



Elizabeth Batten-Carew
by Contemporary Romance

New Concepts Publishing

www.newconceptspublishing.com

Copyright ©First published by New Concepts
Publishing, May 2004

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by Contemporary Romance

MASQUERADE OF LOVE

by

Elizabeth Batten-Carew

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New Concepts Publishing
5202 Humphreys Rd.
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

Chapter 1

"Join me for a night of fantasy."

Vanessa stared at the ragged-edged, golden parchment invitation in her hand. She glanced at Rachel as she unfolded it, then read the details of the lavish costume ball that Nicholas Powers, Rachel's boss, had planned for tonight. The fairy tale theme meant all the guests would arrive as make-believe characters. Her heart fluttered. She loved fairy tales!

"You know you want to go," Rachel urged. "Do it."

Vanessa sighed and handed the invitation back across the table to her friend. "I wasn't invited."

"But I already told you. The woman who was supposed to go can't make it. When she called me to cancel, she told me it would be okay to pass the invitation on to someone else." She pushed it toward Vanessa again. "I knew you'd like to go."

A child about four years old raced past their table, almost knocking over Vanessa's soft drink. She grabbed the lidded, paper cup and took a sip thoughtfully, shifting in the hard plastic seat. "I don't have a costume—"

"I can fix that."

"—and even if I did, I wouldn't feel right crashing the party."

"You wouldn't be crashing—"

"And anyway. I wouldn't fit in with those people."

"Those people? You mean rich, handsome bachelors?"

"Rachel, I wouldn't know what to say. I'll stick out like a yellow dandelion in a field of red poppies."

"Vanessa. It'll be a huge affair, with all kinds of people. You'll blend right in with the crowd."

"Why can't this person go?" Vanessa asked, waving the invitation back and forth.

"Because she's sick."

"It's her costume, I assume." Vanessa watched as Rachel nodded while chewing a bite of tomato. "Why do you have her costume?"

"Nick asked me to arrange costumes for a few of his friends. This woman is one of them."

Vanessa sipped her drink again, then wiped her mouth on the white paper napkin. "So you should take it back."

"I could, but it's already been paid for and they won't give a refund now. Look, Vanessa. The costume will go to waste if you don't use it. The food she would have eaten will go to waste, too. It's not like you'll be depriving anyone of anything. And I know how you hate waste."

Too true. It hadn't been Dad's fault her childhood home had only enough money for the essentials. Every piece of clothing had been worn to the fullest, and with two older step-sisters, her own clothes had always arrived as hand-me-downs. By the time Claire and Mandy passed them on, little more than patches held them together.

"And, Vanessa." Rachel's lingering tone sent a spike of curiosity through Vanessa. They locked gazes. "The costume is Cinderella."

Vanessa stared at her in disbelief. "You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding." Rachel's eyes lit up in delight. "You should see it. The dress is made of this glittery silver fabric

and there are crystal beads and sequins embroidered over the front of the bodice. The skirt's really full with a crinoline and a draped overskirt."

Vanessa couldn't help going a bit dewy-eyed listening to Rachel's dazzling description, but she tried to get a hold of herself. She picked up a french fry and dipped it in her pool of ketchup. "It sounds lovely but—"

"And there's even a tiara."

"A tiara?" Vanessa parroted weakly, feeling her resolve slipping away.

"You know what would be perfect? You could wear your gorgeous little glass slipper earrings with it. They'd look absolutely fabulous."

She remembered when she'd first seen her cherished antique earrings. Aunt Tara, her godmother, had presented them to her on her fifteenth birthday, spinning a lovely fairy-tale. The words lilted through her mind in her aunt's beloved voice. *One day your prince will come, Vanessa, and everything you've ever really wanted will come true.* She didn't believe the prediction, but she cherished the sentiment and the exquisite reminder of her dear aunt.

"I ... but what if someone sees me and recognizes me later? The interview went well today and if I wind up working at Power Systems then someone might remember me from the party and—"

"You'll be wearing a mask. Stop worrying and go!" Rachel took a sip of her juice.

"I don't know. I wouldn't feel right."

Rachel threw her hands up in the air. "Okay, okay. I give up. Could you at least do me a favor?"

"What?" Vanessa narrowed her eyes, knowing Rachel didn't give up this easily.

"I've got a doctor's appointment this afternoon. Could you take the costume back for me?"

Vanessa put her hand on Rachel's, concern forcing away every other thought. "Is everything okay?" Her friend had been having problems with her pregnancy and now, in her seventh month, Rachel looked far more tired than she ought to be and Vanessa knew she still suffered from nausea. She glanced at Rachel's plate and realized how little of her lunch she'd eaten.

"Yeah, sure," Rachel assured her. "It's just a routine appointment, but I won't have time to take the costume back. It's in my car. Will you take it? It's on your way."

"Of course." Even though she'd been out of work for the past two months, Vanessa understood the demands of juggling a job and personal commitments. She'd worked full-time for several years at a small electronics company before money got tight and she'd been laid off. Since then she'd been given the odd temporary assignment through contacts like Rachel, but she'd been searching for something full-time.

Shooing Rachel away, Vanessa cleared their trays off the table before following her friend to the parking lot. Rachel opened the back door of her car and reverently drew out the Cinderella gown.

"It's gorgeous," Vanessa breathed as she stared at the dress under the filmy plastic.

"I told you."

As Rachel slid up the cover, sunlight caught the crystal beads, sending shimmering rainbows swirling across the ground. She fluffed up the full skirt.

"And it's exactly your size," she proclaimed.

Vanessa smoothed the plastic back down. "I told you I'd take it back, but that's it." She took the dress and carefully hung it in the back of her compact sedan.

"I've got to go, Vanessa. Here, take the invitation," Rachel said and she dropped it on Vanessa's passenger seat. "Wait. I'll get the shoes." Rachel reached into her car and pulled out a red plastic bag. She leaned further across the seat, and Vanessa feared her friend might actually tip over with the weight of the baby. "And for heaven's sake, don't forget the tiara."

"Be careful, Rachel. And listen, you'd better get going or you'll be late for your appointment."

Rachel grabbed Vanessa in a big hug and whispered in her ear. "I think you should go to the ball. You deserve to be Cinderella at least once in your life." With that she turned and slid into her car.

Vanessa watched Rachel drive away, shaking her head at her friend's persistence. She'd never had a close friend like Rachel before and, as crazy as her ideas were sometimes, Vanessa knew she'd never give her up.

* * * *

Vanessa laid the costume on her bed and slid off the plastic.

This is crazy. What am I doing?

She had pulled up in front of the costume shop an hour ago and suddenly decided she couldn't take the costume back without at least trying it on, but now second thoughts overwhelmed her. Why torment herself by putting on a costume she'd never have an opportunity to wear? After all, she was no grand lady who received invitations to fancy balls. Why aspire to things beyond her? Her stepmother had always complained about her penchant for dreaming, telling her to stop grasping for fantasies and accept her role in life. She could still hear that strident voice saying, "You're nothing but a lowly shopkeeper's daughter—and that's all you'll ever be!"

Her back stiffened at the memory. She cast a defiant look at the dress lying across her bed.

She ought to take it back right now. Still, now that she had it here, she might as well see what she looked like in it. She tugged off her jeans and sweater and slowly unzipped the dress. As she pulled on the exquisite gown, she felt like a princess getting ready for her first ball. In the bag with the tiara and shoes, she found a wig of blond ringlets. Perfect. It would hide her short, wispy-cut dark hair, further disguising her appearance.

Which would be important if I was going. But I'm not.

She pulled on the wig and slipped her feet into the clear shoes, designed to look like glass slippers. Turning to stand in front of the full-length mirror, her eyes widened, taking in the transformation from plain little blue-jeans Vanessa to glamorous princess. Just like Cinderella.

If only she could go to the ball.

She glanced at the clock beside her bed. The costume shop would close at three-thirty and it was quarter to three now. She'd better get these things off quickly so she'd make it on time. As she pulled off the wig, a red plastic bag caught her eye. The tiara! She had to try on the tiara. Tucking her hair back under the wig, she scooted over to the bed. She unwrapped the tiara from the white tissue paper and stared at it in awe. Rhinestones caught the sunlight and glittered invitingly. She'd always dreamed of wearing a tiara and she'd always been so sure it was a dream that would never come true. But now....

She lifted the small crown from its nest and placed it on her head. Peering in the mirror, she gasped. The three points of the tiara rose majestically from the blond curls and she felt every inch a princess worthy of Prince Charming.

If only she could....

She tipped her head, watching the tiara glitter.

If only....

The phone rang and Vanessa gathered the skirt together and skittered over to answer it.

"Hello."

"Hi, Vanessa. It's Rachel. Well, did you try it on?"

Vanessa glanced in the mirror. "You knew I would, didn't you?" she accused.

"Of course. Why do you think I asked you to take it back?"

"So you didn't have a doctor's appointment?"

"Yes, I did, but I could have gotten someone else to take it back. I hoped the temptation to try it on would prove too much for you. So, are you going?"

She swirled the spiral phone cord around her finger. "I shouldn't."

"Yes, you should."

"But—"

"Vanessa, you'll never have another chance like this. Take my advice. Go for it."

Vanessa didn't know what to say. She was so tempted.

"Look at it this way. Your aunt told you you'd live the Cinderella fantasy one day and meet your prince. At least this way, you will have made the fantasy true."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, there's bound to be someone there dressed as a prince. Just go up and introduce yourself."

Vanessa giggled. "That's not what she meant and you know it. Anyway, she meant Prince Charming."

"Picky, picky. So? Are you going?"

"Rachel...."

"Think of what your stepmother would say if she knew you'd gone to a glamorous ball like this."

Vanessa grinned at the thought. Elena Devon would be livid to think unworthy little Vanessa had even considered attending a prestigious party thrown by Nicholas Powers.

She tugged her finger free of the cord.

"I'll think about it."

She heard a frustrated sigh on the other end of the line.

"You're impossible," Rachel complained.

After she hung up, Vanessa grabbed the invitation from her purse. As she sat on the edge of the bed staring at it,

trying to decide what to do, the address on the bottom captured her attention.

Seventy-Seven Wiltshire Boulevard.

The Erin Gate mansion.

Vanessa had heard about this place more times than she cared to remember. Her stepmother had bragged constantly about how she had grown up in the beautiful hill-top mansion. After marrying Vanessa's father, she had complained bitterly that her worthless husband could not provide the same level of sophisticated lifestyle she'd known as a child. Vanessa hated how her stepmother treated her, but more, she hated how the woman had belittled her gentle, kind-hearted father. Her constant nagging had driven him to work every waking hour trying to achieve the unachievable—the love and admiration of his uncompromising wife.

Seventy-Seven Wiltshire Boulevard.

She held in her hand an engraved invitation to the home her stepmother had yearned after for years.

How could she possibly turn down this golden opportunity? Her stepmother would be green with envy. Not that Vanessa would ever be cruel enough to tell her—but knowing she, Elena Devon's worthless stepdaughter, had walked the halls of Erin Gate mansion as a guest at the biggest social event of the season, would certainly help her own self-esteem.

A slow smile spread across her face as she thought about the evening ahead. As the clock flickered from two forty-six to two forty-seven, Vanessa realized she had a lot of preparation ahead. Her precious glass slipper earrings, safely tucked away in a box deep within her closet, would take time to find. Then

she'd have to buy some new makeup. After all, if she intended to transform herself into Cinderella, she might as well go all the way. Maybe she'd even splurge for new perfume....

* * * *

Tucking the full skirt of her gown into her compact Ford Escort was no small feat. It occurred to her that her sturdy, practical little sedan wouldn't be the kind of car the other guests would arrive in. In fact, her car would stand out among the crowd specifically because it was so ordinary. For someone who wanted to remain anonymous, this was not a good thing. As she drove toward the posh Rosedale area of Toronto, the solution clip-clopped right by her. A hansom cab. Vanessa found a parking space about a mile from Erin Gate mansion and carefully drew herself, and her gown, from the car. She flagged down a hansom cab and rode through the gates of the estate and up the winding road to the mansion in style, feeling quite pleased with herself.

* * * *

As they reached the top of the hill, Vanessa saw a beautiful stone mansion. Off to one side of the main building stood a huge six-car garage, probably a carriage house a hundred years or so ago. A drive circled by the front walk, allowing chauffeurs to drop guests off, then pull away. Moonlight spilled over the stone walkway, a cool contrast to the warm lights glowing from the many windows of the immense house.

So this was where her stepmother had grown up. No wonder she had felt cramped in the small townhouse her father provided for them. This beautiful structure went on and on, spreading into the darkness without end. Vanessa gathered her skirt together as the driver hopped to the ground to help her from the cab. She tried to alight like the graceful lady she appeared, then walked to the door, excitement rising with each step.

She slid the sequined mask over her eyes, then grasped the heavy brass knocker and rapped on the door. A moment later it opened and a butler greeted her in a polite British accent.

Vanessa felt caught up in the pure magic of the occasion as soon as she stepped inside the door. The room beyond the entryway had a cathedral ceiling that rose a good three stories high. Her father's whole house would have fit in this single room. She smiled as she saw a small balcony on the second story overlooking the gigantic room. A man stood at the railing, watching the throng of people around her. He stood in shadow so she couldn't see much of him, but she felt his gaze catch on her and follow as the butler led her through a door to a crowded room with a food table and pointed out the bar. Her skirts swished around her legs as she followed the music to a ballroom. Bright colored costumes flashed by her—Rapunzel, Aladdin, Beauty and the Beast.

Lively music flowed around her and she watched as couples twirled around the dance floor, barely hindered by their sometimes cumbersome costumes. A waiter carrying a silver tray filled with crystal champagne flutes drifted past her

and she swept up a glass and sipped. The bubbles tickled her nose and the warmth that started in her throat slowly crept through her entire body until she wiggled her toes in the end of her pretend glass slippers. She stifled a giggle of sheer joy.

For a while she drifted between groups of people, connecting to one and listening to the conversation for a while, then drifting on to another. The varied topics ranged anywhere from banking to the latest movies. Vanessa stayed on the outskirts, listening.

Another waiter with a silver tray floated past and she discarded her empty glass and scooped up a full one. Vanessa paused, the rim of her glass just touching her lip, as her gaze locked on the perfect Prince Charming. An incredibly gorgeous man, he dressed the part in purple and gold, an ermine-trimmed cape slung over his shoulders and a golden circlet nestled in the dark wavy hair curling around his ears and over his collar. He wore no mask and his strong, masculine features were deftly chiseled to form a classically handsome face. As Vanessa watched in fascination, wishing she could get up the nerve to go and talk to him, he chatted amiably to a woman dressed as Snow White. A fleeting sweep of jealousy flickered through her as she realized the woman must be his date, but she pushed it aside. After all, she didn't even belong here, let alone with a man who traveled in this social circle. What a laugh. Little Vanessa from the wrong side of the tracks on the arm of a man like that. An unbelievably attractive, compelling man.

As she smiled at the thought, the man's gaze flicked up and fastened on her. Vanessa froze in mid-breath, her smile

locked in place. His eyes glowed. The smile spreading across his face slowly lit up his features and, though she would have thought it impossible, made him look even more heart-wrenchingly attractive.

He said something to his companion, then strode toward Vanessa. She quickly patted her wig and brought her hand to her sequined mask, ensuring it was secure. Why would he be coming over here? Did he suspect she shouldn't be here?

But he continued to smile so brilliantly. Maybe he just wanted to talk. But why? There were so many beautiful women around her—like the one he'd just left behind. Maybe it would be better not to find out, she decided.

She turned and slipped through the crowd, but had only gone a few yards when someone grabbed her arm and spun her around. She found herself face-to-face with a tall, attractive man dressed as a prince from the Arabian Nights.

"So you are here. Weren't you even going to say hello?" His face looked taut, almost angry.

"Hello," she stammered hoarsely.

"What's wrong with your voice?"

She stared up at him, wondering what to do. If she talked, he would know she wasn't the woman he thought she was. The only thing she could do was establish a reason why she couldn't speak. She remembered that the woman she replaced tonight was sick, so she roughened her voice into a hoarse whisper as she said, "Laryngitis."

"I see. You really shouldn't use your voice but...." He took her hands and held them tightly, staring into her eyes intently. She could feel his tension like a cord tightening

around them. "It's important that we talk, sweetheart. I don't want things to end between us. Will you meet me after the party?"

She'd been wrong. Anger didn't tinge those troubled eyes with darkness, but frustration, with the added shading of tenderness and concern.

Good heavens. What had she gotten herself into? Had she dropped into the middle of a lovers' quarrel? She didn't want to make life difficult for the innocent woman lying sick at home tonight, but she couldn't agree to meet him. How would she explain?

Luckily, she didn't have to decide because at that moment, Prince Charming arrived.

"Amy, here you are. I didn't think you could come." He drew Vanessa's hand to his lips and brushed them across her knuckles. "You look enchanting."

The touch of his lips sent a shivering tremor through her. She looked into his eyes and felt her insides melting. His spicy scent stimulated her senses. Intoxicating. She breathed him in, his essence infusing her body with desire. She fought the urge to lean toward him and nuzzle his neck, to inhale her greedy fill.

His smile warmed and he gathered her hand in his. The frisson of excitement that rippled through her at his touch exhilarated her.

"Amy, you haven't answered me," the Arabian prince demanded.

"Kyle, Amy is with me tonight. I don't really think it would be appropriate for her to go off with you after the party, do you?"

"With him?" the man named Kyle directed at Vanessa. "Is that right, Amy?"

Vanessa glanced from one man to the other and couldn't think of any reason Prince Charming might be lying, so she nodded.

Kyle scowled. "And I believed you when you told me the two of you were just good friends." He turned to the other man. "You didn't wait long to move in, did you?" He turned and stormed away.

Vanessa's sensible side scolded her for doing anything as foolish as coming to the ball. At the same time, she felt a thrill at being fought over by two such magnificently handsome men. Especially the one by her side now.

"I'd say he's definitely jealous." He tucked her hand in the bend of his elbow. "Come, you must dance with me."

Stunned, she started to stutter a protest, but fear of discovery held her silent. She didn't want to risk trouble for both herself and Rachel.

Before she knew it, he swept her onto the dance floor and slid one arm around her waist. He led her around the other dancers with graceful ease and she found herself relaxing slightly, enjoying the ride.

She watched him surreptitiously from behind her mask. So, he thought she was a woman named Amy. Obviously he knew Amy fairly well, judging from the fact that he felt

comfortable kissing her on the hand and holding her close on the dance floor without any encouragement at all.

"Amy, you're not saying much tonight."

She patted her throat and shook her head.

"Laryngitis? Are you contagious?"

Vanessa shook her head again. He pulled her tight to his body and, suddenly, she felt very glad Amy had taken sick. Could this man be Amy's lover? Vanessa pushed aside the sharp stab of jealousy at the thought. It didn't really matter, because all Vanessa could possibly hope for would be this one evening with him. Still, a girl could dream.

"I'm glad. Now we can get on with the plan."

Plan? If the plan was to drive her insane with wanting, then it was working wonders. She felt his warm breath wisping against her ear, then his lips brushed her temple and tremors of excitement quivered through her. He swirled his tongue around her ear and, at her slight gasp, he whispered, "This is just the beginning, sweetheart."

Things were getting badly out of control. Her pulse and heart rate had taken a quantum leap. She slid her hands to his chest and pushed weakly, desperate to distance herself from the source of fervent longing overtaking her senses.

His eyebrows raised slightly. "What? Too much?" He stroked his hand seductively down her back.

She avoided meeting his gaze, still sane enough to realize her eye color might not be the same as Amy's. The song ended and another started up. He took her hand and led her off the floor.

"Let's go somewhere more private," he murmured.

She slowed, their arms pulling taut between them. If she went somewhere private with him, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. She felt wild and reckless. The way he affected her senses gave her far too much pleasure. It couldn't be good for her.

"But not too private, right?" He winked, as he continued across the room to a pair of French doors. He opened them and led her outside into the mild spring night. The quiet, broken only by the occasional chirp of a cricket, enveloped them both. The sweet smell of cherry blossoms filled the air and stars glittered like diamond dust sprinkled across the sky. She started to shake her head and reach for the door handle, terrified of being alone with him on a night designed for romance.

"Don't worry, Amy. Everyone knows we're out here. Including Kyle."

Kyle? Why should Amy care if Kyle knew she'd come out here? Was that this man's way of telling her she was safe with him? He led her through the garden to a lovely white gazebo. Under the silvery light of the moon, the heady scent of lilacs caressing her senses, he pulled her into his arms and gazed down at her. "Amy, this is what you told me you wanted. Are you still sure?"

Silver moonlight cast his face in soft shadows. Mesmerized by his riveting blue eyes, she could only nod. Was he going to kiss her—or rather, Amy? She should protest. She must. But his body, strong against hers, felt so right, and a raging hunger tore through her, demanding that she let this happen. She'd never felt anything like this overwhelming need.

She nodded and his lips captured hers in a sweet, gentle assault. Her hands slid up his chest and curled around his neck, feeling the soft locks of his hair brush against her fingers. His tongue tantalized the edges of her mouth and she parted her lips and slipped her tongue out to meet his. A growl started low in his throat and what had been a light kiss flared, turning white hot and fiercely passionate. She clung to him tightly, moving her lips on his in an answering declaration of need. The impact vibrated through her body, reflected in his.

"Oh, God, Amy. You've never...." He pulled back and stared down at her intently. His fingers gently caressed her cheek. When she felt a slight tug on her mask, she jerked away, gasping.

"You aren't Amy, are you?"

The tremors of passion turned to ripples of fear.

"Who are you and why are you wearing Amy's costume?"

She pushed against his chest, trying to free herself from his embrace. One thought blazed in her mind, blinding her to everything else.

She had to get away.

"What's wrong with you?" He grabbed her wrists tightly, preventing her escape. "Why are you so panicky? Have you done something wrong?"

Good heavens, why did he think that? But her guilty conscience shouted that she had done something wrong. She'd crashed the party.

"Let me see your face," he coaxed.

He started to reach for her mask again but, with a burst of strength, she jerked her hands from his grasp, batting his other hand from her mask. He caught one wrist before she could flee.

"My God, you're afraid of me." He stilled her struggles with gentle hands, pulling her close to his body, sliding his arms around her. He brought his lips to hers in a gentle, giving kiss, then murmured against her lips, "I won't hurt you. I don't care why you're in Amy's costume or why you're here uninvited." His lips caressed the length of her neck, nuzzled at the pulse point pounding wildly at the base. "Just come with me now." His persuasive words wrapped around her and squeezed away common sense. "We'll go somewhere private and talk." He started to pull her across the moonlit garden, still holding her in the warmth of his embrace. "Give me a chance to get to know you."

Her mind waged a losing battle against her traitorous body as her feet carried her along with him. Could she discuss this with him? Tell him who she was and why she was here? Would he laugh at the comical thought of a plain, working girl like herself entering his world for a night? Her common sense told her he'd find her plight wildly entertaining, but her highly sensitized body told her not to care, to go with him and accept the pleasure he could give her.

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Vanessa felt her companion tense, then mutter an expletive under his breath. Slowly, he pulled away from Vanessa without totally letting go. Kyle stood glaring fiercely at them.

"Amy, how could you?"

"Don't you get it, Kyle? It's over between you and Amy."

Amy! Good heavens, Vanessa had totally forgotten that this man was already involved with another woman. How could he have kissed her so passionately once he knew she wasn't Amy? What kind of man did that make him? And he almost ... *she* almost....

"Is it true, Amy?"

Vanessa stared at one man, then the other.

"Amy, for God's sake, tell me," Kyle demanded.

Vanessa jerked her hand free from her companion's grasp and started to back away.

"No, don't go—" he cried, but Kyle grabbed him before he could catch her wrist again.

"Leave her alone."

She kept backing away, toward the bushes.

"Kyle, you don't understand—"

"I understand more than you think I do. I'm not stupid." He grabbed Vanessa and pulled her toward him, shaking her slightly. "How long have you two been—"

Oh, God, she had to get out of here. She jerked her leg, kicking him sharply in the shin with her pointed shoe. He yelped and fell backward, knocking her Prince Charming off balance. As the two men tumbled, she snatched up her skirt and raced through the bushes.

How had she gotten herself into such a crazy mess? She ran downhill and soon stood facing a small creek glinting in the moonlight. Shouts behind her warned that the two men were close behind. She kicked off her shoes and hiked up her

skirt. Treading through the shallow water to the other side, she ignored the trembles of cold adding to her shudders of panic. She raced toward the thick hedge bordering the estate. Finding a slight gap in the growth, she shoved her hand into the dense foliage and decided she could manage to push her way through. She pulled off her crinoline and wrapped it around her shoulders to protect the delicate bodice of the gown, then squeezed between the trunks.

More or less intact on the other side, she raced down the quiet street. She rolled up her crinoline as she ran and tucked it under her arm, then tugged her wig snugly into place. As her hand brushed the curls behind her ear she realized something was wrong. She couldn't feel her glass slipper earring. Her fingers wrapped around her earlobe. It was gone!

Chapter 2

Vanessa heard the phone ring again as she frantically searched inside her purse for keys. She shouldn't have put them away for the short journey from the parking lot to her door, she berated herself, all the while digging deep, trying to trace the source of the jingling noise. Finally, her fingers closed around the smooth, plastic key holder and she dragged the clump of keys out, then jabbed the square one into the lock. She dashed across the room, dropping packages on the way, and snatched up the phone.

"Yeah, hi," she panted.

"Hello, Miss Graham? This is Mrs. Charter from Power Systems."

"Oh, yes, hello," Vanessa stuttered, the pulse in her temple rising to a thunderous roar. This woman had interviewed her last week. She straightened her posture and tugged on the hem of her jacket to pull out the wrinkles. Why in the world would she be phoning today? Companies didn't make job offers on Saturdays. Vanessa couldn't think of any other reason for the call.

Unless....

Had someone found out she'd been at Nicholas Powers' party on Friday night in Amy's costume? Nicholas Powers *was* Power Systems. If he knew she had crashed his party and was angry about it ... Were they going to press charges of some sort? For trespassing? For stealing the costume?

No, she scolded herself. They wouldn't do that. A big executive like Nicholas Powers wouldn't want to waste his time pressing charges against someone like her for such a minor transgression. She wouldn't be worth the trouble. Anyway, she'd returned the costume to the shop this morning, so they couldn't possibly accuse her of stealing it. There hadn't been a single stitch out of place after last night's bold escape through the bushes. Might they be calling to demand the money back for the rental fee?

"Miss Graham, are you there?"

Vanessa realized the woman had been speaking and she'd missed whatever had been said. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"I do apologize for calling you on a Saturday, but it's a bit of an emergency."

"Emergency?" Vanessa squeaked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, we have an immediate opening for Mr. Powers' secretary, starting on Monday, and—"

"But that's Rachel's position." Vanessa's concern for Rachel immediately crowded out her own worries.

"Oh, that's right. You know Mrs. Jones, don't you? Well, she called this morning to tell me she's in the hospital and will be starting her maternity leave right away."

Vanessa slumped down on the chair beside the phone table. "Oh, my goodness. Is she in labor? Has she had the baby?"

"No, nothing like that, but she is suffering some complications. Her doctor has told her to take time off work, so she won't be back until after the baby is born. What I need to know is, can you fill in for her starting Monday? It'll be a

two month contract, until the replacement we arranged for her maternity leave can start. I've received excellent recommendations from the other people you've worked for on temporary assignment here and, even though you've never worked directly for Mr. Powers before, they all feel you'll be able to step in with a minimum of disruption. Can you do it?"

Vanessa couldn't believe it. The woman had just offered her a job! "Yes. Absolutely."

She could hear the woman's sigh of relief over the line. "Wonderful. I'll send a contract over this afternoon for you to review. Bring it with you Monday morning and check in with security. They'll give you a security pass and take you straight to Mr. Powers' office. We'll worry about the paperwork at lunch."

Vanessa grabbed the pen from the phone caddy and jotted down some notes as they discussed salary and hours.

But as she hung up the phone, her growing feeling of euphoria at finally having a job after two months of searching suddenly burst as she remembered that she'd been offered Rachel's job.

Why hadn't Rachel called her? She glanced at the answering machine and noticed the flashing red light. The message was from Rachel telling Vanessa she'd been checked into the hospital and not to worry.

Vanessa quickly dialed the hospital and asked for the room number Rachel had left. Rachel answered after one ring, yawning.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" Vanessa asked.

"No, I'm just bored," Rachel told her. "I would have called you last night, but I knew you were at the masquerade, so I tried to call this morning."

"I went out to return the costume. I'm sorry, I just got back. So what's happening? Are you all right? You're not having the baby, are you? You're only seven months along."

"Thirty weeks, actually, but who's counting?"

"So tell me!" Vanessa burst out.

"Okay. No, I'm not having the baby. The doctor told me I have to take it easy until the baby arrives. He's going to keep me here for a week or so and then I can go home, but I'll have to stay in bed."

"That's why you called work and told them you're starting your maternity leave early."

"How did you know that?"

Vanessa traced the circle of the receiver with her index finger. How would Rachel take her news? "Because they called me to fill in for you."

"Really? Oh, that's great, Vanessa."

She gripped the receiver tighter. "You don't mind?"

"Of course, I don't mind. I'm thrilled. Do you have a notepad handy? I know how thoroughly you like to prepare for an assignment, so I'll tell you all about how Nick likes things."

Vanessa smiled, pleased at her friend's generosity. She picked up the pen again and flipped the notepad to a clean page, then felt a bit guilty. "Are you sure you feel up to it? Don't you have to rest?"

"Don't be silly. How much effort do I expend talking?"

"Well, if you're waving your hands around like you usually do, probably too much," Vanessa teased.

"Oh, be quiet and listen."

Vanessa scrawled down notes as fast as Rachel fired out information, telling her what time Powers usually arrived in the morning, how he liked his appointments handled, where he kept his schedule, and so on. Once she'd filled the third page, Rachel finally ran out of steam.

"If there's anything else, just call me. I'm sure to be bored stiff."

"You won't be bored," Vanessa said, putting the pen back in its stand. "You'll finally knit those little baby outfits you've always wanted to make."

"I didn't want to knit them. I wanted *you* to knit them. I don't know how to knit, remember?"

"Well, this seems like the perfect opportunity to learn. I'll finally have you trapped in one place long enough to teach you."

Knitting would help Rachel fill the hours she would have to spend in bed. Vanessa hoped her friend would learn to share her own passion for the craft. She took delight in spending hours designing her own patterns and then searching through flea markets and clearance sales to find the unusual materials she liked to work into them.

"Oh, all right. I'll try," Rachel moaned. "As long as you still promise to do that christening outfit I picked out. There's no way I'd tackle that."

Vanessa laughed, thinking of the complex patterns involved and the number of times she'd had to pull out and

rework pieces of the jacket. She didn't tell Rachel she'd already finished it. It was wrapped and waiting for the baby to arrive, along with a brightly colored outfit Rachel had crooned over one day while shopping in the mall, and one Vanessa had designed herself.

"So, how was the ball, Cinderella?" Rachel's tone had changed to one of avid curiosity.

Vanessa's thoughts flickered from baby outfits to elegant costumes—and a certain mystery man whom she'd dreamt about in great detail—hot steamy detail—last night. All night.

"Oh, it was fabulous, Rachel, but...."

Anxiety swelled in her chest. She had to tell Rachel she'd almost been exposed, but she didn't know how to relate the sequence of events. How could she explain that she'd been swept away to the garden to be kissed by a handsome prince? She didn't quite believe it herself.

Her hand came up to fiddle with her earrings and the memory of finding one of her precious glass slipper earring missing hit her like a punch to the stomach.

"But what?"

"Well, I...."

The quiver in Vanessa's voice must have alarmed Rachel because her words came sharply when she said, "Vanessa, what is it?"

"I lost one of my earrings."

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry, Vanessa. Are they insured?"

"Yes, but...."

"I know. That won't replace it but ... well, maybe one can be made to match the one you still have."

"It wouldn't be the same." Vanessa bit her lip, remembering her aunt's smiling face as she presented the delicate earrings to her and how Vanessa had promised to take care of them forever.

"Maybe someone will find it."

Anger spurted through Vanessa as she realized that Fate had planned her revenge well. "And how do you suppose that will help me? I don't exactly want anyone to know who I am, remember?"

"Vanessa, relax. I—"

"Rachel, it gets worse."

"Worse? What do you mean?"

"Someone found out I wasn't Amy. There was a man named Kyle ... and another man and ... well, they were fighting over me."

"You're kidding?" Rachel laughed in her familiar twitter. "But you're talking as if that's a bad thing."

"Rachel! Just listen. The man named Kyle thought I was Amy and the other man did, too, at first, but then...."

"Yes?" she drawled, obviously amused by Vanessa's quandary.

"Well, it gets complicated."

"I bet. How did the second one find out you weren't Amy? You didn't take off the mask, did you?"

"No way."

"Then?"

"He...." She raked her hand through her hair. "He kissed me." The after-tremors of that kiss still reverberated through her system.

"Wow. Right in the middle of all those people?"

Vanessa fiddled with the spiral phone cord, twirling it around her finger. "No, out in the garden."

"How romantic. Are you going to see him again?"

"Of course not. Where has your mind gone, Rachel?" She tugged her finger free of the cord and watched it ricochet back and forth. "He doesn't even know who I am."

"But he does know you're not Amy."

She sighed. "Yes, and that's another thing. He thought he was kissing Amy."

"At first."

She made a fist and pounded it lightly against her thigh. "Well, the point is, if he meant to kiss Amy, he had no business kissing me the second time."

"The second time? Hmm. This is getting more and more interesting. Did you kiss him back?"

Vanessa glared fiercely at the telephone sitting on the table. "You ask too many questions, you know that?"

"And you love it. Well, did you?"

She puckered her lips in a tiny grin. "Maybe a little bit."

"Way to go, Vanessa," she cheered with enthusiasm. "So, you actually found your Prince Charming after all."

"No. He doesn't know who I am—and if he did, he wouldn't want me." She glanced at her reflection in the mirror across the room. Her short hair spiked straight up where she'd thrust her hand through it and her baggy sweatshirt and jeans had seen better days, though not in her closet. "After all, I'm not rich and sophisticated. Even if he did take me out, when he

found out I'm an out-of-work secretary, he'd dump me, great sex or not."

"You had sex with him?" Rachel gasped in mock horror.

Vanessa could just imagine Rachel's eyes widening and a mischievous grin crossing her face. "Get real. I just meant that we were ... well, let's just say that when he held me in his arms, the sparks flew big time, so I'm sure the sex would be great, if we ever did it." She patted down her errant wisps of hair, but they sprang up again. "Oh, Rachel, how did you get me down this path?"

"It wasn't me. You went there all by yourself. And it sounds like you've had a great time along the way. And as for being out of work, you're not now, are you?"

"No, you're right." She stared at her tatty reflection in the mirror. "If only that would solve the problem," she murmured wistfully, wishing she was the woman of *his* dreams instead of the other way around. Then her Prince Charming would come after her and carry her off to happily-ever-after.

She sighed, knowing her fantasy was just that—a fairy tale that would never come true.

* * * *

Vanessa arrived early on Monday morning, hoping to make a good impression. She showed the security guard the letter she'd received with her contract, along with her driver's license, then followed him as he escorted her to the executive office.

She stepped off the elevator on the twenty-first floor and drew in a quick breath at the sight of the luxurious

surroundings. Glossy wood, leather furniture, and limited-edition prints on the walls all combined into one spectacular impression of elegance. As a glorious backdrop, floor to ceiling windows displayed a magnificent view of the city, the morning sunlight glinting through the glass, sending golden highlights shimmering across the office.

She felt about as out of place here as a rock among a pile of diamonds.

The security guard handed her a security pass and she clipped it to her jacket.

"I'll leave you to it." He stepped back into the elevator, the doors closing behind him.

Vanessa crossed the plush-carpeted floor to the desk outside the executive office, resisting the temptation to kick off her shoes and sink her feet into the inviting pile. She set her briefcase beside the desk and dropped her purse in the bottom drawer, then scanned the contents of the desk, ensuring that she knew where everything was. She took a few moments to familiarize herself with the rest of the office and equipment, then she set about making coffee.

Rachel had told her Mr. Powers usually arrived at eighty-thirty and a quick glance at the digital clock on her desk told her she had fifteen more minutes. She grabbed her folder and scooted over to the door to the executive office. Pushing it open, she peered inside, not surprised to find the interior even more sumptuous than the reception area. Sitting down beside his huge desk, she copied appointments from his calendar into her time planner so she'd be able to track his schedule.

Through the open door she heard the ding of the elevator and realized Mr. Powers had arrived. A tiny shudder of anticipation rippled through her at the prospect of meeting the powerful executive. As she jotted down the last of the appointments, a familiar scent settled around her, reaching into her memories. She felt herself pulled back into the hot, velvet passion of her Prince Charming's embrace.

Oh, God! Surely it couldn't be him. As panic threatened, she assured herself there were hundreds—no, thousands—of men who wore that particular brand of cologne. Except that the scent seemed to blend with a healthy male tang that she knew instinctively was unique to only one man.

"Well, well. Who have we here?"

That voice! That smooth, sexy, incredibly masculine voice belonged to only one man. The man she had prayed never to see again. The man she had made love with every night in her dreams—unashamedly, eagerly, ignited by the real passion he'd stirred in her with that fiery kiss.

Slowly, fearfully, she glanced toward the source of that voice, praying she was wrong.

She wasn't.

Although he wore a dark blue business suit with a mauve and navy tie and looked much more conservative than he had Friday night, she would recognize him anywhere as Prince Charming. Seeing his broad shoulders as he leaned lazily against the door jamb, the amused curl of his lips, she leaped to her feet, accidentally launching a sheaf of papers onto the floor.

"Oh, no, I.... "She sucked in a deep breath and scrambled onto the floor to retrieve the mess, relieved to have the inevitable confrontation delayed for even a few moments.

As she snatched at pages, she saw his shiny black shoes step near her hand, then he knelt beside her and scooped up the remaining sheets. They stood up together, face to face, staring at each other. Did he recognize her? Amazingly, no spark of recognition flickered in his vivid blue eyes. His next question confirmed the slender hope that had started to bloom within her.

"And who might you be?" he asked, reaching out to take the stack of papers she clutched against her body like a shield.

She reluctantly surrendered them, all too conscious of his proximity ... of the warmth of his body ... of the answering heat of her own. He might not recognize her, but her body recognized him. If she took a tiny step forward, her breasts would brush against his chest. If she tipped her face up, and leaned toward him, their lips would touch. If....

He smiled, as if he could read her mind. Oh, Lord. The hunger in her eyes must've laid bare her innermost thoughts. More likely her body language, she realized, as she felt her breasts swell in helpless response to his overwhelming presence. She drew in a deep breath, trying to force her quivering emotions into some modicum of control. The action caused her breasts to rise and fall in a slow, tremulous motion, and his gaze slid down to witness the tightening of her nipples through the thin fabric of her blouse. His gaze jerked back to her face and his smile faded slightly.

Just her luck. He had to see her blatant reaction to him. Now, he probably felt embarrassed for her. In fact, for a man as drop-dead gorgeous as Nicholas Powers, fending off swooning females must be a usual occurrence.

At her silence, his sleek eyebrows arched. "You do remember, don't you?" he asked, his voice teasing.

"Remember?" A note of panic tinged her voice. "Remember what?" Good heavens, he could only be talking about their kiss. He did remember her!

"Who you are. And why you're here," he elaborated.

She gulped a breath of relief. "Oh, yes. I ... uh...." She couldn't keep stuttering like an idiot, but she couldn't rid herself of the fear that had plagued her since the night of the masquerade. She desperately wanted to keep this job. If he knew she'd crashed his party, she was certain he'd fire her.

So far he didn't seem to recognize her but ... might he be toying with her? Prolonging her torment? Enjoying her helpless response to him? On the other hand, if he truly didn't recognize her, she'd better start worrying about her professional image. If she didn't answer his question soon, he'd think her an incompetent and quite rightly fire her.

If it wasn't too late.

With a great deal of effort, she kept her voice steady. "Rachel ... she's having problems with her pregnancy. The doctor told her she'd have to stay in bed for the rest of her term, so she had to take her leave early."

His face tightened in a look of concern. "Really? Is she all right?"

"Yes. The doctor said if she stays off her feet the baby will be fine."

"Good." His mouth curved back into a smile, his eyes warm. "So, you're her replacement?"

"Yes, I...." She reached for her folder to pull out the contract that had been sent to her by courier, gasping when she sent his empty mug tumbling to the floor, barely missing his foot.

"Oh, damn." She bit her lower lip, realizing her choice of words was not exactly appropriate in her boss' office. As if that was her biggest worry at the moment. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually so...."

"Tense?" he suggested with raised eyebrows.

"Clumsy," she corrected.

"Do I make you nervous?"

"N-no...."

He reached down and grabbed the mug from the floor, then placed it on the desk beside her. She leaned sideways to avoid him, knocking over a paperweight. "Uh ... maybe a little," she admitted as he reached past her again to set the sculpture upright.

His sleeve brushed against her side as he withdrew his arm. "There's no need to be. I don't bite."

Bite? In last night's dream, he certainly had bitten. Delicate, electric nips, down her neck, along her collarbone. Then lower still. She tried to force her thoughts down another path, but the swell of desire flooding through her carried her along, taking her breath away.

He stepped back, staring at her with concern. "Relax. I didn't mean anything by that, other than the fact that I'm a pretty easy boss to work for. I'm really not the intimidating type."

She realized her hands were clenched around the edge of the desk. She drew them to her sides and straightened up. He thought she was afraid of him. By her behavior, he must think she'd never worked in an executive office before. She had to pull herself together.

If only she could ignore this uncontrollable desire bursting through her that sent her heart up in flames. She wanted—needed—to close the slight distance between them and relive the wonderful passion that had burned so briefly between them in reality, but had constantly flamed through her imagination ever since.

"You haven't told me your name yet," he reminded her.

"Vanessa . Vanessa Graham."

"Vanessa." He said her name as though testing it on his tongue. "Judging from the smell of freshly brewed coffee, I think we'll get along just fine. Rachel never was one to make coffee."

He smiled as he caught her gaze with his own, then his focus grazed her features and something flickered in the depths of his eyes. His smile slipped slightly. She quelled a tiny seed of panic.

"I'm sorry, Vanessa. Have we met before?"

"No. I ... uh ... but I've worked at Power Systems before as a temp. You may have seen me around—on the elevator or in the lobby," she suggested, knowing it wasn't true, that she

had never been in his presence before that fateful party. If she had, it would have been written indelibly on her memory. She fretted, knowing that maybe he didn't remember her yet, but he was bound to sometime soon if they spent any time together.

"Hmm. I'm sure I've seen you. There's something about your eyes...."

The phone buzzed and Vanessa twirled around and snatched it up, thankfully not jarring anything else off the desk.

"Nicholas Powers' office," she said in her most impressive, administrative tone. "Yes, Mr. Cavender, I'll put you right through." She held the phone out to him. "John Cavender wants to speak to you. It's probably about your ten o'clock meeting with Swan Corporation so I assume you want to take it."

Mr. Cavender's name had appeared in Mr. Powers' calendar as one of the meeting participants giving her a legitimate reason for passing the call on. She would have anyway to break the tension that had been growing between them. Her action seemed to be paying off, though, as he raised his brows in appreciation and nodded his head. He stepped past her to pull a file out of his drawer and she drew in a relieved breath, then hurried out of his office. As she pulled the door closed, his voice stopped her.

"Vanessa."

She turned, seeing him holding his hand over the mouthpiece of the receiver. Her heart started to pound.

"Yes?" she asked, keeping the tremor out of her voice, certain he had finally remembered her.

"Arrange to have flowers sent to Rachel. Something nice." His lips curved up in an intensely sensuous smile. "Tell her we'll miss her," he said.

Nicholas Powers settled into his chair and dealt quickly with the phone call, while he contemplated the door that had just closed behind his lovely new secretary. This had to be a record. He hadn't felt a strong interest in any female for months and now he found himself captivated by two women in two days.

As soon as he'd walked into the office, he'd felt a definite attraction to Vanessa. It had been strong, bordering on overwhelming, but he knew nothing could compete with the powerful physical response he'd felt for the mystery woman who'd crashed his party. Unfortunately, Vanessa, as his secretary, was completely out of bounds and Cinderella, his mystery woman, had completely disappeared.

He leaned his head back against his folded hands and smiled. Cinderella at the ball. She'd taken him totally by surprise.

The plan had been for Amy to wear the Cinderella costume, to match his Prince Charming. Amy had suggested the theme herself. Everyone at the party wore masks, except Nick, since he felt that, as host, he should not hide his identity. A brochure with pictures of the costumes had arrived with the bill from the shop, and he'd studied it so he'd recognize Amy's. Naturally, when he saw a woman in that costume, he'd assumed it was Amy.

But holding her in his arms had been more exhilarating than he had expected. When she had surprised him by responding to his kiss with a wild, abandoned passion, he'd been unnerved. Suddenly, his libido had kicked in and he'd desperately wanted her. He knew instantly that it had to be someone else, because Amy would never be so responsive. But who could this mystery woman be?

The question kept swirling through his brain, demanding an answer. She had run off so fast he hadn't even gotten her name. Why had she run away? Had he been too forward? But she'd kissed him back with a passion that matched his own.

That passion had dug itself into his memory and wouldn't be shaken loose. He remembered the feel of her against his body, her breasts crushed against his chest, the arch of her back as she pressed herself closer during their kiss, her hungry tongue tangling with his own. In his dreams their passion had gone further, revealing the body beneath the ball gown. Perfect breasts accentuated by a slender waist. Curvaceous hips topping deliciously long legs. And luminous eyes that had insinuated their way into his heart.

But no face.

Even now, sitting in his office, he could feel his body respond to the memory of her—and of his dreams. He wanted her. Desperately. Completely. Without restraint.

He'd never reacted to a woman as he had to her. He couldn't just let her run out of his life. He couldn't live with the memory of just one taste of her.

He had to figure out why she had this effect on him. No woman had ever sent him over the edge like this one had. He

always knew exactly what he wanted and why. He always stayed right on track—made a plan, then followed it through. This woman had sent his mind spinning out of control, invading his thoughts, throwing off his sense of priorities. If he could find her, he could figure out why. So that's what he would do.

He'd search until he found her. Wherever she was. Whoever she was.

And when he did, he could put things in perspective again. A knock at the door snapped him out of his reverie.

"Come in," he called.

Vanessa pushed open the door and carried a steaming mug of coffee to his desk.

"You commented on the coffee when you got here, so I thought I'd bring you a cup."

"That's great. Thank you." He smiled at her. "I promise, I won't expect it to become a regular thing."

She returned his smile, setting her lovely features aglow. Her hair, cut short and feathery around her face, made her eyes appear huge—and hauntingly familiar. She claimed they had never met, but he was sure he'd seen those eyes before. Still, he felt certain he would have remembered her if they had met.

She put the mug on his desk and turned away. The coffee had cream in it. He took a sip and it had no sugar.

"Are you sure we've never met?" he asked.

She twirled back to face him. "What? No. No, we haven't."

Why did she look so panic-stricken? "If we haven't met, then how did you know how I take my coffee?"

She walked backwards while she talked. "Oh, that, I ... I like to do my research, that's all."

She bumped into the door, jerked around, then skittered out.

She certainly was nervous, but he couldn't fault her enthusiasm for the job. If she'd never worked at the executive level before, she might feel a bit tense around the president of the company.

He smiled at the memory of his teasing when he'd first found her in here. Realizing now how much stress that must have put her under, he promised himself he'd make it up to her. Maybe even his body would cooperate and stop leaping to attention every time she got near, a reaction he found very annoying. It wasn't like him to react this way to an employee, even one as beautiful as Vanessa.

Maybe he could do something to relax her. He didn't want her jumping at his every word. He made a mental note to pull her employee file.

He tugged his handkerchief from his pocket and unwrapped it carefully, revealing a delicate glass slipper earring.

But right now, he was going to start tracking down his Cinderella.

Chapter 3

Vanessa stared at her computer screen and tried to get her breathing back to normal. The shock of meeting her new boss, Nicholas Powers, and discovering he was her Prince Charming from the Masquerade had left her disoriented. What in heaven's name was she going to do? If she stayed on as his secretary, he might figure out she'd been his Cinderella. He'd already commented on her eyes. Should she get tinted contact lenses to disguise them? No. She was being ridiculous. He might notice the difference, and anyway, she really couldn't afford an expense like that. On the other hand, she couldn't afford to lose this job, either.

"Vanessa, would you track something down for me?"

At the sound of Mr. Powers' voice, she jerked upright in her seat, nearly toppling the African violets on the side of the desk. She glanced over her computer screen to see him watching her with an expression of mild amusement. He slid the potted plant a foot further away from her.

"I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right. I'm sorry, I was just ... deep in thought." She flicked the Save menu to store her file. "What was it you wanted?"

"Rachel arranged to rent some costumes for a masquerade ball I held last Friday night. I'd like you to find the bill for them."

"Certainly, Mr. Powers." A chill went down Vanessa's spine. The last thing she wanted right now was a reminder of that

party—and she certainly didn't want it on the top of his mind. He might just make a connection she didn't want him to make.

"None of that 'Mr. Powers'. We're very casual around here. Call me Nick. Okay?"

"Yes, Mr.... I mean, Nick." She swiveled in her chair to reach for the drawers.

"Bring it in when you find it," he called over his shoulder.

She watched as he strode back into his office. Why was he interested in the costumes? Chidingly, she told herself he probably just wanted to check the amount against his budget, or something of that nature. She had to stop worrying about that stupid party.

The best night of her life.

But it was over and she couldn't let it keep encroaching on her real life. And she couldn't let the fear of discovery paralyze her, either.

She opened the large file drawer and flicked through the index tabs to the one labeled "Current Expenses". She pulled out the folder and scanned through the contents until she found a folded invoice from "Custom Costumes" the little shop on Bank Street that specialized in fancy costumes. She snapped the folder closed and carried the paper in to Mr. Powers—Nick.

Nick heard someone tap on his door, then push it open. He glanced up to see Vanessa enter.

"Already? I can't believe you've figured out Rachel's file system so soon." He smiled at her. Rachel was good, but this woman was exceptional. All that talent and a body made in

heaven. She held out the paper and he took it from her outstretched hand, just barely stopping himself from brushing against her fingers. He longed to see if her skin was as soft as Cinderella's. He glanced at the paper rather than his delectable secretary.

Cinderella had obviously affected him more than he'd thought. Now he was trying to find her in other women. At least, in this other woman.

What was the matter with him? He'd never had a problem keeping business separate from pleasure before. In fact, he'd always been able to keep his mind strictly on work in the office. Today, however, his secretary seemed determined to star in his daydreams.

But Cinderella, whoever she was, had haunted his dreams all weekend. He was under her spell as surely as if her fairy godmother had hit him straight in the heart with her magic wand.

And magic was a new experience for him. One he was determined to relive. As soon as he found his mystery woman. He focused on the phone number on the invoice, listed under the store name.

"Speaking of filing systems...."

He glanced up at her again, noting her tense expression.

"I wanted to familiarize myself with the files in here. Would you mind if I reviewed them?" she asked.

He appreciated her efficiency and eagerness to excel in her new job, but right now he wished she'd relax a bit so she wouldn't keep herself under so much stress. The strain showed clearly on her pretty face.

"Sounds like a great idea. Let me know when."

Her hands clasped tightly in front of her. "How about now? I'll try not to disturb you."

Try not to disturb him? A woman like Vanessa couldn't help but disturb any red-blooded male. Her distinctly feminine aura tickled his imagination into action anytime she came near. He couldn't be in the same room and not be aware of her. But he couldn't fault her for that.

"Fine, go ahead." He waved his hand toward the credenza. "Be my guest."

She turned away and headed toward the cabinet, walking with the quiet grace of a cat. He watched the gentle sway of her hips, feeling a tightness tug at his body.

As she pulled open the drawer, he reluctantly drew his gaze away, picking up the phone and dialing. The electronic ring sounded twice before someone picked up, answering with the store name.

"Hello, I'm calling about a costume that was rented last week. It was a Cinderella costume, one of four rented for Nicholas Powers."

Watching Vanessa open the large drawer and scan through the files, his gaze drifted to her nicely curved derriere. *Looking isn't a crime*, he assured himself. *As long as you don't touch.*

"Ah, Mr. Powers. This is Harold Green the manager of Custom Costumes. I spoke with your secretary last week when she picked up those outfits. I trust the party went well."

"Yes, the party was a great success, thank you. I want to know if the Cinderella costume has been returned yet."

"Returned? They weren't expected back until today and nothing's come in this morning. You don't still have it?"

"I have three of them but that one has gone missing."

"Oh, I see. Let me check if it came back on the weekend."

Nick heard the sound of papers flipping.

"Do you think the costume was stolen?" Mr. Green asked as he searched his files.

"Stolen? Yes, I guess it was."

A sharp sound across the office drew Nick's attention and he noticed Vanessa chewing on her fingertip as she picked up a large binder that had fallen over on its side. For such a graceful woman, she certainly was clumsy.

"Wait. It says here the Cinderella costume came in Saturday morning, right after we opened. Either you're mistaken about it being stolen, Mr. Powers, or you have a very conscientious thief."

"I see. Very interesting." More conscientious than himself. He still had to get the other three costumes back before four and he had a meeting in fifteen minutes that would probably take the rest of the day. "Can you tell me who returned it?"

"No, I'm afraid not. It was paid for ahead of time, so we didn't record that information. Wouldn't it have been your secretary Rachel?"

"No, she's been out of commission all weekend. I take it you weren't there when the costume came back. Can you find out what the person looked like?"

"I could talk to the weekend staff if you like, but I can't guarantee they'll remember."

"That's fine. Anything would be of help." Nick pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket while he talked. "Mr. Green, can you tell me one more thing?" Unwrapping the white cloth, he revealed the tiny earring he'd found glinting in the moonlight after his mystery woman had fled. "Are glass slipper earrings part of the costume? Pierced?" He lifted the delicate piece of crystal and examined it, thinking of the woman whose ear it had adorned.

"Pierced earrings? Oh, my, no. There are health laws about that kind of thing."

"That's what I thought. If you find out anything about the person who returned the outfit, please call me."

He stared at the tiny glass slipper dangling from his fingers.

"I ... uh. Could I see that?"

He realized Vanessa was standing right beside his desk, staring at the earring as though it was the most precious jewel in the world. He held it out to her.

"Just be careful. I think it might be antique."

She took it reverently. "Oh, it is."

He glanced at her sharply. "How do you know?"

"Oh, I ... I just mean, it's so beautiful, it must be antique, or very valuable."

Light shimmered from its faceted surface. "Yes, it is beautiful."

Almost as beautiful as the woman who'd left it behind. He'd found it dangling from the hedge surrounding his mansion property. He just couldn't imagine his beautiful

Cinderella in that magnificent gown pushing through those bushes. Why had she been so desperate to escape?

"I've finished reviewing the files. I'll go see if your mail's arrived yet."

Vanessa was halfway across the office before Nick realized she hadn't given the earring back.

"Vanessa, aren't you forgetting something?"

She glanced back at him. "Forgetting?"

He held out his hand, palm up. "The earring?"

She laughed nervously. "Oh, yes. I forgot I had it. Sorry."

She stepped toward him and gently laid the earring in his hand, almost reluctantly, he thought. Her intense gaze remained locked on it while he wrapped it carefully in the handkerchief again and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

Clumsy and forgetful. How in the world did she manage to be so efficient?

Once the earring was out of sight, she turned to leave again.

"Vanessa, wait. Have you got a car?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I've got to get the costumes back before the store closes at four but—"

"Three-thirty."

His gaze darted to her face. "What? How do you know that?"

"I ... uh...." She glanced at the bill and jabbed a finger at the hand-written note scrawled across the middle which said *Pick up before 3:30 Friday*. "I assumed from that."

"I see. Yes, I think you're right. Anyway, I'm going to be tied up until late. Would you mind taking them back for me? You can take an extended lunch and I'll pick up the tab at a nice restaurant as a thank you."

"That isn't really necessary, I—"

He waved away her protest. "Nonsense. I do it with Rachel all the time."

"Okay, thank you."

"Great, I'll go get them from my car."

* * * *

Vanessa peered in the window of Custom Costumes, feeling like a thief casing the joint. She strained to see past the fairy costume to the people inside, trying to assure herself that none of the store clerks who'd seen her on Saturday were here now. Not that they'd really remember her, she felt certain—she wasn't all that memorable—but why take chances?

Finally convinced she was safe, she retrieved the costumes from her car and slipped into the store, keeping her sunglasses on just in case.

"Ah, you're returning Mr. Powers' costumes, I see." A slightly balding man with grey hair and glasses bustled over to her. "I'm Mr. Green. I spoke with Mr. Powers just this morning. Has he found out any more about the Cinderella costume?"

"Any more? Uh, no."

"I see. I can't figure out why he wants to know who returned it. His secretary probably just asked someone to

bring it back for her, though why it didn't come back with these ones I don't know."

"The woman who was supposed to wear it took sick," Vanessa volunteered.

"Well, there, you see? Rachel probably just asked a friend to bring it back."

"I guess," Vanessa agreed, not really wanting to be drawn and further into the conversation. All she wanted to do was get out of here.

A young woman ducked past Vanessa and scooted into the back room.

"So why are you bringing these back instead of Rachel? Is she sick or something?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Nothing wrong with the baby?" His eyebrows arched up in concern.

"No. The baby's fine." Good heavens. Vanessa knew Rachel had only been in here once. This man had a better memory than most. Thank heavens he hadn't been here on Saturday. She felt sure he'd have been able to describe her from top to bottom given the sharpness in those friendly, but observant, eyes.

"So you're filling in for her, are you?"

"Mm hmm." She glanced at her watch. "I have to be getting back. Are we all done?" she asked politely.

He tore the tags off the hangers and stapled them to the bill. "We are now." He smiled. "Have a nice day."

Harold Green watched the lovely young woman leave his shop. This Powers sure seemed to attract pretty little things

as his secretaries. Rachel had been more talkative but this one clearly had something on her mind.

"Hey, Dad. Gonna treat me to lunch?" His teenage daughter leaned on the counter beside him.

"You got paid today. Why don't you treat me for a change?"

"Yeah, right." She grinned and hung up the three costumes on the rack behind the counter. "I wonder how come that lady didn't wait until today to bring in the other costume."

"Other costume?"

"I think it was Sleeping Beauty." She frowned. "Or maybe Cinderella. Anyway, she brought it back Saturday morning."

"Really? It was probably someone who just looks like her."

"No way. I remember her earrings. Dangly little silver stars." She hooked her arm around his. "So, we going?"

"Hold on, Suzie. I just have to make a call first."

* * * *

"Vanessa. How nice. You didn't need to bring me flowers," Rachel exclaimed, as her face lit up at the white blossoms tipped in rich burgundy.

"Don't be silly. I know how you love carnations, especially fancy colored ones." She'd seen the flowers at a stand on the corner near her office and couldn't resist. "I also brought you a knitting book and some yarn. You get your first lesson tomorrow night." She tugged the pattern book from her shoulder bag and watched Rachel's eyes light up further at the bright-eyed baby dressed in a sweater and hat set on the cover.

"Oh, it's adorable."

"And that one's not too hard. You could do it."

"You're kidding, right? I have no talent for this sort of thing."

"Ah, ah, ah. No negative attitude. You told me you've always wanted to learn, so you've got to give it a try." She examined her friend's expression, wondering if she was being too pushy. "You do want to, don't you, Rach?"

Rachel's mouth curled up in a half grin. "You know I do. Just don't laugh if it doesn't come out right."

"You know me better than that." She handed the book to her friend. "Pick out something you'd like to start on—they're all rated for beginners—and I'll pick up the yarn and needles for you tomorrow."

"Okay. Thanks, pal." She snapped the book closed and put it on her bedside table. Suddenly, her eyes went wide. "Oh, Vanessa. Come here quick."

"What is it?" Alarmed, Vanessa raced to her side.

Rachel grabbed Vanessa's hand and laid it flat on her belly. "Do you feel that?"

Vanessa felt a tiny thump against her palm. "Oh." She glanced at Rachel and a huge grin captured her face. "Is that the baby kicking?" she asked.

Rachel nodded, her mouth curling up in the contented smile of a mother-to-be. A baby. Vanessa's eyes misted over as she thought about how lucky Rachel was, with a wonderful husband who adored children and her first child on the way.

Rachel sighed. "Enough of that for now. I want to know how your first day at the office went. Do you like Nick?"

Vanessa sat down in the chair beside the bed. "He's ... uh ... very nice."

"What do you mean 'he's ... uh ... very nice'? Did something go wrong?"

She straightened her skirt, smoothing it down over her knees. "No, not exactly."

Rachel reached out and took Vanessa's hand. "Hey, Vanessa, what is it?" Her eyes narrowed. "You were trying too hard to make a good impression, weren't you? You don't have to, you know. Just be yourself and do your job with your usual efficiency and he'll love you."

"But, Rachel, I...." She lifted her gaze to Rachel's.

"What, Vanessa? Do you think he doesn't like you?"

"No, that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

She pursed her lips. "He's going to fire me. I just know it."

Rachel squeezed her hand. "Fire you? For heaven's sake, why? What did you do?"

She tugged her hand away and stood up to pace. "Because I went to that party."

Rachel pushed herself higher against her pillows. "Are you back to that, again? What could that possibly have to do with you getting fired?"

Vanessa turned back to face Rachel. "You know he was the host of the party."

"Of course I know. I'm his secretary—I mean I was his secretary—remember? But he's not going to fire you just because you crashed his party."

Vanessa leaned against the back of the chair, her fingers gripping the brown vinyl tightly. "No? He might if he found out I was the woman he kissed."

"Nick? He was the man you told me about?" Rachel shook her head, a broad grin spreading across her mouth. "Well, how about that? You and Nick."

"No!" Vanessa slammed a fist on the top of the chair. "Not me and Nick."

Rachel glanced up at her, startled. "Well, if he kissed you ... I mean, this is great. Nick's a wonderful guy and he'd be perfect for you."

"Perfect? How can you say that?" Vanessa took to pacing again. "Nicholas Powers is rich and powerful. He's part of the social elite. He and I are about as different as two people can be." *He'd never want someone like me.*

Rachel leaned forward, tracking her friend's movements with her eyes. "Not where it counts, Vanessa. If you give yourself the chance to get to know him, you'll find he's a really down to earth guy and...."

Vanessa stopped in her tracks. "And a two-timer. You're forgetting about Amy."

"Amy? Is that who he thought you were?" Rachel laughed. "Then you have no problem."

"How can you say that? He kissed Amy."

"You mean you."

Exasperated, she dropped into the chair. "It may have been me, but he thought it was Amy."

Rachel shook her head. "No, you must have that wrong. He and Amy have been friends forever—just friends. I can't believe—"

"I don't have it wrong and he didn't kiss me—her—like a friend," Vanessa muttered.

"Look, there has to be some mistake. If you just talk to him, I'm sure—"

Vanessa gripped the armrests with clenched fingers. "There's no way I'm going to talk to him about this. I don't want him to know I was the one behind the mask."

"Why not? He's obviously attracted to you. He's a rich eligible bachelor. He's the perfect Prince Charming. What's wrong with you?"

He scares me to death. Or rather, my reaction to him scares me to death.

"If he finds out I was the one, he'd be sure to fire me."

Rachel slumped back against her pillow. "Oh, for heaven's sake, why do you think that?"

"Because I was trespassing and ... well, I think he'll be embarrassed that he mistook me for his girlfriend—"

"She's not his girlfriend."

"—and he won't want to admit he was actually attracted to someone like me."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, someone like you?"

"You know, someone who isn't ... successful."

Rachel's fingers slid around the bed rail. "Vanessa, just tell him," she said, her voice tight.

"No, in fact, I ... I think I'm going to quit."

"Quit?" Her fingers clenched. "You are crazy. This is the best break you'll ever get. If you do well on this job, they'll probably find you a permanent position. Isn't that what you've wanted? To get into a big firm like Power Systems as an executive secretary? You can't give it up now."

"I know but ... If I stay, he's bound to figure out I was the one." Vanessa leaned forward in the chair. "He's started looking for her—me—you know? He called up the costume shop and asked them to describe the woman who returned the costume."

"You're kidding. You must have knocked his socks off with that kiss. So he knows what you look like now? And he hasn't twigged yet?"

"No, he didn't get a description. I guess the woman who served me only works on weekends."

She felt a twinge of conscience about the little white lie, but tried to ignore it. Better guilt than the fear that had flashed through her when she'd checked Nick's voice messages after lunch. There had been one from Mr. Green at the costume shop, telling Nick that the woman who'd brought in the three costumes today had been the same one who brought in the Cinderella costume on Saturday. How had he figured that out? She squashed the tiny feeling of guilt at having erased the message. After all, for Nicholas Powers this was a game of hide and seek, but for Vanessa it was self-preservation.

"Vanessa, you just can't quit your job. Look at it this way, if he were to find out, what's the worst he can do? Even if he does fire you at some point, you'll have made some money at

the job—and he'll owe you severance. Being fired won't look any worse on your resume than deciding to leave after a single day on the job. And you know the likelihood is, he'll never find out.

"Rachel.... "She sighed and glanced down at her hands. "He has my earring, the one I lost." She felt a tug in her heart, wondering if she'd ever get it back.

"Vanessa, if—"

She immediately cut off that persuasive voice, certain that Rachel would try again to talk her into telling Nick. "Don't you see?" She sank into the chair. "I can't stay. If I do, I'm afraid he's going to figure it out."

"No, Vanessa. Don't you see? This means that you've got to stay."

Vanessa locked gazes with her. "Why?"

Rachel's hands fluttered up. "Well, what better way to keep him off track than to be on hand when the clues come in? That way, you'll know what he knows, and maybe you can divert any information that lets him get too close."

Vanessa felt her face drain of blood. Rachel had a very good point. It had already happened once.

"And you've got to get your earring back," Rachel continued. "You can't do that if you run off."

"I guess you're right, Rachel."

She grinned impishly. "Aren't I always?"

* * * *

Nick walked through the hospital corridor, following the blue line on the floor that the receptionist had told him would

lead to the maternity ward. He glanced at the numbers on the rooms, following until he saw five seventeen, then peered inside to see if Rachel was awake—and decent. She was, on both counts, wearing a red plaid nightgown and glancing through a magazine. He tugged on his collar as he entered the room. He always felt a bit uncomfortable visiting a woman in a hospital.

"Rachel, how are you doing?"

Rachel looked up from the magazine—something with a picture of a baby on it—and smiled warmly.

"Nick, what are you doing here?"

He stepped further into the room. "Can't a guy come visit the woman who's kept his office in order for five years?"

"Thanks for the flowers you sent. They're gorgeous." She indicated a huge basket of mixed flowers, the purples and pinks adding vibrant color to the beige room. "So how are things at the office without me? Falling around your ears?" she teased.

"They would be if it weren't for the great secretary personnel hired for me."

Rachel's hand fluttered to her flannel-clad chest. "I'm crushed. I'm gone a whole day and you don't even miss me."

"Seriously, you know I do, Rachel. And your job will be waiting for you when you get back."

"Thanks, Nick." She took a sip from the water glass sitting on the little bedside table. "So, how'd your party go? Meet anyone special?"

He settled into her guest chair. "Funny you should ask that. A woman crashed the party."

Her gaze flicked to his face. "Oh? And how do you know that? With everyone wearing a mask and all?"

"I thought she was Amy, but when we...." He cleared his throat. "Well, I figured out it wasn't her."

"So, did you have her thrown out or something? The impostor, I mean."

"No, in fact, I want to find her."

Again, that flickering glance. "Why?"

"I want to know who she is and why she came to my party." His reasons were a lot more complicated than that but he wasn't about to confide his inner secrets to Rachel, no matter how long they'd worked together.

"You don't think she was up to something shady, do you?"

"Shady?" He glanced at Rachel and was surprised by the look of concern etched across her features. "No, nothing like that."

"Nick, I know you. You wouldn't be chasing after this woman if you didn't have a solid reason."

He shifted in his seat, unsure how to explain his crazy reaction. Was it a good enough reason that he couldn't stop thinking about her? That he desperately wanted to hold her again, to feel her lips under his?

"Did ... something happen between you two?"

He folded his hands together and dropped them between his knees. "Not really."

Except the most devastating kiss I've ever experienced—then she ran away with my heart. But no, he was being foolish. Love at first sight didn't make any sense, especially when he didn't know anything about the woman. But that

didn't mean he couldn't get to know her. He had to find out why she had this unnerving affect on him, to explore the magic that had shimmered between them when they danced, to—

"Then why do you want to find her?"

He got up and paced over to the window, staring out into the darkness with unseeing eyes. "Look, it's a long story and I don't want to get into it." He peered back at her, frowning. "The point is, she was at my party uninvited and I want to know why."

He raked his hand through his hair. "The big question is, how did she get her hands on the costume? I'd really like to find this woman and I think you could help. You were going to take it back Friday afternoon. I thought maybe this woman picked it up from the shop after you brought it back, but the store owner said it didn't come back until Saturday morning. Do you have any idea what happened to it?"

Rachel gulped nervously.

"I ... It was in my car when I went to lunch but then I had to go straight to my doctor's appointment. The last time I saw it, it was hanging in the back." Her hands went to her cheeks, covering a gentle flush. "I'm sorry, Nick, I didn't get it back." She flung her hands wide. "I thought taking it back Saturday would be okay, and then with being sent to the hospital and all...."

Nick raised his hands in a halting gesture, not wanting Rachel to get distressed any further in her delicate state. "Don't worry about it. Someone must have taken it from your car, but it arrived safely back in the shop. No harm done."

Except to his plan to find Cinderella.

But now he wondered how his mystery woman had secured the costume. Had she stolen it from Rachel's car? Could his mystery woman be a thief as well as a gate crasher?

* * * *

Nick stepped out of the hospital and headed toward the parking lot. A light rain misted the air. Tiny raindrops glistened in the light of the street lamps.

His talk with Rachel hadn't shed any light on the mystery, he thought despondently as he pulled his car onto the street. A lone figure standing at the bus stop—a very familiar, curvaceous figure—drew his attention. He pulled up in front of her.

"Vanessa. Hop in, I'll give you a lift."

"Mr. Powers?" Her voice sounded shocked. "I mean, Nick. I ... uh—"

"You aren't thinking of refusing, are you? The rain is about to get worse, by the look of it, and I'm sure you'd prefer to ride in a nice comfortable car rather than a city bus."

"I don't want to take you out of your way," she answered reluctantly.

"Get in, woman!" he said in mock impatience.

Vanessa stepped forward and slid into the car. The leather seats felt soft and supple against her hands. "I'm going to get your upholstery all wet." She chewed on her lower lip, knowing this one seat probably cost more than her entire wardrobe.

"Don't worry about it. It'll dry. Were you here visiting a friend?"

Vanessa nodded.

"What a coincidence. This is the same hospital my secretary is in."

Vanessa swallowed hard and stared out the window, hiding her flushed cheeks.

"So where do you live?" he asked.

She gave him directions to her low-rent building in the east end.

"I thought you said you have a car. Why are you taking a bus at night like this?"

"I do have a car, but it conked out on me this evening. It's a bit of a clunker, I'm afraid." She shrugged. "I've been out of work for a while, so I couldn't buy a newer one." She knew she was rambling, but she couldn't help it.

"I guess you have to watch your pennies where you can. So, will you buy one now that you've got a job?"

"I doubt it. I mean, the position is only temporary."

"That's true, but another position might open up before it ends. From what I've seen of your work, I'll recommend you." He grinned at her. "And since I'm the boss, that should carry a lot of weight."

She smiled back. "Thank you. I think I'll wait until I have a definite job offer before I go checking out used cars, though."

"I can tell you're a very practical woman, Vanessa."

He pulled up in front of her building and, before she knew it, he'd leapt out of the car and opened her door for her. He walked with her to the front entrance.

"Nick, you don't have to see me up. I'll be fine."

"But I insist."

She opened her purse and fumbled inside for her keys. As she snatched them out, they slipped from her fingers and tumbled to the ground with a clank.

"I'll get them," they both mumbled. They stooped down at the same time and suddenly she found her fingers entwined in his as they grasped the keys. The strength of his large, warm hand surrounding hers sent shivers rippling through her. She pulled away at the sharply tingling contact. They both stood up slowly, gazes locked. She felt her heart flutter, then stammer forward on a faster beat.

"Allow me," he said, as he pushed the key into the lock and turned it. Pulling the door open, he gestured for her to precede him in. Another couple stood waiting for the elevator and they all climbed aboard and rode up in silence. She and Nick got off at the fifth floor. She led him to her apartment at the end of the hall and waited patiently while he unlocked the door. His fingers touched hers again as they both reached for the doorknob and she felt the same frisson of excitement. She froze and their gazes locked for a moment, then her focus shifted to his lips, only inches from her own. Vanessa felt a wild urge to lean toward him and nibble on those sexy, full, masculine lips, to feel the pressure of his mouth on hers.

Instead, she moistened her own lips, which had suddenly gone as dry as dust. His eyes shifted to watch and his breathing seemed to stop.

"Vanessa...."

He looked like a man tortured by an impossible decision. He wanted to kiss her, she was sure of it. And she wanted him to. Her lips ached, anxiously anticipating the touch of his mouth on hers. She could smell the tang of his aftershave, triggering the memory of Friday night, of him holding her in his arms, of him kissing her....

Of him thinking she was Amy!

She shook her head, breaking the spell between them.

"I've got to go. May I have my keys, please?" She plucked them out of his hand and slipped inside, closing the door on him, but not on the disturbing feelings he evoked.

Chapter 4

"Vanessa, would you come into my office, please?"

Nick strode past her desk and through his office door. She picked up a pad of paper and reluctantly followed him. She sat down in front of his desk, pen poised to take notes, staring at the blank page.

"You won't need that."

She glanced up and saw that he leaned lazily against the side of the desk, watching her.

"You've been avoiding me all morning. Don't you think we should talk about what's bothering you?"

"I haven't been avoiding you," she lied.

"No?" He launched himself away from the desk and strolled toward her. "You've been everywhere but at your desk."

"I'm sorry, but you asked me to—"

"When I asked you to find out if we were running low on supplies in the main storeroom," he said in a patient tone, "I assumed you'd just go and ask the office manager about it, not do a complete inventory of the stock."

"Well, she was busy and since you wanted to know—"

"It wasn't urgent." He folded his arms across his chest and pinned her with his eyes. "Admit it, Vanessa. You've been avoiding me."

She leaned back in the chair. "Why—why would I want to do that?"

He scowled and paced away, giving her some breathing space. Which she desperately needed, because she'd totally forgotten to keep on breathing.

"I don't know."

"Mr. Powers ... I mean, Nick ... I'm sorry if I was gone too long, but I'm just trying to do a good job."

He let out a long breath. "Yes, I know that, Vanessa, and I appreciate it, but...." He paced a couple of steps, then turned towards her. "You're just so uncomfortable around me."

She shifted to the edge of her chair and straightened a pile of envelopes on the corner of his desk. "I don't know what you mean." Clearly, she'd have to do a better job of hiding her anxiety.

"Come on, Vanessa." He stepped toward her. "Every time I get close to you, you almost have a heart attack."

She scooted out of the chair, propelled by nervous energy.

He gestured with his open hand. "See what I mean?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

He stepped forward and she stepped back. "Then why are you running away?"

"I'm not running away."

He took another step forward, forcing her back further.

"What do you call it?"

She stared at him wide-eyed, grasping for some response.

"I ... I...." He examined her face closely and she felt sure he could read all her secrets, that if he stared at her long enough, he'd know she was the woman he'd held in his arms at the ball. She averted her eyes.

He stepped toward her again and she retreated, halting suddenly when she backed into the credenza. "Vanessa, you're not afraid of me, are you?"

"N-no. Of course not."

His vivid blue eyes continued to stare into hers, darkening to a luminescent shade of navy. The effect of his attraction became overwhelming, so strong she could no more resist it than she could stop the moon from rising in the night sky.

"Good." His voice, husky and deep, heated her blood. His breath wisped against her cheek, sending shudders of excitement trilling through her. His lips, so close, so enticing, were much too far away. She longed to feel them pressed on hers. She moistened her lips and parted them slightly. His focus shifted to her mouth and his eyes grew more intense. She wanted him to kiss her, but at the same time the thought terrified her. If he kissed her, surely he'd figure out she was the one.

As she watched, his sexy mouth compressed into a tight line and she could feel tension emanating from him. He stepped back and raked his hand through his hair. "Vanessa, maybe it would be better if you didn't work for me."

She felt the blood drain from her face in horror. The feeling of rejection jolted her like a dousing of ice water.

"But, Nick, you ... you can't mean that." Even though she'd tried to keep her voice calm, a note of panic edged her words. Oh, Lord, if she wasn't Nick's secretary, she wouldn't have the chance to intercept information that might give away her identity ... or to get her earring back. Rachel had been right about that. Vanessa needed to keep this job.

His gaze scanned her face. He stepped toward her and rested his hands on her shoulders, the light touch enough to steal her breath away. "I think it would be best if—" A rap sounded at the door and it swung open.

"Nicky, darling. We're going to be late."

Vanessa jerked back, her whole body stiffening at the sudden appearance of the breezy blond intruder. Nick stepped back but his gaze never left Vanessa's face.

The woman glanced from Nick to Vanessa then back again, her eyes twinkling.

"Oh, excuse me. I didn't realize you were in conference."

Vanessa's face flamed. The woman's sharp green eyes had fixed on her, assessing. Cat's eyes—curious and knowing.

"Amy, what are you doing here?" Nick asked.

Amy! Good heavens, what must she think? A red haze of embarrassment forced everything out of focus. Her face flushed at the thought of how much she'd wanted to kiss him, how much she'd longed to be held in his embrace. How could she have forgotten about his involvement with Amy?

Rachel had told her that Nick and Amy were just friends, but Amy had called him things like 'darling' and 'Nicky'. Clearly, there was something between them. Vanessa realized she was fighting a losing battle. If Amy believed Vanessa was a threat to her relationship with Nick, she'd be sure to insist Nick get rid of her. And he would, of course. After all, why would he risk a long-term romantic relationship over a temporary employee?

"Nicky, have you forgotten our reservations at Les Jardins?" the other woman crooned. "You were going to help me celebrate the Brewster deal."

Frustration flickered across Nick's face, clear in the tightening set of his jaw. "Yes, of course." Nick glanced at Amy, releasing Vanessa from his gripping stare. "But would you wait outside for a few minutes, please?" he asked. "I need to talk to Vanessa."

"No!" Vanessa blurted. "It's all right. I've got things to do."

She skittered toward the door, her gaze averted from Amy's probing eyes. She didn't want to give him the chance to fire her right now. She needed time to think. She grabbed her purse from the closet and raced out of the office. She had to come up with some way to keep this job.

* * * *

"Damn it, Amy, you could have chosen your timing better." Nick drew Amy's coat from her shoulders and hung it up. The maitre d' led them to a table by the window, then pulled out a chair for Amy.

"Don't blame me, Nick sweetie. I didn't know you'd be chasing your secretary around the office." She smiled as their host placed an open menu in front of her, and Nick clenched his teeth. Once the man left, she continued. "It's really not like you, you know? Where's Rachel, anyway? Is she off having the baby?"

"I wasn't chasing her." He snatched his napkin from the wine glass and shook it sharply.

"True. You seemed to have caught her by the time I arrived."

He glared at her. "Amy."

She clasped her hands on the table in front of her and smiled sweetly. "Nick, you know I'm just teasing." She sipped her water. "But truly, the woman did look a bit skittish."

Nick stared at his menu, bent on ignoring Amy's teasing. The look on Vanessa's wide-eyed face just before Amy had walked in still bothered him. He hadn't intended for her to think he'd fire her. He'd only meant to suggest that he transfer her to another department, into a permanent position. It would be better for her in the long run and, after perusing the personnel file on her this morning, he'd intended to do it before her contract ended anyway. From the high praise Meg Jameson, her last supervisor, had given and what he'd already seen of her work, he knew Vanessa was an excellent worker and he'd hate to lose her.

And, he admitted to himself, he liked Vanessa—a lot. Maybe too much. He didn't understand this wild attraction he felt for her. She wasn't at all like the women he usually dated—the intelligent, assertive, career-minded type. Not that Vanessa wasn't bright, and wonderfully efficient, but she was a little too shy and easily intimidated. She'd never make it far in the business world.

If only he could figure out why she was so nervous. From what Meg had told him, Vanessa hadn't been the least bit uncomfortable around her, yet when he'd gotten close to her, even before she'd thought he was going to fire her, he'd seen

a mixture of desire and something akin to fear. What in heaven's name was she afraid of?

An unsettling thought pushed into his brain. Did her nervousness stem from the fact he was a man? Had some previous boss put her in a compromising position? The thought of someone taking advantage of Vanessa tied a knot in his gut. Maybe that was why she was still a temp despite her exceptional skills.

Damn it, whoever the guy was, he'd obviously affected her whole way of life. Nick decided he would do something about it. Somehow, he would help build up her confidence. He'd also show her that some men could respect her for her skills as well as her beauty.

"I hope you're not going to brood all through lunch," Amy complained. "I have wonderful news and I want to share it with you."

He raised an eyebrow, looking at her for the first time. She seemed positively radiant. He smiled, pulling himself from thoughts of Vanessa.

The waiter arrived and took their drink orders. They perused the menu and once he returned with their beverages, they ordered from the house specialties.

"So, what is your wonderful news?"

Amy put down her goblet of Perrier and dropped her hand on top of Nick's. "Brace yourself." She smiled brightly. "I'm pregnant."

Nick's eyebrows quirked up. "Pregnant? This is a surprise." He'd never thought Amy would allow herself to be tied down by children. "Does Kyle know?"

"Yes, I told him last night. Right *after* he proposed to me."

He grinned. "So, what about your career? Do you plan to continue working after the baby comes?"

"Of course. I'll stay home for three months maternity leave, then we'll hire a live-in nanny so I have the flexibility of working late when I need to. Of course, I'll have to go out of town occasionally, but between Kyle and the nanny and I, someone will always be there for the baby. Don't worry, I'll have it all figured out by the time the baby arrives."

Amy was being her usual, practical self, but suddenly Nick felt a cold lump form in the pit of his stomach at the lifestyle she described. He wouldn't want a child of his to be bounced around like that.

She leaned her chin on her hand and stared at him. "Now, tell me about the party last Saturday. Kyle phoned me up the next morning carrying on about you and I out in the garden and some show-stopping kiss." Her green eyes glittered with curiosity.

Nick told her all about the beautiful stranger in the Cinderella costume, and how events led up to their moonlight encounter in the garden.

"Kyle, with his usual lousy timing, burst in on us and interrupted what was probably the most explosive kiss I've ever experienced," Nick concluded.

"Really?" Amy's eyebrows shot straight up and a smile curled on her mischievous lips. "I'd loved to have seen that. The always-in-control, never-affected-by-a-woman Nicholas Powers, drooling over a woman."

"I wasn't drooling." He turned his attention to his steak, cutting off a bite-sized piece with great precision.

"If that's what you think, honey, you're only fooling yourself."

He chewed his steak with great care, deciding to ask Amy's advice about his current romantic problem.

"Amy, we've known each other for a long time."

"Twelve years."

He put down his fork and watched her as she spread butter on her roll with thorough strokes. "You know I'm not the type to go over the deep end for a woman."

"Amen to that."

He lifted his gaze to hers and found her watching him back. "Then why is it that in the past week, I've found myself totally blown away by two different women?"

"Two? Are we finally talking about that little secretary you had cornered in your office?"

"I didn't have her cornered."

"Well, she wasn't trying to scratch her way out, I'll give you that."

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

She leaned her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her palm. "I'm all ears, honey."

He brought his finger to the single rose sitting in the bud vase. The dark pink petals felt almost as soft and velvety as Cinderella's lips, and were almost the same color.

"After I kissed the mystery woman in the garden, all I could think about was finding her and ... and...."

"Taking her to bed," Amy offered.

"Amy."

"Sorry."

He folded his hands on the table. "No woman has ever affected me like that. All weekend I've been dreaming about her."

"And your secretary affects you the same way. So, are you going to keep searching for this mystery woman, or are you going to do the sensible thing and grab onto this secretary of yours with both hands? Figuratively speaking, of course."

"Amy, you know she isn't the kind of woman I'm attracted to."

"No, she's not the kind of woman you usually date. That's not the same thing."

Sometimes Nick wondered where Amy got her crazy ideas. She knew him so well, yet at times like these, he wondered if she knew him at all.

"In answer to your question, I'm going to find my Cinderella."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

Nick tugged his handkerchief from his pocket and unwrapped the tiny treasure.

"With this." He held it out to her.

Amy picked up the glass slipper earring daintily between her thumb and index finger. "Well, isn't that adorable?"

"It's my mystery woman's."

She jiggled it so it swung back and forth, then raised an eyebrow at him. "Take my advice, Nick. A bird in the hand is better than one twice as good in the bushes."

"Amy, if you're going to use a cliché, at least try not to butcher it."

"The point is, Nick, this secretary of yours is more your type than you realize."

"And just what is my type?" He held out his hand, wanting the earring back.

"Well, for starters, one who sparks your interest like she obviously has." Amy dropped the earring into his palm.

"Are you saying physical attraction is enough?"

"Not at all. What I'm saying is, it's a good start. I believe that you wouldn't feel that spark at all if there weren't something backing it up." She tapped the knuckles of his hand and he realized he'd been stroking the earring. "There's far more attracting you to this woman than lust."

"So how do you explain my reaction to the mystery woman at the party? I didn't know anything about her at all."

"I believe that your soul recognizes its other half. If she's right for you, you know it without really knowing why."

"By that theory, my soul must be planning a *menage-à-trois*."

Amy batted him with her napkin. "Nick! Don't be crude."

"Then how do you explain my raging attraction to Cinderella?"

"That's easy. I say your secretary and your Cinderella are the same woman."

Chapter 5

Vanessa glanced up from the word processing application on her computer screen as the elevator doors opened. Nick stepped into the reception area after a two hour lunch with Amy. She flicked her gaze back to the monitor. Maybe if they'd had a good time, Nick had forgotten about wanting to fire her.

"Vanessa, about our discussion this morning...."

Her unlikely hope dissolved with his words.

"What about it?" she asked lightly.

"I didn't handle it very well. First, telling you not to be nervous around me is only going to make you more nervous. It's basic human nature. Second, I...." He sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Look, come on into my office and we'll discuss it."

She felt numb as she stood up and followed. He gestured to one of the chairs at the round table and waited for her to sit down.

Maybe she should be happy about this, since it would end her dilemma. The more time they spent together, the more likely he would suspect her identity as the mystery Cinderella. The problem was, if he continued to pursue Cinderella after she'd gone and found out that Rachel had given her the invitation, Rachel might lose her job, too.

With a new baby on the way and the loss of wages because she couldn't work during her difficult pregnancy,

Rachel could not afford to be fired. Vanessa had to do what she could to keep this position.

She searched his face as she walked toward him. He didn't look like a man about to fire someone. He looked far too relaxed. But that didn't necessarily mean anything.

She sat down and he sat in the chair next to her.

"Nick, I ... I'm sorry you're not happy with me but I—"

"No, it's not that, Vanessa."

"—but couldn't we try again? I mean—"

"Vanessa."

"—I'll work harder and—"

"Vanessa. Stop."

She gulped in a breath of air, staring at him with wide eyes, realizing she'd been nattering like a fool.

"Why don't you let me talk for a minute?"

Her face flamed. "I'm sorry." Of course, she was only making it more difficult for him. Why did she think a big executive like him could be swayed by the ramblings of someone like her? She folded her hands demurely in her lap and stared at them, waiting for him to pronounce sentence on her job. And possibly Rachel's, she thought sickly.

"You don't have to work harder. You already do an excellent job."

She blinked back the well of tears pushing to the surface. Didn't people always say something nice before ending a relationship?

"Vanessa, don't look so upset. That was a compliment."

She glanced up at him and his warm smile surprised her. Nick didn't seem like the type who'd fire someone with a smile.

"I'm trying to tell you I never intended to fire you. When I told you I didn't think you should work for me, I only meant I was considering transferring you to another department."

"Oh, Nick, that's great.... "But wait. Transfer? The swell of relief that had been rising in her suddenly deflated as his words sank in.

He *wasn't* going to fire her. But he *was* going to transfer her. Either way, she wouldn't be working with Nick, which meant she wasn't any better off. If she didn't work as Nick's secretary, she wouldn't have any part in the investigation.

"But?" he prompted.

She focused on his perceptive gaze. "But I would rather stay here."

"Really." His smile broadened. "Why, Vanessa, I'm flattered."

"I mean, working in the executive office and all.... "Good heavens, she didn't want him to get the wrong idea.

He laughed. "I know. It looks great on your résumé. In fact, I'm glad you feel that way. The truth is, you're an efficient secretary and I don't want to lose you. If you just try and relax, I think we can make this work."

She sighed in relief. "Thank you, I'd like that."

"Good. Then grab the proposal for the Bronson contract and bring it into my office. We'll go over the totals."

She hurried to her desk and grabbed the blue folder. *I'll work on being more relaxed*, she promised herself as she

returned to the table and opened the report to the summary page. *But to do that, I've got to forget all about the fact that if Nick figures out I crashed his party he'll fire me, and maybe Rachel, too. And harder still, I'll have to figure out how to ignore his powerful charisma.*

Maybe if she took acting lessons.

"Vanessa.... "He glanced at her, then back to the book. He seemed uneasy. "There was something else I wanted to discuss with you."

Oh, Lord, now what?

But there was a definite note of concern in his voice. She glanced up and met his intent gaze.

"Vanessa, I was wondering ... In a past job ... have you ever ... I mean, has a boss ever ... ?" He waved his hands helplessly, obviously trying to ask her something awkward.

Confusion scurried through her. Did he think someone had fired her before and that was why she'd been so upset over losing a short term contract like this? "What are you trying to ask, Nick?"

"Let me go at this another way," he murmured, his voice soft with concern. "You don't think I'd take advantage of my position as your boss, do you?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not."

"Because I would never do anything like that. I would never abuse the power of my position."

Her stomach tightened as a sudden understanding of what he thought shimmered through her. He believed her nervousness stemmed from a past case of sexual

harassment. And he was doing everything he could to make her feel comfortable.

How sweet.

"Nick, I'm not worried about that. Really."

Without thinking, she had placed her hand on his sleeve but, at the feel of his muscles tensing beneath her fingers, she quickly withdrew it.

"Good." His voice sounded strained. "Then I guess we should get to work."

The warmth of her fingers lingered on Nick's arm, fueling the powerful urge he felt to draw her into his arms. The thought of some creep taking advantage of her brought out protective instincts he never knew he had. Right now, she gazed at him with trust in her eyes ... and yet, if she knew what he was feeling ... how all he could think about was how soft her lips would feel on his and how sweet it would be to taste her....

He jerked his focus to the page that lay open on the table in front of her, not wanting her to see the emotions scrolling across his face. *Damn it, I don't want to feel this way. I've always kept my romantic interests outside the office.* Until Vanessa showed up.

He dragged the end of his pen down the column of numbers on the right side of the page, but didn't sharpen his focus on any of them.

What about Cinderella? Could these feelings for Vanessa be triggered by his need to find *her*? Maybe his subconscious was trying to transfer the desire for his mystery woman to someone more attainable. If that was true, now that he'd

figured it out, it should be easy to ignore. After all, there could be no future with Vanessa.

"Do you want to change any of the numbers?" Vanessa asked. "If you do, I could open the spreadsheet and—"

He shook his head. "No, they look fine."

She was so willing to please. And he knew if he listened to his instincts and dragged her into his arms, and felt her body pressed the length of his, they'd both experience intense pleasure. The thought washed over him, leaving a film of disappointment.

There could be no future with Vanessa.

It wasn't that he didn't want to find the right woman and get married. Someday. It was just that the 'right woman' would be an aggressive professional like himself, someone to be his partner in business as well as in life. And she wouldn't creep into his thoughts all the time, distracting him from his work. There was a place for romance and a place for work and they needed to stay in their own little compartments.

So did he think there could be a future with Cinderella? He didn't know anything about her—other than the fact she was pure magic in his arms, and her kiss held a lingering spell over him. But that wasn't enough to build a relationship on, despite what Amy thought. Why, then, was he so intent on finding her?

The answer swirled into his mind. If he found her, he might be able to figure out why she affected him this way. Because once he knew that, he could regain control of his emotions. He could rein them in and put his life back on track.

He glanced at Vanessa, watching her sift through the other papers in the file, valiantly trying not to look nervous. She caught him staring at her and dropped her pen. He picked it up and handed it to her, his fingers brushing hers lightly.

Damn! He shouldn't have touched her. The moment he felt her warm, satin skin his emotions flared like hot lava in an active volcano. So much for believing these feelings were a transfer of what he felt for Cinderella and that he could ignore his desire for her. But it wasn't just desire, he realized. He wanted to spend time with her—wanted to know what made her smile and what touched her heart. He'd dated a lot of woman over the years, hoping to find that special someone to share his life with, but none had sparked his interest like Vanessa had. And none had reached inside him and triggered a need so intense he couldn't ignore it.

Except Cinderella.

Could it be that his obsession to find Cinderella was a denial of sorts? Amy had accused him of avoiding the kind of woman he really wanted. Could it be that he subconsciously chose to go after a woman who wouldn't affect him so that he didn't feel compelled to make a commitment? Could it be that his obsessive need to find Cinderella was another way to protect himself from falling in love? After all, a woman he couldn't see or touch couldn't say 'I do'.

His watch buzzed, reminding him of his two-thirty meeting. He jabbed the button to cease the insistent noise.

"I'm sorry, Vanessa, I've got to go. We'll finish this later."

When the elevator doors closed behind him, Vanessa released the breath she'd been holding. She didn't know how

she would cope with this for two whole months. Working so close to Nick, trying to ignore the intense magnetism between them. Wishing he would reach out and touch her. But what choice did she have? Rachel's arguments made sense. Only here could she make sure he didn't find out who she was. And only here did she have a chance of getting her earring back.

Thinking of her earring gave her new purpose. She had to find it. She knew that technically if she took the earring, it might be considered stealing, but she'd be taking something that belonged to her and that made it okay as far as she was concerned.

She marched to his office and pushed open the door. The last time she'd seen it he'd had it at his desk. He'd pulled it out of his pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief, but maybe he'd stuffed it in one of his drawers. After all, why would he keep carrying it around? She started to rummage through his desk.

* * * *

As Nick rode down the elevator, he thought about the powerful effect Vanessa had on him. He wanted her—desperately—but not just in his bed. And that terrified him. His head told him to keep away from her, to put a distance so great between them that she couldn't touch him in any way, but his heart told him to reach out and grab her, and never let her go.

He just couldn't believe two separate women could affect him so profoundly. The elevator doors swooshed open and Nick strode across the lobby.

"Mr. Powers."

Nick turned toward the receptionist who'd called to him.

"Yes, Wendy?"

"I was just about to call up to your secretary. Mr. Randal from Data Crown just phoned to say that he's been called away on an emergency and can't meet with you this afternoon. He'll call tomorrow to arrange another appointment."

He thanked Wendy and turned back to the elevator to return to his office. When he stepped into the reception area, Vanessa wasn't at her desk. As he pushed open the door to his office, he heard shuffling noises and his gaze zeroed in on Vanessa leaning over his desk drawer, pushing things around inside.

He folded his arms and leaned against the door. "What are you doing?"

Vanessa jumped slightly, then slowly straightened her back and turned to face him, her cheeks flushed and her jaw clenched.

"I—I—I was looking for the earring."

The answer—so totally unexpected—startled him. He pushed himself away from the door and stepped further into the office. "Earring?" He pulled the handkerchief from his pocket and tugged out the dainty earring, dangling it in front of her. "You mean this one?"

She licked her lips and nodded sharply, her gaze transfixed on the tiny, shimmering crystal. He was struck by the fact that she looked as guilty as sin—and not the kind of alluring sin he usually pondered when he thought of her. This struck him as odd. There were any number of reasons, as his

secretary, that she could be rooting through his desk, and none of them in the least suspicious. And yet there she stood, twitching nervously, acting like a thief caught in the act. That told him two things—one, that the reason she was going through his desk was not one she wanted to admit and, two, that she was inherently honest. If she wasn't, she'd have quickly come up with a reasonable excuse.

The little minx became more and more interesting all the time.

"And why were you looking for it?"

"Well, you said you thought it was antique." She glanced down and, seeing the still open drawer, slammed it shut and stepped away as though it might bite her. "I thought I'd take it to an antique jeweler and see if they could tell us if the owner could be tracked somehow."

"I see. And why didn't you just ask me for it?"

She wiped her hands along the side of her skirt. "You ... uh, I didn't think of it until you'd gone to your meeting and I hoped I could have it all taken care of before you got back."

She looked so anxious, so vulnerable, he wanted to enfold her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right—but she was lying. He couldn't help her unless she was honest with him. Still, he had to fight back the protective desire to crush her to him.

"That was very thoughtful of you. However, it won't be necessary. I spoke to a jeweler yesterday and he's looking into it. He said he's heard of an eccentric who collected all kinds of unusual fairy tale paraphernalia. She died about a decade ago, but he thinks he can get a list of her estate sale,

along with photographs of the items. If he does, and these earrings were part of her collection, I may be in luck. If that doesn't work, he suggested I talk to some insurance companies. The owner may have taken a policy out on the earrings and the insurance company would be only too happy to help me track down the owner, since it would mean saving the money of a claim."

"Oh." The word came out as a croak and Vanessa cleared her throat before going on. "That's great."

He could tell she didn't really mean it. As he gazed into Vanessa's bright, troubled blue eyes, he wondered what was bothering her. It was almost as if she didn't want him to find his mystery woman.

An interesting thought bolted through his mind.

"Vanessa, is the woman who came to my party as Cinderella a friend of yours?"

"No, of course not," she stuttered, backing away. Her head swung back and forth in a very unconvincing manner. "I ... I've got to go to personnel. They've got more papers they want me to sign." She spun around and raced toward the door.

This woman was almost as good at fleeing as his Cinderella.

"Vanessa."

She stopped at the door and slowly turned back to face him, anxiety quivering across her face.

"When you're through, I want to speak with you."

"I don't know how long they'll need me and you have an appointment at—"

He glanced at his watch. "I'll expect you here at three-thirty, Vanessa."

His firm command brooked no argument and she gave none, but the spark of—was it fear—that glittered in her eyes made him feel like a heel. But he had to get answers to the questions that had started bursting inside him.

Was it possible she wanted to take the earring to remove the major clue in his search for the mystery woman? And was it possible his mystery woman knew he was searching for her and didn't want to be found?

He was determined to find out.

After all, his obsession with finding Cinderella was making him see things that weren't there. The way Vanessa worked, trying to anticipate every need, she just might have been telling the truth.

He sat down and pulled the drawer of his desk open, then pushed a few things around, seeing nothing that would be of particular interest to anyone. As he closed the drawer and sat back in his chair, he remembered how jumpy she'd been when he'd walked into the office and caught her going through his desk. He also remembered how Vanessa had almost walked away yesterday without giving the earring back. And the way she'd stared at it as he'd held it dangling—with longing and desperation in her eyes.

I love a mystery, he thought, smiling. And with Vanessa as the mystery ... well, he'd enjoy unraveling her.

* * * *

Vanessa stayed away as long as she could, running any errand she could think of to keep her busy until three-thirty, but finally she had to open the door of Nick's office and step into the spider's lair. She felt exactly as a fly must, caught in a sticky web of deception and struggling desperately to get free. The deception was hers, not Nick's, but he was the one with all the power. The spider.

As she turned the knob and pushed open the door, she wondered where this conversation would lead.

"Vanessa, come in."

Said the spider to the fly.

What did he really think about her going through his desk? Had he decided she was a petty thief, or worse? Would he fire her after all?

It became even more imperative that he didn't find out she and Cinderella were the same person. To protect Rachel's job.

Good heavens, she didn't know how much more of this she could cope with. If she could just get that earring back, that would put a crimp in his search. Then it wouldn't matter if Vanessa lost this job.

If only she could find some way to get his jacket off and retrieve her earring from the pocket. She was sure that was where he was keeping it.

It was time to get a little more aggressive. She knew Nick was attracted to her. Maybe she could use that attraction to her benefit.

Nick sat at the round meeting table by the window, so Vanessa sat down in the soft leather chair beside him.

"Do you want a coffee?" he asked. She nodded and he walked over to the coffee pot on his credenza and poured her a cup, adding cream, no sugar.

"How did you know how I like it?" she asked, taking the cup from his hand.

"I'm very observant."

That's what I'm worried about, she thought.

He sat down, shifting his chair to face her, pressing his hands on his knees. "Now, I have a few questions I want to ask you about the mystery woman who attended my party."

Her stomach clenched, but she kept her face calm. What did he suspect? Earlier, he'd asked if she knew Cinderella. Surely, he didn't suspect that Vanessa and Cinderella were the same person. After all, he probably expected *her* to be some socialite. Even so, some heavy duty distraction might work well right about now. What she planned to do might not be the most professional behavior, but she was getting desperate.

She crossed her legs and reached down to her ankle, smoothing her stocking the length of her calf. Nick's eyes followed her every move, she noted with satisfaction.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm fixing my stocking. Do go on."

He cleared his throat and dragged his gaze back to her face. "I ... uh, wanted to ask you a few questions about Cinderella."

She perched on the edge of her seat and started to take off her jacket. She knew very well that when she shrugged

both shoulders down to slide it off, her breasts thrust forward in a very provocative way.

Nick shot to his feet. "Here, let me."

She stood up, allowing him to help her off with the jacket, his gaze steady on her bosom. She could feel it like a caress. Her chest started to tighten and her breathing quickened. This was not a game she was used to playing.

"Thank you. I find it a little warm in here." She allowed her gaze to trail across his broad shoulders. She felt bold and aggressive—and determined to find her earring.

Smiling in what she hoped was a coquettish manner, she stepped close to him and reached up to trail her fingers down his lapels. "Don't you find it a little warm in here?" She started to undo the top button of his jacket.

"Vanessa." Her name sounded like a silky warning.

She undid the second button and slid her hands inside and up to his shoulders, trying to coax the jacket off. It was half-way down his shoulders when he shrugged it back on, trapping her hands under the collar.

Rats. She'd almost gotten the darned thing off.

"What in heaven's name are you doing?" he asked, his voice a bit shaky.

"I was just helping you off with your jacket," she answered innocently.

Slowly, she withdrew her hands, trying to be nonchalant as she slid them down his chest and over his shirt pockets, searching for the rolled up handkerchief. She was startled to feel his nipples harden under her caress, and his breathing accelerate.

His arms clamped around her and he pulled her tight to his body. "Vanessa, if you don't stop immediately I won't be responsible for my actions."

The feel of his hard body pressed against hers, of his hammering heart beating against her chest, made her sway. She grabbed his shoulders and his hand caressed the length of her spine to steady her. Her heartbeat accelerated to match his.

This was getting out of hand. She had to pull away from his warm, seductive body, to free herself from the strength of his arms. And she would. In a moment.

"Nick, I—"

"Vanessa," his rumbling voice warned, "this isn't a game you should be playing." His gaze seared hers as his hand descended her back, slowly, sending tingles through her entire body.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're making me so hot I don't know what I'm doing." His gaze swept over the rise of her breasts and she gasped. "And it's clear I'm having the same effect on you."

Vanessa didn't have to look down to realize that her nipples were standing erect with wanting him.

"But ... I didn't mean...."

"I'm sure you didn't," he husked. He shifted his hips and she felt how aroused he was. "But," he murmured against her ear, "that doesn't change the results."

Panic skittered through her and she pushed on his chest with the flat of her palms. He released her instantly.

Her breath rasped erratically from her lungs and her pulse felt like a herd of galloping horses. She'd had no idea she would affect him so much. The feeling was a heady one, but dangerous, too. She could grow to enjoy it too much, to want him too much—and that was the way to get hurt. Nick had Amy, and even if he didn't, he'd want someone *like* Amy. Vanessa could not allow herself to forget that.

"Nick, I'm sorry. I only wanted ... I mean, I just.... "Good heavens, she couldn't tell him she wanted to get his jacket off. What would he possibly think?

"I know what you wanted."

Her eyes flared wide. "You do?"

He smiled. "Yes. With your usual helpful attitude, you wanted to get this." He tugged the earring from his pocket and dangled it in front of her. "I'm sure you have some new plan to help me find Cinderella and you wanted to surprise me. I'm thrilled that you're taking such an active interest in helping me track her down."

"You are?" Did this mean he'd give her the earring?

He closed his fingers around the tiny slipper. "But I don't intend to let this out of my sight. Got it?"

"Y-yes. Of course."

He smiled. "Good. Now why don't you put some of your ideas for finding her down on paper and we can go over them tomorrow?"

"Okay," she stuttered, backing toward the door. She slipped out and closed it behind her, relieved to escape.

She slumped into her chair and stared at the computer. Nick wanted her to give him ideas on how to find Cinderella.

If she did a good job, he'd be able to track her down more easily. If she didn't, he might think her useless and transfer her. Then she wouldn't be able to stop him from tracking her down. Good heavens, how had she gotten into a mess like this?

* * * *

Nick sat down on the couch and tried to recapture control of his body. He wiped his hands across his face, then inhaled deeply, trying to slow his racing heart.

She'd definitely been after the earring. No matter what the little minx said, she'd been searching for it in his pockets and getting his jacket off had been part of her plan. Her sheer desperation surprised him. What was her total fascination with that earring? It was almost as though ... He shot ramrod straight in his seat. Almost as though it was something treasured she'd lost—and now it had been found, but it was beyond her reach.

Almost as if it was hers?

Good heavens, could Amy have been right? Had some kind of female intuition made her aware of a truth Nick would never even have guessed?

Could Vanessa be his mystery woman?

Nick knew what he had to do. If he could kiss her he was sure he'd be able to tell if Vanessa was his Cinderella. Which meant he had to get her alone for a while, outside the office.

If he could get her back to the scene of the crime, so to speak....

Chapter 6

Vanessa felt prickles down her spine as the limousine pulled through the huge wrought iron gates of the estate. How had things possibly turned around to bring her back to Nicholas Powers' mansion again? She'd been certain after that one marvelous night, she would never set foot in his house again, but she'd received a call from Nick this morning, claiming that he had to work from home and he needed her to help him sort through some reports for a meeting this afternoon.

The car pulled to a stop in front of the huge double doors and the chauffeur leaped out and opened her door with quiet efficiency. Another of Mr. Powers' minions, she thought, ready to spring to his service. She thanked him, then walked up the granite steps to the entrance and clanked the brass knocker three times. The butler answered within moments and swept her off to the library.

On the way, Vanessa glanced around, taking in the feel of the place without a crowd of costumed figures obscuring the view. A gigantic stone fireplace dominated one wall of the living room they passed through. Vanessa could almost imagine her stepmother as a young woman sitting in front of the fire reading a book. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't imagine her as a child, laughing and playing with toys on the floor. She'd always been too dour, too lacking in joy.

The butler opened French doors leading to the library. Nick sat amidst piles of papers scattered around him on the large oak desk. He wore jeans and a light green cotton sweater, the sleeves pushed up to the elbows. How could the man contrive to look so devastatingly attractive in even the most casual clothing? She straightened her own white blazer, feeling a little overdressed in a suit.

"Vanessa, thank you for coming." He gestured her to a chair beside him.

"I really didn't have a choice, did I?"

His eyebrows slashed down. "You sound resentful. I thought you'd enjoy a day out of the office. A change of scene and all that."

She sat down beside him, finding it hard to maintain her annoyance with sunlight streaming in the large window and the view of trees and flowers outside.

"I'm sorry, I ... I'm just not used to such a casual setting to work in."

Not that the library was exactly casual-looking, with wall-to-wall books on large oak shelves, leather chairs, and heavy velvet drapes on the window, tied back with thick fringed cords. Elegant and masculine.

They settled into work and after about an hour, Nick stretched, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I don't know about you, but I need a break. Come on, let's go for a walk."

He reached out and took her hand, pulling her to her feet.

"Out in the garden?" she asked. The musical chirping of birds and the light breeze wafting through the window, carrying with it the scent of lilacs, had been calling to her.

"If you like." His smile matched the sunshine and suddenly the huge room seemed far too small. He hadn't let go of her hand and she became acutely conscious of the touch of his fingers, of the feel of his palm pressed against hers. The color of his irises changed subtly as he stared down at her, a steadily darkening blue. What did he see in her eyes, she wondered? Was her desire as obvious as his? He brought his hand to her cheek, touching it gently with the tips of his fingers. Sparks of awareness flitted through her at each point where his skin touched hers. His eyes kept hers totally captivated while he curled his fingers around the back of her neck and drew her toward him. She felt herself rising onto her toes, moving to meet him. His full, sensuous lips parted in preparation and she watched his mouth with longing, anticipating his touch, wanting to nibble on that lower lip and drive him absolutely wild.

Why did she feel this way about Nick? Why did she have to be attracted to a man who lived in a different world than she did, both socially and morally? He seemed to think nothing of dating one woman and chasing after another one. Two, actually, if she counted Cinderella.

She splayed her hands across his chest and pushed.

"No, Nick."

"But...." Confusion clouded his eyes.

"You said we'd go out in the garden for a walk."

Fresh air was exactly what she needed right now. She hurried out of the library and headed toward the French doors that led to the patio. She pushed them open and stepped outside. The light summer breeze, fragrant with the scent of a multitude of blossoms, caressed her cheek. She breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the aroma, clearing them of Nick's disturbing scent. Turning around, she saw Nick leaning against the door, smiling at her.

"Tell me, Vanessa. How did you know your way here?"

Confused as to why he'd ask, she answered, "You chauffeur brought me."

He laughed. "I meant out here to the yard."

"I ... uh." Good heavens. She'd been so anxious to put some distance between them that she'd dropped her guard and fled through the house on a path she couldn't possibly have known if she hadn't been here before. "I have a feeling about these things sometimes ... and a good sense of direction helps," she stammered. She turned and pattered along the granite stepping stones, eager to avoid any other questions, but he scooped up her hand, enveloping it in his own. He led her down another familiar path, toward the gazebo.

"Do you like lilacs? The bushes at the end of the garden are laden with them this time of year."

"I love lilacs."

As reluctant as she was to return to the scene of their devastating kiss, she followed his lead, not wanting to alert him to her nervousness. The sweet, heady scent of lilacs drifted through her, a poignant reminder of that magical night

... of being held in Nick's arms ... of giving to him without restraint, unguarded, wanting only what he could give her. If only....

"What is it, Vanessa?"

She glanced up to see Nick watching her intently. They'd arrived at the gazebo and they stood beside the very pillar where ... She drew her hand from his and started to duck past him but he caught her wrist.

"Stay." That one word, softly spoken, stopped her. She leaned back, feeling the smooth wood against her back, and watched as he raised one finger to tip up her chin and gently caressed her lower lip with his thumb. The feel of his slightly callused thumb rubbing on her sensitive flesh sent a quiver through her.

"It seems you're always running away from me. Why is that?"

"I'm not. I...." "She couldn't think with him so close, with him caressing her lip, making her insides turn to mush.

"I think you're afraid."

"Afraid of what?" she croaked.

"Afraid of me. Afraid of what you feel when you're near me."

"No, I...."

He smoothed his fingers across her cheek. Her eyes fluttered closed at the sheer, unadulterated pleasure of his touch.

"You see what I mean?" he whispered. "I barely have to touch you and you melt. What if I were to...."

Her eyelids snapped open as his arms swept around her and he pressed her body against the length of his. "Do you know how badly I want to kiss you? How badly I want to open your silky lips with my tongue and discover the warmth inside your mouth?"

Her eyes grew wide and she felt her knees weakening, her body leaning against his for support.

"Will you let me kiss you, Vanessa?"

"I ... I don't think it would be a good idea."

"I do." He brushed his lips against her cheek, sending swirling tremors racing through her. "I think it's a wonderful idea." He fluttered tiny butterfly kisses over her eyes, across her temple, around her ear. Her breathing grew raspy, her eyes closed and all she could think of was the night of the masquerade, of that explosive kiss they'd shared, and of wanting to feel the magic again, no matter what the cost.

"Kiss me, Vanessa."

A soft moan escaped her. Without conscious thought she lifted her mouth to his seeking lips, wanting—needing—to relive the passion of that night.

Nick's anticipation flared uncontrollably as her lips approached his. As soon as her mouth touched his, as soon as he felt her lips tremble beneath his own, then press against his with building passion, he knew.

Vanessa was his Cinderella! His fantasy in the flesh.

Joy surged through him as he realized he'd finally found his mystery woman. He couldn't believe she was here in his arms. He was afraid to let her go for fear she might disappear again.

She was even more exhilarating than he remembered. And the need she triggered in him was even more intense. A shimmering radiance swelled inside him, blocking out all coherent thought.

Vanessa quivered as she felt his lips, tantalizingly warm on her own, ignite her inner desire. His mouth moved gently at first, then with more vigor as his tongue brushed the edges of her inner softness. His strangled groan coaxed her from her passivity. Her hands shot up around his neck and she pulled him closer, feeling her breasts crush against his chest. Her tongue caressed his eagerly, as he stroked his hands down her back, pulling her pelvis into his until she could feel the hardening contours of his body.

She tensed and tore her mouth away. What had she been thinking? She couldn't allow this. Was it too late? Had he found her out?

In his eyes she saw only the bewildered expression of a man caught up in unexpected passion. She saw no shock of recognition, only the desire to continue what they'd started.

How could he not recognize her? Although she was relieved, she had to admit she was also hurt. Had it meant so little to him?

"Vanessa, I—"

"No, Nick. We shouldn't have done that. I—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Powers."

The sound of the butler calling Nick's name from the doors stopped them both.

"What is it, Garvins?" Nick called back, never taking his eyes from Vanessa.

"That overseas call you've been waiting for has just rung through."

"Damn," he muttered. "I've got to take that, Vanessa."

She nodded.

"Thank you, Garvins. I'll take it in the library."

"Very good, sir."

He held her gaze captive as he spoke intently. "You stay right here. I'll only be a few moments."

She nodded again, not wanting to speak, knowing her voice would tremble. He released her with obvious reluctance and returned to the house.

Nick strode to the library, cursing the timing of the London office.

At least he now knew for certain Vanessa was his mystery woman. As soon as his lips had touched hers, he'd been drawn into her powerful magic, swept away to a passionate world of wanting.

Now, if he could only figure out why she'd decided to hide her identity from him.

He picked up the phone and dealt with the business at hand, pulling back the curtain to gaze out at Vanessa. She sat on the white bench beside the gazebo, wringing her hands together and staring at the house with a haunted desperation in her eyes.

She was definitely afraid. Why?

Suddenly, she stood up and strode toward the house. Thank heavens. For a moment, he thought she'd flee through the bushes as she had the night of the party.

As soon as he finished this call, he would bring her back here and tell her he'd discovered her secret. He would break it to her gently, then assure her everything was all right and tell her he wanted to sit down and talk about that night. About that kiss and the effect it had on both of them.

He hadn't expected the same explosive intensity of that first time but, if anything, this time had been more emotionally shocking. By the time she'd pulled away, all he could think of was how to convince her to give him more, to surrender all of herself to their shared passion. He'd do anything to have her in his bed. But something inside cautioned him that might not be enough. He'd have to proceed carefully. He didn't want to hurt Vanessa, and he didn't want to lose himself.

When he finally wrapped up the business call, he glanced at his watch. It had taken longer than he expected. Vanessa had probably gone off to find Garvins and get a cup of coffee. After he jotted down a few quick notes, he went in search of her, but she was nowhere to be found. Garvins stood in the kitchen, seeing to the details of lunch.

"Where's Vanessa?"

Garvins glanced up at Nick, his face as expressionless as usual. "Ah, Ms. Graham told me she had something pressing to do at the office. She seemed in a bit of a hurry."

"She's gone?" Nick felt his chest tighten at the acute sense of loss.

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Damn. She'd fled after all. Would he ever get her to stay in one place long enough to explore their attraction?

If only he could get her to admit that she was his mystery woman. It seemed clear that she was hiding something. But what? She must be afraid of his reaction if he found out, so he had to alleviate that fear somehow. But doing that hinged on the important question—why was she afraid?

Chapter 7

Nick marched along the corridor of the hospital, then into Rachel's room.

"Nick, how nice to see you."

"Rachel, you and I have to talk."

Rachel's eyebrows shot up at his serious tone. He stood by her bed, staring at her questioning face. Wide eyed, with her long brown hair plaited into two braids hanging over the yoke of her flannel nightgown, she looked almost child-like. Innocent. But she wasn't innocent, he reminded himself. She was as involved in this as Vanessa, he was sure of it.

"About what? Things not going well in the office? You're still happy with your new secretary, aren't you?" Worry strained her voice.

"Rachel, I know you and Vanessa are friends."

He hadn't been sure, but Rachel's shift of expression gave her away. She waited, watching him warily, clearly trying to assess his mood.

"I know a few other things, too," he continued.

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that Vanessa was the woman who crashed my party. Like the fact that it must have been you who gave her the invitation ... and the costume."

"Amy told me I could pass the invitation on, Nick, and the costume was already paid for. I didn't really think you'd—"

He flung up his hand to halt her explanation. "I don't care about any of that. What I need is for you to give me some answers."

"It sounds like you already have all the answers."

"No, I don't know the most important thing."

"And what's that?" Her fingers twisted the sheet around, spiraling it into a white coil.

"Why Vanessa did it." He gripped the metal railing of the bed and leaned toward her. "Why did she come to the party in the first place, and why is she hiding from me? She knows I'm trying to find her."

Rachel released the sheet and smoothed it out with her palm, watching the process with intense interest. "Nick, how much do you know about Vanessa?"

He released the cold metal and stepped away from the bed, shoving his fingers through his hair.

"I know she's a phenomenal secretary."

"Does that mean you won't fire her?"

"Fire her?" He glanced back at Rachel, noting the worry in her eyes. "That's not what this is all about, Rachel."

"Then what is it about?"

"I want to know what's going on. I want to know why Vanessa was so interested in going to a party she wasn't invited to—where she didn't know anyone—and why she's hiding the fact from me."

"I know that's not all there is to it, Nick."

He shot her a startled glance, his eyes narrowing. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you've been searching for this mystery woman ever since the party. Now you know it's Vanessa and I'm just wondering what you have in mind."

He sighed, not sure how to answer her. Rachel was Vanessa's friend and she was concerned about her. "I'm attracted to her, I won't deny that."

Her gaze darted up to meet his. "And what does that mean exactly?"

He stared at her intently, considering. "I don't know, I...." He shook his head and sank into the chair beside the bed, sighing. He clasped his hands on his knees, wondering if Rachel would understand. "I'd like to get to know her better, but ... she's different from the women I usually date."

"So what are you going to do?" Her narrowed eyes pierced his composure.

He slapped his hands on his legs and pushed himself to his feet to pace. "I don't know. I need to hear your answers first. Then...." He turned to her, his arms spread in an appeal. "All I can promise, Rachel, is that I'll be honest with her."

She plucked at the edge of her blanket with her fingernails. "Okay, that's all I can expect. I just hope she doesn't get hurt."

"I don't intend to hurt her."

"Yeah, well ... good intentions don't always lead to good results."

She sighed and leaned back against her pillow. Nick sank down into the chair again, awaiting Rachel's explanation.

"Vanessa didn't have much as a kid," Rachel explained. "Her dad used to work all hours and her stepmother stayed

home with the girls. She had two stepsisters—twins—and they took most of her stepmother's time. The twins, being older, got the only new clothes and Vanessa ended up with hand-me-downs. She never complains, but I get the impression she was a very lonely child, especially after her dad died. She used to read a lot, do crafts, and daydream. Her favorite book was Cinderella, because she had an aunt who used to visit and read it to Vanessa all the time." She glanced up at Nick. "You know about the glass slipper earrings. I hear you have the one she lost."

"That's right."

"Her aunt gave her those. She's always treasured them." Rachel pursed her lips. "She really wants it back."

"I noticed." He folded his hands together and rested them between his knees.

"Nick, are you going to tell her you know?"

"No, and I'd like you to promise you won't either. I'd rather she admit it."

"That's asking a lot. She's terrified, you know."

"Of me?" He remembered how she'd quake every time he got close.

"She's afraid you'll fire her," she said hesitantly.

Nick straightened in the chair, his brows furrowing. "Because of crashing my party? Damn it, she didn't do anything wrong."

"I know, but I had to practically twist her arm to attend that party, even though she desperately wanted to go. She's afraid ... not just of being fired—though that's what she's telling herself—but of believing in the dream."

"Dream?"

"Yes."

The frustration in that single word heightened his attention.

"She met Prince Charming at the party just like her aunt always told her she would. Nick, you know you could give her things she's never had and.... "Rachel shook her head. "She just can't afford to believe in you."

Nick thought about that, about the fact that he could give her all the beautiful things she'd never had. He'd like that—to see her eyes light up when he gave her a new dress or a pretty bauble.

"Rachel, promise you won't tell her I know?"

"Nick, she's my friend—"

"Think about it, Rachel. I've already figured out that she's staying on as my secretary to get her earring back, and probably to throw me off track. Am I right?"

Rachel nodded reluctantly.

"If what you've just said is true, she's likely to take off—to leave the job, and me, behind."

He could tell Rachel agreed, although she refused to comment.

"Neither of us wants her to do that, right?" he said in his most persuasive tone. "There are opportunities for a good worker like her at Power Systems. You don't want her to throw that away, do you?"

"All right. I won't tell her."

"Thank you, Rachel."

"Nick?"

He glanced up to see Rachel fidgeting with the hem of the sheet.

"You said you want to get to know Vanessa and ... I mean, I know you wouldn't mean to, but...."

"What are you trying to say, Rachel?"

"It's just that if you decide to take her out on a few dates and have a good time, she might ... well, I mean...."

"She might what?" he prompted.

She clenched her hands into fists. "She might just fall in love."

Love? Where had that come from? "Has she said something to you?"

"No, of course not, but ... oh, Nick, it's just that you're a hard man to resist, you know?" She laughed tightly. "You're young, handsome, and rich, a combination almost impossible to resist."

"So you're saying she'll fall in love with my money?"

"No, that's not what I mean. It's just that you're the closest thing to Prince Charming this world has to offer. And certainly that she's ever seen."

"You paint her as someone with her head in the clouds, but from what I've seen, she's very down-to-earth."

"Just be careful, okay? I don't want to see her get hurt."

Nick stood up and walked to the window. He sucked in a deep breath, drawing on the tranquility of the lavender sky streaked with pink and mauve clouds as the sun descended to the horizon.

"I don't either, Rachel."

On the drive home, Nick thought long and hard about what Rachel had said. The thought of Vanessa being hurt by something he did made his heart contract. He would never want to hurt her.

If they dated, would she really fall in love with him? Rachel seemed to think so, but he thought Vanessa was more sensible than that. Still, if she did, it would complicate things.

He wanted to date Vanessa, to get to know her, but she wasn't the woman he saw in his life plans. Dad had married a woman like her, sweet and generous, but without ambition, and although his parents had been very happy together, the business had suffered. His father had always insisted to Nick that if he'd married a more aggressive woman who'd been interested in helping run the business, things would have gone better. Nick knew his parents were happy, but he'd decided early on that he wanted it all—a well-run business and a happy marriage. With an ambitious career woman as a wife, he could tackle anything life threw at him, at home or at work.

Unfortunately, Vanessa, although good at her job, clearly didn't see herself as a career woman. She didn't have that driving need to get ahead, the single-mindedness to put her job above all else. The bottom line was, he might want Vanessa desperately, but she wasn't the right woman for him.

So, he should not ask her to the charity dinner this Friday night. Even though he'd love to spend more time with her. Even though dating her would give him the perfect opportunity to play her along and get her to reveal herself as Cinderella.

No, it wasn't a good idea.

* * * *

Vanessa sat at her desk the next morning, dreading Nick's arrival. What would he say about her running off like that? Would he be angry?

She pulled a pencil out of the desk drawer then slammed it shut. So what if he was? He shouldn't have kissed her. How could she be expected to just return to work after that?

She shoved the pencil in the electric pencil sharpener. The whirring sound and the vibration ricocheting up her arm grated on her nerves. She pulled it out and examined the sharp point. Testing it with her finger she decided it would be an ideal weapon to fend off a pushy boss.

Of course, she thought guiltily, it wasn't as if she had discouraged him. Not with the scent of lilacs reminding her of their first kiss, not with the darkening need in his eyes stirring her own embers of desire. She could still remember the feel of his lips on hers, the hardening of his body, the answering reaction of her own as....

The pencil snapped in her hand. Damn.

As she pulled another out, she heard the familiar ding of the elevator. She shoved the new pencil in the sharpener, determined to be cool and composed no matter what Nick said.

The elevator doors whooshed open and a light whistling lilted out to her. Nick, his hands shoved in his pockets, strolled happily to her desk.

"Vanessa, I need you to come with me while I run some errands."

Oh, no. The last thing she wanted was to spend time with him. She wasn't ready to cope with that right now, especially with the memory of that kiss echoing in her mind. Her body still ached from it. Was her face flushed?

"When?" she asked.

"Right now. Then we'll grab lunch."

There must be a way out of this. She flipped open the schedule book on her desk. "But, Nick, you've got an appointment at ten o'clock, then another at eleven..."

"Cancel them."

"But...."

"I'll wait." He perched on the edge of her desk to do just that.

She reached for the phone and made the necessary phone calls. When she hung up, Nick fetched her purse from the closet and handed it to her, then slid his hand to the small of her back, easing her into motion.

Vanessa grabbed her notebook, wondering what kind of errands he needed her for. He snatched it from her hand and tossed it onto the desk.

"You won't need that. Come on."

His limousine waited for them at front of the building and it carried them to Savoury, the poshest shopping district in the city.

"What's this all about, Nick?"

"I need to buy a dress for my date Friday night."

"Oh." Vanessa felt as though a ten-ton weight had been shifted onto her chest. She'd known all along that Nick and she could never ... would never ... but to have him blatantly admit it by asking her to help him pick out a dress for another woman—probably Amy—ravaged her heart. In fact, he hadn't even asked, he'd ordered.

Why did he want her to do this? She didn't want to choose a gown for Nick to admire on some other woman.

"Why not take the lady involved?" she queried.

"I have a feeling she might refuse. This way, I can get you to try on the dress, and I'll know if it's suitable."

"You think we're the same size?" She remembered Amy's lithe figure and long, graceful legs.

"I guarantee, you're an exact match."

They entered a plush establishment with gold-gilt letters elegantly scrawled across the brass-trimmed doors. A saleswoman dressed in a mint-green, tailored, silk suit approached them with a smile that looked as though it might crack her face.

"Ah, Mr. Powers. So good to see you."

The politeness in her voice sounded reserved, but Vanessa supposed that was the way rich people preferred the minions who served them.

"Hello, Hilda. Are you ready for us?"

"Of course, Mr. Powers. I have the models all ready."

Models? The woman led them to a comfortable room in the back where they sat on a couch and another woman served them coffee.

"If they have models," she whispered to him, "then why did you want me to come along?"

"Because the models won't look like my date. I want to see the dress on you."

"But I don't look anything like...." She drew in a sharp breath and practically bit her tongue.

"Vanessa, do you think this is for Amy? I know you were flustered when she came by for our lunch date the other day, and you probably jumped to certain conclusions, but ... it's not Amy I'm taking out Friday night."

"It's not?" If not Amy, then who? How many women did this man have on a string at one time?

"No. Amy and I have been friends for a long time. I assure you, she's only that—a friend."

"But...." Damn, how could she ask him why he kissed Amy, or thought he was kissing Amy, at the ball without giving herself away?

"In fact, we're such good friends, she asked me to help her make her boyfriend jealous. It was all set up for the masquerade I told you about."

She nodded, unable to utter a word, hardly believing he was answering the question she hadn't dared to ask out loud.

"Well, I was supposed to make a play for Amy in front of Kyle—that's her boyfriend. It worked out quite well, even though Amy took sick and couldn't come. We owe a lot to that mystery woman who showed up in her place. When the threat of losing Amy became real, Kyle finally realized how much he wants her. After that, he asked Amy to marry him. I wish I knew who Cinderella was so I could thank her."

So Rachel had been right about Amy and Nick being just friends. That meant that Nick and Vanessa ... that when Nick wanted to pursue her. Her heart fluttered. Should she tell him she was Cinderella? But wouldn't he hate knowing his fantasy woman was not from his social set? Even if Nick knew she was Cinderella, even if he decided to pursue this wild attraction between them, it could never last. The gulf between their lives could never be bridged. Still, if she told him, maybe....

Vanessa licked her lips. But what if—?

The soft music changed to something with more of a beat and models started marching past in a seductive rhythm, swirling by in glamorous gowns of every color and style imaginable.

Suddenly, she remembered why she was sitting here. How could Vanessa have nurtured even a small hope that something could work between them? She'd discouraged him and he'd given up. It was as simple as that. She simply wasn't worth the effort or the time to convince otherwise.

Soon, about twenty gorgeous women stood lined up in front of them wearing the most stunning gowns Vanessa had ever seen.

"Hmm. I'm not sure." Nick said, tapping his lips with his finger. "What do you think, Vanessa?"

"They're all fabulous."

Nick gestured to one of the women, in electric blue, neck-to-ankle sequins, and she stepped forward, turning in front of them to show off the gown. Clusters of matching crystals

adorned her ears and spike heels made her unbelievably long legs seem endless.

"What do you think of that?"

"It's great, but...."

"Too much?" He smiled and nodded. The woman returned to the line-up. "What about the pink?"

The 'pink' was a rose-colored dress with a form-fitting bodice embroidered with sequins and bugle beads. The short sleeves puffed from the off-the-shoulder neckline like cotton candy and the mid-calf length skirt flared out at the hip. When the model twirled, it spun out in an iridescent cloud.

"It's very pretty."

"But?"

"Nick, I can't pick a gown for another woman, especially if I don't know anything about her."

"Just choose the dress as if it was for you."

"I don't know."

"Relax. I'm sure she'll love whatever you choose." He scanned at the row of designer gowns again. "You know, I'd love to see you in that lace number."

The model moved forward and Vanessa felt her face flush. The 'lace number' was black, body-hugging, and very tiny. It looked to be no more than a slip. It barely covered the essentials and Vanessa couldn't imagine wearing it as lingerie, let alone all by itself.

"No. What I really like is the green one," she said. The brilliant jade-colored dress, strapless, hugged the model's body to the knee, then flared out dramatically. Vanessa had always loved mermaid-style dresses. They seemed to

personify glamour, and this one was no exception. The model moved forward and sunlight glittered off the rhinestones trimming the fabric along the top of the breasts and around the crest of the full skirt.

"I like that. Why don't you go try it on?"

She looked at it dubiously. The model had the height and grace to pull it off, but Vanessa wasn't sure she'd do it justice.

"Why don't you pick out a couple of others and try them, too, just so we'll have a selection?"

Reluctantly, she pointed out the rose dress, a purple, and a red one.

The saleslady led her to a lavish change room, with a couch and a huge three-way mirror.

"Will Mr. Powers be joining you?" she asked Vanessa.

"In here? No," she squeaked.

Another woman brought the dresses and hung them on the rack by the mirror. She noticed the woman hang up the lace dress with the rest, even though that hadn't been one of her choices. Vanessa tried on the green one first and was delighted to see it didn't look too outrageous on her. In fact, she felt rather glamorous in it.

"Stunning," Nick proclaimed when she emerged.

She glanced at herself in the mirror, examining every angle, critically inspecting the back. "You don't think it's too ... ?" She snapped her mouth shut, remembering that the dress was not for her, but for Nick's Friday night date.

Nick smiled, examining the same part of her anatomy that she assessed, his gaze sending frothing heat tickling through

her. "No, I don't think it's 'too' anything. It's absolutely perfect."

She tried each of the dresses in turn, except the black lace, and Nick exclaimed over all of them.

"Don't forget the other one," he reminded her when she started toward the dressing room after showing him the last of her choices.

"Other one?"

"You know which one I mean." A wicked light glinted in his eyes.

She pointed toward the change room. "Nick, I am not coming out here in that scrap of lace. It's ... it's almost indecent."

"No, it's not. It's just delightfully sexy."

So was Nick's devil-may-care grin. She frowned and plunked her hands on her hips. "I'm not modeling it for you."

He spread his hands wide in a gesture of capitulation. "Okay, how about this. Put it on and see how it fits. You don't have to leave the change room. Hilda will let me know how it looks."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"So I'll know if it'll fit my date."

"Oh ... yes, of course." She had forgotten. In the excitement of trying on all the glamorous dresses, she'd forgotten she was simply a mannequin, a convenient body that matched his date's shape.

She tugged it on and the saleslady raved about it. Vanessa examined herself in the mirror and a shocked, extremely provocative, reflection stared back at her. Feeling unusually

wicked, she wished she had the courage to push open the door and strut out in front of Nick. Maybe she could convince him that he wanted her and not that other, nameless woman he'd been shopping for. Which was foolish. Nothing had changed. He might not be dating Amy as she'd feared, but the fact remained that they were far too different. He was champagne and tuxedos, and she was soft drinks and jeans. He wanted an aggressive career woman who liked to party, she considered her job just a way to make money and would rather stay home and work on her sweater designs. They were the mismatch of the century. Why, then, did it feel so right being with him?

* * * *

In the limousine, Nick leaned toward Vanessa and said, "Hilda told me you look unbelievably sexy in the lace dress."

"She didn't." Vanessa just couldn't imagine the dour-faced woman saying anything of the sort.

"No, not in those exact words, but the look of shock, mixed with envy, was a dead giveaway." His gaze drifted down her body. "I bet it accentuated every curve and—"

"Nick!" She glanced nervously at the driver, wondering if he could hear them.

"Don't worry. He can't hear a thing," Nick murmured. "So why didn't you come out and show it to me?"

"I ... it ... was just too revealing." She felt a slight flush burn her cheeks. Was it because she could imagine Nick's eyes lingering over every curve of her body, sending her pulse leaping? Or because she'd wanted to come out so

desperately, to convince him he wanted her, and not some other woman, so badly, that she'd barely been able to control the urge?

"You don't like to reveal too much, do you, Vanessa?"

At his solemn tone, her gaze jerked to his face. "What?"

Lines of concentration disappeared from his face as his mouth turned up in a grin.

"Hey, maybe you can help me. I've bought this beautiful dress for Friday night but I don't have a date yet."

Bewildered, she stared at him with a frown. "But I thought you said...."

"Oh, I know who I want, I just haven't asked her."

"Why not?" The way he looked at her, as if his sharp eyes could pierce her barriers, she wondered if he'd been lying about asking another woman, if he really meant to ask her. She quelled the thought immediately. Why torture herself by imagining things that could never be?

"Because I'm not sure she'll say yes."

"You?" Vanessa leaned back against the seat, her fingers spread on her chest in mock astonishment. "You're afraid a woman will say no?"

"It has been known to happen, you know."

He took her hand. "You, for instance."

"Me?" Her throat went dry.

"You said 'no' to showing me the dress." He slid his hand to her elbow and kissed the sensitive white flesh of her forearm. The touch of his lips sent quivers like dancing rainbows along her spine. "Tell me, Vanessa. How should I ask this woman to guarantee she'll say yes?"

"There are no guarantees in life, Nick."

"That's true, but there are ways to influence events." His lips inched to the inside of her elbow. Why was he doing this to her while seeking her advice on how to ask another woman out?

"How should I approach her?"

"You could just phone her up and ask. It's straightforward, simple," she suggested.

He grinned again, showing straight white teeth, and looking like a Cheshire cat. "Definitely not me. No, I want something much more imaginative than that." He drew his mouth away from her arm, and she immediately missed the warmth of his breath. "What if I send her a note, along with a dozen roses?" He held his hands in front of him. "Imagine this. Her doorbell rings and she opens it to see a man dressed as an old English minstrel. He hands her the roses, then breaks into song, asking her to be my date."

Vanessa giggled.

"You laugh, but I'm perfectly serious. I want to impress her."

"I see. Well, that's overdoing it a little."

He looked like a little boy whose puppy had just been insulted. "You think it's stupid. Do you hate the whole idea?"

"No, the flowers were good."

"So the roses stay."

"Roses are nice...." Her voice trailed off.

"But?"

She felt a half smile creep across her face. She was foolish to get caught up in the fantasy, she knew, but Nick had a way of dragging her along for the ride.

"If it was me...."

"Yes?" His interest seemed to intensify.

"A large orchid, floating in a bubble of glass. Your note could say: 'A single bloom for the single most beautiful woman I know. Let Friday be a night of magic for us both.'"

His hand curled around hers, his eyes glittering. "How do I sign it? Love, Nick?"

She shook her head. "You don't sign it. You leave it blank, then as soon as the messenger leaves, you go to her door and tell her it's from you, then sweep her into your arms and kiss her."

"And that would work?"

"On me it would." She drew back reluctantly from the alluring image.

"That's good enough for me."

She looked at him uncertainly. "Are you on kissing terms with her?"

"Absolutely."

Again, his eyes shone with wickedness and Vanessa's heart sank into a pool of icy emotion. Nick drew her hand to his mouth.

"Thanks for your help, Vanessa."

His lips pressed on her palm and her eyelids drifted closed. If only she was the lucky woman.

* * * *

At seven that evening, Vanessa's doorbell rang. She plopped her knitting down beside her and hurried to the door. Peering through the peephole, to her astonishment she saw a young man in a minstrel suit standing on the other side. What in heaven's name ... ? Was Nick pulling some kind of prank on her? She pulled open the door.

"Miss Graham?" he inquired in an English accent.

Nice touch, she thought. "Yes."

He swept off his hat, green ostrich feather swishing through the air, and bowed deeply.

She giggled. "Are you going to break into song now?"

She couldn't help feeling a bit jealous that Nick's date-to-be was getting an orchid with a love note while she was getting a practical joke, but she pushed the feeling aside. The fact that Nick would go to this much trouble to thank her for helping him meant a lot to her.

He grinned. "If you don't object, love."

She swept her hands wide. "By all means."

"Great. You're a sport." He snapped open a guitar case lying on the threadbare carpet and slung the instrument's leather strap around his neck. He broke into a rousing, and slightly off-key, tune.

"Downtown girl won't you come out with me,

come out with me,

come out with me,

Downtown girl won't you come out with me,

on this Friday night?"

He laid his guitar back in the case and closed it.

"Is that it?" she asked. Had he forgotten the roses?

He raised his eyebrows. "You want more?"

"No, not really." She grinned. "What about a message?"

"Just to tell you he wrote it himself."

"I see. Well, thanks. It's been fun."

"Wait, I didn't say no to your first question. There is one more thing."

He handed her a box about a foot square. "You've got to keep it upright."

How nice. Nick had gotten her some kind of thank you gift. She glanced at the messenger again. Good heavens, was it proper protocol to tip him? She wasn't sure.

"Hang on, I'll go grab my purse."

He grabbed her hand. "No, thanks, love. The pleasure's been all mine."

He gave her a charming grin and all at once she realized just how attractive he was. His blond curls hung below his shoulders like laughing sunshine. His brown leather belt pulled tight around a trim waist and green tights outlined very muscular legs. She had no doubt that when he walked away, the back view would be well worth a second look. Probably an out of work actor, she thought, trying to make ends meet. He definitely had the charisma. His eyes glinted with mischief.

He leaned against the door frame. "Look, love. Do you mind telling me what your answer to the bloke's tune will be?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, now. Weren't you listening to my stirring rendition? He wants you to go out with 'im on Friday. Are you going to say yes?"

"No, he doesn't. It's just a practical joke."

"You sure?" At her nod, he continued with a silky persuasiveness. "Well, then, how 'bout doing the town with me?"

"No, I don't think so." She felt a flush blossom over her features. It had been a while since someone had tried to pick her up. She wasn't used to the attention.

"I promise to dress in more suitable attire."

"No, really. Thanks anyway."

"Okay, then. Can't blame a bloke for trying."

He turned and sauntered down the hall. Definitely worth a second look, she thought as she watched him leave. She closed the door and carried the box into the kitchen. The minstrel had taken her mind off her jealousy but now it returned with a vengeance. *Don't be stupid. This was very sweet of Nick.*

She cut the string with scissors and cradled the box to her body as she tugged at the lid. What could it be? Silk roses would be appropriate, to go along with Nick's scenario, but the box wasn't the right shape, unless it was an arrangement of some sort.

The lid came free and she almost dropped the box when she saw what was inside. A globe of glass with a large, mauve orchid inside. She held her breath as she plucked the card from the envelope and read:

A single bloom for the single most beautiful woman I know. Let Friday be a night of magic for us both.

No! This couldn't mean ... could Nick really be ... ?

"How do I sign it? Love, Nick?" he'd asked.

"You don't sign it. You leave it blank, then as soon as the messenger leaves, you go to her door."

She raced to the door and tore it open, then peered down the hall. No sign of Nick. She closed it slowly behind her with a quiet thump. Deflated, she walked back to the orchid and carefully lifted it from the box, then put it in the centre of her kitchen table.

The doorbell rang.

She froze. Could it be?

It rang again and she raced to open the door.

"Nick!"

He took one step forward and she took one step back, suddenly uncertain.

"Well, Vanessa?"

"Well?" She continued moving backward with Nick matching every step.

"The orchid and the note were from me."

"I figured that out."

"... then sweep her into your arms and kiss her."

She stumbled over a footstool and Nick swept his arms around her to stop her from tumbling to the floor.

"Do I kiss you before or after you give me your answer?" His half-grin transformed his face into a playful boyishness. He lowered his lips to within an inch of her own. "Of course, you'll say 'yes' because you already told me this would work like a charm on you."

She gulped. "Not until you tell me one thing."

He brushed her cheek with his lips. "And what's that?"

"Are you still using me as practice?"

"Practice?" He nuzzled her neck, sending goose bumps skittering across her flesh.

"Yeah, practice before you ask your real woman."

He slid his hands across her shoulders and up her neck, his gaze drawing hers by sheer magnetism. "Vanessa, you are very real." He cupped her cheek with his palms and curled his fingers over her ears, as he pulled her face closer. "And so is this."

His lips brushed hers and she felt them quiver at the delicate touch. As his mouth played across hers, a faint tremor started deep inside her and set her heart fluttering. She slid her hands up his chest and over his shoulders. His hair tickled her fingers as she trailed them around the back of his neck. The kiss deepened and so did her breathing. Nick's hands swept down her back, disintegrating the distance between their bodies, the layers of their clothing the only barrier between them. A barrier that at this moment, she wished she could tear away.

As though sensing her thoughts, Nick broke the kiss and stared down at her intently.

"Vanessa, I want you, you know that. I'd like nothing better than to lower you onto that couch and slowly strip away your clothes, then make love to you—slowly, sensuously, awakening every part of you to my touch."

She felt a deep longing awaken at the image his words aroused. She licked her lips. "But?"

"But, I have to be honest with you. I do want you to go out with me, and not just Friday, but...." He pulled away from her and raked his hands through his hair. "Look, what I'm

saying is, don't expect forever. I want you—and I think you want me, but.... "He stroked a finger along her cheek and the breath quivered from her lungs as her eyelids drooped. "Anything this white hot has to burn itself out." He brushed his lips where his fingers had been. "But it'll be one hell of flame."

His strong hands on her shoulders held her steady. He smiled, further eroding her composure. "So, will you come out with me on Friday? It's a charity dinner, quite a glitzy affair."

A thought swirled through her confusion like leaves caught on a fall breeze. Nick had actually asked her out!

But only for a brief fling. A temporary aberration on his part, no doubt.

She couldn't say 'yes'. A relationship between them—even short term—would never work. They were just too different. He wanted different things from a woman than she could offer. But she couldn't say 'no', either. Not when he'd gone to so much trouble, worked so hard to please her. She'd never had anyone give her this much attention before.

"If you're worried about having something to wear, I have the perfect thing for you—a little something in green, as I recall. The woman who helped me pick it out looked absolutely stunning in it."

Maybe ... just a few dates. It couldn't hurt and ... so it wouldn't be forever. What was wrong with a short term relationship? After all, most people started off with all the anticipation and awkwardness of not knowing where it would go. With Nick, there'd be no guessing, and no

disappointment. What was wrong with making memories to last a lifetime?

She drew in a deep breath.

"Yes, Nick. I'd love to go out with you on Friday."

Chapter 8

The next two days went by far too slowly for Vanessa. Nick behaved as a perfect gentleman while at work, giving her space, probably afraid of scaring her off. Twice she stood outside his door, on the verge of going inside and calling off the date, but courage—or sanity—failed her. On Friday afternoon at three o'clock, Nick declared the rest of the day a holiday, insisting she leave and do whatever she needed to get ready for their big night.

"Not that I think you need a lot of time to make yourself beautiful," he teased, his eyes twinkling, "but I'd like to think you want to fuss a little for me."

Once at home, she did fuss, taking a long, luxurious bath in an herbal scented tub. Relaxing with a novel in her hand—one of her favorite romance-fantasies by well-known author Tricia Wallen—she sank into the sensuality of the experience, warm, luxurious water and passionate words.

By seven o'clock she sat waiting for Nick, dressed, made-up, and ready for a romantic evening. He arrived right on time and when she opened the door, he whistled a long wolf-whistle. She twirled around in front of him.

"Do you like it? A very nice man bought it for me."

"Oh, really. I'd be jealous if I didn't know him so well."

He stroked her bare shoulders gently and nuzzled her neck. She wanted to melt against him, feeling again the warmth of the bath and the heat of the passionate fictional

lovers she'd read about. He nibbled her ear lobe and she did melt.

"Oh, Nick, don't do that. If you keep doing that...."

He nibbled again and she felt his cheek tighten in a smile against her own.

"I ... I..." Her voice dropped an octave. "...can't be held responsible."

"Oh. I like the sound of that."

He set her on her feet and she realized she'd been clinging to his lapels. She smoothed the wrinkles from the soft wool as she drew in deep, slow breaths, trying to get her lungs to function properly again.

"Don't worry about it," he murmured, brushing his lips against her forehead, his warm breath lifting the fine hairs at her temple.

She felt the rippling effect clear down to her toes.

"You know, you do look absolutely wonderful."

"Thank you, sir." She curtsied as deeply as she could manage in the fitted dress. "So do you."

And he did. She gave him the once over, dragging her gaze up and down, noting the splendid cut of the black tuxedo, the knife-sharp pleats striping his white shirt. He'd even chosen a cummerbund and bow tie in a green to match her dress.

He cleared his throat, obviously affected by her exaggerated appraisal. "Thank you. And if you want to actually go to the party, you'd better stop doing that."

Her gaze flickered to his and she grinned. "If you insist." She walked over to the coffee table to pick up the green velvet evening bag that had been delivered with the dress.

"By the way, I've got something to complete your ensemble. I borrowed these for you to wear this evening," Nick said, as he snapped open a black velvet box. "What do you think?"

A huge teardrop-shaped emerald pendant, surrounded by glittering diamonds, lay nestled in a cozy bed of velvet. Vanessa stood dumb struck as he drew the diamond chain around her neck. Tingles danced along her spine when his fingers lightly brushed her nape as he fastened the clasp.

"They're ... they're gorgeous, but I can't wear them," she protested feebly. She dragged her fingers over the cool stones, the facets smooth under her fingertips. The necklace cozied into her collarbone in such a satisfying manner that she hated the thought of taking it off.

"Vanessa, I told you they're just on loan. I knew you'd be uncomfortable accepting such an extravagant gift."

"True, but ... what if I lost them? What if the clasp broke and they slipped off without me noticing?"

Nick's gaze dipped down to the deep cut of her dress, a sweetheart line curving over her breasts. "There's only one place they could go, and from what I see, they wouldn't get too far. I'd certainly be willing to help you look for them." His eyebrows quirked up and down in a comedic imitation of Groucho Marx.

"Nick, you're incorrigible."

Laughing, he produced the matching earrings with a flourish. She plucked one, then the other, from his hand and flicked them on.

"What about these?" she asked, flicking her jewel bedecked earlobe.

He kissed her shoulder, right beside the strand of diamonds. "Stop worrying. They're insured."

Nick picked up the green velvet cape draped across the back of the couch, another of his gifts, and swung it around her shoulders.

They rode to the party in the back of his limousine, Vanessa's excitement rising with each mile. When they arrived, Vanessa felt like a princess as Nick took the cape from her shoulders and gave it to the coat-check clerk. The green dress Nick had given her was every bit as lovely as the gowns the other women wore.

He offered his arm and she tucked her hand into his elbow. Nick looked devastatingly handsome in his tuxedo and she saw the admiring glances from other women as he escorted her to the banquet room.

"Nicholas, darling, how are you?" A statuesque blond in a red, figure-hugging sheath glided toward them. She clutched his upper arm and kissed his cheek, branding him with scarlet lip marks. "Oh, darling, so sorry," she said as she plucked his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the lipstick from his cheek, rubbing slowly and sensuously, pressing her breasts against his upper arm as she leaned into him. When she finished, she stroked the cloth back into his pocket.

"Erika, meet Vanessa, my date."

"Oh, yes, of course. A pleasure," she oozed in a sickly-sweet voice, giving Vanessa only a cursory glance. "She's not one of us, is she, Nicky?"

"One of us?" Vanessa asked, appalled at the woman's rudeness.

"Well, yes. I know anyone who's anyone in Toronto." She placed a red-taloned hand on Vanessa's shoulder. "Oh, don't take it the wrong way, dear. I assume you're new on the scene, that's all."

"Erika, why don't you go stir up trouble somewhere else," Nick suggested.

"Trouble? Oh, darling I haven't really caused any trouble between you and Jesse here, have I?"

She looked a little too hopeful.

"Her name is Vanessa," Nick responded, "and, no, I don't think you've done any damage I can't undo." He looked Vanessa straight in the eye. "I hope all she'll think is that I know some very rude people."

Nick led Vanessa away, leaving Erika with a scowl marring her carefully made-up face.

In truth, the woman's comments had stirred up some unwelcome feelings in Vanessa. She knew she didn't belong here, but she'd tried to push aside her feelings of inadequacy in this crowd by focusing on Nick and the attention he gave her. After all, what Nick thought was the only thing that was really important. The only problem was that the blond shark had made her feel like an impostor. How long would it take Nick to realize how badly he had chosen his date? At what

point would her insecurities come out in some embarrassing way?

In contrast to her first encounter with one of Nick's friends, the people who shared their table were very pleasant, making the dinner conversation quite enjoyable. Vanessa didn't notice what she ate, excited at having Nick by her side, knowing she was the envy of every woman here and looking forward to the dancing afterward. She loved to dance—and she kept remembering the feel of Nick's arms around her at the masquerade ball.

"Suzanne?" Nick addressed the woman sitting beside Vanessa. "The last time I saw you, you were telling me about a big project you were working on."

The woman plopped her knife and fork down and smiled brightly. "Oh, I haven't told you yet, have I? I got it." She looked at Vanessa. "Nick's talking about a deal with Pure Essence, the big perfume company. They approached our firm—I'm in advertising—and they asked specifically for me, saying they were very impressed with a campaign I did for a leading jewelry store chain."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Vanessa praised, hoping no one would ask her what she did. So far, at this table, she'd met a bank president, a successful architect, and a plastic surgeon.

"Well, it's a great boost for my career." The woman talked happily about her job for a while, which bored Vanessa a little but she listened attentively. "I'm sorry, I tend to get carried away sometimes," the woman apologized after a lengthy monologue. "So what do you do, Vanessa?"

Vanessa cringed. "Well, I...."

"She's involved in various charity groups," Nick interjected, placing his arm around her shoulders. "She's especially interested in animal groups, so be careful what you say about fur coats."

He smiled at Vanessa, a charming, heart-warming smile that should have heated her blood, but the thick layer of ice that had flash-frozen around her heart at his comment refused to melt.

Why had he said that? The only reason she could think of was that he must be embarrassed by the fact that his date was a lowly secretary. She didn't even realize he knew about her charity involvement. But then, it could be a fabrication on his part. Charities were an acceptable, even encouraged, pastime for the wealthy. The others would assume she was rich enough that she didn't have to work.

"Oh, Nick, you know I don't believe in buying furs either," Suzanne responded. "Goodness, Vanessa, where do you find the time?"

"She makes the time. Vanessa is the most efficient person I know."

The band started a sensuous waltz, drawing the guests onto the dance floor.

"Vanessa, will you dance with me?" Nick asked.

He led her to the floor and, as she felt his arms go around her, she fought the waves of longing.

"Nick, why did you lie to Suzanne?"

"Lie? I didn't lie."

"You told her I'm involved in charities and...."

"Well, you are." He swept her around the floor, swirling among the other dancers.

"How do you know?"

"I've seen the postings you've put up on the bulletin board requesting emergency donations for the Wildlife Federation, asking for volunteers to help with a craft sale for that group that helps abandoned animals, seeking people to foster sick birds, to—"

"Okay, okay, I get the idea." She felt the frozen shell over her heart crack a little. He'd actually read those postings—and noticed her name as the contact. "The thing is, you led her to believe I spend all my time doing charity work."

"I didn't lead her to believe anything. If she jumped to that conclusion, it's not my fault." He twirled her around, then glanced down at her face. "Vanessa, what's really bothering you?"

"It's just that ... well, I assume you don't want anyone to know I'm just your secretary."

"You're not just my secretary." He pulled her close to his body, sending a thrilling heat spiraling through her. "You're much more than that."

"But you wouldn't want your friends to know that your date doesn't have some exciting, high-powered career," she persisted.

"Vanessa, I only stopped you from telling Suzanne what you do for a living because I thought...." He slid his hand down her back, drawing her even closer. "I was afraid you'd be embarrassed, that you wouldn't feel like you fit in."

"Oh, Nick," she said, resting her cheek on his shoulder. "I don't fit in."

He stopped dancing and pulled back from her, staring at her face. Suddenly, he took her hand and pulled her across the dance floor, to a dimly lit room down a quiet corridor off the main reception area.

He spun her around to face him and, hands on her shoulders, stared at her intently.

"Vanessa, you can fit in anywhere you want. You don't think any of these people are better than you are, do you?"

"Well, I...."

"They aren't," he stated with conviction. "The work you do is excellent and you enjoy doing it. That's all anyone can ask of their career. Half these people can't say the same thing."

"Nick...." She felt herself flush, pleased and embarrassed by his praise.

The fine wool of his tuxedo brushed against her bare arms and shoulders as he pulled her into his arms and held her close. "I just wanted you to enjoy this evening without having to worry about what people thought of you." His hands skimmed across the exposed skin of her back, sending trickles of pleasure down her spine. "I wanted you to feel special, Vanessa."

"Nick, you're awfully sweet, but—"

"Because you are special." He lifted her chin and claimed her mouth in a kiss. The trickles turned to shudders, transforming her bones to supple rubber. She melted against him in a fluid wave of compliance. His legs, slightly apart, cradled hers, helping her remain upright.

When their lips finally parted, Vanessa had to catch her breath as Nick smiled at her, then nuzzled his lips across her cheek.

"I can't seem to get enough of you, but this isn't the time or place. Come on, let's go back and enjoy the rest of the dance."

Nick kept her to himself for the remainder of the evening, either dancing or chatting at an intimate table. Whenever someone came to join them, he would talk for a few minutes, then politely excuse himself as he'd draw her away. He touched her constantly—an arm around her waist, a hand on her shoulder, a quick caress of her cheek. Soon people took the hint and left them alone.

Somehow he worked a spell of magic around her in true fairy tale fashion and she could almost believe there'd be a happily-ever-after.

Until the stroke of midnight.

"Nick, I'm sorry to interrupt you two love birds but it's time for the presentation."

Vanessa looked up to see Suzanne standing beside Nick. "Presentation?" Vanessa asked.

Nick pulled away from her reluctantly, stroking her cheek before he broke contact entirely, sighing. "Yes, the business part of this evening, I'm afraid. It'll only take a few minutes, I promise. Wait here for me, all right?"

She nodded. He brushed a quick kiss along her cheekbone and strode away. As he withdrew, his warmth became a sweet memory leaving her skin pebbling in protest. She

watched him with a half smile on her face. She'd never had such a wonderful evening in her life.

What would happen when they left tonight? Would he invite her back to his place? Would she spend the night in the warmth of his arms, making love until dawn? It might not last forever, but why not grab all the happiness she could in the time they did have together?

Nick approached the dais where a silver-haired woman in a royal blue gown stood waiting for him.

Suzanne sat beside Vanessa. "You must be very proud of him. With the work you do with charities, I'm sure you must feel he's a kindred spirit."

Vanessa knew she could never carry off the scam of pretending she knew what was going on without giving herself away, so she simply nodded, her smile bright, and showed great interest in the speeches taking place at the front of the empty dance floor.

The chairperson's announcement that the proceeds of the evening totaled over eight hundred thousand dollars triggered polite applause around the room. She went on to joke that this made things easier on Nicholas Powers' bank book, because last year he had promised to ensure that the final total this year reached one million dollars by donating a check for the difference.

Nick smiled and took the microphone, then talked about the wonderful work the committee had done in organizing the affair and how the money would be put to good use building a cancer research facility at the hospital. Vanessa couldn't

concentrate on his exact words because she was totally bowled over by the amount of money he had pledged.

Two hundred thousand dollars.

The number kept fluttering through her mind like an errant butterfly. What did she possibly have in common with a man who could pull out his check book and write a check for over two hundred thousand dollars? She thought of all the work she and the other volunteers had done to organize a huge craft sale to raise funds for the Humane Society. They'd been thrilled when they'd raised twenty-three hundred dollars, yet here Nick marched up to this woman and handed over almost a hundred times that amount without blinking an eye. Pushing aside the pang of jealousy at how easily the organization had benefited, she concentrated on the fact that Nick was a wonderfully generous man to give so much to a worthy cause

"That Powers sure likes to show off," a masculine voice behind her muttered to his companion. "He couldn't care what charity he's giving to as long as it gives him some free publicity."

Could it be true? Had Nick donated the money in the hopes of boosting his business rather than in the true spirit of giving?

Vanessa peered sideways at Suzanne. Engrossed in the speeches, she showed no indication of having heard the man. She glanced at Vanessa and smiled.

"Nick is wonderful, isn't he? He loves to help people. If he sees someone in need, he tries to help out. You know, he told me about this woman that works for him—she'd been out of

work for a while and he felt sorry for her—so he told me he wanted to do something special for her. He knew she wouldn't accept charity, so he was trying to figure out how to give her a nice evening out. He thought he might arrange for her to win a dinner for two as a door prize at a company event so she wouldn't feel awkward. Isn't that sweet?"

Ice water trickled through Vanessa's spinal cord. Is that what this evening had been all about? Did Nick see her as a charity case? She thought of all the time and money he'd spent picking out a dress for her and what this evening must have cost, but that would amount to nothing compared to the two hundred thousand dollars he'd just given away without a second thought.

Nick saw her watching him and winked. He gave her a heated look that promised he'd be back soon, determined to pick up where he'd left off. Her cheeks burned as she remembered the liberties she'd allowed in his arms. Is that why he'd decided to go with the personal touch rather than arranging for her to win a dinner? Because he thought he could get a very personal thank you from her in return?

She remembered what he'd said the night he'd asked her out.

"Anything this white hot has to burn itself out. But it'll be one hell of a flame."

He clearly expected to take her to bed. And he didn't expect to hang around for long afterward. In her bed, or her life.

Nick shook hands with the chairperson and strode back to the table.

"Thanks for keeping Vanessa company, Suzanne." Nick's tone, although sincere, made it clear he'd like to be alone with Vanessa.

"No problem, Nick." Suzanne stood up. "Will I see you two at the Goldberg's party next month?"

"I'm not sure," Nick answered. "I may be out of town."

Or have another date, by then.

"Oh, that's too bad." She turned to Vanessa. "It's the event of the year. You really must talk him into bringing you." She took Vanessa's hand. "It was so nice meeting you. I do hope I'll see you again soon."

I doubt it, Vanessa thought, but shook her hand and mumbled something polite.

Nick sat down beside her and slid his arm around her waist. She couldn't help the slight stiffening of her spine.

"Vanessa? What is it?"

"Nothing," she lied. Lifting her drink, she swirled the glass in a circle and listened to the delicate tinkle of ice.

"Good." He leaned over and kissed her shoulder lightly and she flinched away.

She plunked her glass on the table. "I'd really like to go home now, Nick. I'm tired."

"Of course, if that's what you'd like."

She heard the uncertainty in his voice and was thankful he didn't question her. He escorted her to the coat check to retrieve her cape. The cool satin lining caressed her skin as he draped it over her shoulders, a mild distraction from her tormented thoughts. She pulled the cape close to her, feeling the plush velvet under her hands, comforting in its softness.

Soon they were in the back of his limousine, gliding through the city streets.

"Vanessa, did Suzanne say something to upset you?"

"No, of course not. She was very pleasant."

"Then what is it? Everything was going so well, but now you won't even sit beside me."

She had contrived to sit on the seat facing him, moving as soon as he sat down next to her, feigning interest in his selection of music tapes.

She glared at him, unable to hide her roiling emotions any longer. "What do you mean by going well, Nick? Do you mean because I let you hold me ... kiss me? Because I got carried away in the magic of the evening and you thought that maybe ... that when you got me home, I'd ... ?" Her courage failed her under his intensely darkening stare. She turned her head to gaze out at the city lights.

"Is that what you think?" he growled. "That I only want to get you into bed?"

"You keep saying how attracted you are to me, how much you want me," she replied weakly, feeling slightly nauseous.

"That's absolutely true. I am attracted to you—and we both know it's mutual—but why are you trying to make it sound like something cheap?"

"No, I realize I haven't been cheap. You've dropped a bundle on me, haven't you?"

"Damn it, Vanessa—"

She heard his seat belt unbuckle just as the car door swung open, startling them both. Neither had noticed the car stop in front of Vanessa's building. The driver, clearly aware

of the tension emanating from his passengers, stepped back uncertainly. Vanessa snapped open her belt and tried to dart from the car. Nick grabbed her arm, preventing her escape.

"Fleeing again, Vanessa?" The glitter of anger crystallizing in his eyes held her frozen. She felt like a rabbit trapped by a fox, with no way to run and nowhere to hide. His finger trailed across her collarbone and lifted the weight of jewels from her skin.

The emerald! She'd forgotten.

"Don't you think you should return this first?" he taunted.

She flung her hands to the back of her neck and worked fervently at the clasp, anger mixed with desperation making her clumsy.

"Here, let me," he said, tugging her hands from the necklace. "You'll break it."

She suffered the invasion of his hands on her nape, refusing to let the touch of his fingers work any more magic. The not-so-subtle reminder of his wealth, and her lack of it, had been enough to quell all the longing he stirred within her. As soon as the necklace slid from her neck, she tugged off the earrings and tossed them onto the seat beside her.

She leaped from the car and raced to the front door. Quickly finding her keys in the small evening bag, she jabbed them into the lock, snatched open the door, then fled to her apartment without a backward glance.

* * * *

Nick watched her go, torn as to whether to follow or not. She was angry—and he was furious—so it didn't seem like a good idea.

Damn the woman! What had triggered her accusations? He'd kept his eye on her the whole time he'd been involved in the presentations. If Erika had joined her, he might have expected some trouble, but Suzanne would never say anything to cause Vanessa distress. So what had turned things around?

"Home, James." Nick sighed wearily, leaning back in his seat. He felt the tension knot his shoulders. He turned them in circles trying to loosen the muscles, deciding he'd jump in the spa when he got home. That should do the trick. It wouldn't ease the other tension in his body, however. The tightness caused by being close to Vanessa, by wanting her so badly he would be willing to give her anything.

Except forever.

He shoved the random thought aside.

So much for his brilliant plan. He had hoped if he gave her a fairy-tale evening, he might coax her into confessing she was his fairy-tale enchantress.

Damn. He wanted her to admit she was Cinderella.

But it was more than that.

He'd struggled hard with the decision to ask her on the date. After talking to Rachel, he'd made up his mind to ask someone else, but thoughts of Vanessa—his Cinderella—danced through his thoughts constantly and he'd finally given in to his desire to be with her and to give her things she'd

never had before. He'd wanted to make some small part of her fantasy come true.

And the evening had gone so well, until the end. Damn it, he'd done everything he could to impress her. To make her happy. To treat her special.

Sure, he wanted to get her into bed. Every time he thought of her, his body reminded him how much. Tonight, in that sexy green dress, he could barely contain himself. But there was more to it than that. Maybe their relationship couldn't last forever, but that didn't mean they couldn't enjoy it while it did last. After all, not every dating couple wound up married. Surely she understood that. He couldn't promise her forever, but ... but....

He raked his hand through his hair. What was he prepared to promise her? A wonderful few weeks? Lots of fun and glamorous parties? Pampering and, hopefully, the best lovemaking she'd ever experienced?

Damn it. What was wrong with that?

The answer hit him sharply between the ribs. Just as Rachel had warned him, Vanessa wanted a fairy-tale-come-true. He'd been fooling himself when he thought he could make her happy by treating her like Cinderella at the ball when what she really wanted was happily-ever-after with Prince Charming. However much he wanted to please her, he couldn't provide her with that dream. She wasn't the right woman for him.

Was she?

He wanted an aggressive career woman. Didn't he?

He wanted a woman who knew what she wanted and went after it. But Vanessa did that, didn't she? She'd always loved the Cinderella fantasy and when the opportunity arose, she'd grabbed it.

His certainty of what he wanted out of life, out of marriage, didn't seem so solid right now.

Remembering his conversation with Amy, he wondered if she was right about him not really knowing what he wanted. Amy fit the description of his ideal woman perfectly, but he'd never been inclined to marry her. And what about the other women he'd dated? They all matched what he thought he wanted—but something had always been lacking. What?

Well, he wanted to have a strong attraction between them. Vanessa fit the bill there. He'd never been drawn to a woman the way he had been to her, even when he didn't recognize her as the same woman. He knew instinctively that what Vanessa and he would experience together would go beyond anything he had ever hoped for—but that didn't mean they'd be compatible for a lifetime together.

He wanted someone warm and giving. Vanessa fit. He wanted someone fun to be with. Vanessa fit.

He pulled out the glass slipper earring from his pocket and twirled it between his fingers. It spun round and round, glittering in the light from passing cars and street lamps. She sure had a lot of gumption. She'd been terrified of going to that masquerade and being found out, but she'd done it anyway. She'd chased after the rainbow even though she knew she'd never reach the pot of gold at the other end. It had been enough to pursue the dream. He admired that.

He stopped fiddling with the earring and it leapt wildly from side to side before coming to rest. The smartest thing to do would be to bring it to an end with Vanessa. After all, it had barely begun. He clamped his fist closed around the glass slipper. The problem was, he didn't want it to end. He wanted her too much and it wasn't just lust.

He opened his palm and stroked the little slipper. Vanessa had more facets than this crystal, and was even more beautiful—in every way. There was no way he could convince himself he only wanted her body. Somehow, she'd infiltrated his dreams, pervaded his thoughts, and captured his heart.

He faced the fact head on. He wanted her. And not just in his bed as Vanessa seemed to think.

The problem now was how to convince her of that.

* * * *

Monday was pure hell for Nick. He knew he had to give Vanessa time to calm down and he waited for signs that she was softening towards him. She worked with cool efficiency all morning. He found the files and reports needed for his scheduled tasks piled on his desk before he'd even requested them, then she contrived to be away from her desk as often as possible.

He'd seen this evasive action of hers before.

She had been the one who'd gotten angry Friday so he had to give her the opportunity to open discussions, but by late afternoon, he couldn't stand it anymore. Always a man of action, he decided to force the issue. He called her into his office, hoping that by forcing her to stand face-to-face with

him, she'd say something about Friday night. If she didn't, he would. Unfortunately, her grim expression immediately warned him that any discussion about their relationship would be doomed to failure, so he shifted the conversation to work. She kept a cloak of cool aloofness clutched around her for the rest of the day and through the next.

Wednesday morning, as Nick sat stroking the glass slipper earring, wondering again how to win Vanessa back, she walked into his office.

"Oh, I'm sorry to disturb you."

He could feel the chill in her voice. Clearly, today would not see an end to the cold front in their relationship.

He placed the fragile earring on his desk with care. "Not at all, Vanessa," he said. A weary note frayed his words. "What is it?"

"Mr. Taylor just called to cancel your lunch appointment." She placed a pink telephone message slip on his desk and turned to go.

Free for lunch. He picked up the earring and swung it back and forth.

"Vanessa? Would you care to ... ?"

She turned to face him and her eyes instantly hardened.

"No, I guess not."

He swung the earring into his palm and snapped his fingers around it. She turned and walked out. For a moment, when she'd first turned around, he almost thought he'd seen hope in her eyes, as though she wanted him to ask her to lunch.

He decided he needed to call in help. He snatched up the phone and dialed Amy's number.

* * * *

The waiter brought Nick and Amy a basket of tortilla chips, a white dish full of spicy salsa sauce, and a beer for Nick. Nick watched Amy dip a chip into the sauce. Her pregnancy certainly had modified her eating choices. She'd insisted on Tex Mex, claiming an overwhelming craving for fajitas. They ordered chicken fajitas for two, with extra guacamole.

Amy crunched happily as Nick told her what had happened on his date with Vanessa.

"She's been the epitome of cool business efficiency in the office all week and refuses to say a word about what happened. I have no idea how to get her to go out with me again." Nick took a gulp of his beer.

Amy raised an eyebrow. "That's a problem you've never had before."

"Damn it, Amy. The woman accused me of dating her just to get her into bed." He couldn't help being a little angry, and greatly frustrated.

"And, didn't you?" She crunched her chip, wiping the dribble of red sauce from her chin with a long, manicured fingernail.

He glared at her. "No, I was trying to make her happy, to fulfill her dream."

"How very altruistic of you. And how is she to thank you for that?"

He stopped rolling his glass between his palms and stared at her. "What do you mean?"

She waved a chip at him like a pointer. "I mean, you bowl the girl over with fancy clothes and glamorous parties. Of course she's going to wonder what you want in return."

He plunked his glass down. "But it wasn't like that."

Her eyebrows crept up. "You do want to sleep with her, don't you?"

He shifted on the wooden bench seat, wishing she'd chosen a restaurant with comfortable upholstered chairs. "I can't deny that. She and I are...."

"Compatible. Yes, I know. I saw the sparks flying between the two of you that day at the office, remember? And there's nothing wrong with wanting to make love. Personally, I'm all for it. But you've got to be on the same level. Unfortunately for you, you're several rungs higher on the social ladder."

He flattened his palms on the table. "I haven't treated her any differently than I would any other date."

She leaned toward him. "That's the problem. She's not any other date." She stared across the table at him, her expression more serious than Nick had ever seen it. "Look, Nick, tell me why we're having this conversation. Do you just want to tell me about the one that got away? Or do you want advice on how to win her back?"

Nick responded in a quiet voice, barely loud enough to carry over the background noise of clattering dishes and rowdy conversation. "I want to get her back."

"To sleep with her?"

He raked a hand through his hair. "Yes, I definitely want to sleep with her, but I want more than that, too. I just don't know what yet."

She sat back and smiled. "Well, hallelujah. You're getting smarter with age."

"Thanks a lot. Now tell me. How do I get her to trust me again?"

"I can't answer that, but I would like to make a suggestion about your approach to this relationship."

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue.

"Look, Nick, you've never liked going to any of these posh affairs. When you do go, it's always to please other people. Why are you doing it with Vanessa?"

He shrugged. "I thought she'd enjoy dressing up and going to fancy places."

"And you thought it would impress her."

"Sure. What's wrong with that?"

Their waiter buzzed by, stopping long enough to top up their ice water and ask if they needed anything. Watching the condensation glisten on the outside of her glass, Amy traced a droplet of water dripping down the side.

"Well, if you want to win Vanessa, I recommend you stop trying to impress her and start trying to get to know her."

"What exactly are you suggesting?"

"Well, for one thing, ask her to do something you enjoy."

He frowned. "You mean take her to a movie I like?"

Wouldn't Vanessa be disappointed with that? After all, any guy could take her to a movie.

"You can't talk at a movie."

"What then?"

"Why not invite her to your place for a quiet evening by the fire? You know, a nice dinner, a bottle of wine...."

The thought of Vanessa curled up beside him on the couch in front of a cozy fire started a raging fire within him. There was nothing he'd like better than to have her alone and all to himself.

"Then she'll be sure to think I'm trying to seduce her."

She smiled, her eyes gleaming.

"If you really want to, you'll figure a way around that. I have every confidence in your abilities when it comes to getting what you want."

Now if he only knew what it was he did want.

He returned Amy's glowing smile. Pregnancy suited her. Suddenly, he found himself wanting to see that same glow lighting Vanessa's lovely features. The longing to make a child with Vanessa burrowed into his stomach and settled deep down inside him.

He glared at his beer, wondering if it was the spicy sauce or the beer that had affected his brain.

Chapter 9

Vanessa tapped her pencil on her desktop, wondering how she could break out of this gridlock with Nick. She'd been angry Friday night but after she'd cooled down, she'd realized that Nick hadn't done anything wrong.

She'd been so caught up in the evening she'd lost her hold on reality. His touches had short circuited her brain cells and she'd drifted into thinking she might have a future with him. It had been her mind wandering off to a fairy tale world. Nick had only tried to please her.

Even if Nick had only wanted to show her a good time because he felt sorry for her, he hadn't meant to hurt her. And if he wanted to take her to bed ... well, she'd been having the same fantasy about him. All evening, she had hoped he'd invite her back to his place so they could explore their growing attraction. She'd been a hypocrite to get angry at him.

She'd decided she would talk to him Monday morning at work to try and put the incident behind them, but minor interruptions prevented her from following through. By late morning her opportunity had come. Finally, he'd been alone in his office, so she'd gathered her courage to go and apologize, but when she'd peeked in his office, he'd been sitting at his desk twirling the glass slipper earring between his fingers, watching it with unseeing eyes. She'd backed off, knowing he was longing for his fantasy woman.

Now they were stuck in their frigid roles. She knew she'd have to make the first move.

The elevator dinged. As the doors swept open, Vanessa kept her focus on the report in front of her. She could feel Nick's powerful presence as he strode across the office.

Say something now. Quivers skittered up her spine at the thought. No, she'd better gauge his mood first.

"Vanessa?"

"Yes?" she asked, without glancing up. She expected a curt order like he'd been giving all week, but he said nothing. Finally, she allowed her gaze to sweep up to his face.

A sharp pain thrust through her heart at the sight of his handsome face. She'd missed him. Even though they'd worked in the same office for the past three days it had been as if they were strangers. Neither had said more than a couple of polite words at a time. As his piercing blue eyes cut through her courteous veneer, leaving her nerves in tatters, she realized what she'd missed most about him was the twinkle that used to dance in his eyes when he'd tease her.

"Come to my office. I want to talk to you."

"Of course."

She grabbed her notebook, but he wrapped his fingers around it, touching hers with an infusing warmth that sent lingering shimmers of need quivering through her.

"You won't need this." He pulled the book from her nerveless fingers and placed it on her desk, then strolled to his office.

"Close the door behind you," he told her once she'd followed him inside.

He stood by the desk, waiting as she skittered across the room to one of the chairs facing his desk. She settled into it, nervously clutching the edges of the armrests, watching him. His eyes, intent and assessing, studied her for a few moments, sending her pulse thumping erratically through her veins.

"Vanessa, things have been pretty tense between us all week."

She swallowed, trying to ease the tight grip her clenched muscles had around her throat. Could it be that Nick was going to fire her? No, she didn't think he'd do that, but he might transfer her. If he found it uncomfortable working with her, then that would be the most sensible thing to do.

But Vanessa didn't want to be transferred. The very thought made her ill with longing. She wanted to be close to Nick.

"I'd really like to clear the air," he continued. He sighed and folded his arms across his chest. "You know, I thought you were having a wonderful time on Friday night until—"

Now that he'd broached the subject, words that had been dammed up within her burst out in a flash flood. "I know. I was, Nick, and ... I'm so sorry I said the things I did. You see, I was confused and ... well, the evening was so different from anything I've ever—"

He held up his palm. "Vanessa, slow down." A grin swept his austere features into boyish good looks—a transformation devastating in its effect on her senses. "Now let me get this straight. You're sorry? You mean I've been brooding all week

over how to get back in your good graces and you haven't even been mad at me?"

"I thought you were angry with me so I ... well, I didn't know—"

"I was but—oh, who cares?" He stepped toward her and pulled her to her feet. Sweeping an arm around her waist, he pulled her against him. "Oh, God, I've been dying to hold you again." He raised an eyebrow and she could feel his hesitation. "Am I going to get in trouble for this?"

Reaching up and stroking a hand across his cheek, still smooth from his morning shave, she stared into his midnight blue eyes. "No. Nick, I really am sorry for what I said. I mean, accusing you of something I want myself isn't really fair, is it?"

Suddenly, she found herself pulled tight against his ribs, his lips capturing hers in a frenzy of need. Her nipples tightened and pushed against the wall of his chest as he crushed her to him. A moan escaped as she felt liquid heat trickle through her. Nick swept his hands under her jacket and across the smooth fabric covering her back. His fingers slid over her skirt and gathered her closer. The hardness of his body pressed against her, making her gasp.

She wanted to tear open her blouse and pull his mouth to her breast to ease the throbbing ache that filled her. She arched her hips forward, wanting to feel the assurance of his need.

"Vanessa." His voice sounded close to cracking. He eased her away from him. "I can't...." He cleared his hoarse throat.

"If we don't stop I'll lay you down on that couch right now and ravish you."

Breathing in short, puffy gasps, she stared at him, wondering why he thought that was a bad idea.

"I want our first time to be special, not some quickie session in my office," he elaborated. "Now, I suggest you go finish that report."

She slid from his warmth and turned away reluctantly, smoothing her hands down her side.

"Vanessa?"

"Yes, Nick?"

His hand on her shoulder seemed to melt into her flesh. She turned to face him.

"I almost forgot. The reason I brought you in here was to ask you out."

"When?"

"Tonight?"

A slow smile turned up the sides of her mouth. "Yes."

He grinned, with devastating effects on her heart rate.

"Don't you want to know where?"

She'd go anywhere with him, especially right at this moment. "Where?"

"I thought I'd give you a choice." He sounded hesitant.

"We could go out on the town. You know, a nice restaurant then hit the popular dance spots, or...."

He watched her face so intently, she started to get nervous, her smile crumbling a little.

"Or what?" she prompted.

"Or we could just have a quiet dinner at my place."

Her smile spread even broader. "I'd love that. I could bring dessert." *I could be dessert.* The wicked glint in his eyes told her he'd read her thought and she flushed hotly.

"All I want you to bring is yourself," he murmured, straightening her lapels, then smoothing his hands down the front of her jacket, stoking the slow flame within her.

"Will there be other people there?" she asked, a tiny catch in her voice.

"No, just a dinner for two."

She grabbed his wrists, holding his hands still. She could only take so much before her control fled entirely. Even his lightest touch sent her sensitized body into screaming fits of need.

"I see. But ... I mean ... I guess there'll be a cook and the butler and...."

He pulled her into his arms again, giving her a quick hug and a kiss on the forehead. "I'll give them all the night off. I promise you, it'll be just the two of us."

"It sounds wonderful." She floated away from him.

* * * *

She opened her closet and peered in, thinking it no longer sounded like such a wonderful idea. Not that she didn't want to go out with Nick, but what in heaven's name would she wear? Her gaze drifted over the dresses Nick had sent her.

If they'd been going out somewhere tonight, she could wear one of those, but not to his house. He'd made it clear he planned a quiet, casual evening—just the kind of evening she'd dreamed of with him—and she didn't want to spoil it by

overdressing. It would only serve to remind him—and her—of the differences between them.

The problem was, she had only two kind of clothes. Old, and older. Aside from her business clothes, of course. She pulled out her best pair of jeans—the ones with the least number of patches—and went in search of a reasonable top. The June weather had turned cool so a sweater would be appropriate. She brightened at the thought, remembering the new design she'd just finished. After digging it out of her drawer, she examined it critically. Blue cotton with beads and metallic thread woven through in an elegant design, it looked casually dressy. Perfect, in fact.

Nick picked her up twenty minutes later and she entered his world feeling mildly reticent. She'd been here twice before, but this time she was his date and they both knew where the evening would lead. Funny how she now thought of this as Nick's house, not the daunting Erin Gate mansion, ex-home of her stepmother.

Nick had prepared a simple meal of steaks and Caesar salad, with a chocolate swirl cheesecake for dessert. Their conversation flowed easily, along with the wine, and Vanessa soon found herself relaxing completely.

"Ah, this is great." Nick sighed contentedly. He settled on the couch and stretched his long legs out in front of him.

"Are you referring to your full stomach, the glass of wine in your hand, or the roaring fire?" she asked.

He grabbed her hand and tugged her down beside him. "All of the above." He waved his hand flamboyantly. "But mostly, relaxing in blue jeans rather than getting all dressed up and

having to do the social bit. I'd much rather have you here beside me like this," he said, as he wrapped his arm around her and tucked her into his side, "and talk, than sit at some fancy restaurant or big social event and have to share you with a dozen other people."

Forehead furrowed, she sent him a sideways glance. "But I thought you enjoyed partying."

"You thought wrong."

She shifted to look at him straight on. "Then why did you take me to that big party? And why did you offer to go out somewhere fancy tonight?"

He shrugged, looking uncertain. "I thought you'd like all the glitz. The chance to wear pretty clothes and dance the night away."

She smiled. "I did. It was wonderful. But I wouldn't want to do it all the time. What I liked best was being with you."

His full lips spread into a broad smile and he took her hand. "And I like being with you, Vanessa."

"Really?" She tried not to withdraw but a tiny crimp in her gut reminded her of the reason he'd started taking her out. Her gaze drifted down to her glass.

"Vanessa? What is it?"

"Nothing."

He lifted her chin. "Don't start building a wall again. Please, tell me what's wrong."

"Well, it's just that...." She made her decision and met his gaze boldly. "Why did you ask me out?"

His eyes narrowed and he said warily, "Why exactly are you asking?"

She settled in beside him again. "Suzanne said ... she told me how you like to help people. She explained that you'd wanted to cheer up a woman at work who'd been unemployed for a while, that you wanted her to have an evening out."

"She must have been talking about Jenny Smith. She'd been out of work for six months before we hired her and she's still living on a pretty tight budget. Rachel told me she never goes to lunch with the others because she can't afford it. Since we often give away certificates for dinner at company social events, Rachel asked if we could throw in an extra one at the next event and arrange for her to win it."

Vanessa felt her throat tighten as she realized how badly she'd misjudged Nick's motives. His thoughtfulness touched her deeply. "Oh. That's so nice." The familiar name tugged at her memory. "Jenny Smith. She works in accounting, doesn't she?"

"That's right." He took her hand and stroked her knuckles. "Vanessa, why are you asking me about Jenny?"

"I...." She sighed, frowning.

"Did you think Suzanne had been talking about you?"

She rubbed her free hand down her thigh. "I didn't think *she* thought it was me."

"But *you* did, didn't you?" he persisted.

"I thought you asked me out because you felt sorry for me."

He released her hand. "And because if I took you out I might get lucky."

Anger tinged his words, springing from the hurt she'd inflicted. She grabbed his hand. "Nick, I'm sorry."

"Vanessa, I asked you out because you're beautiful, intelligent and I enjoy spending time with you. Do you understand that?"

"I'm starting to." She stared into his eyes. "I really don't know much about you at all, do I?"

"There's a way to fix that. Why not try asking me what you want to know? Get to know me."

"All right." She tucked her hand in his and watched him, considering. What she'd really like to know was if he could find some way to fit her into his life—but she already knew the answer to that. She knew the type of woman he wanted, but what role would that perfect mate have in Nick's life? Probably akin to business partner. She couldn't ask that, so she followed another track.

"I've always wondered what someone like you looks forward to."

"Someone like me?"

"Sure. You're a successful business man, president of your own company. What does a man like you dream about? What do you see yourself doing five years from now?"

He stared at her so intently she started to fidget, uncomfortable under that close scrutiny.

"Funny. I've been thinking a lot about that recently. I hope I'll be teaching my son or daughter to play baseball, becoming a scout leader, joining the PTA."

"Really?"

The wistful look in his eyes astonished her. And the way he gazed at her, with subtle speculation dancing across his features, unnerved her.

"Yes, really. What's with the amazed expression? I'm human you know. I want kids just like anyone else."

"I guess you would want an heir."

"Heir? You make me sound like a stallion who needs to carry on the blood line. I want children because I've always dreamed of having a happy family just like the one I grew up in. I want children to teach and to learn from and ... believe it or not ... I want to find a special woman to share my life with. Someone to share life's experiences. Someone to talk over my problems with, to listen to when she has problems—to grow old with."

"I'm sorry, I hadn't realized. I sort of assumed you'd marry an ambitious career-oriented woman and the two of you would spend your time building the business. I wasn't sure how you'd find the time to fit children into your life."

Nick stared at Vanessa intently without really seeing her and she thought she saw doubt in his eyes, then they seemed to shift focus onto her, as though seeing her in a new light. He reached out and touched her cheek, lightly, like a gentle breeze on a summer's day. "I've always been so busy building the company, hoping that the rest of my life will sort of fall into place if I set things in motion, that I've never really taken the time to think it through. But you're right. A career woman wouldn't have the time for children that my mother had for me. In fact, with both of us climbing toward professional success, we might never find what's really important."

Hope flared within Vanessa. "And what's that?"

"Happiness. And love."

Her heart pounded in her chest and she felt a little giddy. She never expected a revelation like that from Nick. Did she have a chance with him after all? He continued to stare at her, as though gauging her reaction, awaiting a response. What could she say? She didn't really know how he felt about her. He was attracted to her, and heaven knew she felt the same about him, but ... they were talking generalities here.

She rubbed her palms along her thighs, glancing around the room, trying to ignore the effect of his attentive gaze. Firelight shimmered on the blue glass of the wine bottle, setting it aglow with rich highlights. She leaned forward and picked it up. "I ... uh ... would you like some more wine?"

The force of his gaze eased and he smiled. "Yes, all right." He held his glass out to her and she filled it.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, the fire blazing brightly, the crackling flames warming her skin. Vanessa sipped her wine, feeling the warm sensation swirling within her. A quiet elation flowed through her as she realized she and Nick might just be able to build a relationship together.

She reached forward to place her glass on the coffee table and spied a chess set on a side table. Slumping back into the cushions of the couch, she sighed.

"Do you want to play chess?" she asked.

"No way. I'm feeling far too mellow for that. And anyway, I have a feeling I'd lose." His fingers stroked the back of her hand.

"You don't like to lose, do you?"

Nick sat watching her, a twinkle in his eyes. "No, and I rarely do."

He traced the line of metallic thread swirling across her chest with his index finger. "I like your sweater. The design is quite unique."

She flushed at his compliment. "It's my own."

He grinned at her, his eyes crinkling around the edges. "I didn't think you'd stolen it."

She laughed. "No, I mean I designed and knit it myself."

"Really? You know I've always wanted a hand-knit sweater," he hinted.

"You have?" she asked doubtfully. "I'd figure you for an Yves Saint Laurent original, not some ratty home-made sweater."

"That shows how little you know me. A hand-made gift would mean a lot to me. It's easy to go out and buy an expensive present. When you make it yourself, it means you've given a bit of your soul."

She blinked at him, wondering if she had ever been more wrong about a man. He wasn't the designer snob she'd assumed. She'd really done him an injustice in some of her assumptions. And if that assumption had been wrong....

"And as for hand-made sweaters being ratty, maybe I'd better take a closer look."

His mischievous grin made her smile as he sat forward, studying her chest with a thoroughness that made her flush anew. He ran his hand from her shoulder to her hip, sending a thrill of awareness through her. A second later, he flicked the tiny silver beads that outlined a patch of angora over her left breast. She'd found two small skeins of the expensive yarn at a garage sale and worked it into the intarsia pattern

sparingly. When he cupped her breast and murmured, "Mmm. Soft," she wasn't sure if he referred to the wool or her. And she didn't care.

"Talking about games, I know how we can play without either of us losing." He stroked his finger over her mouth, tugging on the lower lip, then dipping his fingertip inside. Automatically, she flicked it with her tongue, then puckered her lips around him and drew his finger inside, stroking with her tongue.

"Vanessa."

Her name came out slippery sweet and she felt a thrill quiver through her. She released his finger and turned toward him, hooking her arms over his shoulders and around his neck and pressing her body against his. Their lips met with a hot, fiery passion, tongues tangling like frantic lovers separated too long. Which was exactly how Vanessa felt.

Hot.

And frantic.

For Nick.

He scooped up her legs to lay them across his lap. His hands slid down her back, pulling her closer. She needed to feel more of him, so she tugged him gently, dragging him with her as she eased herself down on the couch, their mouths never parting. He pressed himself the length of her body, his breathing coarse and rapid. His ribs pressed against her breasts, a welcome weight to her aroused flesh.

This passion might be destined to end, but right now she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted any man before. A desperate need clutched her body, determined to squeeze

away every last inhibition until the consuming urgency was met. She arched up to press her pelvis into the cradle of his. She could feel his hard, swollen flesh against her stomach.

More. She wanted more.

She smoothed her hand down his chest, along his taut stomach, and over his arousal.

"Vanessa, my God."

She flicked her tongue to lick the hollow at the base of his neck. His pulse, already racing, leapt a beat or two. She spiked her fingers through his hair, her skin quivering as she felt the softness of his locks caress the sensitive flesh between her fingers. Sliding her hand down his chest, she nibbled at the top button of his flannel shirt, releasing it then sliding the tip of her tongue down his chest to the next button. By the time she nibbled this one open, he pulled back and ripped open the shirt, his eyes dark and glittering. She giggled and lapped sideways until she reached his small, hard nipple then began to suckle. If she'd had any doubts, the catch in his sharply in-drawn breath told her he liked her attention. She dragged her tongue across his heated skin to his other nipple, brushing her cheek against the springy thatch of hair on the way.

"My turn," Nick murmured as he tugged off her sweater and pressed her down again, fiddling with the tiny buttons on her silky camisole.

With pure feminine satisfaction, she watched his eyes grow hungry as he drew aside the fabric. Her breasts, barely covered in blue lace, swelled against the covering. He released the front catch and the bra burst open. She gasped

as his mouth captured first one swollen nipple in his mouth, then the other. He licked, suckled, and squeezed the sensitive flesh within his mouth, forcing her breath to come in raspy puffs.

"Oh, Nick."

She arched her lower body upward, demanding attention. Unceasing in his devoted attention to her breasts, he released her belt and unzipped her jeans, slipping his hand inside. The feel of his strong fingers against her soft flesh made her melt with honeyed passion.

"Oh," she gasped, pressing herself against his hand in blatant need. She squirmed out of her jeans then started to fumble with his fastenings.

"Here, sweetheart. Let me," he murmured, sliding her hands across his chest so they were out of the way.

She took the hint and stroked his nipples, then traced the curly locks of his chest hair down, and when his beautiful arousal sprang free from his jeans, she caught it with both hands and wrapped her fingers around it, squeezing gently.

"If you keep doing that, darling, this will be over too soon, and I want us both to enjoy it."

He dipped his finger in the wine glass she'd abandoned on the coffee table and smeared the burgundy liquid across the white skin of her breasts, then leaned over and lapped it up with his tongue. She reached out and dipped two fingers into the glass, then dribbled it on her nipples and grinned.

"I see you know what you like." He suckled her nipples, making her absolutely wild with wanting.

"Nick." She moaned, a yearning sound from deep inside.

"Yes, sweetheart. What do you want?"

His fingers stroked her intimately. He knew what she wanted, and how much. Why did he keep her waiting?

"Nick, please. I need you. Now."

"Not yet, my love. First we need more wine."

She felt cool, damp droplets splash onto her belly, followed by the warmth of his tongue. She watched in wicked anticipation as his drenched finger dipped into her navel, then stroked downward, leaving a ruby trail. When his tongue descended and followed the path, her eyelids fluttered closed. She'd never felt so comfortable with a man that she'd allow this. With Nick ... with Nick everything felt right. She felt safe and cherished and ... right. As his tongue penetrated the silky folds of her flesh, conscious thought fled. His tongue flicked and cajoled and she felt herself swept away on a torrential wave of passion. Her breathing, deep and labored, mirrored the rhythm of her mounting urgency.

"Let it happen, sweetheart. Let go."

At his words, she released the thread of control that linked her to reality and, on a cry of ecstasy, she felt the world spiral away as she reached her first sexual climax ever.

She lay gasping for breath, eyes closed, and felt Nick slide up beside her. She knew he watched her. She opened her eyes and reached for him, pulling him close to her body, clinging to him, overwhelmed with feelings of elation and wonder that he could bring her such joy. She pulled him tight to her body and felt his arms slide around her, warm and tender. Pressing her cheek to his chest, she wished she could

pull him tighter still, could dissolve into his body and become one with him.

"What is it, sweetheart? Are you okay?" Concern etched his words and she realized her behavior was not what he would expect.

She nodded. "I've never ... I mean, no one's ever...." Suddenly, she felt embarrassed. Why had she admitted that to him? Nick, a wealthy bachelor who could take his pick of beautiful women to bed, would probably find her naiveté ridiculous.

The thought was swept away as soon as he pulled back and stared at her, his eyes tender and loving. "You've never climaxed before?"

She shook her head timidly, wondering how she could feel so shy at a time like this.

"My God, the men you've been with must have been fools. How could anyone take pleasure from you and not want to give so much more in return? What man wouldn't want to watch you in that moment of release, joy folding your features into blissful abandon?" He stroked his hand across her cheek, then kissed her lightly on the lips at first, then with mounting passion. "Are you ready for more?"

She dragged her fingertips along his stomach, then toyed with his navel.

"Absolutely. Do you think we'll be twice lucky?"

"Luck had nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure?" she teased.

He laughed, a very smug male grin on his face. "Honey, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

With that he plunged inside her and started thrusting with a compelling determination. She wrapped her legs around him and matched him stroke for stroke. Almost immediately, she felt an impossible longing fill her, demanding to be met, the need overwhelming in its intensity.

"Nick," she cried, lost in a driving desire. She felt like a locomotive gone amok.

"Vanessa."

Racing over a bridge.

"Nick, I want ... I want...."

Engine full of smoke ... puffing.

"Yes, Vanessa. Yes."

Flying off the edge.

"Oh, Nick," she wailed.

Airborne.

Chapter 10

Vanessa lay in the warmth of his arms, listening to the gentle beat of his heart against her ear. So much had happened so fast. When they'd started out, she'd believed they had no future together, that their relationship would last a few weeks at best. Nick wanted a woman so different from her. They came from different backgrounds and lived different lives. At least, that's what she'd thought—but after tonight the differences seemed superficial. What they wanted out of life was really the same.

She was surprised at what she'd learned about Nick. That he preferred jeans to tuxedos. That a simple hand-knit sweater meant more to him than an expensive store-bought garment. That a quiet evening at home won out against the lure of fancy evenings and glamorous dates. That what he really wanted from life was a woman he could have a lifetime commitment with—and children.

In reality, the two of them couldn't be more alike.

And he'd admitted that he wanted to be with her. He liked her for herself, he admired her talents.

And the attraction between them was cataclysmic.

The stereo played softly in the background and she heard the strains of Celine Dion singing "When I Fall in Love".

When I give my heart

Maybe they had a chance together after all.

It will be completely.

Vanessa hoped so, because she realized that the feeling growing within her had twined around her heart, blooming into full-blown love.

Or I'll never give my heart.

She loved Nick.

And he wanted Vanessa for herself. Not because she was some fantasy woman. When she'd first met him as his secretary, he'd been so hung up on finding his mystery woman from the masquerade that she knew he would never have fallen in love with her—even though she was the same woman he sought. To him, Cinderella represented mystery, intrigue, glamour. Vanessa was none of those things. Thank heavens he'd forgotten all about *her*.

Propping herself up on one elbow, she stared at him. His fine features serene in sleep, he looked more relaxed than she'd ever seen him. She traced the line of his nose with her index finger, dragged it across his cheekbone, and spiraled around his ear.

"Mmm." His arm slid over her thigh to catch her around the waist.

She blew in his ear, then nuzzled his neck.

"Come here, you," he commanded, his voice sleep-roughened. He still hadn't opened his eyes as he pulled her against him and stroked her hair. "You know, I had the most wonderful dream ... of a beautiful mystery woman who made my every fantasy come true."

She stopped herself from pulling back, kept her body pliant against his. "Nick, are you awake?"

He didn't answer, just mumbled on in his sleep-ridden voice. "But I know it wasn't a dream. It was you." He nuzzled her temple, her hair wisping in gentle waves from his soft breath. "My sweet Cinderella," he whispered. "I'm so glad I finally found you."

Her breathing stopped. She couldn't find a way to inhale. Pushing herself gently from him she sat up, shock slowly permeating every part of her body.

"Where you going?" he asked sleepily.

"Bathroom. Go back to sleep."

"Mmm. Don't be long."

She stumbled to her feet and scooped up her clothes, being careful not to make too much noise. As she clutched the bundle to her chest, she stared at the dwindling fire, mesmerized by its dying light.

When I fall in love it will be forever

Or I'll never fall in love.

Had she been fooling herself? Did he still wish for his fantasy woman?

In a restless world like this is,

Love is ended before it's begun,

If that were true, then maybe Vanessa would never be able to completely satisfy him.

And too many moonlight kisses

Even if he decided he loved her—which he never said he did—he might always wish for that intangible magic she could never provide.

Seem to cool in the warmth of the sun.

Maybe he could never accept just plain, ordinary Vanessa.

*When I give my heart it will be completely,
Or I'll never give my heart.*

The line in the song clutched at her. Too late.

"Vanessa, where are you going?" Nick's arms encircled her waist and he pulled her around to face him. His mouth descended on hers in a smoky, smoldering kiss.

*And the moment that you feel that
you feel that way too*

As passion swirled around her, hazing her brain, she realized that the insecurities driving her to distraction were just that ... insecurities. They had nothing to do with Nick and what he felt for her.

Is when I fall in love
With you.

* * * *

She awoke the second time to the feel of Nick kissing the back of her neck. His hand stroked her short hair behind her ear as he kissed around the side, then nuzzled the hollow of her collar bone.

"Are you awake?" he whispered in her ear.

She giggled. "I am now." Sometime during the night they'd moved into the bedroom. The feel of smooth Egyptian cotton caressed her skin as she turned in his arms and looped her hands around his neck. Nipping his lower lip, she smiled. "So I wonder what you want for breakfast?" Her voice lilted in a provocative manner. From the feel of his body pressed against her, they both knew exactly what he wanted.

"You, sunny side up," he growled, flipping her on her back and prowling over her. She found herself trapped beneath a fully aroused male—and loving every minute of it.

The thought of breakfast gave her an idea she simply couldn't resist. "Hold that thought." She eased him back with the light pressure of her hand against his chest.

She climbed out of bed and scooted into the kitchen, returning minutes later with a small bowl of syrup. Leaning against the door, she grinned at him. "I thought of a way to make breakfast a little sweeter."

She walked toward him, adding a slight sway to her hips. As she perched on the edge of the bed, she dipped her finger in the bowl and dribbled thick, sticky droplets on her breasts, then slowly licked her finger with a long stroke of her tongue. His eyes gleaming with sensuous hunger, Nick took her hand and drew her finger into his mouth while his gaze trailed a sticky droplet around the curve of her breast. The feel of his hot, moist flesh surrounding her sent chills through the rest of her body. She lay down on the bed, wanting his mouth to warm all of her. He leaned over and lapped the syrup from her breasts with slow, steady strokes. His tongue swirled around her nipple and he drew it into his mouth, alternately licking and suckling. He cleaned the other breast in the same deliberate manner.

"Mmm. Sweet." He kissed her and she could taste the syrup on his tongue.

"Your turn." She pushed him flat on the bed and gave his nipples the same treatment. Tasting the maple sweetness

under her tongue as his flesh pebbled to life was sinfully pleasurable. A melting hot moistness flowed within her.

Remembering how Nick had pleased her last night, she dipped in the bowl again, this time smearing the amber syrup onto his hard male flesh, swirling it with her finger then following with her tongue.

"Sweetheart, I'm more ready than I've ever been," he warned.

"Me, too."

She proved it, joining their bodies in one swift movement. Pleasure filled her as he gasped in agonized appreciation. She squeezed him, then started a steady rhythmic motion that brought them both to climax with the suddenness of a champagne bottle bursting open. Effervescent, exciting, explosive.

Later, as they showered together, Vanessa mused that the heated steam matched the heat of their earlier passion. After drying each other off with meticulous care, they dressed, then fixed breakfast, sharing the task with an easy camaraderie. *I could get used to this*, Vanessa thought, watching Nick flip pancakes in a frying pan. The thought of doing everyday things with Nick all the time held an appeal too strong to resist.

As Vanessa poured syrup over her pancakes, she was caught for a moment in amber images of their sticky-sweet lovemaking. She'd never again be able to eat pancakes without picturing Nick covered with syrup. Knowing they had to get to work, she tried to keep her mind off arousing thoughts by engaging Nick in mundane conversation.

Sunshine poured in the kitchen's huge picture window, and the ravine outside glistened with dew-drop crystals. The light reflected brightly off the oak hardwood floors, which looked recently refinished, and off the brass pans hanging from the ceiling over a very modern centre island. She wondered if Nick had made renovations in other parts of the house since her stepmother had lived here.

"When did you buy this place, Nick?"

"It's been in my family for generations."

She paused, a forkful of food halfway to her lips.

"But ... I thought a family named Devon owned it about fifty years ago." Could Nick be related to her stepmother? The sweet maple syrup became cloying in her mouth.

"No, one of my great-grandfathers several generations back built it and it's been owned by a Powers ever since. Who is this Devon family and why did you think they lived here?" he asked with mild curiosity.

She didn't want to ruin her wonderful mood by talking about her stepmother, but she'd brought up the topic.

"Well, you see, a long time ago my stepmother told me she grew up in Erin Gate mansion. The first time I came here I was fascinated to finally see the inside of the house she had always raved about."

"Your stepmother? Here?" He watched her speculatively. His eyes narrowed. "Devon. You know, the name does sound familiar."

Vanessa shifted uncomfortably under his penetrating stare, even though she knew he was concentrating on where he'd heard the name, not on her.

He snapped his fingers. "I've got it. We used to have a housekeeper named Devon. She had a daughter called Elaine, I think."

"Elena," Vanessa corrected distractedly. A housekeeper? She fixed her gaze on his. "Are you saying that my stepmother was the daughter of a housekeeper who worked here?"

"It sounds like it." He placed his hand over Vanessa's, concern carving tiny lines around his eyes and mouth. "Does this upset you, Vanessa? Have I disillusioned you about your stepmother?"

"Yes, you have." She leaned forward to place a tiny kiss on his nose. "And I thank you for it."

At his confused expression, she laughed. Relief and joy burst through her as she felt the long-binding chains of self-doubt fall away. Her stepmother had always made Vanessa feel worthless in comparison to herself because of her grand upbringing and yet she turned out to be simply a housekeeper's daughter. Not a wealthy blue blood. Vanessa's stepmother was a regular person, just like anyone else. Certainly no better than Vanessa.

"Do you want to let me in on your thoughts?" Nick asked and Vanessa realized he'd been watching the emotions fluttering across her face.

"My stepmother led me to believe she was a grand lady raised on a huge estate." Vanessa stared down at her entwined fingers, wondering if Nick would understand. "She used to rag at my father and me at every opportunity. My father worked so hard to make her happy, but nothing he did

was good enough for her. I'm afraid growing up in that environment left me feeling a little inferior."

He took her hand, infusing her with reassuring warmth. "You shouldn't feel that way, Vanessa. We're all the same inside. Some of us simply start out with more material things than others. It doesn't make us better."

"I realize my stepmother was probably compensating for her own feelings of inadequacy, but...."

"But it's hard to forgive her for making your life miserable." He squeezed her hand. "It's okay to be angry, Vanessa."

"You're right, but you know what? My feelings for her aren't strong enough now to include anger. All I really feel for her now is pity." Vanessa shook her head sadly. "She never learned to be happy. She could never accept herself for what she was." Vanessa entwined her fingers in Nick's and she smiled at him. "I'm not going to make the same mistake."

"Good for you." He pulled her into his arms. "But, you know what? You have it much easier than she did."

She snuggled against him. "Why is that?"

"Because you are a very special person." He grinned. "And you've got someone like me to remind you of that."

An hour later, Nick dropped Vanessa off at her apartment to change and she insisted he go ahead to the office without her. She didn't want anyone to see them come in together. When she arrived at the office, she settled her purse into the closet, hearing Nick's voice. A quick glance told her he'd left his office door open. He must either be on the phone or have someone in the office with him.

She opened the appointment book and saw that he didn't have anything written in until nine-thirty and she remembered he'd intended to go over the yearly reviews for his senior staff during this time. Someone must have come in unexpectedly. Checking to see if anyone was with him and to ask if he wanted her to bring coffee, she peered into the inner office through the doorway. The sight of Nick staring out the window as he sprawled back in his big, soft leather chair with his feet up on the desk made her heart melt. As he dragged his hand along the phone cord, she remembered the feel of that same hand stroking her body, heating her desire. She leaned on the edge of the door and smiled contentedly, drinking in the sight of him in profile, his aquiline features a perfect silhouette against the bright morning light.

"I got a message from the insurance company. They found out who owns the earring," he said into the receiver. "No. When I called the adjuster he wasn't in, but I'm sure he's thrilled not to have to pay out a claim on it."

Earring? She stiffened as the implication sank in. He must be talking about the insurance company that held the policy on her antique glass slipper earrings. Oh, no. They must have tracked her down and that meant they were going to tell Nick she was Cinderella. Did he already know? No, he'd said he hadn't been able to get in touch with the adjuster and they wouldn't have left confidential information like a policy holder's name in a phone message. A slight hope flared within her as she realized that maybe they wouldn't give Nick her name at all—maybe they'd just demand the earring back so that they could return it. Remembering how Nick had

searched adamantly for Cinderella, however, she felt certain he would never accept that. With his determination, he'd find a way to get her name.

She quelled the panic rising within her, telling herself she'd been worried for so long about being fired over this that she was behaving like a fool. Nick wouldn't fire her. Not now. In fact, since she'd come to know him, she realized he never would have fired her, even if they hadn't forged a relationship.

She had to confess. He might not understand her reluctance to tell him at first, but he'd listen to her explanation. He'd probably laugh at the whole ridiculous situation. The best thing to do would be to go and tell him the whole story right now.

"Yes, I'm going to return it tonight. I can't wait to see her face. You know, Amy, her eyes have haunted me ever since that night."

He smiled, the skin around his eyes and mouth crinkling in that enticing way she loved. Was he really planning to meet with a woman he didn't even know to return the earring tonight? He must be consumed by curiosity to meet the woman who had thrown him so off balance. There was nothing wrong with that, she tried to convince herself. Except ... he had told Vanessa he wanted to see her again tonight.

"I can imagine those beautiful eyes widening in surprise as I hand her the earring." He picked up a pencil and tapped it on the edge of the desk. "Of course, I'm excited. She's been in my dreams every single night."

He'd been dreaming about *her*. Even though she and the mystery woman were one and the same, Vanessa felt cheated upon. Surely after last night, he didn't still....

Her hand clamped over her mouth. Oh, God. She remembered his sleep-befuddled words when he'd called her his Cinderella and said he was so glad he'd found her. He'd been dreaming of *her* right after making love with Vanessa! When he'd reached for her, he'd really been reaching for *her*.

"Amy, I can't know for sure yet ... we'll need some time to get to know each other, but...." He pulled the glass slipper earring from his pocket and held it up in front of him. Sunlight danced merrily off the faceted surface. "What I'm trying to say is, last night, I ... Well, something happened to make me re-evaluate the kind of woman I want. You were absolutely right." He dropped the earring into his palm and stroked it delicately with one finger, sending shivers down Vanessa's spine. The tenderness she saw in his eyes ripped her soul to shreds—because she knew it was meant for another woman.

"That's right, it doesn't matter whether she's a career woman or not. If I find out she wants a family and she'll have me, I'm probably going to ask her to marry me." He nodded his head. "I know it's fast. I just knew, from that first explosive kiss, that...." A smile spread across his face. "Yes, that's right. Love at first sight ... or should I say, at first kiss." He clamped his hand closed, the earring snugly cherished within his fist. "Oh, don't sound so smug."

Vanessa felt an alarming torment well up from the depths of her soul. She had believed she could never fit into Nick's world, had wondered why she'd even dared to try. Just

yesterday morning she had called herself every kind of fool imaginable for putting herself in this position, where she could fall in love with a man who would never be hers. But last night, when she'd gotten to know him—really know him—she knew they were right for each other, that they could make a happy life together. She had fallen in love with him—and not because he represented the coveted Prince Charming she had always longed for. She had fallen in love with a man. Not a fantasy. Not the fancy clothes he'd given her. Not the glittering jewels he'd draped around her neck. Those things she could place in the corner of her mind she reserved for treasured memories—but Nick she would never be able to confine to an out-of-the-way niche where she could call him up only when she felt like it. He would pervade her memories, take over her conscious thought, fill her with longing for something that could never be.

And now, right after discovering that she couldn't live without him, she found she couldn't have him. He wanted another woman. A woman he knew nothing about. How could she fight a ghost? Should she even try? After all, if he thought so little of her that he'd dump her to go after a fantasy....

Quietly, she pulled the door closed with one question grating through her mind. What was she going to do?

Vanessa walked back to her desk and scanned Nick's schedule. Thankfully, he had scheduled meetings for the rest of the morning and all afternoon. Glancing at the clock on her desk, she realized he'd be leaving in five minutes so she scurried out of the office to the ladies room, intent on staying

there until he'd left, unwilling to face him in her current state of turmoil.

When she was certain he'd be gone, she returned to his office and scanned the surface of his desk. Two pink telephone message slips sat in his message tray and she grabbed the one with the name of her insurance company. Vanessa snatched up the phone and dialed the number.

"Mr. Woodbridge? This is Vanessa Graham, one of your policy holders."

"Vanessa Graham? That name sounds familiar. Have you made a claim recently? If you have a file number...."

She tapped her fingers on the edge of the desk. "No, I haven't made a claim, but I believe someone has been telling you I might. You see, I have a pair of antique earrings insured with your company and—"

"That's where I know your name."

She heard shuffling of papers on the other end of the line.

"Glass slipper earring, right? I understand you lost one. You'll be happy to know someone's found it."

"Mr. Woodbridge, it just so happens that I know exactly where the other earring is. Why do you think I haven't made a claim? The reason I'm calling is because I know someone has been trying to find me through you and—"

"How do you know that?"

She turned toward the window and stared at the light drizzle speckling the glass.

"It really doesn't matter, does it? The point is, I do know and I know who he is, but I won't try and compromise your ethics by asking you to confirm his name." Silence crackled

on the line as her message took root. "Well, I'm sure you can sympathize with the fact that I value my privacy very highly."

"Of course, Miss Graham. You have nothing to worry about. We don't give out confidential information on our policy holders."

She swung the spiral cord back and forth in her hand.

"Like my name? And address perhaps?"

"Well, of course, ordinarily we wouldn't but...." His voice took on the halting hesitation of nervousness. "Are you saying this man doesn't have your earring?"

"What I'm saying is that, even if he produces an exact duplicate of one of my earrings, I do not want you to give him my name."

"But if he does have it, we must ensure that—"

"I will not be making a claim on the earring, Mr. Woodbridge."

"I don't mean to imply anything about your honesty, ma'am, but we can't know for sure that six months from now—"

She glared at the phone as though it had called her character into question directly.

"Even if I did put in a claim, you have the man's name and number. You could contact him at that time, could you not?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"If you're really worried, simply ask him to turn the earring over to you. The point is, I really don't care what you do, as long as you understand that if this man finds out who I am, I will know he got the information from your company and I promise you, I will be in touch with the Privacy Commissioner

of Canada, and my lawyer. Have I made myself clear?" She'd pulled the telephone cord as taut as her voice.

"Perfectly, Miss Graham. I assure you, you have nothing to worry about."

She released the cord and it swung wildly to and fro, in time with the beat of her heart.

"I'm very glad to hear that," she said in her most congenial tone.

Vanessa hung up and set about prioritizing her work so she could get as much done this afternoon as possible. She didn't know what the future held, but she did know she couldn't face Nick again. Tomorrow, she would call in sick. Maybe by Monday they could find a replacement for her.

Chapter 11

Damn the woman. Where had she gone?

Nick had returned to his office after his late afternoon meeting to find a message from Vanessa on his desk telling him she couldn't make their date that night. She'd claimed illness and called in sick Friday morning.

By Saturday evening, he started to worry. Why didn't she answer his phone calls? She didn't have an answering machine so he sat in frustration, hearing it ring on and on. When he finally decided she'd unplugged her phone so she could sleep off her illness without interruptions, he went to her apartment, bouquet of flowers in hand. She didn't answer her buzzer and when he snuck in the front door on the trail of an occupant, he went up and pounded on her door. Still, she didn't answer.

By this time, Nick started to get frantic. The superintendent refused to let Nick into her apartment and when Nick claimed it might be a medical emergency, the man insisted he'd check on her himself and pass on a message and the flowers. Even a bribe wouldn't change his mind. Damn. At any other time he would have respected the man for protecting his tenants, but right now all Nick cared about was his desperate need to know if Vanessa was all right.

He decided to visit Rachel in the hospital, hoping that she might have some information about Vanessa and her well-being. He walked the blue line with a determined stride, then marched into her room.

"Nick, how are you?"

He could tell by her defensive posture and the nervous tremor in her voice that Rachel was less than delighted to see him.

"Rachel, do you know where Vanessa is? I've been trying to get in touch with her and—"

"She doesn't want to see you, Nick."

His brows furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean she doesn't want to see me? Is this some vanity thing? She's afraid to have me see her with a red nose and swollen eyes?"

Rachel's sharply in-drawn breath surprised him.

"Nick, you heartless beast."

"For heaven's sake, what are you talking about, Rachel? I can understand you thinking that about me if I didn't want to see her while she's sick, but I've been trying to find out how she is and—"

"Vanessa's sick?" Now Rachel looked confused.

"That's what she said Friday morning when she called to say she wouldn't be in."

"Oh. Nick, I ... well, it shouldn't be me telling you this."

Rachel's strained look sent dread shuddering through him. "Telling me what?"

"Vanessa ought to...."

A sudden thought burst into his brain. Could Vanessa be pregnant? No, they'd only made love two nights ago. Surely she couldn't know so soon. Could she? He'd heard about how fast and accurate these new pregnancy tests were.

"For God's sake, Rachel, what is it?"

"Nick, Vanessa's not sick, she ... well, she doesn't want to see you again."

He blinked at Rachel a few times, letting the unexpected words sink in. Remembering the night of rapture he and Vanessa had shared in each other's arms, he couldn't imagine what might have happened to make her feel that way.

"Nick, don't you understand that Cinderella and Prince Charming live happily ever after?"

"Of course I do, and I thought she'd be pleased that her fantasy has become a reality."

She narrowed her eyes and asked suspiciously, "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Rachel, what do you think I mean?" He strolled across the room toward the bed. "I want to ask Vanessa to marry me." He placed his hands on the side bar and leaned towards her. "But I can't do that if I can't find her."

"But ... I mean, I thought...."

He captured her wandering gaze with his own intent stare. "Just what did you think, Rachel?"

"Oh, Nick. Vanessa phoned Thursday afternoon. I missed her call but the message said something about you asking another woman to marry you. I've been thinking that you're pretty much of a rat."

"Another woman? Why would she think ... ?" The phone call! His heart compressed as realization hit. She must have heard his conversation with Amy. "You haven't told her that I know she was Cinderella, have you?"

"No, Nick, you made me promise not to, remember? And anyway, I haven't been able to get in touch with her either."

"That's it then." He told her about his talk with Amy and how Vanessa might have drawn the wrong conclusion.

"So you really are going to ask her to marry you?" Rachel's eyes lit up like a kid's on Christmas morning.

"If I can find her. Any clues?"

"No, not really. She might just be holed up in her apartment or she might have gone to stay with one of her stepsisters in Ottawa."

"Her car's in the parking lot."

"That doesn't mean anything. She usually takes a bus to the train station. She doesn't like to leave her car in the station parking lot while she's gone."

"I guess I'll have to wait until Monday to see her."

But when Nick arrived at work on Monday, he found a temp sitting at Vanessa's desk and a memo from personnel informing him they had released Vanessa Graham from her contract, by her request. She'd claimed personal problems.

He swung by her apartment on the way home that night and pounded on her door until a neighbor complained, telling him she'd gone out an hour ago.

* * * *

Nick couldn't face going back to his place. Everything there reminded him of Vanessa. Her sweet scent still clung to the pillows on his bed. He decided to go back to the office to put in a couple hours work, then return to Vanessa's later and storm her door until she had to let him in.

As the elevator doors opened, he was surprised to find the lights on. His office door was open and he heard rustling

inside. He peered in cautiously, knowing the cleaning staff wouldn't be by for another couple of hours.

Stunned, he saw the woman who'd been driving him to distraction standing at his desk spinning his dolphin mobile.

"Vanessa, what are you doing here?"

She glanced up sharply, looking like a startled kitten. He could just imagine her tail puffing out.

"Nick!"

"Taking a last look around before you pick up your stuff?"

Even though he wanted to race across the room and drag her into his arms, he forced his voice to sound reserved. He had to find out why she'd come.

"I know you're probably upset with me, Nick, but—"

He strolled toward her. "Upset with you? Why? Because you disappeared without a word last Thursday? Because you refused to take my calls or answer your door, leaving me worried sick about you? Because you quit without a single word as to why?"

She had the good grace to look sheepish, refusing to meet his gaze. She glanced down at the metal dolphins spinning around each other in wild circles. "Nick, this is so hard. I ... oh, sit down, will you, please?"

"No." He wanted to be ready if she made a break for the door.

She sighed. "All right. Nick, I didn't come here to pick up my things."

His eyebrow shot up. "Oh? Why else would you be here at this time of night. I assume you wanted to avoid running into me."

"On the contrary." She stared steadily into his eyes. "You weren't at home so I came here looking for you."

Hope fluttered inside him. "Why?"

"Well, it's about the mystery woman you've been searching for. The Cinderella who crashed your masquerade ball."

"Really?" So, was she finally ready to confide in him?

She walked while she spoke, stepping out from behind his desk. "I know you received a call from an insurance company telling you they knew who she was. I also know that they've refused to give you the information."

"You do?" He'd forgotten all about that call until he'd gone to talk to Rachel and realized it was the cause of the difficulties between him and Vanessa. He'd never returned the adjuster's call and, strangely enough, the man hadn't followed up. "How do you know that?"

She waved away his question. "It doesn't matter. The point is, I know who she is."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Do you now?"

"Yes, and ... well, I'm not going to tell you any more about it until I find out a few things from you."

A smile tickled the corners of his mouth, but he held it back, continuing to look stern. "And what might that be?"

"Nick, please sit down."

This time he complied, sitting on the couch, which stood nearer the door than the chairs. She stood facing him, several feet away.

"I heard you talking to Amy on Thursday. I...." Her gaze dropped to her fingers, which she'd twisted tightly around

each other. "I know you plan to find her and ... that you've decided she's the woman of your dreams."

At the look of pain that flashed across her pale face, he began to feel guilty about what he was putting her through. "Vanessa, let me—"

She cut him off with a wave. "No, Nick. Let me finish. I know you think you want *her* ... and, believe me, I understand all about fantasies. I went after a fantasy myself once." Her eyes misted as she stared deeply into his own. "I know you have the right to do the same thing. I just think you should know that...." She averted her eyes. "I love you, Nick." She turned away from him and marched over to the office door. Nick started to panic, thinking she might flee yet again. Before he could leap to his feet, he heard the click of the lock. She turned back to face him, her hands still holding the knob behind her, in a delightfully sexy pose. "And I'm going to fight for you."

"You are?"

He watched in fascination as she slowly released the buttons of the long suit jacket she wore. Glimpses of black lace teased as she sauntered toward him.

He felt his pulse quicken as she dropped the jacket over her shoulders, revealing the skimpy black lace dress he'd given her, the one she'd refused to model. His hungry gaze took in every inch of her body enmeshed in stretch lace. Somehow, the skimpy dress, with the conservative blazer now draped at her elbows, looked unbelievably wicked.

She dropped the jacket to the floor and turned around slowly, with a swing to her hips that proved incredibly enticing.

"Nick, I know we can't build a relationship on physical attraction alone." Standing right in front of him now, she reached out and ran her fingers through his hair, sending ripples of pleasure along his nerve ends. "But I believe that you love me, and I intend to hang onto you any way I can, until you admit it to yourself ... and to me."

"Vanessa, I...."

She trapped his lips beneath her fingertip. "No. Don't say anything yet." She planted her lips firmly on his as she grasped his lapels and eased herself onto his lap. Her short skirt hiked up even higher as she slid her knees onto either side of his thighs, straddling him, stroking her hands under his jacket to slip it off. He tossed it away as quickly as possible and clamped his arms around her. She stared down at him, holding his gaze as she dropped first one, then the other, ribbon strap off her shoulder.

"Nick, tell me you want me."

"Oh, Lord, Vanessa. Of course, I want you."

She smiled in satisfaction and reached around to unzip the dress, thrusting her breasts forward. He stroked a hand over one, then the other, as he drew the dress down. Her pert breasts, swollen in anticipation of his touch, stood proud and naked before him. He drew one erect nipple into his mouth, feeling his own erection straining against his fly. Her tiny gasp made his pleasure almost painful. Her hand slid over him, and

he felt the pressure ease with the rasping of his zipper, then he was the one to gasp as her hand closed around him.

"Vanessa. Oh, sweetheart."

"You really do want me, don't you?"

She slid her dress up in an enticing shimmy and shifted over him. He gasped as he felt her hot, moist body close around him. He couldn't believe it. Being pinned to this couch by a wild seductress who now slowly and expertly made love to him was beyond his wildest fantasy. How could Vanessa possibly believe she couldn't live up to his fantasy woman?

He stroked her back and, as their pace quickened, planted his hands on her hips, helping her rise and fall to their shared rhythm.

"Nick," she cried out on a lingering gasp. Her muscles tightened around him, sending him over the edge of reality into paradise.

As she slumped in his arms, he held her against him, savoring the feel of her, the slippery sweet smell of her, and reveling in the fact that she loved him. The marvelous thought kept swirling through his head, dancing like a tipsy butterfly. Vanessa loved him.

"Vanessa."

Her head lolled on his shoulder and he could feel her smile. "Mmm?" The sound came out low and musical.

"Sweetheart, I know who Cinderella is, too."

"Hmm?" This time it came out sharp and jerky, as her head flew up. "What did you say?" Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

He looked into her startled eyes and decided to change tracks. "Why did you leave?"

Her lips pinched together. "Because I thought you didn't want me, that you wanted some fantasy you'd created."

"Why did you think that?"

"Right from the beginning I knew you wanted someone like Amy. Beautiful, intelligent, ambitious, career-oriented—everything I'm not."

"I admit, I used to think I wanted someone like Amy. Until I met you. And for the record, you are beautiful and intelligent. You're also much, much more."

"Oh?" She traced her finger along his lower lip, the grim line of her mouth curving up into a smile.

"I want someone soft and feminine."

"Really? What else?"

"Someone creative."

She kissed his nose. "Anything else?"

He ran his finger along the bare skin above the edge of the lace dress, which lay crumpled around her waist. "Someone who's incredibly sexy and willing to seduce me."

Laughing, she batted at his hand and started to get up, but he caught her around the waist and pulled her back against him.

His face turned serious. "I also want someone loving and easy to be with. I always felt the other women I've dated were competing with me, trying to prove something. That meant a lot of pressure—on them and on me. With you I can relax and be myself." He cupped her face gently and kissed her with all the tender emotion flowing through him.

"Vanessa, I love you." He kissed her again. "And I have a feeling you want to have a family as much as I do."

"Oh, I do, Nick, but...."

She drew herself away from him. As she stood up, she shoved the dress to the floor then pulled on her discarded jacket and hugged it to her body.

"Vanessa, what is it?"

"I just ... Nick, won't you always wonder about *her*?"

"*Her*?"

"Yes. Your fantasy woman. Your Cinderella." She paced across the office a couple of times, Nick following her lithe movements with his gaze. "Nick, I know about dreams. You're my dream and I'm lucky to have found you. Don't you think ... won't you always wonder what *she* might have been like ... ?"

"*Her? She?* Vanessa, are you starting to feel a wee bit schizophrenic?"

She glanced at him sharply, her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I know who *she* is, too."

"No, you don't. You're bluffing."

He stood up and she took a step away from him. "No, I'm not."

"But you can't, you ... I called the insurance company. They promised. I threatened to...."

He took another step towards her. She retreated. "You threatened them? Tsk, tsk, Vanessa. That wasn't very nice. Well, I'd better let them off the hook then. I've known ever

since that day you came to work at the house. The day we kissed out in the garden."

"No! You couldn't. You didn't say a thing." She jerked to a stop when she backed into the desk.

"I wanted to know what you were up to. And once I found out why you'd crashed my party, that you'd always dreamt of being Cinderella—"

"Rachel!"

He swept his arms around her and pulled her toward him. "—I decided to make your dream come true. At least partially." He fluttered light kisses across her cheek. "I didn't know then that I'd fall madly in love with my sweet Cinderella."

"Fall ... but ... ?" Her eyes lit up with understanding. "When you were talking to Amy on the phone, when you said you wanted to ask *her* to marry you ... you were talking about—"

"You." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small purple satin box. "I believe you have the mate to this one," he said as he snapped open the box, revealing her glass slipper earring.

She reached into the pocket of her blazer and pulled out the twin. "Yes," she whispered, staring into his eyes with unconcealed joy.

She tugged off her gold earrings and slipped on one of the crystal earrings. Nick handed her the mate and she slid it onto her other ear.

"Beautiful." The earrings glistened in the light, but not as brightly as Vanessa's eyes, aglow with happiness. "And as for marriage...."

He tugged another box from his pocket, velvet this time, and handed it to her. She opened it. Glittering at her from inside lay an exquisite heart-shaped diamond in a setting to match her antique earrings.

"I don't need any more time to know that I want you forever. One weekend of thinking I'd lost you was more than enough to convince me. This is a symbol of my heart, Vanessa. Please accept it. Say 'yes' to happily-ever-after."

"Yes," she whispered almost choking on a sob of joy. "Oh, yes. Nick."

Their lips came together in a flash of passion, erupting within them the fireworks befitting a fairy tale come true.

THE END

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