

# MASQUERADE

By

Sydney Somers

© copyright by Sydney Somers, March 2005

Cover Art by Jenny Dixon, © copyright March 2005

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

## Chapter One

"You cannot tell me the idea of hot, sizzling sex with a masked stranger isn't remotely appealing?"

Katherine poked through her salad in search of a piece of chicken. "Call me crazy but sex with Zorro doesn't make it onto my list of top ten fantasies."

Across the table Lucy leaned forward, her eyes widening. "You have ten?" Slumping back in her chair, Lucy pushed away her half-eaten sandwich. "And here I thought I was doing pretty good with a healthy five."

Kat shrugged. "Some of us just have good imaginations."

"Or too much time on their hands. When was the last time you hooked up anyway?"

Kath glanced around the lunchroom thankful no one was around to hear the turn in conversation. "It

hasn't been that long."

"Liar. I'm betting it's been at least over a year."

Closer to two, but Kat saw no reason to admit it. Given the hours she put in at work, little time was left for things like dating. And as far as meeting the right man went, when it was meant to be it would happen.

Simple as that.

She'd had survived the past 26 years without Mr. Right and saw no need to be out enlisting candidates to fill the role. One of these days he'd emerge from the wood work on his own and wreak serious havoc on her senses with just one soul-stealing look.

"You could have hooked up with Nigel a couple months ago."

"I don't hook up with people I work with." Which was a damn shame because Nigel's sex appeal was nothing short of utterly devastating. Making it no surprise he played the lead in every one of her fantasies lately. Now and then she wondered what would have happened had she agreed to go out with him any one of the three times he'd asked. But Nigel's best friend owned the paper they both worked for and she'd already learned the hard way not to mix business with pleasure.

"Well if you know what's good for you, you'll find yourself a sexy mystery man tonight at the gala and... loosen up a bit."

Katherine pointed her fork at Lucy. "I am most definitely loose."

"Hey Nigel," Lucy said.

Kat resisted the urge to hide her face and instead nodded politely in his direction as though he'd walked in on a perfectly reasonable statement.

Tall, bookish handsome given his scholarly glasses and perpetual frown, Nigel Trask wasn't the traditional lady-killer. But his athletic frame and his silky brown hair--worn a bit longer than most men--gave him a primitive, wild look Kat was achingly aware of. Every time their eyes met since her first day over three months ago, she could feel him slowly strip off every last piece of her clothing. The resulting spark of excitement those molten looks ignited was undeniable.

So why was she still so determined not to get involved with him? A question she'd been asking herself for 94 days, 12 hours and oh, about eleven minutes. Of course there was that whole--been there, done that, got the pink slip to prove it--thing still weighing on her mind. A person who didn't learn from past mistakes was destined to repeat them. She wasn't in any rush to have her heart trampled again to boost

someone's career.

Nigel nodded at Lucy before fixing his attention on Kat, one amused eyebrow arching over his glasses. He said nothing, as was his habit. He brought all new meaning to the term, strong silent type. She could count on one hand how many times he'd actually spoken to her. But even though he seldom spoke, she had no trouble reading the unmistakable hunger in his eyes. With every lingering gaze, Kat became increasingly conscious of her melting resolve.

Lucy stood up, carrying the remains of her lunch to the garbage. "Are you going to the gala tonight, Nigel?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"What, no date lined up?"

"Not exactly."

And exactly what did that mean, Kat wanted to ask. Of course, it was none of her business whom Nigel dated. She had her chance and passed. Still, the thought of another woman being the recipient of those slow, caressing gazes irritated her to no end.

"But you're still going," Lucy prompted.

Nigel nodded. "I'm told I'm required to make an appearance."

Lucy skirted the edge of the table. "You sound about as enthusiastic as Kat."

Ug, the gala. There were hundreds of things she could be doing instead of getting dressed up and spending the evening with a silly mask on. It might have been fun if Lucy was going with her. Instead she'd have to walk around in a crowd of strangers and try not to look as though wished she were anywhere but there. Alone.

"Girls, where have you been all my life?" Blonde, brutish and without a subtle bone in his self-absorbed body, Leo Harris strode into the lunchroom. His arrogant gait faltered upon seeing Nigel in the room. The air thickened and Kat could almost smell the testosterone. She half expected them to circle and then charge at each other. It was no secret the men disliked each other and stayed out of the other's way whenever possible.

Ignoring Nigel, Leo pulled up a chair. "What are you three gossiping about?" Leo asked. Behind him Nigel rolled his eyes. A smile tugged at the corners of Kat's lips so she smashed them together and concentrated on securing the lid on her salad container.

"You two going to the gala tonight?" Leo asked, his attention fixing on Kat. Unlike Nigel's gaze, which she liked entirely too much, Leo gave the impression he was studying his own reflection when he looked into her eyes.

Grabbing a coffee to take back to her desk, Kat let Lucy answer that one.

"I'm not going, my daughter has a school concert, but Kat and Nigel are going."

Leo frowned. "Together?"

"No." Kat answered a little too quickly. She felt Nigel's eyes on her and raised her head. She'd made her decision about not dating him--to avoid complications at work--and she'd stick to it. Right?

There was no more than ten feet separating them, but it felt like mere inches. The amused look had vanished from his eyes and instead they were sharp and... annoyed?

Leo's voice gave her an excuse to look away.

"Sucks that everyone has to wear their masks until midnight. And what's with this crap about being fined five hundred dollars if you're caught removing it before then."

"It's for charity," Kat reminded him.

"Yeah well it still sucks. How am I going to recognize anyone? Hey Kat, what are you wearing tonight?"

That was definitely a question she didn't want to answer.

Lucy saved her by jumping in. "Kat, you forgot to give me that number for that guy."

"Right, it's on my desk. I'll go grab it." Kat didn't wait for Leo to repeat his question before slipping from the room. The only thing worse than attending the masquerade gala alone, would be enduring Leo's irritating presence while he spent the evening talking to her breasts.

A few minutes later Lucy poked her head in Kat's office door. "You're going to have a great time."

Kat dropped her chin in her palm. "I wish you were going." Only a handful of people from the office had been invited to the gala, none of whom Kat knew very well. And there was still the issue of possibly not recognizing those she did know. She should have found a date, but seeing as how it was only a few hours away, there was no time.

"Maybe you'll meet someone tonight. Now that would be romantic. Dimmed lights, soft music, a masked

man with a very big--"

"Luce!"

Lucy grinned. "Oh come on. Like you haven't thought about it."

"I haven't thought about it... much," she added.

"When was the last time you just went out and had fun anyway, Ms. Workaholic?"

Kat tried to sound offended, but knew there was some truth to it. "I have fun all the time." Practically a bold face lie. Although she was very ambitious about building her reputation as a journalist, her personal life barely gave off a spark.

"Yeah well, you won't turn into a pumpkin at midnight, so promise me if a wickedly sexy guy sweeps you off your feet you'll just... go with it."

The odds of that happening were slim to none, but Lucy didn't look like she'd budge from the door until Kat agreed.

"I promise."

\* \* \* \*

Nigel Trask stared at his reflection, satisfied with the overall look.

The hair cut was different for him, much shorter than usual and he wasn't overly fond of tuxes, but it was all worth it.

For three months he had waited. Waited for his chance to prove to Kat there was something between them, something real. He'd tried ignoring that feeling after she shot him down the first time. Then he caught sight of her nibbling on her thumbnail, those sexy titian curls falling from the haphazard up-do she pushed it into most afternoons.

The second time she passed on his offer of dinner, he swore he was done with it. But every time he turned around she was there with her siren eyes the color of green ice and that soft, sexy smile. And those damn power suits she insisted on wearing only hinted at the soft curves underneath. Hell, when he'd walked into the copy room and spotted her sweet behind as she wrestled paper from the jammed copier, it took considerable willpower not to tear the blasted thing off her.

Which led to his third invitation. That time he watched the silent battle wage in her eyes before that all-

work-and-no-play look returned and he knew he'd lost.

All of which should have been no big deal, aside from the minor blow to his ego. He could take the sting of rejection and sure as hell should have moved on by now. Yet....

He wanted Kat.

There was simply no getting around it, no point in pretending he'd get over whatever fascination she held for him. The only real problem was her ridiculous no-dating coworkers policy and the sleepless nights it caused. It was even getting to the point he couldn't leave his office without running into her and risk getting a colossal hard on.

But no matter. That was all about to change, starting tonight. Lately he'd detected a thaw in Kat's tone, a signal it was time to move in for the kill. Tonight's annual charity masquerade ball sponsored by the paper was the perfect setting to make Kat forget about work, about their jobs, about everything but him.

"Whoa stud, where are you off to?"

Nigel adjusted his tie before glancing at his fourteen year old nephew. "Charity gala."

"Planning on picking up?"

"Maybe. Where are you off to?"

"Mom's driving me over to Mark's and then we're going to a bonfire. Tell me about the date in the morning, K?"

"Sure."

Nigel took once last look at himself before picking up his mask. "I hope you're ready for this Kat."

\* \* \* \*

Wow, Kat thought. Even she was impressed with the way she looked tonight. The jade gown her sister lent her hugged her midsection, flowed out over her hips and dropping almost straight to the floor. The neckline plunged deeper than she was comfortable with, but seeing as how no one would recognize her and she didn't plan on staying long, she didn't care. Her sister had piled half of her untamable hair atop her head, letting the remaining loose curls cascade off her bare shoulders.

"My little sister is all grown up."

Kat met her sister's eyes in the mirror. "I've been grown up for quite a while, Sheryl."

"I know. It just seems like something mom would have said seeing you all done up like this."

They shared quiet smile, neither saying how much they missed the woman that had been taken from them too soon.

"So," Sheryl said after a long moment, "You sure you don't want to call up Nigel and coerce a ride out of him. At least then you'd know someone."

Kat turned and hugged Sheryl. She was always surprised at how well her sister could read her, even somewhat thankful for it most of the time.

"I'm sure. Besides he's probably bringing a date anyway."

"You know, not every guy you work with is like Vance."

Grabbing her purse and mask, a feathery splash of tropical colors, Kat switched off the light. "Let's save that discussion for the car, okay?"

In case she decided to have a couple glasses of champagne, Sheryl had volunteered to drive her to the gala and Kat would take a cab home. On the drive over a hum of nervous energy rattled inside her and by the time they pulled up in front of the hotel, her heart was skipping madly.

"Have fun," Sheryl ordered before pulling away.

Taking a breath for courage, Kat slipped her mask on and walked into the lobby, falling in behind a group of masked people.

Inside the grand ballroom chandeliers glistened overhead and soft music drifted on the air. Ivy threaded with twinkling lights wrapped around ornate columns that stretched from floor to ceiling. Over two hundred had to be in attendance, each mask she passed more interesting or absurd. Most were like her own, covering the face from forehead to just above the lips. She could have passed Sheryl or Lucy in here and not recognized them.

A waiter passed and she snagged a glass of champagne from the tray.

And then she spotted him, whoever he was.

The man leaned against one of the tall columns, giving the impression he supported the sculpted pillar instead of it being the other way around. It was impossible to tell who he was, or whether he was in fact

looking at her at all. But somehow she knew. Dressed entirely in black, dark hair, his mask a twisted shade of scarlet and black, he reminded her of a pirate. A ghost of a smile touched his lips and something about it stuck in the back of her mind.

Did she know him?

A crowd of people moved between them and Kat sipped her champagne, resisting the urge to search through the group for him.

Who was he? Unable to help herself, she glanced in his direction only to discover he'd disappeared.

A familiar boast caught her attention. Kat turned and found herself looking at Leo's back. His mask was firmly in place, but there was no mistaking that arrogant stance and know-it-all tip of his head. He was the only person she had recognized and the absolute last she wanted to spend a second of her time with.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and she glanced around, half expecting to see the masked pirate behind her. She scanned the surrounding crowd, but caught no sign of him.

For the next while she circulated, being drawn into small groups, making the usual small talk. Once the conversation turned to politics, a subject that tended to get a bit heated in some instances, Kat excused herself, nearly colliding with a powerful and undoubtedly male body. She didn't need to look up to know it was him.

The pirate.

His gray eyes clung to hers for endless seconds before he politely excused himself and vanished into the crowd. She stared after him, the warmth of his fingers still lingering on her arm. Had she imagined the interest that flickered in his eyes?

Taking a deep, unsteady breath, Kat made her way toward the wide terrace doors open to let the warm night breeze in. Below her the impressive gardens and shimmering pools were lit by antique lampposts, at the same time casting shadowy places for lovers to take advantage of. A couple hurried down the stairs ahead of her, their hands clasped, their heads close together. She could easily imagine what was on their minds as they left the marked trail and disappeared from sight.

Did they know each other, or were they complete strangers under the evening's spell? Surrounded by the mysterious, the unknown, she too felt the subtle magic of the night.

Kat felt the air shift around her and knew without turning around, her pirate had returned.

His deep, sensual voice sent a ripple of awareness through her. "A beautiful woman should never be left alone."



## Chapter Two

Stunning.

Nigel stood in a quiet awe, waiting for Kat to turn around. Even with her mask, he was certain he would have been able to pick her out. A vibrant energy surrounded her, always drawing him towards her. If a flame was this entrancing to a moth, he now understood why it risked being burned simply to get closer.

She stood with such a quiet confidence, a fallen star that still flickered brightly despite being out of her element. And parties such as this were far from Kat's element. He'd done his homework enough to know she was too content with her own company, often choosing to work on a story in seclusion over socializing. Perhaps that was just one more side of her that attracted him so completely. Not so long ago he had preferred to spend most evenings working on a story, focused on building his own reputation as a journalist. Lately he found himself wanting... something more.

Slowly, Kat turned around and an overwhelming need to be close to her slammed into him with the force of an oncoming train. Her fingers tightened around the champagne glass she held, then relaxed. Nervous was she? Relieved to discover he wasn't the only one affected, Nigel forced himself to cross his arms and lean against the doorjamb. At work she always appeared to know exactly what she wanted and how to get it, all the while staying in control, remaining objective. A trait he'd possessed until she walked into his life. But tonight Kat wasn't the one calling the shots, and he didn't plan on giving her the opportunity.

"How is it such a beautiful creature finds herself alone on the terrace?"

She tipped her chin up. "Who said I was alone?"

Keeping his voice deliberately low, he took a step towards her. "I've been watching you."

Kat backed up, but the terrace rail was behind her. "Why?"

"Beautiful things catch my attention. And you've captured mine fully."

She glanced beyond him at the door. Was she looking for an escape route? Nigel took two steps into the doorway in case she decided to bolt. Tonight there would be no interruptions, no chances for her to slip away. Tonight there would be only the two of them.

Kat took a sip of her champagne, caught a drop at the corner of her mouth with her tongue. Explosive currents supercharged his blood. Pretending interest in the gardens, he crossed the few feet and leaned over the terrace rail to peer into the shadows.

"Are you here alone, as well?" she asked.

Nigel was close enough to smell the scent of her shampoo, lavender. He transferred his gaze from the lighted shrubbery below to her face. Her eyes were the deepest green he'd ever seen. "Yes. It's fortunate isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Our meeting like this. Had we brought dates we might have missed our chance." He turned his body towards her, every cell wanting to hold her, taste her, make love to her.

Kat tilted her head, boldly meeting his gaze. "Our chance to what?"

Nigel grinned. "To get to know each other. All of each other." He waited for her to grasp his meaning.

She glanced away and he braced himself for another rejection, cursing the fact that he'd no doubt pushed her too far too quickly. Why was it he couldn't seem to keep his head within ten feet of this woman?

Seconds ticked by. After a long moment she looked up at him, her eyes round, daring. He reached down and took her hand, his thumb stroking the pulse at her wrist. A pulse pounding as fast as his.

The beginning of a smile softened her mouth. "And how do you suggest we get to know each other?"

Nigel leaned down, watched her eyes flare. Would they do that when she was naked, in his arms, right before he filled her completely?

He brushed her hair back, spoke close to her ear. "I was thinking we should start with a dance."

Her fingers closed around his. He took that for a "yes" and set her glass aside before leading her back inside. He found them a spot close to the terrace and the cool night air. A wall of lattice entwined with ivy shielded them from everyone but the closest couples. The music was soft, magical as she slipped into

his arms.

The plunging neckline of her gown caught his attention, the tops of two full breasts exposed for his admiration.

"Why do men seem to find breasts infinitely more interesting than women's eyes?"

Flashing a suggestive smile, Nigel met her amused gaze. "Perhaps it is because we hunger to see what lies hidden from us." He spun them around the room. He'd have to remember to thank his sister for insisting he take those dance lessons for his parent's anniversary party. "Women are very perceptive. If I looked to into your eyes too often you might see what I'm really after."

"Of course, you could save me the trouble of trying to guess and simply tell me."

He paused only a moment before answering. "You."

Kat shivered in his arms. A jolt of raw need twisted through him. He tore his eyes away from the soft swells of her breasts before his better sense abandoned him completely and he dragged her from the room.

She moved a fraction closer. "Well if you're so interested in me, then how come you haven't at least asked my name?"

"I will."

"When?" Her voice, though quiet, was laced with impatience.

"When the moment is right." He bit back a smile when she rolled her eyes.

"Are you always this evasive?"

One song blended into the next. "Do you always ask this many questions?"

When she only arched a brow he added, "At midnight. When we remove our masks."

"And until then what will we call each other?"

"You only have nine left."

She frowned. "Nine what?"

"Make that eight. Questions. Isn't that the game we're playing? Twenty questions."

She grinned up at him and intense pleasure trumpeted in Nigel's chest. They continued to maneuver the dance floor, each movement making him increasing aware of her body. Although he'd had plenty of dreams about the two of them, none felt as real as she did in his arms at this moment.

"You remind me of an English Lord who leads a double life... as a pirate."

So practical Katherine Sinclair had an imagination after all. Would she be so imaginative in bed? "A pirate is a much more exciting career than what I actually do. Nevertheless what would this pirate's name be?"

She frowned for a moment, her green eyes pensive. "Hawk," she said with a playful curving of her lips.

Nigel nodded, his gaze riveted to those full lips. "Much better than Red Beard I suppose. Of course now I'll have to think of a name for you."

Caressing the back of her neck with his thumb, he drew her closer. Would she still taste like the strawberries he'd watched her nibble on earlier?

"Katherine." A masculine voice rang out before Leo squeezed through the surrounding crowd, dragging his date behind him.

Nigel tensed. The arrogant jerk had very bad timing. He wasn't ready to reveal himself and that decision would be out of his hands if Leo recognized him. It had been sheer luck Kat hadn't.

"I was hoping it was you. Wow," Leo drawled, ignoring Nigel completely and focusing on Kat. "When Lucy told me what you'd be wearing, I didn't think you look so hot, babe."

Kat glanced past Leo's shoulder, sympathy for the man's date obvious in her expression.

"We were just going out for some air," Kat said.

"Actually, we could use some cooling off too couldn't we, sugar?" Leo glanced momentarily at his date before his gaze roamed Kat from head to toe.

If it wouldn't ruin his plans, Nigel would gladly knock Leo on his ass. But being with Kat was more important than physically putting the horse's ass in his place.

Setting a possessive hand on Kat's hip, he tugged her back against him.

The unmistakable gesture had Leo's eyes shooting between the two of them. His lips curled. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Hawk," Kat said.

"Like the bird?"

Itching to wipe the smirk off Leo's face, Nigel merely inclined his head and narrowed his eyes.

Leo backed up a step. His date said something about the ladies room then disappeared. Now if only Leo would follow her lead.

"How about a dance, Katherine? A little fun among friends."

Nigel doubted Kat thought of Leo as a friend and tried not to smile when Kat shook her head. "I'm a little tired right now Leo."

"Ahh, come on. I'm sure your bird friend won't mind."

Nigel tightened his grip on her waist. "Actually I do. And Kat said no."

Leo took a menacing step towards him "Look pal...."

Nigel didn't let him finish before connecting his fist with Leo's jaw. The man's head snapped back, his eyes closing as he staggered back against the wall. Nigel felt the surrounding dancers staring at them, but no one said anything.

Kat gestured to Leo, her attention fixed on the curious on lookers. "He had too much to drink."

Mumbling under his breath, Leo shoved away from the wall. His dazed expression drifted between them, before focusing on Nigel. He opened his mouth, but Nigel cut him off. "I suggest you find your date and then a cab." For a moment, he expected Leo to argue. Instead he shrugged Nigel off and stumbled into the crowd.

A sense of relief rolled through him and he turned back to Kat.

She studied him with a critical eye. "You called me Kat," she said matter-of-factly.

Nigel stilled. "What?"

"Just a second ago, you called me Kat. You know me, don't you?"

\* \* \* \*

Kat stared up at him, her brain scrambling to piece everything together. Maybe she did know him after all. Since the terrace she felt she knew him somehow, but nothing about him added up to any of the men she knew. He could have been someone that simply worked in the same building, but something about him....

Only Nigel was as tall as Hawk, but he wore his hair longer than the near stranger in front of her. There was the sports writer who worked with Leo, but he wasn't nearly as smooth as Hawk. And the PC tech always working on her computer had a lisp, so that definitely ruled him out. And something about Hawk's voice seemed so familiar. Familiar in the same way she recognized a caller's voice on the phone, but needed a couple minutes of conversation before she could put a name to the person calling.

Hawk smiled easily. "My cousin's name is Katherine and most people call her Kat for short."

It could have been true, but she sensed he wasn't being fully honest with her. "You sure we've never met before tonight?" Her brain refused to accept the fact they hadn't.

Damn it, why couldn't she remember?

Hawk took her hands. Warmth seeped into her skin. "Do you feel it, Kat? This pull between us?"

Kat stared up at him. Unable to deny the fiery currents surging through her veins at his soft touch, she nodded.

He led her back out to the terrace. "I've been under some kind of spell ever since I saw you."

Somehow she knew he was talking about more than seeing her tonight. She raised her head to find him watching her. Soft gray eyes burned into hers. She would've remembered those eyes wouldn't she? She wanted to rip off his mask right now to be certain.

Hawk cupped her chin, his thumb rubbing her jaw in a slow, seductive rhythm. "You think too much."

He leaned forward, his breath warm on her cheek. "Midnight isn't far off, let's not waste it talking," he murmured.

Kat closed her eyes, breathed in the scent of him, woods and ocean. "And what will happen at midnight?"

"I will answer all of your questions."

"And until then?"

"We enjoy each other's company."

For tonight anyway. She didn't say it aloud, but he tilted her face towards him as though he'd heard her.

"I'm not just looking for a diversion, Kat."

She wanted to ask what that meant, whether or not he'd be there when the charade really ended. It scared her to admit just how much she wanted him to be. And now she was getting way ahead of herself. She needed to slow down, enjoy the fire flickering to life inside her and not think about tomorrow.

Hawk slid his hands down her arms, the tips of his fingers shooting a delicious shudder from her toes to her head. She leaned into him, eager to discover how else her body would respond to him.

He didn't disappoint her.

Cradling her against his chest, he walked her back to the side of the building. They were out of immediate sight should anyone step outside. His eyes raked over her, the desire in the gray depths sending waves of excitement stampeding through her. He didn't touch her, almost as if he wasn't sure where to begin.

"I've been thinking about this for too long," he whispered before beginning a series of slow, scorching kissed down the side of her neck.

Kat dragged in a breath, melted against him. "You mean since tonight, right?"

He ignored her, and Kat couldn't seem to make herself care as his teeth scraped her collarbone with delicate precision.

"What is it about you that makes me want to...."

Her body hummed, a feverish ache building between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together to soothe the soft tightening. "Makes you want to what?" she asked.

His gray eyes flashed a gentle warning. "No more talking."

Then kiss me.

Reading her mind, his mouth moved over hers, devouring it with a shivery softness that stole her breath.

The world tipped on its axis, the purely sensual experience forcing her heart into an erratic rhythm. The

subtle tension clinging to Hawk vanished as he teased her mouth open, the fierce passion in his kiss devastating her senses. His hands moved from her waist and cupped her bottom, drawing her against the hard length of his arousal. Between her legs quivered, an instinctive need propelling her closer to him.

"Much better than any dream," he confessed.

She could barely raise her voice above a whisper. "Are you sure this is really happening?"

He raised his head, locked his arms around her waist. Entrancing eyes gripped her very soul. "Nothing that feels this good could be anything, but real."

An unexpected warmth unraveled in her chest. Before she could read too much into his words she was swept away by the possessive force of his kiss. Subtle and intimate, the kiss intensified, his tongue teasing its way along her lips. Nipping the corner of his mouth, she invited him deeper. She ignored the whispers in her mind to proceed slowly. Being in his arms was like a drug. She'd be damned if she'd walk away when she couldn't remember ever feeling so alive.

Taking the initiative Kat slid her hands under his jacket. A steady heat smoldered under her palms as she explored his chest through his shirt. Hawk's fingers toyed with the straps of her dress before boldly slipping them past her shoulders. He cupped first one breast and then the other through her gown.

Her nipples firmed instantly under his hands. He circled the tight peaks, grazing but never quite touching. Biting back a moan, she arched against the cool brick wall at her back. She met his hungry gaze and silently begged for more.

His answering grin made the tender ache between her legs intensify. Cool air rushed across her breasts when he tugged her dress down. She opened her mouth to protest, but he must have sensed it coming and seized her lips in a ravaging kiss. Her eyes drifted closed, the delicious throb between her thighs, tightening.

His mouth broke away from hers to explore the chilled expanse of skin between her neck and her breasts.

His tongue curled around her nipple, the sinful caress destroying the last of Kat's defenses. She gripped his shoulders. A shaky moan skidded past her lips.

"The gardens are beautiful at night." A woman's voice pierced the night air. "Let me show you."

Hawk hid her from view as a couple passed them and descended into the gardens.

Groaning, he rested his forehead against hers. "Come upstairs with me?"



## Chapter Three

All the air left Kat's lungs in a rush. Go upstairs with him? She swallowed hard, struggled to gather her racing thoughts. Yanking her dress back into place, she felt him watch every movement. She paused and stared up in his eyes. He wanted her to go upstairs with him?

Do it, take a chance. Lucy's voice echoed in her head.

Hawk's gaze traveled over her face. "I know we don't know each other very well yet, but I can't let you go. I won't let you go."

"You have a room here?" If he had a room that had to mean she'd never met him, didn't it?

"Not yet." He grinned down at her as though she'd agreed.

"I don't know," she began only to have all objections slip away when his lips tantalized the curve of her jaw. Each insistent brush of his mouth hurtled her past any lingering reservations.

"Say yes, Kat. Please. Come upstairs with me." The deep rasp of his voice affected her more than she wanted it to.

"I..." Her brain crawled at a snail's pace. The heady effect of his touch slowed all processes to the point she knew she didn't want things to stop here.

He traced the neck of her gown, dipping a finger between the raised swells. The pads of his fingers scuffed her sensitive nipples. Dissolving against him, she closed her eyes.

"Come with me. I promise you won't regret it." He tugged on the hard peaks and pleasure spiked through her.

She tipped her face up. "Yes."

His lips curved into a wide smile. After adjusting her gown one last time, Hawk drew her into his arms, his mouth melting against her in a slow, surprisingly tender kiss.

More people walked out onto the terrace, breaking the spell that had held them both entranced.

"Shall we go inside?"

Kat nodded, watching as he reached down and laced her fingers with his.

She wanted to believe the affectionate gesture meant more than it did. They were merely two consenting adults looking to enjoy the obvious physical chemistry sizzling between them. She couldn't allow herself to think about what would happen after....

Kat shook off the troublesome thoughts. She wanted this, wanted him.

Following him into the ballroom, she blinked against the bright lights inside. Self-conscious, she glanced down at her gown to make sure everything was in place and no one could tell what they'd been doing out on the terrace. Excitement trickled through her. Had she been missing out on life, missing out on someone like Hawk by focusing solely on her career? It didn't matter. Tonight, she was taking a chance, having fun.

Sexy, wicked fun. A satisfied smile teased the corners of her mouth. Lucy would be damn impressed.

From the corner of her eye, Kat saw Leo moving to intercept them. Hawk shouldered past him without breaking stride.

"Not now, Leo," he snapped.

Kat only shrugged over her shoulder at him as she was pulled through the crowd. "See you on Monday, Leo."

Hawk tugged her closer. "Maybe I won't be done with you by then."

Kat shivered at the possessive edge to his voice.

Moving behind her, he brushed her hair aside. He dropped a gentle kiss on her shoulder. Through her gown she felt his erection press against her hip. Searing vibrations echoed through her sex. Brazenly, she inched closer to him.

He sucked in his breath. "Wait right here. I won't take long."

He didn't move.

Was he worried she'd run off? Not in this life. "I won't move," she promised. "Cross my heart."

Amusement flickered in his eyes and he nodded. She snared a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and watched Hawk disappear out the door leading to the hotel lobby.

Was this crazy? She didn't know Hawk.

Kat frowned. That wasn't even his real name. What would happen when they went upstairs? Would they remove their masks at the same time? Perhaps they could keep them on. Now that was crazy, or just really kinky. But there was something to be said for the comfort gained by the unknown. Hawk didn't have expectations about her or plans beyond the moment. He wasn't out to use her to get ahead in his career. There was no pressure to be someone she wasn't.

Would that change when he saw her face? Would her feelings change?

No, she decided. Whether he was a Hawk or a Henry wouldn't change the breath stealing effect he had on her. That knowledge erased any trace of anxiety about what would happen when the masks came off.

Where was Hawk? She took another sip of her champagne, realized she'd already drained the glass. For a moment she contemplated having another, then changed her mind. Her world was already a warm, glowing place. Another drink and she might well tip over. Couples whirled past her on the dance floor, a jazzy swing beat she tapped her foot to. She envied those skilled enough to execute the jumping and swaying motions with seemingly effortless ease. One of these days she'd find time to learn something like that

Four songs later and Hawk still hadn't appeared. What was taking him so long? Maybe he'd changed his mind. Maybe simply captivating women, stringing them along was a game to him. Maybe even now he was elsewhere in the crowded ballroom searching for another poor woman to dupe.

"Miss me?" Hawk inquired from behind her.

Turning around, Kat didn't bother to hide her smile. His presence thrilled every last nerve ending.

"You haven't changed your mind?" he asked.

Was that concern she heard in his voice? She shook her head. "No."

"Good. This way." He inclined his head in the direction of the lobby. His palm settled against her lower back as they walked.

The click of her heels echoed across the lobby's marble tiled floor. Only a handful of people lingered in the scooped leather chairs and sofas and no one paid them any attention. In front of the elevators Hawk depressed the button and silence settled between them. Kat searched her mind for something to say that wouldn't sound like she was forcing conversation. She was saved by the expected ding of the elevator. The doors scrolled open and Hawk ushered her inside. Two women and a man followed behind them, their breath coming fast as though they'd run to catch it.

Hawk pulled her into the corner. She faced the door, Hawk's chest pressed to her back. His hands rested at her waist. As the elevator began its ascent, his hands did as well. They paused at her breasts, his fingers casually grazing the sides. Kat leaned back against him, nudging her bottom against his rigid length.

Hawk's soft groan echoed in her ear. Ignoring the other people in with them, she turned in his arms. She pressed her mouth to his neck, slid her arms around his waist.

"Kat," he warned, his voice oddly strained.

She scraped her teeth along his jaw. "Something wrong?" she whispered.

He stared down at her. "Not here," he said, not sounding particularly convincing.

Kat glanced over at the other occupants. They were lost in their own animated conversation. It was obvious from the smiles and raised voices they'd consumed quite a bit of alcohol.

Feeling bold, Kat raised up on her toes. Locking her arms around his neck, she touched her lips to his. The tingling in the pit of her stomach flared into a scorching blaze.

Abruptly Hawk set her away from him, his eyes glittering. "Kat--"

The elevator doors opened to his floor.

\* \* \* \*

Nigel dragged Kat off the elevator, flattening her against the wall even before the doors closed. He leaned into her, absorbing the feel of her in his arms, the delectable pressure of her full breasts against his chest. Wisps of titian curls tickled his nose as he buried his face in her neck. He couldn't wait to see it down, to run his fingers through the vibrant locks. How had this woman sunk so deep beneath his skin?

Kat whimpered before he caught her mouth with his. Her breath was coming in deep shudders, a feverish rhythm that matched the drumming of his heart. He was aching hard, his cock straining against his pants.

She arched her hips, cradling him against her luscious curves. Down the hall, a door clicked shut and his senses returned long enough to pull back. Continuing this way he'd have her naked and pinned to the wall. Not an altogether terrible idea, but not here and not now.

Nigel smoothed loose coils of hair back from her face. He wanted to tear the mask away, touch her face, kiss the sprinkle of freckles on her nose. Sighing, he gripped her hand and pulled her along behind him. She followed soundlessly behind him, the plush carpeting absorbing the sound of her heels. He glanced over his shoulder. She looked less certain now. Her shoulders no longer as square, and when she noticed him looking at her, she cast her eyes to the floor.

Was she having second thoughts?

He unlocked the door and motioned for her to precede him into the room. Torn between wanting to reassure her and longing to tear her dress off, Nigel hung back near the door. It was best she have a few minutes to take it all in and be sure she wanted this. There was a good chance she'd be pissed at him for not revealing himself before they made love. He wouldn't have her regretting what was to come because he'd pressured her into it.

Kat walked farther into the room, stood by the foot of the bed. She kept her back to him, not quite able to look in his direction. Her fingers toyed with the folds of her dress. Even such a simple gesture provoked him. Everything about Kat provoked him. Her brain, her wit, her smile, her laugh, the graceful sway of her hips. The list went on and on.

"Nice room," she said finally.

Nigel shut the door, crossed to the bar. "A drink?"

Kat nodded, raised her hands to her mask. He closed the distance between them and caught her wrists before she had time to work it free. "Not yet."

"But we're alone." Her voice sounded about as convincing as he felt.

"And it's not midnight yet," he reminded her.

She tilted her head, her lips curved in a teasing grin. "Is this some fetish you have?"

Nigel laughed. "No, but it could become one I suppose." He saw the look of doubt flash in her eyes. "Soon, I promise."

He slid his hands down her arms. She shivered and her skin prickled beneath his palms.

"Are you cold?"

She shook her head. "I've never done anything quite like this before."

"Neither have I. Really," he added when she nibbled her lip skeptically.

Her eyes slid away. "It doesn't matter."

He caught her chin in his palm. "It does matter. You're special Kat."

Her dark eyes flickered and her voice trembled with surprise. "You really believe that, don't you?"

Nodding softly, he turned her around. With patience he didn't know he possessed, he slowly unzipped her dress. "There's no turning back after this, Kat."

She glanced over her shoulder. "Getting cold feet?"

"Hardly." Nigel tugged the dress off her shoulders and worked it down past her hips. It fell to her feet. Neither moved for a long second. He stepped in front of her, admiring the black strapless bra, panties and stockings.

She still had her heels on. He didn't know how long he stood there just admiring the way her hair fell down her shoulders, or the smattering of freckles near her belly button.

Because his jacket felt too tight he stripped it off, tossed it on the chair next to the television. He imagined they'd be too busy to watch anything tonight or tomorrow. If this went half as well as he'd hoped they'd be here for the entire weekend.

So far everything had gone the way he'd planned. Then why was he was afraid to touch her? Kat was here, in his room. Alone. Only she didn't know it was him. How would she react when they saw each other face to face? It was the only detail he couldn't account for and the one that scared him the most.

"I don't think you're done yet," Kat said, unclipping her bra. A slow, secretive smile curved her lips as she tossed it at him.

Nigel caught it, barely. His attention shifted to her full, bare breasts.

After a long moment, she said, "I hardly consider them worthy of speechlessness."

"Then you obviously haven't taken a good enough look at yourself." He led her to the mirror next to the bathroom. He positioned her in front of him. Eyes locked on hers in the mirror he slid his hands up her belly, cupping her breasts.

Her chest trembled and her eyes closed as he flicked the tip of one rosy crown. Her answering moan stoked the fire building in his loins. Swiveling in his arms, Kat unbuttoned his shirt. When she reached the top, she slid her palms up his chest.

"You can't be the only one to touch."

Nigel squeezed his eyes shut as her hands drifted lower, over his abs to his waist. A few deft movements and she had unzipped his pants and pushed them down.

Slipping a hand inside his underwear she smiled up at him. "A boxer man, huh?"

He grunted a response as she closed her hand around him. Pleasure speared through him.

Tracing the throbbing head in slow circles, she purred, "Do you like it when I do this?"

Nigel caught her hand and swept her up in his arms, carrying her to the bed. Knowing they couldn't continue with the masks on, and not prepared to reveal himself just yet, he crossed to the window and yanked the drapes shut. Next he turned off the room's only light, plunging them into blackness. He removed his mask, waited for his eyes to adjust enough to see the outline of the bed and the sexy woman on it.

"Hawk?"

"I'm here."

He stretched out beside her, reached behind her head and unclasped her mask. Nigel gave her no time to ask questions, claiming her mouth with a fierce need to possess. Her hands twined behind his neck, drawing him closer. The kiss sent fresh waves of desire streaking through his veins.

He wanted to taste her, all of her. Sliding down the bed, he drew his mouth between her breasts, swirling his tongue around her nipples. Kat sucked in a breath, her soft moan treading on the air. He tugged the taut peaks between his lips, scraping his teeth across the tips. She fisted her hands in his shirt in response.

Determined to undo every thread holding her together, Nigel continued to nip and tease. His mouth leisurely explored her breasts until she arched off the bed with each delicate stroke of his tongue.

"I need you to touch me," she whispered.

"Where?" He already knew, but wanted to hear her say it.

"Lower."

Close enough. He trailed a finger past her belly to the inside of her thighs. The muscles there quivered under his touch. Her panties were damp. Cupping her through the lacy fabric, his thumb sought the hidden pearl sheltered by the satin folds underneath.

"Oh." Kat's gasp faded away, her breath rushing in and out.

Pulling them down over her hips, Nigel slid a finger along the silky cleft. His body strained at the contact, aching to feel her hot center swallow him. Every cell sparked from his feet to the tip of his cock. Her thighs tightened around his hand. With deft precision he looped the tender knot of nerve endings, skimming the sensitive flesh. She rocked beneath him, urging his play into a steady rhythm. Catching a rose-tipped nipple between his lips, his fingers wove a meticulous pattern before sliding between the sleek crease and into her core. Her wet sex clenched around him. Pulling back, he pumped his fingers into her again. She answered the fervent invasion with a sexy whimper that plucked at his dwindling restraint.

Moving down her body, he settled his mouth against the soft flesh between her legs. She shuddered beneath him, her soft gasp echoing in the quiet room. His blood roared through his system as he fought for control. Seeking her moist center, he parted the warm folds.

"Yes. Please. Right there. Please, don't stop. Don't--"

Kat cried out as he curled his tongue around her clit, her entire body rocking up to meet his lips. He continued to lave and tease, her cries growing louder. She thrust her hips upwards on a deep shudder, the trembling spasms carrying her away.

## Chapter Four



Kat sagged against the bed. Red lightning streaked across the blackness behind her closed lids. She was too limp to move, her heart still galloping in her chest. She'd had orgasms before, or at least she thought she had, but nothing compared to what just happened. If she concentrated she could still feel the pulsing waves echoing inside her.

Hawk stretched out alongside her. His lips found the sensitive spot on her neck just below her ear lobe and she shivered. First scarping the tender skin with his teeth, he then sealed his mouth over hers. Another moan floated up from her throat. She'd been doing a lot of that tonight, too. Hawk had an amazing affect on her body and her heart. She wanted those strong arms around her, craved the tenderness as much as the rippling excitement. Common sense insisted she tread carefully. The odds of Hawk wanting anything beyond tonight were ridiculously low. Still, the night wasn't over and she'd be crazy not to take advantage of whatever time they had left.

Curling into him, she slid her palms across his chest. Smooth skin, a rasp of curls and beneath it all a heart that pounded as fast as hers. He caught her hand, lifted it to his mouth. He kissed the center of her palm, his lips trailing upward. At her elbow he shifted his attention to her breasts. His hands roamed intimately, the pads of his thumbs skating figure eights around her nipple.

A chain of sparks raced through her bloodstream. And when he bent his head, swirled his tongue over the tight bud every cell rocketed to life.

"I can't wait any longer. I have to have you." His deep voice shimmered with barely contained urgency.

"Like this?" Kat cupped his hard length through his boxers.

Hawk tensed, his breath choppy as though he grappled for control. Smiling, she pushed his shirt off his shoulders. Grinning at the sexual power coiling inside her, she pushed the boxers down. His hot shaft bumped against her hand.

In a mood to tease the way Hawk had teased her, she drew the tip of her finger around the straining head. His tormented groan thrilled her, urged her on. Closing her palm around him, she gently squeezed.

"Kat," Hawk groaned.

Between her legs began to hum, her inner muscles clenching as she teased the length of him. The rigid column trembled in her hand and the need to feel him buried deep inside overwhelmed her. Could he possibly want her as much as she wanted him? She bent her head to taste him, her tongue grazing the top of his erection.

Hawk growled and arched off the bed. He yanked her to him. "They'll be plenty of time for that later."

He knelt between her legs, wrapping her thighs around his waist. "I hadn't expected it to be like this," he confessed. "Not really." His tone was oddly gentle, but she had no time to process it. He fit snugly against the juncture, but didn't push inside. Fiery threads coiled in her sex. Waiting. Waiting.

She inched as close to him as she could get. "And what were you expecting?"

Hawk cupped her cheek, then captured her mouth in a tantalizing kiss. Kat drank in the delicious sensation, but wanted more.

"Whatever it was, this is better. Much better," he added, nudging his solid length against her.

"Don't stop there," Kat sighed.

He laughed. "Full of requests aren't you?"

"If you don't--"

Hawk pushed against her. Rippling passion pounded through her head and her heart.

"If I don't, what?"

"Please," she murmured against his neck.

His hands skimmed down across her belly. He raked the curls of her sex, his thumb grazing the nub hidden between the damp folds.

She clamped her legs tighter around him. "I want to feel you inside me."

"Not as much as I want it," he murmured against her neck. "It will always be this way for us, Kat."

The ragged vow whirled through her mind before he surged inside her. He felt big, squeezing against the swollen, hot walls. Her muscles clenched around him and he groaned low and deep in his throat. He felt so much a part of her she was loath to let him slip away.

Rocking up to meet his slow thrusts, Kat nipped at his neck. "Harder," she murmured.

Scooping her bottom up, he angled deeper, increasing the tempo as he sank into her. A thunderous rhythm brewed between them, a perfect meeting of body and soul that seemed impossible for two people who'd never been together before. Each hot glide pitched her closer to blissful release.

Hawk claimed her mouth, the ravishing sweep of his tongue consuming the fast, shallow breaths slipping past her lips. Exquisite tension coiled inside her and she squeezed her thighs around him. A wild crescendo of pleasure engulfed her. Her senses spun inward as her heart pounded to a desperate rhythm. Above her Hawk shuddered, his harsh groan following one last searing thrust.

Breathless, she clung to him. Afraid to let go, afraid to hold on, Kat suspected she'd given much more than her body to this man.

Gathering her close, Hawk shifted to his side. He smoothed her hair back from her face, dropped a soft kiss on her forehead. The mere touch of his mouth sent a warming shiver through her.

"Cold?"

She snuggled closer. "No."

He continued to play with her hair. Nestled in his arms, the room quiet but for the soothing hum of his breathing, she tried to make sense of what had happened. She didn't know this man, and yet being held by him felt so natural.

"That was..." Her brain searched for the right word to describe what had happened between them.

She waited for him to fill in the blank. He didn't say anything.

"I was that bad?" she teased.

He hooked loose strands of her hair around her ear. "No sane man could have any complaints about you."

Kat smiled. "This isn't where you launch the whole, 'it's not you, it's me,' speech I hope."

He laughed, a deep warm rumble. "Hardly."

"Good. Because I thought everything was... well it was...."

"Perfect," he supplied.

"Yes. Perfect." She smoothed a hand along his chest. "But being a man shouldn't that freak you out or something?"

"I've never thought of my masculinity as a handicap before."

Kat heard the smile in his voice and wished she could see him.

"But to answer your question, no it doesn't freak me out. Perfect moments don't come along very often. Only a fool, man or woman, would pretend they weren't important."

Kat lay still against him, afraid to read anything in his words. He sounded sincere, but... She could feel him watching her, his weight of his eyes as intense in the dark as they were in the light. She couldn't tear her gaze from his shadowed profile, desperate to see the face of the man who'd gone beyond stirring her senses and had touched her heart.

"Why don't you go run a bath," he suggested. "I'll call and order some champagne and we'll take a closer look at one another."

She heard something in his voice. Hesitancy or was it regret? Before she sat up, he caught her chin and brought it to his mouth. His arms came around her, folding her tight to his chest. "I'll be just a minute."

Gathering her courage, Kat shimmied off the bed. Her heart beat furiously in her chest. Would he like what he saw? Would he find her face as appealing as he seemed to find her body?

At the foot of the bed she paused. Tension--or was it just anticipation--crackled in the air. "Don't keep me waiting."

"I won't," he promised.

\* \* \* \*

Kat stared at the filling tub, trying to decide if she should get in now or wait for him. Her stomach fluttered between anticipation and apprehension. What if this didn't mean anything to him? Did she really want to have a face to remember when whatever this was, was over? Ordering herself to get a grip, she studied her reflection, critical of what Hawk would see when he walked through the door. Her scarlet hair was rumpled, her face flushed. Taming the wild mass proved fruitless so she gave up. She almost turned away when she caught sight of the mark on her neck and smiled.

He'd branded her.

Was that the phone ringing? She turned off the tap, straining to hear over the soft whirl of the bathroom's hidden fan. Maybe room service had called about the champagne Hawk ordered.

Kat bit back a smile. It would be strange to hear his real name. Hawk seemed to suit him as silly as it was. On a sigh she turned back to the tub and slid into the piling bubbles. At least she wasn't fully exposed, though she might as well have been considering how naked she felt without the mask. The hot water soothed the slight ache between her legs. She couldn't remember ever being with a man that was so thorough and passionate in bed.

Outside the bathroom she heard a click. Breath held she waited to get her first look at Hawk. The door remained closed. Maybe the champagne had arrived, although she hadn't heard a knock at the door. Frowning, she waited a couple more minutes straining to hear any signs of movement beyond the bathroom.

Too quiet. Grabbing a towel and wrapping it around herself, she opened the door. He'd turned a lamp on. She padded around the corner, her bare feet sinking into the silky plush carpet.

Hawk wasn't there.

Kat turned around, searching the darkest corners of the room for him.

He was gone.

Disappointment squeezed her heart. His clothes were gone, a cold fact that obliterated any possibility that he may have gone to get ice. The pleasure of the night vanished, leaving her cold inside.

Son of a bitch. He hadn't even bothered to say good-bye to her face. Tears pricked her eyes. She should have known tonight was just about sex. The inexplicable connection she felt had obviously been one-sided.

Brushing away the tear that slid past her closed lids, Kat gathered her clothes together and dressed. She felt used, alone and utterly stupid. How could she have been so careless? A man didn't seduce a woman whose face he'd never seen with plans to share breakfast in bed the next morning. He probably got off playing such games. For all she knew, he'd returned to the ballroom to find another woman to screw before the night was over. Even knowing she had started on this path with no plans for anything more than a night with a stranger, didn't ease the ache in her heart over his easy dismissal. She'd been foolish to get caught up in what was happening, imagining it was anything more than sex. Had she kept that firmly in her mind from beginning, not allowing herself to believe the obvious lines he spouted, his abandonment might not hurt so much.

Bastard.

Passing the garbage can on the way out, she tossed her mask inside.

\* \* \* \*

Nigel paced the length of the waiting room. Why hadn't anyone come yet? What was going on with his nephew? Was he all right? What had Brandon been thinking getting in the car with someone who'd been drinking? The driver hadn't been wearing a seat belt and had been thrown from the car after it jumped the center divider and hit an oncoming car. Two others were in critical condition like Brandon.

"Sit down," his sister pleaded. "I can't... just sit down."

Pamela's eyes were red rimmed, her nose pink from the tissue she wiped it with. She was holding up better than he expected. No news since Brandon had been taken to the OR and he felt ready to track down the nearest doctor and threaten physical harm if he didn't get an update on his nephew's condition. Pam on the other hand remained seated, an image of strength but for the glassy eyes and occasional snuffle.

He slumped in the chair beside her, raked a hand through his hair. He still wasn't used to the short cut. "They should know something by know."

Pam squeezed his hand. "He'll pull through."

The confidence in her voice soothed his frayed nerves. He frowned down at her. It should him reassuring her that her little boy would be okay. On top of walking out on Kat he was letting his sister down. She needed him calm and together, not a stressed lunatic who would just as soon flip out at the emergency staff, as he would sip a cup of coffee.

A shadow fell across the doorway and they both stood up anxiously.

"Brandon?" Pam asked, her voice a whisper.

The doctor nodded. "He's in recovery."

Pam sagged against Nigel. "Thank God."

"You can see him, but just for a minute. He needs to rest right now, let his body start to repair itself. Later he'll be moved to ICU and immediate family members will be permitted visits for short periods of time."

Pam gripped the doctor's hand. "Thank you."

Once he nodded then shuffled to the door. "If you'll follow me."

Pam hugged Nigel.

"Go on," he said. "I'll be waiting right here with a fresh cup of coffee for you."

He watched her leave, then dropped into a nearby chair. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Relief loosened his aching muscles. Glancing at the clock, he reached for the phone. He prayed Kat was

still in the room. He let it ring a dozen times before giving up.

Of course she wouldn't be there, he'd left without a word. He hadn't been thinking. The tone of sister's voice when she called scared him. He knew he couldn't just run in and reveal himself that way to Kat only to leave her. It had crossed his mind to leave a note telling her to wait for him, but he hadn't known... Nigel shivered at how close they'd come to losing Brandon. He clenched his trembling fist and stood up.

He needed coffee and he needed to think. Chances were Kat wasn't happy about being deserted. Which meant he needed to come up with a damn good plan to make it up to her. Although his plan to seduce her had succeeded, he wished he'd chosen a less complicated arrangement.

\* \* \* \*

Nigel stared through the swishing wipers at Kat's house. It was seven o'clock Saturday evening and he hadn't even been home to get cleaned up. Showing up on her doorstep in the same clothes he'd been wearing since Friday night might not be his best idea, but he had to see her, showered or not.

A close call with Brandon this morning had left him tense and needing... Kat.

He turned off the ignition and stared through the rain. He could do this, all he needed to do was get out of the car, knock on her door and tell her--

Tell her what exactly? He was still a bit fuzzy on that part, but he sure as hell wasn't getting anywhere sitting here.

Sucking in a breath he reached for the handle. A car passed his, pulled into Kat's driveway. Curious, Nigel watched a light haired man emerge from the silver SUV and walk to the door. The man raised his hand to knock, but the door opened first.

Kat stepped into the doorway and Nigel's blood ignited.

The stranger pulled Kat into his arms, planted a smacking kiss on her cheek.

Who was he? A date? Nigel doubted it. Kat wasn't likely to move onto another man right after last night. He'd heard the hopeful tenderness in her voice, felt the same soothing sensation roll through his chest.

Nigel stared at the closed door, his determination dissolving with each splatter of raindrops. Sighing, he started the car and drove away. Now was obviously not the right time to tell her the truth. He'd go home, shower and figure out his next move.

## Chapter Five

Kat stirred her coffee, trying to ignore the photo of the masked couples on the cover of the paper's front page. Her chest clutched before she brushed it off her desk and into the waiting can. Anger had taken the place of hurt. Much of Saturday she'd spent moping in bed watching sappy romantic comedies one after another and thinking it was just a bunch of crap.

Then Sheryl had called to see how her night had gone. A few seconds into the conversation, and Kat had failed to hide the fact that something was wrong. An hour later she showed up on her doorstep. After dodging questions for the first half-hour, Kat finally caved. Keeping the more intimate details to herself, she told her sister what happened, hoping the cathartic experience would improve her mood.

Sheryl had made the customary "what an asshole" comments about Hawk's Houdini routine and by the end of it Kat felt marginally better. At least enough to get up, shower and eat something besides chocolate. In turn making her presentable enough for her brother, who'd shown up that evening to surprise her. In town for a meeting with some television executives, he didn't stay long, but the visit had been just enough to raise her spirits.

Sunday she got mad.

Mad at herself for believing there'd been something special between them, something special about him. And mad at Hawk--who had way more in common with a sleazy rodent than such a majestic bird--for abandoning her without at least saying thanks for the screw.

A line. Nothing but lines. One after another. How naïve she'd been to think he was looking for anything more than a one-night stand. She'd walked straight into it with her foolish heart wide open. How stupid could a girl be? Mr. Right wouldn't be picking her out of a crowd at random, certainly not when he hadn't at least seen her face.

Her stomach pitched again, a squeezing turbulence that made her question the dozen cups of coffee she'd gulped down throughout the day.



Lucy flopped down in the chair opposite her desk. "Working late? What a surprise."

Kat closed the file she'd been working on and turned off the monitor. "What are you doing in here? Weren't you off today?"

"Had a couple things I wanted to pick up. Thought I'd see how your night went. Better than Nigel's I'd imagine."

Kat doubted it. Tiding up her desk she asked, "What happened to Nigel?"

"I'm surprised you hadn't heard. I just rode up in the elevator with him. His nephew, the one who lives with him, was in a pretty bad car accident Friday night. I guess it was touch and go for a while, but he pulled through."

She'd kept to her office much of the day and hadn't noticed he wasn't around. "How's Nigel?"

"Exhausted. He's spent the last few days at the hospital with his sister."

"He should probably be home catching up on sleep."

Lucy shrugged. "That's what I said."

Kat imagined he was hiding out here as much as working. When Sheryl had flat-lined and then fell into a coma after a routine surgery, Kat had dealt with the scare by losing herself in work.

"So I guess that's why you didn't see him at the ball."

Kat probed under her desk for her shoes, not meeting Lucy's eyes.

"So," Lucy prompted, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Did you take my advice and hook up with a masked stranger for wild monkey sex?"

"I don't know about the monkey part."

Lucy perched so close to the edge of her seat, Kat imagined she'd hit the floor before she said another word.

"Really? And?"

Because she knew Lucy wouldn't let it go, Kat kept the story sort and void of emotion. She saved the part

about Hawk punching Leo for the end, hoping Lucy would let the subject rest there.

"About time someone put that horse's ass in his place. I guess your loser in shining armor was good for something after all. Too bad Nigel hadn't made it. He would have loved to see Leo taken down a notch."

Kat shrugged. "He probably wouldn't have been able to pick me out anyway."

Lucy shook her head. "He asked me on Friday what you were wearing so I figured he planned on attending after all. Leo interrupted us before I could get a firm answer out of him."

Now it made sense how easily Leo had zeroed in on her.

"Well, whoever your mystery man was, may he roast in hell for walking out on you."

Kat was unable to manage a smile.

Lucy came around the desk and hugged her. "I'm sorry he hurt you."

Determined to forget Friday night altogether, Kat squared her shoulders. "You have to care enough to be hurt, right?"

Sensing a presence, Kat looked up to see Nigel leaning in the doorway. How much had he overheard?

He pushed away from the frame and walked farther into the room. Tonight his eyes lacked their usual sensual gleam and his brows were drawn tightly together, the frown more intense. Was he annoyed with her?

"Hi," she said softly.

He continued to frown. "Evening."

"Heading home, Nigel?" Lucy asked.

"Soon."

She waited for him to say something. Was he looking for a file or had he just stopped by... for what reason she couldn't imagine. Before she could ask, he retreated back into the hallway. Turning on his heel, he mumbled, "Good night."

Kat stared after him. Some invisible thread tugged at her brain.

Lucy looped her bag over her shoulder. "That was a little weird. Even for Nigel. Oh, he probably doesn't know about Leo yet." Darting out the door, she glanced back over her shoulder. "I'll meet you at the elevator and we'll grab a drink."

Kat continued to stare at the door after Lucy disappeared through it. She couldn't help but wonder how her night would have gone had Nigel shown up after all. She shook her head. What's done is done. She couldn't go back, so there was little point in wondering what if.

And what was with him tonight anyway? He'd looked... disappointed? And he hardly spoke....

Her head snapped up.

Nigel?

No. It was almost too ridiculous to consider. Could Nigel have...?

Kat shook her head, smiling at herself. She'd obviously overdosed on coffee if her brain was spinning such unlikely theories. Still, instead of heading for the elevators, Kat found herself walking towards Nigel's office. It was silly to think for even a second--

The sound of rich masculine laughter rode on the air.

Kat froze.

Hawk's laugh.

No. It couldn't be.

Nigel?

Heart pounding, Kat stepped into the office. Her eyes shot to his. Nigel's brows drew together, his face giving nothing away. She took a step closer, seeing beyond the frame of his glasses and into the troubled gray depths that echoed of secrets shared between them.

Sonuvabitch.

\* \* \* \*

Nigel sensed her in the doorway and turned away from Lucy. Lips pressed in a firm line, eyes flashing first with shock and then with fury, Kat glared at him.

Ah hell.

"What kind of game did you think you were playing?" she demanded, her voice a steel edged whisper.

Torn between relief, and disappointment that he hadn't said anything before she obviously figured it out, Nigel took a step in her direction.

She held a hand up. "Don't. Just tell me why. Why pretend... why the lies?"

Lucy cleared her throat.

Without taking his eyes off Kat, he said, "I think Kat and I have some things to work out."

Lucy didn't budge. Although he admired her loyalty, right now it annoyed him. He wasn't about to talk about this with her in the room. Every spare minute since late Friday had been spent figuring out how to tell Kat the truth. She stood less than three feet away, her emerald eyes glittering with hurt and rage, and he still didn't have two sweet clues how to fix this.

Kat crossed her arms, lifted her chin. "I'll be fine, Luce."

Lucy stalked towards him. "If you make her cry, I'll castrate you faster than you can say, 'No comment'."

Nodding in her direction, Nigel waited until she closed the door before he reached for Kat.

She jerked away from him. "Don't touch me. You lied to me. And then you ran out--"

"Because of Brandon. I wouldn't have left you otherwise."

The delicate snort was laced with disbelief. "Then why didn't you say something? You should have... damn it, where the hell do you get off making me--"

He caught her wrist, his heart speeding up. "Making you what?"

She tugged her hand free, her eyes suspiciously shiny. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. Three months ago you walked off that elevator and turned my life upside down. I couldn't concentrate on work, I couldn't sleep. And every time I tried to get you to go out with me, you refused."

"So you resorted to tricking me?"

Drilling a hand through his hair, he fought the urge to haul her into his arms and kiss the entire mess

away. "I just needed to prove to you that there was something between us."

"There is nothing between us. Whatever I felt that night was for... It wasn't you. You weren't that man. I..." Tears clogged her voice.

To hell with it. He dragged her into his arms, his mouth taking desperate possession of hers. Her body softened, leaned into him. Nigel cradled her to his chest, the intoxicating feel of her lips beneath his slowing the kiss to a lazy caress. What had this woman done to him? No longer could he control even the simplest response to her. Everything about Kat overwhelmed his senses until he couldn't tell in from out, up from down.

And he was in love with her.

Pulling back, he caught her chin in his palm. "Whatever you believe, know that I am the man who made love to you that night. I'm the one who saw the most beautiful woman in the room and had to have her. Today. Tomorrow. And every day after."

"Nigel," she began.

"Later," he whispered. "Right now I need to be with you. Remind myself that Friday wasn't a dream." He waited for her to protest, to storm out the door.

She gripped his shoulders, lifted her face to his. "So stop talking already."

Smiling against her mouth, Nigel tossed her bag into the corner. Her jacket came next. He had barely touched her and already he was hard with need. Kat raised up on her toes, her lips tracing a sensuous trail along his jaw. He gripped her waist, nudged his cock across the tops of her thighs. A uneven hum tunneled through him.

Her hungry mouth feasted on his, the velvety sweep of her tongue as she teased her way inside, shooting a wave of lust straight to his loins. Yanking her blouse over her head, with diminishing patience, he slid his hands over the creamy flesh. The simple cotton bra had him longing to see the full breasts hidden beneath. He broke from her mouth, his lips eager to taste the rest of her. He stopped at her jaw, her neck, her collar bone, nipping and scraping his teeth where he knew it would be most effective. Her hands tightened around his neck and she rubbed herself against him.

Needing to see her bare flesh, he unclasped her bra and let it fall to the floor. She sighed, as his hands slid across her back and down her shoulders. They continued downward, exploring the soft lines of her waist before he settled his palms beneath her breasts. Kat looked up at him, her eyes glazed with desire. Trapping a swollen nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he tugged lightly.

Kat moaned into his neck. Her hand slid between them, gripped his hard length through his pants. His

breath hissed out, every nerve ending aching to be buried deep in her sex. Tightening his grip on the taut peaks, he watched her eyes flare as he circled and teased the dusky crowns. A gasp of sweet agony filled the office as he bent and drew one nipple between his lips.

Grinding her cleft against him, Kat tugged at his belt. "Take a seat."

Although every cell screamed to be sheathed by her hot center, he recognized the determined gleam in her eyes. He slid into the closest chair, his pants already halfway down. He opened his mouth to tease her about working fast, but the first stroke of her tongue rocketed his cock to his stomach. Capturing the aching balls beneath, she slid her mouth along his shaft with calculated accuracy. Each feverish caress launched him closer to the edge of sanity. He tangled his hands in her hair, his insides splitting in two as she took him in her mouth.

Setting her on her heels, he stood up. He tugged her towards the desk, working her snug pants down over her hips. His pants, along with his shirt, boxers and her underwear, followed them to the floor. Setting her on the desk he urged her legs apart enough to get an enticing glimpse of her sex. Her head fell back as he skated a finger through the damp curls. The tender knot hidden by her silky flesh pulsed against him.

"Don't stop, Nigel. Not now. Not ever," she murmured.

Strumming her clit with his thumb, Nigel devoured the delicate column of her neck. Fiery currents zinged through him, her excited cries spurring him on. He slid a finger deep inside her, the scorching inner walls tightening around him. She clutched his shoulders, her dark eyes pleaded with him. "No more games, Nigel. Be with me."

He pumped his fingers inside her once, twice more before he could no longer wait. Brushing the tip of his arousal across her cleft, he plunged into her. Her knees hugged his sides, guiding him back to her, thrust after thrust. Her head dropped back, her long hair falling past her shoulders. Her lips were parted, ragged sighs whispering between them. A blissful tempo unified their trembling bodies.

Kat clung to him, the muscles of her sex rippling around his cock as her orgasm crashed over her. He gripped her hips, driving into her again and again. Fierce explosions ripped through him, the blinding intensity of his climax taxing his already exhausted body. Gathering her close, he sank into the chair, settling her in his lap.

Pensive green eyes stared up at him.

He brushed a kiss across her forehead. "Are you still angry with me?"

She drew figure eights around his heart. "Angry? No. Shocked, somewhat confused, mildly annoyed? Yes, yes, and yes."

He slipped his hands up her arms, bringing her closer. "I hated leaving you like that."

"I may be persuaded to forgive you," she teased.

He caught her chin in his palm, tugging her mouth closer. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"Anything?"

Despite his exhaustion, his body responded to the sexy woman curled up in his lap. "Anything," he reaffirmed.

"Well... I'm rather fond of dark chocolate, tragic love stories and hockey games that go into overtime."

Nigel stroked the tip of one dusky nipple until it stood at attention. "I was kind of hoping for a more, um... physical sort of penance."

"Oh. My car does need a wax job desperately. It's absolutely filthy."

He kissed his way down her chest. "Perhaps I'm not making myself clear." He flicked his tongue across the tight bud.

Kat moaned, her eyes dreamy as she met his gaze. "I think I'm starting to understand."

"Good."

"You'd rather cut my lawn."

Growling, Nigel buried his face in her neck.

Kat laughed, threw her arms around him. Her eyes melted into his. "Is this one of those perfect moments you mentioned?"

He brushed her loose curls back from her face. "Yeah."

"Then whatever you do, don't let go."

Nigel pressed a kiss over her heart. "Not a chance."

The End