the bureau.

"My shirt's wet," he admitted, trying to capture her gaze. When she refused to meet his eyes, he said, "I guess you were right about the fever."

"Yeah," she squeaked out. Pulling the thermometer off the tray, she swabbed it with rubbing alcohol. Then, with averted eyes, she went to him and sat on the edge of the bed. "Hold this in your mouth. Let's see what we're dealing with."

Josh obliged, his eyes filled with amusement. When Dana removed the thermometer, his brow furrowed. "Let's hear it."

"You're at one hundred point eight," she said. "Not that high, but you're definitely running a fever." From the corner of her eye, she saw him reach out to touch her, and she scurried off the bed. Bounding to the tray, she picked up a mug. Her back

turned from his searching look, she said, "Here's the tea I promised. I've also brought in some aspirin and, if you need it, some cough syrup."

"Thanks, Dana." He'd resisted her help up until then, but he now accepted the mug readily.

"I'm going out into the living room," she said, an edge to her voice. "If you need anything, give me a yell." Before she left, she managed to look into his face one last time, and cursed her stupidity. She'd see that face as she tossed and turned the night away, and it would haunt her dreams.

Chapter 9

As he suffered alone in Dana's bed that night, Josh, too, had a vivid sexual dream. She came to him, her cool, naked flesh nestling against his feverish skin and kissed him. "Make love to me, Josh," she said, her dream-eyes sultry chocolate orbs of lust. "I want you."

Though he was instantly hard, he pulled away from her dangerous embrace and turned to face the wall. "I'm sick, Dana. And this isn't right, anyway."

"Who says? We feel so good together. Don't you know what you do to me?" Her soft hands moved along his rigid back, caressing the soft, light hairs that covered his rump. "Please..."

It hurt him too badly to try to resist her. His hardness thickened against his tight stomach, rocketing up to tent the sheets. Embarrassed, he used his hands to try to cup his raging arousal, but it was much too large to be covered, and all his hands did was apply friction to the area, making the ache worse. "You know we can't be together like that," he finally said, turning back to stare at her rose-tinted lips.

"But I love you, Josh," she said, running her whole body along his back. When he refused to respond, she climbed over him and he tensed as he felt the hot juices of her cunt wash over him.

God, he wanted her, had from the first time he saw her, and would ever after. But the promise he'd made to himself—and to Rick—ate away at him. Watching her undulate over him, he pushed the sheets down, revealing the hugeness of his desire.

It came alive, bobbing skyward, its thick head purple with wanting.

Dana reached out to stroke it, her hands working up and down in a rhythmic, tortuous dance across the base. He groaned and sat back, opening his strong thighs and surrendering to the feeling her hands invoked. Up and down, her fingers moved across his taut member, stroking him until it dripped pre-ejaculate, the veins popping and surging beneath her touch.

Just when he thought he'd go crazy with wanting her, she removed her hands. "What would you like me to do, Josh?"

"Everything," his dream-self said, finally free to express his most hidden needs. "Everything and anything you want."

"Well, first, I want to do this." She grinned, bending forward to take him into her mouth. Her lips ran over him, suckling and kissing and licking until he practically leapt off the bed. Expertly, she cradled his balls as she worked, her wet mouth vacuuming him in with no difficulty. Josh's head fell back and he locked his hands into her thick, black mane, binding her lips to his organ, grinding upward to plunder the depths of her throat. Her lips felt just like her insides, warm, slick and tight, as they glided up and down his shaft.

Just when he knew his release was near, his hands tugged at her head, stopping her progress. "What's wrong?"

"What could possibly be wrong?" he answered when he saw the concern etched into her fine face. "I just don't want the party to finish too early."

She smiled, her face flushed from her ministrations. "So how do you propose to keep it going?" Unselfconsciously, she stroked her opening, and he thrilled at the sight of her soft, pink readiness. Except for a small, triangle positioned just above her sex, she was clean down there.

"Sit on my face," he said. "I want to taste you all over my face." His cock thickened and surged as he made the invitation.

She blushed. "I taste too good," she teased. "You might have to come back for seconds."

"Or thirds, or hundreds. Now come here."

Dana's full breasts waved seductively as she crawled up the length of his long body. When her pussy ran over his penis, she stopped for a moment, grinding against him. Before he could get too comfortable with the delightful massage, she continued upward, rocking at the feel of his hands as they rose to rub at her ass. Once positioned over his beckoning lips, she slid down. "Oh, Josh!" she cried out at the feel of his tongue.

He didn't just suck at her pink nub, but instead, licked the whole area, from front to back, treating it the way a child might a Popsicle. She tasted like a sweet plum as she glided over his face, massaging her gaping wetness over his lips and tongue. After she'd set a rhythm, her moans tore the air, wails of hearty satisfaction that spurred him on. He liked a woman who knew what she wanted, so when her body told him where to lick and probe, his tongue listened; and he was rewarded each time by her whimpering agreement.

Much too soon, her pretty back arched and a torrent of sweet juices coasted his waiting mouth. Josh sucked greedily at her orgasm, responding to the sound of her high-pitched, feral groans.

Without giving her time to recover, he forcefully gripped her waist and brought her down the length of his torso, where his erection had grown to shocking proportions. Grinding her atop him, he grunted as he filled her, her still orgasming insides clutching at his hard pole. He pumped into her wet tightness briskly, unashamed of the fevered thrusts that would send him into geyser-like bursts of passion. He came so hard, it took away his breath, and when Dana experienced her second climax at the same moment, they collapsed together.

"Josh? Are you all right?"

The sound of her voice seemed to be coming from so far away, that it confused him. She was in his arms, but she sounded like she was talking to him from somewhere else—but where? He looked down into her sated face, but was astounded to see it begin to fade.

Her hands touched him, and he shivered, the sweat-stained sheets sticking to him. "Dana?"

"Are you awake, Josh?"

He looked up at her and was disappointed. As pretty as ever, Dana Lewis was now fully clothed, wearing a sky-blue t-shirt and dark jeans that showed off her curvy legs and backside. "Yeah, I think so."

"You cried out," she said, her mouth lined with concern. "You sounded upset. Are you sure you're okay?"

The dreamlike haze that had engulfed him now gone, he nodded. "I guess I'll have to be, Dana."

She looked at him hard before placing a hand to his forehead. "I think you've sweated it out, Chancellor. You look a whole lot better." She stood, all business again. "Breakfast will be ready in about twenty minutes. The bathroom is down the hall to the left."

When she was gone, Josh looked down at himself and cursed. He definitely needed a shower. What thirty-three year old man still had wet dreams?

* * * *

Dana picked at her scrambled eggs while Josh downed his three fried eggs, along with five strips of bacon, a cup of coffee and a glass of orange juice like a starving man. "Wow," she said, watching him go. "You do feel better. I went into the room last night to see if you wanted a sandwich or something, but you were knocked out."

"Yeah, I was pretty miserable, but I feel all right today."

"I'm glad." Her tone rang with a sense of finality. "You were so nice to pick me up yesterday. When I saw you were feeling badly, I figured nursing you back to health was the least that I could do."

Finishing the last of his orange juice, he sat across from her, his expression grave. If he didn't say what was on his mind in that moment, he probably never would. "There are a couple things we need to talk about, Dana. Today."

Shoveling eggs into her mouth, she chewed heartily in her attempt to deflect this new development. Her face was aflame and she was keenly aware the look in his eyes always seemed to lead to trouble. She decided to head him off before they wound up on the road to nowhere—in her bed. “Everything’s cool between us, okay? I’ve stopped being mad at you, Josh. I’ve even come to think of you as a friend, as strange as that sounds.”

“But it’s not okay, is it, Dana? If it was, then it wouldn’t have taken your car to break down before we talked.” He sighed, rubbing a hand across the line of thick stubble poking from his skin. “I haven’t been entirely honest with you; that’s why you stormed out of my house the way you did. It’s why, even though you’re perfectly willing to have sex with me, you’re avoiding me.”

Her cheeks burned with her defensiveness. “That day in the parking lot was your doing, Josh!” Her words were accusatory. “It never would have happened if you hadn’t shown up there.”

“But it did happen, and I’m tired of us pretending there’s nothing between us.”

“The only thing between us seems to be sex, lies and guilt,” she huffed, standing to dump the rest of her plate. She slammed it into the sink before turning back to him, her eyes wounded. “Why did you do it, Josh? Why’d you hire a detective to pry into my life?”

She watched as he clasped his hands together, his jaw working as he tried to come up with a suitable answer. *But would it be a lie?* Dana wondered. How would she know?

“I needed to know why you were with Rick,” he stated, his eyes hard on hers. “He just doesn’t seem your type, and I figured—”

“You figured what? And just what the hell is my type, Josh? You?”

“It’s just that you’re so pretty and Rick was...” He shrugged, embarrassed that he’d say such a thing about his kid brother. “He didn’t have a lot of luck with the ladies, Dana.

When I saw you at the barbecue that day, I noticed your beauty. You seemed so different from the women Rick normally dated.”

Dana’s heart raced. Now was the time to put all her cards on the table, to tell Josh the truth. It was better this way, she reasoned. Now that she knew he was such a sneaky jerk, she needed a way to push him out of her life for good. Telling him that she and Rick had never been lovers would do just that. “Rick was the best friend I ever had,” she said, her face warming as memories of her buddy played in her mind. “I loved him very much; I’ve told you that before. It’s true. But we were never more than friends, Josh. We never dated. We shared a few cousin kisses, that’s all.”

Abruptly, he rocked back from the table, his eyes drilling into her. “You weren’t dating? But I thought—” He stopped, his face pained. “My brother was in love with you. I’m sure of it!”

Guilt tore through her, and she averted her eyes, too ashamed to look at him. She’d thought that telling him would make her feel better, clear the air somehow. So, why was it that she felt worse? “I’m so sorry, Josh. I never meant to lead you on. It’s just that when you came to the hospital that day, you were so sure that Rick and I were together, and you were in so much pain. I didn’t want to hurt you any more.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me the truth? Did you think I couldn’t handle it?”

She bit her lips as the tears came and finally found the courage to look into his handsome face. The rage she saw there frightened her terribly, but now that she’d opened the floodgates, there was no way to close them. “I needed to be near someone. You seemed to need that, too. I figured we could help each other through this mess, but I never imagined things would go as far as they did.”

He threw back his head and laughed, but his expression was still hard, and the sound grated through the kitchen. He looked at her like she was a stranger, one who disgusted him. “You’re good, you know that? I’ve been feeling bad because I had my friend Berk check up on you.” He slammed his fist down on the

table, grinning harder when he saw her jump in surprise. "Something I only did because I feared you were looking for a hand-out. All I discovered was stuff I *thought* I already knew: you're a pretty girl who's had a run of bad luck. But now I learn something even my P.I. friend couldn't tell me. You're a manipulator, Dana. Really, truly the worst kind."

Anger jumped in the way of her sadness as she went back at him. "Who's manipulating who here? Except for picking me up last night, Josh Chancellor, I've never asked you for a thing. You're the one throwing around your checkbook—"

He stood and leaned forward until his face cast a shadow over hers. "My checkbook helped you out, with your rent and your credit card debt..." Cursing himself for speaking too quickly, he slammed his mouth shut. But it was too late. Dana had caught the words.

"What about my debt?" Her voice was shaky. "What are you talking about?" Her insides quaked as Josh moved away, grabbing his navy jacket off the chair's back. "Oh, yeah. I guess I forgot to tell you. You'll be receiving your usual bill from the collection agency this month, but instead of an accounting of what you owe, it will show that you're paid in full."

Dana's world swam out of focus and her vision doubled as she watched Josh's retreating frame slam out of the kitchen. Had he really paid off her whole debt? Would she no longer have to dodge her creditor's calls at home and work? *Dammit!* She opened her mouth to call after him, but nothing came out. She was relieved and angry all at the same time. At first, she couldn't understand the emotions floating through her, yet when she heard her front door slam, Dana realized her problem. She'd rather owe a million dollars to the faceless agency that hounded her than be in debt to the high and mighty Josh Chancellor one red cent.

* * * *

Josh's head ached, but it had nothing to do with the fever that had struck him down the night before. He sat by the pool feeling foolish as he thought about what Dana had told him. This

whole time he'd felt guilty for seducing his younger brother's girl, for reveling in the sweetness of her curvy, soft body, for wanting her too damn much, only to find that his guilt had been misplaced.

Scanning Sunday's *Washington Post*, he tried to keep his mind on news and events, but it was a lost cause. Dana Lewis was stuck in his head, her dark, glossy hair billowing around her as she beckoned for him to come closer, to sate the desires he knew stirred under her innocent guise. She'd fooled Rick, dammit, had made him fall in love with her. And now she'd done the same to him!

Although the rage he felt sought to consume him, he couldn't understand the woman's motivation. Her words that morning had seemed genuine, and when he thought about the way everything had happened, he couldn't find a way to blame her for his own stupidity. She was right, she hadn't asked him to do a damn thing for her. The heart-stopping sex they'd shared together had been mutual, consensual, but Josh realized he bore the brunt of the blame for that, too. The first time they'd slept together had been out of sadness, for sure. But the other times? Pure, hot passion. They'd wanted each other so badly after that first go-round, that trying to pretend there was nothing between them would have been ridiculous.

His jade eyes took on a bluish tint as he gazed the length of the pool, though they weren't particular looking into the water. Instead, he was lost in thought, thinking of the easy way he'd written checks to pay off her debts, of how he'd relished the feeling of being able to take care of her. Despite discovering that her relationship with Rick wasn't everything it seemed to be, he couldn't bring himself to regret making her life comfortable.

Even when he was younger, mowing lawns, washing windows and stocking grocery shelves, having money had never been a big deal for him. Though he and Rick had grown up desperately poor, it had never occurred to him to worship money, or be greedy with it. That's why, when he finally got his company off the ground and he was able to afford nice things,

he'd used the majority of his wealth to entertain his kid brother and travel. The rest he banked for emergencies or unexpected expenditures. Rubbing his eyes, he realized that Dana fell into both categories.

Stop it, he told himself. *Stop trying to explain away your idiocy.* He was a grown man, tough in business, and sometimes firm in life, except when it came to Dana. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he understood all too clearly why it'd been so easy for him to throw money at her problems. And his actions had not been just about Rick at all, at least not totally.

He was a man in love, fighting a war with a woman who did all she could to resist being conquered. Though she responded mightily to his kisses and caresses, he could tell she held a part of herself back, that it scared her to want to be with him so badly. And for the first time in his life, Josh realized he was afraid, too.

* * * *

Dana tapped her fingers on her desk and struggled to keep her voice down as she argued with Allan Marshall, the agent assigned to handle her case. She smiled each time Miss Dobson looked at her from over her computer screen, knowing her supervisor would think this private call unprofessional, but she didn't have the time to call the agency before or after work hours.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "Wouldn't you need my signature or something? A notarized statement that said I agreed to allow Mr. Chancellor to cover the debt?"

Mr. Marshall assured her that the payment was perfectly legal. "What I don't understand, Miss Lewis, is why you'd want to void this transaction."

"Because I didn't agree to it, that's why!" Her exasperation got the best of her, and before she knew it, Miss Dobson was looking pointedly in her direction. Quieting once again, she said, "Look, while Mr. Chancellor's gift was extremely generous—"

"I'll say," Mr. Marshall enthused. "I've seen mothers, employers and even the military help settle debts before, but your friend went all out. No haggling or installment plans for

him, he sent over the check by messenger as soon as I gave him the figure.”

“I just don’t understand why no one notified me, Mr. Marshall. This can’t be something you see everyday.”

“No, it isn’t. But I will say this, and I hope you won’t take offense young lady, consider yourself lucky. Mr. Chancellor has saved you years of struggle. You now have a clean slate. I suggest you use it wisely.”

After she’d hung up, Dana stewed over her computer screen, her rapid typing doing little to quiet the thoughts in her head. She’d avoided Kathy’s frequent glances and instant messages the whole morning, in no mood to share what was bothering her.

As soon as the clock struck one, the petite blonde stood beside her desk, demanding answers. “Let’s get a couple of sandwiches and talk outside.”

Dana begged off. “I have a lot of work to finish up and if I’m even going to put a dint in it, I have to keep going.”

“Nonsense,” Kathy’s eyes narrowed. “You’ll be through that stuff way before closing time. Let’s go.”

Outside, under the massive trees overlooking the playground, Dana and Kathy sat watching as the children of Middle Spring Childcare marched back to their rooms for a quick nap. Geraldine Rickey, a particular intelligent and flamboyant three year old, did a little dance as they passed. Kathy and Dana clapped. Geraldine curtsied.

After the backdoor was shut, Kathy set down her tuna on rye and poked her friend in the arm. “Spill. I want to know everything. Especially why you’re in such a snit today.” She folded her arms over her flat chest, crossed her legs and waited.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Dana said, setting aside her chicken salad. “I’m afraid if I start, I might not stop.”

“Uh huh. Girl, that man’s working you big time!”

“Is it that obvious, Kathy?”

"It's as clear as the nose on your face. Remember the day he came in here and spirited you out of the office? Well, that's how you look now, shocked, mad and in lust!"

Dana giggled. "That's the way he makes me feel; it's like I'm so high-energy when I'm around him, I can barely keep still." She lowered her voice when she confessed the rest. "When I'm not with him, though, I feel awful, drained somehow."

"So why aren't you with him all the time, then? I've only seen the man a couple of times, but it seems to me that he has no problem with making himself available."

"I can't be with him," she said simply, her mouth in a deep line.

Kathy wasn't convinced. "If a man who looked like Josh Chancellor, had his own business, and a huge house, came around banging down my door, I'd be on him in a hot second, Dana. You're nuts, plumb out of your mind if you're giving that hunk of burning love the runaround. Call me shallow, I don't care, but he's the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on."

Dana blushed in agreement. "He's absolutely hot. Gorgeous."

"And you're giving him a hard time. I just don't get it. What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing," she admitted, leaning forward so that her wavy hair covered her face. "Everything." She still hadn't been able to bring herself to tell Kathy the full story; she was too shy and private for all that. Not that Dana needed to fill her in all that much. When she and Josh had argued about the detective, and the amazing sex they'd been having, Kathy had been right there, front and center. And after they'd made love in the parking lot, she'd been giddy enough to spill the beans in a raw instant message.

Kathy stared off into space, allowing her musings to be heard aloud. "If someone like him wanted me, I'd probably quit my job to dedicate myself to pleasing him all day."

Dana laughed. "How very twenty-first century of you!" Looking at her buddy, a spark of envy tore through her, for she

knew she'd never allow herself those fantasies. She'd learned years earlier, the hard way that any dreams she had about men would all go up in smoke. Men in real life never behaved the way they did in books, movies or even fantasies; they were too spontaneous, too unpredictable. Though she suspected the other woman knew this fact, it rubbed Dana raw that she could still enjoy the dream.

"Being a modern woman isn't all it's cracked up to be," she explained as she picked up her sandwich. Biting down, she chewed while she spoke. "I'd love for a knight in shining armor to gallop into my life and save the day. How many girls have that happen to them? Meanwhile, here you are, pushing the knight away as hard as you can." She wiped away the spittle that had dribbled along her chin. "Frankly, I don't get it."

As she reached for her own sandwich, Dana measured her friend's words, turning them over in her head. No matter how hard she tried, no matter what excuses she had for her decision, a part of her didn't get it, either.

Chapter 10

Josh was proud of himself. He hadn't called, emailed or stopped in to see Dana in over two weeks. Quite a feat, considering the fact that she was always on his mind. Oh, he'd thought about it, had even picked up the phone to check on her, but he'd been able to stop himself every time his finger strayed toward his speed dial. Today, however, he'd received a phone call that ensured he'd see her again, whether he was ready to or not.

Marvin Glassman, his and Rick's attorney for over six years, dropped a bomb. "Hey, Josh, it's been a while," the message played. "I thought I'd call instead of sending a form letter about this. Just call or email when you're ready to come to the reading of the will. I also need to know when you're available so I can contact Miss Lewis."

When he called the attorney, the man sounded confused by Josh's surprise. "Rick changed his will several months ago," he explained. "Since you boys were so close, I assumed you knew."

Josh swallowed. "No, I didn't."

"Well, now that you do, it's time we set up an appointment to go over his estate."

"Slow down," Josh barked, immediately sorry for his tone. "You're saying that Dana Lewis is mentioned? Rick left something to her?"

"Well, I won't go into details, Josh, but yes, Dana Lewis is a beneficiary."

Something in him snapped at that moment, and the emotions he'd tried to suppress the last two weeks came flying

out. "Well, of course she's a beneficiary, Marvin. That was the whole point, wasn't it?"

"What, son? I'm not sure I understand."

"You will, Marvin. Don't worry, you will." Taking a deep breath, Josh asked, "Do you have an opening for next week?"

"Uh, I'll check with Lucille as to my schedule and let you know." The attorney's tone was curious. "Sounds like you want to get this done as soon as possible, especially now that you've heard that Miss Lewis is included."

"I sure do, Marvin," his voice was choked with restraint. What he really wanted to do was yell at the top of his lungs. "Have Lucille contact my office with a time you can fit me in. I'm free whenever you are. And don't forget to contact Miss Lewis," he added bitterly. "The party won't be as fun if she's not there."

After signing off, Josh buzzed his assistant and told him to hold all his calls.

Settling back behind his desk, he stared at the wall farthest away, his hands clutched atop the hard mahogany. His thoughts kept going back to Dana, his desire for her, his confusion over why she didn't want him. But now he thought he understood her apparent hesitation. Could it be that the little vixen could afford to back off now that she was about to get something she wanted?

* * * *

When the phone rang that evening, Dana sprang for it, certain it was *him*. It had been so long since she'd seen or spoken to Josh—two whole weeks—but she just couldn't bring herself to believe he'd finally walked out of her life forever.

But hadn't she urged him to do just that?

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dana," Kathy drawled. "What are you doing?"

She worked to hide the disappointment that rose in her throat. "Nothing much, reading a little, watching some TV."

"Which one is it?" Kathy demanded.

"I'm very talented; I can do both at once."

"So that means you're not mooning over Josh, right? I mean, it's been positively forever since you last heard from him."

"Only a couple weeks," Dana spat, annoyed. "Besides, it was never a big deal. You made it out to be more than it was." The lie rolled off her tongue like warm honey.

"Uh-huh. From the look on your face every time his name comes up, I'd say it was a *huge* deal." Kathy giggled, thrilled by her double entendre.

"You're gross. Anyone ever tell you that?" Dana barely listened to Kathy gabbing about her mastery over dirty jokes, limericks and wordplay. Kathy could be crude at times, but she was also perceptive, and she'd gotten right to the heart of the matter. Not having Josh around was a huge deal, and she was barely coping.

Twenty minutes passed, as did a lot of small talk, before Dana begged off to get to bed. "I'll see you tomorrow, Kathy."

"Cool. And cheer up. You've been all mopey lately. Get a good night sleep and step out with a new attitude."

Whatever. She was happy with the attitude she had going, and if mopey was it, she'd let it play out until something better came along. The way she'd been feeling, she supposed depressively suicidal couldn't be too far off.

Stepping into the shower, she turned the water on as hot as she could stand it, using her sponge to scrub at her flesh until it was raw. When her hands dropped to the warmth of her pussy, she lingered there, stroking herself until she bit down on her lip. Spent, she leaned against the wall to compose herself.

Though she'd laughed off Kathy's words earlier, she settled down in bed that night thinking she might wake up feeling differently. Perhaps a good night's sleep and a positive attitude would be what she needed to give her the new attitude her friend claimed she needed.

When her alarm sounded the next morning, she felt as cranky as the night before, maybe even more so. When the

phone rang, she jumped, swearing under her breath. *It had better not be Kathy with one of her cheerful, morning wake-up calls.*

"Yes?"

"Good morning. I'm Lucille Duncan calling from the offices of Glassman, Raye and Cohen. May I speak with Dana Lewis?"

Dana sat on her bed, her heart pumping. *What was wrong, now?* "This is Dana Lewis."

"Good day, Miss Lewis. I'm calling to schedule an appointment for the reading of Rick L. Chancellor's will."

"What?" She bolted up, standing in front of her nightstand. As she listened, she glanced into the mirror above her bed and noted the sickly look spreading across her face. "Rick had a will?"

"That is correct. You've been named as a beneficiary—"

"What? Wait, wait. Just stop for a moment." Dana sank back onto her bed, pulling her knees under her chin. "I'm *in* the will?"

"This is why I have contacted you this morning, Miss Lewis."

"Does Josh know about this?"

The woman on the other end seemed taken aback by the question, but she was poised as she answered. "I really can't say, Miss Lewis. I do know, however, that he will be present on the day of the reading. Can we look forward to seeing you?"

Her heart was pounding so hard, she could feel it in her feet. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Why would someone as young as Rick have a will? And he'd put her in it! But why?

"Uhm, yes, I guess I'll come."

Grabbing a pen, she wrote down the address of the law firm as well as the date and time of the reading. "Thank you, Ms. Duncan."

After hanging up, she sat for a while, trying to get up the strength to dress for work. The will would be read in nine days time, but she knew the wait would feel like forever. Nearly an hour passed before she got moving, and then she had to rush. Now that she was without a car, Kathy dropped by every

morning to give her a ride. She would be outside soon beeping her car horn.

When she got into the maroon Quest, Kathy immediately picked up on her emotions. "No new attitude today?" She pulled away, pushing the minivan faster than it had any business going on a residential street. "Maybe you'll feel better tomorrow, then."

"I doubt it," Dana confessed, her lips quivering. "I don't know if I'll ever feel better again."

* * * *

When she returned home that night, her phone was ringing. It was the call she'd waited two weeks to receive yet, once she heard Josh's voice, a part of her wished she hadn't answered.

His tone was clipped, businesslike. "You're aware that you're in Rick's will?"

"Yes. I just found out today."

"Really, Dana? He never mentioned it to you at all?"

The question pissed her off. "What are you accusing me of this time?"

He didn't answer. "I need to see you. Tonight."

Her stomach clenched with a familiar feeling. "I don't think it's a good idea—"

"Let's not play games, okay? I'll be there in half an hour."

Before she could protest, the line went dead.

She took off her work clothes, had a quick shower and put on her ugliest, grey sweats, the ones with the grease stains on the front. There was no way she was getting dolled up for him. He was coming to talk about what Rick had left her, there would be no monkey business.

Josh's call, and the anger in his voice, had startled her. She'd been so sure that they were finally finished with each other. Now, not only would she be forced to see him again, but it would be under strange circumstances. What on earth did Rick have to leave her? Though he lived with his wealthy brother, Rick didn't have a lot of money or possessions of his

own, as far as Dana knew. Perhaps his bequest was something symbolic? A photo or a movie ticket? He was a big comic reader, maybe she'd receive something only of value to a collector?

Whatever it was, Josh hadn't sounded too thrilled to know she'd be getting it. She'd thought about calling him, of course, of telling him that she had no idea about Rick's will. But something about his tone told her that he wouldn't have believed her if she had.

Besides, she was sure he would contest the will—no matter what the bequest was. That would be for the best, she concluded. Whatever it was that Rick thought she should have was only another tie to Josh, one she didn't need. The sooner he was out of her life, the better.

And yet, her body still screamed for his touch. Sometimes, she'd wake in the middle of the night, a dull ache spreading across her most intimate areas. During those lonely moments, she closed her eyes and thought of Josh's powerful body and the way his face felt against her cheek. Then, with the mewling cries of a starving cat, she pleased herself, if only to kill the persistent void his loss had left in her.

Now she sat on her sofa, clad in grey exercise sweats, her thick stream of black hair scrunched atop her head. She was determined to downplay their attraction and get right down to the business at hand. She'd tell him she didn't want Rick's gift. And if push came to shove, she'd say that she didn't want him, either. That's right. She was prepared to lie.

When the doorbell sounded, her heart did flip-flops. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. *I should have put him off*. But that had never worked before, had it? Her face burned as she remembered the morning he'd stormed into her job, sweeping her outside to make love in the parking lot. She'd been so angry with herself. Why couldn't she be strong in the face of the man who had made a joke out of her? He'd snooped into her past, treated her like a charity case and lied to her. Still, she couldn't resist his touch.

She opened the door and her breath stopped. He was too gorgeous, with his unkempt, light brown hair and the green eyes that seemed to pierce right through her soul. His strong face was tight, and a light scruff dotted his chin, making him look rugged, almost like a pirate. He'd captured her body more times than she cared to remember. "Make this quick, Josh. It's late and I'm tired."

"Cut the crap. You knew I was coming." He strode inside, staring her up and down. "Nice sweats," he joked.

She led him into her kitchen, her neck hot from what she was sure was his gaze burning there. Inviting him to sit at the white stone table, she turned to the stove. "I'm making tea. Would you like some?"

He hesitated, his eyes smirking over the fuzzy, grey jogging suit that fitted snugly against her womanly frame. "Sure, why not? I'll take a cup." When Dana turned back to put the water on, he said, "Do you know what Rick left you?"

"Josh, I swear, I didn't even know he had a will."

"Stop playing with me, Dana." He bent his head so that she couldn't see the weariness in his eyes. "Just tell me the truth."

She opened the cabinet, pulling out two large blue mugs and outfitted both with tea bags. She turned then, leaned against the countertop and faced him. "Why do you hate me so much? I think you get off on trying to drive me crazy. First you offer to let me stay in your house, then you hire a detective to dig up information on me. You pursue me like crazy, and then you disappear after you find out Rick and I weren't a couple. Now, you're in my kitchen accusing me of...of what exactly?"

"I just don't want to be surprised—"

"I don't know anything about it," Dana interrupted. "I'm as shocked as you are."

He nodded, his eyes softening. "Rick was full of surprises, huh?"

"You can say that again," she agreed, sitting in the chair opposite him. "I also want you to know that I don't want it, whatever it is."

His brow furrowed. "Why the hell not?"

"Because it should be yours. You're Rick's family; I'm just some girl he hung out with from time to time." She sipped at her tea before adding, "I also plan to pay you back that twelve thousand."

"You know, every time we stop fighting and agree to play nice, you go and say something to piss me off." His voice was dangerously low. "I admire your pride and independence, Dana. It's good to see that you don't run from your responsibilities. But, now that we're just friends, I need you to know that I paid off your debts because I wanted to, not because I expected anything back in return."

"I want us to be friends, Josh. If I'm going to get on with my life, I need to make things right between us."

He sighed. "Since you only want to be *friends*, I'd say things are as right between us as they're gonna get. I even stayed away from you like you asked." Noting the stricken expression on her face, he grinned. "Don't look at me like that. You started it."

Her hands shook a little as she set down her cup. She had to remain strong, it was the only way she'd make it through this mess. It was moments like this when she felt like fate had brought them together, that he would always be in her life, despite knowing everything about her past, and her deception about Rick. The only thing she could do to keep herself safe was to put the brakes on the physical part of their bond. "You're a good guy," she said finally. "You've been so wonderful in these last weeks and that means the world to me."

"So why do I hear a but on those sexy lips of yours?"

"Because it's necessary, Josh!" Without thinking, she reached across the table and stroked his hand. "Things haven't been right between us from the beginning—"

"That's crap."

"Let me finish, okay?" She squeezed his hand before continuing. "From the start, you thought I was someone I wasn't—Rick's girlfriend. And what did I do? I allowed you to

keep thinking that, out of a misguided attempt to make you feel better.”

He flipped his hand over, causing hers to fall away, and then quickly picked it up so he could do the squeezing. “And I forgave you for that.”

“Yes, but not before you hired a detective to hunt down info on me.” She sighed, thinking of the day she’d seen that horrible email on his notebook’s screen. “Everything that happened after that, the sex, you eliminating my debt—”

“The sex...” Josh said, teasingly.

“Yeah, well, it’s been a wild ride. I want you to know that I’m proud to have been your brother’s friend. I’m also happy to have had a chance to know you. But when I find out what he left me, I’m turning it down.”

His hand bore down on hers, effectively changing the subject. “You’re a stubborn one, Dana. Don’t you know that I came over here to try and make you change your mind?”

“I won’t.”

“I’m not talking about Rick’s bequest, sweetness.” He stood and broke the distance between them. Before she could catch her breath, Dana felt herself being drawn to her feet. “Don’t do this, Josh.”

“Why on earth not? We both want it.”

“I can’t anymore,” she said, resisting his hot gaze. “This *thing* between us, whatever it is, needs to stop.”

But he wasn’t buying. As she looked everywhere but at him, he bent to taste her forehead. “I don’t want it to stop.”

God help her. She clung to him, his soft breath caressing her face as she looked into his eyes. “It’s chemical,” she murmured. “It doesn’t mean anything.” Although she’d uttered the words, she knew she didn’t believe them—not one bit. Her knee-weakening reaction to this man meant everything to her, held her in a death grip.

Since she’d woken at the hospital that day and saw his chiseled face, she hadn’t thought of anything, or anyone else. His hold over her scared her, it seemed almost life-threatening in its

intensity. It certainly took up a lot of her time. She thought of the way his pecs glistened as his body thrust into hers while she worked. And when she did something as mindless as watch television, his face appeared, his keen, jade eyes sparkling come-ons. She had it bad. No other man, not even the scam artist Trent Peters, who'd stolen her heart and her money, had ever made her feel like this. And that's why she needed Josh Chancellor to leave her alone!

One of his hands ran the length of her face before sweeping through her thick hair. There, his hand gripped at her nape, pulling her face closer for the kiss they both needed to happen.

"The more you try to resist me, the more I want you." His mouth claimed her lips in a grinding, breath-capturing kiss.

Breaking free, Dana looked up at him with glistening eyes. Her lips trembled and she was sure her heart would burst under his scrutiny. "You have to go."

"You really want me to?" His eyes were jade orbs of pain and confusion.

I never said that I wanted you to! her mind screamed. "You have to go," Dana repeated, liking the simple rhythm of the words. "If you don't..."

"If I don't, we'll set this apartment ablaze," he finished where she'd trailed off.

"Yes." Even though she'd managed to free herself from his arms, he was still much too close, dangerously so. She had to get him out of there. If he touched her one more time...

As if reading her thoughts, he grabbed her by the waist, picking her up like she weighed nothing, and pressed her bottom to the kitchen table. Before she could complain, his tongue was in her mouth, telling her everything he planned to do to her, no matter how much she resisted. "I want you, Dana," he admitted after finally pulling free. "It eats at me everyday, making me useless and achy. I'm a total bastard to be around."

Her heart swelled at his words, but she couldn't allow herself to read anything into them. "If you'd give yourself some space, Josh, I swear it'll get better," she said, warming to the

false hope her statement inspired in her. "Just give it a couple months, you'll see that the desire will go away."

His eyes flashed. "You're even crazier than I thought, Dana." His tone was jocular, but she sensed the truth beneath them. "You think avoiding each other for a couple months is going to kill the attraction?"

No. Hell, no. At least not on my end. To him, she said, "We could give it a try."

"Like hell." With that, he grabbed her hand, rubbing across the front of his jeans. The relaxed fabric hung loosely over his lean but muscular frame, and there was no disguising the arousal that lay underneath. She blushed as he pressed her hand to his hardening cock, and she trembled at the heat that coursed off of it. Gripping her hand against its length, he moaned from between gritted teeth. "Can you feel what you do to me, Dana? Do you really think a couple months are going to help me? If anything, it will make me crazy. And then, I'll have to come looking for you."

Dana's nipples hardened at his sexy threat and, when she realized this, her face burned shamefully. *Why was he making it so hard?* That thought made her think of the throbbing, hard mass beneath her hands. In no time, her panties were drenched. "Please, don't." Even as she gasped the words, her hand remained upon his pulsing manhood. It was expanding in her hand at an astounding rate.

"You want me as much as I want you. Stop fighting it, dammit!" The words were sex-filled venom. "Stop fighting this."

She shook uncontrollably as he drew closer, his growing erection massaging the tips of her fingers. Without thinking, she rubbed against it, her pulse quickening as he expanded. When she felt his hand curve over her breast, a cry escaped her lips. Leisurely, he used the pad of his thumb to stroke the thickening, peach-colored bud. She tensed and closed her eyes at the sensations. Although his attention was focused on her nipple, she felt pleasure in the depths of her soul.

This time, when his lips slammed onto hers, she did not resist. She didn't know how. For some reason, *this* was the only thing they knew how to do right together, and no one did it better.

Dana opened her mouth to allow his searching tongue to find hers. How had she resisted this temptation for so long? Yes, she wanted him, needed to have him close to her. Her body, traitorous shell that it was, always consented, even when her head refused. She was much too eager, she knew, but her body was like an aching tooth and Josh was the drill that would eventually take away all her pain.

As his mouth worked her lips, Josh's hands roamed her body, and though she'd totally surrendered, he still held her as if she might scurry away. Digging his hands beneath the waistband of her grey sweatpants, he massaged her clit, circling the moist nub that puckered out to meet him. Using the other hand, he reached around her back and lifted her bottom, grasping the material and yanking it, along with her drenched panties, down around her ankles.

Losing the last of her control, Dana leaned back to expose her entry, convulsing in pleasure when he looked down at her. When he ridded himself of his jeans, letting them drop to the floor, her mouth watered in anticipation. She returned his stare and held it for a moment, allowing the electricity whirling around to build to a fever pitch. Dana could feel her insides swelling thick and hot with wanting and was amazed to watch his member pulsing sympathetically.

While his initial caresses had been rough, he now reached out to gently stroke her face. Behind the perfect jade of his stare lay some unexpressed emotion, a hurt or a sorrow he couldn't yet admit to—perhaps even an apology. His hand ran the length of her face, gentle and sweet in its tenderness. But that sweetness couldn't last, it wasn't how things were with him.

With a growl that shook the air, Josh lifted her legs and drove deeply into her, causing her eyes to roll back and close. Despite her excitement and sopping wetness, he felt huge, and

she quivered with white-hot pleasure-pain as he dove into her. She was so overwhelmed with pleasure, she had to remind herself to breathe—she'd nearly hyperventilated during his first powerful strokes. Grunting her fulfillment, she grabbed his taut ass cheeks and pulled him closer. Each time he rammed into her tightness, her womb quaked in recognition. After a few moments, her arms grew heavy and she laid them at her sides. Dana no longer had to move them anyway, for their bodies had melded into a hard, slick machine and held fast.

Because of their positioning, Josh's hips pistoning into her and Dana spread, prone and open, she could watch his face clearly and was amazed at the pleasure she saw waiting there. *Did she give him as much pleasure as he gave her? Was that why each was drawn into this maddening place?* Before she could think about anything too deeply, her body convulsed.

"Oh!" she cried out her pleasure, a lone tear running down her cheek. Now that he'd struck gold tunneling into the dark haven of her waiting pleasure, Josh dove over and over, his progress helped by her tightening, stroking muscles.

"You feel so good, Dana. You feel so good." His groan split the air and he drove her harder, reveling at the feel of her hot flesh gripping his pounding organ. Sweat formed on his forehead and he whipped his head back to see her better.

"Please, Josh! Yes, oh..." she begged with abandon, his every stroke close to toppling her over, but teasing, too. By then, he knew her body so well, that he understood her internal orgasm clock, how to plug it in, set it and make the alarm go off. Only when he was ready would he allow her dam to burst.

So she begged him, even as she spasmed and spread herself further open for his deepening plunges. She hated herself for needing him so badly, that she'd grovel; she was reduced to a panting slut with every thrust. It was only after she cried, shivering as tears of pleasure flowed down her face, that he finally released her from her passionate torment.

Like a wave, it swept up to topple her, and down she went, her climax burning away the last of her strength. Josh gritted his

teeth and threw back his sweat-moistened head. With three hard pumps, he let his load go, and Dana thrilled at the feel of his squirting hotness.

For a moment, they stayed together, each panting for breath. Dana tried to look into his face, to see his expression, but he'd bent into the flesh of her breasts to hide.

Before she could collect herself enough to formulate a sentence, Josh pulled away from her. She watched as he bent and pulled up his briefs and jeans. Running a hand through his sweaty, light brown hair, he turned and walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Dana called out, sitting up to cover her nakedness.

"You said you wanted to be friends. I'm okay with that if you are." A thin smile fluttered across his lips as he exited.

She sat up in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"See you next week, buddy!" His voice called from the hall.

"Josh!"

A moment later, she heard his steady footsteps moving through the living room, then the slam of her front door.

Chapter 11

"How's it going with your lady friend?" Berk asked, stretching his massive frame down the length of the green, leather chaise. If anyone else of that size had dared get that comfortable in his favorite chair, Josh would have balked. But the kinship he felt toward the big man allowed him benefits few others received. Also, who in his right mind wanted to anger a man like Berk?

Josh scanned his enviable CD collection until he found what he was looking for. Before sitting on the bar stool directly across from his guest, he pressed the remote control, smiling as the trippy, reggae-light sounds of Roxanne soared through the room. Finally, he said, "I don't know if it's going anywhere."

"What are you doing wrong, man?"

Josh was indignant. "Why does it have to be me doing something wrong?"

Berk laughed, his round stomach rolling with the effort. "Why? Because it usually is, Josh. The man's fault, I mean."

His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the always impeccably dressed private dick. Though the two were merely spending a casual day in Josh's entertainment room playing cards, video games, listening to music, Berk had arrived wearing three hundred dollar shoes and a custom-made, white silk tracksuit. A two carat diamond sparkled in his right ear. "Berk, you're too damn much. I had no idea you were a feminist."

"I just call them like I see them," he offered, pulling out a cigar. "If you all aren't grooving yet, it's your fault, not hers."

"I never said we weren't grooving."

“Ha! Well, if it’s like that and she’s still not with you, you’re really doing something wrong!”

“I wish it were that simple,” Josh’s tone turned serious. “Sex isn’t the problem. Hell, if it was, we might be able to fix it.”

“You can’t fix bad sex, man.”

“I wouldn’t know, thank goodness. Anyway, that’s fine, great. Damn, it’s more than great, actually. The problem is that she doesn’t want me around for some reason. I don’t know. It’s like she sees me as some kind of a threat.”

“And are you?” The big man’s eyebrows rose.

“To her body, maybe, but other than that, my intentions are purely noble.”

Berk thought that was funny. “I know you don’t like to think about this sort of thing, but the lady did have a life before she met you. People often avoid things that remind them of the past. Maybe having you around makes her think about things she’d rather forget.”

He focused on what Berk said, and something dawned on him. “In your background search into Dana’s life, what kind of info did you find on her boyfriends?”

Pulling at his cigar, the detective scanned his memory bank, his computerlike mind running a spreadsheet on Dana Lewis. “Except for some high school ballplayer, I couldn’t find info on any men.” He exhaled, waving at the smoke billowing around his head. “Come to think of it, that’s kind of strange. I have pictures of the mark and she’s a mighty ripe honey. A girl like that would have plenty of guys lining up for a chance.”

“My thoughts, exactly,” Josh said, frowning. “She’s so beautiful, but she’s also the loneliest woman I’ve ever known.”

“Well that’s it, then, Josh. You’ve got to get down to the heart of the matter; find out why this woman is so determined not to have any meaningful relationships.”

Josh shifted on the stool, growing uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. “That’s kind of harsh, isn’t it?”

She's not some emotional cripple, Berk. Something tells me she's just scared."

"Of you?"

He waved that off, not caring to ponder what that might mean for his future. "She got along with Rick just fine."

"But that wasn't a sexual relationship, man. It's like apples and oranges." Berk rose to his feet and grabbed his fashionable, though manly, leather pouch. "I'm not going to sit in here with you and talk about your women problems all day, Josh. So if you want my advice, here it is, find out what's got this girl so freaked out. After that, the rest should fall into place."

"We'll see how that pans out day after tomorrow." Josh stood and shook his buddy's hand.

"What happens on the day after tomorrow?"

"The reading of my brother's will."

* * * *

On the night before the reading of Rick's will, Dana was a nervous wreck. She still had no idea what she'd be in for and simply not attending seemed to be a good option.

She tried not to think about Josh, or about how they had left things. Whenever she did, she found herself fending off too many emotions at the same time—anger, lust, confusion and yearning topped the list.

That was another reason to stay away from the lawyer's office tomorrow; if she went, she'd have to face Josh and deal with the feelings she so desperately needed to bury.

She called Kathy and invited her over for pizza. As the women sat in the middle of Dana's bed twirling extra cheese around their fingers like kids, Kathy started in. The woman never quit!

"So, you're seeing *him* tomorrow. How do you feel about that?"

"How am I supposed to feel? He demands to see me, we have sex, and then he leaves!" Dana threw her half-eaten slice back into the box. "The man is crazy."

"I'll say. Totally crazy. For you. And you seem a little crazy, too."

"Don't start, Kathy!" She couldn't help but smile despite her protests. "He might as well have come out and accused me of playing Rick into leaving me something in his will. But the thing is, I don't even know what it is!"

The slight blonde reached over for Dana's unfinished slice and took a large bite. Unfortunately, her chewing didn't stop her from speaking her mind. "He doesn't believe that, no way. I've seen the guy with you, Dana. If anything, he's frustrated."

"Like I'm not? I can't do anything, I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't even think, and it's all Josh's fault!"

"Poor you! A hot guy with an urge to satisfy is banging down your door, throwing money at you and making you lose weight. Like I said, poor you!"

Dana burst into a fit of giggles. "Boy, you're a harsh critic."

Kathy reached for a jar of crushed red peppers. "I'm your biggest fan. But I'm not going to lie to you. You suck at relationships."

That hit a nerve, making her pull back. "It's really hard for me to trust men, Kathy. And with Josh, it just feels impossible."

"I know. The hunk had you investigated. I have to admit that's kind of weird. But I'm not only talking about Josh, I'm talking about everyone in your life. With me, too."

"What do you mean?"

Now that she'd finally finished chewing, Kathy was free to climb up on her soapbox and sermonize her adoring public. "Your social skills stink. We've worked together for what, a year or so? The only reason we ever talked was because Rick, who was my friend, too, don't forget, decided to take you under this wing." Her eyes misted a little as she went on. "And you know what? If he hadn't died, you and I would still only be passing acquaintances."

Dana reached out to hug the other woman. Next to Josh's touch, it was the best physical sensation she remembered sharing

with another human being since her childhood. "Am I really that bad?"

She dabbed at her eyes. "No, you're not that bad. If anything, that's the problem, Dana. You *think* you're bad, but you're not, sweetie. You are a special, warm, beautiful girl." When Dana smiled, Kathy added, "With a great rack!"

"You always have to mess stuff like this up, don't you?"

Kathy's grin took up her whole face, but her eyes were serious. "It's the only way I know to be, kid. All any of us can do is be ourselves. Once you learn that, I think you'll be all right."

* * * *

Josh leaned back in his seat and tried to block out the honking snores of the man in the window seat. On his way back home from a day trip to New York, Josh closed his eyes and did everything he could to avoid thinking about Rick's will, and what it might mean for him and Dana.

What he did think about was his night at the Plaza and the stupid mistake he'd made, or almost made. In an effort to prove to himself that he wasn't whipped, he'd decided to lure a beautiful woman into his bed, and then drop her without a second thought. After his round of business meetings had concluded, he'd immediately spotted a tall, willowy brunette with eyes as black as coal. Veruka was a model from the Ukraine.

At the bar, he'd downed three drinks with her, talked to her chest the whole time and even mispronounced her name. She'd still been willing to go up to his hotel suite.

He'd agonized over his decision. The woman was a stunner, bubbly and probably quite uninhibited where it counted. But during the whole exchange, he'd thought of nothing but Dana. How her eyes were prettier than the model's, and the way her fuller, rounder frame put Veruka's to shame.

After paying for her drinks, he'd thanked her for her company. A couple hours later, he took a cab ride to the airport and headed back home.

Now, as the plane prepared to set down, he scolded himself for his actions during the last few days. Chatting up a slutty model in a hotel was one thing. No matter what his intentions had been, he hadn't followed through. But the way he'd treated Dana, pounding away at her on the kitchen table and then leaving so rudely, was horrible. Not to mention dropping the bomb about her credit card bills, or lack thereof.

He'd been so insensitive, so crass, that it amazed even him. He wouldn't be surprised if Dana refused to look at him tomorrow, much less speak to him. And yet... It had been great—the feel of her body pressed against the table, clinging to his every thrust had excited him beyond anything he'd ever experienced. She'd begged for him to make love to her, and he'd obliged, though in hindsight, he wished he'd been gentler.

After he'd left, he'd felt like such a prick. And why shouldn't he have? He'd certainly acted like one.

If Rick had been alive to witness his older brother's downward spiral, he would probably have called him an asshole. It wouldn't have been the first time Josh had worked hard to earn that description. He just wished his brother was still around to bring him down to earth when he got a little out of control.

Is this what life without Rick will be like? Now that there was no one to be his conscience, would he suddenly slide into debauchery, alcoholism and decay? And if so, why not? Who the hell wants to do the right thing all the time, anyway? Sometimes, he just wanted to be mean, take stuff that didn't belong to him and break a heart or two.

It was certainly a seductive alternative, he decided. Just stop being a person, stop being real, and life was a lot easier. Truth be told, having a teenaged brother to look after was probably what saved him from that sort of lifestyle to begin with. But he'd chosen the road of responsibility, he supposed, because no one had ever been responsible for him. His drunken mother and absent father could not have cared less about either of their sons, and Josh decided that he'd be the one to give a damn.

But maybe he'd outgrown that role—maybe it had outgrown him. All he knew for certain was that from now on, he was going to begin taking care of his own needs for the first time in as long as he could remember.

What he needed at that moment was to take care of family business. No matter what Rick's will said, Josh was prepared to stand by it. Even if it meant washing his hands of Dana Lewis permanently.

* * * *

"Hurry up!" Kathy yelled. When Dana poked her head into the car, she frowned. "I'm thinking of not going."

"But you're already dressed! Get your butt in here right now. Go and get your man and your inheritance!"

Dana grinned and jumped in. "Thanks for all the rides. I'm looking at buying a used car by the end of the month."

"It's not a problem. You'll have to take a cab service back home though; I can't cut out of work without being read the riot act by Dobson."

"I know. The only reason I have today off is because she thinks I have a doctor's appointment."

Kathy grinned. "Why does she think you have a doctor's appointment?"

"When she asked if this absence had something to do with the car accident, I told her it did," Dana blushed. "Then she said that my health is of major importance, that I should always keep up with it."

"You're good, and you didn't even have to lie!" Kathy said, with admiration in her voice. She eased up on the gas, coming to a complete stop in front of the attorney's office. "Get out of here!"

A few minutes later, Dana sat in the lobby of Glassman, Raye and Cohen and waited to be buzzed in. She was dressed in the most expensive suit she owned, a two-piece black pants suit she'd bought at Ann Taylor, marked way down.

The longer she waited, the more anxious she felt, and a few times she thought about calling a taxi service and running out of there before the fireworks could start. Frankly, she was wishing she hadn't shown up at all. Not only was she losing half a day of work, but there was also her anxiety to consider. She hadn't slept a wink in the last week, and she could barely keep her eyes open.

Her eyes darted around the drab taupe office suite. From her seat to the left of the glass doors, she saw every person who entered and exited. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched

for a tall man with sandy hair and unbelievably toned arms to enter, but after ten minutes, there was still no sign of Josh.

Right about the time she started to feel antsy, the young receptionist leaned forward, her giant, over-tanned bosom peeking out of her lavender blouse. "You may go in now, Miss Lewis."

"Thank you." She approached the door, her throat clicking when she tried to clear it. Where was Josh? Had he decided not to come?

"Miss Lewis?" A short, round man with dyed black hair stood in front of the enormous conference table. "I'm Marvin Glassman."

She shook his hand and sat in the comfortable, grey swivel chair next to him. "I almost didn't come," she admitted, running a hand over the loose bun at the nape of her neck.

"That would have been disappointing," a voice from the other end of the long table said. Dana jumped, her heart fluttering in recognition. "Josh? You've been here the whole time?"

"Mr. Glassman and I had other business to talk about, so I came a bit early," he explained. His gaze held hers for a moment before lowering to scan the rest of her ripe body. "You're looking well, Dana."

"So are you," she replied without thinking. It wasn't a lie. He'd slicked back his slightly too-long hair and his chiseled face reaped the benefits. She quickly looked away from him, turning her gaze on the elderly Mr. Glassman, where it was safe.

"Are we ready to begin?" Glassman asked, fiddling with the papers in front of him.

"I am," Josh said.

Dana looked between the two men, her expression wary.

"Sure. I guess."

Glassman cleared his throat. "To get started—"

"Could you just skip the preliminaries?" Josh shifted impatiently. "Come on, Marvin, spare us the legal mumbo jumbo."

The attorney licked his lips nervously before turning to Dana. "Would that be all right with you, Miss Lewis?"

"Actually, I think I'd like that a lot," she said. "If you could just phrase everything in terms I'll understand, that would be great." She turned to look at Josh. He nodded gravely before looking back at the lawyer.

"Okay, then," he began. "Here's the way it goes, kids. Josh, you've been named executor of the will and will retain the bulk of the estate." He paused, turning to Dana. "However, Rick did set aside two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for you, Miss Lewis, to do with as you please."

"What?" She almost choked on the words. "What are you talking about?" She looked over at Josh. His face was a cold, hard mask.

The attorney spelled it out for her. "Mr. Chancellor's will bequeathed a quarter of a million dollars to you." He watched Dana's face fall. "Is there a problem?"

"I don't understand. Rick and I were good friends, but why would he leave me that kind of money?"

"It's not up to any of us to question a person's—"

"But I *am* questioning it. It just doesn't make sense!" Dana felt dizzy. What the attorney had just said...it couldn't be right, could it? She turned to see Josh's eyes narrowed on her. "This is insane, Josh. I didn't even know Rick had that kind of money. I don't want it!"

He stood stiffly and moved toward the door. She watched him helplessly, too stunned by the look of pure hate she'd seen on his face to speak again.

"Josh," Marvin Glassman climbed to his feet. "Son, is there something wrong?"

Dana's heart sank when he stopped to look over his shoulder. His mouth worked, his jaw clenching and grinding, but no words came out. Balling his fists at his sides, he bolted from the room.

Dana's eyes filled with tear. "Please tell me this is some kind of a mistake, a joke."

“The will is legal and binding. No mistakes, no jokes.” The older man stood and briefly touched her shoulder. “It would appear that Rick’s final wishes have caused great grief, and I’m sorry for that. My advice to you, Miss Lewis, is to go home and

sleep on this development; perhaps all will seem clearer when you wake.”

Though she nodded, Dana felt she might never sleep again. On the taxi ride back to her apartment, the look on Josh’s face kept replaying in her mind. *He thinks I knew about the money, and now he hates me.*

Chapter 12

Josh's foot was heavy on the gas as he careened into the two-car garage that housed his Jeep. The garage had also been home to Rick's grey Acura Legend, the car he'd died in. Now the Jeep sat each night by itself, as lonely as Josh himself.

In the shower, he washed the gel out of his hair and pondered the day's events. Rick had left Dana the two hundred fifty thousand dollars he'd gifted to him—a shock he was still reeling from. He remembered the look on her face, the slackness of her mouth as she stumbled for words. He wanted, no needed, to believe so badly that her shock was genuine, that she hadn't planned this all along, but would he be a fool if he did?

Before she'd ever met the Chancellor boys, the woman had had serious financial problems, problems that wouldn't go away given her education level and current job. Had she conveniently lucked in to her friendship with his kind and accommodating younger brother? Or had she used her considerable charms to bait him into making her life a little easier?

Josh scrubbed his lower body, angry with himself that the image of her still aroused him so much. She'd inspired so much devotion in Rick that he'd been willing to leave her everything he had in the world. But he wasn't much better. Wasn't he the one who'd made good on all her debts, freeing her up to stay the next three months rent-free in her apartment and totally eradicating her credit card debt? Yep, he was as gullible as Rick had been, maybe even more so.

While many would have said that Josh had gotten more in the deal—sex so mind-blowing a man could be tempted to

literally write home about it—he wondered if this assessment was really true. Sure, Rick's love for Dana had gone unrequited right until the day he'd died, but at least he'd been able to think of what might have been, what his future with her might be if he'd hung in there long enough. But Josh wasn't allowed that sort of hope. The bond he'd thought they'd developed had started, heated up and sputtered to a stop at an alarming pace, despite their attraction.

What made things worse were the dreams. They were incessant, making it nearly impossible for him to get a full night's sleep. There was the one he'd had many times, and he always woke from it painfully, his raging hard-on so insistent, that it threatened to jerk itself off without his help. Instead, he'd take things in hand, rubbing himself raw, thinking of Dana's legs and breasts the whole time, until he came hard enough to finally go back to sleep. If all he could manage was an average orgasm, then he'd usually be up the rest of the night, watching bad TV.

Sometimes, he felt he knew *too much* about her, despite her reticence and solitary nature. Hiring Berk to snoop on her had a lot to do with that, but even if he hadn't been privy to the files documenting her personal, medical and financial history, he knew her large, brown eyes would still have hinted at the secrets she tried so desperately to hide.

Her eyes...they were the problem, dammit. They were why he wanted to believe she was as ignorant about Rick's new will as he'd been. Hell, when the kid first had it drafted, all he had to leave was a beat-up guitar and a spotty Spider-Man comic book collection. It was Josh who'd convinced Rick to draft his last will and testament.

Life was short. Their mother had died in her late forties, leaving her sons nothing but whiskey bottles and bitterness. After he had started making money, Josh was determined that he'd have his finances set up in a way that left his younger sibling able to support himself, that he'd have some sort of legacy. It had never occurred to him that Rick would be the first one to pass on.

After putting in a few hours of work in his home office, he decided to turn in early. His heart told him he had a decision to make, and sleep might be the best way to process all the information swimming around his brain.

Whatever he decided, Dana Lewis would be the first to know.

* * * *

"You don't look well, Dana," Dr. Goldfarb said from behind his thick glasses. "In fact, I think you looked better the day you left the hospital."

"Life has been a little complicated lately," she admitted. "But I'm doing all right, I guess." She fidgeted during her first medical checkup since the accident, hoping to leave with good news. "My headaches are gone, at least."

"That's great, Dana. But what are you planning to do about the complications you mentioned?"

"What do you mean, doctor?"

He cleared his throat. "You said life is complicated. What steps can you take to resolve these complications?" The physician's tone was paternal, if serious.

"If it was that easy, Dr. Goldfarb, it wouldn't be complicated." She shrugged and tried to banish away thoughts of Rick's will, Josh and the quarter of a million worries that now tormented her dreams. "I'll be fine."

* * * *

Later, as she sipped at a bowl of soup, she wondered just how fine she would be, and if she'd be able to make it through.

A couple days after the reading of the will, Dana felt she'd come to a decision about the money, and about Josh. Tired of the tension she felt, and the suspicion she knew he was dealing with, she felt the path she had chosen would be the best for everyone involved.

Sure, Josh Chancellor had stolen her heart, but he'd done so using deceit and the hypnotic effect he had over her. From the beginning, he'd never really trusted her, she realized. Instead, he'd used his money and connections to snoop into the private

spaces of her life to gain power over her. When he found out about her debt, he'd used that information to try to lay claim to her, to treat her as if she was no better than a cute puppy in need of a home.

But how could she have expected better when she'd been so happy to accept his generosity? Right after Rick's death and her eviction, she'd been at her loneliest and most desperate. She'd practically begged him to buy her, to own her and make her life easier. Hell, even after she'd found out that he'd hired a private detective to snoop on her, she'd sulked only a few days before tumbling back into his bed. He'd treated her like a whore, an easy mark, because she'd acted like one, she decided.

But now, she was prepared to stand tough, to really take care of herself and gain control over her life. Her first step would be paying back the twelve thousand dollars Josh had secretly used to wipe out her debt. But how?

She thought about Rick's bequest then, and her stomach trembled. At the reading of the will, Josh had been as surprised as she when they learned his brother had left her a cool quarter of a million dollars. He'd been even more shocked when she'd said she didn't want the money. Didn't he know her well enough to see how humiliating this all was for her? She was being bailed out again. And much like before, she didn't want it. She thought she would rather die before ever she ever touched that money.

Dana remembered the curious way his eyes had flashed in the conference room, how he had looked at her as if she had known the whole time about Rick's will. In that moment, she realized Josh assumed that her whole friendship with his brother had been built around Rick's trust fund; and there was nothing she could say that would change his mind.

She wondered if he would contest the will, pulling out all the stops to make her life miserable. Even if he did try to keep her from receiving the money, it wouldn't matter; the look etched into his handsome face when he'd heard the news had said it all, hadn't it?

Yet his stricken expression hadn't stopped her from waiting for her phone to ring. And each time it did, she'd jumped, hoping with all she had that it was him. But he hadn't called, and now she suspected he never would.

Dana moved to her nightstand, rifling through its contents until her hand slid over the envelope. She trembled as she read the words, her gaze caressing hungrily over the documents that stood between her and the six numbers that could afford her a new start. She'd held on to those papers for days now, reading the legal language so many times that she now knew the terms by heart. All she had to do was sign, and if Josh didn't stand in her way, the money would be hers! *This is the key to your freedom*, her mind whispered.

If only that were true. Accepting the money would certainly change her life, but not necessarily for the better. She felt that spending even a penny of it would be like admitting to Josh that he'd been right about her all along. From the beginning, he'd made it clear he thought she needed someone to take care of her. Why not let it be one of the Chancellor brothers?

Smiling even as she allowed her dreams of security to slip away, she sat on her bed and cleared off a corner of her cluttered nightstand. Breathing deeply, she grabbed a pen and began to write.

The high treble of her doorbell startled her. She gritted her teeth. It was probably Kathy coming over to try to get her out of her bed. Well, it was *her* party, and she'd sulk if she damn well wanted to. But when she opened the door, Dana was truly startled when she saw who was there.

Josh.

He stood in her doorway, his tall frame filling up the space, hulking in his extreme masculinity. She immediately noted the bloodshot whites surrounding his ordinarily magnificent green eyes and, after a moment, caught the faint scent of whiskey seeping through his pores. He peeled back his lips to smile, but there was no humor or good feeling behind it. Josh Chancellor

was a very angry man, and his rage was a heat-seeking missile pointed in her direction.

Reflexively, she tried to close the door, but not before a shiver had gone down her spine. His large, steel-toed foot burst through before the door could smack closed, and Dana released the handle, backing up with a gasp. "What do you want?"

"You," he said, with a devilish gleam in his eyes. "But life seems to be conspiring to keep us apart. And now that you're about to come into a lot of money, I don't suppose you'd want to see me, anyway."

He'd finally come to her, just like in her fantasies, and this is how he acted? She stuck her chin out, her face stubborn, her stance proud. "You're damn right, I don't want to see you," she barked, a feeling of power surging through her. *That a girl, Dana. Take your power back.* "We have nothing else to say to each other."

Josh slammed into the apartment, his face red. His broad arms spread in a shrugging gesture. "Now, why don't I believe that, Dana?"

"Because you're a jerk. Or maybe it's because you think you can get anything you want."

"Can't I?" he wheedled. "I wanted you. And I got you, didn't I?" He advanced on her, his usually smooth stride slow and pantherlike. "But I couldn't keep you, could I?" His eyes caressed her face, his expression wistful, despite the heat of his words. Soon, they trailed over her full breasts, her red tank top offering no protection against his searing stare.

"Get out!" she spat. She felt nauseated as he stared at her, disgusted. But simmering beneath the surface was her aching desire, and her attraction to him trampled forth, making her feel weak. She had to get away from him. Even as she turned to walk away, leaving him to stand alone in her tiny living room, she felt the electricity of his body as he silently followed her into the bedroom. Again, she tried to close the door on him, and once more he easily stormed through, intent on having his say.

"Please, Josh, just leave!"

"Not until you hear me out, dammit."

"I don't want to hear anything *you* have to say!" Her voice sounded shrill even to her own ears, but she couldn't help it. "Let's just forget about all that's happened."

"I can't." He strode across the room, grabbing her by the arm. "Do you think I'm going to let you walk out of my life like this?"

Her face was stony, though her insides were jelly. "Let me go."

"Not so damned fast. You have to let me explain why I acted the way I did."

"When, Josh? Which of our misunderstandings are you going to explain away this time? What kind of explanation can you give me for having someone pry into my private life? Do you know what it cost me to forgive you for that? All of my pride!" Her eyes glistened with rage. "Then, you pay off my creditors, after I told you I'd handle my own damn finances, thank you very much! You said you'd let me make my own way, but you never had any intention of letting that happen. You lied to me, Josh, you have been lying the whole time." She laughed bitterly. "Then you act as if I'm some sort of floozy, preying on you and Rick! You're the one who's preyed on me!"

His hand squeezed at her wrist, digging into the soft flesh, causing her to whimper. She tried to wrench free, but his grip only hardened. "You're going to listen to me, Dana."

"And if I don't? What are you going to do?" Even as she asked this, the look in his jade eyes hardened and he set his handsome jaw in a rigid line. She could no longer keep up the brave façade. "You're hurting me," she whispered. "Please, let go."

Instead, his mouth crashed onto hers, taking her breath away. Tasting the alcohol on his breath, she recoiled and tried to pull away from his heated embrace. Yet the fire in his kiss seared her soul, causing her heart to palpitate and thud into her shoes. She tried to fight the onslaught of emotions and raw sexuality that tore through her femaleness, the part of her that could get lost inside of him. She knew if she didn't, she'd surrender to his

touch. She'd be his fool once again, and if that happened, she'd let Josh get away with anything.

She turned her face away from him, desperate to escape his scorching kiss, but could only shudder as his mouth followed gamely behind hers; reigniting the flames she was trying to put out. She gasped as she felt his hardness seeking to get closer. She wrenched away again, pulling away so hard, that she tumbled upon the bed.

Josh followed, grabbing at her legs, pulling them wide so that he fit snugly into the inviting V of her thighs. His lips stole kiss after kiss from her and Dana wept, her helplessness matching his macho desperation inch by inch.

Briefly, he pulled back, only to kiss away her salty tears. "I'm sorry, Dana."

"Stop it... You've been drinking, I can smell it, Josh. You're acting like a brute and that scares me."

He did stop, his expression clearing. His face immediately softened and he seemed frightened by the depth of his passion. "I didn't mean for that to happen, baby. God, I would kill myself before I ever hurt you."

"The last guy who said that to me left me in a world of hurt and in debt up to my eyeballs." She regretted the words as she as she'd said them, but it was far too late to take them back.

"Someone else ran up your debt?"

"Yep. I was seventeen and stupid. I thought I was in love. That is until he stole my credit card and used it all over town." Her eyes glistened as she relived the shocking event. "He'd used it all over town. No one even questioned that it was a woman's credit card, and I didn't find out until it was much too late."

"Why didn't you say anything, Dana? Why'd you let me think you'd messed up your credit?" He leaned in close, searching her face.

"Would it have mattered? What's done is done, Josh!" Her eyes shone as she looked up into his face and her heart pounded with her surge of confidence. "Besides, you don't care about me. You don't respect me. This whole relationship has been nothing

but a crock. *You've* used *me* from the beginning, and *that* hurts, dammit!"

Taken aback by her strong words, Josh's grip loosened. Dana wriggled free, sliding upward into the softness of the pillows. He looked at her for a long time, his eyes sober, and his mouth slack with shock. He rubbed his hand over the day's worth of beard that spotted his rugged chin, before replying. "You think I've been using you? That I don't respect you? Woman, what the hell are you on?" He was incredulous; the anger he'd stormed in with was now replaced with sarcastic barbs. "I may be a lot of things, but I'm nothing like that jock who stole from you. I'd give you the world, if I could."

Ignoring him, she picked up the envelope she'd placed on her nightstand before he'd rung her bell. "I was going to send this through the mail, but since you're already here, you might as well take it with you."

"What is it?"

"Open it and see."

His eyes were suspicious as his hands shredded the envelope's flap. Stunned realization clouded his face when he saw what it contained. "What the hell are you doing, Dana?"

She turned from him, her eyes focused on the window she'd looked out earlier. It'd be easier if she didn't have to look at him, she knew. *He's just too delicious*, she thought, wallowing in her own shallowness. *If I don't look at him, I'll be fine*. "I told you I didn't want Rick's money, and I meant it. Who are we fooling here, anyway? We both know the money is yours. So, I've refused it. If I could, I'd sign it over to you, but that'll probably involve a lot of time and paperwork."

"That money belonged to Rick." There was an edge to his voice. "I gave it to him because I wanted to, not because I had to, Dana. He was the only family I had left, and I wanted him to have a little fun with it, maybe travel, or continue his education."

"But he didn't." Her eyes burned and dampened, betraying her firm stance. "He never had a chance—"

"I gave Rick the money on his twenty-first birthday. I'd say he had a lot of chances in the last three years to spend it." Josh's voice was a whisper. "That's the real reason for my anger, Dana. Not because he'd left you the money, but that he'd never enjoyed a cent of it. That hurt me."

She was stunned. "I don't understand." She turned back to him, immediately softening as his hot gaze captured her eyes. "Why would he leave that money to me?"

This time, Josh's eyes grew moist, and he was forced to look away. "Isn't it obvious? He loved you, Dana. The money wasn't important to him." He sighed, his voice choked with emotion. "And it's not important to me. I want you to have it. Someone I love should be able to enjoy it."

He loves me?

Cursing her weakness, she reached out to him, leaning forward to grab his hand, which lay at his side, balled in a fist. "Well, it's not important to me, either." As she said the words, she realized, wholly and purely, that they were true. "I just wanted to pay you back for everything you've done for me."

"Do you really want to pay me back, Dana?"

"It'll take a long time, but I'll figure out a way—"

Josh's hand flexed beneath hers right before the rest of his body sailed into action. As easily as a cat might stretch, he turned to face her, sweeping her up close, mashing their bodies together. She could feel the hard thud of his heart against her breast, and she immediately grew wet with longing. "I said do you really want to pay me back, Dana?"

As the fine stubble on his top lip ran against her cheek and his hand gripped the nape of her neck, she knew she was done. She wouldn't, no couldn't, fight him anymore. Lord, she didn't want to. "Tell me how," she whimpered, her body heating up against the rigid muscles of his chest. "Please, tell me how."

"First, admit you're in love with me, that you want to be with me." She tried to look away, but he palmed her chin and forced eye contact. "I, Josh Chancellor, freely and completely admit to being crazily, miserably in love with Dana Lewis."

"I feel the same." She shook as the words escaped her lips.

"We belong together, Dana. Promise me you won't try to push me away again."

Tears cut off her vision, blurring his gorgeous face. Before she could wipe her eyes, Josh reached out and did it for her. Dana gasped and trembled, her emotions were at an all-time high. She looked him in the eye. "I love you so much it scares me," she admitted. "I...I need you. I don't want to leave you, but sometimes, it scares me too much to try to stay."

"You'll stay," he said, not unkindly. "I don't want to play the Neanderthal here, but I am staking my claim. You're not getting rid of me because you belong with me."

Now that she'd finally said the words, it was like she was free. She no longer feared the consequences; she only cared that he knew how she felt. "I've always wanted you, from the first day I saw you. After that, there was never anybody else."

"I know the feeling." He stopped to sprinkle light kisses all over her face, hairline and neck. "I won't lie to you, my body knew way before my heart did. But when my heart and flesh got in sync, there was no better feeling." Kissing her hand, his voice wavered a bit. "Finding out that you and Rick weren't together was a real shock to my system. I felt horrible for wanting you the whole time; but I think I felt worse for being relieved that the two of you had only been friends."

At a loss for words, she hugged him, hanging from his neck. *This felt too good. Too good. But could it last?*

He beamed at her then, truly beautiful, his perfect features a sculpture of epic, manly proportions. "See how easy that was? And to compensate you for your honesty, I'll consider our account closed if you make love to me. Right here, right now. I've missed your sweet kisses, your fine ass, and the way you look when you're riding my face."

She giggled. "You're the cheapest creditor I've ever had!"

"And you've got the tightest—"

"How dare you!" she interrupted his sex-laced words, slapping playfully at him. "Sir, I am a lady."

Josh shrugged, the delicious glint in his eyes exciting her all the more. "You've never seen yourself having an orgasm. The faces you make definitely ain't ladylike."

His last remark gave her an idea. "How about we pull out a mirror so I can see these faces?" As she spoke, she lifted the material of her red tank, molding her juicy, wanton breasts in her hands, working the peach-tipped nipples into stiff, lip-ready points. "But first, Mr. Chancellor, I want you to step forward to claim your prize." She climbed to her knees and rubbed her hands together like a villain in a silent-era movie. If she'd had a mustache, she would have twirled it.

Josh stood at attention, pulling down his pants to show that he was ready to play. His erection surged forward, enormous and fat with wanting, already dripping with anticipation. Dana wet her mouth with the slick pinkness of her tongue before parting her lips into a huge, perfect 'O.'

Epilogue

Josh knocked on the bathroom door. "Dana, what are you doing in there?" He was still getting used to sharing his bathroom with her. Though there were three other perfectly good bathrooms in the house, Dana had laid claim to his. In the two months she'd lived with him, her stuff had popped up everywhere.

Not that he would have ever complained. There was nothing like waking up to the feel of her soft flesh beside him, or the thick, dark cloak of her hair upon his chest. Now that she was finally his, he made sure to tell her how much he loved her every day. Each time her bow-shaped mouth spoke in agreement, he realized how truly lucky he was.

The day before they moved in together, Josh signed Rick's bequest back over to Dana. "Fair is fair. Rick left this to you because he wanted you to have it. When the lawyers sign off on it, and the money comes through, I want you to put it into your account for safekeeping."

Dana had looked scared. "Oh yeah, because I'm so good at taking care of money," she'd said, thinking of her not-so-distant past. "Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with it, anyway."

"That's the best part, Dana. It's yours until you do decide. Don't you have any dreams? Isn't there something you've always wanted to do, or someplace you want to go?"

She had shrugged, her face paling. "The reason I took the job at the childcare center was so I could be around kids. I guess I've always been interested in teaching, but since I never finished college, it wasn't an option."

After she'd received her inheritance, Dana enrolled at the University of Maryland.

He knocked again. "What are you doing in there?"

"You don't want to know," she called back, her voice shaky.

Immediately, concern mobilized him into action. "You okay, baby? I'm coming in."

"Don't, Josh—"

Josh was already in the door, ignoring her protests. He saw immediately that she was ill; the evidence of this floated greenly in the toilet bowl. He grabbed a hand towel and bent to place it to her lips. Her pallor disturbed him, and he wondered uneasily about the seafood dinner they'd enjoyed the night before. Was she suffering from food poisoning? "What's wrong, Dana?"

She groaned and shook her head. "You're a smart guy, Chancellor, figure it out."

The mischievous gleam in her eyes caught him off guard. "So, you're not sick?"

"I'm beyond sick, Josh. Did you see what's in the toilet?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Yeah. Let's flush that." After he did, he gripped her hand and they stood. "Well, if you're not sick, what then?"

Dana's smile was bittersweet. "I know this is bad timing," she began. "It's probably the worst, since we're just getting used to living with each other..."

Josh's heart thumped. "Wait. Wait a minute; I think I know what you're about to say—"

"And I know you probably don't want to hear it." She stopped, perplexed, as he raced from the bathroom. "Josh? Where are you going?"

A moment later, he reappeared in the doorway, smiling from ear to ear. "I'm sorry I didn't let you finish. Go ahead."

Shrugging, she placed her arms over her chest and looked at her feet. "I'm late, Josh. Actually, I missed my period two weeks ago," she admitted. Her face was beet-red. "I've been putting off buying a pregnancy test, hoping that maybe I'd missed my period because of, well, stress or something." Finally, she met his eyes,

and Josh's heart broke to see the fear in them. "I'm pretty sure that I'm pregnant."

"How'd this happen?"

Her answer was defensive. "How do you think it happened, Mr. Horny? I know I wasn't doing it alone."

He laughed and stepped before her. "And you won't be alone now." Sinking to his knees, he produced the sky-blue ring box he'd gone back into the bedroom to get. "I was going to ask you anyway, but now that you're having my baby, I guess it's time to get a move on."

Dana's hands flew to her mouth. "Are you serious?"

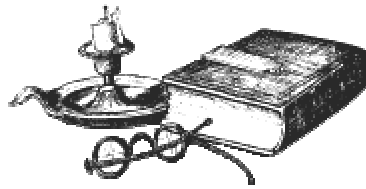
"Serious as a gorgeous pregnant woman hacking up her breakfast." He opened the box, revealing the delicate, square-cut solitaire platinum ring he'd picked out a week earlier. "Will you marry me?"

Her eyes glistened. "Sure, Chancellor. Just let me brush my teeth first."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Saint escaped into her first romance novel when she was twelve years old, and still reads several each week, nearly twenty years later. Stephanie lives in the Northeast with her family.

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