



The
REBOUND
GUY

*Jennifer
Colgan*

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The Rebound Guy

Jennifer Colgan

Dedication

To the Romance Divas for all your support and encouragement. Divas rock!

Chapter One

Lauren's hand shook as she reached up to ring Eric's doorbell. The faint tremor should have served as a warning, a yellow light of sorts, to slow down and rethink her headlong leap into a whole new set of problems, but it didn't. In fact, the frisson of fear and uncertainty coursing through her body only seemed to make her more determined to get what she wanted tonight.

She took a deep breath of humid night air. As her chest expanded, her half-unbuttoned silk blouse rubbed against her scandalously braless breasts. She remembered why she'd come here and that gave her the courage to thrust her finger the final two inches and stab at the glowing button on the doorframe.

So much for heeding a warning. Lauren didn't believe in fate anyway—or signs from above, or below, or anywhere else. If she had, she certainly wouldn't be here at her best friend's front door, naked beneath her tight black jeans and ready to plunge into moral bankruptcy.

The bell chimed somewhere in the depths of Eric's apartment, and Lauren's nerve wavered once again. What if he turned her down?

Her heart fled to a tight spot just below her rib cage when the door flew open. She hadn't counted on him looking this good. Maybe the useless tears she'd shed over Mark's betrayal had heightened her senses. Of course Eric Reynolds was attractive, but tonight his dark blue eyes seemed more intense, his black hair darker. He wore faded jeans and a blue, button-down shirt open at the collar to reveal a triangle of smooth, tanned chest. He was barefoot, and he looked sexy and sleepy, like she'd woken him from dozing in front of the TV.

She bit her lower lip and tossed her hair, hoping the move made her look alluring rather than spastic.

“Hi.” Did her voice sound husky and sensual, or would he think she had a case of laryngitis?

Lauren hooked her thumbs in her belt loops and tugged a little so the waistband of her jeans dropped just enough to reveal some skin beneath the hem of her blouse. Would Eric notice?

“Hey.” He gave her a quizzical stare, one eyebrow up, a half-smile curving his suddenly very kissable lips.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” *At half-past eight on a Tuesday night? Not likely.*

Eric squinted at her as though he didn’t quite understand the question. His gaze traveled over her shoulder as if he expected to find her posse of girlfriends hiding in the bushes. Tara and Roxy would kill her if they knew she’d come here after ducking out of the pity party they’d thrown in her honor. Being cheated on by Mark, her boyfriend of eight months, was supposed to make her depressed, resolute perhaps, and mad as hell, not lusty and reckless and hot for the only man on the face of the planet she could trust not to lie to her.

“Interrupt what?”

“Good.” Relief made her lightheaded. What would she have done if Eric had been with someone?

“Are you all right?” His smile faded, replaced with grim concern. The only time she’d showed up at his place without calling first was the day her parents announced their impending divorce. At twenty-five, she should have taken the news with maturity and aplomb. Instead, she’d run to Eric to cry on his shoulder because her family was breaking up.

“I’m fine,” she replied, taking a bold step forward. The move put her directly into his personal space. Warmth radiated from his chest when she placed her hands there. When she leaned close, the tempting vanilla spice scent of his aftershave tickled her nose. “I need a favor.”

He seemed to gulp for air, but to his credit, he held his ground. He didn’t step back to put distance between them.

“You know I’d...do anything for you.”

Lauren stifled a giggle at the brief hesitation in his response. Eric’s bad-boy good looks and his athlete’s physique hid the soul of an altar boy. He meant he’d do anything that wasn’t illegal or dishonest. That’s what she loved about him. Eric was straight up. He didn’t lie and he would never cheat on his girlfriend the way Mark had. *And* he was currently single.

“*Anything?*” Lauren licked her lips as she traced the line of his jaw with her finger.

“What’s going on, Laur? Are you sure you’re all right?” He put his hands on her shoulders and the heat of his touch sent her spiraling into desire for sweaty sex and sweet, sweet revenge.

She wanted revenge against Mark for letting her find him this afternoon cock-deep in a blonde bimchette. She wanted to feel important to someone, cherished and sexy and safe. Eric could do that for her. She needed him to do that for her.

Fear of rejection lasted all of two seconds. Her tumultuous thoughts conjured a particularly vivid memory of last summer’s Fourth of July beach party. Brilliant fireworks over the bay, an oyster bar and an extra large beach towel spread on the coarse sand had led to a moment of soul searching she still hadn’t forgotten.

A single kiss from Eric had sent her senses rocketing up among the roman candles bursting overhead. For a moment, as she’d absorbed the sweet taste of saltwater taffy from his lips, she’d wanted him inside her.

It never happened. The moment fled too soon. Their friends, marching down from the rented beach house in a drunken conga line, had shattered the spell with an off key rendition of Billy Joel’s “Just the Way You Are”.

The next morning, Eric had feigned amnesia about the whole evening. Lauren, ever the self-analyst, realized it was his way of letting her know, without embarrassing either of them, that the kiss had meant nothing. It had been just a sweet moment between two friends, nothing more.

Until now.

Now she drew on that memory to give her courage. It had sustained her during the long cab ride to his apartment from the restaurant where she'd left her two best girlfriends. She turned that memory into the full-fledged belief that she needed Eric now. Tonight. All the way.

"I want you. I want you to make love to me, right now."

Wet dreams don't get much better than this, Eric thought as he lowered his arms and brought Lauren's sumptuous body close to his. She kicked his front door shut, and the sound galvanized him, waking the skeptical part of his brain.

Lauren wanted him. Lauren James. His best friend. Had the world turned upside down when he wasn't looking?

Lauren dropped her purse on the floor and pressed her body against him. Together they stumbled back a step. She gazed up at him, her luminous green eyes dilated to huge pools of endless black. Her plump lower lip beckoned him and he leaned in close. His gaze plunged into the deep valley of her cleavage visible in the open neckline of her blouse and his mouth went dry.

She smelled like sultry sex perfume and strawberry shampoo. Would she taste like peach lip gloss and coconut rum the way she had that one reckless moment last July when he'd kissed her and indulged in the fantasy they might be good together as more than just friends?

"Don't say no, Eric. I know you want me. Don't you?" Did she look hopeful, or desperate? God, did it matter?

"A favor..." He repeated the words as he dipped his head into the space between her neck and shoulder. He took in the alluring scent of her skin and thought about planting his lips on the pulse point below her jaw.

"I need you, Eric. I need you to make love to me tonight."

"You're a little drunk, aren't you?" asked the good Eric Reynolds, the corporate security consultant who spent his days building computer firewalls and tweaking virus protection software. *Drunk and horny*, thought the bad Eric, the one who hated being the guy all the women

turned to for moral support because he was always honest and trustworthy.

Women liked bad boys. He'd been reminded of that time and time again when his girlfriends left him for ex-cons, compulsive gamblers and rock musicians with coke habits.

Good guys finished last. That was his motto.

"I had one frozen margarita with the girls. I'm not drunk, but I took a cab here since Tara was driving." As she spoke, Lauren lowered her lips to his chest, to that little hollow at the base of his throat, and licked him there. He groaned as his balls went tight.

Instant hard-on. Bad Eric grabbed her ass and squeezed, pushing her pelvis against the growing bulge of his erection.

Lauren smiled up at him, letting him know she had him right where she wanted him.

The good Eric demanded to know what brought this on. Lauren James was one of those nice girls. She wasn't loose or slutty. She didn't bang every guy she met just for kicks. Therefore there had to be a reason for her sudden...attack.

They'd met at one of Roxy's legendary Christmas parties four years ago and, like ninety percent of the women Eric met, she'd immediately turned to him for advice on how to deal with her current boyfriend. The Neanderthal hadn't wanted her to have any friends he hadn't picked. She'd dumped the guy on Eric's advice, and they'd been friends ever since. Up until this moment, that meant Sunday afternoon matinees, lunch when his job took him to see clients in her office building, and all the requisite birthday, holiday and what-the-hell-it's-Friday parties thrown by their large circle of mutual friends. Except for that Fourth of July kiss, they'd never even considered...well, that wasn't true. He'd considered quite a lot of things.

"Have you got condoms?" Her breathy question came with an expert flick of her wrist that caused a button to pop off his shirt. She giggled. "Sorry."

"No problem."

“Condoms?” she asked again.

“As in, more than one?”

She gave him a wicked grin and spread his shirt open down to his navel. Her hot tongue branded a line of fire down his sternum. She licked her lips and when she looked up at him, her eyes smoldered. “How many have you got?”

A mental inventory told him he could dig up at least four. “Laur, are you sure you—” The good Eric’s question was lost in a heart-stopping kiss. She drew his tongue into her mouth, playfully at first, then with a sensual determination. She held herself to him with one hand, fingers laced through his hair. Her other hand eased down and popped the final button of his shirt, then grazed naughtily into his jeans to tease at the waistband of his briefs.

When she broke the kiss, good Eric was a memory. Bad Eric was ready to give her everything she wanted and then some. *After all, that’s what friends are for.*

Chapter Two

She should have chickened out by now. She should have come to her senses and apologized for making a fool of herself, then asked Eric to make her some coffee and call her a cab.

Instead, she tore open his fly, reached into his Jockeys and curled her trembling fingers around his erection.

Thank God he had one! What if she hadn't been able to get him hot for her?

After all, she wasn't his type. Eric liked blondes, and her naturally brown hair looked better with an auburn rinse. His girlfriends ran to the tall side, and Lauren had to stand on her toes to kiss him. Maybe that was a plus, though. It felt so good, sliding her body up over his, feeling the toned ridges of his abs under her eager hands. Maybe she wasn't his dream girl, but she was enough to get him going. He'd told her once she was cute—not beautiful, not sexy as hell like she wanted to be now—but cute. Was that enough?

Right now she wanted to be fuckable, as fuckable to Eric as that blonde had been to Mark.

Revenge. The word came back to her as she moved her hand along the silky skin of his cock. When she tightened her grip on his hot shaft, he made no move to stop her. Encouraged, she wrapped herself around his lean body and pulled him toward the couch.

This was about getting back at Mark. Tit for tat. Not that it would matter to him. If Mark knew she was seducing Eric only hours after catching him in the act with someone else, he probably wouldn't care.

The bastard had seemed so shocked when she'd walked in on him and his Tuesday afternoon hump buddy going at it on his couch. Why had he given her a key to his apartment if he hadn't thought she might show up unannounced once in a while?

"Wait-wait—" Eric foiled her attempt to get them horizontal on the couch by pivoting her hips against his and keeping them both upright. "Not here."

"Where?" Her breath caught. Was he expecting someone?

"The bedroom. Let's do this right." He surprised her by capturing her mouth in another kiss. A kiss that made her feel wonderful and began to melt the lump of ice that had formed around her heart that afternoon. He tangled his hand in her hair and dove into her, his tongue claiming hers, fierce and relentless.

Lauren's heart raced and something deep inside her ignited, sending a bolt of liquid heat to her core. With each thrust of his tongue, the sensation rose higher from her womb to her heart, infusing her with an urgency she'd never felt before.

"Eric, I need—" She gasped the words between kisses as he steered her around the couch and into the darkened bedroom.

"Whatever you need..." he whispered, pushing her onto his bed. He lowered himself over her and worked the buttons of her blouse open with one hand, exposing her breasts in the dim light of his LED alarm clock. The red glow made her feel wanton and sexy, and any thoughts of what she needed to tell him fled when his hands spread her shirt open all the way.

He took one taut nipple into his mouth, and she forgot everything. The pressure of his lips on her flesh made every muscle in her body tense. She held his head, trapping him against her to keep the sensation of his hot tongue on her skin. Her breath came fast and shallow as he rolled her hard nipple against his tongue. She felt the pull of it all the way down to her clit.

“Eric—” She moaned his name and sighed when he slid one hand into her jeans and found the hot, wet spot between her legs. The intrusion into her slick folds made her arch toward him, seeking more.

“No underwear?” He rasped the words into her ear as he circled her swollen clit with one finger. The teasing pleasure of it made her pant.

“They’re in my purse. I...took them off in the ladies room at...Houlihan’s. I wanted to...be ready for you.”

Words alone had never made Eric come, but these almost did the trick. He’d never heard anything sexier in his life, and he couldn’t believe it was Lauren saying them. He couldn’t believe it was Lauren lying beneath him, wet and primed for him. He had to be dreaming.

Of course, it certainly wasn’t the first time he’d played this scenario in his mind. Fourth of July he’d been lying with her on the warm sand, feeling her tremble each time another fireworks display cracked the air above them. He wanted her then, wanted to feel her body shudder when she came and hear her whisper his name as he claimed her.

And he’d hated himself in the morning, both for chickening out after that one phenomenal kiss and for considering she might want more from him. Mark Dalton had been following her around all weekend like a love-struck puppy, and Eric had even encouraged the big lout to ask Lauren on a date. If Mark hadn’t been called back to his law firm to deal with some client’s probate emergency, *he’d* have been sharing the beach towel with Lauren instead of Eric.

Eric raised his head, found Lauren’s eyes in the darkness. “I want you,” he said, all giddy “I’m-about-to-get-laid” thoughts aside. With his hand in her pants, his fingers buried in her heat, he probably didn’t need to say it, but he wanted her to know his head was in the game, not just his dick. “I want you, but I want to know what’s really going on here.”

She closed her eyes and bit her lower lip in that way that had begun to drive him insane with lust. He wanted to bite that lip, suck it into his mouth and taste it again. She reached for him and he took her into his arms. Together they rolled to the side so they lay chest to chest, one of

his knees between hers resting tight at the apex of her thighs where damp heat seeped through her jeans.

“It’s over with Mark,” she said, the words coming out in a breathless tumble. “Eric, please don’t turn me away tonight.”

As if he could. He kissed her hard and trailed her slick moisture up her belly. “I won’t turn you away. I just want you to be sure.”

“I’m sure, Eric. I’m sure.”

Together they unzipped her jeans and Eric slid his hand down inside again. Lauren moaned and writhed as he pressed his palm against her mons. Anticipation had made her hotter than she’d ever been. The sensation of his long fingers sliding over her clit and into her sex made her come.

Her inner muscles clenched around his fingers, tightening deliciously as he inched upward. She bucked against him, urging him deeper. She cried out in frustration as hot waves of pleasure broke over her.

“I wanted you,” she whispered and turned her face to his chest. She kissed the smooth skin, tasting his heartbeat and his salty sweat on her lips. “I wanted you inside me.”

“It’s okay. We’ve only just begun.” Eric punctuated his words with a deep thrust that renewed the pulsing inside her. She responded with a startled gasp and clung to him, desperate for more.

“You feel good against me.” Eric’s whisper in her ear made her body tingle and her nipples ache. She arched, pushing her hips forward to take his fingers deeper. Did he know how good he felt to her?

He surged forward again and she moaned, brought her hand up to his face and caressed the dark stubble on his lower jaw. She guided his head down to her breast, urging him to suck again. The rasp of his unshaven cheek against her hypersensitive skin made her tight and wet.

Slowly, he drew his fingers out of her, trailed her thick cream along her inner thigh and her belly.

“More! Don’t stop.” God, was she begging?

“I haven’t even started yet.” He shoved her open jeans down her hips and she craved the roughness of it. She’d never been so eager to be naked. Kicking the heavy fabric down, Lauren helped him push the tight denim over her knees until finally she was free. She moved to sit up and pull off her blouse, but he stopped her, rested one hand on the center of her chest above her heart and pushed her back into the pillows. “Leave it on, I like it.”

Lauren liked it, too. So much so that she hadn’t thought about Mark since they’d hit the bed. Or had she? It didn’t matter. Mark didn’t matter. She closed her eyes against the unwanted images of her now ex-boyfriend and concentrated on the sensual friction of Eric’s hands on her. Giving him access anywhere he wanted to go, she moved with him, as he explored her body inch by inch.

When he ran his hands up her thighs and over her hips, she shivered. He skimmed his fingers over her belly and followed his hands with a trail of kisses that set her nerves on fire. She wrapped her legs around his thigh and squeezed to ease the ache in her clit when the first stirrings of a second orgasm began deep in her womb.

When he suddenly vaulted off the bed, she cried out and reached for him.

“Stay right here, don’t move. I’ll be right back.” His wicked grin in the crimson glow reassured her he hadn’t changed his mind. Lauren smiled as he peeled off his jeans and slid his briefs down over his hips.

His erection sprang thick and long from a nest of dark hair. Lauren shifted on the bed in anticipation. She’d imagined Eric naked. In fact, she and Tara and Roxy had even speculated on what a nice guy like Eric might be like in bed.

She couldn’t believe she was about to find out.

He produced a condom packet from a nearby drawer and tore the wrapper with his teeth. “Are you ready for this?” Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded. She watched him from under lowered lashes, her body trembling as he knelt between her legs and tore the rest of the foil wrapper from the condom. He rolled the latex over his cock and Lauren

bit her lip again. Who knew good, sweet Eric, who blushed at dirty jokes, was hiding such enormous equipment under his sensible Dockers and faded jeans?

He lowered himself to her, guiding the tip of his penis to the right spot, just above her opening. He held there a moment and his eyes seemed dark and dangerous. Lauren imagined he was about to unleash the beast that lived under that good boy exterior—the beast she needed to ease her broken heart.

“I want you to talk to me.” He placed one hand on her hip as she rose to meet him. “Talk to me and tell me how it feels. Tell me what you want. Tell me everything.”

“I want you now, Eric! Now.”

Anything for a friend, Eric thought as he slid his cock into Lauren’s waiting heat. She opened to him slowly, her head thrown back to expose the long, sexy column of her throat. Her eyes squeezed shut as she accepted his length, and she curled up around him, raising herself to match his movements as he sheathed himself in her.

As he lowered his body over her, she shifted her hips and wrapped her legs around his back, pressing him deeper. He whispered wordless encouragement in her ear as he wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her close. Joined together now, their bodies finally one, he started to move.

“Tell me.”

“Eric, you feel so good. I want you deep...please...”

Every breathless word made him hotter and harder. He licked her throat, nipped at her jaw, and felt her tense in his arms when he bent to suck one nipple, then the other.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked when she whimpered against his shoulder.

“No—oh! I had no idea you were so big.”

What every man likes to hear. He thrust harder, letting her feel every inch of him. The friction built and her body tightened around him. Her

nails raked up his back, exciting the nerves, making him move faster. He took her mouth again as she moaned his name. He swallowed her breath, tasted her arousal.

Somewhere deep in his balls, his orgasm began and he realized he needed to race to meet it. He wanted it fast so he could revel in the act of coming inside her, delivering himself into her body. He braced himself with one arm on the mattress and steadied her beneath him with the other.

She panted his name, and when she grabbed his ass and held on, raising herself up against him, he let loose. A ragged gasp escaped him coupled with her name as he exploded and, just as he'd fantasized, he felt her shudder in his arms, her body trembling in sweet release as her third orgasm squeezed him to ecstasy.



Hours later, the sex play began again in earnest. Eric, rejuvenated from a brief sleep, set to work exploring Lauren's willing body with his tongue.

She gasped as he worked his way from the back of her neck, down her spine, kissing, sucking and nipping at her flesh. She clutched the ruffled blankets and tensed when he spread her legs again and settled his lean hips between them. His erection parted her folds from behind, the cool, slick latex of the condom a contrast to her feverish heat. He slipped into her again and remained sheathed, still and tight inside her. One hand worked under her, cupping her breast.

His gentle thrusts pressed her body into the mattress, and her clit rubbed against the sheets.

"Harder, Eric, please..." She panted and whispered and sighed to him as he worked her up again. He increased speed and accuracy, hitting that spot inside her that made her ache with need.

"That's it." He coaxed her body off the bed, pulled her hips against his. "Tell me how it feels inside you."

“Hot...hard. Oh, God, I’m coming again.”

He chuckled in her ear, bit her shoulder lightly, and gave her all of him at once. “Me, too. Your voice makes me come, hearing you ask for it.”

She tensed beneath him before the next wave hit, then bucked hard, seeking to take him and hold him while he spent himself in her. His body, all tight muscles and hard planes, shuddered against her for a long, intense moment, then he lowered them both to the bed, wrapping his legs and arms around her while she trembled in the wake of it.

“God, Lauren, what you do to me.”

Chapter Three

Lauren awoke to the sound of Eric's shower, the water thrumming against the bathroom tiles on the other side of the wall behind her head.

She stretched, releasing the kinks in her neck and back, and luxuriating in the feel of having been thoroughly loved. The scent of his cologne clung to her and the warmth of his lean, hard body lingered between her legs. The last of the four condom wrappers tumbled from the mattress as she rolled over and faced reality square in the bloodshot eyes.

She'd slept with Eric. She'd used him to assuage the gut-wrenching pain of finding Mark with another woman.

How could she begin to apologize?

The water shut off abruptly, and Lauren's heart did a somersault in her chest. She sat up, clutching the sheet and her blouse around her. The clock beside the bed read 7:55. They'd been in bed for ten hours—very little of it asleep.

The bathroom door opened with a puff of steam, and Eric strolled out in his underwear, a damp towel draped over his broad shoulders. His dark hair stood out in all directions, spiky and shiny from the shower, and his lower jaw was smooth from a fresh shave.

Something squeezed Lauren's runaway heart, and she blushed at the thought that only a few hours ago, she'd been straddling him, riding him to a mutual orgasm that had left them both breathless and exhausted.

"Good morning," he said with the exact same tone he used when they met in the elevator of her office building. Why had she expected differently?

“Um...good morning. How—”

His head disappeared under the towel and he rubbed vigorously. When he emerged, his hair was nearly dry, and it looked sexy and soft. What woman wouldn't kill to be able to do that? He bent over the bed and planted a quick kiss on her forehead. “I've got to go to work. There are clean towels if you want to take a shower, and cereal in the kitchen. I've only got Cheerios, hope you don't mind.”

“Oh...thanks...I—”

“You don't have your car here...do you want me to call you a cab?”

“No. I'll do it, later.” Lauren grew cold by degrees as she watched Eric pull on a clean pair of pants and a crisp white shirt from his closet. What had she expected the morning after a night of incredible sex with him to be like? Hearts and flowers? A marriage proposal?

She hadn't come here looking for the world to stop revolving, after all. All she'd wanted was a few hours diversion from her heartache with a man she trusted to give her what she needed. Eric had done that. And then some.

Why, then, did she feel so horrible and so abandoned?

“Call me later,” he said as he straightened his collar and ran a hand through his hair. He looked fantastic. Better than he had last night, better than he'd ever looked. Lauren raised a hand to her hair, which had to be a frizzy mess. She probably had raccoon eyes and sheet face besides. No wonder he hadn't actually made eye contact with her since he walked into the room.

“Okay... Have a...a good day.” She gave him a wan, uncertain smile.

“You, too. Oh, do you want to have lunch on Sunday?”

Sunday? Lunch on Sunday? No. She wanted to have sex on Wednesday morning, and Wednesday night and every day in between now and Sunday. *And* she wanted to crawl into a deep, dark hole and hide where the shame of her own slutty actions couldn't follow.

“Sunday's fine.”

“Great. Bye.”

“Bye.” Lauren sat as still as a statue until she heard Eric’s front door close and his car start. Then she hurled herself over the side of the bed and grabbed his phone from the nightstand. She had to call Tara—or Roxy—whoever answered the phone first, and beg them to figure out a way to turn back time and erase the awful mistake she’d made.



Don't blow this, don't blow this. Eric repeated the mantra over and over as he eased into traffic on the turnpike. The hardest thing he'd ever done was leave Lauren in his bed this morning.

She'd looked like a goddess, her auburn hair sultry and wild from their uninhibited night. Her green eyes were heavy lidded, smudged with smoky eye shadow, and her lips swollen and pink from his kisses.

He'd left her looking like a temple concubine out of some hot fantasy novel, wrapped in his sheets, one curvy thigh partially visible, the collar of her black blouse standing up around her bare throat.

What kind of wuss walks away from that? Every fiber in his being demanded he stay and take her again and again until she cried out his name the way she had at four a.m. when he'd brought her to her final orgasm before they'd fallen blissfully asleep in each other's arms.

Why hadn't he followed his heart—or was it his cock? Mental illness, the bad Eric suggested as he picked up speed to match the flow of late rush hour traffic.

No. The big reason, of course, was lack of condoms. Since his last girlfriend had dumped him for the man who'd run up a thousand-dollar debt on her credit card playing on-line Texas Hold'em, he hadn't bothered to replenish his stock. Forced celibacy was good for the spirit, he'd told himself.

Bullshit. He'd never felt more spiritual or soulful as when he'd held Lauren in his arms and kissed her while she came around him that final time. The truth was, if he'd had a twelve pack of Trojans somewhere in his apartment, he'd never have left.

Of course, he'd considered going free-style, but what would Lauren have thought of him? Would she have seen him as irresponsible and careless? A bad boy?

Damn. Maybe that's exactly what he should have done. Though he had no idea if she was on the pill or anything. He figured she was. It wasn't something they normally talked about. He wasn't one of her girlfriends, after all.

That brought him around to the real reason he'd pried himself out of bed, taken a long, cool shower, and forced himself to get dressed and go to work this morning while she fixed him with that languid, sexy gaze of hers.

He wanted Lauren. He wanted her so badly he'd jerked off twice under the tepid water before he trusted himself to walk back into the bedroom. While he'd imagined sex with her would be good—let's face it, he'd never imagined *bad* sex with anyone—he'd never thought it would totally blow him away.

But the truth was, she'd wanted him because she'd broken up with Mark. Idiot Mark. What had he done to make Lauren dump him? Something stupid, no doubt. Something really horrible that would have her running back to him, practically begging to get hurt again. That's what women did, wasn't it?

They liked the challenge of thinking they could make a bad boy change. They all wanted to be the "one" who tamed the beast within and turned him into a puppy dog.

Lauren had used him. And that didn't bother him. He was her friend. He'd always be there for her when she needed him. Whether she needed a pat on the back and a shoulder to cry on or a mind-blowing fuck—well, he was up for both.

What bothered him was that he wanted her to do it again. He wanted to figure out how to be the one she went running back to—the one she couldn't get out of her system.

The only way he knew how to do that was to ignore his urge to fall on his knees at the foot of his bed this morning and worship her. He had to

walk away, go about his life and treat her as if nothing spectacular had happened. He had to practically ignore her, even if it killed him.

Chapter Four

“You’re *where?*” Tara’s voice sounded tinny and distant over the phone, making Lauren’s suddenly skewed world seem all the more surreal.

“I’m in Eric’s...apartment.” She wanted to say “bed”. In fact, she’d said “bed” the first time and she hoped Tara hadn’t heard her clearly. No such luck.

“Bed. You said *bed*, didn’t you?”

Lauren swallowed the knot that had formed in her throat. “Yes,” she said as she scooped up her jeans and headed for the bathroom.

“You did it with Eric? Eric *Reynolds?*” Tara’s voice rose with each word and Lauren’s heart sank lower and lower. What had she done? Even Tara was shocked.

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Was he good? Did he say please and thank you?” Was that a twang of jealousy in Tara’s voice, or annoyance? She’d always thought Eric’s good boy exterior was an elaborate act. Not that she disliked him, she’d just had enough experience with bad boys to know they could disguise themselves really well. Maybe Tara was right, and now that Lauren dug under the surface, she’d found the real man underneath—the insatiable sex god who could walk away from a night of multiple orgasms as easily as he could walk away from a cold cup of coffee.

“He was...” The best she’d ever had. “Fine. He was great.”

Tara’s voice dropped back to normal pitch. “So what’s the matter?”

“I hate myself. I feel terrible. I should never have used Eric like that. I think he hates me now. He just left for work.”

“Well, hon, the man has to work, you know? Don’t we all? What about you? It’s after 8:30 and you’re still lounging around in Eric’s bed?”

“I called in late. I’ll never make it to the office by nine. I’m going to call Roxy and see if she can give me a ride home and a good talking to. I need your help to figure out how to make this up to Eric.”

“You want to apologize for having sex with him?”

“Yes.” It sounded ludicrous when Tara put it into words, but that’s exactly what she wanted.

Tara laughed. “Hon, you made his year. He’s been hot for you for a long time.”

“Come on.” Lauren tossed her jeans in a heap and wiped condensation from the bathroom mirror with a wad of toilet paper. A frizzy haired raccoon stared back at her and she cringed. “Eric and I are just friends, we could never be lovers.” The word echoed off the damp tile. *Lovers.*

They were lovers now. Did that mean they weren’t friends anymore? Why hadn’t she picked someone else to be her rebound guy? Then she could call Eric for advice and he’d know just what to do. She needed a man’s perspective on this and the only man she trusted had just left her with a cheery goodbye and an offer of Sunday brunch.

“Let’s meet for lunch,” Tara said. “How about Blue’s Diner?”

“Okay. I’ll see you at noon.”

Lauren’s hand shook as she hung up the phone and placed it on the back of the toilet. At least she had a much needed therapy session with her two best girlfriends scheduled, but that didn’t help her at the moment.

She looked around the bathroom. She didn’t even have a toothbrush here. Should she shower? Make the bed?

She decided to just freshen up, dig her panties out of her purse and leave him a note, but what to say?

Thanks for the spectacular night. See ya Sunday? XX OO XX.

How about something sultry signed with a lipstick kiss?

Any time you're ready for more, Tiger.

He'd think it was a joke.

How about an apology?

*I'm sorry for everything. Please forgive me. PS: You were fantastic.
Love, Lauren.*

Love, Lauren. Didn't that seem weird now? Of course she loved Eric. She signed all her Christmas and birthday cards that way, followed by a cute string of X's and O's. He did the same.

She'd even said it once out loud. They'd been together on a marathon Christmas shopping spree the day after Thanksgiving. Laden with shopping bags and bundled in a too-warm winter parka, she'd waited on the curb outside of Macy's while he ventured off into the mall parking lot to find his car.

When he'd pulled up twenty minutes later after fighting traffic that would have made Attila the Hun wet his pants, she'd climbed into his SUV and said in all sincerity, "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

He'd just grinned like the Cheshire Cat and done his best Han Solo impression. "I know."

She'd wanted to say it last night, over and over each time she came. Each time he locked eyes with her and panted her name as he pumped his hard cock into her, she'd wanted to say, "I love you, Eric." But she hadn't because it would have seemed false, cliché somehow.

Good Lord, she had to get out of his apartment and get her head on straight before she did something completely ridiculous like start considering a relationship with Eric. That could never happen. Would

never happen. He didn't feel that way about her and she didn't feel that way about him. Sex didn't change anything.



For the fourth time that day, Eric hung up the phone midway through dialing Lauren's office number. He had the conversation all planned out in his head. She'd answer the phone, all business-like and sweetly secretarial, and he'd say, "Hey sweetheart. How about I pick you up at 6:30 for dinner?"

She'd giggle and probably blush at his sultry tone and know that by "dinner" he meant "sex".

In his fantasy world, that was all he needed to do to make her his. In real life, she was probably with Mark trying to patch up their relationship.

He plunked down the receiver and turned back to the program that sat half-written and mostly full of errors on his screen. She'd call him. He'd told her to and she would. Lauren kept her word. She'd call. And when she did, he'd be aloof, distracted. He'd reaffirm their date for Sunday and go home and take another cold shower or two or three and try not to think about everything he wanted to do to her, everything he wanted to share with her.

Another uneventful hour slipped by and Eric jumped when the door to his office swung open. JR Ellis, one of Eric's team managers, poked his head around the heavy door. "A bunch of us are going to Antonio's. Are you in?"

Eric looked at his screen and contemplated the monumental lack of work he'd accomplished, then at the silent phone on his desk. Would it help or hurt if he missed Lauren's call? Would she try his cell phone if she didn't get him at the office?

His stomach rumbled. He'd skipped breakfast and after all the energy he'd expended last night, he needed to eat.

JR raised an eyebrow. “Once again, in *English*...Eric, are you coming with us for lunch?” He spoke slowly, enunciating each word as if he were speaking to someone hard of hearing.

Eric shot him an evil glare. “Yeah. I’m useless here. I might as well eat.” He pushed back from his desk and grabbed his jacket.

“Got the Hump Day blues?” JR asked as Eric joined him in the heavily carpeted corridor.

“What?” Eric slid his guilty gaze to JR. Was it written all over his face? Did he have a hard-on from thinking about Lauren all morning?

“Hump Day. *Wednesday* is the ‘hump’ of the week.” JR crooked his index fingers in air quotes around the word “hump”. He shook his head as he turned down the corridor toward the office lobby. “You programmer types are so out of the loop.”

“I know what Hump Day is, JR.” Eric sighed as he strolled through the corridor past the mostly empty cubicles of his co-workers.

“You seem more introverted than usual,” JR said when they reached the lobby. “Is the Jericho deadline making you crazy?”

“Yeah.” The project for Jericho Lighting was a bitch and a half, but truly nothing Eric couldn’t handle. It made a good excuse, though, not to think about Lauren and how hot and sweet and sultry she’d looked wrapped in his sheets this morning. He forced the image of her looking up at him, her mouth parted in a gasp of pleasure, out of his mind and concentrated on work for the first time since arriving at his desk that morning. “I was actually going to call a meeting this afternoon to go over the specs one more time.”

JR sighed. “Oh great, because I love being tortured.”

Eric laughed despite his internal turmoil. “Good. Then you’ll have a wonderful afternoon.”

They spent all of the short drive to Antonio’s Pizzeria complaining about the difficulties of working with the snobby staff members of the international lighting company. When they joined the small office crowd at the restaurant, though, no one seemed interested in talking business. While everyone ate and discussed sitcoms and ball games, Eric let his

mind wander to his perfect night with Lauren and how much he wished he could take back the morning and stay with her in bed.

To hell with waiting for her to call, he decided as his co-workers divvied up the lunch bill. He'd call her when he got back to the privacy of his office and tell her he wanted to see her again before Sunday. At least if she refused, he'd know where he stood with her.

When he rose from the vinyl-upholstered booth, JR shoved a stack of twenties in his hand. "You pay. We'll meet you outside."

"Right." Eric took the wad of cash, added his own share to the pile and headed for the cashier. With several people in line to pay, he'd probably get back to the office a little late and that would delay his call to Lauren. On a whim, he pulled out his cell phone to check his messages on the off chance she'd called while he was at lunch.

"Reynolds? Eric Reynolds?" The male voice registered as vaguely familiar, but Eric didn't place it until he looked behind him. Mark Dalton stood in line next to him.

Something went tight in Eric's chest. Whether it was jealousy or anger, he couldn't tell. His jaw clenched and he greeted Mark with a curt nod.

"Hey, Eric. How's it going?" Mark clapped him on the shoulder, seemingly oblivious to his cool reception. "I haven't seen you since Tara's Christmas Party."

"Right."

"You still working for that software security firm?"

"Yep."

"Great! That's good." Mark nodded his overly large head in what, to Eric, seemed closely akin to the motion of those ludicrous bobble-headed dogs people used to keep in their cars. Had Mark always seemed so clownish and ungainly?

Eric moved up in line, wishing Lawyer Boy would just go away. No such luck.

"Hey, Eric, you're still friends with Lauren, right?"

Eric drew in a slow breath to curb his rising annoyance. *Was* he still friends with Lauren? Had he irrevocably destroyed their friendship by agreeing to sleep with her when he should have taken the high road and made her talk about her problems with Mark?

“Yeah. Why?” How could Mark call himself Lauren’s boyfriend if he didn’t know she and Eric were still friends? They had lunch together at least once a week and she usually mentioned Mark, who was looking more and more like a droopy-eyed Bassett Hound every second. Maybe Lauren didn’t talk about Eric when she was with Mark.

“I was...I’m a little...” Mark shifted from one huge clown foot to the other, his red power tie swaying to and fro. He jerked his head sideways, gesturing Eric out of line.

I don’t have time for this, Bozo, Eric thought as he reluctantly followed Mark toward the salad bar.

“Lauren and I had a *misunderstanding*. Have you talked to her since yesterday?”

Eric bit back a sarcastic reply that included full disclosure of the half-dozen orgasms he’d given Lauren last night. “Have you tried Tara or Roxy?” He forced innocence into his voice. Why was he so angry with Mark? He should be thanking him. If Lawyer Boy hadn’t screwed up big time, Lauren wouldn’t have showed up last night needing...

“I tried them, no answer. I don’t think they want to talk to me.”

“What did you do?” Eric’s fists clenched involuntarily. He wondered if Mark’s wide, doughy face would feel like an overstuffed pillow if he punched him right now.

“I...she saw something and she got the wrong impression. I was... A girl from my office came over to my apartment yesterday. Lauren never stops by in the middle of the day—I thought she was at work. How was I supposed to know her boss was sick and closed the office early? Anyway, this girl, she came over and sort of threw herself at me. She wanted me to—*you know*. I was trying to let her down easy, tell her I wasn’t interested but she started taking her clothes off, then she’s all over me and—”

“And Lauren caught you.” Eric’s heart went cold, but anger blazed behind his eyes at the thought Mark would be so stupid as to cheat on Lauren and try to lie about it. Mark was as transparent as a quivering mass of Jell-O. On the off chance some poor girl from his law firm really had thrown herself at him, odds were he was more than willing to play catch.

“Lauren *thinks* she caught me. She saw what looked like, but wasn’t, me fucking this girl.”

“Uh huh.” Clench. Unclench. Clench. Unclench. Eric’s short fingernails dug into his palms. Of course Lauren had come to him wanting sex, not for comfort, not for love, but for revenge.

Could he blame her?

“You haven’t talked to her since then?” Eric forced himself to ask.

“I’ve been calling her cell. I guess she’s screening.”

Eric nodded. He’d do the same.

“You’ve talked to her, haven’t you?”

This was his chance to deliver a blow to Lawyer Boy without even touching him. Good Eric wanted to feign ignorance, keep Lauren’s secrets and let her deal with Mark in her own way. Bad Eric had a different plan, an evil, wickedly satisfying plan that, even if it didn’t rip apart the shreds of Lauren’s relationship with Mark, would still make Eric feel damn good.

The name of Bad Eric’s plan was Brutal Honesty.

The words came out of his mouth before he could stop them and they fell like stones in the suddenly quiet restaurant. “She was with me last night. She was still in bed when I left for work. I could give her a call if you like.”

A collection of emotions played over Mark’s suddenly rubbery features as Eric’s words sank in. What appeared to be relief at locating Lauren quickly morphed into confusion, enlightenment, and finally anger. As if Mark had a right to be angry.

“She stayed at your place?” All the dopey, false friendliness drained from Mark’s voice.

Eric fixed a cold gaze on his brand new rival. “Yes.” There was no way Mark could mistake the challenge in his tone. He braced for the third degree, mentally climbing onto the witness stand so Lawyer Boy could drag a full confession from him.

And exactly how many times did you make her come, Mr. Reynolds? he imagined Mark asking as he paced back and forth in front of a dozen captivated jurors.

At least six, he’d reply.

At least? You mean you’re not sure?

You’d have to ask Ms. James herself, Counselor, but I will swear to six orgasms, and that’s not counting the first time when I barely touched her. Just sliding my hand over her hot, wet—

“She stayed over at your place?” The subtle difference in Mark’s tone told Eric Lawyer Boy was in denial.

“Yes. She did.”

“If I find out you took advantage of her, I’ll rip you a new one.”

Mark’s threat coaxed a satisfied grin from Eric. He felt eight feet tall. “Can I get that in *writing*, Counselor?”

Mark’s lips contracted into a thin line and his colorless eyes blazed, but to his credit, he backed away from decking Eric right there at the salad bar. “I’m not kidding.”

“I hope you aren’t.”

“We’ll finish this conversation another time.”

“I’m sure we will.”

Mark spun on his heel and stalked away. He made it as far as the door before the cashier collared him with a sweet, slightly annoyed, “Um, your check, sir!”

Mark threw money at her and slammed through the pizzeria’s double doors, leaving the cashier shaking her head as she ironed out the crumpled twenties on the counter.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath, and Eric couldn’t help but agree. Drunk with his own power and a primitive sense of possessiveness he’d never felt before, he slipped an extra twenty into the pile of bills in his hand and told her to keep the change.

The euphoria of staring down Mark and staking a public claim to Lauren gave him the strength to delay his phone call. By quarter to five, though, his willpower evaporated. Lauren still hadn’t called him, and the realization hit him that she might not forgive him for rubbing their impromptu sleepover in Mark’s face, no matter how angry she might be at her hopefully ex-boyfriend.

Chapter Five

Work had been impossible. No project Lauren worked on during the two hours between her late arrival and her noon lunch hour seemed to take her mind off thoughts of Eric. Though she'd taken a shower at her place, after Roxy gave her a ride home, she still felt like she had Eric's essence on her. She smelled his aftershave and the warm scent of sweat and sex each time she took a deep breath. Her heart lurched each time the phone rang, and she cursed her irrational desire to hear his voice. Why was she suddenly so obsessed with Eric? He was still Eric, still her friend. She'd never spent an entire morning lost in contemplation of his deep blue eyes or the fascinating scar under his jaw, or the delectable hollow at the base of his throat that beckoned her tongue to lick there.

Lunch with Tara and Roxy had been torture. She hated to kiss and tell, but she was weak. She'd given in to their relentless inquisition halfway through her spinach quiche at Blue's Diner and fed them tantalizing tidbits of her evening bite by bite, just to watch their eyes glow with astonishment.

"Is he bigger than Mark?" Roxy had asked, a forkful of radicchio paused halfway to her lips.

"Mark's a horse, isn't he?" Tara chimed in. "He's so damn tall, I always figured his dick hung down to his knees. I mean, why else would our girl date Mr. Boring?"

Lauren had blushed and her friends giggled like schoolgirls. She stopped short of defending Mark who, she realized, never seemed to have much to talk about except his job.

Thoughts of Mark dissolved quickly when Tara assaulted her with more questions about Eric's prowess in bed. Finally, she begged off any more juicy details and asked the all-important question of her friends.

"What should I do about Eric? He was so...nonchalant this morning. Not cold, but just so normal. I feel awful about using him."

"Did you have a good time?" Roxy asked as she shoved her half-eaten salad aside.

God, yes! "Sure. Yeah." Lauren shrugged to throw the bloodhounds off the scent. Despite the sour pang of Mark's betrayal, her night with Eric had been the best night of her life. She longed to repeat every sultry, sweaty minute, to taste him on her lips and feel his long, hard shaft inside her again. He'd been amazing in every way, and she hated the fact that now, in the harsh light of day, he probably regretted giving in to her desperate seduction.

She owed him a huge apology.

"Did *he* have a good time?" Roxy asked, her sculptured eyebrows disappearing under her platinum bangs.

"I assume so." Lauren couldn't help but grin. Roxy's own brother, Todd, was fond of saying, *If you're a guy, there's no such thing as bad sex.*

Roxy clapped her hands. "There you go. I don't see the problem."

"The problem is, he just got up and left this morning," Tara said after a long sip of her iced tea. "This is Eric we're talking about. He's sensitive. What if he reads too much into the whole thing? What if he thinks it meant more than it did?"

Lauren's heart plummeted. Tara had put her worst fear into words. Eric was a good guy. He had real feelings, and Lauren never wanted to hurt him or make him think the wrong thing. She'd had the time of her life. She couldn't stop thinking about him. Now, Mark seemed like a bad dream. In fact, when she pictured her now ex-boyfriend's potato-white ass in the air and the look of stark terror on the blonde bimchette's face when the door of his apartment flew open, she wanted to laugh. If only she'd thought to whip out her cell phone and snap a picture of Mark's

posterior for posterity. What a Christmas card it would make—a big snowy moon hung with dangling red balls...

She almost spit out her iced tea.

“Are you all right, hon?” Tara asked.

“Fine, just thinking about something funny.” It hadn’t been at all funny yesterday, though. She sobered. How could she have gotten over it so quickly? “Really. What should I do? Should I just have brunch with him on Sunday like nothing happened or should I call him up tonight and talk to him?”

“He said for you to call him, didn’t he?” Tara asked.

Lauren nodded. She’d tried twice from her office, but her stomach felt so knotted each time she’d picked up the phone, she’d ended up just scurrying off to the bathroom to splash water on her face.

“Then call him. Tell him he was phenomenal and any time he wants to do it again, you’re available. Why not take advantage? Mark’s history. Eric’s not dating anyone right now. What have you got to lose?” Roxy’s words seemed so logical. It all made sense.

“What have I got to lose?” she asked her friends. They shrugged and smiled, but in her head Lauren heard the answer.

Eric.



She’d made the bed, Eric noted when he got home that evening. The navy spread was stretched so tight he considered trying to bounce a quarter off it.

The bathroom was spotless and he wondered if she’d taken a shower before she left. Had she stood naked before the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door? Had she wrapped her supple, magnificently responsive body in one of his towels?

Had she called?

He gave the answering machine next to the bed a skeptical glance. Two messages. He tried to maintain nonchalance as he hit the playback button. The first message was an automated sales call, followed by his sister Clarice's cheery voice.

"Hi, Uncle Eric. I'm just calling to remind you that Jeremy's birthday is Sunday at noon at Mr. Mouse's Pizzeria on Route One. He's looking forward to beating you at Whack-A-Mole, so take your vitamins! Love ya!"

Eric lowered himself to the bed and sighed. His nephew's birthday party had completely skipped his mind. Thank goodness for Clarice, the paragon of efficiency. He would have hated himself for disappointing the tow-headed five-year-old who called him "Unca Eric".

Brunch with Lauren. Sunday.

Under normal circumstances, he would have thought nothing of bringing her to the party. She loved Jeremy. His sister and bother-in-law, Andy, had asked him more than once why he wasn't romantically involved with his best friend.

Now, after last night, what would she think of lunch with Mr. Mouse? Would it be the same between them? He'd wanted to take her someplace fancy and romantic and suggest that perhaps they cap off a fine meal with an afternoon of hot sex, not a roll in the ball pit and a half-melted slice of ice cream cake.

Of course, that assumed she'd still speak to him, and that Lawyer Boy hadn't hunted him down by then and flattened him.

Bad Eric said to hell with it. *Call the girl. Tell her you want her body. Now. Under you, begging you to make her come.* He had, after all, foolishly stopped at the drugstore on the way home to pick up a twelve pack of ribbed Trojans. He wondered if they'd disintegrate from old age before he even opened the box.

Chapter Six

Black teddy? Pink teddy? White lace thong and matching bra? White lace thong and no bra?

Lauren paced before her open underwear drawer, naked and damp from her second shower of the day. She'd never worried about what to wear around Eric before. He'd seen her in a bathing suit, a fur-hooded parka and ski mask during the last blizzard, and dressed as a vodka martini for Roxy's last Halloween party. Why should her underwear, or lack thereof, matter so much tonight?

She fanned herself with her hand as she contemplated the array of discarded lingerie strewn on her bed. How desperate had she become?

The idea to show up at Eric's again tonight, dressed for sex, had struck her halfway home from the office. She'd squirmed in her seat behind the wheel, hyper-aware of her body—the fullness between her legs, the sensitivity of her nipples—the moment she thought in earnest about a repeat performance of last night.

In the shower, she'd imagined Eric's hands on her as she slid her soapy fingers over her breasts and down to her thighs. She'd conjured his taste, his scent and the feel of his cock buried deep inside her. She'd sighed his name when she brought herself to shuddering release as the massaging showerhead pulsed a steaming stream of water against her clit.

Her heart still beat erratically from the exertion, and her stomach fluttered with nerves. Should she call him first and tell him to be ready for her? How foolish would she feel if she went to his apartment and he wasn't there?

She'd call. She'd tell him they needed to talk and that she'd be over in half an hour, if she could decide what to wear under her clothes.

Her fingers shook as she dialed the phone and she toyed with the idea of flat-out telling him she was sitting on the edge of her bed wearing nothing but a blush at the thought of him touching her the way he had last night. Would he laugh, or think he'd gotten a wrong number?

Her breath caught when his answering machine picked up. "Eric—" She managed to get his name out, then stuttered something unintelligible that ended with the clipped phrase, "Call me back, okay?"

Her cheeks burning, she threw herself back against her pillows. *I'm not sixteen, for God's sake!* she berated herself. *Why do I feel like this?*

The doorbell spared her an embarrassing bout of soul-searching. What if it was Eric? Her heart soared and plummeted by turns as she scrambled for her robe.

"Just a minute!" She took a deep breath to calm the butterflies in her stomach, cinched her silky blue bathrobe tight around her and sprinted for the door of her apartment.

A quick peek through the security lens dashed her hopes for a sizzling reunion with Eric. Mark stood in the hallway, his expression grim.

"I'm not here!" She didn't care if he stayed out there and rotted. There was no way she was going to let him in.

"We need to talk!" he bellowed through the door.

"No, we don't."

The doorknob rattled and Lauren remembered the sappy little key-exchange ceremony they'd held on their eight-month anniversary.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared daggers as the door swung open. At least she could get her key back. "You realize that's the last time you're using that key, don't you?" she said.

"What's going on with you and Reynolds?" Mark shoved the key in his front pocket and puffed up his massive chest in challenge.

“What do you mean?” How the heck did Mark know anything? Had Tara and Roxy spilled her lunchtime confessions to try to make him jealous?

“He told me you spent last night with him.”

Lauren’s whole body trembled at the reminder. “And?”

“That’s how you handle this? You run off and bang Reynolds?”

“Handle what, Mark? That I walked in on you with what’s-her-name-Sandy from your office? Can’t you get in trouble for ‘banging’ a paralegal?”

“I didn’t.” Mark’s poker face and rock steady gaze made him an excellent defense attorney. His supreme self-importance, however, made him a terrible liar.

“If you didn’t, the only *reason* you didn’t is because I walked in on you.”

Mark’s split-second hesitation validated Lauren’s words but didn’t shut down his argument. “The fact remains, I *didn’t* fuck her.”

“What’s the phrase? It goes to *intent*, your Honor.” Lauren almost choked on the words. Mark just rolled his eyes.

“So I’m guilty for something you think I *would* have done if I had the chance?”

“If the glove fits.”

Mark sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I stopped myself, Lauren. I sent Sandy home and I came here to apologize. I would have apologized sooner, but I couldn’t reach you. I guess because you couldn’t stop yourself from taking your revenge with Eric.”

Lauren bit back a sarcastic reply. She didn’t think of it as revenge anymore. She just shrugged.

“So you admit you had sex with him?”

Yes. Sex. Just sex. Why did she want to think of it as making love, as more than just a physical act? “Guilty as charged.” The words stung, though. She certainly felt guilty. “I slept with Eric and you know what? I

can't *wait* to do it again. In fact, I'm on my way to his apartment right now."

Mark smirked even though his face had turned crimson with anger. "In your bathrobe?"

"No. In Saran wrap. Now give me my key and go."

"Come and get it."

Her jaw dropped. Lauren thanked the stars she'd tossed Mark's key into his mailbox as she left his apartment. She wouldn't have trusted herself at this moment not to aim the little piece of metal at his heart. Did he really think she'd stick her hand in his pocket to retrieve the key? She took one menacing step forward, hoping to call his bluff, but a shadow in the hallway beyond her still open front door drew her attention.

Eric appeared behind Mark. "Am I interrupting something?"

Why hadn't he heeded his own warnings? Eric began mentally beating himself up the moment he saw Mark's hulking physique in Lauren's doorway.

Lawyer Boy stood in her living room, facing Lauren who looked flushed and defiant and delicious in a satiny, powder blue bathrobe.

This was the scene Eric should have expected. Would the argument he'd heard on his way down the hallway end in the inevitable reconciliation?

He hurt me, but I still love him. Eric had heard that line more times than he cared to count—from women he'd dated and lost and from women like Lauren who saw him as nothing more than a shoulder to cry on, or a safe harbor to shelter them temporarily from the rough waters of a dysfunctional relationship.

Why should he think Lauren would be different?

"Yes, you're interrupting." Mark swung around, his face set in hard lines and much less doughy than it had seemed at Antonio's. Behind him, Lauren seethed.

“No, you’re not! Eric, come in. Mark was just leaving, *after* he returns my key.”

Eric stared Mark down, not trusting his voice. Finally, Mark produced the key from his pocket and handed it to Eric. “I guess you’ll be needing this now.”

A dozen snappy comebacks ran through Eric’s mind, most of them lewd, so he kept his mouth shut. He stepped aside to allow Mark to pass by and stood absolutely still until his archrival disappeared around the bend in the corridor.

He held out the little silver key as he stepped over the threshold of Lauren’s apartment. “I think this is yours.”

A tight fist clenched in Lauren’s chest at the look in Eric’s eyes. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and close his hand around the key, urging him to keep it, but she realized that would seem foolish and immature. This wasn’t a boyfriend exchange, after all.

She wanted to throw herself into his arms, but she couldn’t meet his gaze. Instead, she picked the key out of his open palm.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, though he didn’t sound completely sincere. “I didn’t mean to get in the way if you were trying to work things out.”

“Work things out? There’s nothing to work out between Mark and me. I said it was over and I meant it.”

Eric nodded. Then he jammed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I’m sorry about this morning, too. I didn’t want to just walk out like that.”

Lauren warmed. Beneath her robe, her nipples peaked. “I wish you’d stayed. I’m sorry, too, for not telling you what happened with Mark.”

“I don’t care what happened with Mark, as long as he’s gone.”

“We should talk, I guess...” Not that she wanted to. Liquid heat settled between her legs at the realization she was alone again with Eric.

“We don’t have to talk now,” he said in the same hopeful tone.

“I’m sorry I used you.” Her breath caught on the confession. “I was wrong to—”

“Use me.” His mouth turned up in a half-grin. “I don’t mind that. I mind that you didn’t talk to me first.”

Lauren lowered her eyes. “You’d have calmed me down and talked me into trying to work things out with Mark.”

“No. I would have calmed you down and talked you into breaking up with him. And today, I wouldn’t feel so guilty about taking advantage of you.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did. A nice guy would have turned you down.”

“I guess you’re not such a nice guy, then.” She smiled. Her heart felt light and huge in her chest. The butterflies were back, hammering under her rib cage at the thought she might, very shortly, be with Eric again.

“Bad boys have all the fun,” he said with a shrug.

“Do you want to be bad again?” She punctuated her question by skimming her fingers along the soft neckline of her robe. The folds of satin parted slightly as she drew her finger down between her breasts.

“I never stopped being bad. I came here to ask you to spend the night with me, and I brought these.” He pulled a familiar blue box out of his jacket pocket.

“Only a dozen?” She pouted. “Good thing I bought my own box.”

Her breath caught at the sudden, feral look in his eyes. She’d never seen him look so sexy and never wanted him as much.

She bit her lower lip, turned on her heel and sauntered into her bedroom, dropping her robe as she went.

Chapter Seven

Eric didn't need a second invitation to follow Lauren into the bedroom. He shed his jacket on the way and started unbuttoning his shirt.

His erection strained against his fly by the time he arrived in the cozy world of lilac and lace where Lauren slept. She stood next to the bed, her auburn hair curling seductively over one eye. A scrap of black lace dangled from her index finger.

"I was going to dress up for you," she said, her voice low. Her eyes blazed with desire as she tossed the lingerie on the floor with a collection of other lacy contraptions. "But I couldn't decide what you'd like best on me."

"The only thing I like on you is me." He crossed the room and gathered her naked body into his arms. She slid her hands under his open shirt and around his back. All his nerve endings stirred to attention as she pressed her breasts against his chest. The hard peaks of her nipples rubbed against him, exciting his skin to goose bumps. His cock pulsed and he thought he might come just from the delicious pressure as he cupped her ass and pulled her wet heat hard against his erection.

"I thought about you all day," she said, her breath a feathery whisper as she dragged her nails up his back. "I was afraid you were mad at me."

"Mad at myself for not staying this morning," he murmured against her hair. The scent of her shampoo made him think of sultry tropical nights and sun-burnished skin.

"I'm sorry I—"

“Shh.” He hushed her with a quick brush of his lips against hers. “Too much talk.” The last thing he wanted to do right now was get into a mutual examination of their feelings. That would probably lead them right out of the bedroom and into the kitchen for coffee and cookies, which was not at all what he wanted right now. Eric needed release more than conversation, and by the urgency of Lauren’s movements as she thrust her hips against his, so did she. Yet, she wanted to talk.

“I tried to call you—”

Eric had never kissed a woman breathless before, but he gave it his best shot now. He claimed her mouth, plundering with his tongue. He nipped and sucked until they both broke away panting.

“On the bed.” He issued the command without thinking. He wanted her and he wasn’t going to wait any longer. The dark, commanding tone in his voice surprised him, and he liked it. That was something else he’d never done before, been the boss in the bedroom. Nice guys, after all, let their women call the shots during sex.

Lauren’s mouth dropped open in shock, but she obeyed with a hint of a smile. She crawled across the lavender bedspread and stretched out, writhing in anticipation as Eric circled the bed.

He threw his shirt aside and unbuttoned his jeans, thinking wicked thoughts. Should he make this a fantasy game? Play the master to her sex slave? Or should he just jump on her and claim her like he needed to, without complicated foreplay?

“Close your eyes.” The words came unbidden. *Time to be bad.*

She complied eagerly, her luscious lips curved in a satisfied smirk. He bent over and kissed her, careful to keep from touching anything but her mouth. Then he moved his lips to the hollow of her throat, that sweet spot she liked so well on him. Finally he trailed kisses down between her breasts.

She moaned encouragement and when she reached up to cup his head to her breasts, he grabbed her wrist and trapped her hand above her head.

“Wait your turn,” he told her. She bit her lower lip and Eric almost lost it. That sexy little move made him so hard he almost couldn’t stand it. To combat the urge to pounce on her like a fevered jungle cat, he took a deep, slow breath. He had work to do. “You were going to dress up for me tonight, to please me?”

“Yes.” The answer came in a fluttery sigh.

“And last night, you took off your underwear so you’d be ready for me.”

“Yes.”

“I like that. No. I *love* that. Just thinking about you standing on my doorstep with your panties in your purse, hot and wet for me, had me hard all day long.”

She nodded and squeezed her eyes shut tight. Her little pink tongue slid over her lips in anticipation.

“Are you ready for me now?”

“Yes!”

He placed one hand on her stomach, spreading his fingers wide so the tip of his thumb dipped into her navel. Beneath his hand, her muscles tensed. He brushed the tips of his fingers lightly over her skin and smiled as goose bumps rose in the wake of his touch.

One at a time, he licked her nipples and blew a cool stream of air over each one just to see the pink skin of her areolas pucker and pebble.

Gently, he spread her thighs and dipped his fingers into the moisture that coated her inner folds.

“Hmm. You are ready.”

“Eric!” A nervous giggle accompanied her cry of frustration and her eyelids fluttered.

“Don’t peek! Keep your eyes closed tight and tell me what you think I’m doing.”

“What?”

“What am I doing? Where am I? You narrate as I get ready to take you. Each time you’re right, I’ll reward you.”

Her sharp intake of breath froze him. Had he gone too far? He didn't want to scare her. He just wanted to play and to show her she'd released the beast within, one who was never going to act like a puppy dog again.

He let out his breath in relief when she grinned. "What happens if I'm wrong?"

"I'll..." He wanted to say "punish you", but again he feared her reaction. This was Lauren, one of the good girls. How would she react if he threatened to spank her?

"I'll...tickle you." *Cop out*, he berated himself.

She squirmed playfully on the bed, her body sinuous and so, so sexy. Eric's hands trembled as he unzipped his fly.

"Ah...you're opening your fly."

"Very good. That was a gimme." He dipped one finger between her legs and stroked her swollen clit once. She sighed. "Now what am I doing?"

"You're sliding your jeans off?"

"Are you guessing? That could get you into trouble."

She giggled. "You're just standing there, watching me." He gave her one steady stroke and she moaned.

"Good. Now what?"

"You're moving toward the bed. You're leaning over and—oh!"

"Say it. Say what I'm doing to you."

"You're...licking my...clit..." She finished her sentence with an unintelligible sound. Her body arched at his intimate touch and he tasted her unique essence on his tongue. "Now?" He slid two fingers inside her and she moaned the words in a breathless tumble.

Her whole body seemed to pulse around him and she whimpered as her orgasm hit hard, raising her hips and pushing herself against his hand.

Eric held her, his hand tight against her mons, enjoying the feel of her sex contracting around his fingers, drawing him in. A simple touch

and she belonged to him. He reveled in the power he held over her, enjoying her pleasure as much as his own.

“My God...” she panted when her trembling limbs finally relaxed. “That was unreal.”

He smiled as he withdrew from her. “It’s like you’re ready to come all the time.”

She laughed tremulously. “Only with you...honest.” Her breath caught on the last word and Eric raised his gaze to her face. Her sultry smile faded. Her lips parted and, unbidden, her eyes fluttered open. “Make love to me, Eric. Please.”

Lauren’s whole body felt like liquid fire. She sighed and curled her body around Eric’s as he lowered himself into the vee of her open thighs. He stretched his now naked body over hers, covering her with his warmth. While his hands explored her body, he kissed her until she lost herself in the sensation of his tongue laving hers.

She’d loved his game, his masterful tone and the giddy fear of what he might do to her while her eyes were closed. She would have played all night, let him tease her to orgasm again and again, but her own words hit her and made her suddenly aware that this wasn’t a game.

Only with you.

She’d never felt as free or as sexy as she did with Eric. Was it because she knew him so well and trusted him to care about her feelings and her needs? She’d dated plenty of men, a few of whom she thought she loved, but none she’d ever trusted as much, or felt so certain with.

Though she’d spent the day wondering how to deal with their sudden intimacy, she’d never actually been afraid Eric wouldn’t call her, that he wouldn’t want to see her again. Deep down, she’d never really doubted her friendship with Eric could survive a night of passion.

One question tickled the back of her mind now, as he claimed her, his body taut above her: Would this ever be anything more?

She took him in and let him love her, and long after he fell asleep with his arms wrapped around her, she whispered the words, “I love you.”

Chapter Eight

“Something’s different about you,” Clarice said when she cornered Eric at the air hockey table on Sunday. The frenetic atmosphere of Mr. Mouse’s Pizzeria flowed around them like white water rapids as they faced off over the game.

“What makes you say that?” Eric’s gaze automatically sought Lauren, who was happily passing out ice cream cake to a dozen kindergarteners. Jeremy’s birthday party guests flocked around her like eager moths to a flame and she looked like she was loving it.

Clarice blocked Eric’s first shot with a vengeance and the blue plastic puck sailed into his goal. “You’ve lost your arm. And you seem distracted.”

“I’m not.” He retrieved the puck and lined up his next shot. This time he managed three returns before Clarice made a point.

She jerked her thumb in the direction of the birthday cake frenzy. “Did you and Lauren have a fight?”

“No! I mean, no. Of course not. What makes you think that?”

Clarice tucked a strand of dark, curly hair behind her ear and whizzed another goal past him with clinical precision.

“Damn!”

“I’ve been practicing. Do you know how many parties I come to a month here?”

Eric laughed. “I don’t want to know. Actually, I do. Tell me all about it.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“We didn’t have a fight.”

“You seem so formal with each other today. You hung up her coat, pulled out her chair—”

“I always do that. I’m a *nice guy*, remember?”

Realization swept over Clarice’s face just before she sank another goal on him. “*That* issue again? Let me guess. She’s dating Jack the Ripper and she wants your advice on how to get him to stop murdering prostitutes before she considers marriage?”

Eric placed the puck on the side of the table and followed Clarice to a relatively quiet corner of the chaotic restaurant. He had no desire to psychoanalyze his relationship with Lauren, but he didn’t see much choice at the moment. His sister would bug him until he spilled something, so he needed to think of something to spill.

It had been an amazing week. After Wednesday night at Lauren’s place, they’d spent Friday and Saturday night together, too. Like teenagers again, they were insatiable and uninhibited, but there was an unspoken issue between them now that neither had the courage to touch.

As lovers, they were perfect. As friends, they found themselves drifting in casual formality. The reason was clear to Eric. They were both afraid to define their new relationship. He didn’t want casual sex and she obviously didn’t want a full-fledged commitment.

He was, after all, the rebound guy. She might not want Mark back, at least not yet, but she wasn’t after another long-term relationship after the way the last one ended. Neither of them could admit to the other that their passionate fling had no future.

“Let’s just say, the guy she’s with now wants more from her than she’s willing to give.”

“He’s pressuring her?”

“No...”

“She’s skittish?”

“Yeah.”

“If she asks your advice, and I know she will, tell her to dump him. If she’s not sure how she feels about him, she probably doesn’t feel enough.”

“Right.” Eric wondered how he’d pull that blade out of his heart.

“Then you swoop in and ask her out.” Clarice winked. Everything always seemed so easy to her, so black and white.

“It’s not that simple.”

She put an arm around Eric’s shoulders and leaned up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “It’s always simpler than you think it is. You and Lauren would be good together. Give it a shot. I bet if you lay it all on the line, you’ll find out she feels the same way about you.”

Eric shook his head, even as a grin broke through his troubled frown. “Maybe you could slip a note in her locker for me, like you used to do in high school.”

Clarice giggled. “With one of those silly multiple choice questions on it and the boxes to check off? Let me think: ‘Dear Lauren, who is the cutest guy? Mr. Mouse or Eric?’ I’ll make your box bigger so she’ll get the hint what the right answer is.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I can compete with a rodent in a bow tie.”

The birthday party ended an hour later with a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday” and the distribution of party favors. As the guests left, Eric watched Lauren. She looked sweet and untroubled, playing jacks with Jeremy while harried parents rounded up their sugar-fortified tots.

When everyone had gone, including Clarice and Andy with their own sleepy five-year-old in tow, Eric retrieved Lauren’s coat and met her at the ball pit.

“Care for one last dip before we turn in our ID bracelets?” he asked.

“Oh, no thanks. I’m still a little sticky from the last time. I think I sat in gum.” She dusted off her hands and gave the bin of plastic balls a skeptical glance.

“I’m sorry about this. I appreciate that you came along.”

She laughed as she buttoned her coat. “I don’t mind. It was fun. Except for the kid who stuck his lollipop in my hair. Besides, I really like your family.”

Eric took her hand and led her through the crowded playscape and finally out into the parking lot. Before opening the car door for her, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She tasted like cotton candy and she felt like heaven in his arms.

When he broke the kiss, her heated glance fell to his lips. “Your place or mine?”

“Neither.”

“Ooh, someplace new?”

He brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and took a deep breath. She stiffened.

“This week has been wonderful, really, but...”

Lauren’s arms fell to her sides as she transferred her gaze from his to the top button on his shirt. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t. Lauren, I don’t want to be your rebound guy anymore.”

Lauren’s heart turned to stone at Eric’s words. Did he really think of himself that way? Had she given him any reason not to?

After Wednesday night, she’d been careful around him, trying not to seem too needy. Truth was, she couldn’t get enough of him. Each time they’d made love she felt a glow, a heat that didn’t go away. She thought about him constantly and wondered how to tell him she didn’t regret showing up at his apartment nearly as much as she regretted not following through after that Fourth of July kiss.

Now he wanted it to end. He had every right not to want to be used anymore. She put her hands on his chest and sighed. “I’m sorry, Eric. I never meant to—”

He put a finger against her lips. “Let me finish. I want to make a change. I want you to go out with me.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. I want to go on a date. And it doesn’t have to end up in bed, though I’m not going to rule that out, of course.”

“You want to...date?”

“Yes. I want to start fresh, from the beginning. Let me take you out to dinner, someplace nice and we’ll see what develops from there.”

She shrugged, still uncertain what he was aiming at. They’d spent three nights together this week, woke up in each other’s beds, in each other’s arms, and he wanted to back off and go to dinner? “Where do you want to go?”

“I’ll pick the place. How’s Tuesday?”

“Tuesday? Not tonight?”

“No. We need some time to regroup, to think about things.”

Uh oh. Was this just a cleverly constructed brush-off? “Think about what?”

“Everything.”

She searched his eyes. The familiar spark was there and his mouth curved in a grin. “All right. Tuesday.” How would she get through two days without him?

“Good. I’m going to take you home now. I’ll pick you up at seven on Tuesday. Dress up.”



Lauren forced herself not to call Eric on Sunday night. Instead, she busied herself cleaning her apartment to ease the frustration of not having him around. She’d taken his words to heart, but she couldn’t figure out how she’d get through a date without thinking about him peeling off her clothes and making her moan in ecstasy.

It made sense, in a strange way. If they were nothing more than hump buddies to each other now, the relationship had nowhere to go. They needed to fill in the blanks they’d missed between the last time

they'd met for lunch and talked about work and movies, and the moment she'd decided to seduce him.

They'd skipped too many steps in the transition from friends to lovers.

Then again, maybe there were no steps in-between. Maybe this exercise in restraint would just prove they weren't right for each other.

When the phone rang at eight, she jumped on it, then let it ring once more. *Don't be desperate*, she berated herself. She lifted the receiver and forced her voice to sound casual despite the tremor in her stomach. Thoughts of Eric had left her electrically charged.

Was it normal to feel like a cat in heat every time his name ran through her head?

"Hello?"

"It's Mark." The familiar voice cooled her sexual buzz instantly. She thought of hanging up, but decided she needed the distraction.

"What, Mark?"

"I want to apologize. I'm sorry for what you saw."

She laughed. "I bet you are."

"I mean, I'm sorry for what I did. You may have been right about my intent and I was wrong to allow something like that to happen."

Lauren sat on the edge of her bed. Her eyes fluttered closed and she rubbed them and pinched the bridge of her nose. "All right. I accept your apology. You're admitting your mistake, and that's good."

"Great. Can I come over so we can talk?"

"No."

"Why not? You just said—" His voice rose in that petulant way he had. Lauren hadn't realized until now how much it annoyed her.

"I accept your apology. It doesn't mean we have anything else to talk about."

"That's it, then? You're dumping me for Eric because he was there to give you a free ride when you wanted to get back at me?"

Anger flared in Lauren, not because of Mark's crass remark or his harsh tone, but because she feared he might be right. Her own feelings made no sense to her. Could she fall out of love with Mark in the space of a few seconds and fall in love with Eric just as quickly?

The answer was at least partially clear. She hadn't loved Mark. The pain she felt at finding him with Sandy had been a mixture of shock and indignant anger, but had he really broken her heart? No. He'd opened her eyes.

"Mark, let's just leave it, all right? If you had 'intent', then maybe you should be with someone else. I know I should be." She hung up without waiting for Mark's reply. She held her breath for a moment, waiting for him to call back with his closing arguments, but the phone remained silent. After a few minutes, she lay back on her bed, relieved and a little out of sorts.

Mark wasn't right for her. No need for cross-examination there. But his words still stung. What could she do to convince Eric he was more than a rebound guy? What did she need to do to convince herself?

Chapter Nine

Eric contemplated the bouquet of pink roses he'd picked up on the way to Lauren's apartment. *How cliché*, he thought. She'd probably think he was a sap for bringing her flowers.

Maybe he should have gone with red ones, or perhaps a single rose? He laughed to himself. Why was he worried about her reaction? He'd already shown up on her doorstep with a box of condoms. Any kind of flower could only be a step up in class.

He rang the bell, straightened his tie and waited. He hated ties. Lauren would think he was an ass, showing up with flowers and wearing a tie to impress a girl who'd thrown herself into his arms a week ago.

Maybe that's what this was all about. She'd chosen him then; he wanted her to know he chose her now.

When the door opened, he knew he'd made the right choice. She looked incredible.

Her sexy black dress had barely-there straps and her shoes laced around her ankles. She'd put her hair up and her lips were wet and red as sin, like she'd been sucking on something juicy and sweet.

How was he supposed to concentrate on dinner when she looked like that?

"You're early," she said. He watched her mouth, caught by the shimmer and thought wicked things.

"No traffic." He handed her the flowers.

"Thank you." She seemed to hesitate, bit her lip as she took the roses and stepped back. "Do you want to come in?"

Oh, yes. But if he did, they'd never leave. He wanted to see how that hot little dress looked on the floor. "The reservations are for seven-thirty. We need to get going."

"Okay." Disappointment flickered in her eyes. Who was he kidding? They'd never get through a meal. Just looking at her, the curve of her shoulder, creamy against the thin black strap of her dress, made him hard as a rock. He wanted to taste her, dip his finger down into the tight cleft between her breasts and run his hand up her thigh under the flowing hem of her skirt.

"I'll get my purse and put these in water," she said as she turned toward the kitchen. As she moved, her hips swayed and her dress whirled around her thighs.

Eric licked his lips and tugged at his collar. His cock stood at full attention when she stretched to reach for a vase from a high shelf next to the sink. Her fingers just missed it.

"I need to get the step stool—"

"Don't bother. I've got it." He crossed the living room in three strides, barely aware of the fact he'd shut the door behind him when he entered. He reached over her head to retrieve the vase and all logic fled.

With her body pressed between his and the kitchen countertop, he felt every curve. The scent of her perfume, a musky, warm floral, seeped into his brain and kicked his libido into overdrive.

As they set the vase on the counter, he brought one arm around her waist and drew her body tight against him. She moaned when his lips found the soft spot under her right ear.

"What about dinner?" Her question ended in a sharp sigh of surprise as he burrowed his hand under her skirt, searching for her heat.

"We should...go. Now." His body refused to obey his words. He craned his neck around to make sure he actually had closed the door behind him. He hadn't really meant to, but maybe instinct had taken over. Some part of his brain had known that if he crossed the threshold, the gentleman he'd wanted to be tonight would be left outside in the hall

looking in while bad Eric took over. At least the neighbors wouldn't be doing the same.

"Maybe we...can change the reservation?" Lauren murmured the words through a silky sigh. She backed against him, giving him unspoken permission to do as he pleased. His fingers found the lacey band of her panties and tugged down. He cupped her and seated his erection between her legs.

"This isn't what I had planned for tonight," he told her as he ground his hips against her. She spread her legs and leaned forward. One strap of her dress fell from her shoulder, and Eric was lost.

He held her against him with one hand while the other found the zipper of her dress and yanked it down. When the satiny bodice fell open, he filled that hand with her breast. Her nipple grew hard against his palm.

He planted kisses from the nape of her neck down her spine as he sank to his knees behind her. The dress fell, inch by inch, until it pooled around her ankles, and she kicked it aside.

She braced her hands on the counter as he dragged her black lace panties down to her knees and farther, kissing the sensitive skin behind her knees as he went. She kicked them aside as well, and turned around.

"How do you want me?" she asked. His body seemed to catch fire, burning under his clothes as he gazed at her. He'd been prepared to worship her, but her question transformed him from supplicant to plunderer. A growl bubbled up around his reply.

"On the floor, on your back."

Lauren's knees buckled at Eric's command. A small part of her brain that was still lucid thanked the stars that her kitchen floor had carpeting.

She lay back, watching Eric as he dragged his loosened tie out of his collar. He trailed the strip of silk over her thighs and between her legs. The rasp of fabric set her clit pulsing with need. She arched and dug her

heels into the carpet, writhing for him as he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled off his belt.

He peeled his fly open and released his erection, already glistening at the tip. She wanted him inside her so badly she almost suggested they forget the condom, but that lucid part of her mind wouldn't allow her to be completely irresponsible.

She flicked her gaze in the direction of the bedroom and he understood her telepathic signal.

"Don't worry. I've got one." He produced a foil packet from his back pocket and ripped it open with his teeth.

Had he planned this all along? Did he know she'd be so hot for him after two days apart that she wouldn't care about dinner? She'd worry about that later. Right now...

She reached for his cock, pumped him as he settled over her. Together they rolled the condom down over his shaft. "In me...now!"

He didn't question her directive. Instead, he plunged inside, his hot, hard length filling her. She gasped at the sensation. With no mattress to cushion her hips, no give to the floor, she felt him all the way. "Ah!"

Lauren pulled Eric's body down on top of her and threw her head back. He kissed her neck, her breasts, and began to move. She clung to him, riding the wave of sensation that built higher each time he crashed against her. Her moan became a whimper as her ass slid along the carpet. He pumped harder and she rose to meet him, titling her hips to take him in as deep as she could. His breath rasped in her ear and sweat covered his chest. At the moment his body went rigid, Lauren's orgasm claimed her. She gasped at the sensation of his cock pulsing, thrumming inside her tight channel. She held him while he emptied and he stroked her gently, easing her back from the brink as her inner spasms subsided.

They lay panting, wrapped in each other, Lauren's dress beneath her head and her panties at arm's length on the floor beside her. Eric's tie trailed between her thighs, christened with the essence of their lovemaking.

It had never been that good with anyone else. Eric thought his heart would give out from the intensity of his orgasm and from the overwhelming need to feel Lauren around him. When his racing heartbeat finally slowed and the sheen of sweat that had lubricated their movements cooled, he pushed himself up, straddling Lauren as she lay spent beneath him. He didn't yet trust his legs to hold him, so he rolled to the side, pulling the used condom off carefully for disposal.

"I really wanted to take you to dinner tonight," he said finally. "I didn't plan this."

She rose on her elbows. With her legs now crossed at the knees and one sexy foot dangling, she looked both heavenly and sinful. "So the emergency condom is a throwback to your Boy Scout training?"

"It is." He tried to sound sober and determined. She laughed.

"Do you get a badge for that?" She rolled to retrieve her panties and handed them to him. "Put these back where you found them, please."

"If I must." He slid the lace over her thighs and she shimmied them back into place. He looked at the clock above the dinette. "If we hurry..."

"Hurry? And go out looking like I just had sex on the kitchen floor? No way."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Not hungry enough to go out with my new rug burns showing." She reached around to massage her shoulder and when she turned her back, Eric saw some of the damage they'd done to her creamy skin. He traced a reddened patch with his finger and she shivered.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you."

"It's all right. You can be on the bottom next time."

"No problem." He caught her gaze then zeroed in on the slight trembling of her bottom lip. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and turned away to gather her dress. Eric's heart missed a beat and he scooted across the floor to pull her into his arms. "What's wrong? You didn't...I didn't..."

“You did. You proved your own point, I guess. Or maybe it was my point. I didn’t mean for this to happen when I showed up at your apartment last week. All I wanted...” A deep, shuddering breath interrupted her confession, and hot tears spilled on Eric’s chest. “All I wanted was to be with someone I trusted. I didn’t want to hurt you or lead you on.”

“It’s okay.” Ah, the truth. Lauren didn’t want to date him. He was good for a roll on the kitchen floor, but that was it. Beyond the incredible sex, they were nothing more than friends, drifting apart now because sex had replaced the easy trust they’d built with each other. He smoothed her hair and swallowed a bitter, self-deprecating remark about not minding being her rebound guy.

“It’s not okay, Eric. I want more than just this.” She shook a handful of black satin at him. “I want to be with you. I don’t care about fancy dinners or keeping a respectable distance during the week. I want you here, all the time. I know that doesn’t make sense. I know it’s stupid to think I’m in love with you after one week of—”

“You think you’re in love with me?”

“No. Yes! How can I be sure? Is this love?”

Eric looked around the kitchen. His pants lay under a chair. His tie smelled like sex and the roses he’d brought lay wilting on the counter above their heads. *God, yes.*

“Maybe not *this*,” he replied. “Sex in the kitchen might just be sex. But this...” He kissed her, each cheek, her nose, her lips. He folded her body against him and kissed her hair. “I think this might be.”

“How can we tell?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we start by getting dressed? Then we can order some Chinese food and watch a movie, or talk...and then go to bed, alone or together. Whatever feels right at the time.”

Lauren smiled through her tears. “You sound so wise. This is why I always come to you for advice.”

“Well, no more of that. I’m not going to help you deal with your man problems anymore.”

“What will I do...if I have man problems?” Lauren nuzzled his ear, kissed him, and her head dipped down, seeking access to the smooth skin above his collarbone.

“If I’m your man, you won’t have any problems.”

She laughed. And laughed.

“Hey.” He tapped her nose.

“Sorry. It’s a sweet sentiment. I guess I’ll just have to rely on Tara and Roxy to get us through the rough patches in our relationship.”

“Heaven help us.” He kissed her again and cradled her in his arms as he lowered her back to the floor.

“I thought you said kitchen sex was just sex,” she said as he tucked her dress behind her shoulders and dove in to taste the sweet spot beneath her collar bone.

“It is. But I think I have another condom in my other pocket—and the only rough patches we’re going to have will be on your butt.”

She bit his earlobe and rolled on top of him.

“Or maybe mine!” he said.

“Burn, baby, burn!” Lauren giggled as she straddled Eric and set to work giving him a few rug burns of his own.

About the Author

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Two firefighters battle the hottest flames they've encountered—their attraction to one another.

Red Hot Lover

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After a fire sweeps through the school where she teaches and she's unable to save the life of her best friend, Faith Sloan leaves the chalkboard jungle for a career as a firefighter, only to find that one of her former students may be the arsonist responsible for the current devastation in her area of the city.

Without losing her trust, Captain Chance James must ensure that his rookie firefighter doesn't get caught between the truth and a killer. He's willing to bend the rules to protect Faith from harm, but there's nothing he can do to shield his own heart once they become lovers. Faith takes him into her bed, her parents take him into their home as he recuperates from a freak accident, and soon the rough-and-ready firefighter must decide what he wants most...his woman or his career.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Red Hot Lover*:

Chance's fingers slid through the soft curtain of hair, giving him access to the zipper, and he felt her shiver slightly when the backs of his fingers grazed her neck. He bent to drop a light kiss on her shoulder as the dress slid down her arms, and when she relaxed against him, exposing her breasts to the moonlight, he knew he was a goner.

Her arms crept up and back to entwine about his neck, and she rolled her head against his chest, giving him total access to her body from the front and inviting his hands to claim her.

He'd never known a woman so trusting, so willing to give herself to the moment. To unabashedly invite him as she had, to taste and touch her. And he wasn't about to say no.

She turned in his arms and began aggressively undressing him, her fingers sure and confident as she released his belt and practically ripped his shirt open.

“Faith!” he whispered, his head bent to her hair. “Are you sure that you...?”

“I’m sure!” she said, pressing her lips against his chest and trailing kisses across it as she continued in her quest to strip him to the bone. “I want you!”

After a failed marriage several years back, in which case nobody wanted anybody, and several affairs in which case the spark just wasn’t there, Chance was overwhelmed with her passion, her audacity, and her...*enjoyment* of the moment. She took his breath away!

The little devil on his shoulder smiled an evil *ah-ha* as they tumbled to the bed in a flurry of undergarments.

He tried to register his thoughts, to rationalize why he was a party to this seduction, how he could possibly face her afterwards once she knew how their relationship would change come Monday morning. He struggled not to fall into the abyss she’d created and to cling to at least one solid reason for not sleeping with her tonight.

“Faith, I didn’t plan...that is, I didn’t bring any...”

She leaned over and pulled a foil packet from her beside table. “Taken care of, sir.”

“But...this is...I mean, you’ve had a bit to drink tonight.”

“I’m not drunk.” She shut him up with a kiss. “Intoxicated in another way, but I assure you that I am not drunk.”

Chance lay back and moaned in ecstasy as Faith administered the condom on his aching shaft.

“Captain,” Faith said, after she’d managed to land on top of him, with his hands on her bare hips and her body poised above him. “I’m not asking for your hand in marriage.” She cupped his balls as she slid down on him.

“Nope,” he agreed breathlessly, enunciating each following word clearly in an effort to maintain concentration. “That wouldn’t be my hand.”

“Then show a little enthusiasm.” She gouged him in the ribs and laughed. “You’re not immune to me, are you?”

“This feel like I’m immune?” His hips thrust to meet hers.

Faith eased herself up and down over his body, rubbing her stomach with her fingertips before letting them travel upwards to caress her own breasts and then to slip into her hair as Chance’s hands replaced hers on her body. And as blood gathered speed and intensity in his veins and his rod became more rigid, she began thrusting harder, taking him deeper and eliciting one unvarnished groan after another from him, her body glistening with sweat the closer she came to climaxing.

Chance pulled her off him and rolled her onto her back.

“No!” she cried. “Chance...no...please!”

“I want to taste you as you come.” He growled, burying his face into the moist curls that had rubbed against his groin moments before.

He thrust his tongue inside of her and laved her clit, tugging at it until he had his teeth gently but securely planted on it. She clutched his hair and screamed...

What was happening to her? This wasn’t what she’d planned. She’d just wanted to release some pent up emotions, not fall for the guy.

Tears pooled in her eyes as her brain finally caught up with her body. This wasn’t fucking—this was mating, and she had definitely crossed over into unfamiliar territory.

He's vice. She's nice. This potent mix has to be handled with care...

Strip Tease

© 2006 Kate Davies

It seemed easy enough. Hit the local all-male strip club, pick a likely target, and hire him for her best friend's bachelorette party. But the stripper who catches Caroline's eye has a different agenda. He's an undercover cop, and Caroline ends up under arrest — for solicitation!

Tony DiMarco realizes too late that he's made a mistake. Caroline's reputation and business are suffering, and he feels responsible. He feels something else, too — the pull of red-hot desire. He wants Caroline, but she's afraid that he's just trying to make up for his mistake. Can this determined vice cop teach her to trust again?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Strip Tease*:

What the hell?

Caroline stopped at the entryway into the club, staring around in confusion. When she'd slipped backstage, everything had been calm, almost comatose, especially since the stripper who had followed Tony had been the poster child for anticlimactic.

Now, the entire room was in chaos. People were shouting, tables knocked over, drinks spilled across the floor. A uniformed police officer stood in the doorway yelling orders through a megaphone that no one was listening to. One of the bachelorette party attendees was bent over the funky-haired waiter, her knee in the small of his back, cuffing his hands behind him. Another was lining up the dancers against the far wall, holding a gun on them.

A gun! Caroline backed away, trying to escape the madhouse in front of her. There had to be a back exit somewhere around here...

She made it a couple of steps before she ran into a solid object. A warm, well-muscled, breathing object. “Where are you going?” Tony gripped her upper arms.

Any other time, she would have focused on how good it felt to have his hands on her. Right now, though, she only wanted to escape. “We have to get out of here. The whole place has gone crazy.” She turned just enough to see his profile. “I think some people are getting arrested.”

She couldn’t get caught up in this. It was tough enough being a massage therapist, what with all the assumptions about the profession. If news got out that she’d visited a strip club—especially one where illegal activities were evidently happening—it could destroy her career and her reputation.

“This is a bust,” Tony said in her ear, his hands sliding down her arms.

“I know,” she hissed back. “I can’t be found here. Is there a back door or something?”

“Yes,” he said, his fingers circling her wrists. “But you won’t be using it.”

Too late, she realized he was snapping something around her wrists. “What are you doing?” She struggled, but the restraints were metal and unyielding.

“You have the right to remain silent,” he answered. Grasping her by the elbow, he pulled her into the main room. “Everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“You’re arresting me?” Caroline knew she was shrieking, but it wasn’t as if anyone could hear her besides the stripper-slash-cop dragging her into the fray. “What for?”

“Solicitation.” He turned her around so she was lined up with the rest of the criminals. Criminals!

“Solic—” She gaped at him. “You thought I was trying to pay you for *sex*?”

Silence descended on the room, heads swiveling her direction.

“You have the right to an attorney,” Tony continued, unaffected by her outburst.

“I was trying to hire a stripper for a friend’s bachelorette party, you moron,” she yelled, too angry to care that they were the center of attention.

“Let’s get everyone down to headquarters and sort this out,” a female cop said, placing her hand on Tony’s shoulder. Her lips twitched, as if she were trying to hold back a grin. “Nice show, by the way. I don’t blame her for wanting to see you strip again, whatever the circumstances.”

“Stuff it, Phillips,” he replied, his gaze focused on Caroline.

“You probably do.” Caroline looked at his groin contemptuously. “And after I sue you for false arrest, you’d better believe I never want to see you—in or out of your clothes—again.”

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