



Chapter One

"You want a cup of java? Worst coffee in the world, swear to God. Only seventy-five cents for a half-ounce brewed yesterday morning. Best any bastard machine can vend."

"Damn, if you're not a prince among men. Jerk."

"Only the best for you. Drink up before it gets cold. Colder."

Chastity stared down at the micro-cup her best friend Gio had shoved into her hand.

"Christ," she said in disgust. Not only cold, it had lumps of powdered creamer floating on top and an oily skin. "Is this coffee or engine grease?"

Gio gave a shrug. He leaned back against the bus station wall, adjusting his worn-out Yankees ball cap. "Probably both."

"If I drink this crap, will it put hair on my chest or kill me?"

"Bitch." Gio swatted at her. "Cut the dramatics and play nice. This is our touching goodbye scene, in case you forgot."

"How could I?" Chastity asked dryly. She glanced around. "So this is me, running away from home. Not too much like the movies."

"In real life, it never is."

"That's the God's honest truth." Chastity glanced around herself. "Feels like I'm in a movie. A bad one. Set the scene: the Bronx, an empty bus station. Time: midnight. Extras: two—no, three winos. Maybe homeless, maybe not. Extra touch of local color with the one wearing a Smart Shopper plastic bag on her head, but you need a shopping cart or two full of crap to really make the background pop."

"Don't forget the crack-heads begging for loose change."

"Right. Those are important. Need them for a real New York flavor." Chastity took a sip of her coffee. "Oh, shit, this is awful!"

"You better learn to watch your mouth, C. Way you got this plan laid out, you're gonna have to start talking like a Manhattan call girl, not a hooker straight out of the Queens."

"Sex. Everything with you is sex. Sex-related."

"I'm a guy. What else do you expect?"

Chastity rolled her eyes. "Mother of God. Why do I put up with you again?"

Gio grinned. His teeth sparkled against the pale mocha of his skin, surrounded by the goatee she'd been nagging him to shave for months.

"You love me and you know it." He threw an arm around Chastity and dragged her against his chest. "Come away with me. We'll make a run for the Jersey border and stop in Reno to get married by a fat, fake Elvis. I'll even buy some condoms ribbed for your pleasure and not wear them inside out."

"Would you shower?"

"Hey, now you're pushing it." Gio relaxed his grip on Chastity with an easygoing jostle. "I don't put on the Ritz for anyone who just asks, you know."

"And you wonder why you can't get a date."

"Aw, hell. The girls all think I'm too pretty for their skinny asses."

Gio dodged Chastity's slap.

"I'm in no hurry. I'll find someone, probably right around the corner. Heck, after all, I'm not the one who's going anywhere. That'd be you."

"Yeah," Chastity said. She took another swallow of what was, yes, definitely the world's worst coffee and shuddered. "I'm on my way."

"Straight to the top."

"No more punks who want to make me their baby's momma or their latest street piece."

"Say goodbye to spray-paint art."

"So long, Times Square."

"Farewell to fucking Broadway."

"And to hell with the rest of this shit-hole town, too." Chastity toyed with her paper cup. "Hello, Texas."

"Texas." Gio shook his head.

He laid a hand, rough from hard work at the age of twenty-one, on Chastity's strong thigh. "You've got the best legs," he said, distracted for a second. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. Go on and hit me if you want, but I got to ask: you sure you know what you're doing? I mean, you're pointed at a whole new world. Texas might as well be another planet from what I hear. How do you think you're gonna fit in? How do you plan to make it on your own?"

"Are you saying you don't think I can do this?"

"Jesus, no. Anyone who says that to Chastity Vincent better watch out for their balls. I just want to be sure you'll be all right."

"I'll be great." Chastity lifted her chin. "Have you ever known me to fail when I put my mind to something?"

Gio considered the question. "Nope."

"There you go, then."

"Are you sure you won't stay here? Just think about it. You could move in with me above my dad's garage and start popping out a litter of street rats."

"I'd rather burn in Hell, thanks."

Gio whistled.

"Ouch, girl. Ouch." All the same, he offered her his special grin, the one he knew melted women's hearts and dampened their panties at twenty paces. If he used that look on a girl, nine times out of ten he'd have an X-rated story to tell the next

day. None of them would go out with Gio on an actual date, but by God, they'd fuck him.

Chastity eyed her best friend. He did look pretty fine, even worn out from a hard day's work and backlit by too-bright fluorescents. Not like she'd be stupid enough to fall for his tricks, of course. Chastity held up a hand.

"Oh, no. Don't you even go there. Don't try the look on me, mister. I had my shots."

"Yeah." Gio's hand squeezed her leg. Anyone else, she'd have punched.

From Gio ... well, they had history. She'd let his move slide. They both knew the score. "We did give things a shot. Once upon a time, eh?"

His eyes glittered with sudden humor. "I still say you didn't give me a chance to prove myself. See, the way I figure, it doesn't matter how wrong we got the sex part the one time we tried. You need special treatment. I know that, now. I could do better for you. Help you enjoy it, instead of..."

His thumb stroked circles on her hand. "We could give things another shot, you know," he said, voice warm and tempting as tequila. "You and me. See where it takes us."

Chastity started to giggle. "You'd actually give up your wicked ways?"

"For you?" Gio gave her a half-smile. "Yeah. I would. But I'm not a dummy, even if I didn't make it through high school. I already know if I asked, really asked, on the level, you'd say no. I'm not who you want. Not what you need."

"Please. You had your chance, and you blew it." Chastity sighed. "Hell, we both did."

"Only 'cause you ran so far so fast the morning after it took me months to catch up and get you talking to me again."

Chastity shrugged. She picked at the rim of her cup. "I just ... you ... I freaked, okay? You and me, naked. Being together like that felt wrong. A dirty kind of wrong."

"God, you're good for a man's ego. Me, I think we could've been good. Hey, can I demand a right to a retrial?"

"You want to relive our one night by the docks in your pimp-mobile?"

"It's not a pimp-mobile. It's a pussy bus."

Chastity slapped at Gio, laughing. "Jerk! See, this is exactly why it wouldn't work for us. All you know is how to think with your little head."

"Magnum-sized, thank you."

"You wish."

"I get the job done." Gio reached out to twine his fingers through Chastity's. "We didn't even get all the way to gold when we tried, sweet girl. I would have made it good for you."

"Gio..."

"I never will forget that night. God, but you looked fine by moonlight. All shiny dark hair and that body of yours." Gio whistled. "Chastity, you were made to make men sit up and take notice."

"I'm too tall and my tits are too big."

"There's no such things as too much in the cups. So you're not a heroin chick, all bones and baggy eyes. Chastity, you've got the body of an Aztec queen. An Amazon. A warrior woman."

"Gio, don't. Okay? Don't."

"She doesn't like poetry either. God help you, girlfriend." Gio shook his head. He offered her another grin, softer, more like her friend, less like a man on the prowl. "You'll never catch a man."

"I don't need one."

"Bull!"

"See? Again with the sex, sex, sex. Life is so not all about sex, Gio. The life I'm headed for is not going to be about finding someone to fall in love with. It's about freedom. Always has been. Always will be. I don't need someone to tie me down. Don't want anyone, either."

Gio sighed. "Yeah. That's my Chastity. Stone-cold, ball-busting bitch, right to the end. You're gonna be lonely as hell."

"If you have cash, fine clothes, and a swank place to live — who needs love?"

"Love, maybe not. What about friends?"

"I already got the only one I need." Chastity smiled at Gio and patted his hand. "I won't forget you, you jackass."

"Same here, friend." Gio tightened his fingers around her own. "Same here."

"Gio, if this were all just about making the best of what I had, or about sex, or love, I might..."

"No, you wouldn't. Come on, babe. Don't lie to me. Not me."

"I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Not a damn thing. Way I figure, you've just gotta figure out who and what you want, is all." Gio nodded at Chastity's bus ticket. "Guess that's where you start, huh?"

"Guess so." Chastity looked across at her best friend, asking him to understand.

Accept. Give his blessing. "You get me, right? I can't stay here and be one little fish in this big bad city. A place like the Bronx eats you alive and doesn't give you a chance.

"I can go somewhere else. I can be someone else. I don't have to spend the rest of my life getting fat and reading magazines about what the people who are people are doing. What they're wearing. How they're living their lives. I can't turn into my mother and marry some pretty face right out of school, then regret it until I'm a total alky or a raving bitch. Or both."

"You're not a bitch already?" Gio evaded Chastity's punch. "God, woman. Tell me again why I taught you to throw a decent right hook?"

"Cause you love me."

"There is that."

They fell silent for a minute. In the pause, broken only by one of the winos having a coughing fit, the midnight bus pulled into the lot outside. Diesel engines rumbled as the battered road hog juddered through potholes to a stop and let loose with a cloud of gray smoke and fumes.

Chastity glanced at her ticket, then at the worn number on the bus's side. "Looks like my ride." Her voice shook just the tiniest bit.

Gio squeezed her hand. "Are you nervous?"

"Me? You have to be joking. Chastity Vincent does not get nervous."

"Sorry, forgot. You're the Tough Bitch of the Bronx. Accept no substitutes. Chastity the Great."

"And don't you forget it."

"Be that as it may," Gio said, standing, "you're a Tough Bitch with a fucking expensive new manicure, so how about you let your one good friend do you a favor and haul your suitcases for you?"

"I can do it myself."

"I know." His face turned serious. "Believe me when I say this: there's nothing you can't do, Chastity. No mountain too high, no river too deep. You'll make it. Just remember me every now and then, si? Maybe even smile when you do. I'll be wishing you well whenever you cross my mind."

"Gio..."

"Don't you dare get weepy on me. Not now. You've got more balls than most men, Chastity. Use 'em. Be hard. Be tough. Don't let your guard down. Never say yes when you mean no. Remember to say yes when you need to. Remember me, but don't look back and wonder 'what if'."

He held out a hand to pull Chastity to her feet. When she settled, he kissed her cheek, goatee scratchy and comforting as a favorite wool sweater. "Now. You go knock 'em dead, you hear me?"

"Damn straight." Impulsively, Chastity kissed Gio's caramel-colored cheek in return. "Thanks."

Gio rested his head against her own. "Bye, Chastity. Make me proud."

"I will. But, Gio, there's one thing you should know. It's not Chastity anymore because I'm leaving her behind, too."

"No shit!" Gio tilted his head. "Who are you gonna be instead?"

She grinned, smile sparkling with mischief. "Someone the world remembers for a long, long time."

"How about Madeline?"

"Madeline? Why the fuck would I name myself Madeline?"

Gio rolled his shoulders. "I don't know. Always liked the name. Go by Maddy for short."

"You're a nut." Still, Chastity grinned as she said it.

Madeline, huh? Maddy. I kinda like the sound. Could be the one.

Maddy Vincent, then. On the move, on her way up. Watch out, world. Here I come. You've never seen anything like me yet!

Chapter Two *Texas. Early August in the Southwest.*

Christ in a flaming ten-gallon top hat—I thought summers in the Bronx were hot but next to this weather? No comparison. You could melt a Religious Right member's heart out here.

Again—why the hell did I pick Texas to start a new life?

Oh, yeah. Money. Oil barons.

I could have done worse.

And yeah, she could have. Someone who didn't dare to dream big might have suggested L.A., Charlotte, Chicago. Places like the one she'd come from, where she'd have fit in a hell of a lot quicker. Dark-skinned ladies like Maddy who still spoke with a Latino Yankee taint stood out like freckles on a Southern belle's nose. Definitely not white-bread or pure WASP blood, and cursed with a pedigree so mixed her family tree was half broken limbs.

She'd gotten there, stepped off the bus, and after the first time she'd spoken to someone, knew exactly what was what. But hey, after the sting and the urge to flip them off passed, Maddy realized it had been for the best. She knew, just like snap, what she had to change.

So she'd done it.

Remodeled herself from the Bronx Chance into Texas Maddy. Polished her voice until she could drawl sweet and honey-coated as you please, with a crisply professional edge that let people know not to fuck with her.

Smoothed off her rough edges for the public eye, but kept her brass balls gleaming bright. Turned out Texans liked a tough girl with a sweet tongue as much as New Yorkers.

The rich ones, anyway, and hey, they were the ones Maddy cared about. Screw the paupers. Been there, done that, not going back, thanks. She was on her way up, and hell with anyone who got in her way.

Shit. She even learned how to drink Texas tea. You could choke on the sugar, but it made the medicine go down.

There'd been plenty of bitter pills. You wanted into the oil-rich elite? Fuck if you could get there without an old family name, piles of cash, a prep school diploma, and a Bush knowing who you were. Maddy wrinkled her lip. God, she hated those pricks. But she'd made nice. She did that; had to.

And she'd learned how to start small. Use the skills she had. Years of reading every fashion magazine she could get her hands on came in useful, as well as actually knowing how to use a computer. Making friends with a hacker helped even more. He'd wanted to know about the Bronx, and she'd wanted a forged resume and a faked degree in Fashion Design.

Fair trade and no drawbacks. She'd had to smack him around when he got fresh, but nothing new there. They'd both gotten most of what they wanted.

Another New York field skill she put to good use was dumpster diving. Maddy still couldn't believe the things people threw out if they got so much as a wine stain on one cuff. Pansies. One good rummage, some serious elbow grease, and she had a wardrobe which, while it wasn't exactly gold and pearls, both fit and made her look fine enough to jump on the playing field.

Armed and ready, she'd taken her faked creds straight to the best designer salon outside of Houston. Marched right in, like she had every right. Never took 'no' for an answer. Had herself an interview with the head of sales within a day.

Landed herself a sweet job ten minutes in. Madame Lafitte might have seen through Maddy's upgrade from Bronx bitch to Texas ball-buster, but she was no dummy. She saw Maddy for who she was and what she could be: one hell of a powerhouse on the sales floor.

Lafitte took a chance on her. Maddy didn't let her down. Five years in, and she had the best sales track record in the salon's history. No way they'd let her go now. And with each day, week, year, she'd polished herself up a little brighter.

Perfected her change-over.

And sweet Jesus, had it paid off. She had her own, non-recycled wardrobe full of elegant originals, racks of shoes that were a bitch to wear but made her legs and ass look great, a sweet condo full of gleaming white furniture, and a shiny red sports car. Not to mention invites to every shindig, debutante ball and pool party the crème de la crème threw, a few in her honor. Two more years of top sales, and she'd get to open her own branch of the salon.

Oh, yeah. Hell, yeah. She'd made it. Clawed her way to the top, and she was gonna stay there no matter what. No friends, no lovers, no complications.

This? This was the life.

Of course, she shouldn't have let herself start thinking as much.

Karma absolutely loved kicking proud people in the ass and off their pedestals—in the worst, most unusual ways. Changed their old or new-made lives forever.

And for Maddy, it started on an ordinary day.

Just an ordinary day, if a damn profitable one. Maddy had just finished escorting a millionaire's wife around the furs—yeah, they were dumb enough to buy and sell fur coats in Texas, for God's sake—made a fabulous sale—and decided to take a short-cut back through the Petites and Misses department back to her shiny new workstation.

With nothing on her mind but recording her latest Big Sale, Maddy threaded her way through the racks, happy as a man who'd just struck fresh oil. But as she

walked with the slow, easy grace she'd turned into an art form, fate stepped in and sucker-punched her right between the eyes. One, two, T.K.O.

It started with an unfamiliar scent. Perfume. Not the imported French shit her clients liked to wear, but something sweet. Childish. A hint of lavender.

Maddy stopped and turned her head, curious. She had to see who'd be wearing such an innocent, little-girl scent. But when she looked around, she came almost face-to-face with the hugest pair of puppy-dog eyes she'd ever seen. Huge, panicky eyes in the middle of a pixie face, surrounded by a really bad choice of dreadlocks with jingly beads on the end.

Mother of God. Maddy had never been much for compassion, but something about the girl—woman?—so very much out of her element gave her a rare sense of pity. Touched her heart, or glanced off its stone-cold coating at least.

"Look," she said, kindly as she could, "just some friendly advice? That 'do' worked about twenty years ago. It's not really the 'now' thing. Your perfume's good, but what say you lose the braids and fast? I know a great stylist if you want his card."

The woman blinked, automatically reaching out to touch her head. "Oh," she faltered. "I—I thought they were pretty."

Maddy considered the mess of dreads and bit her tongue. Hard. Rephrased her first reaction into: "Well, they might be, if white women could carry off dreadlocks for longer than one sleep cycle."

To her surprise, the woman giggled and blushed. "Yeah, they are kinda tangled, aren't they? God, I must look like a mess."

Then, as if realizing she was chatting to Maddy as she would to a friend, her pink cheeks deepened into a true red blush. "Oh, my gosh, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to—I babble, I always have—I'm keepin' you from your work, aren't I?"

Maddy had been down the babble route more than enough before.

Also Crazy Road. The Bronx thrived on nut-bars like this skinny woman. Funny, though ... it'd been so long since hearing those voices that this woman's chatter, even while spoken in a soft, lyrical Texas accent, brought an unexpected grin to her face.

Not a smile. A grin.

What the fuck?

Maddy blinked and composed herself. "It's okay," she said. She took a second for a fresh assessment of the girl-woman, taking a good measure. "I can tell you're new in town. Did you just graduate from college?"

The woman ducked her head. "Doctorate in Physics at Texas A & M," she admitted.

Bull.

Maddy arched one eyebrow.

"You're young for a doctorate, aren't you?"

"Well, I skipped ahead a little. You know."

A little. Uh-huh. She couldn't have been older than Maddy herself, early twenties if that. Hard to tell, since she was so tiny. Tiny enough you wanted to hold her tight and keep her safe ... Maddy shook herself. What on earth was happening to her? She'd felt a chill like the beginnings of arousal, her nipples puckering a bit.

Had the woman caused this reaction in her? It couldn't be.

Well, whoever she was or whatever weird vibes she gave off, a potential customer like this was a whole new ballgame.

Maddy shifted tactics, laying on the friendliness and charm. She wanted to make a serious sale here. Wanted to see how she could rebuild the mess and bring out all the potential she was picking out. This girl-woman could be a real knockout, once she cleaned up and lost the college look. The kind of lady who made anyone look twice.

And those eyes ... God, you could drown in the deep brown of her eyes.

Maddy pulled to a mental screeching halt.

Okay ... losing it there, girlfriend. Work the job, play the game, make the sale, and get a nice fat commission. Forget about her eyes. What the hell, I care about eyes now?

Right. Showtime.

Maddy put out her hand.

"I'm Ms. Vincent, but why don't you call me Madeline?"

The girl-woman looked startled, but then beamed—fucking beamed. Bright as sunshine and twice as warm. "I'm Lissy," she said, her slightly too-broad mouth suddenly beautiful when she smiled. "Short for Felicity. Felicity MacVeigh. Just call me Lissy, though. It's all I'm used to. I just about jump when someone uses the whole name."

Nut-bar...

All the same, a sale was a sale, and money would be money. Maddy reached out to put a hand on Felicity's arm. "So, Lissy," she said, tactfully leading her away from a display of pastel button-downs that would wash her right out into the walls, "you look like you could use some help."

"Yeah. I'm pretty clueless about shopping. I mean, I just always wore what came handy, you know? But now I've got this teaching job at the ladies' college, you know, San Maria Private, and they're sayin' I've got to dress proper, and all. They gave me an advance on my salary, but—" she shrugged helplessly. "I just got no idea what to buy."

"Lissy, this is your lucky day, because you have bumped into the perfect woman for your special needs." Maddy gave Lissy a playful nudge, sensing she'd appreciate it. "So, tell me. What kind of job did you land right out of school at a place like San Maria?" The most fucking exclusive Texas princess school in the land, of all places. "Lecturing?"

Lissy's eyes glowed. Beautiful before, now they'd take anyone's breath away. Or so Maddy told herself with another stern mental shake. "Professor," Lissy said simply. "Full professor of Physics."

"Not bad." Like hell it isn't bad. It's unbelievable. But somehow, I don't think she's lying. You got it right again, girl—Felicity MacVeigh is someone special. A woman Lissy's age with that much power? Maddy liked it.

Weird thing, though, she was beginning to suspect she liked Lissy too. Kind of gave her the creeps. She'd spent all her time deliberately not making friends or letting anyone sneak under her skin. Where did Lissy get off sneaking in?

All the same, no way she'd turn a client like her down. She'd deal with the other crap as it came about. "Congratulations on your new career," Maddy said with her best, most convincing fake smile. "I'm just the person you need to get you outfitted exactly right."

Lissy glanced up shyly. "You don't mind me bein' stupid about fashion?"

Maddy winked. "Lissy," she said. "It's my job to be the expert, and yours to learn from the best. Now come on. We're headed for Business Casual."

And that's how it all began.

Chapter Three

Six hours, a four-digit-sale, and more than a few bites to the tongue later, Maddy finally made her way back home.

Condo, sweet condo. The Bronx Bitch lives high at last.

Frantic meows greeted Maddy the second her key slid into the lock. She rolled her eyes. "Worse than a man," she muttered as she let herself in. The popular thing was to have a decorative pet, preferably one with a pedigree longer than your leg. So, she'd bought a Persian kitten, picking out the single ball of fuzz that didn't want to be petted.

Mostly, she and Veronique Patrice Alleyne the Sixteenth ignored each other. The deal worked for both of them. So long as Ronnie got fed, she was happy to lie around and look decorative.

If, however, she didn't get her chow on time...

As Maddy tossed her purse on a polished sideboard table which had cost her a mint, a blur of white fluff hurtled out of hiding and began running high-speed laps around her ankles. Veronique was not a happy camper, and made no bones about letting Maddy know all about her pique. A change in the routine? How dare she? Bad human slave. No cookie.

Yep. Worse than a man.

If Veronique were human, and male, he'd be standing there with a cold beer or freshly stirred martini in one hand, demanding to know why she hadn't been home in time for the evening meal.

Had she been out on the town? Seeing someone else on the side? Get in the kitchen this instant, little lady, and see to my needs. Or, more likely, give the cook a right proper scolding.

Oh, and while you're at it, fix me another drink. Heavy on the alcohol.

Bronx bad-asses and Texan oil barons—not a pin to choose between them. All balls, zero brains, and I-own-the-world attitude.

"You are the reason I left home," she informed the cat. "I'll feed you when I'm good and ready. First, these shoes come off."

Groaning, Maddy kicked her high heels into a corner. She winced when one hit the wall, thinking about how she'd have to polish out the scuff later. God, though, some nights you just had to choose between flaming insteps versus a little elbow grease.

Veronique dodged the shoes, shook her well-groomed head, and dived in again to circle Maddy's stockinged feet. Her very expensively stockinged feet.

"Hey. Hey!" she scolded, dodging clouds of fur and the occasional swipe of a paw. "God, what's your problem? Yes, I'm late. I had to work. You know, that thing I do so I can buy your platinum-stamped cat food?"

Veronique stared at Maddy as if she were an idiot.

Maddy gave in. "Fine," she muttered, stomping toward her kitchenette. "The good little woman of the house springs into action. Me make food now."

Veronique meowed as if to say: about time, missy! But then, probably just to be contrary and to shock the shit out of her owner as punishment, she jumped up, light as thistledown, onto the sparkling island. Bumped her furry forehead against Maddy's stomach and started up a trilling purr.

"What the..." Maddy blinked. Slowly.

She ought to knock the cat down. Veronique knew better. Kitchen counters were not for cruddy kitty paws to tromp on.

Veronique purred louder.

Slowly, Maddy reached out to stroke the cat's fluffy white fur. Veronique chirped in pleasure. She butted her hard little head into Maddy's hip, closing her eyes in pure stoner bliss.

"Fuck me," Maddy whispered, awed. "What's gotten into you?"

Veronique mewed softly, kittenish.

She lifted her delicate velvet nose to sniff Maddy's hands. A pink tongue flickered out for a taste, rasping against lotion-softened skin.

"Do I smell good?" Maddy stroked Veronique again to see how she'd take it, and grinned despite herself when the pampered Persian flopped down and rolled over to show her belly, all four paws in the air. "What, did I dip my hands in a hot dog cart and forget about it? The last thing I touched with any kind of different smell was—oh. Oh."

Lissy.

Lissy, with her sugar-sweet, little-girl perfume. Her soft skin that had smelled like the outdoors. Wind, fields of grain, sunshine. Innocence.

A picture sprang into her mind of Lissy on her back, lying in a patch of soft, green grass. Wearing nothing, or almost nothing. What would Lissy look like underneath her clothes? Would she have the same porcelain skin and creamy roses in her coloring?

Would the thatch of hair between her legs be soft as the curls escaping from her dreadlocks? Maddy closed her eyes and swayed, envisioning the scene. Her pussy began to throb, a low beat setting up a rhythmic, liquid pulsing. She grew damp, aching to reach down and touch herself.

"Lissy," she breathed, dreaming of the woman arching herself as if she offered her body to the sunlight—turning to Maddy with a smile, and a beckoning finger...

Maddy slipped a hand under her skirt. Her cunt was wet, burning hot, and when she slid one finger in to touch her clit, almost cried out.

"Oh, God," she whispered, voice ragged. "Lissy.. Lissy ... I ... oh, Mother of God, what am I doing? I'm not like this! No!"

Maddy ran out of the kitchen and stopped in the hall, bracing herself against the doorway. Her head spun. Lissy. She'd just gotten hot enough to come over the thought of a dreadlocked, painfully naïve tomboy-cum-geek.

"I need a drink," she muttered. "Hell, I need several drinks."

But—no. That'd be like giving in. Saying Lissy'd had an impact on her as well.

Maddy wasn't about to go there. Another day, another customer, another sale—if a damn good one, because it bore repeating—and end of story. She'd do a few sessions on her home workout machines, fix a dinner of steamed vegetables with basmati and no salt, drink a glass of distilled water and go to bed.

Not thinking about Lissy.

Definitely not thinking about Lissy.

Not about the way her smile had brightened the dressing room and turned soft, ambient light into sparkling summer sunlight.

Not about her laugh, rippling like brook water over smooth, shining stones.

Not about the softness of her skin. Creamy silk, pale peaches and cream.

Not about her smile, big as Texas itself.

Not about her hands. Lissy's tiny hands, so much smaller than Maddy's own, cuticles a mess, nails messily clipped off to the quick, no polish. Lissy, so gentle and reverent when she wonderingly touched the softness of pure linen or the rich weave of jewel-colored velvets.

Maddy was especially, especially, not thinking about the way Lissy had kissed her cheek when they parted ways. How her lip prints still tingled if Maddy let herself remember the feeling. The move had surprised her, hell yes, but at the same time it had felt ... good.

Like getting a gift when it wasn't your birthday or Christmas.

Nothing fake about that kiss.

Lissy hadn't done it to coax anything out of Maddy. She'd just been tickled pink over the help and special attention.

"You're the best, Madeline," echoed in Maddy's memory. "I couldn't do this without you."

"Just glad to help, Lissy. Here, take my card. Call me if you ever need anything else."

"...my card."

"...my card."

"...my card."

"Call me."

"Call me."

Maddy closed her eyes and swayed on her bare feet, rocking from toe to heel.

Memories of the feel of Lissy's skin under her fingers, so soft and warm; of her hair, rough and tangled; of her smell, sugary spice overlaying something feminine and rich as a blooming rose...

Her smiles and blushes.

Shyness easing into happiness as they talked—well, as she chattered and Maddy'd nodded, smiling. A real smile, not the plastic one she'd perfected for the rest of her clientele.

How long had it been since someone really made her happy?

How long since she'd been kissed for free, no strings attached?

Why did the thought make her pulse flutter and her stomach tight? Or start a slight, warm, wet tingling again between her thighs, insistent that she do something about it right away? All but ordering her to plunge two fingers inside herself, thumb stroking her clit, and rub herself to orgasm...

"Whoa!" Maddy snapped her eyes open. Her lips fell apart.

Sex thoughts! Sex thoughts about Lissy!

"Oh, no, not again!" she said, backing away at warp speed. "There's no room in my life for anything like that. Besides, I'm straight, thank you. Very straight."

And she was, she thought, surprised at the way her spine arched like a spitting tomcat. So she'd had a little fantasy, helping Lissy in and out of pretty clothes.

Probably happened to everyone once or twice.

Didn't mean she had to act on it, even if she ever did see Lissy again. Definitely didn't mean she needed an itch scratched. Maddy had no room in her life for romance. Flowers wilted, chocolates made you fat, and crushes were for puppies.

Nope, gonna pass on the option right there. She had her life in order just fine, thanks. No Texas tomboy geek was going to set her head spinning.

Maddy nodded again.

All the same, the thought of exercise and dinner didn't sound too appealing. Bed would be so much better. Cool sheets, a soft pillow, and sweet dreams. Skipping a meal wouldn't kill her, and she could work out in the morning.

Yeah. Bed. Definitely the way to go.

Bed, where she would not, emphatically not, fantasize about Lissy in any way, shape or form.

Still, if she happened to reach for her vibrating friend and work off a little tension, well, it was a free country, right?

Right. And first thing in the morning, she'd forget about Lissy, one-hundred-percent. She'd move on with her life. So Madeline Vincent decreed, and so it would be done.

She did what she set out to do. Always had. Always did. Always would.

No regrets.

Chapter Four

She wouldn't have called the job easy, but Maddy did in fact manage to shove Lissy and those big baby deer eyes out of her mind. She threw herself into her work and let the rest of the world go screw itself. Fifteen minutes of calculating quarterly bonuses and one non-fat cappuccino later, she hit her goal. No more thoughts of Lissy. No more fucked-up tingles or disturbing daydreams.

Goodbye, sugar-spice perfume.

Maddy even forgot to be damn proud of her self-control.

Life as she knew it was just too good, and kept getting better.

Each day, another toehold on the next rung up, and she kept on climbing. As the month wore on, invitations started rolling in for last summer hurrah hootenannies, but uh-uh, Maddy knew how to play that game.

If you took someone up on their request to party, and that was a big "if", you never showed up on time, always dressed just a little bit better than the hostess, and always, always kept them guessing how to make you happy. Made them want nothing more than to earn your smiles.

And the best way to do that? Dodge the hook. Make them chase you, instead of the other way around. Besides, what did she need from sweating in the sun and listening to dumbass good old boy jokes while drinking beer and smelling grilling meat not on her diet?

Screw that. Maddy had better things to do with her time.

Although she knew how to put a better spin on her mood, natch.

After one particular week of dazzling sales, Maddy considered her sheaf of barbeque invitations, then, with a shrug, socked each and every one away in the round file. Not this time around, kids.

Instead she went home, put on her favorite designer sweat suit, and spent a few hours on the phone declining fabulous party after even more fantabulous party, plus brunches, soirées, and even a debutante ball.

Then, one by one, she phoned the men who had wanted to escort her when she knew they wouldn't be home to answer, and left cheerful messages which said exactly the same thing:

"So sorry to miss your (insert gathering here), but I'm taking the weekend off to kick my heels up for some R and R. See you soon. Kiss kiss!"

She hung up on her last call with a satisfied grin.

There.

That ought to keep them on their toes. They'd all be wondering if they'd offended her, and suck up like underfed leeches to win her favor when she breezed back on the scene Monday.

Better yet, they'd go green with jealousy, wondering what she could be doing that was better than their offers.

Truth?

Not a damn thing except curling up on her couch with diet soda, popcorn, and watching every last episode of Mikey Millionaire, How to Win a Million(aire), Who Wants to Date a Millionaire, and My Boyfriend the Millionaire. Laughing at women desperate enough to take the easy road to riches by way of acting the fool, while taking notes on their wardrobes—now that was quality TV.

She'd gotten deeply, satisfyingly into her first Saturday morning marathon when the phone rang. Veronique squalled and fled for the bedroom, and Maddy just stared at the phone. People knew better than to call uninvited, and she had her number damn well screened against telemarketers.

One more half-ring, then silence.

Maybe someone had come to their senses in time?

"Weird," Maddy grumbled, turning back to her TV and jacking the volume. She liked things loud. Idly, she picked up a fashion newspaper and flicked through some pages, hunting for her name.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang again. Once.

Okay, now she was starting to get pissed. Maddy narrowed her eyes.

"Someone being cute? Playing games with me?"

She snapped her paper shut, got up and moved both phone and caller ID next to her on the couch. "Fine. You want to go? Let's go."

Five minutes after that, the phone rang a third time. She snatched it up before it finished warbling its first peal, barking:

"Ah-ha!" instead of "Hello?" into the handset.

She heard a small gasp, then silence.

Maddy seriously didn't have time or patience for any such shit.

"Listen up, whoever you are," she snarled. "This is Madeline Vincent, and I am having a very good, very busy morning. I don't play phone games with kids, pranksters, or heavy breathers. Either tell me who you are, why the hell you're calling, or hang up and do not, I repeat, not, dial this number again!"

"Gosh." A tiny voice piped up, sounding taken aback.

"Um ... Madeline? Maddy?"

"What are you, deaf? I already said so. Who is this?"

"Lissy. Felicity MacVeigh. We, um, met at the store. I am really sorry for pesterin' you on the weekend, like, that's why I kept hangin' up, but then I figured you'd probably be getting pissed off if you were home after all, so I tried back, and..."

The babble faded. "Don't hate me, please? I just.... I have a problem. You were so good when I was hopeless last time, and I'm pretty helpless right now..."

Maddy rolled her eyes. The temptation to tell Lissy, of all the fucking people, to leave her alone, was pretty strong. But darn it, now she was remembering something else. That little note in Lissy's voice. Pleading. Looking up to her.

Seeing her as a source of salvation.

Those damn tingles between her legs and the ache in her pussy already starting up at the sound of Lissy's voice...

Don't think about that! Think about ... her money. Money, of which Lissy had lots. Big bunches of lots.

"Okay," Maddy said, abandoning paper and TV. "What's up?"

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Don't push your luck."

"Well, okay. It's like this..."

* * * *

Lissy met Maddy at the door of her apartment with a little squeal and a hug.

Maddy almost dropped the coffees she'd brought before automatically hugging back. Lissy's fragility startled her. She'd known the woman was tiny, but wow, talk about bird bones. She felt like she'd sprout wings and fly away.

She almost did. Squeaking again, Lissy jumped back. "Oh, no. There I go again. You don't know me from God's left sandal, and here I am huggin' on you like you're my sister. I am so —"

Maddy held up a hand.

"Listen. For some reason, I like you, or at least I'm willing to put up with you, and no, don't ask me why, because I don't have a clue." Liar.

Lissy blinked. "Oh."

"Whatever. You asked me to come over and help, for salary-equivalent pay, so I came. First, we set some ground rules. Number one: if I ever hear you say the word 'sorry' again unless you've just stomped on my instep, I'm out of here. Got it?"

Lissy blushed and smiled a nervous half-smile. "Oh-okay."

"Good." Maddy breezed past Lissy into her apartment. She glanced around, summing the situation up with a practiced eye. Standard just-graduated shit-hole. Battered couch, lopsided armchair, TV on a milk crate, and yep, an old electrical spool for a coffee table.

"Remind me to put you in touch with a good interior decorator," she murmured.

"Anywhere I can put these down?"

"Coffee table's fine,"

Lissy said meekly. She seemed to be more or less afraid of Maddy by then.

Good.

"You didn't have to."

"I know. Professional courtesy. Besides, I wanted one. You do like espresso, don't you?" Although come to think of it, Maddy was a little afraid of what a caffeine buzz would do to Lissy.

The hummingbird of a woman nodded eagerly. "I love 'em. But wow, I usually just drink the stuff out of my Mr. Coffee. Nothin' this fancy."

"Uh-huh. Lesson one, don't ever say that in public. Only confess to drinking coffee bought at one of the trendy cafés. I'll tell you which ones."

Lissy nodded, eyes huge and serious. "Okay."

Maddy shook her head.

For some strange reason, she couldn't hold back a grin. Damn her! What was it about nutty Lissy that made her do that? "You have a lot to learn, you know?"

"Yeah." Lissy ducked her head, then peeked up through her eyelashes. Long, thick eyelashes. "But you'll teach me? I'll pay extra."

"The magic words. Sure. Now, c'mon. I left a few bags of stuff in my car that I don't want to have stolen. Did you pick this neighborhood for its crack-head ambience, or was it just the first place you found open? I have to tell you, the graffiti on your door doesn't exactly say 'successful Professor'."

"Actually, it says 'Cun-'"

"Yeah. I read it. Once was plenty. Are you going to help me with the bags I have in my car or what?"

Lissy's smile peeked out. "Sure. I can carry a whole mule-load of stuff."

"Oh, swell. Okay, as we go, we'll continue the first lesson on things you just don't say in public..."

* * * *

Freaky as ever, Lissy lived up to her word. She didn't even get winded, hauling half-a-dozen weighty dress bags and a small trunk of makeup and hair care products up to her apartment. In fact, she started to chatter again, pausing every time Maddy corrected her.

When they got to “you're sweatin’ like a pig”, Maddy covered her eyes.

Lissy wilted. “Aw, shit. This isn't gonna work, is it?”

“Oh, no. Uh-uh. Those are fighting words. You. Do. Not. Say. That. Madeline Vincent never gives up on what she sets out to do. And we are going to turn you into a lady before your department dinner party. When is it again? Wait—you didn't say. How long do we have?”

“Um. It's. Um. Tonight.”

Years of training and a wellspring of Bronx blasé kept Maddy from letting loose with Texas-spiced Latino curses. She managed not to bat an eyelid, much less throw her hands in the air and have a tantrum. She had the talent. She had the knack. She could give even Lissy MacVeigh the works in a few hours. Easy.

Of course, she could always turn and walk away, too. But damn if Lissy wasn't giving her a look again, her scared-puppy special. Maddy let out a long sigh, counted to ten in Spanish and English, then patted her client's skinny arm.

“It'll be okay. I promise. You're smart. Remember what I tell you, let me have my way dressing you up, and we'll turn you into a princess. Deal?”

Lissy bounced back to life. She threw her arms around Maddy a second time, squeezing with a damn good grip. “Thank you,” she whispered, voice soft and breath tickling Maddy's ear. “Thank you so much.”

Mother of God! There went her old friend, the fucked-up wet, tingling cunt Lissy brought on way too easy. Woman! Lissy is a woman. You want to keep this important fact in mind, girlfriend?

Maddy nodded, her mind set.

For all of five seconds.

Ah, hell.

Somehow, she found herself rubbing small circles on Lissy's narrow back, rocking her a little. No idea why. Just came naturally.

"It's my pleasure," she said softly.

Much to her surprise, Maddy realized she actually meant it.

Chapter Five

Giving Maddy one last squeeze with her fairy-fragile, wrestler-strong arms, Lissy bounced out of their hug. She beamed a dazzling smile as she pulled her hands through the wreck of her hair.

Maddy winced as she almost saw ends splitting before her very eyes. Whoa boy, maybe it was time to drink her coffee. It hadn't even registered that Lissy still wore a set of dreadlocks. They were so tangled and knotted she wondered if they weren't the same awful dreadlocks she'd first seen Lissy in.

How had she missed the crime against God, nature, and hair? What, am I losing my touch now? This girl messes with my head, I tell you.

Lissy's smile faded under Maddy's dagger stare. "What's wrong?"

Maddy swallowed the Spanish words Lissy probably never heard before, cleared her throat, and reached out. She meant to tug at the end of one messy dreadlock, but found her fingers wrapping around a snarled lock, gentle as a butterfly's wing. "Never did get rid of these, did you?" she scolded. "What did I tell you?"

"I tried," Lissy protested. "Honest, I did."

"And the reason you didn't go to a professional...?"

"Too embarrassed," Lissy mumbled. "Figured I'd best do what I could myself. I thought it might be easier if I put on a lot of conditioner to make it slick, only I forgot and shampooed them first, and then they ended up like this. I can't even figure where to start untangling, and I've got a real tender head." She looked ashamed. "Silly, huh?"

Maddy shook her head.

Poor, dumb kid. No—not a kid. A woman. Her own age, or close enough. Just sort of ... really lacking any common sense. Come to think of it, from what she'd

heard it was a pretty common problem with academics. Book-smart, people and life-stupid.

"It's okay," she said, her hand sliding across to cup Lissy's cheek, still without thinking. "There's no hair-care disaster I can't fix with a little effort." She sized up the mess again. "And maybe some scissors."

Lissy paled. "Scissors?"

"Oh, shut it. If I have to cut any, I'll be careful." Maddy patted her own sleek, shiny knot of black waves. "See? I do great hair."

"It is awful pretty." Lissy petted Maddy's head, uninvited. Anyone else, they would have gotten their clocks cleaned, but Lissy—well, Maddy stood there like a chump and let her go to. Her dainty fingers felt strange, cool, and kind of ... nice ... on Maddy's scalp. "Is it real long when you let it down? Mine's a lot longer than it looks tangled up this-a-way."

Maddy shook her head, trying, and failing, to clear her thoughts.

"Long enough to be sexy, short enough to be with it. But that's another lesson."

"You should write a book or somethin'!" Lissy looked startled, then thrilled with her brainstorm. "For people like me. That'd be brilliant!"

Write a book?

Well ... she'd done weirder things to pass the time. Word had it royalties could be pretty lucrative, too, and—Maddy caught herself. "Maybe later," she said. "First things first, chica. You go get into the shower. Not a hot shower. Lukewarm at best. Hot water chaps the skin."

Lissy nodded eagerly. "Bathroom's right through there. I'll just be a jiffy." She darted away hummingbird-quick. "Don't have what you'd rightly call hot water, anyway, not here," her voice floated back. "Should I shampoo?"

"No! My God, no. We'll get to your hair after you wash the sweat off."

"Okay."

Maddy heard various clunks and clatters. Then, a pure Texas: "Aw, shoot!"

"What did you do?" she asked, suspicious. She didn't trust Lissy not to get up to any new disasters.

"Nothin'. Just knocked over some bottles I haven't put up yet. I always see 'em here when I go to pee, but I never remember to —"

"Yeah. Got the picture." A warning prickle ran down Maddy's spine. "Lissy? Do not touch your hair. I mean it. You get so much as one clump wet —"

"Worry, worry," Lissy shot back with a giggle in her voice. "I'll be good."

"You'd better, or I'll — I'll spank you!"

Lissy whooped with laughter as the shower turned on, but Maddy found herself gaping into thin air.

Spank her?

Where the hell had that come from? She hit people, sure, when they deserved it, but not clients, and these days only bleached bimbos who asked her if purple matched green.

Besides, she'd break a nail.

And she was not, very much not, thinking about how the mental image of Lissy turned over her knee made her nipples pucker up into aching buds.

Holy frijoles, as the Texas morons would say. The sooner she got this job done with, the better.

Shaking her head, Maddy picked a path to Lissy's couch.

She sat down gingerly. Yep. Springs, poking her right in the ass. At least none of them had actually pierced the cushions yet, so she wouldn't rip her jeans. Jeans that fit like this did not come on the discount rack.

Just to make sure, Maddy examined her French tips. No damage yet.

The shower ran with the steady, lulling sound of rain, making her sleepy.

Yeah. Caffeine time. She reached for the coffee, but almost dropped her cup when Lissy started, utterly un-self-consciously, to sing.

Fuck. Me!

Maddy had thought she couldn't sing, but Lissy made her sound like a soloist at the Met. Didn't seem to have a clue about key, either. Girl had to be one hundred percent tone deaf, judging by the way she belted out "The Lord Loves Texas" in the highest range that her squeaky little voice could reach.

"Oh yeah," Maddy murmured to herself, taking a sip of still-hot, rich, smooth espresso. "This is going to be one for the diary."

All the same, she found herself laughing under her breath. Not making fun, either. Singing in the shower fit the picture she was forming of Lissy, and Lissy was ... well, different would be one way to put it. Like no one Maddy had ever met. She could run away, sure, but Maddy did not back down from a challenge.

Not ever.

Besides, Lissy...

Ah, God, she had those big brown eyes, melted-chocolate brown, twinkling as she grinned, or going wide when she got spooked. A teeny-tiny little body with the lifting power of a lumberjack. Fragile birdy bones you had to be careful of in a hug. Tiny hands that felt so strangely good when she touched Maddy anywhere...

Lissy added a coloratura whoop of cowgirl pride to her rendition of the rockabilly tune. Maddy found herself giggling. God, what a nut. Weird. She'd thought she would have had enough of crazy people for one lifetime, but instead, a touch of insanity was kind of refreshing. Almost like going home, minus the gangsters and ghettos she could do without for the rest of her life, thanks.

She took another sip of coffee, careful not to smudge her lip gloss, as Lissy's shower went on and on. Apparently, the girl liked her baths. And her music. She moved on to an equally awful rendition of "Crazy" that had Maddy stifling guffaws with a fist stuffed in her mouth.

She got control of herself with a cough. "Lissy!" she called. "Come on. Time's money, remember? Your money!"

"Almost done!" Lissy sang back between lyrics. "Just gotta get between my toes!"

Maddy sighed.

Well, at least she didn't have to worry about dirt. She'd seen some amazing things while outfitting the moneyed elite, up to and including women who didn't believe in deodorant, didn't wear panties when trying on designer outfits, but did wear enough makeup to put that weird preacher's wife to shame. Smearly, smudgy, tacky goop. Maddy'd had to bully more than one woman into shelling out for a designer original ruined with over-red blusher and caked-on foundation.

Did Lissy wear any makeup? Huh. Maddy didn't think so. Lissy's skin was smooth and soft-looking. Natural strawberries-and-cream. Really good skin for a native Texan, Maddy had to admit. Probably never went out into the sun much. Spent most of her waking hours indoors, peering at a book in some dark library corner.

The mental image made her smile again. She could just see Lissy hunkered up in a chair way too big for her, holding a book twice the size of her head, those amazing eyes glued to something physics-y and way too complicated.

Maybe she'd bite her lip, concentrating, or give one of her cute squeaks when she found something she liked, and ... stop that train right there!

What the hell had gone wrong with her? Maddy didn't daydream or fantasize often, but when she slept she might, every now and then, have a pop star offering a dozen roses or a movie mogul down on one knee with a big honkin' diamond. Not babbly science geeks reading, for Christ's sake!

Not women!

Maddy took a hurried gulp of coffee. Fuck, but she had to be homesick or something. Actually missing the Bronx brand of crazy. Yeah. Had to be it. Lissy made her think of the wackos she'd left behind, and that was that.

Nostalgia, plain and simple.

Maybe she should make a fly-over visit. Pack her best clothes and go break a few hearts at trendy Manhattan bars. Hey, now that could be fun. Maybe hook up with a celebrity. Some big names on her string would give her resume a major jump.

She could even go visit Gio. It'd been years; they'd drifted too far apart. Time to see if they could catch up on old times.

Maddy nodded, her mind made up. After finishing up with Lissy, she'd go home and book a first-class ticket for a good weekend. Maybe she'd call first, or maybe she'd just breeze in and knock the Bronx's dirty socks off. Even better.

Smirking, she tilted back her espresso for one last sip. Always strongest at the bottom, and she wanted the caffeine. It hit her throat just as Lissy stepped through the door, clutching a worn terrycloth robe around her body.

Her otherwise completely naked body.

Maddy choked and almost sprayed coffee out of her nose. She stared, her lips parting unconsciously.

Holy shit!

Lissy had been cute in Saturday grubbies, all bags and sags. In the too-small robe, washed paper thin, she was ... oh, my God. She could make a priest revoke his vows.

Maybe even a nun, too.

Lissy, naked, proved just as tiny as Maddy had known her to be, with the same silky, strawberry-cream skin glowing from head to dainty bare toes. Her small, pert breasts all but peeked out through the opening of her robe. They were model-perfect in shape, even if she'd barely fill out an A-cup.

She looked radiant after her shower, small droplets of water still clinging to her neck, beaded like diamonds on those awful dreadlocks.

Maddy stared and swallowed hard. I've lost my mind. Definitely, definitely lost my whole fucking mind. She's a woman. I don't like women. They can be attractive, sure, but they don't make me ... aw, crap, there go the tingles again.

Tingles! I ask you. Where the hell, how the hell, why the hell?

This is so not right on too many levels.

I don't have time for...

Lissy padded closer, bare feet soundless as a kitten's.

"Are you feelin' okay? You look like you've seen a ghost or somethin'."

Maddy swallowed, throat dry and closing up fast. "Fine," she said, managing to keep confident, stay cool, keep it on the business level. Ignoring the tingles. "So how about we get you fixed up? We're on the clock, and it's moving fast."

"Okay." Lissy smiled, opened her robe, and let it fall to the floor, innocent and nude as Eve in the garden of Eden. "What do we do first?"

Maddy squeaked.

Chapter Six

Note to self, Maddy finally got it together enough to think: no matter what, don't you ever dare "squeak" again. You're the Bronx Bitch, not a virgin mousie, for crying out loud.

Also? Don't flinch when you're holding hot coffee. Only leads to heartbreak, stained shirts, and wide-eyed Texas waifs running over to whack your back so hard they damn near break a rib.

Okay, so that last part might just apply to me. All the more reason I should remember it, eh?

At least Maddy had managed, between coughing fits, to more or less "politely" ask Lissy to get her ass in some clothes pronto. Lissy had blinked, clearly confused as to why her being naked was a problem, but shrugged and put her robe back on when Maddy shot her a death glare to underscore her "request".

Not that the old rag hid much, though. It'd been worn nearly threadbare, probably bought when Lissy stood even smaller than now. Clung to her like a pale blue second skin. But hey, the thing mostly covered her breasts and did hide her thighs, so Maddy decided not to push her luck by asking Lissy to try again.

It's not like I don't see more lady parts than a Penthouse camera jockey during a regular business day, she rationalized. See above: women who think underwear is optional when trying on new clothes. Yecch.

The odd thing—although Maddy wasn't about to let herself think too hard about this part—none of what she usually got an eyeful of even made her blink.

But Lissy? At Lissy, she wanted to stare. Wanted to roam over her from tousled head to delicate toe, not gauging her dress or probable cup size or budget, either.

No.

Maddy wanted to look because ... she liked.

The sight of Lissy's little, fairylike body made her own ripple with, oh yeah, some seriously unexpected appreciation. She'd caught herself lingering on the vision of Lissy's dainty breasts, fascinated by their slight dip and swell...

Dios, stop thinking, she ordered herself. You need a break. Do your job here, get paid, go home. Dig out a wig, a pair of sunglasses, and go slum in some honky-tonk bar. Find a bronzed, buff ranch hand—male, thank you—and dirty dance to rockabilly crap music like no one's business. Drink. A lot. Then go home—alone—and sleep it off. Forget this day ever happened.

Sounded like a plan to her.

No more girly-pal bonding crap. She'd treat Lissy with the same practiced courtesy she used on her store clients. Who knew if Lissy might not mention the name of her dresser to a few faculty wives? New clients equaled more cold hard cash and that, Maddy would never turn down.

Yeah ... yeah, she liked that thought. If she pulled off this miracle, Maddy had a feeling people would be whispering about the transformation. Her own name could get tossed around, and she'd net herself some calls, the kind she looked forward to, waiting to be answered on Monday.

Because, looking at the fragile beauty that was Felicity MacVeigh, Maddy knew that she could turn the Texan tomboy bookworm into a storybook princess, even if just for one night.

"Okay," she said, maybe a touch too sharply, and clapped her hands together.

"Let's get moving, hon. Ready or not, here it comes."

* * * *

"Stop wiggling!" Maddy ordered for what felt like the tenth time as Lissy fidgeted. "You'll fall flat on your ass, and if you think I'm icing down your bruises, you got another think coming. Savvy?"

Given that Lissy stood a few inches too short for Maddy to play seamstress, they'd dug up and dragged over a sturdy packing crate. Lissy had hopped right on up, no fear. Trouble was, once up there, she moved around like she had fleas nesting in her hair.

At least the god awful dreadlocks were gone. Damn, they'd had a battle royal over what to do, but Maddy won in the end. Ten minute into trying Operation Detangle, and she'd known a hopeless case when she saw one. Lissy had blanched, used the saucer eyes, and even thrown in a lip quiver, but Maddy stood firm. She'd made the mess, so she had to live with the consequences.

Damn her, though, if Lissy's new pixie cut didn't make her eyes even bigger and bring her face from "cute" and "pretty" all the way to "TKO".

"Stand – still!"

Maddy swore in Spanish for effect. Screw the polished accent. This called for balls from the Bronx. "I swear, if you do fall –"

Lissy giggled. "You wouldn't let me lay there hurtin', either," she sassed.

"Wrong. I'd let you slap on some liniment yourself, thank you."

"Nuh-uh!"

Maddy looked up at Lissy. The tiny woman's eyes sparkled. She had to bite.

"And what makes you so sure?"

"If I'm all bruised up, I won't be able to finish gettin' dressed. Nor will I make it to the party after all. Don't look so good on you if I can't make it 'cause my personal dresser let me fall on my tailbone, does it?"

Maddy's lips parted.

Bronx balls, meet Texas spunk.

God, that sounded wrong.

But Lissy was still talking. "Besides, I trust you." Her strawberry lips curved up in a teasing smile that made Maddy's stomach knot. "You won't let me fall."

Maddy swallowed. What the hell did she say? "Nah," she muttered after a pause that went on too long. "You got me. I won't let you get hurt."

"Bad for business?"

"Yeah," Maddy lied. "You're not just a customer anymore. You're a fucking walking billboard for me." So? Not like she was about to tell Lissy the truth. Let her know the thought of a bruise on that luminous skin almost gave Maddy a physical pain in her guts.

Lissy ... no idea why, but while she might drive you crazy, she made you want to keep her safe just the same. Lissy could probably handle herself just fine, but still she made you want to wrap her up in cotton wool and protect her from the world.

Humph. Maddy's lips firmed. Would you cut it out already? So she's little. She's pretty.

Big fat whoop.

No one took care of me when I was in trouble. I did it all for myself. I fought my way into this life. I don't owe anyone any favors, and I'm sure as hell not going to coddle someone too naive to know what she's up against in this Big Bad World.

I said it before, and I'll say it again: I'm finishing the job, and then I'm leaving.

Case—closed.

Almost done, too. After careful thought, Maddy had decided against the sexier, slinky numbers she carried around and opted for a dress that carried off a combination of demure sensuality. A soft, scoop neck and a high princess waist, with a long skirt. Looked gorgeous, especially in a sizzling crimson that turned her pink strawberry coloring harvest ripe.

They couldn't find shoes in Lissy's size to match. Maddy'd been ready to tear her hair out by then, but after some rummaging, Lissy had come up triumphant with a pair of hose and some reasonably feminine half-boots without too many scuffs.

They'd do. No time for a run back to the salon.

The dress had to be fixed — just — right.

Maddy pinned here and tucked there, adding a stitch or two where need be.

Jesus.

A size zero, the smallest they carried, and still it hung overlarge on Lissy. Maddy shook her head in amazement, but didn't say a word. She'd known scrawny girls in her time, and they'd always gotten their feelings hurt when people called them skinny.

Talk about stupid, but also seriously not fair. Maddy had to live on water, fat-free yogurt, and steamed veggies to keep in shape. From the looks of Lissy's open cabinets, she ate everything from tacos to chips to double-chocolate snack cakes, and not of an ounce of it had stuck to her.

Damn the god of metabolisms to a really painful level of Hell, anyway.

Finally, she finished her work, despite Lissy's continued fidgeting and a stream of nonstop chatter that Maddy managed to mostly ignore. Sounded like she was going on about the dissertation that had won her professorship. Something about wormholes, chaos theory, and strings. Uh-huh. Well, if that kind of shit landed you a gold-mine of a job...

"Finished," Maddy said at last, standing up. Without thinking, she offered Lissy her hand to help her down, and instantly wished she hadn't.

The second Lissy's palm clasped itself against Maddy's, the electric tingles fired through her body. Her nipples stiffened into (hidden, thank God) peaks. She felt her knees begin to wobble.

Stop it! Maddy commanded herself, starting to feel the burn of panic plus desperation. You hear me? Stop this right now! Lissy — is — a — girl.

As in female.

Comes complete with pussy, minus cock.

You do not get turned on by women!

Right. Right?

Maddy tried to look away from Lissy.

At the floor, the ceiling, anywhere but Lissy's face.

Trouble was, she couldn't.

Worse, Lissy stared back at her, those amazing eyes wide with wonder.

"Mads?" she breathed, oh so curious. Fascinated. "What is that?"

Huh? What, now? "You feel it too?" Maddy blurted.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do." Lissy licked her lips.

"Feels sorta like the time I snuck into the barn with John Jay. I knew he wanted more than kissin', but I was drunk on what I'd stole out of the grownups' punch bowl, and I didn't care. He touched me, and I felt like this."

Maddy couldn't breathe. "Like what?"

"Like I knew what it felt to be grown up and to.. to want grown up things for myself," Lissy whispered. "Like every bit of me was on fire. Didn't care who saw, didn't care if it all came to tears in the end. I just wanted."

"Did you – did you – um – take?"

Lissy nodded. A tiny hand came up to touch Maddy's cheek, a butterfly-light caress. "I did," she said. "And he liked it."

"Did he?"

"Oh, yeah." Lissy stood up on her tiptoes. "You're all shaky, Maddy."

"Uh-huh," Maddy whispered, staring down at the tip-tilted face.

"Sweet Mary, Mother of God, you're beautiful." The words popped out.

She couldn't not have said them. And oh, God, she'd be in for a world of hurt now, wouldn't she?

But Lissy smiled. Smiled, not half so innocent now. Knowing. Understanding.

Accepting. "You're pretty, yourself," she said softly.

Lifting her face on its swan-like neck, she gained just enough height to lean in and almost, almost, almost touch her lips to Maddy's. "Can I?" she breathed.

Maddy couldn't move. She wanted it. Wanted Lissy. God knew why.

But oh, hell, she wanted it so much.

All she had to do was tuck back her prized brass pair and say "yes"...

Chapter Seven

"Maddy?" Lissy whispered. "It's okay. Really, it's okay."

Maddy swallowed. So many things she wanted to say.

I don't. I'm not. I've never.

Problem was, not a syllable would take shape on her tongue and let the words spill out. Words she needed to say. Words she should say. Really, really should say.

Words including goodbye.

She should march right out the front door, and forget all about Princess Felicity.

Maddy knew it was the right thing to do. Or the smart thing, anyway. She always did the smart thing. Stayed two steps ahead. Her life was one big game of chess. Guess your enemy's move, then be in place with a smirk when they tried to barge in on your turf.

But somehow Lissy had trumped her gambit. Maddy'd missed a crucial move somewhere, and found the white queen waiting to knock her down.

God, she was really losing it to be thinking about chess at a time like this. There were other things to concentrate on.

Good example: Lissy's hands, gently stroking up and down her forearms.

Better example: Lissy's eyes, wide and brown and full of awe, staring into Maddy's own, looking for answers to questions silently asked.

Best example: the growing wet heat between Maddy's own thighs. Dampening the scrap of silky thong she'd worn without thinking. The scent of arousal crept up between them, musky and rich.

Lissy half-closed her eyes, smiling.

"You smell kinda like me," she murmured. "I didn't know another woman would be so sweet." She breathed in. "Like French perfume. Not really what you'd call flowers, but good. Real good. Fine as wine."

"Lissy." Maddy felt her cheeks turning red. God, what kind of woman talked like her? "Don't."

"Sorry." Lissy didn't look the least bit apologetic. In fact, her full lips curved up into a grin as she breathed in a second time, so not hiding how she was savoring the smell. "Makes me kinda proud," she said, voice dreamy. "Knowin' it's me who made you hot."

"Lissy!"

"Ssh." Lissy leaned forward—no shame, no blushes—and nuzzled her lips against the base of Maddy's throat. Maddy gasped when she felt the flicker of a tongue against her skin. Once, twice, and again. Then, the pressure of lips, light and faint. A butterfly kiss, Lissy's eyelashes tickling her skin.

"You're sweet, Maddy," she said. "Sweet as autumn berries. Always liked those best. Hardest to find, but they're all ripe from a summer full of sunshine. Juicy, sugary, plump. Taste so good on your tongue. You never had anything better until you've tried one, and then you never want green fruit again."

Maddy felt herself begin to sway, lulled by Lissy's soft siren song and the lips dancing against the skin of her throat. Gentle hands slid further down Maddy's arms, to her wrists, and then her hands. Lissy played with her fingertips, patting each one with her own.

Weird.

Really weird.

And sexy as hell.

Maddy found herself thinking about Lissy taking those fingers into her mouth and sucking on them. Lapping each one with her small pink tongue. Maybe nipping, just to play. She could see Lissy's mischievous pixie smile already.

The wet warmth began to soak through Maddy's silky thong. A ripple ran across her lower belly. Not meaning to, Maddy leaned forward into Lissy's delicate touches, aching to feel them go deeper. Scared to death, yeah, but she wanted more. Couldn't help herself.

"Lissy." She breathed out the name. "Please..."

"Yeah?" Lissy asked. She began to kiss her way down Maddy's chest, stopping at the place where her collarbones met. "This is okay? I mean, really okay?"

"Mmm."

"You scared?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Want me to stop?"

Maddy swallowed. "No," she said, raw as unbrushed silk. "I just ... I got no idea what I'm doing. How we got here."

Lissy giggled against Maddy's skin. "Me either. Nor where we're goin'."

"Nope."

"Mind if I figure out where to turn next? Which way we're headed?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm thinkin' being non-verbal, that's probably a good sign," Lissy mused. "So how about I do this? After all, I was talkin' about autumn berries, and I've had an awful urge to try yours out since you leaned over me today and I saw down the front of your pretty blue sweatshirt..."

"Mmm ... what? Lissy?"

"Ssh." Lissy's small hands traveled upwards, trailing a path along Maddy's stomach that buzzed and sparkled. Gentle as blowing fluff from a dandelion, she pushed up sweatshirt material as she went, rucking it up high. Maddy winced,

wishing she'd thought to wear a bra—but she'd been dressed for Saturday casual, and that meant leaving the boulder holder off.

Cool air brushed over Maddy's breasts ever so briefly, puckering her nipples hard as, well—rocks.

Then, Lissy's lips closed over the tip of Maddy's breast, sucking it like one of her favorite autumn berries for all the sweet juice it held.

Lips and tongue both worked gently as a baby, but her hands were all grown up, cupping the weight of Maddy's breast in her palm. It overflowed, too big for her to hold the whole globe.

"Full." Lissy's breath tickled so fine.

Maddy moaned despite herself.

Couldn't help it.

Wet suckling—brush of warm air—soft fingers—"Ripe and heavy. I always wanted big ones. Figured I'd lost out by bein' so small. But now I think I've got the pair I always dreamed of."

Maddy laughed out loud, and then gasped as Lissy's mouth stopped with the talking and started back up with the kissing. Also with the licking, and biting.

She crooned soft nonsense between sucks as Maddy moaned, and all but purred when Maddy, unable to stop herself, brought her red-tipped nails up to tangle in Lissy's new pixie cut.

"Sweet," Lissy whispered. "Just so sweet. I could eat you all up. Ain't that strange? But..." she said, drawing one finger back downwards, "don't think I care too much. I think I'm havin' too much fun to go askin' questions right now. I think I want to take another curve in the road."

Oh. Oh, God.

"Lissy—" Maddy choked.

"Ssh." Lissy's mouth left Maddy's breast, puckered and damp, to travel back up her throat and finally, thank God, to her lips. Her kiss was light and sweet, a fairy's dainty brush painted on her mouth. Not enough.

"More," Maddy demanded.

She felt Lissy's lips grin beneath hers. "Since you ask so nice and all," she said.

And Lissy's hand slid down the front of Maddy's jeans.

Maddy sucked in a deep breath. She clutched at Lissy, half afraid she'd fall down. It wasn't the first time someone had tried to feel her up, God, no, but it had never been like this. From the first scratch of callused fingertips against the softness of her mons, her pussy lips began to burn with a tightening fire. She whimpered into their kiss, still way too gentle for her sudden taste.

"You okay?" Lissy whispered.

"God, yes," Maddy said, voice gone husky. She sounded like pure sex. They both recognized the sound. "Don't you dare stop."

"It's okay?"

"So very okay." And it was. It was weird and strange and unexpected and possibly going to be something she truly regretted later, but just then, Maddy couldn't care less. She wanted to come, and she wanted Lissy to take her over the edge. Wanted them both to wash away in the rushing tide.

"Can I...?"

Lissy grinned again. She flickered out her tongue, tasting Maddy's mouth. Her finger toyed with a tuft of the curls between Maddy's legs, twining them together. Teasing. "Maybe," she said. "One condition."

"You want my firstborn? You got her. Her name is Veronique, and she likes Kitty Cuisine Elite."

Lissy laughed. "Well, as much as I'm beginning to suspect I got a taste for pussies—"

"Lissy!"

"—a cat's not what I had in mind. Nope." Lissy nuzzled into Maddy's mouth, just a little deeper. When she drew back, she whispered, teasing but serious at once:

"Come to the party with me tonight. You and me against the maddin' crowd."

Maddy hesitated. "You mean like a date? A date?"

"Cart before the horse, but yeah, I think I do." Lissy's finger dipped just a tiny bit deeper, brushing the top of Maddy's clit. "Yes or no?"

Maddy whimpered.

Ah, hell.

This was crazy.

Nuts.

Also insane.

And there was no way she'd turn it down.

"Yes," she whispered. "Hell, yes."

"Good," Lissy whispered back. Her lips sealed onto Maddy's in a real kiss as last, tongue darting in to roam and taste. Then finally, thank God and all his angels, her ivory sweet fingers dipped into Maddy's wetness and began to stroke.

Maddy gasped and clutched at Lissy's back.

"Where ... where did you learn how to do that?"

"Natural talent?" Lissy giggled against Maddy's skin. "Hush, now. Let me do this. I want to play you like a Texas fiddle." Her fingers stroked up and down, flicking Maddy's clit. "Right where mine is," she murmured. "Wonder if you like what I do? Let's find out."

She rubbed in slow semi-circles around the swollen bud, edging closer and closer. Light flicks and slow strokes, up and down. Then, with a sly glance up and a grin, Lissy pushed a finger up in Maddy's pussy and began to slide it in and out. Maddy all but doubled over and fell down. Laughing, Lissy—so strangely strong—managed to hold her up, pressing another kiss to her lips. Her tongue teased Maddy's into playing between whimpers and gasps.

Lissy added a second finger, and then a third.

Maddy sucked in a deep breath. She still wasn't as full as she would be with a toy, but the way Lissy pressed with her fingertips, thumb still stroking Maddy's clit – "I'm gonna," Maddy said, ragged. "Oh, God, Lissy, don't stop. Don't stop now, keep going..."

Lissy darted down and seized one of Maddy's nipples in her mouth. She sucked hard, pulling the areola between her lips and lashing it with her tongue. Maddy let out a short scream, then did collapse, taking Lissy to the floor with her.

Resting atop each other, she felt her sopping tuft of hair come up against Lissy's, just as wet.

"Did you come, too?" Maddy whispered.

Lissy nodded, looking exhausted but happy as a ray of sunshine. "I did. Best I ever had in my life." Almost shy, she reached out to smooth a wisp of hair away from Maddy's forehead. "You think we could do that again sometime? Maybe?"

Maddy reached up, against her better judgment, and kissed Lissy gently on the lips. "Maybe, chica," she said. "But who says we're done already?"

Throwing caution to the wind, Maddy rolled Lissy over in a squealing tumble and slid down between her legs, eager to taste and see what another woman was like. And when Lissy was shrieking, her back arched in a delicate bow and her legs gripping Maddy's shoulders, she found out: women tasted as good and sweet as Texas Tea.

Chapter Eight

"Oh, God. Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God." Lissy clutched Maddy's arm hard enough to leave marks. She buried her face behind one bared bronze shoulder. "I don't think I can do this. I shouldn't be here."

"Hey, you! Chickenshit. Whose idea was it to do this thing at all?"

"Yeah, but I didn't ... and it was you, with the clothes, and the hair, and the ... ohh, God." Lissy wailed and tried to wiggle behind Maddy. "I'd never have if you hadn't been all sultry and temptin' and –"

"Well fuck me, and thanks a ton. Doesn't it just do my ego a world of good to know I'm the cause of all your problems, not to mention your nervous breakdown?"

"But ... but Maddy..." Lissy protested, breath warm on one shoulder blade.

"They're all staring at me!"

"D'uh? It'd help if you quit hiding behind my skirts like I'm your momma!" Maddy tugged Lissy forward, to her side.

One finger under the chin tipped Lissy's face up towards hers. The miserable, terrified look in her big doe eyes almost melted Maddy's resolve.

Almost.

"Listen to me, missy. Of course they're staring. You've knocked their socks off and spring-rolled their bowties."

Lissy giggled. "Their what now?"

"You never watched cartoons?"

"You did?"

Maddy waved her hand. "We'll talk Tex Avery another time, another place, because distractions don't work on me. In public. Usually."

Lissy whimpered.

"Look," Maddy said. Her voice was brisk and firm, but her fingers gentle as she gave Lissy's dress a few discreet tugs.

"Do you even know how pretty you are? No, really. In your princess dress, with your hair done oh so chic and that dab of makeup I forced on you? You're a bonafide TKO."

Lissy's cheeks pinked. "Knock-out, huh?" she asked shyly.

Maddy couldn't hold back a smile. "Had me out for the count earlier," she said.

Quick, so no one would notice, she brushed her fingers along the curve of Lissy's throat, letting of wisp of hair slide through, soft as flax. "Knocked me over with a fucking feather."

The fear in Lissy's eyes flickered to wicked glee. "I know," she said, grinning like an imp. "I mean, for two ladies who never, I mean not even thought about, we

did a pretty good job, huh?" Glee changed to wonder. "I think about it, and I can't believe how lucky I was, and how you make me feel."

"And how's that?"

"Mmm?" Lissy's lips had parted.

Ooh, tempting, tempting, but ack, not in public. Maddy was pretty sure neither of them were ready to step outside their attractive closet doors. Yet. Would they?

Ah, hell. There came reality, crashing right back in when she least wanted it. But hey, look, there it was, and she had to face the facts. That was what she did.

Get over yourself, Maddy.

So she had just spent half the day doing things good girls should never, ever do.

Especially not with other girls.

And...?

She'd liked it.

She wanted more. She didn't think it bothered her. Not one bit.

Matter of fact, with Lissy standing before her, tiny and pale and fairy-fragile with her flyaway hair and full, sweet mouth, all Maddy could think of was how she wanted to kiss her pet tomboy so badly she could all but taste Lissy's essence.

If she licked her lips, Maddy could still catch the flavor.

But she knew when the party was over and time to go home.

Thanks for the memories, doll.

"Hey." She gave Lissy's shoulder a light squeeze. Comforting. Weird how natural it felt. Like she wanted to protect Lissy, make sure she was okay. That she knew her own worth. "Trust me, would you? You're going to be a smash." Maddy straightened and preened, flipping her hair back. "Look who you're with. Not everyone gets the honor, trust me."

Lissy stared – then, burst into giggles.

"Hey!" Maddy protested, hiding her own grin.

Lissy whooped, but softly, and wiped her eyes.

"God, you're not vain or nothin', are you?"

"Nope. I just call them as I see them." Maddy put her hands on her hips, triumphant. Saying goodbye, in her own way. "Go knock this crowd dead."

Lissy stood up tall as she could. Granted, not very tall, but she'd do. She radiated an inner toughness, a no-nonsense tough chick with brains to back up her stacks of degrees. "Nope. Knock 'em down, then knock 'em out. Then, they die happy."

Her grin turned wicked. "Or, if they sass me, I'll chase 'em down and make them listen to my thesis on quantum physics. That way they'll die tired and outclassed."

My God.

I think I love you.

Maddy ached to tuck her hand in Lissy's. Instead, she folded them on her tiny black evening bag. "One, two, three. Go, Killer, go."

Lissy gave Maddy one last, beaming smile, and sailed on ahead, proud as a ship in full rig. Watching her go, Maddy knew—just knew—she was on her way. No one could stop that girl once she had her mind set on something. Let the stuffy ties and tweed crowd just try it.

Lissy would show them. She'd show them all. She'd come out on top and have them thanking her for the honor.

And I really do believe she's caught me, too. But what do I do about it? Good girls don't, at least ones who want to keep their fabulous jobs, the place in society they fought tooth and nail to reach, and invitations from the Who's Who in the Texas elite.

Gotta be practical, Maddy. You don't need love. No complications. Remember?

Face it: lesbians don't have a place in the world where you chose to live. Which was damn unfair, now it occurred to her. Why shouldn't they? People ought to be allowed to love who they want, and not have to hide it.

For the first time since she was a kid, Maddy hated The Rules.

She drew in a slow, deep breath, and exhaled, letting all the building tension go.

As much as she could, given how she could still taste Lissy in her mouth. A temptation, teasing her to sneak just one more bit. But she couldn't. Not just for her sake, no. For Lissy's, too. Lissy deserved to be happier than anyone else.

Hearts like hers didn't come along every day. They should have all the happiness life could bring.

Not the heartache of having the wrong person panting at their heels.

So.

Lissy had been gone a few minutes; no doubt already wowing the crowd. Maddy would just go touch up her eye makeup, powder her nose, and make a discreet, classy entrance. She'd watch, and be happy for Lissy, and maybe she'd make a few job contacts.

She'd send it all down the path originally laid out, not the road less traveled.

That would make all the difference.

Go, chica.

Do your thing.

Maddy marched forward, ready to take on and conquer another crowd of the elite. Bold and sassy. Flirtatious and sexy. Savvy and sharp. Everything she'd taught herself to be.

Everything she wanted.

No regrets.

And her heart wasn't breaking a bit.

Not one bit at all.

Chapter Nine

Maddy stood in the doors to the faculty ballroom for a moment and breathed in deeply. Mmm, she loved that smell. A heady mix of good fabric, tasteful perfumes, mouthwatering food, and best of all, old money.

Cleared a girl's head up better than a slap from her grandmother.

Maddy nodded decisively, pleased. Already putting a new spin on the day's strangeness. So, she'd lost her head. Hey, it could happen when Mr. Buzzy was overdue for fresh batteries.

Lissy had been sweet, she'd been pretty, she'd been convincing—really, really convincing—and she'd been there. A good time had by all. No harm, no foul.

Plus a bonus orgasm. Okay, orgasms. Plural. Fingers did beat battery-operated latex, for damn sure.

But sex was all it had been about. Sex, and doing her job in turning a sow's ear into a silk purse. The Madeline Vincent specialty, plus an unexpected dessert. Having sex didn't mean falling for someone, and it didn't mean they had any kind of “connection”.

She was Maddy, the Bronx Bitch, overlaid with Texas sugar.

She didn't need those kinds of connections. Give her the type that came with salary bonuses, upper management approval, and her name mentioned in the paper as Ms. Rich's “personal fashion consultant”.

That was what life was about for her. What she'd always wanted. What she'd gotten.

No way she'd risk it all now for two dainty hands, a pair of sweet lips, and big brown eyes.

It was good, it happened, but now? It's over.

There. Much better. Much more “her”. Moving right along with no dents in her hard, shiny shell. The afternoon's roll on Lissy's creaky old bed was just a passing scuff she could polish off her spotless reputation without anyone noticing.

Time to get back to business, and work this room like a mother. Maddy had practiced the art of subtle assessment, and could tell from one glance around the

lush room with its muted ambient lighting, cultured accents chatting in lazy “if time is money, then money is no object” tones, and designer leather far as the eye could see, private academia looked like an untapped gold mine.

Either professors got a better salary than she'd thought, or they had plenty of family cash. Whichever. They were prime for the picking, and Maddy? She was ready for the harvest.

Gracefully accepting a crystal flute of champagne from a passing, discreet waiter, Maddy sipped the sparkling liquid gold and let herself smile.

Oh, yeah. This was the life.

Heaven ... I'm in Heaven ... she sang to herself as she moved forward, floating like a swan and passing out her best professionally seductive smile in response to approving appraisals and nods. These guys didn't know her from Eve, but they knew class, and they accepted her just like snap. She belonged.

One of “the right people”.

Nothing's gonna stop me now, Maddy thought in triumph, sipping her champagne. Nothing in the whole wide—

"Oh, dear Lord! Did you see her? What a walking disaster!"

A burst of laughter startled Maddy into almost dropping her glass. She frowned. Okay, gaucherie? Way out of place. People might chuckle, titter, or giggle behind their hands at a function like this, but they did not fucking guffaw.

What the hell had just happened?

Curious, she angled forward to find out. Maybe some old fart emeritus had slipped on a fallen escargot, or—

Her heart sank.

Oh, shit.

Lissy.

Lissy, standing in front of a plate of spilled food. Way too much food, probably once piled high on a dainty china saucer. She must have been startled somehow and dropped it. Big-time mess.

But while a tiny fraction of Maddy's brain calculated cleaning bills, the rest of her made straight for her sinking heart.

Oh, Lissy...

Her little waif had buried her face, blazing red, in both hands. She'd spilled some expensive sauce down the front of her designer original. Drops slid down her fingers to her wrist and plopped to the floor. Each time a glob fell off, the laughter got louder.

Laughter.

At Lissy.

Lissy, who just liked to eat.

Lissy, who didn't know any better than to fill up her plate.

Lissy, who looked about ten years old, and like she wanted to crawl in a hole, curl up, and die.

Her Lissy.

Maddy couldn't have explained herself afterwards, no matter how she tried, but at the moment she didn't waste time thinking. She moved straight into acting, to hell with the consequences. The things she heard as she elbowed her way through paunchy bellies and bulging butts made her see flaming red.

The Bitch was back.

"What was the Dean thinking to hire someone like her?"

"Honestly. So gauche."

"Untutored child."

"Book-smart and life-stupid, eh?"

"What will the girls in her classes think?"

"Their parents certainly don't send them here to be taught by bumpkins."

"What is her family name? MacVeigh? Not the ranching MacVeighs, for heaven's sake!"

"Oh, yes."

"Hicks."

"Countrified farmers."

"No wonder she can't handle herself in public."

"Disgraceful. Positively disgraceful."

Maddy rounded on that last one, an elegantly slim woman whose face-lift lied about her being thirty, dye job confessed to forty, and her own trained eye could tell was pushing sixty. She jabbed a sharp red nail into the bitch's fake boobs and hissed: "'Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

Then, for good measure, added: "Cunt."

Horrificed gasps replaced the laughter. Maddy couldn't have given less of a flaming shit. She'd reached Lissy, and her arms were wrapped tight around the girl she loved.

Loved?

Analyze later. Comfort and rescue now.

"Lissy?" Maddy hugged her close. "Come on. We're out of here."

"Maddy?"

"Yeah, doll. It's me."

"Maddy, they — they laughed — and all I did was trip — and —"

"I know. Shush, shush, I know." She nudged Lissy forward. "Walk with me, chica. Come on. You can do this."

"Wh — where are we going?"

Maddy lifted her head to glare at the gawping elite, the moneyed American royalty she'd worked so hard to win over ... saw her career gurgling merrily down the toilet ... but could only think of just one thing to say.

For the fun of it, she said the words out loud: "The hell with you."

Holding Lissy tight, protecting her against the world, Force of Nature Maddy, Category 5, got them out of there at hurricane speed. Woe betide anyone who got in their way. Maddy had a new mission, and she meant to plunge in and win the game.

Save the day, and rescue the maiden fair.

Sounded like a good deal to her.

What?

She could be adaptable.

Chapter Ten

There was one good thing about old faculty centers, Maddy soon discovered—they had all sorts of great nooks and crannies. Shadowy places to hide.

Not that Maddy felt like hiding. For all she cared, every single faculty member could file on by in a line and take pictures if they wanted. She had more important things on her mind. In her arms.

Lissy.

Her Lissy.

God, what an idiot she'd been.

I always knew I was a great liar, Maddy griped to herself, but I didn't know how much of a dumbass I could be or how good I could fool myself.

Sure, the High Life was all I ever wanted, but God, it's a fucking shallow pool and Lissy's deeper than the deep blue sea.

I know where I'd rather swim.

So, bye-bye career. Hello, alternate lifestyle.

Wonder what'll happen next?

Does it matter? Nah ... not right now, I don't think. I'm still me, and I keep my priorities in order. Which means...

"Hush, baby, hush," Maddy crooned, rocking Lissy back and forth gentle as a baby. She felt so light and fragile in Maddy's Amazon arms. A broken butterfly, helpless on the cold hard street after the shock of falling from a first try at taking wing. A shattered china doll. "It's okay, you. I'm here. It's okay."

Lissy clung to Maddy as if she'd never let go, and hey, fine by her. Under any circumstances, though for choice, preferably not involving tears. Or snot.

Maddy wrinkled her nose. Well, you took the bad with the good, right? Besides which, anyone with functioning hormones knew Kleenex were essential to a good cry.

Speaking of which ... Maddy slipped a hand down into her purse and drew out a micro-pack of tissues. "Here," she said, nudging one between them, into Lissy's palm. "Come on, cowgirl. I've got you."

"Don't let me go?" Lissy said, muffled against Maddy's shoulder.

"I won't." Maddy held her Texas pixie tighter. "I'll never let go."

"Promise?"

Maddy drew back just far enough to cup Lissy's cheeks with her hand and lift her face. Her gorgeous, sweet face, pretty even when she was waterlogged. A face she'd like to learn to live with. "Swear on the Virgin's lily-white toes."

Lissy's smile broke through. Weak sunshine from behind the clouds.

"I guess that means something in Bronx-ish. Aw, Maddy, I'm sorry as I can be. You tried so hard, and I just messed up something terrible. First thing I did after sayin' hi to the committee who hired me was dive right for that dumb buffet, and I went and ruined it all."

"No, you didn't."

"How can you say that? I did. All your hard work. Everythin' you did, today, just for nothing. I spoiled it."

"Bull." Maddy gave Lissy a light shake. "Besides which, you know what? I don't care what they think."

Shocked-eyes.

"Hey! I'm serious. Who came riding to your rescue, huh? Huh? Tell me," Maddy tapped the pads of her fingers along Lissy's cheekbones.

Shock shifted to wonder. Then, amusement. Then, thank our Mother, who art in heaven—giggles. Chuckles. A burst of laughter that almost bent Lissy double, her tears drying up like magic.

"You," she managed. "Was that you? You actually told those rich folks to fuck off an' die, or did I imagine that part?"

"Not in so many words, but yeah."

Lissy's laughter slowed. She peeked up through her lashes. "For me?" she asked, hesitating, as if afraid of the answer.

She didn't have to be. Maddy pulled her close again and bumped their foreheads together. "For you," she said. "All for you."

Lissy shook her head. "I don't get this. I swear, I don't."

"You think I do? I am so lost here. Thing is, when I get lost, I find a map, and I figure things out. I decide what I want to do, and then I do it. Like this. I really, really want to do this. Right now." Maddy pressed her lips to Lissy's. One quick, strawberry taste.

"So," she said, looking down into Lissy's eyes. "You with me?"

Those deep brown eyes began to sparkle.

"All the way. Wherever this road leads."

"Good. Saddle up those horses, pony-girl. Rancher's kid, huh? You learn how to ride someone so hard that way?" Maddy aimed a swat at Lissy's pert ass, laughing when she dodged and squealed. "Come on. How about we go for a ride?"

"Indeed. And may I ask where, precisely, you intend to travel?"

Maddy and Lissy pulled up short. The speaker, male, old, and crusted with grim headmaster wrinkles, stood in front of them with arms crossed over his chest and weak chin high in the air.

Fuck, all he needed was a neon sign flashing: "I Am An Important Person" over his head and he'd qualify for society sainthood.

Maddy snorted. "Wherever we damn well feel like, Grandpa." She pulled Lissy close, their breasts pressing together. Her own tits threatened to spring out of her tight designer top, but hey, that could be fun. She'd love to see the academic prick-on-legs' eyes pop out of his head.

But no ... wait. Back up a sec. She had to remember—it wasn't just her life she was dealing with.

This was about Lissy. Much more about Lissy than herself. This was Lissy's job, her career, everything she herself had worked for. Maddy's own professional status might be swishing around the U-bend, but she didn't have to push the plunger down on her girl's future.

Swallowing, she let go, dropping her arms and her eyes. "God. The dumb just keeps on coming. I'm sorry," she said to Lissy. "I didn't think."

Lissy looked baffled. "Didn't think? About what?"

"Your future, stupid!" Maddy hissed. "You have to work with these people!"

"Yeah." To Maddy's surprise, Lissy looked suddenly—smug? "I sure do. See, I've got this little thing most of them might not know about. I like to call it a contract. Signed, sealed, delivered. They can turn up their noses until they're sniffin' clouds, but they can't get rid of me."

She grinned, pure mischief and delicious vengeance. "Boils down to: we can make out right here, right now, and they can't do a damn thing that matters."

"You," Maddy breathed. "You little brat, I'll—"

She didn't get to finish.

Lissy had rounded on a growing crowd of faculty, each one with a bigger stick up his ass than the last, and planted tiny fists on her hips. When she spoke, her

voice was far louder than anybody that small had a right to project, but did she ever pull it off.

"Listen up, all of ya'll! I got your attention? Good.

"I expect by now you know I'm Lissy MacVeigh. I came here tonight thinkin' I'd try to make friends, but I'm more than disinclined to the notion right now. So I have a few things to say instead.

"So I spilled a plate of overcooked canapés! Yeah, I know what they were. I do speak something besides country slang. Don't mean I'm gonna stop for your sakes, though.

"Why? I don't bend over for any inbred snobs who ain't got better things to gossip about. Look there, the new brat's not only green, not only country, but holy cow, it appears she might be one of those God-be-Damned lesbians, too! Horror!" Lissy mocked.

Maddy had to press a hand over her own mouth to stop from cheering. Now that was New York chutzpah, best in class. Go, Lissy, go!

"So? Maybe I am a dyke, and maybe I'm not. Don't know myself, yet. But I'm willing to take a chance. With her." Lissy's hand shot out and yanked Maddy forward with surprising strength. "For her. Cause she helped me, cause I like her, and cause the sex we had this afternoon would blow your stuffy little brains to smithereens if I started givin' out details. Which I'm not, so tough if you're feelin' nosy.

"This woman? I could even be fallin' in love with her. The way I figure, that's what matters. Not any of your stuck-up notions about what's proper. So if you don't like it? Don't like me? Wrap it all up and shove the packets up your asses.

"Oh, and when it comes to the new semester? Ya'll can eat my dust, 'cause I plan to turn out some grade-A geniuses who'll show the world what a woman can be besides a decoration on some rich man's arm. You watch and see."

Maddy wanted to jump up and down, shout and cheer. Lissy, her Lissy, spitting fire at the crowd of wide-eyed conservatives, was the best thing she'd seen in years. Her fairy had just gone dragon on them all when no one expected it, showing off more balls and brains than all the men combined.

God bless Texas.

This could definitely be love. Hearts, stars, and who needed anything else, in the end?

Her temper vented, Lissy turned to Maddy with a grin that she must have borrowed from an imp in Hell that harbored dreams of Heaven. "That is, if she don't want to kill me right here and now for makin' a scene." Her eyebrow arched. "Do you?"

Maddy stared. Then, she grinned. "Vixen."

"Bitch."

"Putt."

"Brat."

"Love you. You love me?"

"God, yes."

"Good. Then come an' kiss me, Kate. Let's do this up right."

"Is that a dare?"

"Nope." Lissy's eyes darkened with pure sex. "More in the line of a promise."

"Then you bet your ass I will." Maddy pounced, no half-measures. She swept Lissy into her arms, spun her around until she made that yummy squealing noise again, then stopped and dropped her into a low dip.

They beamed at each other despite Lissy's being upside-down. "You want a kiss?" Maddy asked. "Try this one on for size."

Lifting her lover easy as a feather, Maddy wrapped strong arms tight around her girl and pressed their lips together. Lissy's mouth opened beneath hers, sugar-sweet, their tongues sliding naturally together as breathing. Maddy moaned; Lissy whimpered, and neither was anywhere close to done.

In fact, Maddy planned on doing nothing else but kissing Lissy for a good damn while.

So the sound, when it came, almost startled them apart.

Loud. Staccato. Rhythmic.

Clapping.

One set of hands, clapping. Maddy stole a peek up and saw a woman near the edge of the crowd, maybe a little older than them, her hair cut short and rakish.

A lady dressed in silk and lace stood closer to her than most good friends might, a slow smile lighting up her face with a glow that made it beautiful.

She, too, raised her hands and began to clap.

Another couple joined in. Another. Another. Not the whole room, but more than plenty, and even some who'd been sneering before but had sense enough to go with the rise of a new power.

New power. Huh. Maddy liked the sound of that. Definite potential.

But she'd think about such things later. At the moment, she stayed focused on the goal.

"Let's go back to your place," she murmured against Lissy's lips. "I want your mouth on my breasts and my fingers in your pussy."

"Or the other way around?" Lissy suggested. "Share an' share, that's fair."

"Chica? Let me put it this way. What we did this afternoon was nothing but the warm-up. Now I want to go home and play for real. For keeps."

"For keeps," Lissy repeated. She grinned at Maddy. "Good. Let's go home."

Home. Maddy liked the sound of that even better.

"Then, we'll fuck each other through the mattress."

Ooh. Better still.

"Baby doll," Maddy said, smile blazing for real and true, "I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

And so it was.

Chapter Eleven *One Year Later...*

Mmm. Warm. Cozy.

Not gonna wake up.

Nope. I'm staying right here until the day I die.

Maddy snuggled deeper into her nest of soft quilts, plumped the fat goose down pillow beneath her cheek, and let out the long, happy sigh of a hard-working woman with nothing better to do on a Saturday morning than snooze as long as she damn well pleased.

Truth to tell, she was hoping for another dream like the one she'd had the night before, where she and Lissy were walking hand in hand down a red-carpeted runway at the Governor's Ball, cameras flashing while she waved and smiled at her crowd of admiring fans...

Best New Designer of the Year award pinned right over my tit, where everyone's gonna look...

Maddy sighed, happy as all fuck, and started drifting off to sleep.

Then:

Ring Ring Ring

"Oh, shit!" she groaned into her wonderful, squishy pillow. "Go away!"

The phone, that little fucker, ignored her and rang on in merry abandon. Maddy turned on her side and socked Lissy hard as she could in the ribs.

Lissy barely stirred except to half-open one eye and mumble something that sounded like: "ionic particalization", or maybe "I want pistachio ice cream".

With Lissy, either was a definite possibility.

"You want to explain to me why you refuse to plug in and use the answering machine we bought?" Maddy snapped over the jingling of the phone,

Lissy mumbled again and doubled her pillow in half over her ears.

Maddy rolled her eyes, sighed, and picked up the receiver. "Vincent-MacVeigh residence, Madeline speaking, and this had better be really good, because I was sound asleep!"

A chuckle from the past, way too knowing for its own good, burst in her ear.

"God help me, Chastity. Sorry, Maddy. So the stories I hear are all true?"

Maddy sat bolt upright, ignoring Lissy's moan at being jostled.

"Gio! Is that you?"

"One and the same, babe."

"Holy fuck! How long has it been—no, don't answer that. How are you?"

"Almost good as you. I own the garage outright now. Broke my back getting it in shape, and learning how to tinker with fancy cars at prices no big city mechanic can beat. The Manhattan cows pay me out the ass to tow and fix their Beamer of the week, and by God if they don't thank me for it."

"Gio, you prick," Maddy said in admiration. "So you learned from my shining example, huh?"

"Oh, yeah, and then some. Wanna welcome me to the dark side, Maddy?"

Maddy blinked at the first thought that came to her. Nah. Couldn't be. But would she put anything past him? Hell, no. "Gio?"

"In the flesh. Naked flesh. Bare-ass naked and damn happy to be this way."

Maddy groaned. "Gio, remember when I told you: never change?"

"That I do."

"Start. Now. The TMI is something I haven't missed."

"Bitch, please. I haven't even started on things you don't want to hear."

"Which would be, for example..."

"How about we start with the sweet piece of ass I got in my bed right now, for one?"

"Oh, God, Gio!"

"That's what he said last night, Right now he's lying here, bare as God makes us when we're born, laughin' his ass off at the way we snipe."

"I'm not surprised, the way you — back up. Repeat that last part."

"Which part would that be?"

"You want a slap upside the head when I see you next? Don't get smart with me, pal. Let's try pronouns for two hundred dollars."

Gio's laughter rippled across the miles.

"Let's not. You heard what you heard. Just think of it this way: you're not the only one who had a change of taste. You wanna say hello to him? Name's Enrico, but I call him Mr. Wizard."

Maddy blinked. "Do I want to know why?"

"You would not believe the magical places he takes me."

Maddy groaned again. Well, she had asked. "So, you're gay now?"

Lissy stirred. "Who's gay?" she slurred sleepily.

"That your lady friend? She sounds sweet as Texas tea." Gio put on an awful, fake drawl.

"She is, not that it's any of your business," Maddy snapped. "She's the one, Gio." her voice softened. "The reason why it never worked between you and me. I just had to wait for her to come along."

"Yeah." Gio sounded serious for once in his life. "Like me and my Wiz. I tried so hard to hook us up, you and me, but something up there has a hell of a sense of humor and works in mysterious ways. Si?"

"Si. Never a truer word." Maddy rolled onto her back. "Go on."

"Go on, what?"

"Dumbass! Dish. I want to hear all about Mr. Wizard. Where you met, what caught your eye, what it felt like to kiss a man for the first time – "

"Maddy, you are only getting those details on one condition."

"Which is?"

Gio's chuckle was pure, sweet evil. "We get to come up there and watch you two demonstrate the joys of a love that dares not speak its name."

"Up yours!"

"Nope, that's Wiz's job. Speakin' of which, he's up, and also awake, if you catch my drift. Plus I'm not as rich as you—yet—so why don't you foot the long distance bill and call me back when everyone's out of bed?"

Maddy grinned. God, she loved a happy ending. Lissy had taught her how to appreciate them. "It's a date."

"Watch that word, now. Wiz gets jealous."

Maddy rolled her eyes. "Cheapskate horn-dog. Talk to you later then, Gio," she said. "It's good to hear you again, you know? I missed you. Lots. Didn't realize how much until now."

"Same here, Maddy. Catch you later."

"Later," she repeated. Her eyes began to close. "Hey, how'd you get this num – "

Click

Maddy stared at the receiver for a long moment. Then, shaking her head, still grinning, replaced the thing in its cradle and cozied back down in bed. Looked like life might be getting even more interesting soon. Again.

She cracked up, laughing until her sides hurt and she had to smother the peals in her pillow. God, what a crazy, mixed-up world!

She wouldn't trade it for anything.

"Mmmzat?" Lissy mumbled.

Maddy raised up and reached over to pry the pillow off Lissy's head. She ran a hand over her lover's shining tumble of tangled brown curls, beautiful as ever, growing out into a waterfall of silk. "Morning, sunshine," she said, leaning in for a long, slow, wet kiss. "Mmm, tasty. You drive me crazy, but I love you, you know that?"

Lissy's eyes opened halfway, both of them. Her lips curved in a sweet smile just made for doing dirty things. "Yeah? Good. Love you too."

"Want to spoon a while?"

"Mm-hmm." Lissy turned her back to Maddy. Maddy moved into place, cradling Lissy's smaller body in her own curves. Silky skin to silky skin, her own full breasts pressed against Lissy's slender shoulder blades, her hand idly caressing Lissy's own nipples.

Contented, Maddy nuzzled her head into the curve of Lissy's shoulder and let out another deeply happy sigh. "If you ever tell anyone I'm a cuddler, I will have to kill you."

"Secret's safe with me," Lissy mumbled. "Bet we could make a fortune sellin' pictures, though."

"You sure you're not a nympho? Not even the least bit?"

"Not last time I checked." Lissy yawned. "Maybe some snapshots just for us, then?"

"Don't push your luck."

"Aw, c'mon."

Maddy shook her head, unable to keep from smiling. "I'll think about it. Now, go back to sleep."

"Yes, ma'am." Lissy reached up to twine her fingers together with Maddy's. "We got that fancy dress party tonight, right?"

"We most certainly do." Maddy's eyes sparkled. "Along with our special meeting during the festivities."

Lissy giggled. "I still think it's just plain nuts."

"Bite your tongue."

"Bite it for me."

"Don't tempt me, lady."

"Not even a teensy bit?"

"Mmm ... could happen. Right now, I got my mind on tonight." Maddy chortled, dollar signs dancing in her eyes. "I cannot believe we got this meet, but you bet your sweet little ass—" which she smacked for good measure—"I'm gonna milk it like one of these damn cows you see everywhere."

"That's my girl," Lissy yawned.

"Oh, yeah. When we're done with her, our lady senator is going to know everything there is to know about dressing like a thoroughly modern Millie in the City, as well as have the scientific know-how to win over every environmental platform there is. Madame President, look out."

"God help America. Was she the one who sent us white roses for our ceremony?"

"No, she sent imported jasmine, and that fuck-knows-how-old copy of Sappho."

"I think she likes us."

"Damn right." Maddy chuckled to herself. See, she always did what she set out to do. Once she'd given herself a good hard mental shake, taken Lissy to bed and stayed there until they were both too sore to move, she hadn't looked back once.

Also?

Thanks in no small part to the cards Maddy had played, lesbians were damned trendy now. Women were popping out of closets all over the United States of Patriarchy and turning the nation on its edge. They looked to Maddy and Lissy as their role models.

She had it all, everything she'd dreamed of, and then some: power, privilege, money, and a Rolodex full of "Names" that begged for a moment of her time that she didn't spend with Lissy—in bed or out of it.

Not that it mattered. That was just icing on the cake. A sweet, home-baked Texas angel-food cake with strawberry icing.

Her favorite.

And, the way she figured it, the best was yet to come, and even better yet.

It always did when you were Madeline Vincent.

Watch out, world.

Wait until you see what I've got planned next.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willa Okati is known for her love of coffee, cats, and homoerotica/romantica. She is also living proof that you have to watch out for the quiet ones, as they're plotting the most nefarious of schemes. Please feel free to contact her at willaokati@gmail.com