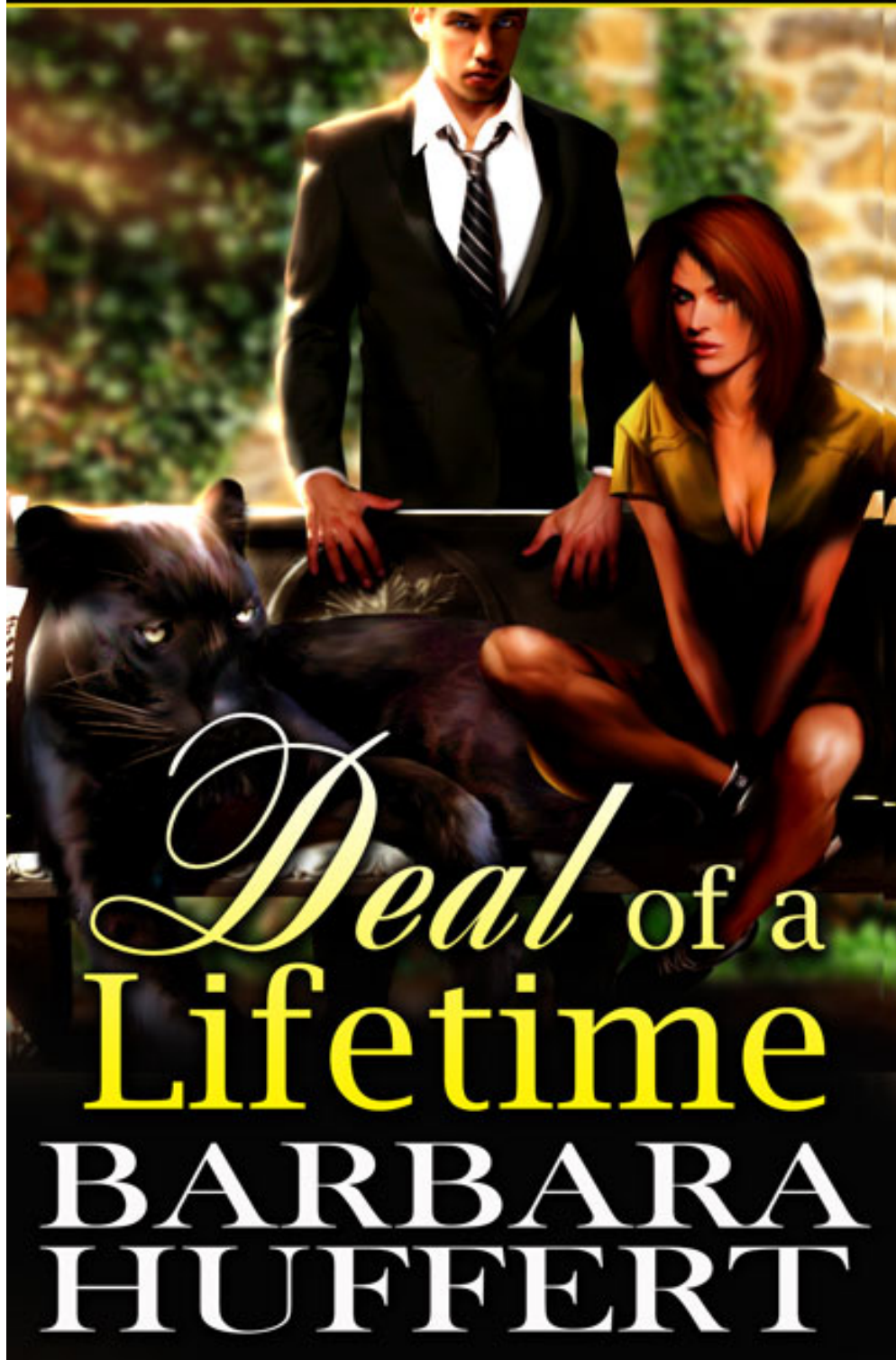


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Deal of a Lifetime

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DEAL OF A LIFETIME

Barbara Huffert

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Chapter One

"I simply don't understand why you continue to tolerate this, Annette," Candace Ashton commented snidely. "I expected Richard to make an appearance before the theater since he missed the entire evening the last time you were in town."

Annette Phelps cringed inwardly but refused to be baited. "Candace, please. For the last time, his name is not Richard. It is Michael Richards. People call him Rich because his father goes by Mike and his grandfather, Michael. I've told you that umpteen times just as I've mentioned how hard he works. He already had his appointments set before you suggested that we get together tonight. He can't up and leave in the middle of a meeting or he wouldn't be such a good salesman. He's really not avoiding you."

"Well, it certainly seems deliberate to us, doesn't it, Lars?" Candace drew her husband into her perceived slight.

"Oh now, Candace." Lars patted his wife's hand and sent his sister-in-law a beseeching look. "We've heard how dedicated Annette's Rich is. You can't expect him to neglect an important customer on our account."

"Taking his side?" Candace's tone was cold.

"No, dearest, not at all. I'm merely suggesting that it's a good thing he's not slighting his obligations to join us. You don't want Annette with someone willing to cut corners and not do a thorough job. Remember that James she dated a few years back? Unless I'm mistaken, I seem to recall that his lack of commitment to anything was one of the traits you liked the least about him. Didn't you say that a man who couldn't focus on his career would never be able to focus on a relationship? Isn't Rich more what you had in mind when you warned Annette away from James?"

Candace gave her husband an icy smile and patted his hand, dismissing him. "There's a fine line between dedication and avoidance."

"Of course there is." Annette's heart went out to Lars. He'd pay for his comments later unless her sister was too busy gloating by then. "There's still time for Rich to get here. And if he doesn't make it, we'll leave his ticket at the box office and you can get acquainted afterwards at dinner."

"Right. Dinner. So tell me, Annette, where did this mystery man of yours finally settle on or shouldn't I bring that up either?"

"Why sure you can. I'm sorry, I should have mentioned it earlier. Rich suggested The Palm since it's so close to the theater. He made reservations but we can cancel them if there's someplace else you prefer."

"The Palm? Oh my, that's awfully pricey." Candace wrinkled her nose.

"Candace, please. I told you tonight is our treat. After all, you and Lars were nice enough to invite us to join you on your anniversary."

"That's not necessary, Annette," Lars spoke up. "The theater tickets are more than enough. We certainly don't expect you to treat us to dinner as well."

"We know that, Lars, which is exactly why we insist. Rich is the one who decided on it as soon as he heard it is your fifth anniversary. Please don't make such a fuss. He wants the whole evening to be a celebration in your honor so can't you just let him do this? How about we make a deal? When it's our fifth anniversary, you can take us out, okay?"

"Are you saying you're serious about this man?" Candace perked up.

"Honestly, Candace I don't know yet," Annette sighed. "I could be. We really haven't been dating all that long so let's not jump the gun here. I don't want to get ahead of myself and jinx things by saying too much but I will tell you that Rich is a very nice man who makes me feel special. Please don't put him on the spot about this later or he might feel pressured and then things will get awkward."

"You're saying I shouldn't ask his intentions," Lars teased, attempting to lighten the moment.

"I'd very much appreciate it if you didn't," Annette said seriously.

"Humph," Candace snorted. "Why, Annette? If he's obviously willing to share your bed, shouldn't he be equally willing to share your life? Unless, of course, he's just using you for sex until he finds a proper young lady to settle down with. One who isn't so loose perhaps."

Annette gawked in stunned silence while Lars squirmed uncomfortably. Candace's expression became smug as she smiled in satisfaction.

"Wow," a deep voice reverberated from the man who had stopped by their booth. "I don't know if that comment means my timing truly sucks or is impeccable," he pondered, sliding in beside Annette. "It's usually my morals that are trashed by my date's family, not hers and then generally not until after they've gotten to know me somewhat. I don't know what to make of this."

"Huh?" Annette's mind went blank.

"I'm not sure if I should apologize for being late or for coming early enough to join this conversation," he restated. When she didn't react, he leaned over and kissed her cheek, whispering into her ear, "Smile like you're happy to see me or the game's over before it starts."

Annette instantly plastered a pleasant expression on her face. "I don't know what to say."

He laughed and slid closer until his thigh pressed hers. "How about hello and you're glad I didn't miss half of the first act like you thought I would?" With a wink, he turned to the couple across the table. "Let's pretend I didn't hear your last comment and do this right." He extended his hand to Lars. "Hi. I'm Michael Richards, Rich to

most everyone. It's nice to finally meet you." He repeated the gesture with Candace. "Congratulations on your anniversary."

"Thank you," Candace muttered, openly scrutinizing him.

"Do I have time to order?" he asked, switching his attention back to Annette. When she gaped, he shrugged. "That's all right. I'll just share yours, darling." After a sip, he glanced at all three. "You seem surprised to see me."

"Forgive us," Lars cleared his throat. "Annette sounded fairly certain you'd meet us at the theater."

"Yes," Annette recovered slightly. "You said your meeting would probably run late."

"I did and it would have had I not mentioned our plans and the occasion we're celebrating. I didn't want to get your hopes up only to disappoint you again but Harris, my buyer, is a very devoted family man who understands the importance of evenings like this. He skipped the usual chitchat and had me go straight to the bottom line so I could be here tonight. And, believe it or not, he even signed the contract today so I'm all yours tomorrow too."

"W-what?" Annette gulped.

"Oh no, don't tell me I'm too late and you girls already have the whole day planned out. I suppose I should have hinted about the possibility but I hoped to surprise you and that you'd be as pleased as I am." Rich raised her hand and kissed her palm. "Contrary to what you assume, Candace, your sister and I haven't spent all that much time debauching each other."

"Well, I never," Candace gasped.

"I sure hope you don't mean that literally." Rich winked at Lars. "I'd think by your fifth anniversary, you'd have found many opportunities to indulge in all sorts of mutual debauchery."

Candace's face was so twisted with shock that Annette couldn't contain her giggles. "Rich."

"What? She's the one who brought the topic up in the first place. I'm just trying to be honest about it. And they are married so a little sex talk shouldn't throw either of them into a tizzy, right?" He grinned at Candace's discomfort and the amusement Lars was struggling to hide. "For the record, it's damned near impossible to seduce a woman with three tiger cubs crawling all over her, thinking she's their mother and expecting to be fed every hour. That takes about fifteen minutes a piece, which only leaves fifteen minutes between feedings and that's hardly enough time to even get started on any of the things I have in mind for her."

"This is highly inappropriate," Candace fumed.

"No more inappropriate than it is for you to imply that your sister is a slut for being a consenting adult sharing intimacies with another consenting adult." He paused for effect. "Our relationship and what it includes is between us. If one of us wants your

input, we will ask for it. Until then, we—and yes, I am taking the liberty of speaking for both of us—would appreciate it if you mind your own business unless, of course, you're willing to submit your sexual relationship to equal scrutiny."

Annette and Lars both tensed for Candace's reaction. "Fine," she hissed with a glare.

"Great." He smiled. "Now that that's settled, let's forget it and enjoy the evening, shall we? I've been looking forward to this ever since Nettie mentioned it."

"Me too," Lars agreed, casting a quick glance toward his wife for her reaction to Rich shortening her sister's name. "After we missed you here and the time before that in Pittsburgh I was starting to wonder if our paths would ever cross. We do know Annette is a grown woman and can take care of herself but we can't help worrying about her. I call it Candace's big sister syndrome and I hate to say it but I'm afraid it'll never go away entirely. Forgive us if we were rude and overstepped our boundaries and please don't hold it against us for wanting to check out the man who managed to lure Annette from her tigers." He leaned closer and flashed Rich a conspiratorial grin. "We were beginning to worry that she'd forget how to interact with anyone who doesn't have four legs and a furry tail."

Rich responded with a chuckle as Lars had intended. "I'll have to get back to you on that. She still hasn't agreed to spend the day with me tomorrow and I wasn't kidding when I said we haven't had many nights alone. Who knows? By the time we head home, she might be wishing that she'd stayed with them."

"That's highly unlikely." Candace refused to let Rich have the last word. "Not with the way she's been talking you up. And she's all yours tomorrow. Lars and I are off to the Cape first thing so you and Annette will need to entertain yourselves."

"Excellent." Rich wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh for Pete's sake," Annette muttered and glanced at her watch. "I think we should be going. It's not far but I know how you hate to rush in at the last minute, Candace."

* * * * *

Walking to the theater, Annette hung back slightly, drawing some distance behind the couple. When she was sure they wouldn't be overheard, she yanked her arm from Rich's grasp and demanded, "Who the hell are you and what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Isn't that my line?" he sneered. "You got balls, lady. I'll give you that."

"What!"

"Cut the crap. They can't hear you so save it for when it matters. You only have three blocks to explain your game so you better make it snappy."

"Me? How dare you! You're the one playing games here so why don't you just admit it already? Start with who you are."

Rich forced his driver's license inches from her nose and let her stop long enough to read it. "As you can see, I am exactly who you already know I am." He put it away before she could take it from him and forced her back into motion. "Drop the innocent act. I admit it's a great performance but I already know you're a lying bitch so don't bother. What I don't know is what you're hoping to accomplish with all this. What's Monica's scam this time and how'd she blackmail you into being part of it? Answer me, damn it!"

Annette tried to free her recaptured arm without success. "Look, I really don't understand how you got mixed up in this but I swear you're making a mistake. I don't know this Monica person and I have no idea what you're accusing me of."

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Don't you get it? It's over. You're busted. The gig's up. Ditch the script and tell me what the hell is going on here before you really piss me off."

"You're hurting my arm."

"Spill it or I'll hurt more than that."

"I told you. I don't know what you're talking about. I made you up, okay? Your name, your job, the things we've done together, everything. I was sick of hearing Candace go on and on about poor Annette, still alone after all this time. I couldn't take it anymore so I invented you a few weeks ago to get her off my back."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. I have no idea where you came from but you are not supposed to be here. I was going to leave your ticket at the box office but you weren't going to show up. There is a message in my voicemail saying you're stuck in your meeting and apologize for not being able to meet us tonight after all."

"Like they're going to buy that one again. How many times do you think people will believe that your lover is unavoidably detained and has to cancel at the last minute before they question his existence?"

"So now you're accusing them of being in on this, whatever it is, too?"

"No offense but I don't think either of them is capable of being as convincing as you are. Mrs. Candy Ass is too deep in her own little world and Mr. Lard Ass is too whipped to be acting. So what's the story? You're running out of pavement here so spit it out."

"Stop saying that." Annette was panicked. "I told you everything. There isn't any more except how I was going to tell them I broke up with you because you obviously don't have room in your life for the things that are important to me."

"And here I thought I was the best thing since sliced bread." His smile was as sarcastic as his tone. "Fine. Suit yourself, you pathetic twit. I certainly hope you got us good tickets. *Wicked* is supposed to be great and I'd hate for bad seats to ruin their anniversary. After all, I'm not being stingy with dinner so I don't want to have scrimped on the show." He watched her face pale and laughed. "Yep, you guessed it. I'm sticking to you like glue until you give it up and tell me everything. Bottom line, it's

up to you. Confess and explain or start acting like you're thrilled to be my lover because we're going to put on one hell of a performance together if you insist on playing this out." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. "Now smile, darling. Big sis is watching."

They chatted about the play while they stood in line to enter the theater. Once inside, Candace announced that she and Annette were detouring to the ladies' room and would meet the men at their seats. The look Rich flashed Annette as her sister led her away dared her to hand Candace the same line about her supposed charade and put an end to the game.

"My goodness, Annette," Candace began the instant they were out of range. "Why on earth didn't you tell me he was so arrogant? Imagine the nerve of that man, telling me to mind my own business like that. As your sister I'm obligated to look out for you, no matter what Mr. High and Mighty thinks."

"I'm sorry, Candace," Annette pleaded pathetically. "Please can't you ignore it, just this once? I'm sure Rich didn't mean it the way it sounded. I don't think his meeting went as smoothly as he claimed and he's probably kicking himself for snapping at you because of it."

"As he should be." Candace sounded superior.

"He is, so please let me apologize for him and then forget about it. Can't we just start the evening now and have a nice time tonight? It's your anniversary and we wanted it to be so special."

"Why, Annette, aren't you sweet to fuss over us like this?" Candace became smug. "Perhaps we did start off on the wrong foot with him turning up like that and overhearing my comment. I can see how it might sound, taken out of context as Rich did, so I say let bygones be bygones."

"Thank you." Annette forced a grateful smile as she bit her lip. The comment sounded exactly as it was meant to in any context but that was the least of her worries at the moment. She didn't have time to dwell on Candace's low opinion of her morals when there was a lunatic with them, pretending to be her boyfriend and accusing her of who knew what. She had no idea how he knew things about her life or even why he latched onto her in the first place but he was clearly furious with her. And from what he'd said he wouldn't be going away any time soon so she decided it would be best to play along and keep him calm in order to protect her family from harm.

Standing in the aisle, waiting for the women, Lars sighed. "I should probably apologize for my wife's behavior and warn you that she may not be finished being rude."

Rich raised a questioning eyebrow. "Oh?"

"No, but things aren't necessarily as they appear. Don't misunderstand, Candace does go a bit too far, worrying about poor Annette but I assure you, her heart's in the right place. She only wants what's best for her sister as do I."

"Naturally but I'm getting the impression there's more to it than that." Rich reconsidered the bland, overweight man next to him, wondering if he had overlooked something.

"Well, yes, but this is not something I normally discuss in public." Lars glanced nervously toward the door. "I will tell you however, but please understand I am speaking in the strictest confidence and am relying on your complete discretion."

"Go on," Rich urged, thoroughly curious.

Lars hesitated then nodded. "In spite of how it appears on the surface, my wife is not the backbone of our relationship. I see that you don't believe me but trust me that what I'm saying is the truth. You see, Candace must act as a rude ball-buster or I will have no reason to punish her."

"Punish her?" Rich's mouth fell open.

Lars chuckled. "That surprises you, her seeking punishment."

"Just what sort of punishment are we talking about?"

"Exactly what you're picturing." Lars flushed with excitement. "My tough as nails ice queen thrives on physical correction of any kind. Whips, belts, riding crops, my bare hand but she most especially relishes a cane."

"Holy shit!" Rich gasped. "Sorry. I mean, damn! That's just about the last thing I expected you to say."

Lars laughed again. "Your reaction is common. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it but I needed you to understand and not take anything she says personally. It is our anniversary, after all, and we both want tonight to end in a very special way. The more horrendous she is toward you, the more excited she'll be, anticipating her fate. On a night like this, the longer she has to wait, the better it will be. For both of us."

"Hey, whatever floats your boat," Rich shrugged. "Personally, it's not for me but who am I to judge how the two of you get your rocks off?"

"Thank you. Perhaps, if you don't mind, you could goad her a bit at dinner?"

"Sure. No problem." Rich wondered just what he was involved in. The woman, Annette, seemed to be the only one in on the game at first but now he wasn't so sure. "I take it Nettie doesn't know about her sister's tastes."

"No and I think Candace would prefer it stay that way. For now at least. Unless Annette asks you directly, of course. I'd never ask you to lie outright."

"O-kay," Rich drew it out and was almost relieved to see the women approaching. It was a hell of a thing when the conniving bitch his almost ex-wife was scheming with was the lesser of the evils. With any luck, she'd give up on the charade before it went much further and he could get back to his original plans to spend a nice, relaxing few hours with his friend Dan.

Chapter Two

"Come on, help me out here," Rich begged with a teasing tone as Annette cried into his shoulder. "It's fiction, Nettie. Just like the original version. Neither is real."

"I know." She sniffled and dried her eyes. "But don't you think it's sad anyway?"

"Tsk, tsks." Candace shook her head. "Don't you know to ignore her when she gets like this? I'd think anyone who ever spent more than twenty minutes with my overly sensitive baby sister knows how emotional she can become over nothing. I can't imagine what she was like when that tiger cub was mauled by its mother. I'm sure hysterical doesn't even begin to describe it."

"Stop talking about me, Candace. I can hear you," Annette pointed out. "And yes, I was extremely upset when Kahn died but who wouldn't have been? It was so awful that even you would have been bothered if you'd been there."

"I'm not suggesting otherwise, dear." Candace gave her a condescending look. "But don't things like that happen all the time in nature? You forget that those tigers are still wild animals just as you forgot that *The Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked* are both fictional stories. You really must stay more focused on actual events, Annette, or Rich will believe you're as empty-headed as you seem."

"Now, Candace," Lars cautioned.

"It's all right, Lars. Rich understands that I'm only saying this for her own good. Someone has to remind her not to lose sight of reality if she has any hope of holding his interest."

"Oh no." Annette wanted to dive under the table when she noticed the waiter smirking at her as he delivered their drinks.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Candy," Rich spoke up. "I feel I must clarify something for you since you seem to have the wrong impression of our relationship."

"I hardly think—"

"Please," Rich cut her off. "Before you unintentionally embarrass any of us, let me explain that Nettie and I always agreed to limit this to a casual acquaintance. We're having some fun with each other but neither of us is interested in anything more."

"What!"

"Oops." Rich frowned at Annette. "I guess I wasn't supposed to get into this tonight, was I, Nettie? You probably expected me to play along now and let your family think I'm some kind of schmuck once they find out it's over between us."

"I...well...you," Annette sputtered in shock.

"It's okay. They aren't prudes, darling. I'm sure they understand what it's like to be in lust with someone. They must also know that lust burns out and when it does both of us can merely walk away without being forced to deal with any of those messy emotions that would be involved if we tried to make this into something more than what it is." Rich smirked inwardly at her obvious discomfort and decided to continue. His gaze rested on Lars. "Perhaps you'll understand better if I told you some of the horror stories of my marriage."

"You're married?" Lars snapped.

"Mm, unfortunately," Rich sighed. "Biggest mistake of my life and one I'll never repeat under any circumstances. No, one wife is more than enough for me. Lars, I'm sure I don't have to tell you what a lucky man you are. Me, well, I made the absolute worst choice possible."

"What happened?" Lars couldn't resist.

"As you know, I'm a salesman. A peddler, traveling from town to town, hawking my wares," Rich chuckled. "I was long before I met Monica, my wife, and I never made any secret of how much I enjoy it. She just wanted to be married. To anyone stupid enough to be tricked into asking her. She expected to clamp on the ball and chain first and whip the poor schmuck into shape after the deed was done. She didn't realize I was untrainable and I didn't suspect she seriously intended to retrain me. The fighting started even before the honeymoon was over. By the time I got home from my second sales trip, both of which were only two days long, I should add, we were barely speaking. After the fourth, I found her in bed with one of my former friends and his girlfriend and that was that."

"So why don't you just divorce her?" Lars asked the obvious.

"That, my good man is not nearly as easy as you'd think it would be." He paused to glance at each of them. "Apparently Nettie hasn't told you that my grandfather, Michael the first, is rather comfortable. He has a wonderful home on Mt. Washington, overlooking the Monongahela. He's had me helping him restore it for years and it's shaped up nicely, if I do say so myself. Somehow, Monica got the notion that if she holds on to me she'll end up with my share of Gramps' investments in addition to his house. Not that that could ever happen. Gramps rewrote his will when he found out I was marrying her. He added the stipulation that I can only inherit if we're divorced. If not, my sisters split what would have been mine and the house is to be demolished immediately even though he knows how much I love it and the memories it holds. Hell, he didn't have to go that far. I'll torch it myself before I let that faithless tramp set foot inside it again."

"Why are you doing this?" Annette asked, tears in her eyes.

"Because I like your family, darling," Rich stated with an amused grin. "Yes, Candy is a little uppity and self-centered just like you warned and Lars is too indulgent for his own good but so what? They're good people and it doesn't feel right, letting them have the wrong idea about us. I don't want them to trash me if I'm not around the next time

they visit and I don't want you to hear a list of what you did to chase me off after we're done with each other. Besides, I want them to understand why I can think it's so cute that you cried over the Wicked Witch of the West being so misunderstood."

The conversation lapsed when their dinner arrived. For the next few minutes, they focused on their meals. Rich had to hide his satisfied smile when he saw Annette was having difficulty eating. He also felt smug for handing Candace the perfect opening to condemn them again. Lars had to be ecstatic over the opportunity Rich was certain she wouldn't be able to resist.

"Hmm," Rich finally spoke. "Guess I was wrong about thinking you'd prefer honesty. I'll ask the waiter if there's room for me at the bar and let you get back to your celebration. I'm sorry that I put such a damper on it for you."

Unexpectedly, Lars began to chuckle. Soon it grew into a full-bodied laugh which he didn't even try to contain.

"Lars," Candace hissed in horror.

"Wait." He held up a hand for patience. After a few moments, he was somewhat under control. "Forgive me, dear. You too, Annette. I do realize that there's absolutely nothing funny about this but I can't help it. When I pictured you, Rich, I formed the image of a typical salesman, no offense intended."

"None taken."

"Thank you. I assumed you'd be somewhat officious, a little pompous and cocky, self-important since you're apparently successful and able to make it seem like you agreed with whatever any of us said."

"As many salesmen do."

"Exactly." Lars was pleased with Rich's reaction. "You're not at all what I expected and I must admit how glad I am that I was so wrong about you."

Rich nodded. "Then I must admit that tonight has been a pleasant surprise for me too."

"Well, honestly," Candace began with a huff.

"Candace." Lars covered her hand. "Before you start, let me remind you that Rich is Annette's chosen escort in addition to our host. She mustn't have a problem with what they're doing together or he wouldn't be here with her. Not everyone needs or wants a relationship like ours to be happy."

Rich watched as Candace accepted Lars' hidden meaning. "You're right," she agreed, stunning them all. "Annette, if you prefer to settle for a dead-end thrill with a married man that's your business. Just as it's his if he chooses to use his failed marriage and lack of divorce to avoid the responsibilities of a committed relationship."

"Gee, Candy, why don't you tell us what you really think," Rich requested blandly. "I'm sure we could all benefit from your perfection."

"How dare you, you son of a bitch!" Candace sputtered as Lars choked with renewed amusement.

"Oh my God," Annette gasped. "You made her swear. I've never heard her swear in public before."

"Really? Want me to tease her some more? Maybe I can get her to say something worse," Rich offered.

"Don't." She rested her hand on his arm. "I don't think I could take twice in one night."

"Very funny." Candace glared, causing even more laughter. "You're both incorrigible."

"And you need to pull that stick out of your ass before you hurt yourself," Rich countered. "No wonder you were afraid to tell her we're just using each other for hot sex, Nettie."

Annette blushed and squirmed nervously as his comment coincided with the waiter's arrival. "Please, can't we talk about something else? Tell us about your plans for the Cape," she pleaded to her sister.

Rich took pity on the woman he had so effectively turned the tables on and let the conversation drift to less embarrassing topics. He didn't let her off the hook completely, however. He didn't want her feeling too confident since he was far from finished with her. While they consumed the rest of their meals, Rich deliberately touched Annette whenever possible. When she tried to separate herself from him, he hooked his leg around her ankle to trap her close to him and forced her feet apart. He thought the unexpected move might crack her shell but she quickly pulled the mask back into place and continued to conceal her true motives.

* * * * *

"It was awfully nice of you to suggest this," Lars commented as he surveyed the luxurious lounge in the Marriott where the younger couple was staying. "Can you believe we've never been here?"

"Honestly, no." Rich winked. "I love the decadence of slipping off to a hotel for an assignation. Now that the tigers are old enough to do without Nettie overnight, I plan on exploring all the local hotels with her." He flashed a seductive smile at her startled face. Leaning forward to kiss her cheek, he managed to hide the way his fingers brushed the side of her breast. "Order our cognac, darling. If you'll excuse me for a moment?"

Rich released a chuckle as he strolled toward the restrooms. Tonight was shaping up nicely, so much better than he'd anticipated. The stupid bitch was too stubborn for her own good. No matter how many openings he provided for her to admit her attempt to scam him, she'd refused to take one. That was fine with him and getting finer by the moment. He had been too furious when he first saw her to bother taking a good look at her. Once he'd calmed down, he'd noticed that she was very attractive in a subdued way. Her dress was shapeless and completely wrong for her but Rich had studied her closely throughout the evening and suspected that she had plenty of curves in all the

right places. If she persisted in maintaining her ploy, he had every intention of taking full advantage of her in every way imaginable. Repeatedly.

"Find anything useful?" Rich asked after he confirmed that he and his friend Dan were the only two in the men's room.

"Not a damned thing," Dan stated. "Not even Monica's number on her computer. You get any answers from her?"

"Nope. Silly twit tried to convince me that she made me up to get her hateful bitch of a big sister off her back for not having a man in her life," Rich snorted. "But get this. The second the old hag hauled the bitch off to the john, the little dough boy begged me to overlook her snootiness because she's only acting that way so he'll punish her later."

"No fucking way!"

"Oh yeah. He says she likes all the standard props but really gets off when he uses the cane on her bony ass."

"Well, hell. Guess it really does take all kinds, huh? Anything else?"

"Nothing and I pushed her hard. I gave her plenty of chances to spill it. I almost thought I had her when I told her sister that we were only together for the sex but she didn't cave."

"No shit."

"Nope. Didn't back down even though I made sure the waiter overheard all of it."

Dan chuckled. "Hey, maybe this isn't about you. Maybe Monica screwed around with her man and she's using you to get back at them."

"Fine by me."

"What, you gonna fuck her?"

"Sure. She's got a decent face and from what she's let me feel so far, a body to match." He shrugged at Dan's sharp inhalation. "Don't even try to bullshit me and pretend you wouldn't do the same thing in my position."

"Hell no but hold up and say that first part again. I don't think I heard you right."

"You heard me just fine. I've been groping her all night and she hasn't pushed me away once so I doubt she'll need much persuading."

"Too bad for you."

"Yeah maybe. Or maybe not. Maybe I'll hold out and make her persuade me. Don't give me that look. You didn't feel her shiver or see her nipple pop out just now when I was barely touching her tit."

"Shit! Tell me more. Is it big? You know how much I love tits with huge nipples," Dan groaned. "You are the luckiest damn son of a bitch."

"I know it but don't I deserve something for being stuck with Monica?"

"And whose fault is that? I warned you but did you listen?"

"Mine, mine and only mine. You don't have to say it again, Dan. You were right about her and I was an idiot and an asshole not to pay attention when you were trying

to save me. You have no idea how many times I wished I'd listened to you when you told me I'd be making the biggest mistake of my life if I didn't run for the hills while I still had the chance."

"Yeah, yeah, you can thank me for sticking with you even though you ignored me which nearly wrecked your life, by giving me all the juicy details on the plane. I doubt I'll see you before then if you really do nail this bitch. Bite her tits for me. Hard."

"Will do, bud." Rich laughed and took the key Dan had picked up for him. "Give me a minute and walk by the table. I'll see if I can get those puppies sticking out for you."

"Gee thanks. Can't you fuck her unconscious and let me suck them raw instead?"

"Not real likely but for you, I'll give it my best shot," Rich promised and returned to his group.

Sliding his chair against Annette's, Rich twisted her in front of him for a hard kiss. He angled her body so her family couldn't see his hand covering her breast. He smothered her startled gasp with the kiss and then again when he ended the grope with a quick tug on her nipple after he spied Dan approaching out of the corner of his eye.

"Miss me?" he asked wickedly as he released her, blatantly staring at her stiffened peak. He almost tweaked it again when Dan masked his envious groan with a cough as he passed close to their table.

"Rich." Annette crossed her arms in embarrassment.

"What's the problem, Nettie? It's no big secret what we'll be doing soon. And I'm all but positive that Lars and Miss Candy Cane will be involved in something similar."

"Oh my God." She was mortified.

Rich let his amusement show. "Time to grow up and get over it, darling. Your big sister already knows we're only in this for the sex and we all saw how perky your nipples got when I kissed you just now. Frankly, I think they'd be more shocked if you weren't aroused at the moment."

"Stop." Annette gulped.

"No, you stop. It's fairly dark so no one else can see how your puppy noses are begging for attention. And I'm willing to bet that Lars noticed that great tits run in your family years ago. Look at your sister. She's not cowering and hiding her nipples like a bashful little girl. No, she's sitting up straight and displaying herself for anyone who might come close enough. I'm sure Lars is enjoying the view and not ashamed that his wife is aroused in our presence."

"That really is enough," Candace snapped. "Just ignore him, Annette. Put your arms down and stop drawing attention to yourself. We are adults whose bodies are having an entirely natural reaction. Unfortunately, you are with a juvenile Neanderthal who has forgotten he is no longer in high school. Lars," she slapped the table in front of her husband, "it's getting late and I think we should be going. We have an early

morning tomorrow and I will leave without you rather than sit around waiting for you to roll out of bed because you didn't have the sense to know when to say goodnight."

Lars smiled weakly and drained his glass. "Yes, dear. Thank you both for the celebration. It was great to finally meet you, Rich. I hope to see you again."

Rich stood and shook his hand. "Same to you. Candy Cane," he stunned her with a noisy, wet kiss, "it's been real." When she flashed him a look of pure disgust and turned away, Rich snickered and gave Lars an exaggerated wink with a leer. "Enjoy the rest of your anniversary, folks, and don't worry about poor little Nettie. She's in good hands, I promise."

Annette swatted his arm in horror and squeaked. "Thanks for inviting us to share this tonight. Have fun at the Cape. Candace, call me when you get home."

Candace kissed the air near Annette's cheek and leaned close to her ear. "He may look nice in that expensive suit and have a bit of charm when he chooses to but I do hope you get him out of your system soon, Annette. That man is no gentleman. You could do much better if you would only put some effort into it."

Annette sank back into her seat with a stricken look on her face as she watched her sister sweep regally from the lounge with her husband scurrying in her wake. She had been so stupid earlier when she decided that actually having a date for an evening with her sister would be better than spending the time solo. Of course, it might have been better if her date wasn't a complete stranger and an insane one at that. Not to mention the fact that he seemed determined to humiliate her in every way possible and spoke to Candace so rudely. And it couldn't have helped that he considered her to be some vile lowlife out to get him. What the hell ever possessed her to keep her mouth shut and not confess her lie to Candace at the very beginning? It was beyond her at the moment.

"That went rather well." Rich drew her from her thoughts. "A very successful evening."

Annette sputtered and choked and finally gulped her unwanted cognac, coughing as the liquid burned its way down her throat. "Successful!" she squawked. "Hello. Were you with us at all tonight?"

Rich signaled for refills and got comfortable before he responded. "Every second once I discovered we had a date. Sorry I was late but I'm sure you understand since I had no prior knowledge of our plans."

"Who are you?" Annette asked with renewed frustration.

His reply was delayed when the waitress arrived with their drinks. She gave Rich a suggestive glance and pressed her breast against his shoulder as she leaned over dramatically to place Annette's snifter in front of her. "Will there be anything else?" she asked, straightening but not breaking contact as she accepted his money.

Rich smiled as he covered the hand Annette fisted on the table and forced it open to link their fingers. "No but thank you. I have everything I need."

"I'm here all night if your needs change." She pressed into him briefly and walked away with her hips swaying much more than necessary.

Rich laughed at the expression on Annette's face. He was definitely occupied for the rest of the night if her possessive frown was any indication. As curious as he was about whatever scheme Monica had concocted which had brought them together, he would be extremely disappointed if she suddenly relented and told him everything. Those details could wait until morning or perhaps late afternoon after her body was too raw to stand any additional stimulation.

Annette realized Rich was watching her and pulled herself together. "I must say you surprise me, not taking her up on that."

"Why's that, darling?" He toyed with her palm.

"She obviously wants to sleep with you. And you seem just as interested in sex. She's what men always go for, tall, blonde, legs right up to her big boobs. Why'd you turn her down?"

Rich stared. After an uncomfortable pause, he shook himself and smiled. "Simple. I don't make plans with one woman when I'm with another."

"But you're not with anyone. Not for real anyway."

"Nettie," he sighed and kissed her palm, "what am I going to do with you?"

"Tell me who you really are and why you showed up tonight?"

"Sure. Right after you tell me who you really are and what you're setting me up for." He swirled his cognac. "But back to what we were discussing, I may not be looking for a long-term commitment but I expect my relationships to be exclusive however long they last."

"Mm, right. A great-looking guy like you with a voice that could melt butter, who wears expensive, tailored suits, able to hold his own with anyone, who also travels constantly and you expect me to believe that you don't get offers like that everywhere you go? You've been pawing me all night and saying all sorts of things with double meanings."

"What's your point?"

"You're a man. You spend a lot of time away from home in different hotels. You have unlimited opportunities. You figure it out."

"Ah, I get it. I'm a traveling salesman who women find attractive so therefore I am incapable of resisting whatever's offered everywhere I am and must screw around with countless women continually, probably several different ones every night. Is that what you think?"

"Well, not exactly but okay, yeah."

He scowled. "You have a lot to learn about me. Not that I'm surprised since Monica never bothered to get to know me. For what it's worth, I do not cheat. I've learned that commitments are nonexistent pipedreams and that there are no relationships beyond the casual, but I have never and will never have more than one partner at a time. It's disrespectful and just plain wrong."

"If you say so." She shrugged.

Rich caught her chin and forced her to look at him. "I do say so. Every word of it is true. No matter how long I'm away or how horny I may get, I do not cheat. With phones and email there are plenty of ways to have extended foreplay while I'm traveling. It's called anticipation and personally, I find it very erotic and something that helps make the wait worth it. Monica, however, never shared my point of view. In fact, she never even bothered to give it a try. No, she always made sure my side of the bed stayed nice and warm whether I was home or not. Too bad I didn't figure that out until after I married her."

"I'm sorry," Annette whispered softly.

Rich snorted. "Course you are, darling. So sorry you're hanging on to your act long after you got tagged."

"It's not an act," Annette pleaded with him to believe her. "I told you I made you up. I didn't know you were real or that you'd be here. You were supposed to stand me up so Candace would tell me to break up with you. I was going to follow her advice and then be so upset over losing you that I couldn't possibly consider dating anyone else for months to get me off the hook with her."

"Right. You'd go to all that trouble instead of just telling her to back off and butt out of your life."

"You don't know my sister."

"I know more than enough. Tell me the rest."

"There is no rest. I swear there isn't. I don't know how you got caught up in this and I'm sorry you did. I'm sorry it interrupted your night and I'm sorry that you think there's more to it but there really isn't. Call it twisted fate or bad luck or rotten karma or whatever you want but until you sat down I honestly had no idea there really was a Michael Richards more commonly known as Rich. I didn't. I am not lying to you. Really I'm not. This is all some weird, mixed-up coincidence and I'm sorry you wound up in the middle of it. I still don't understand how any of this happened but I am truly sorry it did."

"I think you're sorry it blew up in your face and you didn't get to do whatever it was you were supposed to do. You're sorry because you have to go home and tell Monica that you failed and she'll have to come up with some other way to annoy me. You're sorry because you know what a bitch she'll be and that she'll take it out on you even if her plan was lame and not likely to work in the first place."

Annette was shaking her head the whole time. "I don't know your wife or you or any of what's going on between you. Please, why can't you believe me?"

"Because you're lying to me and I hate liars. I'm sick and tired of that woman trying to screw me and I've let this whole mess drag out for too long. It has to stop and it has to stop now. Why don't you just tell me what you were trying to do and get it over with because I will find out, one way or another. Make it easy for yourself. If you tell me, I won't hold it against you. Who knows? I may even decide to help you deal with Monica's wrath instead of tossing you back to the wolf. You seem like you're a nice

woman so I don't understand how she coerced you into going along with all this but whatever your reason was, you're only making it worse for yourself by not dropping it."

"I don't believe this is happening," she muttered and gulped her drink.

Rich watched Annette stare miserably at the table and wondered what hold Monica had on her to make her persist as she was. When she closed her eyes and sighed, he switched her empty glass for his almost full one and nudged it toward her.

"Drink up," he urged. "I think it's time to call it a night."

Annette's eyes filled with hope as she took his suggestion and drained the glass. "You're going to let me go? You believe me? Oh thank you."

Rich chuckled. "Hell no. Well, let me revise that. I believe parts of your story, like your sister and her husband aren't involved and today really is their anniversary but that's about it. I'm tired of sitting here and I'm ready to get out of this suit but this conversation is far from over." He threw a few dollars on the table and captured her hand. "Come on."

Chapter Three

"You don't have to walk me all the way to my room," Annette protested when he stepped out of the elevator with her. "I promised I'd meet you for breakfast and I will be there. I verified my room number for you by asking the desk clerk if I had any messages, didn't I? I even gave you my wallet."

"Yes but what difference does knowing what room you're in make? And credit cards and driver's licenses are easy to replace. For all I know they're fakes and you'll be out of here as soon as I turn my back although I do doubt that they are and I do believe that I'll see you at breakfast. Besides, I'm not walking you to your room. I'm going to mine."

When Annette's mouth fell open after his card unlocked what she believed to be her room, Rich had to bite his lip to contain his laughter. He reached inside and flipped on the light.

"Is there a problem, Nettie?"

"What are you doing? I don't understand. Why do you have a key to my room?"

Rich guided her into the room and closed the door behind her. "You must be confused because I assure you, this is my room." He gestured to the clothes Dan had hung in the closet with hers. "Or should I say our room?"

"But this isn't possible. There's no way this is really happening. I must be dreaming," she muttered, desperate to convince herself by touching one of his jackets. Next she wandered around the room and opened the dresser drawers, clearly in denial at what she found. "But I don't feel like I'm dreaming. Why is this happening to me? What are you going to do to me? I don't even know you. I'm not a bad person. I just didn't want to listen to Candace go on and on about how pitiful my life is because I'm still single. The only thing I ever lie about and this happens. I'm not hurting anybody. I didn't steal anything. Hell, I'm the one who took the extra money back to the grocery store when the cashier gave me too much change so she wouldn't get into trouble. Doesn't that count for something?" She sank to the floor and cried into her hands. "I swear I'll tell Candace everything. I'll listen to every lecture she gives me from now on if you'll just go away."

Rich ignored the doubts forming in the corners of his mind while he removed his jacket and tie. He took his time unbuttoning the top few buttons of his shirt and rolling up his sleeves. Stalling in hope of avoiding her tears, he slipped off his shoes and socks and went into the bathroom to splash his face. He had to give Monica credit for enlisting such a talented actress. The woman was damned good, staying in character the way she was. He needed to keep reminding himself that it was all a ploy so he didn't get sucked in and begin believing she was as innocent as she claimed to be.

"All right, that's enough," Rich told her as he lifted her to her feet. "Much as I hate to see a woman cry, tears aren't going to change a thing so you can knock it off now."

He could tell Annette was fighting hard to stop without success and gave in to the impulse to wrap her shaking body in a gentle embrace. At first, she was stiff as a board but she relaxed once he began to stroke her back with soothing caresses. His arms tightened when she slid hers around his waist and slumped against him.

"I'm sorry," Annette whispered into his chest when her emotions were under control.

"Sh." Rich pressed her head back where it had been and refused to let her pull away. "I'm not really a beast, Nettie. I'm furious with Monica for using you and putting us in this position. I'm pissed as hell at you for protecting her but I guess you have your reasons. I'm sure you believe they're good ones even though they're completely wrong and it's a huge mistake to go along with her but I could never hurt you."

"You'll let me go?"

"No, not yet. I still think I can get you to see that you'll be better off if you explain this to me."

"But I already did. There isn't anything else."

"Sh." Rich cuddled her close again. "Let's drop it for now. We're going around in circles and I need a break. We can get back to it at breakfast like we planned to."

"I can't stay here with you."

"Sure you can. I've told you I won't hurt you. Your stuff is unpacked and it's late."

"But I don't know you. I can't stay with you."

"Nice try but forget it, darling." He unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and tugged it from his pants. "As I see it you have two choices. One, you can do this the easy way and stay put like a sensible little girl or two, you can do this the hard way and run out of here screaming about being held against your will by some stranger. Just keep in mind if you do bolt, I'll be forced call your sister to verify who I am. I'd hate to interrupt the rest of their anniversary but hey, I don't mind if you don't." He crossed to the dresser and grabbed a pair of shorts. "You think about it while I take a shower. I'm leaving the door open so you won't make it very far if you decide to chance it but you go ahead and do whatever you have to do."

Rich fully expected Annette to attempt to sneak out while he showered. Before he stepped into the oversized tub, he took advantage of one of the amenities of the fancy hotel she had chosen and angled the hinged mirrors so he had a view of the doorway without soaking the entire bathroom. He was torn between the anticipated challenge of breaking down her resistance until he got the explanation he sought and the expression he was sure he'd see on her face if he needed to prove their relationship and offered a description of her sister's sexual tendencies as that proof. He was still undecided as he shaved after his unhurried shower.

Wearing only a pair of navy blue silk boxers, Rich returned to the spacious room. His sarcastic comment went unsaid when he saw Annette huddled in one of the chairs. She had positioned it to face the wall and was curled up with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her head was lowered but he was still able to see that her eyes were closed as if to make doubly sure she had no chance of seeing him.

"Bravo." He forced away the fleeting feeling that he had misread their situation and concentrated on his certainty that she had some ulterior motive supplied by his wife. "If I didn't already know better, I'd believe you are the one being victimized. Too bad for you we both know that's not true."

Rich busied himself with hanging his discarded clothes. When he turned back to Annette, he saw a tear slide down her cheek and grew frustrated. "A word of advice, darling," he sneered. "Don't overplay the waterworks. It's not only tiresome but extremely annoying since you already know it isn't going to work."

He tugged her chair to face the bed before settling himself on it. "Come on, Nettie. Let's see what else is in your repertoire."

Annette's head rose and she met his gaze, still blinking back her tears. "Why do you keep calling me that?"

"What? Nettie?" She nodded. "Isn't it a standard nickname for Annette? Hmm, guess that means you go by Annie. I did consider that at first but you look more like a Nettie to me." He shrugged.

"I don't use either. My name is Annette. Just Annette."

Rich studied her suspiciously. "Oh? Why? No offense but Annette is too stuffy for you. I suppose that means your sister uses Candace all the time too." Again, she nodded. "Figures but that's just too damn bad. If anyone needs to be knocked off her high horse, it's that sister of yours." He chuckled as he remembered Lars' admission. "Or am I the only one to bring out the worst in her?"

"No, that's pretty much Candace. Always has been too and I never understood why. Mom and Dad aren't like that."

"What's with the names then?" Rich had to remind himself not to be fooled by this new tactic.

"Grandmothers." She suddenly frowned. "Is that it? Did Candace find out that I was pretending to be involved with someone and hire you to teach me a lesson? God, I'm stupid. I should have known she'd do something like this. When's she coming to rub in my face what can happen when I don't tell her the truth?"

This time, Rich clapped. "Excellent," he declared. "Switch gears and turn me into the imposter. What's next?"

Annette closed her eyes and shook her head sadly without responding. Another tear escaped.

"Getting old, darling," Rich stated. "Tell you what. Why don't you go take a shower and get comfy while you think about what trick you want to try next?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine." Her lip quivered. "Please tell me why you sat down with us. I was watching the door like I was expecting someone and I saw you come in so I know you weren't there before you joined us."

"Ah, going for the stubborn angle this time." He grinned. "Okay, I'll play along for now. To avoid a stalemate, since I can guarantee that I am equally stubborn, I propose we make a deal. For everything you give me, I'll give you something in return."

"Like what?"

"Like you get ready for bed and I tell you how I knew you were waiting for me."

"Why should I go first? Why don't you tell me and then I'll take the shower that I don't want?"

"Simple. You're already busted so I get to make the rules. Also, I have this particular bit of information so you need to earn it in order to get it."

"You have all the information. I already gave you all of mine."

"Hey, nice touch, adding in a pinch of innocence here." He paused expectantly. "Well? I'm waiting." She didn't move. "Oh for Christ's sake! You've wanted out of that ugly dress all night so stop being ridiculous and get a move on before I get bored."

Annette's jaw dropped. "Y-you think my dress is ugly?"

Rich roared with amusement. "Finally. An honest reaction. I knew there was a real woman lurking in there somewhere. How typical too. Cool as a cucumber until your vanity is under attack and then you go all prickly." She gasped. "And hell yes, I think it's ugly. Makes you look like a shapeless blob which you're definitely not. Now don't get snippy with me, darling. It just proves my point that you're not comfortable dressed as you are. No, I'd guess you much prefer more casual attire. Stuff that doesn't require pantyhose and heels. Am I right?"

"Yes," she admitted meekly.

"Hey, I'm putting you down so you can skip the pouting. There's nothing wrong with finding certain social uniforms distasteful. Hell, there are days when I'd give my left nut to never wear another suit as long as I live."

"But you looked so good in it."

"Why thank you, darling. So nice of you to notice," he chuckled when she got flustered. "But looking good in an expensive suit, yes, you guessed correctly earlier, doesn't change the fact that I'd only put one on when there was absolutely no way to avoid it if my job didn't require it. Okay, enough stalling. Unless you're waiting for my assistance. Is that it?"

"No," she shrieked, leaping to her feet. Much to his amusement, Annette scurried around the room, searching for the clothes Dan had moved to create space for his. At the bathroom door, she hesitated and turned back to him. "I'll be closing the door. Please feel free to pack your things and leave. I promise not to come after you now or in the future so there is no need to fear that you'd have to bother yourself with me ever again."

He let out a hearty laugh. "Now that's priceless. Thanks but no thanks. I'm good right where I am. Don't take all night or I might think something's happened to you and be forced to break down the door for your own safety."

Annette sputtered and disappeared into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. In an act of insane defiance, she decided not to lock it. She had no doubt that he could break through it if he chose to. Maybe he'd try and end up hurting himself in the process, proving that there was something wrong with him because there wouldn't have been any real need for it since the door wasn't locked in the first place. She grumbled when her nail punctured the pantyhose she'd purchased specifically for this night. She hated the way she was grasping at ridiculous straws. She knew he'd still be lounging on the bed when she finished just as he said, unless she was truly stupid enough to attempt to hide in there forever. No, doing so would only make him madder and that was something she desperately wanted to prevent since she was already petrified of whatever he had planned before he released her.

Chapter Four

Giving the belt one last tug to make doubly sure it was tied securely around her waist, Annette left the relatively safe haven of the bathroom. She took in the greatly diminished lighting even before she was fully into the room. The bed had been turned down and Rich was now partly beneath the covers. His bare chest was visible and his posture gave the appearance of being thoroughly relaxed. The fleeting peek she permitted herself of his face was enough to determine that he was watching her with a lazy grin. If this were a movie, Annette would have found the scene extremely sexy. As it was, however, the setting only served to heighten her trepidation.

"Feel better?" Rich asked innocently as Annette nervously tucked away her clothes.

"No." She jumped at the broken silence.

"What are you doing all the way over there?" he questioned after she claimed the chair farthest from the bed.

"Waiting for you to tell me why you came to our table like you said you would. I did my part of the deal."

Rich chuckled. "Nice try. Now come here." He patted the bed next to him.

"No!"

"Don't tell me you're going to make every little thing a struggle. I already told you I can be just as stubborn as you. Unless you booked this room for the next month, I recommend you forget the resistance and show me how accommodating you can be."

"I can't get in bed with you," she insisted when he repeated the gesture.

"Sure you can, darling. And you will. The only question is how. Will you stop behaving like an annoying prude and stretch out so we can relax while we chat or are you going to force me to come get you? I'm comfortable so getting up will piss me off but it might be worth it if you're planning to struggle so much I need to tie you in place. I'd hate to crease my nice ties but what the hell. Sacrificing a few ties is barely worth bitching about when it's for such a good cause."

Annette scowled as she stomped to the bed and perched on the very edge of the mattress. She wished she were on top of the blanket but knew Rich would never release the cover he was holding up for her. "There. Happy now?"

"Hardly." Rich glowered.

Annette didn't have a chance to resist when Rich grabbed her and pulled her to the center of her half of the bed. He raised her head to stuff a pillow beneath it after tucking the covers around her. Other than her surprised squeal at his first touch, she didn't make a sound as she lay rigidly where he positioned her.

"Well, I guess great tits aren't the only things that run in your family."

"What!" Annette gasped, snapping her eyes to his.

"I didn't notice it before but you have a stick up your ass too, just like Candy's."

"You're horrible!"

"Yeah. Right. I'm horrible for wanting us to be comfortable and not have to shout across the room at each other while we discuss our options. I'd rather be horrible like me than a frigid bitch like you turned out to be." He paused thoughtfully. "Oh. Pardon me. I just assumed you weren't a timid virgin and—"

Annette almost choked on her indignation as she rolled to face him. "Why you, you...how dare you! I'll have you know I am not a virgin! I haven't been a virgin for years and..." she sputtered into silence when she saw his amusement.

"Hallelujah!" He watched her befuddled expression as he shifted into a more comfortable position. "Settle down, Nettie. I'm just helping you let go of some of the tension you're hoarding, not insulting you. I won't make you admit how much better this is so don't go all righteous on me, okay? You might tense up again and then I'll have to find another way to loosen you up." She gulped. "It's all right. You can thank me later."

"You are such a-a jerk!"

"And you're an ungrateful twit, calling me names when I'm worrying about your comfort." He pressed his fingertip to her lips. "I wouldn't if I were you. If you say something too nasty, you'll negate our deal and I won't tell you anything."

Annette opened and closed her mouth several times before clamping it shut. *How dare he? Who the hell did he think he was, twisting things to suit himself like that! Calling him a jerk had been much too nice.* No, she should have said overbearing asshole but even that was kinder than he deserved.

"Fine." She unclenched her teeth to give him a sickly sweet smile. "It's so thoughtful of you, being concerned for me."

Rich grinned. "Sarcasm. I like that. I'm sure there's plenty more where that came from but if you can hold off a sec, I think you've earned some information." His grin widened when she bit her lip to silence her next comment. "Yep. I figured that would get your attention. Okay, here it is. My buddy Dan and I planned to hook up in that bar this evening only not until later. We've been friends since we were kids. He's in sales too, not with the same company but when we can, we arrange our trips to coincide. Contrary to popular opinion, some of being a salesman isn't all it's cracked up to be. Very few clients become more than business acquaintances and traveling constantly can, at times, be lonely and depressing for those who aren't interested in taking advantage of the opportunities we discussed downstairs. Anyway, Dan's last meeting was canceled, which I'm sure was Monica's doing and..."

"How could she do that?" Annette asked, curious in spite of herself.

"Oh please." Rich raised an eyebrow. "You know her. How could you miss what a manipulative bitch she is? I'm sure this wasn't even much of a challenge. Now as I was saying, Dan's last appointment bailed so, like a good little pawn, he headed for the bar,

hoping to bump into someone we had crossed paths with before and find some conversation while he waited for me, thus making him available to overhear your little spiel. Again, as Monica predicted, he used our old phone signal to alert me that something was up so I would contact him as soon as possible.”

“Oh no,” Annette groaned as she remembered all she had said to her sister and brother-in-law.

“Oh yes. Imagine my surprise when I learned I was running late for an anniversary party date with the woman I’ve been seeing for weeks and am very fond of.”

“I made it all up,” she mumbled.

“I know. And I must compliment you on the excellent story you and Monica created. Very believable or that’s what Dan said.”

“So he called and told you what he’d heard and you came running,” Annette concluded, mostly to herself.

“You got it.” Rich shifted closer. “What I haven’t figured out is what was supposed to happen. I mean, Monica has no concept of discretion so she has nothing to gain by setting me up with another woman. Maybe she expected me to go ballistic and cause an ugly scene, hoping someone would call the cops on me. That might embarrass me but it certainly wouldn’t do any real damage. Dan suggested that you may have lost your man to the tramp and thought you’d have sex with me to get even with them but I don’t think so since you’d need her help to know where I’d be not to mention the fact that she wouldn’t notice or care since it’s likely that she’s already moved on and forgotten your man.” He leaned forward and cupped her face, caressing her cheek with his thumb. “If that is the plan, I recommend you stick to it. Maybe I’m wrong. They might be pining away so us getting together would hurt them.” He dipped his head and kissed her. “Yeah, this’ll work. We better get started so we don’t need to exaggerate when we tell them about all the different ways we fucked tonight.”

“No! Stop,” Annette cried, pushing against his chest.

Rich draped a leg over hers and pressed his arm to her upper body as his hand held her head in place. “Mm.” He nibbled on her lip. “That’s good.” He licked the same spot. “Fight me so we can honestly say we tried to resist each other,” he encouraged, forcing his tongue between her lips.

Annette had no idea how it happened. One second she was pushing her hands against Rich’s shoulders to stop the insanity and the next she was clutching those same shoulders to hold him to her, urging him to continue. His persistent tongue explored her mouth and she heard a moan. It suddenly dawned on her that the sound came from her and she decided she was even more insane than he was. What was wrong with her, letting – no, encouraging – a complete stranger to ravish her mouth? And how could it possibly feel so amazing when his only reason for kissing her was to punish her for her role in some nonexistent plot? The miniscule portion of Annette’s mind that was still functioning snagged her attention. She had to end this before it got totally out of hand.

Every nerve in her body screamed in protest as Annette freed her mouth from his demanding plunder. She twisted her head to the side and fought both of them when Rich sought to recapture her. "Stop it! Just stop it! Get off me!" This time she remembered she was supposed to push him away.

"Still playing?" Rich sneered. He flopped back where he had been and rubbed his hand over his face. Eventually he sighed, focusing on her with a cold stare. "Great strategy. Let me applaud you, darling. A perfect balance of teasing and indignation. Can't wait to see what you have up your sleeve for the next round."

Annette meant to slip from the bed but was halted by Rich's hand clamping around her arm. A quick glance at his face warned her not to make demands. "Rich, please. This is not a game. I know how it seems but I swear this really is just an unbelievable coincidence."

"Unbelievable being the key word here."

Instead of letting herself crumble and curl into a protective ball, Annette met Rich's eyes. Throughout the evening, her emotions had gone full circle. Now her strongest feeling was overwhelming sadness. She should have known something like this would occur when she foolishly chose to carry on with the farce she'd created to spare herself from a few sisterly lectures. Fate had stepped in to twist things and the joke was now on her. If she had met Rich under any other circumstances, she would have been extremely attracted to him. Hell, she was anyway, never mind that he was a paranoid lunatic who refused to accept the truth even though it was staring him right in the face. Never mind that he was currently holding her hostage in bed with very little clothing to shield her from his rage-filled leer.

If only things were different. Then Annette wouldn't be shaking with fear although at the moment it was more a fear of her reaction to him than the man himself. She wouldn't be fighting to hold back the panic that had threatened to swallow her for hours. No, she'd be following her body's instincts and giving in to the desire he inspired. She'd be lost in kisses that were so incredible they left her breathless and incoherent. She'd explore every inch of his yummy body until there wasn't a spot that she hadn't touched and tasted. Rich's knowing grin drew her from her demented daydream, reminding her of her precarious position. She had to keep him talking until she managed to figure out how to escape without him kissing her again.

"Okay, this Dan guy filled you in on what he heard so you could bluff your way through those parts. How did you know so much about the tigers? We didn't talk about them before you got there."

"Why does your sister lecture you about your life? Is there something wrong with it?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with it! There doesn't have to be for Candace to spout off about it. That's just how she is."

Rich shook his head. "Nope. Not good enough."

"For what?"

"For you to earn the answer to your question. I need a more detailed explanation first."

"Man, you're not going to quit, are you? But okay, fine. Not that this is any of your business but Candace assumes everyone wants to be just like her. She can't accept that I like my life just fine the way it is."

"And how is that? What's so different about yours?"

"Candace graduated with a degree in art history and uses it to help with her husband's flourishing antique business. I took five and a half years to get a business degree that I have no interest in. If I hadn't felt so guilty about the money my parents invested in me, I probably wouldn't have bothered to finish school."

"They pressured you?"

"Candace pressured me. Mom and Dad never nagged me about school. They figured I'd get around to taking the last few classes eventually. They're always much more concerned with whether or not I'm happy with myself than a piece of paper that isn't important for what I'm doing."

"Where are they?"

"Home. Skippack. In the same house they bought when they got married thirty-one years ago."

"And where is Skippack?"

"Not too far from Philly but far enough to seem like the middle of nowhere. It's a cute little town with an old-fashioned main street, you know, lots of big houses with wraparound porches and shutters on windows that are two feet too long, old trees, shady yards, flower boxes. There's a neighborhood bar at one end that serves typical bar food, a snooty bar at the other with a menu to match and an old hotel with hearty, family-style dinners in the middle."

"Sounds like a nice place. Lazy and relaxing."

"Yeah but I haven't told you why Skippack is unique. There's a town festival every weekend from early spring through New Year's that all the houses on the main drag participate in. Just about every first floor is open for the hordes of tourists to wander through and buy whatever junk is set out to reflect the theme of the week. The town rents out space in the park to circuit vendors and food stands. Wait." She frowned. "I'm making it sound trashy and it isn't. It's not a freak show, carnival type of thing. It's all very homey and small-town. I shouldn't call the stuff junk either because the majority of it isn't a rip-off. It's nice and the people who buy it are happy and that's what counts most, right? There's plenty of authentic stuff if you take the time to look for it. Nothing's cheap but nobody really gouges either. I guess everyone sort of keeps everyone else in line."

"Your parents are part of that?"

"In a way. Our house isn't in the center of town but they own half of the cozy bar. That's why they moved there in the first place, to go in on it with some friends of theirs."

It was a great way to grow up or it was for me. Candace didn't approve of me then either. Our parents always told me to let it go in one ear and out the other and not let the things she said get to me because the only opinion that truly mattered was my own. They've always been very supportive of both of us and said that they'd be proud of us no matter what we do as long as we're happy doing it."

"So how'd you end up where you are?"

"Candace lives for art. New York's where she always wanted to be so of course she went to college there. Lars already had his shop in Manhattan when they met so there was no question of her staying once they got together." Annette chuckled. "Poor guy. I don't think he had any idea what he was getting himself into when he asked her to show him around the town that first day."

"They met in Skippack?"

"Yep. Lars specializes in eclectic antiques. He opened the store when he realized that he had way too much stuff for his apartment but couldn't stop bringing home more. He loves flea markets and local stores in little towns and has always had trouble resisting a treasure when he finds one. You wouldn't believe what some people will pay for the things that your grandparents have tucked away in the corner of their attic."

"What about you?"

"I think you need to tell me a little something first, as an incentive," she teased, shocking herself with her boldness. For an instant, she feared Rich's reaction but she peeked at him and saw amusement in his expression. "I gave you an extra by telling you about my parents and Skippack so I think I deserve a reward."

"And I think you're forgetting who is in charge of this game but I'll let it slide this time since you told me something I would have asked for later. I can't answer any questions until you answer mine but I'll give you an extra too. After we left for the theater, Dan took the key card I left on the partition between our booths and checked me out of my hotel. As expected, this room is in my name so he had no trouble talking his way in here to unpack for me. We met up in the men's room downstairs so I could get the key and give Dan a rundown on our evening."

For some reason the confirmation that some unknown man had rearranged her things upset her. "He was in here? He moved my stuff?"

As if he sensed her building panic, Rich rested his palm on her stomach. "Bit obvious, Nettie. How else could my shit be here?"

Annette was bogged down in his admission until she felt his thumb rubbing the bottom of her breast. She grabbed his hand and tried to force it from her but failed to do more than return it to her stomach.

Rich smirked. "I think Dan is a little jealous."

"Huh?"

"He has a thing for big nipples, the bigger the better."

"What? Are you saying..."

"That I told him I didn't think he'd be disappointed with yours?"

She groaned and loosened her grip on his hand without realizing it. "You didn't!"

"I did." Rich cupped her breast and thumbed her nipple. "I even gave him a little peek so he'd know I wasn't bullshitting him."

"You did what! How? What do you mean?"

"When I came back to the table," he boasted. "He was watching." Rich completed his statement with a repeat of the pinch he had given her in the lounge.

"Oh my God," Annette gasped in horror. She tried to squirm away and found herself trapped. "How dare you!"

"How dare me? How dare you! You are, after all, the one with the original script. I'm merely following your lead. And you're the one who was flashing those high beams at me most of the evening, including, I should point out, right now so spare me the mock outrage."

Annette sputtered speechlessly as she looked between his face and her unruly nipples. They were indeed on full alert and extremely visible through the silk of her camisole. Where was the thick robe that was supposed to be shielding her body from neck to ankle? When had the secure knot she had firmly tied in the sash come undone and how had it happened without her being aware of it?

"Ooh baby," Rich crooned as he fondled her. "Dan would be in heaven if he were in my place."

"Don't," Annette pleaded, grasping his wrist but not shoving him away.

"Save it," he snarled. "There's no way you can convince me that you're not as into this as I am. Not with the way your other nipple is reaching for me, begging for attention."

Annette was appalled by the truth of his words. Her traitorous body clearly didn't share her brain's objections to the man or the things he was currently doing. No, it was highly pleased with the unexpected turn of events and full of anticipation at the direction they were headed. For a minute, she permitted herself to stop hearing her common sense and listen to her hormones. She didn't resist when his mouth found hers or when his hand gave each of her mounds an equal share of stimulation.

"Sit up and get rid of the robe," Rich ordered as he nipped her earlobe.

His seductive voice startled Annette back to reality and she twisted to break the contact. "I-I thought you wanted to talk," she stuttered, feebly hiding her nipples beneath her unsteady hands.

"I do and we will but I think this play needs an intermission." She shook her head and tried to sink into the mattress. "Hmm, okay, here's the deal. You take off the robe yourself and I'll let you take it off completely. You force me to take it off and I'll make sure your arms stay trapped in the sleeves."

She shook her head. "Let's try you get back on your own side of the bed and keep your hands and everything else to yourself and I won't scream."

"How about you shut up and ditch the robe and I won't tie you down and gag you? Or does that run in your family too?"

Annette scowled with confusion. "Does what run in my family? What the hell are you talking about now?"

Rich grinned wickedly. "You're a long way from earning that particular piece of information, darling."

"You're bluffing," she insisted at his smug expression.

"I prefer to call it negotiating while you attempt to stall long enough to regroup but time's up." He flipped the lowered cover completely off and waited.

Slowly, Annette sat up. She trembled as she inched the thick cotton from her shoulders. "I wish you'd stop being such a brute. I don't want to do this. I don't want to be here. I don't want you to touch me."

"You'd be much more convincing if your nipples weren't about to poke through your top and your skin wasn't flushed with excitement. And you might want to stop staring at my mouth and licking your lips." He gently urged her rigid torso back to the bed. "Now this is more like it," he stated as he looked her over from head to toe. "Oh yeah, much better than that dowdy sack you were passing off as a dress." He brushed her side with a knuckle. "This your standard lingerie or did you get it special for our trip?"

She gasped. "That's none of your business."

"Course it is. As your lover, it's something I should know. What if, for instance, I decided to surprise you with a gift tomorrow? I'd hate to get you something that didn't suit your tastes. Why I'd probably even go so far to ensure that you'd be pleased that I'd call your sister and enlist her help."

"Oh you-you...God, you're so manipulative!"

"Isn't this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?" He rolled away from her and picked up the phone on the bedside table. "Give me a sec to get the number from information."

"No!" Annette shrieked as she lunged over him to grab for the receiver.

Rich dropped it in the cradle and snaked an arm around her to trap her sprawled over him. "Maybe it'll make it easier for you to answer if I tell you how much I love a woman who appreciates the feel of something delicate against her skin. I don't know if you noticed but I prefer to wear silk myself when I bother with underwear." He winked at her startled expression and shifted her body so she was more accessible. "Knowing that you were wearing something slinky under that rag tonight would have made it much more bearable. Well?"

Deciding her lingerie wasn't worth antagonizing him over, she replied, "It's all pretty much like this."

He nodded once in acknowledgement. "I bet you'd be real hot in nothing but your work boots and a few little strips of silk and lace barely covering you."

Annette had every intention of interrupting his inappropriate comments until his tongue thrust into her mouth the instant she opened it to speak. One hand slid from her back to her buttocks as the other roamed over her skin under her top. He was still kissing her when he rolled them over and kneaded her breast.

"No," she struggled, pushing without conviction against his unyielding chest until he captured her wrists with one hand and held them over her head.

"Sh." Rich soothed by licking her neck. "Take it easy. Intermission is almost over. Yep, there's just enough time for a quick tease." He silenced her with another kiss so she couldn't protest when his hand emerged from the top of her camisole and worked the thin straps from her shoulders. Only when he had her breasts exposed did he remove his arm from beneath her top in order to continue his exploration unhindered. "Damn, you're soft. And hard," he declared as he tweaked her nipple into a firm point. "Perfect," he announced, raising his head to watch his finger trace her wide areola.

Annette was in complete turmoil. Her will to escape was at odds with her desire to experience whatever Rich chose. She was torn equally but caution was once quickly overpowered by need. Her mind conceded the battle and her back arched, offering her flesh to the mouth that hovered mere inches above her.

"Mm." Rich accepted her invitation and closed his lips around her nipple. Teasingly, he sucked the distended nub gently in and out of his mouth.

"Oh please," she moaned, pushing herself higher.

"Begging already, darling?" he taunted.

Before his words could register, he caught her with his teeth. He nipped and tugged much harder than he meant to as her moans and gasps encouraged his actions. When she began to retreat, he switched to caressing with the tip of his tongue, adding in an occasional lick with both the flattened top and bottom of it. All the while his mouth was devouring the nearest orb, his hand was busy with the other. Annette whimpered his name and Rich went wild. He pinched her almost cruelly and pulled until he nearly lifted her by her tautly stretched flesh.

"Rich," Annette cried.

What was happening to her? No one had ever treated her like this, not that she would have permitted it had anyone tried. What was wrong with her? Why wasn't she fighting him off instead of pushing herself at him like she was begging for more? She was even more insane than he was, to actually like the way he hurt her as much as she liked the way he erased the pain soon after he inflicted it. By the time he eased away, she was thoroughly confused and had no idea what to do about anything.

Rich grinned at the lost expression on Annette's face and rested his hand so it loosely cupped her breast. "I've never really been much of a breast man."

"Huh?" She struggled to focus on his words.

"Oh don't get me wrong. I love boobs as much as the next guy but I enjoy them as part of the package no matter what shape or size they are. Unlike Dan, who has been known to salivate over a huge set of knockers especially when there's a pair of extra

large erasers poking from the bull's-eye without even noticing the broad they're attached to, I never had a particular preference."

"Interesting," Annette commented bleakly. "So what is it that attracts you?"

"Wouldn't you just like to know?" he teased. "Sorry but you're nowhere close to deserving that one. Anyway, as I was saying," he fondled her playfully, "these hooters of yours are damn fine and could just get me to rethink this whole thing."

Annette forced herself to ignore the things his fingers were doing. "I thought intermission was over."

"Yeah," he sighed, tugging her camisole back into place. He hated to cover her but she was entirely too tempting to leave exposed. He almost groaned when he glanced at her chest to see her nipples clearly outlined under the thin silk and conceded that it was only marginally better. He needed to get her talking again real quick if he had any hope of getting to the bottom of this. "Okay." He couldn't resist thumbing a peak to determine if it would stand out even more. "Nice," he stated when it did. "So tell me how you ended up in Pittsburgh."

Annette sensed from his tone that it would be much easier to answer than to refuse so she did. "I never had any specific ambition as to what I wanted to do with my life. Still don't actually even though I'm happy with where I am for now. My parents advised me to go to college, thinking maybe I'd find something while I was there. Mindy, whose parents own the bar with my parents, has always been my best friend. Her boyfriend, Bruce, is a year older than us. They've been in love since middle school and will be forever," she sighed. "Anyway, Bruce had a football scholarship at Pitt so when Mindy applied there I did too. We both got in and shared a dorm room for a year and a half until we moved into an apartment together. Halfway through the second semester, Mindy got a part-time job at the zoo through one of her professors and managed to talk them into hiring me too. She's a high-tech landscape architect that specializes in habitat recreation. That's someone who helps create zoo exhibits and theme parks so they're as close to environmentally accurate as possible given the climate where they're located. The things she's done are so amazing that she's now well-recognized as the person everyone wants to design their new project. It's great and I'm so proud of her. She's still my best friend even though she's not around much anymore. Thank God for those phone plans where you can talk free to family members because it would cost us a fortune otherwise."

"What about Bruce?"

"He's still in Pittsburgh. He's an engineer. They have a great house on the Slopes. I think I've spent more time there in the last year than Mindy has which is something Candace will never understand."

"What's that?"

"That Mindy and Bruce are a couple. They've always said they'll get around to getting married one of these days and they will but they're not in any rush. Candace doesn't understand that or why it won't change things between them. They have the

commitment with or without the legal stuff. Ever since the beginning, Bruce accepted me as part of being with Mindy so we've never been weird around each other. Mindy knows he's hers and that I love him like the big brother I never had so she's always encouraged us to hang out when she's not home." Annette snorted. "I never even thought about how it might seem until Candace stuck her two cents in. She doesn't believe that Bruce and I can honestly be close friends without more going on when Mindy's not around or that Mindy would worry herself sick if we stopped doing things without her."

"What sorts of things?"

"Everything. I've gone to dinners for Bruce's work when she's out of town and he's taken me to zoo functions if I wasn't seeing anyone at the time. We meet for meals and go out for drinks after work sometimes. We split Penguins season tickets with one of the guys he works with and go together even when Mindy's home since she really doesn't like hockey although she does go sometimes because Bruce loves it so much. He goes to those cultural films and lectures with her when she asks him to but she usually takes me instead because I enjoy them much more than he does. There have been plenty of Saturday nights when Bruce and I have split a pizza and rented movies when Mindy wasn't home. I'll never forget the things Candace accused us of when she found out about it."

"Found out as in you didn't mention it?"

"Found out as in showed up at my apartment earlier than expected and I was still at their house alone with Bruce because I drank more than my half of the wine and hadn't thought it would be safe to drive home."

"I take it Candace jumped to conclusions."

"Big time. I still don't understand since she's known them as long as I have. Granted not as well but Skippack is a very small town without the tourists and it's impossible not to know everybody. She refused to listen and didn't believe that I spent the night alone in their guestroom and that Mindy would have killed Bruce if he'd let me leave and I'd had an accident. I think that was the first time Candace called me a whore."

"The first of many?"

Annette nodded. "She does it so often it doesn't even faze me anymore. She'd probably have a stroke if I ever told her about the times that Mindy has covered me and Bruce up and gone to bed alone while we slept on the sofa. Or the times the three of us have conked out on the floor together."

"Does that mean you and Lars aren't buddies?"

"Yes and no. Lars and I will never be close but Candace would think I'm rude if I didn't spend time with him when he's in town without her."

"He doesn't stay with you?"

"Nope but she never has either even though I invite her to every time she visits. My apartment is in one of those converted warehouses so it's huge. Technically I have three

bedrooms. I have my computer and books in one but there is a guestroom with its own bath. Mom and Dad always stay with me but Candace insists she'd feel like she's intruding if she doesn't get a hotel."

"Ah. So their anniversary and early departure tomorrow aren't the reasons we're here instead of with them," Rich concluded.

"Correct, or it would be if you were really supposed to be here. Sometimes I think Candace is so critical of me because Mom and Dad aren't. They put their foot down when necessary, don't think they didn't, but unless I was way out there they were pretty cool about most things. Same with Mindy's parents. Candace was the only one who got bent out of shape and went overboard trying to call us on every little thing."

"Tell me about the zoo."

"Oh yeah. I started working there freshman year with the ground crew doing mostly grunt work. I spent all my breaks watching the big cats and worked near them whenever I could. God, I love them. They're all so regal. They're sleek and graceful and, I don't know, so there even when they're not moving. There's a panther that I would've gotten lost in if I'd let myself. He used to stand at the edge of the trench and stare at me even if I was working and couldn't pay attention to him. I didn't know anyone else had noticed until one day when one of the cat keepers asked to borrow me. I was working on the other side of the zoo and my boss introduced me to this guy, Matt, and told me he had a special job for me. It turned out that my panther, Galahad, had an infected nail. They needed to treat it but they couldn't coax him back into his cage from the yard and they don't tranquilize the cats outside unless it's an absolute emergency. Matt and Dr. DeAngelo, the big cat vet, thought if Galahad saw me going inside and then standing at his cage through the open door he might follow me. It worked and I became a part-time assistant cat keeper. I worked full-time during summers and breaks for two years and part-time during classes until I took enough vet tech courses to qualify as a keeper. After that, I switched and was at the zoo full-time and school part-time."

"Oh my. I had no idea I was involved with a woman capable of taming the savage beast," Rich teased.

"Only nonhuman ones. Obviously, I don't have the same calming effect on humans that generally leads to mutual trust with the cats or I wouldn't be stuck here like this. No, we would have had a good laugh over the bizarre coincidences that initiated our impromptu date and said goodnight downstairs."

"There are no true coincidences."

"Says the man with a big empty hole where his heart used to be before it was ripped out so brutally that all his beliefs were destroyed and made it impossible for him to accept things as they truly are."

Rich's features hardened. He gave Annette an icy glare. He saw fear flicker in her eyes as she seemed to shrink into herself without actually moving. For an instant, he nearly acknowledged that her observation had him so furious because it was the truth he had yet to admit. The notion was gone as quickly as it had come however, once he

reminded himself that their situation wasn't real. The woman beside him had been coached by his coldhearted, malicious bitch of a wife and not at all the insightful, sensitive, intriguing female she appeared.

"Psychoanalysis too, darling? It's nice that you're going all out for me like this. I'm surprised that Monica thought I was worth so much trouble but maybe I'll change my opinion once you supply me with the purpose of this little get-together. Please continue unless you prefer an early intermission." He squeezed the breast his hand had been resting on for emphasis.

"No," she sputtered. "Um, that's how I ended up in Pittsburgh and at the zoo. I love it there but I'm not sure I can see myself doing the same thing thirty years from now. Honestly, I can't picture myself doing anything else thirty years from now either so until I can, I see no need to change things since I really do like what I do.

"That's it for my non-career that Candace disapproves of. As for the rest of my life, well, it's worse in her opinion. She thinks everyone should be paired up and married within a year of graduating from college with a firm plan for the rest of their lives, careers, kids, savings and retirement goals, everything. You already heard about my closest friends, unmarried and living in sin as they are. My other friends aren't any better as far as she's concerned. I get together with my Russian professor and his lover at least once a month. And there's a group from the zoo that I do things with. I date when I find a man I'm interested in. Some of my relationships have been somewhat serious but never serious enough to make permanent. I've been infatuated and in love in a more than friends sort of way but never in the all-consuming, forever with my whole heart way. I'm not actively searching for that since I don't believe it's something you can go looking for but I do hope I find it someday. When I do, if the guy feels the same about me, I'll get married and hopefully, have a few incredible kids and grandkids to entertain me as I grow old with the man I love. But I'm only twenty-six and I'm not really worried about it yet. If my guy shows up this week, great. If he waits a few years then that'll be great too. I only hope I have the ability to recognize him when he gets here but again, I'm not overly concerned since we'll be in it together and one of us is bound to figure it out. When whichever of us does, we can help the other see what's going on and that'll be that."

"You're a naïve fool."

"And you're a misguided cynic. Understandably so and I'm certainly not criticizing you. It just makes me sad since I suspect you were quite a man before that Monica wrecked you. For your sake, I hope you find a way to put it behind you and move on before you're permanently destroyed but that is entirely up to you and absolutely none of my business since I know we're not discussing you here. I'm getting back to me now so please don't get pissed at me for saying what I was thinking, okay?"

"How touching," Rich sneered. He manipulated her flesh cruelly, yanking on her nipple until he saw tears form in her eyes. He felt her tremble and suspected it was fear instead of desire as he lowered the silk and eased the pain with his tongue. "So nice of you to be concerned for me but save it for the next sucker, why don't you? Other than

spending the night with your friend's lover and using me for sex, why else does Candace consider you a whore?"

"Because I continue to have sex with men I have no intention of marrying. She has this weird idea that it's okay to play around while you're in college as long as you're selective and discreet but unless it's with the guy you're going to marry, it's wrong after you graduate. Or maybe turn twenty-two since that's the normal age for most people to get out of college. I have always been selective and discreet but I do enjoy sex and I see nothing wrong with indulging if I'm dating someone I'm physically attracted to. I don't sleep around and I have dated more than a few men without going to bed with them. And, like you, I have never juggled multiple partners. I may not plan on settling down but I do expect exclusivity in my relationships while they last and if the guy has a problem with that then he's welcome to leave.

"Candace thinks I should be out there interviewing potential husbands and saving myself until I find him. What you heard tonight was mild compared to some of the things she's said to me lately." Annette's laugh held no humor. "Guess that's what got me into this trouble in the first place. If I hadn't wanted to shut her up or been able to ignore her, I never would have invented you and you wouldn't be trying to get me to confess to some evil, twisted plot that doesn't exist. Then again, what do I know? Maybe it does exist but if it does, I am not part of it, nor have I ever heard of it. And," she forgot that she was afraid of angering him for the moment, "let me make it perfectly clear that I would never—I repeat, never—be involved in anything that was meant to intentionally hurt someone, no matter what the situation was or who asked me to get involved. Not that you'll believe that even though it's the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God but it is and I am honestly not the type of person who would willingly do anything devious."

"No? Then what do you call your imaginary boyfriend?"

Annette sputtered. "That's different. I mean, yes, it was untrue and yes, it was probably the wrong way to handle my problems with my sister but it was harmless. I only wanted Candace to give it a rest for a little while. I love my sister dearly and will do anything for her if she needs me to but sometimes she pushes too hard. She was harping so bad that I was avoiding her and I hated that. In spite of how it may seem, Candace is a great sister and we usually get along. I admit I lied to her but I did it so we could get through a visit without it ending with hurtful words and me feeling like slime, wondering if I should be ashamed of my life and if I'm at fault because there isn't a permanent man around. She's almost had me believing I'm defective for still being single at my age. But I'm not. There's nothing wrong with me or my life even though it doesn't fit with her image of how it should be. And I don't necessarily want to be single but I'm not going to hook up with some guy that I know isn't right for me just for the sake of being with someone. When I meet the right man, or maybe I should say if I meet the right man, and if he agrees that I'm the right woman then things will change but until then, I'm staying single and I'm going to enjoy my life as it is."

Rich applauded. "Great soliloquy. Wonderfully done. I mean it. Delivery, tone, tempo, emotion, perfect, all of them. And so believable too. I better watch myself or you'll have me fooled. Yep, that was damn convincing, darling. And it is just the right note to end act two on."

"Wait." Annette panicked at Rich's leering expression. "You haven't told me how you knew about the tigers yet and you said that was the deal."

"Hmm, so I did. All right, but it's very anticlimactic. On the other hand, a deal is a deal and I'd hate to be accused of not holding up my end of it so I suppose I ought to tell you before intermission. My ten-year-old nephew Billy is fascinated with tigers at the moment. As his favorite uncle and best bud not his own age, I've made an effort to pay attention to all the articles in the paper. I even watched the special that was on the public access channel a few weeks ago with him. He's been to see them with his club at school but I'm sure I'll be roped into zoo duty even more often than I usually am while they're still there. Not that I mind, since he's such a great kid."

"He-he's been there with a school group?" Annette asked timidly.

"Yes. That is what I just said and I don't think I stuttered." His face darkened. "Don't tell me you have him involved somehow. Don't even think about it! I swear if I find out that you've done something to him I'll...I'll...hell, I don't even know what I'll do but I promise it'll be ugly. As a rule, I do not hit women but if you do anything to that kid, I'll be on you so fast—"

"No!" Annette finally screamed loud enough to gain his attention. "Please, God, don't say that sort of thing. How could you? My God, Rich, think anything else you want about me but please don't say you honestly believe I'm capable of doing something to hurt a child. I love the kids that I meet at the zoo, all of them not just the ones that get to see behind the scenes. I was just a little surprised because that means I've met him. I've talked with all the groups that visited the tiger cubs. Those kids are so great, asking their limitless questions and being so enthusiastic in their interest. They're wonderful and I'd never..." She dissolved into tears.

This time, Rich embraced Annette without hesitating. He believed that she was incapable of using his nephew to get to him no matter what incentive Monica had used to gain her cooperation in this scheme. She might be a conniving bitch but he had been way out of line to accuse her of being that ruthless. His hasty threat had caused what he decided were honest tears and he felt the guilty need to comfort her.

"Sh, Nettie. Please don't cry. I didn't mean it. I was wrong to accuse you like that. I overreacted because I love my nephew and didn't stop to think first. I know you aren't wicked and heartless enough to use him and I went overboard because I'm so protective of him," Rich whispered against her hair between light kisses that he hoped would calm her. "I'm sorry. I know you wouldn't do that. Please forgive me," he continued.

Rich's apology worked its way into her mind and Annette's tears slowed. It finally got through to her that he was truly upset with himself for making the assumption that

she could stoop that low and seriously asking for her forgiveness. A part of her admitted that it felt nice, being held and comforted so tenderly by the sturdy man in bed with her. The same part noted how appealing he was. Not handsome in the classic sense because his features were too sharp for that but extremely striking and memorable for that same reason. His eyes were so blue she had thought they might be contacts but decided they weren't after she noticed how the color changed slightly with his emotions. He had an adorable crooked grin that had appeared just for an instant when he momentarily forgot he hated her and had teased her. It made her wonder what he'd look like if he was happy and smiling. Annette mentally shook herself to derail that train of thought before it carried her into more trouble than she already was. She really had to remember that Rich was a delusional lunatic. He was not her lover. She did not know him. She needed to find a way to escape and ignore how good it felt to be in his arms. She had to forget about his incredible kisses and the amazing things he had done to her breasts. No matter what, she could not give into the throbbing between her legs and under no circumstances could she reach for the erection that was once again pressing against her thigh.

Annette's internal lecture lasted until she tilted her head to speak and found Rich's tongue exploring her mouth before she uttered the first syllable. No way could she think coherently while that was happening. How on earth was she supposed to resist something so seductive and tempting? Not with his big, strong arms wrapped around her so tightly and his big, warm hands roaming over her bare skin as they were. And how could she possibly remember that she wasn't going to let him touch her again when it felt so good? By the time he separated their mouths and drew her camisole over her head, she barely remembered her own name let alone her resolution to keep her lingerie on her body where it belonged until she was safely away from him. Be real, for Pete's sake. How could any woman still breathing resist when this sexy man whispered her name with such desire? Especially when he was also looking at her with eyes that were seductively darkened by that same desire? No, there wasn't a woman anywhere who would fault her for giving in to her body and ditching her common sense in her current predicament.

"Holy shit, your nipples feel good against my chest," Rich commented as he shifted Annette to her back. "Damn," he exclaimed, taking a minute to rub himself against her.

Annette feebly attempted to protest until his mouth nibbled a path to her breasts and picked up where he'd left off at the end of the first intermission. She knew she should stop him but was simply too fascinated by what she was feeling to interrupt just yet. She knew she shouldn't be pressing herself up in encouragement, just as she knew she really shouldn't be whimpering and moaning like she was. Annette was lost in sensation until Rich's hand covered her thoroughly naked mound. She was so horrified that he'd removed her tap pants without her being aware of it that she regained some of her sanity.

"No," Annette said. "No, oh please no." She struggled halfheartedly to push him away. "Rich, stop. Don't," she protested softly into his open mouth. "No," she pleaded

weakly when his knee urged her legs apart. "Stop," she ordered breathlessly as his fingers stroked her swollen lower lips, first on the outside and then on the inside.

"Oh yeah, darling. Fuck yeah," Rich muttered as he kissed her. "Hot and wet, just the way I like them." He teased the tip of one finger into her. "Damn, you're soaked." He penetrated her fully. "You're ready for it, aren't you? Oh yeah, you want this, I can tell by how juicy your cunt is."

"No-o," she moaned, squirming on his hand. "Don't. Oh please. Rich," she gasped when he added a second finger and began to stroke her fully.

"Nice. Say my name again," he urged, biting her nipple before sucking it relentlessly. "Prove you know who is making you feel good. Say it," he demanded, his thrusts and bites becoming almost savage when she didn't respond immediately.

"Rich," she cried desperately. "Rich. Oh Rich, please. Don't. Oh God, Rich no."

Annette's words registered but Rich understood them as encouragement to resume the rough play that he'd gentled as soon as she'd repeated his name and not as a plea to stop. He chuckled as he alternated between touches that he suspected bordered on pain and ones that were sure to soothe. The more Annette squirmed, the longer he continued.

"That's it, Nettie. Squeeze my fingers with that tight cunt of yours. Work them like you're gonna work my cock later on. Oh yeah. That's real good. Hold me deep in that nice, juicy pussy."

"Rich," Annette moaned, no longer knowing if she was pleading for him to stop or continue. "Rich, please."

"Please what? Please add another finger and fuck you harder? Please bite your nipples? Please suck them? What do you want, Nettie?"

"Rich," she panted.

"Are you begging me to make you come? Is that what you want? Is it?" He pumped her relentlessly. "Tell me, Nettie. Damn it, say it."

"Rich," she cried incoherently, raising her hips to meet his hand.

"Oh yeah, that is what you want, isn't it? You want it real bad, don't you? You're almost there, I can tell. Won't take much now, will it? Oh no, not much at all. I bet all I'd have to do is press my thumb on your clit and that would do it for you. Am I right, Nettie? Shall we find out?"

"Ri-ich!"

Rich did as he suggested and Annette felt every nerve in her body burst into a million shards of pure ecstasy. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before and she let herself be swept away as wave after wave of unbelievable pleasure crashed through her. By the time her mind began to function again, Rich had positioned himself between her sprawling thighs and was lapping at her overflowing opening. He was mumbling contentedly and thoroughly enjoying himself. Annette was so fascinated that

she forgot all about shoving him from her and locking herself in the bathroom as she should have done earlier.

"Rich," she sighed, reaching for the hand on her hip.

"Welcome back." He grinned as he linked their fingers. "Guess by now you figured out what it is that I go for in a woman. Course you earned it, juicing all over my hand like that so I don't mind you knowing."

"Knowing what?"

"You better be asking because it'll turn you on, hearing me say it and not still playing me. Which is it?"

"Tell me, Rich. Please tell me," she begged, arching toward his raised mouth.

"Yeah." He paused to lick her. "That's what I thought but you can't blame a guy for checking." He thrust his tongue rapidly for a brief moment. "This." He flattened his tongue and swiped her slit from one end to the other and back again. "This is what I like best. There's nothing nicer than a juicy cunt. Nope, nothing finer than an overflowing pussy. And let me tell you your pussy is even better than your boobs are. Mm," he teased her until she whimpered. "Yep, darling, you could very well be the perfect woman. Too bad you're a liar because other than that glaring flaw, you're so far above any other woman I've ever been with that I doubt I'll ever find one that tops you. You're in a league of your own and it's a crying shame. Is that it? Did I guess it? Are you here to ruin me for all other women? How did Monica figure out that being with you would be so fucking good that I won't ever truly enjoy another woman because I'll be comparing all of them to you and each and every one will fall short? You destroyed me already and I haven't even fucked you yet. How'd she know? Huh, darling? Tell me how she knew."

"Rich, no. Please. Not now. Oh Rich, don't."

"Yeah, you're right. Why waste what I've got now when it's all I'll ever get since we both know this is temporary. I better enjoy it while it lasts before I let myself do a reality check and remember that you're the idiot helping my wife destroy the only thing that I can still share with a woman after she worked me over." He stopped talking and concentrated on Annette. "Damn, you're the sweetest thing I ever tasted. I would eat you all night and keep you coming in my mouth 'til morning if I had the time for that."

"Oh my God," she screamed as another orgasm hit her. "Ri-ich. Oh my God, Ri-ich!"

"Mm," he hummed around her distended clitoris, taking her even higher. "Fuck, you sure know how to come," he declared when her shudders subsided. "Damn you, bitch, why do you have to be so hot? You're going to kill me, you do know that, don't you? But you know what? I don't care. I just don't fucking care if you do because right now I need to make you come with my tongue so bad I'm a dead man either way. I may as well just enjoy myself as much as I can now, right?"

Annette once again forgot how to think as Rich's mouth began another magical assault. This time he refused to quit until her climaxes ran together with the next

beginning before the last ended. She was a whimpering pile of mush by the time he kissed his way up her body to claim her mouth for another bout of mind-altering kisses.

When Annette finally managed to focus her eyes, she found Rich studying her. His hand was once again exploring her center, leaving no part untouched. She didn't understand what he was doing, swirling each of his fingers individually through her wetness until he brought his hand to his lips and proceeded to lick all traces of her from each of them. Without saying a thing, he recoated his fingers and extended them to her. As soon as her lips parted, his joined hers and together, they cleaned his hand.

Rich groaned when Annette sucked the finger he was thrusting into her mouth. "Son of a bitch! You are un-fucking-believable, Nettie. Great boobs. Amazing nipples. Sweet, juicy cunt that responds faster and more often than I ever thought possible. You come like a bitch in heat and aren't at all shy about it. Your mouth is so hot that it's a toss-up of whether I shove my tongue in there next or jam it back in your pussy. And now, with the way you're sucking my finger I'm ready to bet that you're one very talented cocksucker. Oh yeah, I can't wait to get some of that when the time comes. Where the fuck did Monica find you anyway?"

With a growl, Rich tore his hand from her mouth and glared. "You one of her lovers?" he accused suspiciously. "Is that her game? You give me the most incredible night of my life, one even more amazing than my wildest dreams and ruin me for everyone else, then turn up wherever I am with Monica so she can flaunt that she has something she knows I want so bad it'll kill me, seeing you and knowing I can't ever have you again? Tell me you're at least bisexual and not pure lesbian so you don't have to pretend you're enjoying this."

"Rich!" Annette screeched in horror.

"Damn it, I hate you! The thought of you begging Monica to fuck you with one of her strap-ons makes my skin crawl. It won't last, I hope you realize that. No matter what Monica's been telling you or how fine you are, she doesn't have it in her to remain exclusive or honor a commitment. She'll probably stick it out longer with you but eventually, she'll get restless and start thinking that the grass is greener. It won't make one bit of difference that she already has the best. Not even if you're willing to let her invite others to share your bed. Take my advice and bail before you get burned. Don't let her screw you over the way I did because I can guarantee that one morning, just when everything seems perfect, you'll wake up alone."

"Stop it!"

"No, listen to me, Annette. I can't believe it either but I'm honestly trying to help you out here. In fact, let's help each other. Since we both know it's only a matter of time before Monica leaves you in her dust, why don't you pull the plug first? Don't go back to her. Stick with me instead and we'll beat her at her own game. Just picture the look on her face when we show up together and she realizes that she's the one left high and dry for a change. I know we haven't fucked yet but my cock's been poking at you all night. You must know that it's going to be so much better than any of her plastic imposters. Come on, Nettie. What do you say?"

"I say you are a very sick and disturbed man. You had me feeling bad for you with the things you said about your wife but I'm beginning to think you're as twisted as she is. If you seriously believe even part of that mumbo-jumbo then you're certifiable." Annette shivered in disgust. "How can you even say that stuff? My God, Rich, what's wrong with you? How can you possibly think that I'd let my female lover, something I've never had the slightest bit of interest in experimenting with, convince me to spend the night with her husband so she can use me to torment him afterwards? You are out of your mind!" She struggled to break free from his grasp. "I can't believe I'm even here with you. And that I let you touch me like that! God, I'm as nuts as you are. Let me up."

"No." Rich crushed her to the bed. "Nice sense of outrage but I'm not convinced that I'm not right about this game of yours. Of course, you could clear everything up if you would just tell me what game you're playing."

Annette sighed miserably. "I did tell you, Rich. There is no game. I invented an imaginary boyfriend who, unfortunately for both of us, has some details that match yours. It was a coincidence that we happened to choose the bar where your friend was just as it was a coincidence that we ending up in booths next to each other. I never heard of Monica before you brought her up and I don't know either of you. I am not some psycho lesbian willing to fuck my lover's husband as some sick joke, nor am I fickle enough to drop the person I'm intimately involved with for the sake of helping my brand-new conquest get even as you've suggested. I do not currently have a lover of either sex. My only crime here is foolishly letting my sister's opinions get under my skin to the extent that I chose to become a liar to avoid causing a huge argument and hurting her feelings by insisting that she butt out of my personal business. Rich, there's no sense beating a dead horse all night. We're never going to resolve this so can't we please just admit we're done here? If you'll excuse me." Annette pushed at his arm again, "I'll collect my things and get out of your life."

"One problem, darling." Rich silenced her with his deadly tone. "Even if you are right about us reaching an impasse, which I'm nowhere near ready to agree, we are far from finished."

"Wh-what do you mean?" she asked nervously.

"I mean we paused just as we were getting to the really good stuff. We haven't fucked yet." He forced his hand back between her legs and pushed inside her. "You're as wet as you were before we let ourselves be distracted by yet another pointless discussion so don't even bother trying to deny how much you want it."

"I don't," she insisted even though she moaned when his thumb teased her stiffened clitoris. "I mean it, Rich. I really do not want this."

"Right," he agreed, pumping his fingers in the way that he already discovered would excite her. "You have no interest in how my cock will feel ramming deep inside you." He shifted against her hip and chuckled at her expression. "You don't want me to rub it back and forth on your G-spot so you come, over and over again." He managed to remove his boxers with one hand. "You don't want this." He forced her to wrap her fingers around his erection and covered her hand so they were both stroking him.

"Oh my God," she whimpered. "Please, Rich, no."

Rich rolled so he was kneeling between her thighs. He continued to play with her as he caressed himself. "No? Your pussy isn't saying no." He switched hands and rubbed her moisture along his length. "Your pussy is so damn wet. It's crying for me. It's squeezing my fingers, darling, begging for my hard cock."

"No," she cried. "You can't...it won't—"

"You think I won't fit? Is that what has you saying no?" He grinned wickedly. "Don't you worry. It'll be tight but I promise there's plenty of room in this hungry cunt of yours for every bit of me."

"No-o." She struggled when he pressed the tip against her.

"Easy," he crooned. "I'll be right in." He surged forward and penetrated her fully. "See. No teasing this time." He retreated as he spoke and punctuated his statement with a deep thrust. "Nope, this time is gonna be hard and fast." He pumped as indicated. "First time's always fast."

"No!" Annette chanted, her head rolling side to side.

"Don't worry. The first load shoots out real fast but there's always plenty more where it comes from. I don't even go soft so I can start right in on the second one. It's pretty quick too but after that I usually calm down enough to take my time."

"No, no, no," she panted, clutching his arms without pushing him away.

Rich grunted as he leaned back on his knees and straighten up. He yanked Annette closer and draped her legs over his shoulders until she was practically upside-down. His hands gripped her hips while he pistoned his rock-hard penis into her.

The new angle created a formerly unknown sensation for Annette. The pressure multiplied with each thrust and drove any lingering thoughts of demanding he stop from her mind. Soon, all she knew was the overwhelming pleasure his pounding generated within her.

"Ri-ich," she screamed as her world splintered.

"Fuck! Oh fuck, yeah! Yeah, fuck yeah," Rich grunted, forcing his penis even deeper as it pulsed out his first climax. "Damn, that was good," he groaned, pausing only to rearrange them. "If I didn't hate you so much I'd be head over heels in love with you, Nettie 'cause you are, without a doubt, the finest piece of ass there is. Even better than I expected."

Rich glared into her dazed eyes until they cleared enough for him to be certain his hatred had registered. When she blinked in confusion, he withdrew just long enough to flip her to her hands and knees, reentering her from behind with a brutal thrust.

"I hate you so much, you bitch," he snarled as he clenched her hips, anchoring her in place while he slammed into her like a savage. "Your cunt just keeps getting tighter. How the fuck do you do that? I'm working it good so it should be getting sloppy not turning into a vise. Good thing it's so juicy so I can fuck you as hard and as long as I want without any danger of tearing you up."

Somehow, Rich maneuvered Annette so she was on her knees in front of him with his hands attacking her breasts as roughly as his penis assaulted her vagina. His grunts and groans increased when he felt her flesh quiver around his in another orgasm. He was still pummeling her when her body began to go limp so he dropped her to the bed and fell on top of her prone form.

"Oh my God!" Annette shrieked as she became aware of yet another brand-new form of stimulation. She screamed his name when his teeth clamped onto her shoulder.

Rich growled as he bit into Annette's flesh. He knew he was about to draw blood but was too incensed to care. Everything about her was perfect. Too perfect. Way beyond perfect and the realization was more than he could handle so he reacted by redirecting his emotions into an all-consuming rage and venting it on the woman who overwhelmed him without even trying. She twisted beneath him, her inner muscles clenching his punishing flesh. Trapped deep within, Rich exploded, releasing another gusher into her already saturated sheath.

Without thinking, Rich shifted them to their sides. His shaft was still buried in her flesh which continued to pulse with aftershocks of her climax. His arms found their way around her, unintentionally holding her while his lips caressed the bruise he left on her shoulder. When Annette's frame shook with her sobs, he comforted her unconsciously, mentally berating himself for treating her so harshly. Separating them, he gently turned her until they were facing as he attempted to calm her.

"I'm sorry, Nettie," he whispered. "Please don't cry. I promise I won't hurt you again. I'm so fucking sorry but I couldn't help it. I know I should have slowed down and not been so rough with you but you felt so good you made me insane."

"Rich," she managed to interrupt by nipping his chin. "Stop it. I'm not hurt so just shut up already," she sniffled.

Rich frowned as his thumb caught her last tear. "If I didn't hurt you then why the fuck are you crying? I know you got off. I felt you and I heard you screaming so, oh, wait. You want more and are pouting because you're afraid I don't have anything left for another round. Silly bitch," he teased as his hand closed over her breast. "I told you that the first two times are just to get me primed. No, darling, nothing to get your panties in a bunch over. You keep the river flowing and I'll take care of the canoe. We might need to take a break for a shower or a catnap at some point, maybe some room service too, but I'm willing to bet that I'll still be fucking you at lunchtime."

Annette's features crumbled just before she hid her face against his chest. She was gulping and gasping, fighting to contain her sobs, her mind filling with renewed determination to escape before he destroyed her completely. "Please let me go," she begged miserably.

"What the fuck?" Rich hissed, forcing her head up to see her face. "I don't get it. I just don't get it. When we were kissing, you were begging me not to stop finger-fucking you. When you were coming nonstop in my mouth, your pussy kept sucking my tongue back in for more. Your cunt was grabbing my cock like you couldn't get enough

and you wanted to keep it buried to the hilt. You say I didn't hurt you and I just promised you more of the same. I can give it to you any way you want it, rough like you just had, hard and fast in whatever position you want, slow and steady, gentle or teasing. I'm back in control again, or I think I am although it might take another wild one with what you do to me, but after that, you can have it however you want it. I can make you come until dawn or I can keep you right on the edge until you're promising me the moon if I'll give you what you need most. Didn't Monica tell you about this? I'm kind of surprised since that was the one thing she actually liked about me," he chuckled. "Don't tell me she's using us against each other. Don't tell me you really believed you were a lesbian and Monica convinced you that you would be able to get through this if you truly loved her. Did you agree to prove yourself and let the devious twit set you up, knowing full well that I'd make it so good for you that you don't know who you are anymore? Is that what's wrong?"

"No!" Annette screamed hysterically, trying to break free. "For the last time, I have nothing to do with your wife or you or any cruel ways either of you can come up with to get back at each other. Now let me go. Now, Rich," she demanded, struggling frantically to get away from him.

"Hold still," Rich snapped. He trapped her with his solid body. "Calm down. Relax, damn it! Stop squirming because no way are you getting out of this bed. At least not until you explain what the hell is wrong with you."

"Me!" she panted from her useless exertion. "Me! What's wrong with me! What's wrong with you? That's what you should be asking, you big jerk!"

"Whoa. I'm right here. No need to yell. Especially when you're not making any sense."

Annette shook her head and stared in disbelief. "I don't believe you. This really takes the cake. But I sure have learned my lesson. Big time. There is no chance in hell I'll ever lie to anyone about anything again for the rest of my entire life."

"Gee, I'm so glad to hear that but you're stalling and I'm sick of it. I know. We'll make another deal. You can explain why you were crying and I'll make you come as often as possible or I can fuck you for the next six hours in a way that gets me off repeatedly without letting you go at all. I'm gonna enjoy the hell out of it either way so it's up to you. What's it gonna be, hmm, darling?"

"How about neither? How about you get off me and I take a shower and pack up my junk and go so you never have to see another one of my tears as long as you live?"

"Ha, nice one." He snorted. "No."

"Fine," she sighed in defeat when his fingers played across her stomach. "You are the meanest man I've ever met."

"Thank you but don't change the subject. I'm waiting."

"I, well, I was crying because I don't understand you. Why are you worrying about how we should have sex? Why don't you just cut me off with the sample I had and toss me out without letting me have any more? You don't make any sense."

Rich frowned for a moment before he started to grin. "Very clever, trying to trick me out of the pleasure I'll get fucking you all night. Maybe you should suck my cock while you think up the next one. I was planning on saving that for much later but what the hell? You're done anyway so what difference does it make?"

"Wait," she cried when he forced her head toward his groin. "I'm not trying to trick you. I really don't understand. I don't, Rich."

He glared impatiently. "Okay, we'll try this one more time. What exactly is it that you have so much trouble comprehending it has you in tears? No bullshit this time unless you're ready to drink until you choke."

"I am not trying to piss you off. Honestly, I'm not. I seriously don't have any idea how you can hate me so much you can't stand to look at me but still want to have nonstop sex with me. You hate me but you're offering to make me come any way I want, as many times as I want and that doesn't make any sense at all. I don't understand how you can say those things about how good you thought we just were and act like you really want to spend the night in bed with me and like it matters to you if I enjoy it too and..." She dissolved into a fresh batch of tears.

Rich watched her cry for a minute, frowning as he replayed her words. Annette was right. He was swinging from one extreme to the other and, now that she'd pointed it out, it didn't make any sense to him either. He had to hate her. She was a lying, manipulative bitch who was only with him because she was doing his demented wife's bidding. She had to be. The other alternative was entirely too inconceivable to consider. There was no possible way that Annette was telling the truth about him unfortunately having the same name as her fictional boyfriend. It was impossible that their meeting was due to an incredibly twisted maze of coincidences. No, she couldn't be the interesting, wholesomely seductive woman she was portraying. If she wasn't Monica's slutty, evil minion then he had no reason to hate her and without that, he would have to admit that she might very well be the ultimate woman. If that were the case then he would be forced to rethink all his convictions about true love being a fool's illusion and honest commitments being nonexistent. If Annette wasn't a phenomenal actress then his carelessly claiming to hate her would have honestly hurt her as much as it seemed to have.

"Fuck," Rich barked sharply, rolling so he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He braced his elbows on his knees and pressed his face into his hands, swearing under his breath. Without looking, he knew Annette was watching him. He could feel her eyes burning a hole in his back. When he finally looked over his shoulder, what he found was much worse than he'd expected. Yes, she was watching him and yes, she was still on the verge of tears but now he could read the emotional pain in her eyes. She was staring at him with huge doe eyes that would put Bambi's to shame and that held a wariness of him because his words had honestly hurt her. But what truly surprised him was an unmistakable sadness. He wasn't sure if it was over his unwillingness to consider anything other than his version of the truth or his refusal to accept her for the woman she insisted she was or the situation of his life in general or whatever else she

thought she knew about him but he was certain that he was the cause of it. Realizing that added to his already growing sense of guilt and Rich needed to do something to distract himself before he did the unthinkable. Correction, he decided after another glance at Annette. He had to distract them both if there was any hope of him walking away no more damaged than he already was.

Chapter Five

Without warning, Rich scooped Annette from the bed and carried her to the bathroom. "What are you doing?" she shrieked when he kicked the door shut behind them. "Put me down," she demanded, struggling though she feared he'd drop her on her head. "I don't want another shower," she protested as he steadied her inside the tub. "Oh God," she groaned in horror and spun away from him.

Rich forced himself to adjust the water and unfold the door to abort his first reaction which was to yell at her again. "What did I do to make you cry this time, Nettie?" he asked more calmly than he felt, tipping her chin sideways.

"I'm not crying," she declared, blinking rapidly to contain her tears.

"Course not." He eyed her skeptically. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She bit her trembling lip.

Rich snarled, turning her to face him. "Damn it, must you always be so stubborn? Or are you just pushing me like Candy does Lars?"

"Huh?" She was clueless. "What are you talking about?"

He shook his head. "You still have a ways to go to earn that one. You can start by explaining why showering with me upsets you so much." He waited. "Treat this like a Band Aid. Spit it out quick and it'll be relatively painless. Make me pry it out of you one word at a time and it'll seem much worse than it actually is."

She took a deep breath and exhaled fully. "Fine. I don't even know why I let it get to me. I shouldn't really be surprised. Not with how much you hate me. You didn't want to look at me while we had sex so it makes sense that you wouldn't want to smell like me after we're done."

Rich could tell that Annette was struggling to appear unaffected. Without second-guessing his intent, he reached out and embraced her. "Listen carefully. One, I did not bring us in here because I dislike the fragrance of your lust. Hot sex like we just had is supposed to be sweaty and personally, I think our combined scent is almost as much of a turn-on as I'm sure our combined flavor will be. I wish I'd managed to get you wet at the beginning of the evening because I find the smell of an aroused woman highly erotic. I especially like a woman who's not embarrassed should someone else happen to recognize her perfume for what it is."

"But if that's not why we're in here, then what are we doing?"

"Taking a break while I clear my head. It was unnecessarily cruel of me to say that I hated you. I don't hate you, Nettie. I hate that you're lying. I hate not knowing your agenda. I hate that you refuse to reconsider your loyalties and see that all you are is a

pawn, one that Monica will sacrifice without batting an eye. I hate the corner you backed us into but I could never hate you, personally."

Rich took advantage of her disbelief to bestow a soft, lingering kiss on her gaping mouth. "I'm sorry my careless words hurt you. No matter what, it's wrong to let my anger with Monica interfere with our mutual enjoyment. She's not here. You are. Give me a few minutes under the hot water until I'm relaxed enough to forget her vindictiveness and then we'll make the best of what's left of tonight. We can pick up her game again over lunch."

"All right," she agreed quickly. "But wouldn't it be easier for you to relax without me in your way? I'll just go wait outside and give you some privacy."

Rich caught her before she could escape. "Not so fast, darling. Forgive me if I'm jumping to conclusions here but I seriously doubt that I'd find you waiting in bed for me if you leave this bathroom. I got away with that once because you were still in shock over me invading your room. I'm not stupid enough to press my luck a second time. Am I right? Were you thinking about making a run for it or do I owe you another apology?"

Annette gave Rich a sheepish grin. "Well, um, okay. I admit I did consider it but I don't have the nerve to actually try."

He laughed. "That's priceless. You got more balls than anyone I ever met." He handed her the soap. "You better make it up to me quick before how close you came to being a bad girl sinks in. Wash my back."

Annette began tentatively. At first, she held the soap in her fingertips and attempted to rub it over his skin without touching him. It was too small and every time she fumbled it, she felt Rich's muscles tense. Since he had declared a truce of sorts, she decided it would be foolish to anger him over something so ridiculous. After all, the man had been up close and personal with her entire anatomy. Why was she trying so hard to avoid touching his back now when she hadn't hesitated to dig her nails into it, screaming his name while his penis reamed her core? Besides, maybe a little massage in combination with the hot shower would relax him to the point where he could finally let himself hear what she'd been telling him all evening and think about it rationally. Maybe then he would accept that she wasn't involved in some master plan against him.

Once Annette had her hands thoroughly lathered, she placed the soap in one of the convenient nooks scattered along the wall and ran her palms up Rich's arms to his shoulders. He was too tall for her to knead the muscles the way she wanted to but she decided the angle wasn't completely wrong when Rich moaned and let his head fall forward.

"Ooh," he sighed when she kneaded the base of his neck. "Mm. Yeah," he groaned appreciatively every time her hands shifted. "This is so good. You have great hands, Nettie. You do this to your tigers and I bet they purr nonstop."

Annette smiled at his compliment. "I hate to break it to you but tigers can't purr. None of the big cats can. That is a trait unique to housecats."

"Really? I'll have to remember to tell Billy."

"He probably knows. I generally include that when I speak with a group of kids. It's a good way to get them over their shyness because they're all familiar with housecats. Once they start talking, they forget that they were intimidated and ask all sorts of interesting questions."

"You really do enjoy that part of your job, don't you?"

"Absolutely. Why wouldn't I?"

"Well." He paused to let out another contented sigh. "Nice. I just assumed that it would be tedious, giving the same spiel over and over again. Doesn't it get a little boring?"

"Not really." She re-lathered her hands and continued to make her way down his back. "I guess it might if I didn't love the cats so much. They have such different personalities. It's great to watch people realize that they're more than overgrown fur balls who sit around and do nothing all day."

"You don't do tricks with them, do you?"

"God no! It's not a circus. They're not pets, Rich."

"Whoa. Don't get all riled up and start hissing at me. I didn't mean to insult you or the cats. Sometimes you sound like you're talking about harmless kittens. I'm having trouble picturing you in a cage with a full-grown, untrained panther."

"Oh. Sorry," Annette exhaled the tension that flared whenever she anticipated the need to defend the animals she cared for. "Guess I don't have to tell you that I'm a little too sensitive and overreact at times." She hesitated at the top of his buttocks until Rich shifted slightly. Mentally shaking herself, she decided it was silly to be shy at this point. An ass was mostly muscle and Rich's was probably tight what with the way he had been clenching it earlier while he was throwing his hips against hers. Maintaining the firm pressure, she resumed the massage.

"As a rule, keepers don't hang out in the cages or the habitat. We only go in on rare occasions if it's absolutely necessary. But I'm not afraid of any of them and no one's ever been hurt. I think they can sense how much I respect them and that I am as harmless to them as I am willing to protect them in any situation. Yeah, I know. Don't say it. I'm being naïve again, thinking that a creature that could kill me with one swipe of a paw would ever need me to defend it." She soaped her hands again and went to her knees in order to reach his legs. "That is what you're thinking, right?"

"Yes and no," he stated, widening his stance slightly and bracing his hands on the wall. "You're right. In a physical confrontation you wouldn't be much help but you can do many things they can't. For instance, say the zoo went bankrupt and had to get rid of the animals because it was forced to close. I'm sure you'd prevent them from being sold to someone who would abuse them or even worse, one of those despicable organizations that charge outrageous fees for an unscrupulous asshole with more money than brains to shoot a drugged animal in a fenced-in area."

"Damn right I would. I'd shoot whoever came to pick them up and go to jail before I let that happen," she snorted. "Then again that might not be all bad. It would get me out of any more of Candace's lectures because there's no way she'd ever visit me in jail."

"It wouldn't be worth it so don't get any ideas here. There are plenty of other ways to accomplish both." Rich was stunned by his words but couldn't stop them. "But if you are ever forced to do something that drastic, you don't have to worry about being forgotten and alone. I promise to come visit you."

Annette gulped and rested her forehead against his bottom without thinking. "Thank you," she whispered, believing he would keep his word if she were ever in that situation. Once again reacting, she tilted her head and kissed his solid cheek. When it flexed at her unexpected touch, she couldn't resist giving it a playful nip. Hearing his sharp inhalation, she covered the spot with her tongue, soothing his skin even though she knew it hadn't hurt. Annette could sense his anticipation as well as curiosity about whether or not she was daring enough to continue what she had unintentionally started. Stalling for time to consider what she was doing, she turned her attention to his other cheek and repeated her play.

As Annette saw it she had a choice to make and no time in which to make it. Of course, there were very few options so it wouldn't take long to go through them. She could begin to fight him off and get herself out of there as she should have done way back when he opened the door and stepped inside as if he belonged in her room. She could renew her denial of having any involvement with his wife and their mutual sniping. Listening to Rich, she had at some point accepted that this Monica woman was not someone she cared to meet and most likely not a good person though she probably wasn't quite as bad as he made her out to be. She had also decided that he had been the victim initially but, over time, had become at least partially an aggressor as well. Then again, who could blame him if what he told her had any truth in it?

If she opted to resume her insistence that their situation was the result of a huge misunderstanding, it would surely set him off again. His anger would resurface along with his dislike for her. Okay, his overpowering hatred of her and then she'd start crying again which would only make him madder and they'd spend hours having the exact same argument. She was certain that nothing would change and in the morning they'd be essentially where they had been before they got into the shower only both of them would be a lot more frustrated in addition to being exhausted and not in a good way.

Her remaining option was to uphold the truce he'd declared and enjoy herself. Maybe she was as naïve as he accused her of being and maybe she was the biggest fool in the universe but the more she considered it, the more she wanted to do as he'd suggested and make the best of their current situation and indulge in a night of carnal decadence. She suspected that initially Rich had launched the erotic assault on her senses to frighten her into confessing to the crimes he'd already convicted her of in his mind. He used her own arousal against her to coerce her into admitting that she was a

willing accomplice. Perhaps she was misreading their predicament and letting her imagination twist things into more what she wanted them to be but she felt as if something between them had changed. She was almost positive that Rich had offered a night of incredible sex because he truly desired her and wasn't merely using her traitorous body to punish her.

Quickly concluding that mind-blowing sex was much better than fighting an impossible battle, Annette reclaimed the soap. She knew Rich saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and wondered what he was thinking. This time when she touched him, she kneaded and fondled with no trace of the pressure she had used at the beginning. She made her intent even clearer by boldly stroking the crease between his cheeks. She couldn't help smiling when Rich's only response was to widen his stance, giving her complete access to whatever she cared to explore.

Feeling daring, Annette leaned forward and rubbed a nipple across the taut flesh of his upper leg. At the same time, she teased a finger farther into his crack. "You okay with this?" she asked when he remained silent.

"Depends on how far you're planning on taking it," he replied honestly. "I don't mind a little ass play. Your hands are clean and your nails are short. If you want to work a few fingers inside and include a prostate massage then by all means, be my guest. If you're thinking of shoving your whole fist up my ass or strapping on an extra-large dildo then you better forget it 'cause you're with the wrong guy."

"Hmm." Annette pictured what he just described and mentally shuddered. She caught some water in her palm and rinsed the soap from one spot for her mouth. She knew he was waiting for her response but decided to let him wonder a little while longer. Instead of commenting, she suctioned her lips to his skin and wiggled one finger inside him. She felt the flinch he tried to hide and realized he was forcing his muscles to relax. Still not answering, she added a second finger and stroked through his resistance. When he shivered, Annette assumed that she had indeed located his prostate.

Relenting, she finally answered. "Don't worry, Rich. Your ass is safe with me. This is as far as I go." He let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Well? Aren't you going to state your preferences now that you heard mine?"

"Sure thing, Nettie," he chuckled. "Holy fuck, that's good," he uttered, temporarily distracted as she adjusted the angle. "For the most part, we're pretty much in line here. I have, on occasion when requested to, replaced my fingers with my cock. I'm not opposed to it and yes, it's a hell of a sensation but honestly, I'm not overly interested in fucking a woman's ass. I know many men go to great lengths to do so and I can't argue that, in general, assholes have a different level of tightness but personally, I could not care less."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. As I already explained, I have a thing for juicy cunts, the wetter the better. Once I'm primed, I can last forever. No matter how lubed up my cock is there will be a point at which it becomes necessary to grease up again to avoid injury. Why

the hell would I subject myself to that hassle when there's a slick, slobbering pussy mere inches away? I know there are plenty of men who claim there's not enough stimulation once they've emptied themselves into a cunt or after a woman orgasms but I suspect they're only making excuses because they were interested in taking her ass all along. Either that or they're lousy fucks who have no idea what they're doing and are clueless about how to satisfy a woman, unlike me."

"Oh my, you sound awfully confident," Annette teased, wiggling her fingers against each other while still embedded.

"Don't mean to brag but I never had any complaints." Rich's body trembled slightly. "Oh yeah. Right like that."

Annette grinned wickedly and withdrew her fingers. She giggled at his protesting grunt. "Calm down, stud." She stood slowly, kissing her way up his back. "You're only half done. I don't want to hear you complaining later that I let myself get distracted and neglected you. Tilt you head under the water please," she requested as she grabbed the small bottle of shampoo.

Taking her time, Annette washed Rich's hair. She'd never done it before and hadn't realized how stimulating a scalp massage could be for the one giving it. After she asked him to close his eyes and rinsed the suds from his head, she took half a step back to indulge in ogling his body.

Rich was still standing as he had been, waiting for instructions. Annette gulped and said, "Okay, turn around and I'll do your front."

"Whatever you say." He grinned down at her. "I must confess that this is a first for me. I never had such a thorough massage in the shower before. The few women who bothered to start gave up long before this point and none ever offered to continue once they got what they were after."

Annette took her time lathering up her hands, aware of Rich studying her. "Then clearly you've been showering with the wrong women," she stated plainly as she forced herself to meet his eyes, hoping hers were as emotionless as she managed to make her voice. For an insane moment, Annette was flooded by an unreasonable sense of rage at the idea of some other woman standing in her place and touching her man. She squelched her anger instantaneously, reminding herself that she was taking advantage of an opportunity with a virtual stranger, not engaging in love play with a new partner.

"Most women fail to appreciate the entire man. They go right for the parts they deem most useful and ignore the rest. They don't understand how arousing a man's body can be. I, on the other hand," she began to massage his chest as she had his back, "am not most women."

"Oh hell no," Rich exclaimed. "You are definitely not most women. You are one of a kind."

"Thanks. And thank you for this too." She kneaded his arms and hands thoroughly. "Very few men have the patience to let me finish. I guess that makes you one of a kind too."

"Then obviously you, as you put it, have been doing this with the wrong men," he stated in a husky tone.

Annette concentrated on soaping her hands to hide her smile from Rich. He had no idea how close to impossible it was for her not to abandon the massage and beg him to take her however he wanted. The only thing that made her resist her body's needs was the fact that he was struggling as much as she was. Judging by the state of his penis, he had to be nearing his limit. It was harder than any other she'd touched and was miraculously larger than it had been. The drops of pearly liquid were practically oozing together to form a stream.

Avoiding his groin after a perfunctory scrub, she worked her hands from his hips to his legs as she slipped to her knees in front of him. Tormenting them both, she massaged her way down one leg and up the other. Flashing Rich what she hoped was a seductive smile, Annette lifted his testicles and slid her hand between his legs to caress the soft skin beneath them. He inhaled sharply when she flicked her tongue along his shaft. Annette meant to tease him until he either demanded more or showed her by directing her head with his hands. Her plan changed with her first taste.

"Oh wow," she whispered as she drew the engorged head into her mouth. "Mm," she hummed as her tongue devoured what pre-cum her lips had missed. "So good," she murmured around his shaft.

Rich growled with primal need. The feel of Annette's hot breath combined with the vibrations from her words almost destroyed what little control he still possessed. He tried not to thrust wildly into her mouth and thought he would succeed until she sucked him into her throat. He might have been able to restrain himself even after she began to hum as her swallowing motion nearly set him off. But when her finger sought out his prostate, nothing could prevent him from losing it entirely. He snapped. He unleashed the beast within and savagely ravaged her mouth and throat. He was so far gone that he failed to recognize Annette's encouraging sounds for what they were.

"Fuck," Rich swore when her whimpers and moans penetrated the carnal haze clouding his brain. "God damn you, Nettie," he snarled, forcing her from him and hoisting her to her feet.

"Rich, what," she squeaked, startled and confused.

"Shut up. Just shut the fuck up," he ordered as he trapped her against the wall. Holding her wrists above her head with one hand, the other captured her leg. With his elbow under her bent knee, Rich rammed his cock into her slippery opening. He pummeled her relentlessly, each thrust pushing her higher until she dangled from his arm and shaft. "Why are you doing this to me?" he demanded between grunts. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

"Rich," she cried. "Please," Annette begged for him to release her arms so she could wrap them around him and hold on.

"I told you to shut up," he repeated, his tone deadly. "Not. Another. Word." He punctuated each word with a punishing thrust.

A small portion of Annette's mind remained detached. It was as if she was observing a stranger. Surely the woman screaming for more over the sound of her buttocks slapping against the tiles couldn't possibly be her. The woman begging for the brute to take her harder had to be someone else. It was impossible that she was the woman writhing in ecstasy as the beast used her so primally. There was no way that she was the woman who inspired the powerful climax that ripped through him. Nope. Not a chance. Un-uh. Annette was still denying it when she saw the woman collapse at the same instant she dissolved.

Rich miraculously managed to support them on his shaky legs. He was panting breathlessly but hadn't passed out. He knew if he released her, Annette would melt to the bottom of the tub. Good thing for her he was incapable of even thinking about moving let alone actually doing so. He couldn't believe she had demolished him as she just had. If he didn't get a grip on himself he'd be in big trouble. More trouble than he'd ever been in before. Yes, the woman with him was dangerous in ways he never knew existed and he had to get it together before he forgot why he had to resist and fell completely under her spell.

Still pinning Annette to the wall, Rich drew her hands down next to her head and linked their fingers, holding on tightly without being aware of it. "Nettie," he whispered.

She shook her head to stop his words. "Don't."

"Nettie."

"Please don't," she pleaded.

"But Nettie..."

"Rich, please," she begged. "Not now."

He lifted his forehead from hers to study her. "You okay?" he asked, forcing himself to release her and shift away.

Annette nodded as her mind screamed no. "You?"

"Sure," he answered flatly. "Guess it's your turn now."

Annette's eyes grew huge as she stared at him. She gulped several times before she was able to speak. "Why don't we save that for next time? I'm not sure I'm up for it just now."

Rich frowned, searching her face for hidden meanings. Eventually, he shrugged and stepped under the spray to rinse himself. "I'll be waiting so don't take all night."

Annette continued to lean against the tiles long after Rich vacated the bathroom, amazed to be alone. She couldn't quite believe he had granted her these few moments of greatly needed privacy. Even less believable was her reaction. Now that she was on her own, she wished she wasn't. That thought spurred her into action. She showered quickly, unable to shut off her mind. It was filling with ideas too outrageous to acknowledge. It would be a huge mistake to let herself consider any of them. She was ridiculous to even let them form in her head. She and Rich were strangers, thrown

together by a slew of bizarre errors. They had given into their mutual lust and were living in the moment. That's all this was. That's all it could ever be. But it didn't make one bit of difference. Annette now understood what she'd been looking for, what had been missing from all her previous relationships. No. It did not matter at all. She couldn't let it matter since what they had together was an illusion. It didn't exist outside this moment. Rich was the one who had the right idea. True love was something in fairy tales, not real life. Lifelong commitments were better left in romance novels and chick flicks where they belonged. She had no room for either of them. Not in her life. Not with him.

Shaking her head sadly, Annette squared her shoulders and peered at her reflection in the mirror. How could she still look the same as she had when she dressed to meet her sister? How could her appearance remain unaltered when her entire life had changed so drastically? Nothing would ever be the same again. Annette sighed at the woman staring back at her. She didn't understand how it had happened but somehow she had fallen in love with a man she barely knew. She was hopelessly in love with a man who despised her. She was thoroughly in love with a man who could never let himself trust her and believed she was capable of all sorts of awful deeds. Deep inside, Annette accepted that she had found the only man she would ever give her heart to just as she understood she had to hide that from him at all costs, even though it would destroy her in the process. She had to stay detached and maintain the same emotional level and tone. He already believed she was lying through her teeth. She couldn't even begin to imagine his reaction if she suddenly professed her undying love for him. Without a doubt her heart would shatter when he walked away from her. She'd be living with a gaping hole in its place soon enough. Since she would only have the memories of this single night with Rich, she had to create as many as possible. She had to conceal her feelings because otherwise she'd ruin what little time she had left. Determined to make the most of every remaining second, Annette slipped on the robe that Rich had been kind enough to hang on the door and went to join the one man she cherished more than life itself.

Chapter Six

Rich was confused as he watched Annette fidget nervously with the cuff at her wrist. She had the scared rabbit look about her again as she had when he opened the door to her room. No. That wasn't it. Not exactly anyway. She seemed almost frightened but not in the same way as she had earlier. Something was different. Rich was positive of it. Unfortunately, he was equally certain that she was no more likely to explain the new portrayal of her character than she was to explain her connection to Monica. Pushing aside the nagging suspicion that he'd missed something big, Rich reminded himself that they had agreed to make the best of their bad situation. That meant he couldn't accuse her of shying away from him like some timid virgin now instead of maintaining the ruse of being a wanton, sexual woman that she'd exhibited at his first touch.

"Come sit down, Nettie. I ordered a little snack since you didn't eat much of your dinner. It should be here momentarily."

"Thanks." She slipped into a chair at the table by the window.

"I got a fruit and cheese platter. I hope that's okay but I can call for something else if you prefer."

"No, that's fine." She sounded lost.

"Why won't you look at me, darling?" Rich asked more sharply than he meant to. "Have you forgotten our agreement to put the game on hold?"

"No." She flinched. "I'm sorry, Rich."

He scowled. "Unless you're deliberately trying to piss me off, I would appreciate it if you look at me when you speak and stop mumbling so I can understand you."

Annette forced herself to meet his gaze. "I said I was sorry and I am. I swear I'm not trying to make you mad. It's just...nothing. I'm being stupid so forget it, okay?"

"No, it is not okay. Clearly, I've done something to upset you yet again and for the life of me, I can't figure out what. I thought we were getting along fairly well, all things considered."

Mentally, Annette raked herself over the coals for turning into a bumbling twit mere seconds after promising herself she wouldn't. Acting differently was the worst thing she could do since it would open the door to further suspicion. Frantically, she searched her brain for an explanation that would be both truthful and acceptable without exposing her feelings. Silently cursing herself, Annette decided that she was the biggest idiot on the planet. Of all the single men in the world, why did she have to fall head over heels for the one too immersed in his own pain to ever open his heart to any of the possibilities available to them? Why did they have to meet like this? Why

couldn't they have stumbled across each other in Pittsburgh and gotten to know each other slowly, gradually becoming friends long before she fell in love with him? If it had happened that way, they might have had a chance. Given time, Rich might have been able to let go of the bitterness instilled by Monica and permit himself to take another stab at life. Could anything be more foolish than hopping on the super-fast express train of love, hurtling faster than the speed of light toward a wreck that was just waiting for her to board before it happened?

"Think Band Aid," Rich encouraged.

Dangerously close to panic, Annette's mind finally landed on something useful. Something that, now that she remembered it, had truly upset her before Rich had made her forget how to think. "Band Aid. Right. I'm sure I'm overreacting and being a jerk and I apologize for misunderstanding and taking something the wrong way again. It's really not intentional, no matter how it seems and I think we were doing much better too."

"So what is it?" he asked a second before he frowned. "Oh. Wait. Damn it, I'm the one who's sorry. I should have let you have your fun and not shoved you up against the wall like that. It's not that I didn't want you to finish me off with your mouth. I fucking loved having you blow me, please don't think otherwise. The way you swallowed me was awesome. It would've been so hot, coming in your mouth. I really am sorry that I interrupted you but I'm still stuck on how your pussy milks my cock when you come. As good as your mouth is and trust me, it is above and beyond, I needed to feel that again so much that I had to pump into your cunt instead of down your throat."

"Oh my God," Annette sputtered. "I hadn't even thought of that one yet. Am I stupid or what?"

"Nettie, you have shown yourself to be many things but stupid is not one of them although your absurd loyalty to Monica and her malicious plot comes close. But before we get sidetracked and forget we're ignoring that, why don't you make me a happy man and tell me what is bugging you since the only thing I came up with isn't it?"

Annette's mouth dropped open as she gaped at him. "That's it. You just did it again. I don't understand you at all." Her jaw snapped shut at the knock on their door.

"Hold that thought." Rich swore at the untimely interruption. He snatched the tray from the room service waiter and barely managed to scribble his name on the receipt before slamming the door in the poor man's face. Depositing the tray on the table, Rich yanked his chair closer to hers. "Okay. You were saying?"

Surprised giggles burst from her throat and Annette slapped her hand over her mouth in a useless attempt to stifle them. "I'm sorry. I'm not really laughing at you —"

"Yes, you are," Rich countered, grinning at her sudden animation.

"Okay, I am but not the way you think. I wish I had that on tape so you could see yourself. I sure hope you remembered to tip him since you were this close," she held up her hand with her thumb and forefinger almost touching, "to breaking his nose."

"I was not." He pretended to pout which earned another round of giggles. "And, for your information, I tipped him enough that he wouldn't have cared if I had broken it. Now, getting back to our conversation, I believe you were about to tell me something."

"Oh. Yeah. Okay. I was trying to explain that I'm being a ninny because you keep confusing me. I don't understand you at all so when you say things, I don't know which to ignore and which to take personally."

"For instance?"

"Well, it's like how you said you hated me but just now seemed so sincere when you said you'd be happy if I told you why I was being weird, like it really matters to you. And when you apologized for wanting my, um, you know, instead of letting me get a good taste of you, you sounded like you meant it."

"I did."

"All right then, if you wanted it like that so much, why were you yelling at me? You accused me of doing something to you and wanting something from you, what, I have no idea since I wasn't doing anything more than going along on your wild ride. Not that I'm complaining about the sex because, God knows, the sex part was really, really great. I just don't understand why you make it feel like that when you thoroughly despise me."

Rich delayed his response by uncovering their snack and selecting a strawberry. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that you shouldn't pay attention to anything a man says during sex? There isn't any blood left in our brains so we tend to blurt out all sorts of incomprehensible things. Don't you know not to believe any of the bullshit that comes out of our mouths once our bodies start rocking against yours?"

"I have heard that but I've found that that statement applies only when the man is going on about one of two specific things. One, his current feelings for his partner or two, asking for a real-time critique of his performance. I mean, really." She rolled her eyes. "What woman doesn't know that's her cue to pant and moan and say that he's the best ever? It's been my experience that men, more often than not, actually mean what they say on most any other topic."

"Hmm. Interesting." Rich offered her a piece of pineapple and groaned when she licked the juice from his fingers. "You are a truly unique female, Nettie. I never met anyone who enjoys sex as much as you do yet somehow manages to listen to all the gibberish that men spew carefully enough to not only analyze it at the time but retain it afterwards."

"Just another of my many faults." She shrugged and accepted a bite of cheese. "There's probably something wrong with me but I always stay hyper focused on the guy until I'm about halfway into my orgasm. Then my brain turns to mush and my body is one big blob of nerve endings. Hey, there's an idea. You hold off on the split personality bit until I'm comatose and I won't get all bent out of shape over nothing."

Rich laughed. "One of a kind, Nettie. One of a kind," he repeated as he opened the bottle of wine that he'd ordered. "A toast." He waited for her to raise her glass. "To a most unusual woman. Meeting you has been a truly unexpected experience."

"Did you just insult me or should I say thank you?"

Her question added to Rich's amusement. "Priceless," he mumbled, watching her squirm over the rim of his glass.

Briefly, Annette debated whether or not to press the issue since Rich had avoided any explanation as to why he had been yelling at her. After some thought, she decided not to. Though she was curious, she realized that whatever his reasons were, they had no relevance in the scope of things. If she had unlimited time with him it would be different but she didn't so it would be stupid to waste any more of it arguing.

Rich wondered if Annette would point out that he hadn't commented on his behavior. He didn't know why but he was positive that this concern was secondary to whatever it was that truly upset her. If she chose to confront him, he would counter with that. Unless she explained herself, he felt no obligation to clarify anything for her. Watching her accept another tidbit from his fingers, he was doubly certain that the dynamics between them had been altered somehow. He wished he could ask Annette if it was deliberate. If it wasn't and she felt it too, he couldn't possibly discuss it without reopening parts of his life that he swore no woman would ever have access to again after Monica betrayed him.

"You're looking awfully pensive," Annette broke the silence. "I think we need a new topic. Hmm, let's see. Why don't you tell me more about your family? You met Candace and heard about how I grew up. So far all I know about you is that you have a grandfather who has a great house and an inquisitive nephew. Is there anyone else?"

"Yep." Rich was relieved that she'd steered the conversation in this direction. He could be as detailed or vague as he chose. "As you can guess, I'm a native to Pittsburgh. When I was a kid, we lived on the north side, out far enough that it was a neighborhood but still technically part of the city. I have an older sister, Ashley, and a younger, Lauryn. Ashley is married to Will. Billy is theirs. They also have twin daughters, Marcy and Lacy, who are seven. They're much too smart for their own good and Ash swears their goal in life is to turn every last hair on her head gray. She usually follows that up by wondering why they are bothering since she'll have all her hair pulled out long before that happens. Will breaks out in a cold sweat at the thought of them deciding they're old enough to date. I suspect there are times when Billy has used me to escape from them but I've never called him on it because I can't blame him. The girls are a handful to put it mildly. And Lauryn is a violinist with the San Francisco Symphony but has been traveling as a solo performer and is as yet unmarried."

"Wow!"

"Wow is right. I suppose she was a child protégée but I didn't appreciate it at the time. To me, she was my kid sister. So what if she played the violin and all sorts of adults made a big deal of it? She was a pest who had an annoying habit of following me

and Dan around when we least wanted her to. Man, there were days I picked on her so badly. Ashley too. And they gave it right back to me. But let me tell you, as bad as I was toward them, I wouldn't let anybody get away with messing with my sisters."

"Sounds like you were typical siblings."

"We were. I guess Mom and Dad were fairly normal as parents go. Both worked hard but still made time for the three of us. We did things together as a family, vacations, picnics with other families, ball games with a group of our friends, hot chocolate and cookies after we spent the day sledding, all that stuff. We were an average middle-class family. It was a great way to grow up."

"Your childhood sounds pretty similar to mine. I wish more kids could have that now."

"Some do but I know what you mean. Ash and Will are raising their kids like that but they're still growing up faster than we did. At least they know what a family is, unlike a few of Billy's friends I've met. Some of the things they're used to living with scare me. Billy and I talk about it fairly often. He's an amazing kid. He soaks up everything and rolls it around in his head until he filters out the bullshit. Then he puts the rest in order. He told me he watches what he says with a couple of the guys because he doesn't want them to think he's putting them down or bragging about his parents. He's figured out that he and his sisters have a nice family and a decent life and that not all of his friends have the same."

"I'm guessing you guys are close."

"We are. As his uncle, there are things that he feels more comfortable talking to me about even though he and Will have a great relationship. Billy knows he can go to either of his parents about anything and get an honest reaction even if they disagree. Ash and Will are fine with him coming to me. I felt guilty the first time I realized he had confided in me so I talked to them. They reminded me of how it was to be a kid and said they trusted me because they know I love him and will help them take care of him. They know I understand their values and can count on me to handle things as they would. They're pretty amazing too." He smiled. "Anyway, Billy and I are cool. He knows he can trust me with his personal business. I'm always straight with him even when I know he won't like what I have to say. He asks his question or tells me what's going on and then he listens to my response. After he mulls everything over, he decides what's best for him to do. When he's opted not to follow my advice, he's given me solid reasons for his choice. And on the rare occasions I recommended that he discuss the situation with his parents, he's done so as soon as he got home."

"He's ten?" Rich nodded. "He sounds more mature than a lot of adults I know."

"He is definitely more mature than some I know. But don't get the impression that he's always serious. That's just one facet of his personality and I don't think he lets many people see that side of him. He is also very much a growing boy. He and his friends can be little hell-raisers and they don't always think things through before they act. He torments his sisters constantly and it isn't always self-defense. He plays Little

League but he also loves tennis. The last time we played, he kept me on the run about half the time so it won't be long before I stop taking it easy with him." Rich got lost in his thoughts.

"At the beginning of my eleventh grade year, my dad was offered a promotion that hinged on being transferred. I'm sure he and Mom spent hours hashing it out alone before they told me and my sisters. Ashley was already in college so it didn't affect her all that much. Lauryn was in ninth grade and by then she was so into music that she didn't have much time left over for anything else including friends. When our parents told her that there was a performing arts high school in Atlanta willing to let her audition in the middle of the semester, she was gung ho for Dad to take the job. I was the one they were worried about.

"See, I was on the track team and had gone to state as a sophomore. I finished third but had a really good chance of being on top the next two years. If I was, it would guarantee at least a partial scholarship, possibly even a full one. If we moved, I probably wouldn't get that opportunity and that left the whole college thing up in the air since my grades were decent but far from outstanding. We weren't anywhere close to poor but we certainly weren't rich either. Two kids in college at the same time would have been tough on my parents even if it was only for one year. I started to tell them that I'd save every penny from my summer jobs and that I'd keep working while I went to school but they refused to consider it even though they appreciated my offer. They preferred us to have the best college experience possible which wouldn't happen if my sisters and I spent all our spare time working. They said we'd manage and that it was only a minor consideration but they wanted everything out in the open. They said it had to be a family decision and that my opinion mattered as much as theirs did. Their other concern was that I only had a year and a half of school left. I already had a strong network of friends and activities and moving would create big holes in my life. It's not that they were afraid I wouldn't be able to make new friends in Atlanta but, as the new guy, it wouldn't be the same for me. They told me to take some time and give it all some serious thought and we'd talk about it again."

"So what did you do?"

"What I always did. Went to find Dan. We had an old boat that we rebuilt ourselves. It looked like a wreck but it floated and that's what counted. We took it out on the river and Dan let me ramble on until I talked myself out."

"What did he say?"

"That he was damned glad he wasn't me. He said he agreed that I should tell my parents not to move because he didn't want me to go any more than I did. And he agreed that if I did, I would feel like a selfish jerk and I'd end up being miserable and blaming myself for every little thing that went wrong in my parents' live forever. He also agreed that it was probably the right thing to do to tell them that I was okay with going and that they didn't have to worry about me because I could adjust to whatever."

"So talking to him left you right where you were anyway?"

"Yep but at least I had somebody to commiserate with. It didn't solve anything but I felt better. We floated around for a while and then Dan got the look on his face that I knew meant he had a plan. He took us to the public dock near Station Square and headed straight up the hill to my grandfather's. I didn't have any uncles so Gramps was always the one I went to when I needed an adult other than my parents. See, Dan's family wasn't close like mine so he sort of adopted my grandparents when we were just kids. He was comfortable enough with them that he would stop to see them without me by the time we were ten. When we were thirteen, Dan's parents, who never got along anyway, started fighting really bad. One day after school, Dan walked in on them throwing things and threatening to kill each other. I was at track practice so Dan went to Gramps. After that, when he had something too big to handle on his own or with me, that's who he went to too.

"Anyway, we told Gramps what was up, he asked me to dig deep into my heart for what I would say if I didn't have to worry about hurting anyone's feelings or trying to do the right thing. I thought about it and then told him I didn't know. Part of me wanted to stay more than anything but another part of me wanted Dad to take the job because I knew he worked hard and deserved it. Gramps said he needed to discuss some things with Gram and asked me and Dan to take the boat home before it got dark. He promised he'd see us later and told us not to worry because everything had a solution if you looked for it hard enough."

"He sounds nice."

"He is. Gramps is the best. I wish I was half the man he is."

Annette reached out and squeezed Rich's hand. "I bet you are more like him than you give yourself credit for."

"Hardly but thanks for saying that. Anyway, my grandparents showed up after supper. They asked to speak with my parents privately but told us kids to stay close. Dan thought he should leave but Gramps stopped him. He said he had been part of the discussion that afternoon so he should be there to hear the results. Mom and Dad didn't object since Dan all but lived with us anyway. The four of them disappeared for a little while and then came back outside. My parents started out saying I now had a third choice and that the final decision would be mine. They said that they loved me and would always be proud of me and that nothing would ever change that. I had no idea what was coming and them saying that scared the shit out of me even though I knew it couldn't be anything bad. I remember Dan and I were sitting on the picnic table and as they were talking he kept moving closer. I think they freaked him out too and he wanted me to know he was with me."

"You're making it very hard for me to dislike him like I did before."

"Good. I understand why you would feel that way but Dan's a good guy. We've been through a lot over the years and have stuck together when anybody else would have bailed."

"Sounds like Mindy and me."

"Then I don't need to explain what it's like to have a friend like that." He paused to link their fingers since she hadn't pulled her hand from his. "Okay, so I'm sitting there, telling myself that I'm not going to cry no matter what they say next and Dan's got his shoulder against mine, looking like he's about to puke. Gramps takes over and next thing I hear is him saying that I can live with him and Gram during school and with my parents over the summer. I could have everything I said I wanted."

"Oh wow."

"Yeah. One minute I'm sitting there, scared to death that something awful was coming and the next, Gramps has me and Dan in a bear hug. Mom and Gram were both crying and Dad was hanging on to both of them. Lauryn and Ashley were bouncing around us like little kids. I'm sure I don't have to tell you what I decided."

"I think I love your grandfather."

"He'd probably love you too," Rich blurted out without thinking.

"Why thank you." Annette batted her eyelashes and gave him an exaggerated smile to prevent the awkward moment his comment might have caused. "And thanks for telling me about your family."

"You say that like we're done talking." He returned her grin.

"We could be if you wanted us to be."

"If I say I want us to be what will we be doing instead?"

"Well." Annette lounged back in the chair and toyed with her belt. "Since we're out of food, we won't be eating unless you're still hungry and want to order more."

"No, I'm good."

"Okay, then I think it's bedtime." She blushed but untied the belt.

"Oh do you?" Rich stared as she pushed open the sides of the robe far enough for him to see the valley between her breasts but not so far that he could see her nipples. "I think you're right but perhaps I should warn you that I'm not at all sleepy."

Annette stood and let the robe fall to the floor. "Who said anything about sleep?"

"Come here," Rich ordered.

Annette stepped closer and stood next to his chair as he held her gaze. She gasped when Rich pushed his hand between her thighs and inserted one finger into her vagina. When he spread his other fingers, she separated her feet so he could move freely. They continued to stare at each other as he raised his finger to his lips and swirled his tongue around it.

"Have I mentioned how much I adore a woman with a juicy pussy? Especially one that gets wet all on its own."

"You could make it wetter."

"It'll be my pleasure." Rich winked as he fastened his mouth on one of her nipples. His hand returned to her slit and began to tease her.

She had lost her mind. Annette told herself that had to be the reason she was standing there naked, letting a man she barely knew, the same man she loved in spite of all the rational reasons that it was impossible, the man who hated her as much as she loved him, do whatever he wanted to her body. All right, she was crazy. But so what? What did it matter that she was certifiable when she felt so good? Who cared that falling in love with a perfect stranger who accused her of all sorts of horrible things that he believed she'd actually do was too unreal to be possible when every instinct she had was screaming how perfect it was to be with him? What difference did it make to know that it wouldn't last more than a few hours? Some people never even got the chance to have any of this.

She was shivering, making sounds that told Rich she was about to climax. "Get in bed, Nettie." Rich watched the pre-orgasmic haze fade into disappointment. "Be a good kitten and lie down with me and we'll see if I can make you purr."

Immediately, Annette decided she much preferred his voice when he called her kitten over the ever-present sneer she heard every time he used darling. Aware of Rich's gaze, she arched her back and stretched like a cat as she crawled to the center of the bed. "Mm," she sighed, rolling to her back. When he continued to stare, she raised an eyebrow.

"Damn," he swore, devouring her with his eyes. "I can't decide if I should pet you with my fingers, my tongue or my cock."

"How about all three?" she suggested helpfully. "Want me to pet myself while you make up your mind?"

Annette bent one knee slightly to expose herself as she dipped her fingers into her moisture. She stroked slowly at first, with just the tips inside. After a moment, she slid her knee higher, offering him a better view and buried two fingers as deeply as she could. With a moan, she worked them all the way in and out several times before bringing her hand to her mouth to suck them between her lips.

"I can taste a hint of you too," she informed him with a seductive smile. "You were right. We are a good combination."

With a growl, Rich flung his body on to the bed. He landed between her legs with his tongue in her crotch. Instantly, he began slurping her juices, grunting and groaning his enjoyment as he feasted on her.

Annette's excited whimpers soon joined the smacking sound of Rich's lips. "Ooh," she moaned, arching against him. "Yeah. Mm, Ri-ich." Her cry of rapidly approaching pleasure switched to one of despair when his hot mouth abandoned her mere seconds from climax. "No!"

He rested his head on her thigh and chuckled. "Easy, kitten," Rich crooned, stroking her as she had. "You're the one who said I didn't need to limit myself."

"Yeah, but...oh." She forgot her point as Rich impaled her on his fingers. She was lost until he eased his touch to pull her from the edge again. "You're staring," Annette commented when she finally noticed how closely he was studying his hand.

"And?" he asked without altering his gaze.

"Nobody ever looked at me like you are."

"And?"

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with it."

"Why not?" Rich sounded surprised. He forced his eyes to her face. "You really have no idea how exquisite you are, do you? That's sad, kitten." He paused to collect his thoughts as the lazy strokes continued. "And it further strengthens my point that you've been wasting yourself on the wrong men. Damn, if I had free access to this fountain, I'd have to get a different job just so I could race home and dive in every night."

Annette snorted to choke back her reaction. If she hadn't, she would have offered Rich all the access he wanted, anytime, anywhere. "You are so full of it."

"Not even close." He twisted her comment to suit his purpose and quickly suctioned his lips over her opening. "Mm," he praised, lapping up her moisture with his probing tongue. "Mm, mm, mm," he hummed against her until she trembled.

"Oh please," she begged for more. "Don't stop."

Rich chuckled and returned to petting her. "Stop? Now? Maybe if the hotel were on fire but definitely not before it reached this floor. No need to pout." He leaned forward and kissed her until she smiled. "That's my girl. God damn but you're good, almost too good."

"Rich." Annette squirmed. She had to break his mood before she forgot that he didn't mean any of what he was saying. It was just the sex talking and none of it was real to him.

"Hold still," he snarled, curling his body so he could trap her bent leg between his knees. "I didn't bitch when you went exploring in the shower. Why can't you let me have my turn now? If you stop trying to piss me off, I promise I'll make it fun for you too."

"I'm sorry," Annette whispered, not meeting his eyes. She took a deep breath and willed away her tension. "Please continue."

Rich balked at her rapid about-face. The feeling that she was somehow different grew stronger when her knee fell to the side, opening herself even farther for his perusal. "What's with you, Nettie?" he questioned as his fingers delved deeper.

"I'm not trying to trick you into anything." She faced him, hoping he would let himself see the truth in her eyes. "I know that's what you're thinking but I swear I'm not. You were right. It's only fair that you get to have your chance too. And I believe what you said about me having fun because I already am in spite of the fact that you're making me insane."

He responded by wiggling his tongue both inside and out of her heat. "This is torture for me too, kitten. You are so hot when you let go but I know you'll be all that much hotter if we let you simmer first."

Annette felt a gush of moisture and didn't need to ask if Rich had noticed. She heard it in his appreciative groan. When his mouth captured it, her own appreciation echoed his.

"Bet I could make it even hotter." Rich switched to his hand.

"How?" she asked before she could stop herself. She was in so far over her head that she was already in serious trouble. Anything more would surely kill her.

Rich kept her waiting while he took her almost to the edge and back again. "Simple," he declared confidently. "I'd shave your camel toes. Baring them would heighten sensations for you."

"You wouldn't shave all of it?"

"Nope." He paused to ruffle her bush. "If your pussy was completely naked, it would look too much like a little girl's. I'm not interested though I know plenty of guys who are. Personally, I prefer a woman with a little pelt. Shaving here," he touched the area surrounding her slit, "and leaving this full," he cupped her mound, "is my idea of perfection. Too bad we're on the clock, kitten, or I'd show you," he sighed and suckled her gently. "If this were mine, I'd take such good care of it. I'd get you all pliable and floating and then see to keeping you smooth and soft. Your pussy would be so pampered and happy that the smile would never leave your face and you could toss out all your perfume." He inhaled deeply and grinned. "Oh yeah. Nothing better than the scent of an aroused woman."

"Oh my God," Annette whimpered when Rich inhaled again with his nose touching her.

"So wet," he stated, swirling his fingers inside again. "Bet your juices are flowing like this because you're thinking about what I said. This mean you'd let me groom your cunt the way I'd like it best?"

"Yes," she cried as she arched closer. "Anything. Just don't stop."

"Anything? Really, anything?" Rich propped himself on his elbow to see her face better. "Do you mean that?"

Annette shivered. "Well, I, um, yeah. Anything as long as it's fun for both of us and not really, really weird, you know? And if it's something big, you'll need to give me something in exchange."

"I see." He spent some time considering her as he played. "Deal. Come on." Rich rolled from the bed and held out his hand.

"What?" she asked, hoping her fear didn't show.

"You said anything as long as I don't stop and we have fun. I know what I want and I have a suitable trade."

"Now? I thought we were talking about what it might be like."

"We were. Mostly. But you got me thinking." Suddenly, his expression darkened. "I assumed you were being sincere and not playing me. Was I mistaken?"

"No," Annette insisted as she scrambled from the bed and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Rich felt out of whack again and took a minute to hold her. "I'm glad, kitten. I want to show you what I see." He pulled a chair to the mirrored closet door, flipped on the overhead light and sat down. "How about you make sure I'm nice and hard first?"

Annette giggled happily. He'd caught her licking her lips as she ogled his erection and was using her obvious desire to ensure her cooperation. He was already as hard as a rock and leaking his excitement but both knew there was no way she'd refuse the pretense of sucking him into readiness. Eagerly, she slid to her knees to taste him. With the next breath, she swallowed him deep into her throat. For a moment, she held him in place while she used her tongue for torment. Unable to resist, she soon began to raise and lower her head, devouring his shaft with each movement.

"Aw fuck, kitten," Rich hissed as his hips lifted to thrust deeper.

"Hmm?" she hummed as she tightened her lips.

"Son of a bitch, you gotta stop now. Damn it, Nettie! Stop!" he cried as he forced her from him.

"What's wrong? I think that's fun. Isn't it fun for you too?" she asked innocently.

"Jesus," he swore, shielding himself so she couldn't reclaim him. "Hell yes, it's fun. Too much fun. Which is why I made you stop and you know it."

"Yeah," she admitted with a tiny smile. "I guess I'll just have to keep you busy until you're so exhausted you pass out. Then I can suck your cock as much as I want to without you interrupting again."

Rich shook his head. "Fucking 'til we drop definitely sounds like a plan but that last bit ain't gonna happen. You latch onto a cock with that sexy mouth of yours and you could rouse the dead. You'll have me raring to go in no time."

"Ah." Annette's hands closed around the base of his shaft as she considered him. "What if I crawl on top of you before I start so my pussy is within reach when you wake up? Think that would distract you enough to let me enjoy myself?"

"Oh hell yeah," he groaned but permitted her to draw his penis back into her throat for a few more minutes. "That's enough, kitten," he stated, removing her much more gently this time. "Later, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed and raised her lips for a kiss.

"Damn, everything about you is distracting."

"As if you're not."

He chuckled, nipping her breasts while she pressed her crotch to his muscular thigh. "Does everything work you up this easily?"

"When it involves you, yes," she answered honestly even though he had been teasing. "In my opinion," she worked to keep her voice steady, "you are one truly fine man. Every bit of you." Mentally, she reminded herself that her opinion meant less than zilch to him, no matter what it was about.

"Gee, thanks. Flattery will get you everywhere. In fact," he spun her to face the mirror, "I think here is the perfect spot for you."

Rich used his knees to part Annette's legs. He positioned her so she straddled his lap with his penis buried to the hilt. For a prolonged instant, he held her gaze as if waiting for her to object. When she didn't, he nodded once and let his eyes roam down her body until they zeroed in on the spot where they were joined.

"Watch with me," he commanded as he shifted her over him. The movement exposed his penis, glistening with her lubrication. "If you were shaved, nothing would be between us. Hold yourself open so we can see better. Do it," he snapped when she didn't obey instantly. "Ooh yeah, look how wet you are. You're slobbering all over my cock. In another minute, you'll be dripping on my balls." A quick glance confirmed that she was focused with him. "You're soaking me, kitten. I think there's a little exhibitionist in you. Or is it a lot? Well?"

"I-I don't know," she stuttered as she rearranged her hands so she could display herself with her thumbs and caress his shaft with her fingertips. "I never did this before either."

"What? No home movies? No solo play over your hand mirror?"

"No."

"Shit, you're serious," Rich realized. "Hate to repeat the obvious but you sure picked the sorriest bunch of losers to have sex with."

Annette silently agreed. She dropped her chin so she wouldn't reveal anything in her expression. With his first touch, her mind had blanked out every other male she knew. No one would ever be able to make her body tingle the way Rich did. Not that she'd be proving that one. No, now that she'd been with Rich the thought of being intimate with another man made her skin crawl and she was certain that that would never change.

"Hey." Rich ran his hand up her body and tipped her chin to see her face. "I don't mean to offend you. I'm just having trouble accepting that no one else ever noticed what a sensual woman you are. I could feel you radiating sexual heat as soon as I sat down beside you. And later, when you let me cop a feel, I was half afraid you were going to burn us up. What the hell was wrong with those guys?" His hand covered her mouth. "If you're thinking about defending them or making excuses for them, don't. I'm benefiting from their stupidity and that's what matters here. They had their chance and blew it. Now I'm the one watching your pussy play hide and seek with my cock and I gotta tell you that this ranks way up on my list of favorite shows. It would be number one if you were shaved but," he shuddered with lust, "damn if you're not on top anyway."

"Oh God." Annette leaned back against his chest to expose more of their flesh.

"Jesus fucking Christ, you have been doing it on purpose all night!"

"Doing what?"

"Playing with me. Letting me think I was getting away with a grope here and there and acting all coy when I stuck my face in your cunt. Son of a bitch, you're a horny little thing, aren't you, darling?" he sneered.

"What? Rich, no! I never —"

"Save it. I can see how into this you are. Did you have a good laugh, getting off when I tweaked your tits downstairs, pretending you were so shy and inexperienced? Would you juice even more if I open the door so anybody walking by can watch you ride my cock?"

"Stop it!"

"Kinda late for that one, don't you think? Damn, I can't believe I almost fell for it. What a fool you must think I am. No wonder you were so serene just now. You got me playing right into your hands and I didn't even see it coming."

"Rich, stop! Don't do this. Just stop it!" she cried out in near panic.

He snorted as he lurched from the chair and twisted so she was bent over the arm in front of him without separating their bodies. "Stop! Stop? No chance in hell that's happening anytime soon, darling. I may be a fool but I'm not that big a fool that I'd stop fucking you now. Not when I'm finally warmed up. Hell, I'm just getting started."

"Rich," she shrieked she was so stunned.

One cruel hand abandoned her hip and closed around her throat. "Quiet down or I'll make you," he snarled as he slammed his penis into her.

Annette whimpered. How had everything gone so wrong? Rich was creating the most erotic experience of her life and right in the middle of it, he switched back to hating her so much he was ready to strangle her. Briefly, she wondered if he'd continue to punish her lifeless corpse with sex but quickly pushed the thought from her mind. She didn't understand him but she understood herself even less. How could she actually like how he was using her? She should be fighting for her life and screaming for help, not anchoring herself against the chair so she could push back to meet his thrusts. It wasn't supposed to be so intense this time. He said he wanted to take his time and tease them both until they were delirious before tipping them over the top, not going at her like a wild man.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry, Rich. Please, I'm so sorry."

The roaring in Rich's head finally faded enough to hear her softly chanted apology. "For what, darling? What lie are you going to spew this time?" he asked sarcastically as his hips slowed.

"I'm sorry I made you mad again. I'm sorry, Rich but I wasn't lying. I never watched myself before, not alone, not with someone. I didn't but you were right about how turned on it made me. I've seen movies but we were so much better. I'm sorry that I wrecked it for you."

Rich hesitated, mid-stroke. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He resumed.

"You said you wanted to take it easy and I pissed you off. Again. I didn't mean to. I swear I didn't. I'm not sure what I did but I ruined your fun and I wish I could fix it but I don't know how and I'm more sorry than you'll ever know, especially since you don't believe that I'm sorry at all even though I am. I am, Rich. Oh what's the use? Just go ahead and kill me. Go on. I won't fight you so just break my neck and get it over with already."

Without warning, Rich slumped over her body. He was struggling to breathe. He withdrew from her sheath and gently lifted her to the bed. Stretching out beside her, he slowly wrapped her in a loose embrace.

"Do you honestly believe I want to kill you, that I'm capable of killing you?"

Annette's twinge of fear evaporated even before she tilted her head to look at him. "I don't know. I'm sorry, Rich, but I won't lie to you. At this very moment, I have to say no, you won't hurt me let alone kill me. When you were mad and yelling, yes, I was afraid of you. But I was panicked before you wrapped your fingers around my throat so when you did, I fully expected you to squeeze. Now," she repeated at his confused expression, "I do believe you would have stopped long before you came anywhere close to killing me but while it was happening, I wasn't sure because I didn't think you even knew what you were doing."

"Fuck," Rich swore, hiding his face against her neck. A million unfathomable thoughts raced through his mind. *What was happening to him? What was she doing to him?* If he had half a brain left, he'd get the hell out of there and as far away from her as he possibly could without looking back. Unfortunately, his brain had deserted him along with his common sense. Instead of releasing her, he held her closer. It was irrational and insane but leaving Nettie alone was the absolute last thing on his list of possibilities. What he really wanted was to kiss her until she melted and then take his time pleasuring her as he had originally intended.

Annette couldn't suppress her shiver when Rich tenderly kissed his way around her neck. The arms that had been dangerously close to crushing her relaxed to the extent that they barely held her. When he tried to hide again, she caressed his cheek. "I wish—"

"Sh," he silenced her with a gentle kiss. "Don't talk now, kitten. Kiss me instead. You're safe with me." The word *liar* echoed through his head so loudly that he was extremely surprised she couldn't hear it too.

All his doubts were visible in his eyes but Annette chose not to acknowledge them. Being with him was unsafe in so many other ways than those he was thinking of but she simply didn't care. On top of everything else, Rich was clearly waiting for her to turn on him as his wife had, though she suspected he was unaware of it. His expression showed he expected her to lash out and return to his imaginary plot. He believed she'd distort what had just happened until it seemed much worse than it actually was to use against him. For now, though, she refused to worry about any of it until she absolutely had to because he just told her to kiss him and that was exactly what she was going to do. Watching his eyes as she leaned forward, Annette couldn't miss his surprise. He

never even considered the possibility that she would cooperate willingly without any coercion. It filled her with both sadness and rage that he had been hurt so badly he had himself convinced that all women were cut from the same cloth as his wife.

"Mm," Annette sighed between kisses. "Yeah." She pressed closer. "Rich," she whispered as she traced his lips with the tip of her tongue. "Kiss me back."

Rich resisted, denying the overwhelming desire to respond to the gentle pressure of Annette's lips. She was up to something. With the way she complied to his request so readily, she had to be. Practically all evening, she hadn't done a thing without an argument and now, here she was, kissing him without uttering a single word. It had to be some new ploy meant to lure him into dropping his guard again.

"Please," she begged against his taut mouth.

He heard her breathy plea and decided that two could play at this game. He'd lull her into believing that he was in sync with her and then, when she made her move, she'd find herself caught in her own trap. With a smile, Rich parted his lips and welcomed her into his mouth.

Annette was aware of Rich's internal debate and assumed he was still waiting for her to trick him into some unknown, but dreadful snare. The realization added to her sadness but she was determined not to let anything interfere with the memory she hoped to create and refused to dwell on it. Banishing all distracting thoughts from her mind, Annette focused her concentration on the man. Since he remained passive, it was up to her if she wanted this kiss to be a prelude to something more intimate.

Tentatively, Annette caressed Rich's back, gradually deepening the kiss. She couldn't help wondering how long he'd last before he blew up and took charge of the action. When her fingers circled his erection, he growled. Annette was pleased that she managed not to flinch. Mentally, she chastised herself. If her behavior was strained, his would be too. She would hate herself forever if she spoiled what little remained of her one night of bliss. Even if Rich lost control again, she was certain he wouldn't actually hurt her regardless of what she had told him. She decided it was ridiculous to even bother worrying about especially since he surely could have done so already had he truly wanted to. No, she was completely safe from physical harm. Emotional pain was an entirely different story and one that she refused to concern herself with for however long their encounter continued. After all, she had the rest of her life to deal with that so it made no sense to start now, not when she was in bed, naked, with the most delicious man in the universe.

Rich groaned. Annette heard it as encouragement. She tightened her grip and stroked his penis faster for a few moments before shifting her hand to fondle his testicles. She didn't want to release him but knew Rich would force her to if she persisted. Easing almost out of the kiss, Annette looped her leg over his hip and guided his shaft so it pressed along the outside of her slit.

"Can you feel what you do to me?" she asked softly, kissing him before he could respond. "I'm so wet. We kiss and my body drools. I touch you and all I can think of is

how much I want you." More kisses. "You make me feel like I'll burst into flames and soak the sheets at the same time. I never felt like this before. No." She kissed away his reply. "Don't. I know you don't believe me and I know I can't change that. I don't want to argue anymore, Rich. And I'm not saying this to piss you off. I'm saying it because I need to hear it out loud, not because I'm looking for a response." Kisses. "I won't say it again so please don't go ballistic on me." Lingering kisses. "Your cock is so hard. Your body wants me. Mine is craving you. My pussy's hot and wet and ready, just the way you like it. Isn't there something else you'd rather do besides fight?" Deeper kisses. "Please, Rich. Just feeling you stroke outside me has me so horny I can't stand it. My pussy is crying because it isn't holding any part of you. I feel so empty. There's so much juice pooling, waiting for you to dive in."

Rich's resistance fled at Annette's husky words. The woman was sex incarnate and he was a dead man but oh what a way to go! One little shift was all it took to change the angle and slide into her moist heat. He tormented them both by entering her slowly. Once he was fully in, he grabbed the leg she'd thrown over him and held her motionless.

"Feel better?" he asked wickedly.

"Much," she stated.

Their eyes locked and Annette realized he had no intention of letting her move any time soon. She could also sense how much willpower it took for him to torture her. The knowledge of how she was about to up the stakes made her smile. She relaxed her leg and saw a flash of wariness cross Rich's expression before curiosity replaced it.

Instead of struggling as Rich expected, Annette was just lying there passively, watching him. She was smiling, her eyes twinkling with amusement. A minute ago she had been begging for sex of any variety and now she seemed perfectly content to rest with his penis filling her.

"Son of a mother fucking bitch!" Rich shouted when Annette flexed her inner muscles, making them dance along his shaft. "Nettie...oh fuck!"

She giggled. She couldn't help it. She had managed to surprise him completely and in a good way, judging by his reaction. Still giggling, she clamped her muscles around him and squeezed continually for a moment before switching to rapid clenches and releases.

Growling almost savagely, Rich pinned Annette beneath him and withdrew until just the tip of his penis remained inside. "How the hell did you do that? What kind of witch are you?"

"I'm not a witch at all," she answered with her best Dorothy imitation.

Rich bit his lip to hold in his laughter but failed. He sank into her, supporting most of his weight on his elbows. He was grinning like an idiot but so was she and for the first time in a year, Rich remembered what happiness felt like. He squashed the emotion before it took hold by reminding himself that this was merely another of her numerous tricks. Yes, her playful remark had broken the tension but he mustn't forget that the

whole reason for the humor was to set him up for whatever scheme Monica had concocted. His laughter faded and Rich watched her silently with a brow raised in question.

Annette's heart sank as his smile disappeared. For one second, she had a glimpse of the man he must have been before that hateful wife of his turned his heart to stone. That tiny flicker made her love him even more and she needed to close her eyes to hide her emotions until she reined them back in.

"Guess I don't have to tell you I'm one of those people who watch the same movie over and over. Sorry. I'm stalling because I can't decide if you are waiting for an answer or getting ready to yell some more." She paused. "Okay, you're not yelling so I'll explain about that." His eyebrow went up even farther and she knew what he had concluded. "No, not like that although I suppose that would have worked too if I'd been involved with a guy with unlimited patience and resiliency. Oops, still stalling. Anyway, it started out as a joke. Mindy and I were sophomores and we ended up at a party that was a real bust. You see, when Bruce had away games he always asked us to stick with a group if we went some place questionable. Everyone we usually hung with was going to this party and we were bored so we went along even though we hadn't been planning to. We couldn't leave without the girls we went with because Mindy didn't want Bruce to worry about us any more than he already did."

"You could have lied."

"Yeah right." Annette frowned. "Get real, Rich. In spite of what you think, not every female is deceitful. The only way Mindy or I would break her promise to Bruce was in an extreme emergency and lying about something that stupid was so far out of the question that neither one of us even considered it. Are you mad now or do you want to hear this?"

For some unknown reason, Rich decided he liked the way Annette challenged him. Or maybe it was the way she kept flexing her cunt muscles that had him so interested in her explanation. Pulling her with him, he returned them to their sides so he could relax while she talked.

"This doesn't sound like a ten-second story and I didn't want to squash you," he explained. "Go on."

"Oh. Thanks. Okay, so we were stuck at this party, trying not to count the seconds until we could leave and started poking around for something to entertain ourselves with. We would have been happy with an old *TV Guide* at that point but what we found was so much better. Way in the back of the drawer in a stand right by the front door was a stash of porn magazines. Most of them were too nasty to touch but we found a few that weren't all stuck together and took them to the porch. It was kind of cold so no one else was out there. We weren't exactly innocent. I mean, we'd seen *Playboys* and *Hustlers* but we weren't nearly as experienced as we liked to think we were."

"Hard-core, huh?"

"Oh yeah. Very explicit and somewhat kinky. The more we looked, the sillier we got. We had a whole list of things that Mindy was going to attempt with Bruce to see if they were really possible. She pretended to be put out and said that it wasn't fair for her to do all the research. She thought I should find something to experiment with too so it wasn't all one-sided. After that, we read through all the performance enhancement ads and Mindy decided I needed a set of Kegel balls."

"Hold on a sec," Rich interrupted. "You expect me to believe that you and your friend really did the shit you came up with that night and then compared notes? That's a little farfetched, darling."

"Yeah well, think what you want but that's what we did. Of course, Mindy told Bruce what was going on and ended up showing him the pictures of what she was supposed to try."

"And he didn't mind that his girlfriend was running around, blabbing the details of their sex life?"

"First of all, she didn't run around and blab. She told me. And secondly, talking about what they did together wasn't new for us. Before you ask, yes, I shared my experiences too when I was with someone. And three, Bruce thought it was a riot. Think about it, Rich. A twenty-year-old guy whose girlfriend not only wants to experiment sexually but boasts about his expertise afterwards? Granted, it was only to me but a third party still heard how talented he was. Would you have refused?"

"Well, no."

"Didn't think so and thanks for not denying that you've done plenty of experimenting yourself since it's extremely obvious you have."

"Yeah, okay but not because some girl and her buddy were curious about pictures they found in a smut rag."

"You so sure about that? How do you know you weren't enlisted to do things out of curiosity?"

"You're right. I don't. My track record even before Monica wasn't all that great though no one even came close to her level. But this isn't about me. I think you're stalling again."

"Busted," she admitted. "I didn't try the Kegel balls right away. I started feeling guilty after Bruce showed me the picture of the fourth thing they'd tried. Yeah, Bruce showed me. After he stopped laughing at us, he got really involved. He sort of became the official judge of whether or not something was doable and worth repeating. Mindy knew I got them and Bruce was aware of my part but neither pestered me. They probably figured it would take some time and I'd tell them when I was ready. Are you familiar with Kegel balls?"

"Yes."

"Good. Anyway, I checked them out one day when Mindy wasn't around. Once I got used to them, I got brave and walked around with them in me all day. Still do sometimes, if I'm not dating anybody."

"Holy shit! Aren't they supposed to get you all worked up?"

"Un-huh." She nodded with a huge grin. "They do too, in case that was your next question."

Rich gawked. "So how did you convince your friends that you really used them?"

"Jeez, I didn't have to convince Mindy of anything. I simply told her what they were like and she accepted it. We're close. We trust each other to be honest. Bruce, on the other hand —"

"No way. Don't tell me he wouldn't believe you without a demonstration."

"Oh he believed me but he asked for a demonstration anyway. God, you should see the look on your face. You're thinking I screwed him, aren't you? Well, you're wrong and apparently haven't been listening at all."

"I'm listening. I heard you say that you're close to both of them and that you and Bruce are friends but not involved physically. But I don't see how you could demonstrate without having sex. Oh, I get it. You had sex with someone else and he confirmed what you told them."

"Wrong again, stud. I still wasn't sleeping with anyone but I did show them how well the balls worked."

"How?" He looked skeptical.

"With bananas. Mindy and I had just moved into our apartment. There was a counter that separated the kitchen area from the living room. I put on a skirt and hiked it up really far so Mindy could see that I wasn't mashing the bananas with my hand."

Rich gulped. "Where was Bruce?"

"On the other side of the counter where he couldn't see anything until I dropped the bananas on a plate. We started out with really ripe, soft ones because Mindy was afraid the balls hadn't worked as well as I thought they had."

"Must have been some mess. What did you do, scrape the mashed bananas out with a spoon?"

Annette giggled and shook her head. "No. The bananas weren't peeled so there wasn't any mess."

"Ah. Makes more sense that way now that I think about it. I hope you washed them first."

"Of course I did. Jeez. And when I was done, I made banana bread and sent it to Candace."

Rich stared. "You're kidding, right?"

"Yes, but we did joke about it before I threw them away." When he laughed harder than she expected him to, she said, "It's not that funny."

"No. Sorry. It's not that."

"Well? What is it then? I told you what you wanted to know so I think I deserve an answer."

He rolled back on top of her. "Yeah, but let's do this first," he suggested as he began to move inside her.

Within minutes, Rich was pounding away again. "Hey, take it easy," she urged. "Slow down. I'm not going anywhere. There's no need to rush."

"Huh?" he realized she was actually saying something and not just babbling.

"Calm down, stud. I thought you wanted to play."

Rich heard and was momentarily confused since what she said was totally opposite from how she was matching his pace. "Yeah," he finally responded, slowing them both. "I forgot I was going to tease you."

When he slowed even more, Annette whimpered. "I am such an idiot. What the hell was I thinking, reminding you like that? If I'd kept my big mouth shut, you'd have me screaming by now instead of begging like I'm about to."

"You telling me you aren't liking this?"

"No-o," she moaned, arching against him. "Oh God, that's so-o good."

He chuckled. "Thought that's what you meant."

"Tease." She unsuccessfully tried to urge him to move faster.

"You're calling me names?" he groaned when she clenched around him.

They continued to tease each other playfully. Whenever Rich neared the limits of control, Annette would calm him until they returned to a more languid pace. By the time they were no longer able to deny themselves the ultimate release, both were incoherent with need. The sexual tension they'd built exploded, engulfing them in an overwhelmingly powerful surge of pleasure.

"Wow," Annette managed to whisper against Rich's neck as she clung limply.

"Double wow," he agreed. "Pull in your claws, kitten. I gotta move before I suffocate you."

"Huh?" she didn't understand until a few heartbeats later. When his words finally registered, she unclenched her fingers, unhooked her limbs from his back and squirmed out from under him. "Oh God," she gasped when she saw the raised red streaks on his back. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I don't believe I did that. I've never done that before," she apologized repeatedly, horrified with herself.

Rich rolled, catching her arms and pulling her beside him. He laughed as he swallowed her apology in a hard kiss. "Sh, kitten. I wasn't complaining. I'll live. I promise, okay?"

"But —"

He kissed her into silence again. "Knock it off. God damn that was hot as hell!" He read the doubt in her eyes. "You have no clue, do you, Nettie? All right, here's the deal. I'll try to explain if you try not to cry."

"I'm not crying."

"Not yet but you're about to over something that in no way, shape or form requires tears. Just listen, okay?" She nodded. "Correct me if I'm wrong but you're upset because you think you hurt me by dragging your tiny nails across my back." Another nod. "I assure you that you absolutely did not cause even the slightest iota of pain. God's honest truth, kitten, I swear. I'm speaking from personal experience here. I've been raked by dagger nails before and yes, it can hurt like hell but what you did was nothing even remotely similar. I'm not making this any clearer for you, I can tell, so bear with me and I might." He paused for a reassuring kiss. "I know I already told you how amazing it feels when you come. You probably think that's just a line because you must hear it all the time but, for me anyway, it's not. I am being completely honest about how great your pussy feels, on my cock, my tongue, my fingers, doesn't matter what you're squeezing, it's great everywhere. Hell, I bet it'd be just as awesome on my big toe."

"Yeah, right."

"Hey, don't knock it unless you've tried it." He gave her a sexy wink. "Now, as I was saying, feeling you come is a zillion times better than any wet dream fantasy imaginable. I mean, damn Nettie, you get off like a woman should and I know you really are 'cause no way in hell could you fake that. Not with the river you let loose and especially not this last time."

Annette tried to pull away. "You think I'm faking?"

Rich's arms locked her in place. "Hell no! Weren't you listening? I said there's not a chance of that because of all the evidence pouring from your pussy. Yes, I'm just a dumb guy so maybe I can't tell the difference. I always try to be decent and take care of the woman I'm with instead of being a selfish bastard like some guys are and I think I'm a pretty accurate judge of the responses I get."

"You're extremely generous."

"Thanks. I know I'm bumbling this pretty badly but I'm trying to tell you that the way you ran your nails over my back made the whole thing even more erotic for me. Kitten, I never had anyone hold on to me quite like that before. Every part of your body was clutching me like you couldn't get enough. Your pussy was gripping my cock, your legs were clenching my waist, your mouth was devouring mine, your arms had us pressed so tightly together that you probably still have indentations from my chest hair. And then, right before you took me with you, your hands gripped my back like you wanted to pull more of me inside you." Rich heard what he just said and snorted dismissively. "Listen to me, would ya? Prime example of what I meant when I said you can't pay attention to anything a guy says when he's having mind-blowing sex. We took our time and let it build so when we came, we came hard. You hung on and my brain got so fried I tried to make it into something poetic. Bullshit, darling. Pure bullshit."

Annette snuggled against him and buried her face in his neck. She spent a few minutes nibbling on it to hide her raw emotions. Rich had been correct, thinking she was trying to get closer to him. Hearing him say it had filled her with a surge of

unrealistic hope that there was a chance it didn't have to end once they left this room. It drained just as rapidly when he belittled the experience by declaring his sentiments nothing more than sex-induced hype.

"Keep that up, darling, and I'll forget all about what I planned on telling you." Rich yanked her back to reality.

"That's right." She felt controlled enough to face him and propped herself partly on his chest so she could see him while they spoke. "You do owe me, after all."

He chuckled at her expectant expression. "Yeah, but now that I think about it I'm not sure this is something you really want to know."

"Hey! Not fair. You can't back out now."

"All right, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Stop being so dramatic and just tell me already. Jeez, how bad can it be, right?"

Rich took a deep breath. "Damn, I wish I hadn't started this but here goes. First, tell me, do you and your sister discuss sex as openly as you and Mindy do?"

"Hell, no! What are you nuts! I'd go into all the gory details with my dad before I'd tell Candace anything."

"Yep, that's what I thought. You're probably not going to believe me but Lars and I had a very interesting chat when you girls ran off to the ladies' room at the theater."

"About?" Annette asked skeptically.

"About why I should forgive your sister's rudeness and why he suspected she wasn't finished."

"Okay," she drew it out. "And just why was that?"

"Because, brace yourself, kitten, your uptight, seemingly repressed sister behaves badly in order to earn the punishment she craves."

Annette sputtered. "What the hell are you talking about? You don't mean...it sounds like...no, that's impossible. Candace wouldn't...would she?"

"According to Lars, she would. Shocked the hell out of me too. So much, in fact, that he clarified it for me. Apparently, your high-and-mighty sister isn't so righteous after all. Lars claims that although she truly does think she knows what is best for you, most of her bitchiness is deliberate because she knows it makes Lars angry on your behalf. And, from what he says, she doesn't let up until she's sure she's guaranteed herself more than just a simple little spanking with the palm of his hand."

"No!"

"Yes, although he did indicate that his hand or belt will do in a pinch, he said Miss Hoity-Toity much prefers a cane."

"A cane? As in she likes it when Lars, harmless, meek, mild Lars," her voice squeaked with every word, "my calm, patient, sweet-natured brother-in-law Lars beats her ass with a wooden stick! And that she goes out of her way to pick on me just to

make sure he does it! Ew! Oh yuck." She shuddered as she climbed across him and out of bed.

"Where you going?"

"To the bathroom. I think I'm going to be sick."

Rich followed her. "Hey, Nettie, I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be so freaked out over this."

Annette hid her surprise that he was comfortable using the toilet with her in the bathroom as she splashed water on her face. She held the towel over it until he finished.

"Oops." Rich recognized her unease as soon as he turned around. "Guess I owe you another apology. I should have waited until you were through."

"No, that's okay." Annette ignored her embarrassment and sat on the toilet. "I mean, why should I get all weird about us peeing after we spent the last five hours naked, digging in each other's crotches, right? Not to mention how I bargained for you to share that intimate little detail of my sister's sex life. And I'm not really freaked out. I just wasn't expecting that. I do know people like that sort of thing. I'm not one of them and yes, I have been spanked so I really do know what I'm talking about but Candace." She shook her head. "Candace, my prim and proper, looks-down-her-nose-at-me-because-I-admit-I-like-sex sister, Candace, gets off on pain. Why the hell did Lars tell you about it?"

"I have no idea. I certainly didn't ask him, that's for sure. Oh, I should probably add that he told me in the strictest of confidence so you can't let on that you know." He followed her from the bathroom.

"Great," she snorted as she flopped on the bed. "Just great. Thanks a bunch, Rich. No really. I can't tell you how thrilled I am that you felt the need to share this with me after Lars made it clear that it was a secret just between you guys. God, how am I ever going to be able to look at either of them again and keep my mouth shut? Especially when Candace starts in on me and you better believe she will. You just had to tell me, didn't you?" She propped her chin on his chest again. "Don't even think of laughing at me or I swear I'll smack that smirk right off your face. Oh my God," she gasped. "Don't tell me you made it up to see if I was into it! Or that you were fishing to find out if I would spank you! Do you want me to spank you?"

Rich couldn't hold in his laughter another second. He held her tightly until it receded. "Thanks for asking but I'll pass. And yeah, I've tried it too, from both sides. I didn't make it up, kitten. Lars really did tell me all of it. You're probably right, I should have kept it to myself but I thought it might help next time Candace starts in on you. Nothing she says should get under your skin now that you know why she's being such a bitch, right?"

"Hmm, I guess but don't expect me to thank you," she finally giggled and relaxed. "Damn. Candace isn't so straight and narrow after all. Wait 'til Mindy hears about this."

"You can't tell her."

"The hell I can't. Mindy and I used to say all sorts of stuff, just to shock her. Guess Candace got the last laugh. God, I love it."

"So I'm off the hook and you're not going to puke?"

"Calm down, stud. I'm fine now that I'm getting used to the idea."

"Good." He rearranged them so they were more comfortable. "I could use a little power nap. How about you?"

"Mm." Annette snuggled against him. "Sounds good."

Chapter Seven

It was almost dawn when Rich suggested the nap. Annette was exhausted but refused to doze. This was the first and last time they would be together and her one and only chance to see his face without any tension as he relaxed in sleep. She'd have the rest of her life to catch up on her rest. Hoping to hasten his slumber, Annette forced her body to go limp and made her breathing deep and even. She kept her eyes shut until she was positive that Rich had drifted off.

At first, Annette merely memorized the sight in front of her. Currently, she was lying with her head resting on Rich's shoulder. Her hand was on his chest with his covering it. The good thing was he hadn't bothered to turn off the light. The bad thing was he had pulled the sheet up to their waists and she wasn't able to see the lower half of them. She was disappointed that she couldn't see if it looked as perfect as it felt to have her leg draped over his. Even more unfortunate was that she wouldn't get to watch his body's reaction should he happen to roll the few inches it would take to bring his penis in contact with her thigh.

With a sigh, Annette closed her eyes and shifted enough to tilt her head in order to see Rich's face. She tried to move as she would in her sleep and waited to raise her eyelids until she was sure she hadn't disturbed him. It took all she had not to react when she saw his features. Without the strain of his life etched into his expression, Rich looked years younger. He was smiling in his sleep and appeared happy as well as peaceful. Awake, his appearance, while not classically handsome was riveting to say the least. Asleep, he was absolutely adorable. All the underlying seriousness was gone and he looked like someone she could not only have fun with but someone she'd never tire of.

Annette's heart already ached with sadness for the way he permitted his failed marriage to affect his life but now, seeing him like this made it all the more unbearable. It simply wasn't fair! Even if she was one hundred percent wrong about what she thought they could have together, she still hated that he had dug himself into a hole so deep he couldn't remember what sunshine was. What made it even more awful was the fear that Rich might never stop digging and find his way back to the surface. It broke her heart to know that her love was strong enough to help restore him and that he would never know it was available. Even if she offered it to him, he'd reject it. Walking away from him was going to be hard enough without the additional pain there'd be if she allowed Rich to twist her feelings into something ugly because he was unable to accept them for what they were.

Twelve hours ago, her biggest concern had been how she would have to hold her tongue and listen to Candace berate her absentee boyfriend. If anyone had told her that

so much would change in such a short amount of time, she would have laughed. She was still having trouble believing it and she was the one living through it. Love at first sight always sounded wonderful but she'd never truly believed it existed. All-consuming rage fueled by never-ending bitterness was another thing she'd doubted. If someone had asked her yesterday if she would fight for the man she loved no matter what the circumstances, she would have insisted that nothing could prevent her from doing just that. Since meeting Rich she'd come to understand that using love as a shield was futile if the one you were protecting didn't want outside interference of any kind and wasn't able to reach out for help much less join in the battle. Then again, maybe a miracle would happen and Rich would wake up believing she was exactly who she said she was, ready to let go of his past and open up his future to include her.

Annette had no idea how long she lay in Rich's arms, watching him sleep. As much as she wanted to touch him, she hated to disturb his slumber. She would have remained as she was if he hadn't shifted. The hand holding hers moved over his head and his knee bent, dragging the sheet along with it, baring them to mid-thigh. Once Annette was positive Rich wasn't waking up, she slid her leg ever so slowly off his. Instead of pressing it to his penis as she had wanted to earlier, she chose to rearrange her body so she could use her mouth to coax him into hardness. Very grateful that the mattress was firm enough not to magnify her movements, Annette carefully inched her way lower until her head was at his groin and propped herself on her elbow.

For an extended moment, Annette indulged her need to memorize him intimately. But fearing Rich to be one of those people who sensed when they were being stared at, she didn't linger nearly as long as she wanted to before gently lifting his shaft from his thigh, touching as little as possible before capturing him with her mouth. Initially, all she did was hold him between her lips, letting him rest on her tongue while watching his face for any signs of waking. The temptation soon became too great for Annette to resist sucking tenderly on his soft skin. Instantly, he twitched and began to harden. Rich groaned but remained asleep. Annette raised her head to slide her lips up his increasing length and back again. By the fourth caress, Rich was fully awake and devouring her with lust-filled eyes.

"Morning." He smiled. "You forgot something."

"No. I decided to watch you wake up first," she stated, shifting to cup his testicles.

"I'm awake now."

Annette teased him before responding. "I know."

"I'm ready for my distraction."

"Isn't this distracting?" she asked with her eyes wide and full of innocence before dipping her head and massaging him with the back of her throat.

Rich groaned. "Hell yeah, but not in the way you need it to be. Have a heart, kitten. At least flip around so I can pet my pussy."

His expression was too adorable for Annette to make him wait. As soon as she was within reach, he tugged her closer and bent her leg for better access. Instantly, Rich's

hand covered her mound. With a boyish grin, he took a minute to pet her as he would a feline. When Annette returned to her play, his attention became more intimate and it wasn't long before his fingers were dipping deep into her moisture.

"Damn, it sure doesn't take much to get your juices flowing. You always wake up this ready?"

"Depends on who I wake up with," she answered between licks.

Rich was lost. He knew without a doubt what a stubborn, manipulative, lying bitch Annette was but, as she had many times over the past hours, she seemed so open and sincere. At the moment, it was hard for him to remember that she was anything other than a vivacious woman with a quick mind and sense of humor, not to mention a sexual appetite that equaled or possibly even exceeded his. She behaved like she was truly enjoying herself and not merely acting as if there was nothing else she'd rather be doing. Another thing that he found confusing was that she hadn't revealed her true purpose. They'd been alone for hours and he still had no idea what she was supposed to accomplish. Not that he had any objection to waiting, considering how they were passing the time. His only problem with the whole thing was that he might do something incredibly stupid like ignore the one glaring flaw in her otherwise perfect persona and let himself acknowledge how right being with her felt. For the first morning in who knew how long, Rich woke up smiling and no matter how badly he wanted to deny it, he had to admit that the smile wasn't entirely due to the fact that there had been a sexy woman sucking his cock at the time.

Rich hastily derailed that train of thought and focused all his attention on their physical activities instead. "Let me have a taste, Nettie," he pleaded.

"Only if I get to keep this." She licked him like an ice-cream cone.

Instead of replying, Rich rolled to his side, leaving his penis available. "Mm," he hummed as he buried his lips in her heat.

"Mm," she echoed, humming around him.

Soon, all that was heard were the sounds of their mutual enjoyment as their mouths and hands stimulated their still-sensitive flesh. Rich was sorry when he needed to interrupt their fun.

"Take a break, Nettie. Please. I'm too close."

"Not close enough," she protested.

"Aw, fuck," he groaned when she vibrated her lips. "Stop. Sweet Jesus, stop. Don't make me come. Please. Not yet."

"Why not?" She paused for his reason. "I told you how much I want you to so why should I stop now?"

"Because I'd like to offer an alternative. One that might interest you more."

"Go on." Annette rested her head on his thigh and held him loosely with her hand.

"Thanks. Here's my suggestion. First," he wiggled his fingers inside her, "you come in my mouth."

"I don't think so!" Her lips fastened below his bulbous head.

"Hold on, hear me out." He waited for her mouth to release him. "Okay, you come first, once at the very least but several times is preferable, since you don't have the same limitations as I do and it'll help with phase two."

"Phase two?"

"Phase two. That's when I stretch out and watch you fuck yourself on my cock until you get off another couple or three times before you ride me like a bucking bronco, holding on with your tight pussy until you make me come so hard you feel me shooting all the way up in your throat."

"Would I have to stop sucking your cock completely or can I play with you as long as I take it easy?"

"You promise to let me go when you feel me tighten up?"

"Yes, but only if you promise not to take over later."

"Can I touch you? And kiss you?"

"You damn well better!"

Rich grinned expectantly. "Deal?"

Annette tried to give him a stern look but could tell by his expression that she failed to conceal her excitement. "Deal."

Instead of immediately diving back in with his tongue, Rich began with his fingers as he continued to hold her gaze. Annette knew she should look away before he saw the emotions she was struggling so desperately to hide but was momentarily captivated by the total lack of suspicion in his expression. For the first time, he was studying her as a man might to familiarize himself with a new lover. How could being the sole object of his unwavering interest be so exhilarating yet fill her with such despair all at once? If only the sentiments permeating this second were their truth. But they weren't and Annette knew she had to protect them both from her unwelcome feelings.

With an exaggerated sigh, Annette moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. She tore her eyes from his to give his erection a lingering glance. With what she hoped was an inviting smile, Annette pointed her tongue and licked a milky drop from the slit. This time, she moistened her lips with his excitement. Rich stared, his eyes darkening with lust. His fingers caressed more deliberately. Annette already knew she was in trouble. Now this less-stressed version of Rich made her feel like she'd been hit by a ball from one of the Fort Pitt cannons they fired to open the regatta every summer. Part of her wanted the interlude to last forever and part of her grew more petrified with the passing of each and every emotionally charged second. Determined not to dwell on the impossibility of a future, Annette forced herself to stay in the present. She needed to make the most of it because this, like all good things, would come to an end.

"When I woke up, I was certain my memory exaggerated how good you felt. I was wrong. You're so soft and silky." He inhaled deeply. "You smell like heaven." He licked slowly. "You taste like ambrosia reserved exclusively as nectar for the gods." Rich

worked three fingers in to the hilt. "You fit like a glove no matter what I cover with you." He watched intently as he thrust his hand. "They'd ban you from every pussy beauty pageant in the universe because no one else would stand a chance with you there. You'd win all of them hands down." He flicked her clitoris with his tongue. "You're so responsive. So juicy. I wish I could shrink myself and live in your pussy." He lapped up some of her wetness before retreating to stare again, working her nub with his thumb.

Annette moaned. "Bad idea." She slowly swallowed his penis and released it even more slowly. "If you did that your cock would shrink too and it's the perfect size just like this."

"Mm." Rich's hand stayed active as he pumped his hips to help Annette's mouth move along his shaft. "Good point. Okay, I'll invent a remote so I can expand back to full size with the touch of a button. Think of it, kitten. One minute I'll be wallowing inside, swimming around in your hot cunt, fucking your clit with my cock and the next, I'll hit the switch and you'll feel my cock swell until you're stretched tight, just like last night."

"And like I'm about to be."

"Soon. Come on my fingers while I watch you suck my cock." Rich increased the pressure and soon had her whimpering.

Annette almost devoured him before she remembered her promise not to push him to climax in her mouth. He tasted so good. She hadn't lied when she'd told him that she found him perfect. Not only was his body perfect on its own, it was a perfect match to hers. If only she had more time, say the rest of her life, to explore that perfection. Annette felt Rich's testicles tighten and let him slip from her mouth instantly. She switched her devotion to his sac and couldn't continue to resist the magic of his hand.

"Great way to start the day, kitten," Rich mumbled with his lips so close she felt his warm breath. "You have my cock so hard. I want you to squeeze my tongue and flood my mouth before you take over but I don't know how much more I can handle without letting go."

"Why don't you get back to what you were doing and let me worry about you? I've decided that I'm going to enjoy riding you so no way am I letting you out of this deal. Besides, if I wait to suck your cock until after you come just think of how much longer I'll get to indulge myself."

Rich chuckled. "Don't bet on it. I doubt I'll last very long even if I fucked you a dozen times first. I don't need to spunk down your throat to know how hot it'll be."

"Uh, thanks but I'd rather wait until you actually have something to base your opinion on." Annette gave his shaft a few strokes before wrapping her hand firmly around the base. "I'm ready for more and I'm pretty sure you are too so how about we save the rest of this discussion for later?" She slurped the bead of moisture from the tip as she held his eyes. "I keep thinking about squeezing your tongue."

"Fuck," Rich swore at her words and the way she arched her body to open herself even more.

Annette played tug-of-war with Rich's tongue. Each time he crushed his lips against her to penetrate as deep as possible, she clenched her inner muscles to grasp it. The man was beyond amazing! She had no idea how he managed to flex his tongue with her clutching it so tightly. It was so far beyond good already that she nearly lost her mind when Rich began to massage her clit with his lip. The only thought that didn't succumb to her orgasm was that she must not take him with her. Somehow, her fingers clamped on the one spot that would prevent ejaculation and limited herself to the few drops of pre-cum that had already seeped from his cock.

"Again," Rich demanded.

There was no time for objections since Rich was already coaxing her body toward another climax. Taking advantage of her natural lubrication, he had little trouble working his thumb into her anus while his fingers claimed her vagina. His teeth grazed her engorged flesh, causing a quick flare of pain before he fastened his lips on it. His tongue flicked and prodded, swirled and laved, licked and caressed all at once. Annette was soaring higher than ever before. Each time with Rich had been better than the last and she hadn't thought it possible for the trend to continue. He proved her wrong by pressing his fingers together with only the thin barrier of flesh separating them. If she weren't so delirious, she might have been embarrassed, thrashing and squealing as she was, not to mention how she was clutching his penis as if her life depended on it, but the fireworks within were just too spectacular for her to worry about anything. Of course, it didn't help her control any to have Rich ordering her to give in to his physical encouragement and let herself soar.

When Annette's mind kicked in, she realized she still had Rich's penis in a death grip and was panting around the throbbing head. Before uncurling her fingers, she gently slid her lips down to her hand and sucked her way back up his shaft. She had to smile after she released him because she'd ended up with a dab of his liquid heat on her bottom lip.

"Mm," she purred after she swiped it with her tongue. "Please say we're ready for phase two because this," she licked him like a lollipop, "is damn near impossible to resist."

"Yeah, I guess you're warmed up enough."

"Warm hell! More like within two seconds of spontaneous combustion."

Rich caught her wrist and tugged until their heads were together. "Sorry about that, kitten. I'll try to make it better for you next time."

"I'd argue that it isn't possible but I've been thinking that every time and you keep proving me wrong."

Flashing her a smug grin, Rich silenced their banter with a searing kiss. It was deep and full of heat at the start but gradually diminished to sweet and tender. By the time their lips parted, the kiss was soft and barely there. Annette felt boneless and dazed.

She was grateful when Rich gave her a minute to reorient herself before rolling to his back and urging her over him.

"Phase two, Nettie. You ready?"

"Yeah. I think I can remember how to move." Annette demonstrated by raising her head to his chest and latching on to his nipple.

He'd traded control for the sensation of coming in her vagina instead of her mouth and she intended to enjoy herself immensely. Taking her time, Annette nibbled down his body and positioned herself between his knees. Rich was sprawled in front of her with his hands behind his head. He would have appeared to be fully relaxed if the raging lust in his eyes hadn't given him away. Grinning happily, Annette leaned forward to surround his enormous erection with her breasts. She teased him, pressing them together, rocking back and forth with him trapped between them while her nipples grazed his groin.

"Later on, remind me to coat your breasts with pussy juice. I want to rub it all over until you're nice and slippery and then squeeze you around my cock. Or maybe I'll start in your pussy and fuck my way up to your mouth and back again."

"Yes, please," Annette said politely, making them both chuckle.

"Give me your cunt, Nettie. I love your boobs just like I love your mouth but right now I need your tight pussy."

Grinning again, Annette licked a trail from his penis to his mouth. After several more mind-numbing kisses, she pushed her torso up until she was kneeling between his thighs. Without rushing, Annette straddled Rich. Inch by inch, she lowered herself onto him, watching him while he watched her. She was motionless, savoring the feel of him lodged inside her.

Annette needed to move before she turned into a blubbery idiot. This non-hostile Rich reinforced and magnified her already overwhelming feelings for him along with her solitary knowledge of what they could have together. She had to keep her focus on the physical and block out the emotional. Sitting tall, Annette began to undulate over him. Her eyelids were so heavy but she was trapped by his expression and unable to let them drift shut. Each time she slid down and engulfed his shaft, desire flared in Rich's eyes. She gave him exactly what he asked for but she could see how much effort it was taking for him to remain passive.

"Ooh," Annette moaned. "Your cock is so hard. You're huge." She tightened her muscles slightly. "I can feel every little ridge. And your heartbeat. Oh God, this is good." She watched his face and saw that her words were affecting him as she'd hoped.

Following her instincts, Annette ran her hands over her thighs and up until she cupped her breasts. She lifted her mounds as if offering them to Rich. Next, she manipulated herself the way he had. By the time she centered her play on her nipples, they were both breathing heavily. Annette was stunned to feel her own fingers pinching and tugging much harder than ever before though not nearly as hard as Rich's had.

"Damn, you're fucking hot," Rich snarled. "Let me do that for you."

Smiling, she shook her head and saw his disappointment. "No hands," she stated. "Mouth only," Annette specified, leaning forward.

Rich propped himself on his elbows and submerged his face between her breasts. When he first saw her in that shapeless dress, he never suspected it hid such a passionate creature. If she'd been telling the truth about experiencing things for the first time with him, it supported his hunch that Annette was the most uninhibited, sexually aware woman he'd ever met. He raked her stiffened peak with his teeth and felt her responding shiver so he followed up with a deliberate bite. Immediately, he sought the other nipple and suckled it gently, swirling his tongue softly around the areola before swabbing the tip. Annette sighed and Rich returned to the first nipple, resuming the harsh treatment. He alternated until Annette straightened, no longer within reach.

"I'll come if you keep that up," she declared.

"That's a bad thing?" He split his attention between her eyes and their joined flesh, astounded that she had maintained the same slow pace.

"No. But then you'd miss this."

"Miss what?"

"This." She nodded to the hand that now held herself open so he could watch her fingering her clitoris.

"Mm, I like that. You gonna keep at it until you come?" She nodded. "Want some help?"

Annette shook her head. "Just watch. Don't move."

"Easier said than done, kitten," he stated, obviously struggling against his body's demands.

"Hold still and I'll give you a treat."

"Kiss me after you come?"

"Sure," she agreed and proceeded to stimulate herself until she exploded.

Even before she was functional, Rich plundered her mouth. Incredible! The man's kisses were hot enough to melt her bones. Or they would be if she had any bones left to melt. Wanting to generate some heat of her own, Annette managed to shift her torso and drag her nipples across Rich's chest. The sensation drew moans. Annette couldn't decipher hers from his but decided they made nice harmony. Eventually, she eased her way out of the kiss and used her mouth to torment his flesh. When she mimicked his most recent attentions, his arms tried to slip around her but she pressed them back to the bed, reminding him without words that she was still in control. When his hips lifted, she clamped her inner muscles tight until he swore and forced himself to lie still.

"Damn, you're cruel," he hissed.

"And you're about to lose your treat."

"Oh no, anything but that! Please forgive me! I'm sorry. You just feel so incredible that I forgot myself for a second. I'll behave," he pleaded and teased nonstop until she began to giggle.

"Okay, stud, you can quit now."

"Are you sure? I'll grovel all day if my treat has anything to do with that sweet pussy of yours."

"Jeez." She leaned forward and brushed his forehead with her lips. "Are you always so needy?"

"Only when your wet cunt is involved."

Rich stared at Annette's mouth until she gave in and kissed him for real. Why had he said something that made him sound so vulnerable? Yes, her cunt—okay, her entire body—was to die for but that didn't supersede the fact that she was evil through and through. So what if she was a great fuck? Um, okay, since this was just between him and his cock, he'd admit she was the best fuck ever. Or, if he were being perfectly honest, there was way more than simple fucking going on with her but that had nothing to do with anything and no matter what, he wasn't stupid enough to toss that card on the table. Not when she'd run it straight back to Monica who would undoubtedly find some way to use it against him.

"See, kitten, I can be good."

"You sure can," she teased, biting his bottom lip then soothing with her soft tongue.

"Thanks. Goes both ways."

"Mm," Annette purred.

With a catlike move, she rounded her shoulders and rolled her body up, ending with her back arched to display her heavy breasts as she straddled him. Annette reached behind her hips to lift her breasts even higher. With a sexy smile, she fondled his testicles as her inner muscles rippled along his pole.

"I changed my mind. Instead of shrinking and living inside your pussy, I think I'd rather be your sex slave. I'll stay naked so you can do that to my cock any time you feel like it."

"Hmm." Annette tilted her head and pretended to consider his suggestion. "How about you stay full-sized and naked when I'm home alone and play in my pussy whenever I leave the house or have company?"

"Perfect! Or maybe not. How's your panther going to react to all the pheromones you'll give off when I keep you coming continually?"

"Don't know. He's never had any competition."

Rich snorted. "Now that I find hard to believe. A nympho like you? There must have been plenty of hounds sniffing around during the time you've worked at the zoo."

"Nympho? Excuse me but it takes one to know one so speak for yourself, stud. And I hate to burst your bubble but very few guys have been worthy of meeting Galahad. He's never been in any danger of losing top billing in my heart and he knows it." She pressed a finger to his lips. "Careful what you say. You already insulted me twice. Do it

again and the only thing that'll be squeezing your cock is your own hand since I doubt that you're flexible enough to suck yourself."

Rich raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't you like to know," he teased playfully.

Annette flexed her muscles so her flesh danced around his. One fingertip from each hand rubbed the sensitive flesh beneath his swollen testicles, still enclosed within her palms. Her expression was full of innocence as she waited for him to reply.

"This is so not fair," Rich groaned when the torment persisted. "All right. You win. No, I can't do it and yes, I did try years ago."

"Oh my," she giggled. "Sorry but I gotta ask. If you had been able to reach, would you have done it?"

"Hell if I know. When we were fourteen or so, Dan's mom lost it over some movie she caught his dad watching. He was so pissed that he left it in the VCR when he took off. His mom was in the habit of splitting before the dust settled and that night was no exception. Dan was curious so he checked it out and called me over right away so I could see it too. Since his parents generally took turns seeing who could stay away the longest, we had plenty of time to watch it before either of them got back."

"It was one with that dorky guy who always sucked his own cock while he spied on other people fucking," Annette stated.

"Yeah and I'm not even going to ask how you know that."

"Bruce," she explained anyway. "And no, he can't do it either."

Rich realized he was actually enjoying himself in ways that had nothing to do with sex. Certain that he was in danger of setting himself up, he forced back his response and scowled instead.

Annette sensed his mood shift and laughed to cover her sadness. "I know. Too much information. Before we get any further off track, I think it's time for your treat."

"Ooh goody." He grinned expectantly.

"You're just too cute," Annette couldn't stop herself from blurting out. "You don't have to ham it up, stud. I'm as ready for your treat as you are."

"Gonna tell me or do I have to guess?" he asked as moved over him again.

Annette shivered with heightened desire. "Tell," she moaned, clearly having difficulty maintaining her teasing pace. "Since you let me do things my way last time, I'm going to let you help this time. Now before you get carried away, I want to stay on top."

"Anything else?" he asked, already thrusting up to meet her.

She nodded, her skin flushed. "Yeah. You have to come too. With me."

"No problem," Rich growled.

Conversation stopped as passion took over. The only words uttered were ones of encouragement and pleasure. Annette and Rich worked together to flame their desire until their bodies were zinging with erotic sensations. Though both sought to prolong it,

neither could hold back. All too soon, they gave into their mutual need, pushing each other over the edge.

Her climax ebbed. Annette sagged onto Rich's heaving chest and wrapped her body around his. She felt so complete that she never wanted the moment to end. "Mm," she sighed, listening to his heartbeat as his arms tightened around her.

Rich wanted to hold Annette forever. More than anything, he wanted to say to hell with her involvement with Monica and forget all about the circumstances that brought them together. He wanted to ignore what he'd learned about the true nature of women and beg her to stay with him for the rest of his life. The second after his thoughts registered, Rich flinched. His body tensed and his mind balked at his stupidity.

"That was great, darling. Definitely worth the price. Hell, it would have been worth it even if I'd had to spring for the tickets and the room too."

"Huh?" Annette was completely baffled.

"So, tell me what I have to do to arrange to see you once we're back in Pittsburgh."

"What?"

"Pardon my ignorance but I never paid for sex with a hooker before and I don't know the technicalities. Do you have a pager that I leave my number on when I want to schedule some of your time or is there someone I call to request you? How does it work?"

Annette pulled away and stumbled to the floor. All the color had drained from her face and her eyes were bright with unshed tears. When Rich started to reach for her, she stopped him by grabbing the empty wine bottle.

"Stay away from me."

"What's the problem, darling? I thought your kind survived by retaining a steady customer base."

"How dare you!" she hissed as she yanked on the first clothes she found and picked up her purse.

"What? Oh, I get it." He clapped. "Bravo. Excellent. Indignation because I figured out where Monica found you. No wonder you're so talented. You must be in great demand. Frankly, I'm surprised you have any time left for the zoo," he sneered. "You don't need to worry that I'll horn in on your, ah, regulars. I'm pretty sure I can't afford a whole night with you since I'm betting your services don't come cheap. Hell, I doubt I'll be able to swing more than an occasional hour now and then but hey, a guy deserves to splurge sometimes, right?"

Flinging open the door, she turned to face him and dropped the bottle. Her lips quivered and one lone tear trickled down her cheek. "You know what, Rich," she said softly. "In spite of everything you said, I still feel sorry for you." With that, she stepped into the hall and closed the door gently behind her.

Chapter Eight

Rich had started pacing two hours earlier. He had been so positive that Annette was bluffing. He was sure her dramatic exit had been purely for effect and that she'd be back sooner or later simply because she hadn't taken her things when she walked out. After she left, he had taken a long shower, certain there was plenty of time before she returned to pick up her charade. Now, however, he was beginning to have doubts.

Hearing a knock, Rich raced to the door. "Nettie," he said her name before he could see who was on the other side. His face fell when he discovered Dan standing there. "Oh. Sorry. I thought you were Nettie."

"Yeah, I sorta figured that." Dan followed Rich into the room. "Where'd she go?"

"I have no idea," he admitted as he stood, staring out the window.

Dan looked around and didn't need to ask how they'd spent the night. He also knew by the look of his friend that something had happened. "Is she coming back?"

"Don't think so."

"But her stuff is still here," Dan stated the obvious because he didn't know where else to start.

"Yeah," Rich agreed, visibly pulling himself together to face his friend. "So, what's up? I wasn't really expecting you this morning."

"I know but I thought you'd want to hear this. Last night, after you left the bar I called Stacy."

Rich frowned. "You did what! What the hell for?"

"Hear me out, Rich. You know Stacy and I avoid anything to do with you and Monica when we hook up. Neither one of us even mentions your names. We get together for mindless sex not for heavy debates about the two of you, you know that."

"I thought I did but now I'm not so sure. Why'd you call her and what did she say that got you here now?"

"I was watching you with that babe last night and something seemed off. I don't know why, because I was sure she was up to something when I first heard her talking about you but, after you left, I started to wonder. I called Stacy to see if she would give me a yes or no answer on whether or not Monica was setting you up."

"Fuck," Rich muttered as he slid into a chair and dropped his head to his hands. After a moment, he scrubbed his face and looked at Dan. "What did she say?"

"She didn't pick up last night so I left a message, asking her to call me back as soon as she got it."

"What did she say, Dan?"

"Well, um, the first thing she did after I explained my question was laugh. Really laugh. As in long, hard, rolling on the floor, tears on her cheeks laugh. Then she assured me that Monica has absolutely nothing to do with what I overheard. Stacy claims Monica has met her soul mate and is in love." Rich snorted. "Yeah, I had the same reaction but Stacy swears it's true. She also says Monica signed your divorce papers Tuesday and that they're waiting for you at home."

"I'll believe that when I see them."

"Me too. Either way though, I thought you'd want to hear about it so I came over as soon as I hung up."

"You're right, Dan, thanks." Rich shook his head. "Fuck! If what Stacy told you is true, then—"

"Who the hell is Annette?"

"Exactly who she claimed to be," Rich swore and got up to stare at nothing again. "I fucked up, Dan. I fucked up royally. What the hell am I going to do?"

"What do you mean, Rich? What happened?"

"I-I." His shoulders slumped and he needed a deep breath to continue. "I raped her."

"Holy shit!" Dan gasped in horror. "Sorry. No way. I don't believe it. Come on, Rich. There's no fucking way you'd do that no matter what was going on."

Rich turned and let Dan see all the self-loathing and regret he was feeling. "I did." His hand slammed the window frame. "Before and after I almost strangled her."

Dan's mouth opened but no words came out. He sat and stared. "You tried to strangle her? Are you serious?"

"Yeah," Rich admitted. He was shaking and didn't hide it. "I got rough and she screamed so I put my hands around her throat and told her to shut up before I made her."

"Holy shit," Dan repeated. He was shocked by what he was hearing and couldn't accept it as truth even though Rich would never lie to him.

"What the fuck do I do now? Do I turn myself in? I'm surprised the cops haven't come to get me already. Nettie's been gone for hours. They should have gotten here by now."

"Hang on. Don't jump the gun, okay?"

"Didn't you hear what I said, Dan? I. Raped. Her. Weren't you listening? I forced an innocent woman to have sex with me and almost killed her when she tried to fight me. I let myself get so twisted that I refused to consider any of the million reasons she had for why I was mistaken to believe she was connected to Monica. God, I let that bitch turn me into a monster," he snorted with disgust. "No. I turned myself into a monster."

"Rich..."

"Don't, Dan. I know you mean well and are trying to help but I don't deserve your support. I don't deserve to live after what I did to that poor girl."

"Something's not right here. And don't say it's you because it's more than that. I mean, if you really did, ah, what you said you did, then why was she still here this morning? Wouldn't she have been able to get away earlier? Didn't you sleep at all?"

"Not much. And when I did, I had her pinned beside me."

"But if you were asleep she could have slipped away, right?"

Rich just shook his head. After a minute, he went to the closet and started to pack his things. "Thanks again for coming, Dan."

"That's it? Just thanks? What the hell is that supposed to mean? What are you going to do?"

"Go home I guess. Wait for the cops to come. Dear God, how am I going to tell Gramps?" Rich's hand trembled. "Just go already. You shouldn't be here. I don't want you involved. I won't drag you down with me, any more than I already have."

Dan swore and grabbed Rich's shoulder, forcing him to face him. "Shut the fuck up and stop acting like an asshole. I called you, remember? I'm responsible for what happened."

"The only mistake you made was sticking with me long enough for me to distort things for you too. I sucked you into my delusions. I'm sorry, Dan. You deserve better."

"That's bullshit! I don't want to fight with you but I will if you don't stop saying this shit. Monica's been fucking you around since you met. I'm the one who warned you. I'm the one who told you not to trust her. When I called Stacy, I fully expected her to confirm that Monica was behind all this because I honestly believe she's capable of it. So don't you dare tell me to take a hike now. Understand?"

"Yeah. And thanks. But Dan, I really did rape her. And nearly strangle her. You called me because you're my friend and were trying to protect me. Again. Christ, why couldn't I have listened to you in the first place? If I hadn't been such a pigheaded ass and married Monica in spite of your warnings, none of this would have happened."

Dan wanted to protest but knew he'd be wasting his breath. He sensed there was more to it and didn't accept that his friend had truly raped anyone. No matter what Rich said, Dan knew he wasn't capable of it. It was impossible and nothing Rich came up with would convince him otherwise but until Rich had time to rethink things, Dan knew he wouldn't be able to change Rich's mind. All he could do was wait and stay close so he was available when Rich needed to talk and help work out what had really happened.

"What are you going to do with her stuff?" Dan asked when Rich had it packed too.

"Take it with me. I'll leave a note at the desk telling her I have it. I'll turn it over to the police when they come to get me. She'll be glad to have her laptop back if nothing else."

"Why'd she leave it behind anyway? She's got all sorts of information about the tigers on it. I don't get it."

"Uh, Dan, I don't think she was real concerned with anything other than getting the hell away from me at the time. I'm guessing no woman would stop to pack after being sexually assaulted for hours."

"Would you stop saying that! I know you believe that's what went on here but there's no need to announce it every two minutes."

"Oh. You're right. I don't want to cause a stampede. It's bad enough that I brutalized one woman. I'd hate for someone to get trampled when they all panicked because they heard what I did."

Again, Dan kept his thoughts to himself while they rode the elevator to the lobby. "Let's just get you checked out so we can pick up my junk. Then we'll head to the airport, okay?"

Rich stepped up to the counter and announced his purpose to a very bewildered desk clerk. "Mr. Richards, your companion already took care of everything. She said you had a later flight and didn't want you to be rushed since you occasionally lose track of the time. Here," he handed Rich an envelope, "she left this for you."

Rich thanked the bewildered man and let Dan guide him from the desk. He didn't need to open the envelope. He knew what was in it just by the feel of it.

"Aren't you going to see what's in there?" Dan asked.

"Money," Rich stated. He stopped in the middle of the lobby and dropped the bags. "Nettie ran off this morning because I called her a whore and told her she was well worth the cost even if I'd had to pay for everything."

"Holy shit!" Dan exclaimed a third time as he watched Rich slit open the envelope.

"See." Rich held it so Dan could see the bills. "I'll have the cops return too, not that it'll make up for anything."

Dan wished he knew how to help. Rich looked so weary and defeated as he bent over to pick up their bags. He knew better than to offer to carry something just as he knew not to comment about Rich's latest bombshell. There was definitely more to this story, for Rich to have said that sort of thing to her. No matter how much Rich tried to shut him out, Dan was determined not to let him. He had to see Rich through this because Rich would stick by him if the situation was reversed. They'd been friends far too long for Dan to turn his back now. He hadn't deserted him when Monica had tried to destroy their friendship so no way was he going to abandon Rich at a time when he needed him even more than when he'd learned that Dan had been right about Monica all along. Dan was positive that whatever had happened with Annette was eating at Rich in an entirely different way than the mess with Monica. He was just as positive that it hadn't included rape by any definition. If only he had a clue of how to figure it out so that he could help Rich deal with this as he so clearly needed.

Chapter Nine

The zoo's visitors that gathered to watch the tigers' daily play session were always amused by their kitten-like antics. Annette loved to observe the expressions on their faces soften as they temporarily forgot their personal pressures and succumbed to the feline charm, looking for a moment as if they didn't have a care in the world. She needed to enjoy it while she could because all too soon the cubs would be old enough to leave for their permanent homes. As sad as the thought made her, Annette couldn't help smiling at the sense of pride that filled her heart. She hated that the cubs had to go but understood why it was necessary. The other human caretakers shared her feelings and it was comforting to know that she wasn't alone with her mixed emotions. They had all helped give the magnificent tigers a good start in life. Dr. DeAngelo and the zoo director had secured excellent homes for all three cubs and though they'd be sorely missed, they'd bring joy to hearts of all ages in their new locations.

Laughing with the group, Annette followed the cub on the other end of the leash she held to prevent it from becoming tangled as he rolled playfully with his sister. Once the cub settled, Annette divided her attention between her charge and the observers as was her habit. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck stood up. A quick glance at the tiger confirmed that he had nothing to do with her increasing sense of unease. This time she scanned the crowd more closely, searching for the cause of her discomfort.

With a start, Annette found the source. Rich was standing at the back of the group, watching her instead of the tigers. Without realizing it, she began to back away. The cub must have sensed her building panic because he too became wary. When his sister took a friendly swipe at him, the baby tiger reacted with uncharacteristic violence, pinning her to the ground, his jaws locked on her exposed throat. Annette continued to retreat, not noticing the dangerous growl coming from her normally mellow feline friend. The only thing she was aware of was that Rich was circling the crowd and coming closer.

"Let go of the leash," Dr. DeAngelo's level voice cut through her dazed mind. "Annette, give it to me and go wait inside. Now!"

With a mortified gasp, Annette took in the scene in front of her, instantly relinquished the leash and fled. As she pushed through the staff entrance, she heard Rich calling her name. Without looking back, she knew he was following her into the cat house. She may have beaten him inside but there was little chance she'd make it all the way around the room to the door leading to the non-public area before he caught up with her. Running blindly, Annette heard the desperation in Rich's voice as he shouted for her to wait. Simultaneously, she heard Galahad's ferocious snarl as the panther flung himself against the barrier of his internal cage. As she stumbled toward the door, Rich's voice was drowned out by several other masculine tones. Inside the protective

walls of the cat care facility, Annette sagged in relief. Additional male voices meant Rich was no longer pursuing her and, for the moment at least, she didn't have to face him.

* * * * *

An hour later, Annette leaned against an interior wire enclosure, murmuring softly to Galahad as he rested nervously on the other side of the barrier. Dr. DeAngelo waited patiently with Matt and two security guards for her explanation. While she attempted to calm the protective panther, Annette collected her thoughts. She knew she owed them an explanation and wanted to be truthful without revealing the whole story. It had been beyond awful confiding every painful detail to Mindy and Bruce. Though she considered Dr. De and Matt to be more than coworkers, neither was close enough to expose her shattered heart as she had with her oldest friends.

When Galahad finally dropped his head to his paws and relaxed, Annette turned her attention to her human protectors. "First, I apologize. I know better than to behave like that. I know how perceptive the cats are and I'm sorry I let my life intrude in my job. It won't happen again."

The men deferred to the veterinarian who responded, "Thank you, Annette. Apology accepted although it is totally unnecessary. I'm more concerned for you."

"Thanks but I'm fine."

The older woman gave Annette a look that clearly showed she disagreed but she refrained from commenting. "Then perhaps you would be so kind as to fill in some blanks for us. The man claimed to know you. Once he understood that he wouldn't have the opportunity to speak with you, he went from being insistent and aggressive to completely passive in a defeated sort of way." She paused but Annette remained silent. "He said he was chasing you in order to return some of your things. Your laptop, for instance."

"Oh." Annette scratched Galahad through the wire with her fingertips to reassure him. She wasn't looking so she missed the glance that the vet shot the men who quickly left them on their own.

"Annette." Dr. De sat on the floor facing her, "I won't pry into what is obviously a personal matter but this has me worried."

"Oh please don't be," Annette gushed. "I won't let what happened today repeat itself. I should have handled it better and I'm so sorry that I overreacted without thinking. I won't let anything affect the cats."

"Shush, child." Dr. De covered her hand. "I'm not worried about the cats. I know how much you care for them and how sensitive they are to you. They'll be fine. As I said it's you that I'm concerned with."

"Oh, I...well, thanks. I..."

"Again, Annette, I'm not asking for details. I don't need them to know that whatever is between you and that man isn't finished. Your reaction tells me that."

"It is finished," Annette insisted vehemently. "He was someone that I thought I might be able to have something with but I was wrong. There's no room in his life for me. There never will be."

"I'm sorry." She smiled sadly. "I know you and Mindy are still close and I saw her the other day so I know you have someone to confide in and don't need me. But I also know that Mindy has no experience with the emotions associated with failed relationships whereas I do. If you ever want to talk, Annette, I'm available. I can't promise you any magical solutions but I'm more than willing to share my own experiences if it would help, knowing you're not the only one who has misjudged a man. Unfortunately, there aren't nearly enough princes like Mindy's Bruce."

"But that's the whole problem. He is a prince. He just can't let himself be one."

"Oh my." She saw the tears in Annette's eyes and drew the younger woman into a hug. "Then I'm sorry for him too. Perhaps..."

Annette pulled away and shook her head. "No. As much as I want to, there's nothing I can do for him. He's the only one who can change things and he's too lost to reach out for help. He's too lost to trust that someone might actually be willing to, not that he'd ever ask for it."

"Such a waste," Dr. De stated. She practically felt Annette reconstructing her protective emotional shell and extended a hand to help her up. "Anyway, he asked us to bring you your things after he was escorted to his car. He also begged not to be barred from the zoo for his nephew's sake and hoped you would tell us how important that is." Annette nodded her agreement. "Additionally, he gave his word to keep his distance but if said you did happen to cross paths when they are here, he wants you to know that you have nothing to fear from him. He promised to nod politely and stand quietly until the boy is ready to move on."

"He will. He'd never involve his nephew in this so please don't ban him."

"Amazing. The mere sight of the man sent you running for the hills. I strongly suspect that he hurt you and yet you didn't hesitate to defend him. Are you sure it's hopeless?"

"Yes. And I'm not defending him. I'm defending his nephew. He visited the tigers with one of the school groups. He loves the zoo. He shouldn't suffer because his uncle's personal life is a mess. Besides, I would hate to take this away from him since the time he spends with his nephew may be the only time he can let go of his problems."

"All right, Annette. If you think he'll keep his word then I'll let him return."

"Thank you." Annette smiled her gratitude. "Okay, lazybones." She rubbed Galahad's neck. "Up with you. Time to go outside." She paused at the door. "Thanks for everything, Doc. I really do appreciate your offer."

"You're welcome. And the offer stands indefinitely." Dr. DeAngelo watched Annette square her shoulders before she walked through the door. Her heart went out

to her and she wished there was something she could do to take away some of the pain the young woman hid so bravely. Annette was one of the sweetest people she knew and it saddened her to see her so resigned to accepting the situation as impossible. Thinking on it a moment longer, the man saddened her too. It was such a shame to find that level of defeat in people who should be taking advantage of everything that life had to offer. Unfortunately, she knew Annette was correct. It was useless and more often than not, counterproductive to try to force help on someone who didn't want or couldn't accept assistance of any kind. Too bad that sentiment applied to Annette as well as her mysterious acquaintance. And, like her male friend, Annette was just as clueless that she needed aid to ease her pain. Determined not to smother her, Dr. DeAngelo vowed to pay close attention to the troubled girl who was as much her responsibility as the felines in her care. Granted, it wasn't quite the same thing but, as her supervisor, she had an obligation to Annette's well-being if at all possible, didn't she?

Chapter Ten

"I'll go, Gramps," Rich called from the entrance hall after the doorbell chimed. It was his grandparents' wedding anniversary and, though he never said anything, Rich knew his grandfather preferred not to spend it alone. This year, he and Dan had both taken the afternoon off to be with him. They planned a relaxing cookout on the deck, hopefully to include easy conversation which would distract not only his grandfather but himself as well.

"Lars." Rich stared at one of the last people he ever expected to find standing on his grandfather's doorstep.

"You bastard!" Lars snarled. "How could you! After all you said! Why I ought to..."

Michael Richards moved as quickly as he could manage with his cane, rushing to see what the commotion was about with Dan close behind him. They made it to the hall just in time to witness Lars' fist connecting with Rich's cheekbone.

"What the hell is going on here?" Michael snapped, wondering why his grandson hadn't moved to defend himself.

"Go on. Tell them," Lars shouted angrily, his fists clenched as if he wasn't finished using them. "Tell them how you spouted all that bullshit about mutual lust and walking away without doing any damage but then turned right around and crushed my sweet sister-in-law's spirit. Tell them what a two-faced bastard you are. Damn it, how could you!"

Rich gestured for Dan to back off when he saw that his friend was ready to step in. "Let him finish."

"See! He's not even trying to deny it. He knows how much he hurt her and I'm almost willing to bet that it was intentional." Lars swore as he grabbed Rich's shirt. Instead of hitting him again, he shoved Rich away. "You're not worth it," he hissed with a humorless laugh. "I have to hand it to you, you sure had me fooled. You are one slick operator," Lars sneered distastefully. "You disgust me." He turned to Michael. "Sir, I apologize for my behavior. This despicable reprobate spent some intimate time with my wife's baby sister recently and foolishly I believed that they might actually be starting something special. When my wife and I returned from a brief vacation, she called her sister and I expected to hear news of a growing relationship and how happy they were. Instead, my wife's been worried sick because she could hear the tears in her sister's voice and, though she denied it, I know this ingrate put them there." He paused to glare at Rich. "Again, forgive me for disrespecting your home but surely you understand my rudeness."

"Certainly," Michael agreed, eyeing Rich speculatively. "Perhaps you'd like to come in so we can get to the bottom of this?"

"No thank you, sir. I'm on a short layover with only enough time to check on Annette. I had planned on taking her for a quick lunch somewhere private and reminding her that she has our support in whatever way she needs it but she pretended to be too busy today. I certainly didn't set out to come here but I was so angry when I left her that I wasn't thinking. I called his office and convinced the receptionist I'm practically his brother-in-law. I told her I'm only in town for a few hours and that we had plans to get together but I misplaced the address and would feel foolish calling to ask him for it again since he's always so well organized. When she took pity on me and told me I'd find him here, I came before I considered my intentions."

"That's perfectly understandable." Michael escorted Lars the few steps to the door. "I know my grandson well and I can assure you that the behavior you described is not one I'd normally attribute to him but I can see how positive your beliefs are and that raises many questions. Until I have answers, I won't dismiss what you've said and I give you my word that I will have answers posthaste."

"Thank you." Lars shook the hand Michael offered, clearly stunned by the old man's words. "You're very generous."

"No. I'm an old man who still believes that women are to be protected and pampered even though it's no longer politically correct. My grandson was raised to respect others as any decent man should. If he's been careless with your sister-in-law and I hate to admit it but I fear he has," he glanced at Rich, "I need to remind him of his obligations as a gentleman."

Rich was still slumped against the wall with Dan hovering nearby when Michael finished speaking with Lars. "They say a picture is worth a thousand words," he began. "Judging by the way you just stood there and allowed him to hit you and the expression currently on your face, I feel it's safe to assume that there is some truth to what he said."

"Yes, sir," Rich stated.

"I see." He noted the guilty look that Dan now wore and moved to his study, certain that they would follow. "Explain yourself," he commanded as he took a seat behind his imposing desk, remembering how much it had intimidated the pair on the few occasions they'd earned a lecture in their youth.

"Two weeks ago, in New York, I spent an evening with Lars, his wife Candace and his sister-in-law Annette. We had a drink first, saw *Wicked*, went to dinner and ended with a nightcap in the hotel lounge."

"How did you meet them?"

"That was me, sir," Dan interrupted. "I was eavesdropping on their conversation and overheard them discussing Rich. I called him to warn him that Monica was up to no good again."

"Don't, Dan," Rich spoke over him. "Gramps, he's trying to share the blame for something that was entirely my doing."

"Stick to the details," Michael snapped, very aware they could get lost defending each other. "Rich?"

"Nettie took every opportunity to insist that she had invented me and had nothing to do with Monica," Rich talked steadily until he revealed all the intricacies of their association. "Lars was correct that I hurt her. But he was wrong, thinking that I broke her heart. I refused to accept the truth. I cornered her in that hotel room and I raped her. At one point, she screamed and I threatened to kill her. I had my fingers wrapped around her neck and I can't honestly tell you that I would have stopped if she hadn't."

"My God, Rich, what were you thinking!"

"There's more, Gramps," Rich resumed quietly. His face was wet with tears and he couldn't meet his grandfather's eyes. "In the morning, after I forced her again, I called her a whore."

"He's wrong, sir. I know he is." Dan once again sprang to Rich's defense. "He'd see that if he'd go talk to her."

"I tried, Dan," Rich sobbed. "I went to the zoo last Saturday. Do you know what happened? I'll tell you. The second she saw me standing there, she ran away. When I called out for her to wait and that I only wanted to return her things, she disappeared behind a locked door. Two security guards, a guy who works with her and a woman who was someone official dragged me out of there. It didn't take them long to figure out that Nettie needed to be protected from me. Damn, I wish to hell they'd called the cops. It would have been so much easier for them to haul me in instead of me going to the police station on my own to admit what I've done."

Michael pushed himself out of the chair and stood in front of his grandson who was still weeping silently. "I'm ashamed of you," he stated. "I never in my life expected to say those words to you but right now, I'm honestly ashamed of you." His voice willed Rich to meet his eyes. Without intending to, Michael had raised his cane as if preparing to strike his grandson. When he saw the resignation on Rich's face as he readied himself for the impending blow, he realized what he was doing and lowered his arm. "I need some air. Dan, take me for a drive. You," he flashed Rich a hard glare, "will be here when we return. Hopefully, I will manage to make some sense of this and be thinking clearly enough to speak with you."

* * * * *

Dan pulled his car from Michael's driveway without a word. He blamed himself for all that had happened, both in New York and today. If he hadn't reacted to the conversation he'd been listening in on and called Rich, the three of them would be lounging around on the deck now, talking about this, that and the other. Rich wouldn't hate himself and Gramps wouldn't have been forced into the position he was in. Lars wouldn't have a bruised hand as the result of his need to protect his family and Nettie

would still be living her own life as happily as it had sounded before he butted in and wrecked it for her.

"Why do you think it would help Rich to speak with the girl?" Michael broke the silence.

"Because she'd make him see that he's wrong. Gramps, I saw them together. Anything that went on that night had nothing to do with rape. I'm one hundred percent positive. You and I both know Rich couldn't do that under any circumstances. I think something happened that has him so panicked he'd rather believe what he told you than deal with it. I just have no idea what it could be."

"Take me to the zoo."

"Gramps, I don't think—" Dan's protest died when he glanced at Michael.

"I met Annette Phelps a few months ago. I remember thinking at the time that Rich should have married her instead of Monica. I agree that there is more to this than Rich is saying."

"But you can't just walk up to her and ask her about it."

"The hell I can't! One of the few advantages of being old is that I can get away with much more than is deemed acceptable by polite society."

"But..." Dan argued weakly.

"I haven't mentioned this to Rich yet and I expect you to keep it to yourself." He waited for Dan to nod. "I heard him say he's lost interest in traveling as much as he has been one too many times so, being the shameless old man that I am, I decided to meddle."

"In what way?" Dan was more than confused by the change in their conversation.

"Joanna Mengel is the director of the zoo. And as you well know, she is also the daughter of a very good friend of mine. I've known her all her life. Several months ago, she mentioned that her current marketing manager is nearing retirement and how she hoped to locate someone capable of bringing a fresh perspective to the job. Someone with charisma who will love the zoo and all it represents enough to find new ways to ensure its future."

"Rich."

"Exactly. We've discussed it in great depth and she is ready to invite him to meet with her."

"Oh shit!"

"Precisely. One of Joanna's ideas is to include existing personnel from the various departments in an attempt to spur public interest and make it more of a team effort. I was deliberately introduced to Miss Phelps with that possibility in mind."

"Damn, Gramps, when I screw up I screw up big."

"I think I'll hold off on disputing that until after I speak with the young woman."

Michael and Dan were taken straight to the director's office as soon as she was informed of their arrival. After Michael explained their purpose, Joanna summoned the four who had been present the afternoon Rich had attempted to speak with Annette. The security guards and keeper didn't stay long but Dr. DeAngelo spent the next half hour with the group, comparing what Rich had said to what she had learned from Annette. In the end, they all agreed with Michael.

Chapter Eleven

"Annette." Dr. DeAngelo found her preparing for the cats' afternoon feeding. "Let Matt take over there. I need you to come with me." She smiled reassuringly at the girl's curiosity. "I don't know if you remember meeting Michael Richards—"

"Oh my God," Annette gasped, all the color draining from her face. She reached out a hand to steady herself and Galahad appeared instantly on the other side of the clear wall.

"It'll all be okay, Annette," Dr. DeAngelo stated confidently. "Michael just wants to speak with you. Trust me? Please."

Annette nodded, visibly shaking as Michael extended a hand to support her elbow. "Thank you, Doc. Miss Phelps, would you be kind enough to accompany me outside where we can have some privacy?" She nodded again. "Gentlemen, you'll excuse us?" He gestured to Dan and the security guard who had followed them from Joanna's office. "We understand that you're both looking after us but our conversation is no concern of yours. I would appreciate it and I'm sure Miss Phelps will as well, if you would wait by the doors. We'll be just over there on that bench and I assure you that we're perfectly safe together."

Annette let Michael lead her from the building. "I'm sorry," she hesitated. "Can I have a minute please?"

Michael sat down and waited while Annette took some time to calm Galahad. The panther had access to the observation yard and had trailed them outside. His nervousness reflected Annette's and she clearly hated to distress him.

"You're very good with him," Michael observed when she joined him.

"You don't have to say anything, Mr. Richards. My resignation will be on Dr. De's desk first thing tomorrow."

"Why on earth would you do that?" he asked sharply.

"Well, because of Rich. He's why you're here, right?" She covered her face with her hands. "It wasn't intentional. I honestly thought I'd made him up. God, no wonder he didn't believe me! I must have overheard you talking about him that night and—"

"Lord give me strength, not another one."

"Excuse me?"

"Idiots. You're all idiots."

"Mr. Richards, I'm sorry but I don't understand."

Michael shook his head. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

Annette stood. "Look, you got what you came for. But no way am I going to sit here and let you call me names too."

"Sit down, young lady. I'm too old to go chasing after you and we haven't come anywhere close to the purpose of my visit."

Annette sat as abruptly as she stood and stared at him. "What? I said I'll leave. I won't be any trouble so what else is there?"

"First of all, you aren't going anywhere. At least not today and not because of my grandson. Second," he sighed. "I'm here to ask you a question."

Annette grew concerned over how tired he suddenly seemed. "Mr. Richards, are you all right?"

"No, child, I'm far from all right. I'm old and today would have been my fifty-first wedding anniversary if my wife hadn't up and died years ago. I'm alone in a drafty old mausoleum that kills me to stay in almost as much as it would kill me to leave. My grandson, who I've always adored, told me something today that caused me to say things I never in my life expected to say to him. Things that hurt him as much as they hurt me. I'm tired. I'm angry. Damn, I'm too old for any of this."

"I'm sorry. How can I help?" she asked sincerely.

"Answer my question honestly. That's all I need from you."

"Of course."

"Not so fast. You haven't heard the question and I'm sure it's not one you want asked, especially not by an interfering old man like me."

"Please just ask. It can't be that bad."

"No, it's much worse. It's highly personal and I wish to God it wasn't necessary but your answer is very important." He took a deep breath. "Did my grandson rape you?"

Annette's eyes widened and she clutched his hand. "Oh my God, no! Absolutely not! Why would you even think such a thing?"

"Because he told me he had. Along with everything else about your time in New York and by everything, I mean literally everything. Including how you kept saying no. Did you say no?"

"Well, yeah but not for real. We both knew that. I mean, there's no as in stop now and back off and there's the no that I said." She blushed. "Um, like when I was pushing parts of my body at Rich because he wasn't paying enough attention to them and when I linked my ankles behind his back so he couldn't pull away from me."

"I see. Your nos that night were more of an encouragement than a resistance to what was occurring."

"Exactly. Mind if I ask what inspired you guys to discuss this?"

"It became necessary once your brother-in-law stormed into my house and socked Rich in the face for upsetting you."

"No! Oh God, no! Please tell me he didn't."

"Can't do that, Nettie. May I call you Nettie?"

"Sure." Her head was spinning. "I told Lars I was fine. I said Rich and I broke up but that it was okay since neither of us ever expected it to be more than it was. Why would he go and do that?"

"Simple. He cares."

"I am so sorry." Annette still clung to his hand.

"Sorry enough to let me ask another question?" She nodded. "Please forgive me for being rude and I assure you no one will know the details of our conversation. Rich told me that after your initial, ah, coupling, you stopped struggling. Again, I apologize for my need to understand. He claimed you encouraged him to slow down and be less frenzied. He feels you did that because you had accepted that he wasn't ready to release you. That you became agreeable in order to save yourself from additional physical harm because he hurt you the first time."

Annette was shaking her head long before he finished. "That's not it at all."

"Then I beg you to explain it to me, Nettie. I love my grandson. I've always seen him as a good man, yet today, I found myself doubting that. I told him I was ashamed of him. I came very close to striking him with my cane but even worse was the way he accepted it. He sat in front of me, waiting passively for me to hit me. He had no intention of raising his arm to protect himself, nor did he when Lars confronted him."

"Oh my God." Annette blinked back her tears. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Mr. Richards. This is all my fault."

"Sh." He patted her hand. "Tears won't solve a thing. Please be strong and tell me why you wanted Rich to make things last, as it were."

She gulped. This poor man was torn apart and she owed him the truth. Not that it would fix anything but it was the least she could do after her supposedly harmless lie to Candace had hurt him so deeply. "I-I wanted us to take our time and tease each other so I could add that memory to the ones he'd already given me."

"Why did you want to make memories, Nettie?"

"B-because, because I loved him. I fell in love with him as soon as he showed up next to our table and defended me over something my sister said."

"Hallelujah, praise the Lord, this one isn't an idiot after all." Michael smiled widely. "Hot damn! Something we can work with to fix this."

"How? I heard about his wife, sir. He doesn't want anything to do with anyone, least of all me."

"Now that's where you're mistaken. Dan and I were talking on the way here and he suspects Rich is so insistent on turning himself in to the police because something happened with you that has him scared to death."

"You can't let him do that!"

"He won't listen to me. You are the only one who can stop him."

"But I can't."

"Oh, but you can. And, since you love him, I'm willing to bet you will. Consider this, Nettie. Rich gets a call from his most trusted friend, warning him that his no-good, lying bitch of a woman with no concept of the meaning of wife is playing some sort of trick on him. He rushes there, expecting to find someone as ghastly as she is but instead finds a charming and lovely young woman. You spend an enjoyable evening together in spite of how each of you persists in maintaining your convictions of who you are. You, correctly of course and him, completely wrongly. Dan said your mutual attraction was obvious. You continue your argument in private and end up spending the night very intimately. In the morning, my grandson insults you horribly to push you away because he sees something in your face that is more than he can handle at that point in his life. Your face is very expressive, by the way."

"Oh God."

"Now, now let me tell you my theory. I think Rich would rather believe that he raped you than accept that you found a way into his heart."

"Impossible."

"Is it, Nettie? Monica did quite a number on him but Rich is not vindictive or cruel by nature. What if you are just the catalyst he needs to free himself from her? What if he can finally be rid of her and have the kind of relationship he'd hoped for? What if he needs you for that relationship because you're the only one it would work with? If you can sit here and let me, a virtual stranger pry into very personal, intimate details of your life and then admit you're in love with my grandson, don't you owe it to yourself, to both of you, to take one more step and discuss it with him?"

"He doesn't want me."

"I disagree but let's let that go for now. Do you know why you were included in the fundraiser where we met?"

"Dr. De said Dr. Mengel is thinking of making some changes and wants to encourage more staff involvement in public relations."

"Yes. You and the other keepers in attendance are under consideration to participate in the new program. As you may recall, I was present as a member of the board. Joanna Mengel and I have a personal relationship as well. Her father and I have been friends since grade school. She grew up with my children and her children played with my grandchildren when they were in diapers. One of the reasons for the change is that the current marketing director is nearing retirement. Joanna is minutes from inviting my grandson to take his place."

"Oh my God." A tear trickled down Annette's cheek.

"I see you understand my dilemma. I'm old and I want Rich home so he comes around more often. He's tired of living out of a suitcase half his life. He's always loved the zoo and Joanna knows him. The evening we met, I liked you. It's easy to see how enthusiastic you are about the animals in your care. You're bright. You're personable. You're a very attractive young woman in a fresh, uncalculating, sweet sort of way. I remember thinking how well you and Rich would work together and, being the

sentimental old coot I am, hoping that you might hit it off on a more personal level. Nettie, unless you can get through to him and make him see that he isn't a brutal rapist, he won't even consider the position here. Hell, he may even leave the city all together if he can't get anyone to arrest him and that would break my heart. Won't you please come speak with him? If not for yourself or for me, then for the sake of your panther friend over there."

Annette stared at him with huge eyes for a long moment before she began to giggle. She slapped her hand over her mouth but couldn't contain it. "You are such a scoundrel! I'm sorry. I know none of this is even remotely funny but you are simply shameless. That is so unfair, playing on my love for Galahad like that." Michael gave her a sheepish grin. "Guess I know where Rich gets it from."

"You're smiling so does this mean you'll come home with me?"

"Yes, as you already know. Old, hah!"

Michael hugged her impulsively. "Thank you, child. I sensed you were a good girl right when I met you."

"Yeah, I'm a real good girl. Such a good girl that I spent the night with a man I only met a few hours earlier." She buried her face to hide her embarrassment.

"Nettie, please listen to me." He tipped her chin. "My wife has been gone for eight years but I can still remember what unquenchable passion feels like. In my day, we weren't as open about it but I assure you, there was plenty of hanky-panky going on outside the marriage bed. You're a pretty girl. My grandson is a good-looking fellow. If you have sparks, you have sparks. That's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's nobody's business if the two of you play a little footsie or when you choose to do it."

Annette gaped at him in disbelief. "This whole conversation is so unreal."

"I couldn't agree more." Michael winked. "One more thing before we go. I meant what I said about not repeating what we discussed or the things Rich told me."

"Thank you." Annette kissed his cheek and received another grin. "Old," she muttered as they returned to the cat house.

"Gramps?" Dan questioned nervously.

"Relax, son. Nettie's coming with us. She'll set that idiot grandson of mine straight. And once she does, maybe I'll see what she can do about you and that other idiot child." Michael noted Dan's confusion and turned to Annette. "Have you met Dan?"

"Not officially but I've heard a lot about him."

Dan groaned. "Nettie, please let me say how sorry I am for the part I played in all this. If I hadn't been so hasty, none of this would have happened."

"Quiet, boy. If you hadn't listened in and called Rich, they wouldn't have met yet. Think of that before you spout off again."

"Yes, sir."

Annette giggled again. "Oh my. You are so good, Mr. Richards."

"Mr. Richards, bah. May as well get used to calling me Gramps too but I suppose I could settle for Michael temporarily if I have to."

"Thanks, Gramps." She rolled her eyes. "Just don't get your hopes up. I'll do what I can to make Rich believe I wanted to be with him that night, for Galahad, but if I were you, I wouldn't count on anything more."

"I have complete faith in you, child. As one non-idiot to another, we have to stick together and take care of these poor souls."

"Is he always like this?" she asked Dan.

"Sort of but he's not usually this bad." Dan felt lost. Michael was so much more full of life than he had been when they walked into the zoo. He'd watched the pair talking on the bench and saw the range of emotions they experienced but he couldn't quite believe that Michael was as carefree as he seemed. "I am sorry, Nettie."

Annette surprised Dan with a hug. "As a wise old man just said, bah! I have a friend like you so I understand what you were doing." She turned serious. "What am I going to say to him?"

"You're going to tell him the truth of what's in your heart," Michael declared. "And you're going to keep telling him until the idiot listens. You impress me as a strong woman, Nettie Phelps. My grandson doesn't stand a chance."

Chapter Twelve

Rich sat on his grandfather's deck absently pressing a warming soda can to his cheek. He was totally drained. How had he made such a mess of his life over the past few years? How was he ever going to get it back on track? He once thought having his divorce finalized would trigger a new beginning but how could he start over after what he'd done to Nettie?

He heard the sliding door to the kitchen but didn't turn around. Gramps and Dan had been gone over an hour and, as much as he wanted them to return, he dreaded it even more. Now that they were home, he was afraid to face his grandfather because he didn't want to see the disappointment that had been in his eyes when they left.

"Son, you have two choices," Michael began, stepping in front of Rich's chair. "One, find some sense and listen on your own in private, or two, make Dan and I sit out here so you can't run away and have this discussion with an audience."

Rich met his grandfather's eyes and was thoroughly confused by the warmth they held. Slowly, he stood and followed Michael's gaze to see Annette waiting by the door with Dan. For a minute, he stared. He looked at Dan and saw his encouraging grin. He glanced back at Michael, who was now smiling as if very pleased with himself, before finally facing Annette.

"Nettie?"

"Hi, Rich," she greeted him softly.

"Gramps? How...why...Nettie?" He couldn't breathe.

"I think they'll be just fine without us, eh Dan?" They retreated into the kitchen after Michael gave Annette's shoulder a supportive squeeze.

Annette hesitated before approaching Rich. With every step she took forward, he took one back until he was halted by the deck's railing. Gingerly, she reached up and brushed the bruise on his cheekbone with her fingertips. The gentle contact made him flinch as if he had been struck again.

"I didn't know Lars was coming here or I would have stopped him. Do you want some ice?"

Rich shook his head wordlessly. He was watching her intently, a mixture of confusion, disbelief and fear showing in his expression.

"Apparently, I owe you an apology for Lars in addition to the others." Before Annette could continue, her cell phone chirped in her pocket. "Damn, I forgot to turn it off," she grumbled as she pulled it out to do just that. She shook her head and sighed. "I'm sorry. It's Mindy. I'm supposed to be there. Don't go anywhere."

Rich shook his head, feeling as if the rest of his body were paralyzed.

"Hey, Mindy. Sorry I didn't call you sooner but I can't make it tonight."

"What's wrong?" Mindy demanded, hearing the strain in Annette's voice. "Where are you?"

"With Rich. At his grandfather's."

"What! You go, girl! I knew he'd come to his senses! Did he call you? When do we get to meet him? Why don't you guys come over now? There's plenty for four."

"Mindy," Annette said sharply to interrupt. "I just got here. His grandfather came to the zoo earlier and..." She glanced at Rich before turning her back and lowering her voice to a whisper. "Rich told him he raped me and he's going to turn himself into the police."

Mindy screeched. "No way! Oh my God, Annette, how can he possibly think that? You gotta straighten that boy out pronto!"

"That's why I'm here, Min. Look, I can't talk now. Call you later?"

"Oh, yeah. Go! No, wait. Bruce wants to talk to Rich."

"That's not a good idea. I just got here. I haven't said anything more than hello yet."

"Annette," Bruce's deep voice reverberated in her ear. "I heard what you just said and I'm not going to overstep myself but if you don't hand the man the phone right now, I'm coming over there to speak to him in person."

"Bruce," she pleaded.

"Annette, please. You know you can trust me not to make this worse for either of you. It's just a guy thing and it'll only take a second."

"Fine." She turned and walked back to Rich. "I'm sorry," she repeated as she held out the phone. "Bruce won't take no for an answer. If I don't let him talk to you, he says he'll come here."

Rich accepted it with a shaky hand. "Bruce."

"Hey. I know you and Annette have a lot to talk about and the last thing you need is outside interference, but this is too important for me to let go. I hope you realize how significant it is for her to be there with you."

"Yes."

"Good. Mindy and I got the long version of what happened between you guys so don't blow this next thing off as coming from someone who doesn't know what's up, okay?"

"Okay."

"I get that your life is totally fucked up right now but you have to let it go and listen to her. I mean honestly listen to what she tells you and how she says it because the truth is Annette Phelps is one of most genuine, guileless women you'll ever find. If you look beyond your own bullshit, you'll see that she is exactly what she seems to be, a real sweetheart. I know that, as a guy, it's hard enough to open up and for you it's probably much worse, but forget about being tough. Be a man instead and admit that you might

not be able to do it all on your own. It takes more guts to ask for help than it does to rant and rave and punish whoever's within range."

"I understand."

"I sure as hell hope so. Mindy and I can forgive you for making Annette cry before and if you ask her, she'll explain why but I don't think we'll be able to ignore it if you honestly listen to her and then do it again anyway."

"I see."

"Good. I'll let you to it then. Wait." Rich could hear muffled voices. "Sorry. Mindy wants me to make sure you understand that what I just said means that I won't stop her from hunting you down and cutting off your nuts with a dull knife so she can stuff them down your throat if you hear all Annette has to say and she shows up here in tears later."

"That's more than clear."

"Excellent. Now hang up and turn the phone off. Tell Annette to call us at some point."

"Dan and my grandfather are here so she's not alone with me. She's safe."

"Don't be an asshole! We know she's safe. Doesn't stop us from worrying about her. We love her so that gives us the right no matter what she's doing. Bet your buddy Dan would say the same about you."

"Yeah."

"Okay, 'nuff said. Later."

Rich disconnected and returned the phone to Annette. "Bruce said you should turn this off and call them later."

Annette knew her friend had said a lot more than that but trusted him so didn't comment. Instead, she switched off the power and tucked the phone back into her pocket. "I guess I'll start by apologizing for that and Lars since they're the easy ones."

"Nettie, you don't have to apologize for anything. I—"

She held up her hand. "Please let me say this first. You might have a different reaction after you hear it."

"All right. I'm listening." Rich leaned against the railing and waited.

"This afternoon, I realized that I didn't invent you as much as I thought I had. I mean, I did make up all the stuff about us seeing each other and being in New York together. That part was true. So was what I told you about needing a fictitious relationship to appease Candace. Unfortunately, the man I created was based loosely on you. I lied when I said I knew nothing about you."

"A bit ago, I was invited to a special reception. I was introduced to the members of the board, your grandfather included. But I didn't remember meeting him when we were in New York. I didn't remember overhearing him talk about you until I saw him at the zoo today."

Annette wanted to touch him but was afraid he'd pull away so she stayed standing where she was. "I can't apologize enough, Rich. What I thought was a harmless, little fib told to spare my foolish pride from yet another of my overbearing, well-intentioned sister's lectures has hurt so many people in so many ways. I know nothing I do or say can fix the damage I caused but I am truly sorry for the pain I've added to your life."

"Nettie..."

"Please, I'm not finished with this part yet." Rich nodded. "I have a lot of explaining to do to a lot of people. I already talked to your grandfather and Dan and the people at work. I'll take care of Lars and Candace later. Don't be surprised if you hear from Lars because hitting you is so out of character for him. God, I still can't believe he did that. Candace is never going to let me live this down and I deserve every lecture I have coming to me. I feel like I should call your client to make amends for rushing you out of your meeting. Hell, I even need to apologize to your wife for causing you to think such horrible things about her."

"Ex-wife."

"Pardon me?"

"Ex-wife. Monica signed the divorce papers while I was in New York. I was no longer married when we met."

"Oh. Well, I still feel awful for making you suspect her like that."

"Don't. She's more than capable of everything I accused her of but it's not my problem anymore."

"Good. I'm glad for you." She paused, dropping her chin to collect her thoughts. "Rich, I have so many things to say to you but I don't know where to begin. Not that any of them will erase the hurt I caused. Gramps told me what he said to you. Please don't let my mistake come between you. That night you said you wished you were more like him. Meeting him again today showed me that you are like him. He loves you so much, just like you love him. And he's very proud of who you are so I'm begging you, don't let my stupidity affect your relationship."

"I don't understand why you're saying any of this. Why you're here," Rich said when she hesitated.

"Because I made a huge mistake and when I know I've done something wrong, I try to put things right. I can't make up for a lot of this but God knows how much I wish I could. There are some things, however, that I can repair and I won't be able to live with myself if I don't at least do that much. Oh, who am I kidding? I'm going to be punishing myself for this one on the day I die no matter what I do about it now."

"Stop it, Nettie!" Rich's voice broke with emotion. "So what if you borrowed some of the specifics of my life for your mystery man. So what if you fibbed a little to avoid a squabble with your sister. Nothing you did warrants what you're making it into. Not if you put it into perspective with what I did to you."

"You didn't do anything to me, Rich," she stated softly.

His mouth opened and closed several times as he sputtered. "You don't have to pretend it didn't happen. After you leave, I'm turning myself in."

"Turning yourself in? To who? For what?"

He gawked. "For-for raping you! And holding you against your will. And let's not forget how I tried to kill you."

Annette stared in shock. Though Michael and Dan had both told her what Rich believed, she hadn't really accepted it until she heard him say it too. "Excuse me, I thought I was speaking with the man I met and spent the night with in New York a few weeks ago. I must have you confused with someone else."

"Nettie, you don't have to twist things anymore. I'm taking responsibility for what I did."

"I see. What you did, huh? Since you're accepting the responsibility for what occurred that night, then not only do I owe you an apology for lying but also a tremendous thank you."

"What the hell?" His knuckles were white from clutching the railing.

She interrupted him with a finger on his lips. She'd moved closer so they were standing less than a foot apart. When she was sure he was listening, Annette dropped her hand and rested it on his chest. "I need to thank you for giving me the most erotic, pleasurable night of my life. I got excited the instant I heard your voice and saw you standing by our table. I had more orgasms with you than everybody else combined and you made each one better than the one before it."

Rich stared, unable to speak. His gaze alternated between her expressive face and the hand burning a hole in his chest. His breath was labored and his heart was racing. Eventually, looking at Annette became too difficult and he spun away.

"I-I raped you, Nettie. I forced you to have sex with me. I didn't give you a choice about what I did to you. I threatened you. I yelled at you. I called you horrible names. I accused you of unthinkable things. I was rough, brutal. I hurt you so badly you actually submitted to spare yourself from more abuse. I punished you for all the horrible things my mind condemned you of by attacking your body and using it for my own satisfaction."

"Well, at least I satisfied you." She slid her arms around his waist instead of retreating as she sensed he expected her to. "Not nearly as often as you satisfied me but it's better than not at all. Please listen to me, Rich. I could have told Lars and Candace that I had no idea who you were any time after you walked into that bar. I didn't. I could have avoided most of your kisses while we were with them. I didn't want to. I could have slapped you many times for how you touched me. I didn't even consider it. I could have left with Candace and Lars when you were in the men's room. Instead, I tried to figure out how long it would take them to finish their drinks and go home so we could be alone. I could have run away when you slid your key into the lock on my door but again, I didn't. I could have screamed once we were in the room or called the

desk for help when you were in the shower or said something to the room service guy. I didn't. You seeing a pattern here yet?"

"Nettie."

"No, listen. We had wild sex. Yes, you were rougher than I'm used to but not in an abusive way and I loved every second of it. I was sore the next day in all the right places. You did not hurt me. You did not rape me. You did not force me into anything I didn't already want. Well, except when you made me quit sucking your cock but that's different."

"But..."

She scowled. "Just listen. Please. You're right about yelling at me and accusing me and yeah, some of what you said was just plain mean, but none of it was really about me. I was there and available but it wasn't personal. You reached the point where you needed to get it out of your system."

"I hurt you! I know I did because of how you kept pushing me to take it easy and tease you."

"Rich, please look at me." She gave him enough space to move and didn't continue until he met her eyes. Then, she clasped his hands and bent their elbows to pull them closer together. "I wanted you to slow down but not because you hurt me. I already discovered how amazing you made me feel when you were out of control. I wanted to find out if you were as good when you were being playful. And, for what it's worth, everything with you was beyond incredible. For me, anyway. I honestly didn't know what mind-blowing sex was before you."

"Nettie, I-I...I don't know what to say."

"Hmm." She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. "Maybe you could start by saying you remember how you made me come, now that I've reminded you of it. And that you noticed how ready I was for you every time you touched me. Then, you could agree that there is no way in hell that you forced me to do anything I was unwilling to do, let alone raped me. Perhaps you could say something kind, like you didn't hate being with me. It wouldn't be out of line for you to apologize for punishing me for Monica's faults. And maybe you could add that you do believe I'm not a hooker even though you didn't keep the money I left to reimburse you for what you spent that night. It would be okay if you forgave me for being a total coward and running away from you at the zoo last weekend. Oh, you can come back anytime. In fact, if you could stand to be in the same room with me again sometime, I'd be happy to give you and Billy a private tour."

Annette's face fell and she blinked back tears. She released Rich's hands and took a step back. "Rich, your grandfather is a remarkable man. The conversation we had wasn't easy for him. The questions my lie made necessary are not ones that any grandfather should have to consider asking in regards to his precious grandson. My seemingly harmless fib blew up all over the place and because of it he was forced into an awkward position that hurt both of you. Please, for him as well as you, don't let

things go unsaid. Don't put it off because it makes you uncomfortable. Don't ruin what you share over my stupid foolishness."

"Why are you doing this? Why did you talk to Gramps and how did he convince you to come here? I don't understand why you'd bother. Great sex doesn't excuse the way I treated you that night even if you have decided that my cruelty wasn't actually intended for you."

"Simple. I care. Too much to let you torture yourself over something that absolutely did not happen the way you think it did. Your grandfather believes you are taking yourself off to jail. How could I not come try to stop you before put him through that? Think how stressful today has been for him already. Now think about how much worse it would be for him with you sitting in a cell until I managed to convince a bunch of perfect strangers whose duty it is to protect woman from predators that I truly wanted every bit of what happened between us and that I wasn't just saying so because I was afraid you'd do something worse to me if I didn't. You know someone would hear about it and people would wonder even though you weren't ever charged with anything. How could I not come and prevent him from being subjected to whatever vicious rumors there'd be if you went to the police?"

Instead of responding, Rich closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her. He clutched her tightly to his chest as he buried his face in her hair. Annette held him just as securely. Her heart broke all over again when she felt him sobbing in her arms. She had no idea how long they stood like that but was willing to comfort him however long he needed her to. Part of her hated to release him once he collected himself enough to pull away but the rest knew she had to.

"Thank you," he mumbled, clearly embarrassed. "For everything. You didn't have to talk to Gramps or come here in person instead of asking him to tell me that you disagreed with what I said but I won't deny how glad I am you did. I'm as responsible for us ending up together that night as you were so there's no need for you to apologize unless you let me do the same. I'm the one who's sorry for not listening to you in the first place. I'm sorry I let my experiences influence me to the point where I refused to recognize the truth when I heard it. I'm sorry I lashed out at you and said such horrendous things to you and about you." For a moment, Rich merely stared with the saddest expression that Annette had ever seen. "I wish..."

"What? Tell me if your wish is the same as mine."

Again, he studied her. "I believe you care, Nettie, even though I don't understand why. Bruce said he and Mindy can overlook the fact that I made you cry since you're willing to and that you'd explain why if I asked you to. Will you explain it to me?"

"Sure. Again, it's the same simple reason. I care." She shrugged, not meeting his gaze.

"Look at me and say that again."

Annette knew her emotions were too raw to hide but forced herself to face him anyway. What if his grandfather was correct and Rich was ready to open himself up to

all the feelings he'd buried because of his ex-wife? What if his wish was that they could ignore their less than ideal introduction and her cowardice chased him away before he permitted himself to admit he was interested in spending a minute with her once in a while?

Inhaling deeply, Annette raised her eyes and let Rich see all she was feeling. "I care about you very much, Rich. Not because I think I can use that to manipulate you in any way or because I expect anything from you in return. I care because, in spite of how someone else might have interpreted your persona the night we met, I can see beyond that enough to know that you're as good a man as your grandfather knows you are."

"You overwhelm me," Rich admitted as he leaned back against the railing. "Dan's been hounding me about what freaked me out to the point that I resorted to calling you a whore to chase you away. I'm ashamed of myself for that, Nettie. I didn't believe it even as I was saying it." He paused to search her face again. "You're looking at me now the same way you did that morning after we made love the last time. I'm just as overwhelmed and scared as I was then, if not more."

"I'm scared too."

He almost smiled for the first time since she got there. "Now that, I don't believe."

"Why not?"

"You're the strongest person I ever met. You're as fearless as your cats, kitten. You came here, no clue what state I'd be in when I saw you and handed my life back without any hesitation. You were brave enough to look beneath my ugly surface even though you stood a damn good chance of uncovering something even nastier than the top layer. What else is there to be afraid of?"

"That you'll tell me what your wish is and it's totally opposite from mine."

Rich nodded. "If you'll bear with me, I'd like to tell you but there's more than one that relates to you so I'll need a little more of your time."

"I'm in no rush."

"Thanks." He took a calming breath and gripped the railing again. "One thing I've been wishing for is that we'd met under better circumstances. I've been thinking about it and I realized that part of why I was so bipolar that night is that I kept forgetting that you were the enemy and not someone I should be having fun with. If we'd bumped into each other when I brought Billy to the zoo, I think we would have become friends."

"Me too."

He honestly smiled. "I also wish we'd had more time, much more time, unlimited time to explore each other. How it felt to be with you blew me away. I suspect it would no matter how often we made love."

"I agree."

Rich studied her before resuming. "Either of those coming true would make me a very happy man so I don't want what I say next to diminish them. I should also tell you

in advance that the thought of this has me scared shitless and shaking like a leaf." He briefly pried his fingers from the rail and extended his trembling hand to show her.

Annette was shaking as badly as Rich was. She wanted to reach out to him but stopped herself when his hand returned to its death grip on the wood. "You don't have to tell me, Rich. What you said already is more than enough."

"Hardly," he snorted. "Kitten, you've had yourself out there since the moment we met. It's time for me to stop hiding. It's the least I can do." He swallowed nervously but held her gaze. "What I wish for most is for what I keep seeing in your eyes to be real. I'm absolutely petrified by how much I want that. It's irrational and unreasonable and probably impossible. I'm not at all sure I could handle it if it is what I'm thinking but none of that stops me from wanting it."

Not letting herself debate about what she was about to say for fear that she'd lose her nerve and never say it, Annette stepped close enough to put her hands on Rich's waist and said, "I love you."

For what seemed an eternity, the whole world stopped. Neither moved. Neither breathed. Her throat closed and her heart forgot how to beat. In a flash, everything came back to life and Annette found herself caught up in a searing kiss. By the time it ended, they were both crying and laughing all at once.

Finally, Rich cupped Annette's cheeks and kissed her tenderly. "I don't deserve you but if you'll give me a chance and help me, I think I could relearn how to do this. Please help me, Nettie. I need you. I can't promise I won't do stupid things that make you cry but I will promise to do my best not to hurt you. Or not intentionally. I can practically guarantee that I'll screw up and disappoint you, probably more often than not. It won't be easy and I have no idea how long it'll take me to trust myself enough to love you as you should be loved or even if that'll ever be possible. It's totally unfair to you and extremely selfish of me but, more than anything, I want you to stay close and not give up on me."

"Sh." Annette put her fingers to his mouth. "I'm in no rush, Rich. I have faith in you. I told you I didn't expect anything for caring about you. I don't expect anything for loving you either. You didn't reject me or laugh in my face and that's way more than I ever hoped for. I won't pressure you and I won't let you pressure yourself either. I only have two things, well, three, that I'd appreciate if you'd try to remember."

"And if I can't? What happens then?"

"I don't know. It depends on what you do when you forget. They're not bad, Rich."

"Doesn't matter. I'm already scared to death. Hold my hand while you tell me?"

Annette clasped both of them and smiled. "One and this works both ways, okay? We need to be as honest as possible. Even if it's something that will hurt, like you've changed your mind and don't want me around anymore. I'd rather hear it from you as soon as you decide than have to figure it out on my own after you disappear." She rushed on so he couldn't comment. "Two, I don't think this'll be easy either but whether we're laughing, crying, or screaming like banshees, you can never let yourself

forget or even start to doubt that I love you. If I say it too often and you get sick of hearing it, you'll have to tell me to tone it down because I'm one of *those* people. Ask Mindy or Bruce if you don't believe me. And three." She tried to make her face look stern. "I'll warn you ahead of time that there will be very dire consequences if you ever intentionally forget this one. Okay, three, do not—I repeat, do not—call me darling the way you did in New York. Ever. You can swear at me and call me any other name you can think of and then some but if you ever sneer at me and call me darling again, I'll turn you over to Mindy and I won't be responsible for your safety."

Rich attempted to stay serious but couldn't. "I guess it worked as well on you as it did on me when Monica used it to be obnoxious."

"Well, that sure does explain it. Let's make three into a deal, shall we? Good. You don't call me darling and I won't call you that either."

"Deal. I didn't mind it at all when you called me stud, for what it's worth."

"That was a statement of fact, not an endearment."

"Why thank you, kitten. Is kitten okay?"

"Kitten is fine and please don't get paranoid."

"Paranoia comes with fear."

"Oh, that's all right then. Since you have nothing to be afraid of with me, you have nothing to be paranoid about. It's not easy to get me seriously pissed off, Rich. I get miffed, I point it out, I let it go. Candace and anyone who tries to hurt the cats are the exceptions but otherwise, it takes a lot to push me into the red zone."

"As I know from experience already." He winked. "Just please don't let me hurt you. Don't put up with my bullshit because you're not mad yet if I'm getting to you."

"Fine. Same goes for me."

Rich nodded because he was too choked up to speak. Very slowly, he urged her into his arms and lowered his head, holding her gaze until their lips touched. This time, Annette felt all the emotions he couldn't verbalize expressed by his kiss. He was shaking again when they separated and rested his forehead against hers.

"Tell me again. So I'm sure I didn't imagine it."

"I love you. Impractical, illogical, unlikely as it may be after spending only a few short hours with you, it's true. It didn't take hours. I loved you within minutes. And I'm going to love you forever, whether you walk away within the next five minutes or never feel anything other than temporary lust for me. When I left that hotel room, I didn't expect to ever see you again and had accepted that I'd spend the rest of my life loving you, living with those few memories. This is already a bonus. No." She kissed him quickly. "Don't say anything. Just let me love you." He nodded. "Now don't you think it's time for you to speak with your grandfather and Dan? Want me to give you some privacy?"

"Gramps came to get you after I revealed every intimate detail of our association and you think we need privacy? If I could, I'd sneak you around the side of the house and take you somewhere where we would have the privacy."

"Much as I'd like that, it'll have to wait. You need to talk to them now. And I accepted an invitation to dinner in honor of your grandparents' anniversary. No way am I running out on that."

"Really? Why am I suddenly grateful that I met you first?"

"Because you're an idiot."

"Dan!" he shouted after he stuck his head through the doorway. "Come help! Nettie's sounding like Gramps. They're ganging up on me already."

Chapter Thirteen

Joanna Mengel decided she didn't care if she was intruding. Ever since Michael had left her office that afternoon, she'd been extremely worried about him. She briefly considered enlisting her father to check on his oldest friend but didn't want to cause him to worry and stress him unnecessarily. She'd known Michael all her life. There was no reason she couldn't swing by on her way home. If she felt he needed her father's support once she spoke with him, she would make that her next stop.

The small driveway was full so Joanna parked on the street. As soon as she slid out of her car, she heard laughter coming from the back of the house. Instead of heading for the front door, she walked through the yard.

"Hello, all," Joanna called as she rounded the corner before her appearance could startle anyone. "I hope you don't mind that I didn't ring the bell."

"Joanna, what a pleasant surprise. Please, join us." Michael waved her to a chair. "Dan, get another plate. The boys are trying to duplicate Ellie's barbecue sauce and we could use your expert opinion."

"Um, thanks, Michael, if you're sure you don't mind the intrusion."

"No, no, not at all. In fact, I'm glad you're here. What do you think, Nettie? Can the idiot at the grill handle another surprise today?"

Annette giggled as she handed Joanna a glass of fresh lemonade. "Now, Gramps, I thought you decided he was only half an idiot."

"So I did. Sorry, kiddo."

"No problem, Gramps. Hi, Joanna."

"Evening, Rich. Dan. I take it things have settled down some since this afternoon?"

"Nope. But now they're stirred up in a much better way. Nettie?" Annette nodded and moved to slip her arms around Rich as he basted the ribs. "Would you just look at that? Rich does remember how to smile. Nettie, we'll have to work on the other two idiots next."

"Anything you say, Gramps, but maybe I should meet the other one first before we get started."

"That'll happen soon enough. Once they hear about you, you'll be swamped with busybody relatives and she'll be one of the first in line."

"Still at it, Michael," Joanna joined the teasing.

"Course. Someone has to take pity and give them a little push in the right direction. Thank God Nettie here has a good head on her shoulders. I don't have to worry so much about Rich now that he's got her to look after him."

"I'm very happy to hear it. Perhaps you can spare some time to help Daddy with my Tina. She broke another engagement last week and moved home again."

"What's that make it, three?"

"Four. You're forgetting the second one but maybe it's not worth counting since it only lasted six days. I hate to say it but it might be time to pull her safety net like Daddy keeps urging me to."

"Could be." Michael patted her hand sympathetically. "We'll have to discuss it in greater detail and see how we can help."

"Thanks, Michael. I'd be grateful, even if Tina's not."

The conversation was interrupted as dinner was served. They had almost finished eating before Michael steered it back to the zoo. Rich was stunned when Joanna explained the position she hoped he'd accept.

"Damn, I hope I'm not dreaming. Hey," he gasped when Annette pinched his behind.

"What?" she asked innocently. "Aren't you supposed to pinch someone when they say that?"

"Yeah, but generally not on the ass," Dan chuckled.

"But it's such a pinchable ass," she protested.

"Give the poor guy a break, Nettie. You've had your hands all over him all night," Dan teased. "Look, he's blushing again."

"It's called payback, Dan. And don't think I've forgotten about your involvement in the hotel lounge that night."

"Hey now. I'm the one that got you to meet, remember?"

"You're right. Guess I'll just have to enlist Mindy to settle up for me. Maybe she can get Bruce to tell her what would embarrass him the most and then do it to you."

"Don't bother, Dan. I heard a little about these three together and they're like us. As a guy, Bruce might appreciate our little ploy but not enough for him to refuse to assist his best buddies after one of them has been publicly taken advantage of for our personal enjoyment."

"You sure about that? Not that I'm questioning their friendship, but come on. Guys are guys and generally stick together when it comes to females seeking public humiliation, even if the females are close to us. What about that guy who had Ashley on a rampage? She was justifiably pissed and we did what she asked but not until we gave him a heads-up to take some of the sting out of it for him."

"Yeah, I remember but I still think you're going to be on your own on this one. You didn't hear Bruce earlier when he warned me not to blow off what Nettie had to say and how if I did and made her cry, he would have to let Mindy remove my testicles in a very unpleasant way."

"Oh. So you're saying their friendship overrules the guy thing." Dan pretended to cringe as the others chuckled with amusement.

Rich nodded. "Remind me to tell you about their little research project sometime," he couldn't resist teasing her.

"Fine with me." Annette grinned. "You guys can let me know if I need to give you a demonstration after you talk about it."

"I'll vouch for you, kitten. Dan doesn't need more than that."

"Ooh, possessive. I like that because that means you shouldn't have any problem with me being the same once you start schmoozing for the zoo."

"You'll have no need for that, child," Michael declared. "The boy is yours if you choose to keep him. Or he will be if he has half an iota of sense left in that idiot brain of his."

"I don't think he has to worry this time either, Gramps, since I snagged the right one for him. You should have let me find Nettie for you years ago, Rich."

"I wish you had." Rich linked their fingers and kissed Annette's hand. He let out a sad sigh. "For Nettie's sake as much as my own."

"Rich," she said tenderly, covering their joined hands with her free one. "No pressure, remember? You want me beside you for this moment. That's enough for me. I don't expect promises for anything beyond this."

No one commented as her words sank in. "Listen to her, son," Michael urged. "Nettie may very well be as kindhearted and generous as your grandmother was."

"Oh my." Joanna patted Michael's arm. "You're right. She does remind me of Ellie. Nettie, I hope you'll participate in the new program even if Rich doesn't. I'd like to get to know you better. I'm ashamed to admit it but I don't spend nearly enough time with the keepers and I should since you are the heart of the zoo. It couldn't function without you."

"Thank you and I'd be honored to help any way I can. But please don't feel bad. We all understand how busy you are. And, in case you were wondering, any time you come up in a conversation, you're always spoken of highly. Everyone knows you're an animal lover first and an administrator second."

"No wonder Doc recommended you the instant I mentioned my ideas to involve existing staff." Joanna smiled. "Can you imagine it, Michael? The combination of her natural sweetness and his persuasive charm will be lethal. The old tightwads won't know what hit them. They'll just fork over all their cash and we'll have an even better zoo than we ever dreamed of. Oops. Sorry, Rich. I didn't mean to jump the gun like that and assume we have a done deal."

"Joanna, I'm thrilled with your offer. Your timing couldn't be more perfect. Nettie can tell you that I said I'd need a new job if I had her to come home to every day. I never thought such a great opportunity would be handed to me and I'm certainly not going to turn it down. I have some odds and ends that I need to tidy up when I give my notice but they shouldn't take that long."

"The job is yours, Rich, whenever you're available. Just give me a call and let me know when that'll be and I'll take care of the rest." Joanna was obviously pleased he was taking the position. "Nettie, I know you're usually scheduled on weekends but I don't want to see you until Monday and don't even think of arguing with me. I'll call Doc tonight and let her know."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." Annette's smile was radiant.

"Yeah, thanks, Joanna," Rich seconded, making everyone laugh.

"On that note," Michael spoke up. "I suggest it's time for you two to go somewhere else. I'm old but I still remember what it was like to be hot for each other and trying to be patient."

"Gramps," Rich began.

"Go on. I'll be fine here with Dan and Joanna."

"But—" Annette tried.

"But what, Nettie?" Dan interrupted. "Rich cooks. I clean up. That was the deal all along anyway so go already."

"Oh, just go," Joanna joined in. "We all know you want to."

"Yeah," Annette admitted and tugged Rich from the table. "Quick, before they change their minds."

As they all said goodnight, Annette and Rich both took an extra minute to thank Michael again for his assistance in bringing them together. He waved them away but all could sense how happy he was.

Chapter Fourteen

Annette started her car and waited. She could feel Rich's tension and feared he was having second thoughts.

"Rich, it's all right if you want me to drop you off at your place. A lot has happened today and I understand if you need some time to consider things before we start something you might not want after you think about it. Maybe you can give me a call sometime over the weekend?"

Rich caressed her cheek. "I've done nothing but think of you for two weeks. I want to keep you close enough to touch so I know this is real and that I'm not just having the best dream of my life. I would like to swing by my apartment and grab a few things but then, if you don't mind, I want to spend the weekend with you."

She leaned into his hand and smiled. "Take a deep breath and tell me if I mind."

Annette could tell by the look in his eyes, the instant her meaning registered. With a grin, Rich inhaled sharply. "Ooh, yeah. Good thing I didn't notice back there. Gramps was already having too much fun calling me semi instead of half an idiot. It would have taken on a whole new meaning if I'd smelled you. I had enough trouble hiding my reaction every time you touched me anyway. Course you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yeah," she giggled. "But I don't think they had to actually see you to know what was happening."

"No, probably not. I want to thank you, Nettie. It meant a lot to Gramps that you let him talk about Gram with you."

"It meant a lot to me that he wanted to. I wish I could have met her. It sounds like they were great together."

"They were. He's never said it but I think he misses her every day."

"I'm sure he does. He's a very special man, Rich."

"Yep. I'm glad the two of you hit it off so well."

"Me too. Would I be a bitch if I admit that I felt really smug when he said he likes me so much more than Monica and how he never invited her to visit without you but I'm welcome anytime?"

"Nope." He grinned. "And he was serious so don't be shy about dropping in, okay?"

"Okay. I think we better get going before they come check on us. Where to?"

"Is it too late to stop by your friends'?"

Annette was stunned. "No, but are you sure you want to do that tonight? It'll be fine if I call them. We don't have to go there."

"I know but I want to. Dan and Gramps got to see for themselves that they don't have to worry about me. It's only fair that your friends get the same. Calling and saying everything is fine isn't the same as seeing it in person. They love you. They know I made you cry. I want to show them that I can make you smile too."

She leaned across the console and hugged him. "You are such a good guy. No wonder I love you."

"Mm." He inhaled deeply and his body reacted again. "Damn, that sounds good. I can't wait to hear you say it when you're coming." He pushed her back into her seat. "Hurry up and drive before I forget why it's so important that we see your friends tonight."

Annette laughed but headed for the destination Rich requested. Though it had been his idea, he didn't seem quite as certain once they got there. Before she opened the front door, she gave him a quick kiss for courage.

"It'll be fine, Rich. Ten minutes tops and I'm dragging you out of there."

"I don't want to seem rude."

"We won't. Trust me?"

"I do," he stated solemnly. "As much as I'm capable of. I wish..."

"Sh. That's enough for me. No pressure, remember?" He nodded. "Good." Taking his hand, Annette used her key and opened the door. "You have guests," she yelled. "If you're naked, you might want to grab a cover."

"We're in here," Mindy called from the back of the house. "Did you say guests? As in you're not alone?"

Annette led Rich to the enclosed porch off the kitchen. "Yep. Rich is making me wait to jump his bones until after he gets your seal of approval."

Rich blushed as her friends grinned openly. "I-I..."

"Relax," Bruce greeted him. "These two have no shame when it comes to sex. Since it seems you'll be around, you better get used to it. You will be around, right?"

"Yeah." Rich watched Mindy wrap herself around Annette and had to smile at their easy and open affection. "I took your advice and the most amazing thing happened."

"Oh?" Bruce raised an eyebrow and gestured for Rich to sit.

"I found out that this incredible woman loves me. Enough that she's willing to put up with me while I get my life back on track. She's even going to help me do it."

Mindy shrieked and hugged Annette tightly. Both women smiled widely as they let the men talk.

"Thank God," Bruce sighed dramatically. "As Annette's friend, I was in complete agreement with how Mindy was planning on punishing you but, as a guy, I sure am glad I don't have to hold you down and watch her do it. She's been elaborating since we spoke and I was getting a little scared."

"Me too. That's why I asked Nettie to stop here first. So you could see that smile. I'm planning on keeping it there as much as humanly possible."

"Good man. Can I give you another piece of advice? When you screw up and let's face it, you're a guy, just like I am, so you are going to screw up eventually, just like I do, don't wait to bite the bullet. Nine times out of ten, you'll be the one who's wrong so swallow your false pride and start groveling right away. Do whatever it takes to fix it. A happy woman is so much better than a disgruntled one."

"Bruce!" Mindy laughed.

"Just telling him like it is, babe. We all know it's true."

"I'm not sure I'm capable of giving her much of anything at this point but, if possible, I do want her to be happy."

"I'm so glad to hear that, Rich." Annette's eyes were sparkling with amusement. "In fact, there is something you can do now that will make me very happy."

"Uh-oh." Bruce gulped. "Sorry. I think I just set you up big time."

"Yeah, but I know what's on her mind and I'm more than willing to take care of it. I hate to rush off but I'm pretty sure that was my cue to leave."

Mindy chuckled. "Nice try, Rich, but no way are you getting off the hook that easy. You're not going anywhere until I hear what Annette means."

Bruce shrugged. "I warned you. May as well ask and get it over with."

Rich watched the smile on Annette's face grow and felt his heart skip a beat. He nodded at Bruce and asked, "What can I do for you, kitten?"

"Hmm, let's see. You said you needed to pick up a few things at your place. How long will that take?"

"Five minutes tops."

"Okay. It'll take about ten minutes to get there and then ten or fifteen more to get home. I think I'm going to drive instead of letting you like I was going to."

"All right," Rich agreed slowly.

"That way you can play with my nipples from here to your place."

Mindy giggled as both men groaned.

"I'm going to wait in the car and keep them nice and perky for you so you don't take any longer than you need to."

"Oh man," Bruce chuckled as Rich squirmed.

"And then, before we take off again, I'm going to pull one leg out of my shorts so you can watch me get myself ready for you the rest of the way. Think you'll be ready too by the time we get there?"

"I don't know, Annette," Mindy began. "I may be wrong here but it looks to me like he's already ready. In fact, I think you just got Bruce ready for me too."

Rich glanced at the trio. "I don't know if I should be embarrassed or grateful that you don't mind us cutting this visit so short."

"I know I'm grateful." Bruce grinned. "Nice to meet you, Rich. Thanks for stopping by. I'm looking forward to getting to know you better but get the hell out. Now."

Mindy kissed Annette's cheek and pushed her into Rich's arms. "Bye. Have fun. Call me tomorrow," she called over her shoulder as she advanced on Bruce.

"You too," Annette giggled as she tugged Rich through the house.

Annette had her uniform shirt half unbuttoned before Rich made it around to his side of the car. She had the edges separated enough for him to see her lacy bra before he pulled the door closed and the interior lights faded.

"Fuck, you're serious?"

"Yes," she whispered, lifting herself from the lace. "Unless you don't want to."

With a growl, Rich dipped his head and captured a nipple. His fingers sought the other and he soon had both standing in stiff peaks.

"Oh yeah, I wasn't imagining how good this feels," she moaned as he switched sides. "Ooh! Damn. Sorry, stud." She ran her fingers through his hair. "Gotta stick to your hands so I have room to drive."

Reluctantly, he raised his head. "Let's go."

When they reached Rich's apartment, he took a few minutes to nibble before he raced inside and stuffed a few things into his overnight bag. The thought of Annette stimulating herself while she waited had him insane with lust. She promised to lock the doors behind him and keep her breasts covered so he knew no one would see what she was doing but he still worried over her safety. As he rushed from the building, he was amazed at how important she'd already become.

"Hi." Annette had a blanket over her lap when he returned.

"Hi yourself." Rich made sure she saw him check on her nipples. "Nice."

"Would have been better if you'd been watching. Ready?"

"Hell yes!"

"I meant to go."

"That too."

Annette pulled away and slid the blanket to the side. She scooted down and propped her left foot on the seat. Her shorts were gone and her lower body was totally exposed. Without taking her eyes from the road, she rubbed her fingers between her folds. When she stopped for a red light, Annette pressed two fingers deep inside and watched Rich watching her.

"I'm so wet for you. I'd ask you to give me a hand here but you're too good at it." She played until the light turned green. With her eyes back on the road, she removed her fingers and sucked them into her mouth. "Mm. Maybe I'll let you taste if we hit another light." She returned her hand to her lap.

"You're killing me, kitten. Aren't we there yet?"

"Don't you want to go for a nice long drive?"

"Fuck, no! Straight home! Please!"

"Well, since you asked so nicely." She extended her fingers to his mouth and turned into a small lot. "Grab your bag. We're here."

Somehow, Annette wrapped the blanket around her waist as she got out of the car. She was almost to the door before Rich caught up with her. She was laughing at his impatience as she fumbled with her key. As soon as they were in, Rich slammed the door shut, dropped his bag and yanked the blanket from her. He pinned her back against the door and kissed her savagely as he worked to lower his zipper over his massive hard-on. Annette screamed when Rich slammed into her. He had one leg draped over his arm. A hand had claimed a breast and his mouth plundered hers as he pumped frantically into her heat. Before long, she was convulsing with pleasure. Rich tensed and buried himself deep to empty his passion within her.

"Wow," Annette panted, clutching him for support.

"Happy?"

"Very. You?"

"Definitely."

"Want to make me happier?"

"Absolutely."

"Sit down on the chair right behind you and let me suck your cock until you come. If you do, I'll show you where the bed is and you can play in my pussy however you want to."

"You'll let me shave you?"

"Yes."

"You gonna tell me something next time you come?" he asked as he sat down.

"Of course, if the something you're referring to is that I love you." She sank between his knees and swallowed his nearly erect penis.

"That's it," Rich moaned as her tongue massaged his sensitive flesh.

Chapter Fifteen

Three months later

Michael felt nothing but contentment as he surveyed his deck and yard. Technically, he was hosting a birthday party for his youngest grandchild, Lauryn, but the usual guest list for such a gathering had been expanded to include Annette's family and friends. Though they'd all met since she had cracked the isolation his grandson had shrouded himself in, this was the first time they were all together in one group. If only Rich could open up and let himself acknowledge what had been obvious to Michael the instant he saw the pair together, this combination of personalities would become a new tradition instead of the novelty it currently was. Thank goodness, the boy had stumbled across Annette and not another scheming witch like his ex-wife had been. This girl was the perfect match for him in every way he looked at it.

Within hours of bringing her to talk some sense into Rich, Michael had seen glimmers of the person his grandson had been before his disastrous marriage. Since then, Annette's patient, unwavering love and support had restored him fully. All that was left now was for the boy to gather the courage to admit he was in love with her and form the security of a permanent relationship. Not that it would change anything. Annette had made it clear right from the beginning that she would stay with Rich for however long he wanted her, in whatever capacity he was comfortable with. Michael never had any doubts that she would remain true to her word but it would still be nice to see them married. He knew that things had changed dramatically since he was young and so in love with his Ellie that he couldn't stand being separated from her, even though he slept through most of the hours they were apart and so what if it made him a sentimental old fool, he liked the significance associated with marriage vows as much now as he had when he and Ellie exchanged them.

"Well, Nettie," he lowered his voice so only those closest would hear, "this is the third time you've seen that pair of idiots together. Come up with anything yet?"

Annette was standing near Michael's chair, lounging between Rich's thighs as he perched behind her on the railing. "Possibly. Tomorrow night, we're going on a dinner cruise with Mindy and Bruce. We're taking Lauryn as part of her birthday present and Rich is going to talk Dan into joining us so Lauryn doesn't feel like a fifth wheel."

"Not bad but that still doesn't get them alone."

"Wait. I haven't told you the best part. It's not the regular two-hour dinner cruise. This one includes music and dancing for a few hours after dinner."

"Bruce and I have both promised that we will spend the majority of the cruise dancing with our ladies and not hanging at the table with Dan and Lauryn," Rich added.

Joanna chuckled as she and Michael exchanged an amused glance. "Oh my, what a hardship for you guys. The sacrifices you're willing to make astound me."

"Amazing, isn't it?" Rich shrugged. "But, as Bruce says, it'll make our ladies smile so it'll be worth it but I still say it's not going to matter. Dan and Lauryn are pals. A little dancing isn't going to change that."

"My hero, even if you are clueless." Annette hugged his arms that were linked around her waist.

"Better not let Galahad hear you say that," Joanna teased.

"It's okay, Joanna." Rich laughed. "We had a man-to-man talk and came to an understanding. I don't intrude on his private time with Nettie and he won't break out of his cage and eat me."

"He's not that bad."

"Yes, he is," Rich stated. "But, as long as you don't start leaving me at the zoo and taking him home with you, I can handle sharing you with him. I know you love both of us."

"Sure do." She tipped her head for a kiss. "So, Joanna, how's Tina doing?"

"Surprisingly well. This is the first time she's living on her own and I think she's surprised at how much she enjoys it. You should see your old apartment, Rich. It's not the same place, with the curtains she hung and her pictures on the walls. She has so many plants it's starting to look like a jungle. I don't see why you kept the blinds closed all the time. It was so dark in there."

"Sunlight isn't conducive to brooding. Dark and depressing suited me just fine before Nettie came to my rescue."

"How's the house hunting?"

"Frustrating," Rich stated with Annette nodding in agreement. "I never expected to have so much trouble. It's not like we're being overly picky. All we want is someplace decent in a nice neighborhood with a yard for our kids to play in. Everyplace we looked at so far had a house too small for two let alone a family but a big yard or a house that's borderline with absolutely no space around it. The one we saw at that might have worked, size-wise, was so run-down it should have been condemned."

Seizing the opportunity, Michael stood and called for everyone's attention. "Rich, Nettie, we have the perfect solution to your house woes. The last time everyone was in town, we had a family meeting without you."

Rich's parents and sisters nodded as his gaze swept over each of them. "Why?" he asked, tightening his arms protectively.

"Because I needed to discuss something with them before I spoke with you. Billy, run into my study and bring the envelope tucked under the lamp." He paused until he had it. "Here."

Rich held the paper it contained in front of Annette and read it over her shoulder. "Gramps, this is the deed to your house. You can't do this. Where are you going to live?"

"In the carriage house if you'll permit me," he announced smugly. "The steps are getting too hard for my knees. Your dad and mom aren't ready to move back yet. The girls never loved this place like you always have. We talked about it thoroughly and all agree that it should belong to the two of you."

"This is too generous," Annette gasped. "I can't accept half your house."

"Why not? You love my grandson and are planning on sharing a home with him anyway. Wouldn't it be in both your names if you bought one?"

"Well, yes but..."

"But nothing. Don't lose your sense on me now, child."

"Thank you," Annette responded emotionally, looking at each member of Rich's family.

"That's better. I'll be moving what I want over the next few weeks and the others have picked out some items they'd like to have for sentimental reasons. Anything that's left is yours to do with as you see fit. Keep it, sell it, give it away, it's entirely up to you. Ellie and I had many good years here. When we moved in, we made it ours. We all expect you to do the same so I better not find out years from now that you're waiting for me to die before you make changes."

Annette took two steps and thanked him with a hug. "You're too kind, Gramps. I love you." Still wrapped around Michael, she shifted to face Rich. "Aren't you going to say something?"

Rich scowled. "Well, hell, Gramps, you sure threw a monkey wrench in my plans."

"How's that, idiot?"

"I was going to wait until after Lauryn's cake to ask you if Nettie and I could make arrangements to hold a small wedding and reception here." He stood.

"Oh my God!" Annette whispered.

Rich dropped to one knee in front of her and took her hand. In his other, he held an open ring box. "Annette Phelps, I love you more than any man has ever loved a woman. Having you with me has made my life complete. Will you please marry me?"

Everyone held their breath while they waited for her answer. The tears that threatened when Michael had presented them with his house were now flowing down her cheeks. Her eyes were huge and her hands were shaking. She had to swallow several times to find her voice.

"Yes, on one condition," she stated.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Dan grumbled, breaking the tension. "Can't you two ever do anything without turning it into a deal first?" Lauryn shushed him loudly, causing everyone to laugh.

"What condition, kitten?" Rich asked softly, taking the ring from the box and slipping it on her finger.

"That we get married soon. I don't want to look too pregnant in our wedding pictures."

Rich was stunned. He was speechless. Everyone had stopped breathing again for his reaction. Very gently, as if afraid to touch her, he pressed his palm to the inch of bare skin between her shirt and shorts.

"We're pregnant? We're really pregnant?" His voice was filled with awe.

"Uh-huh." She nodded, linking her hands behind his neck. "Tell me again."

"Oh, God." Rich finally got to his feet and clutched her to his chest, spinning her around. "I love you. Did you hear that everybody?" he yelled, not looking at anyone but her. "My soon-to-be wife and I are having a baby!"

The couple was instantly surrounded by everyone wanting to hug the pair as they congratulated them for all their unexpected surprises. Rich refused to release Annette to any of them, including her parents and Mindy. The group was still swarming when Rich decided to seal their deal with a kiss. A minute later, he scooped her into his arms, muttered something unintelligible and whisked her inside. Annette was too busy nuzzling his neck to notice the laughter that drifted after them.

The other partygoers soon settled back into smaller groups, each having an excited conversation. Billy drifted from one to the next, reminding all that they hadn't cut Lauryn's cake. Michael finally took pity on him and invited everyone to sing while Lauryn blew out her candles.

"Wait, Gramps." Billy bounded for the door. "I'll go get Uncle Rich and Nettie so they don't miss this."

"Let them be, son." Michael clamped his shoulder before he escaped. "They just made the deal of a lifetime. One that calls for some private celebrating without anyone barging in. They'll be back out when they're ready." He ruffled the boy's hair. "We'll save them some."

As everyone devoured their cake, Joanna squeezed Michael's hand. "I wish Daddy had been feeling well enough to be here today."

"Me too. He would have loved it as much as I do. I think I'll give him a shout later. Have to let him know Rich finally lost his idiot status. I knew the boy would make it as soon as Nettie agreed to follow me home from the zoo that day."

"They're good together." She paused to watch Dan and Lauryn.

"All we need now is for those two to figure out that they're idiots for overlooking the obvious and I will feel my life is complete."

"Oh no, you don't," Joanna protested. "It's bad enough to hear Daddy talking like he's getting ready to die. I won't put up with it from you too. Don't even start or I'll tell Nettie on you. She'll set you straight."

"Hmm, that she will. Probably say that I've taken over Rich's place as an idiot," he chuckled. "I can just hear her, can't you? I tell you, Joanna, she's a feisty one even with all that sweetness."

"Just like you." Joanna kissed his cheek. "Think of how much fun you'll have with that baby of theirs."

"This one's going to be a real spitfire. Even more of a handful than the twins, I bet. You're right. I better stick around. They're going to need my help." With a wink, he relaxed into his chair and smiled happily. All was right in his grandson's world and life was good.

About the Author

Barbara Huffert wrote her first book after a friend issued a challenge she couldn't ignore. Once she started, she realized there had been movies flickering through her mind her whole life. With the tolerant purring of her cat, Mouse, she figured out how to operate her internal remote and has been transcribing them ever since.

Sharing their space are Bixby the Snuggle Bug, Mouse's twin brother, Harry No!, the baddest of the bad, and Barb's indulgent human companion, the Milk Man. He doesn't understand her never-ending compulsion to write. Fortunately, he's kept occupied by friends with a limitless supply of things in need of fixing.

Barbara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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