



A Greek Affair

Flesa Black

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

Dedicated to the great people of the opera. I admire anyone who can sing like an avenging angel in three different languages, and look darn good doing it!

Also to my husband who tolerates my shower voice, and even claims he likes it.

Foreword

A Note about Safe Sex

I'm so glad you chose this book to add to your collection, or to start it. I really enjoyed writing this story, and I hope you enjoy reading it just as much. Before you get started, though, I wanted to add a note about safe sex.

While sex is a beautiful, erotic, and satisfying activity, it should always be approached with some caution. Even in a committed relationship, safe sex should be discussed and a method of protection should be decided on. Before engaging in any sexual activity, take the time to decide what method is right for you. Don't forget that sexual activity includes any intimate relations, not just actual intercourse.

Abstinence is the only sure way to keep yourself free of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. Condoms aren't 100% reliable against diseases, but they are the most effective protection currently available. I encourage everyone to carry either male or female condoms with them. It's always good to be extra careful and to know that you have protection when you need it, whether your partner does or not. I believe we should all be responsible for our bodies and for the health and welfare of the people around us. This includes the use of condoms to reduce the spread of venereal diseases and to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

While you may not read specifically about what the couple in this book does to protect themselves, rest assured that they are practicing safe sex. I simply chose not to point it out during certain scenes because I felt it did not fit with the flow of the story.

Please, enjoy my book and remember that safe sex is something that we should all consider and practice.

Chapter One

His hands roamed her body, skimming her smooth skin with arousing movements as they followed her naked curves. Anticipating the sensations she knew he could create, she tilted her head back in ecstasy.

"Rachel."

Her eyes fluttered open and locked on his smoldering green gaze. She felt her breath catch as he stared at her while his fingers traced the delicate column of her neck. Then his touch moved across her collarbone, straying down until he touched her breasts.

"You are so beautiful," he said softly.

She gasped when his wet mouth nipped her sensitive earlobe at the same time his fingers pinched her hardened nipples. Carefully, he positioned himself over her, his hot body covering hers as she trembled in expectation.

His mouth descended to her neck, scraping her heated skin with his teeth. She moaned and arched, mesmerized by the feel of his hard length as it rubbed against her sensitized flesh.

He chuckled deeply, sensually, making even the sound of his laughter an erotic joy. She wiggled underneath him, waiting in tortured need as the head of his shaft tormented her. Then suddenly his mouth was scorching her breast, tugging the erect nub with slow, hard suction.

"Oh, God," she gasped. "Oh, please, Ben, please..."

He looked up, releasing her nipples reluctantly, and held her eyes in another intense stare.

"It'll be good, Rachel, I swear it will," he promised.

She nodded mutely as she wrapped her legs around his waist, her moisture beading at the top of her thighs. He leaned down to kiss her and she felt his long shaft press more insistently against her swollen folds. Now, her mind screamed, now!

He pushed forward slowly—

The blaring of the alarm clock scattered Rachel Connelly's erotic dream to the four winds. Growling in anger and frustration, she picked up the intrusive clock and hurled it across the room, gritting her teeth as the little box smacked off the cream colored wall and fell in pieces to the floor.

Damn interruption! Damn dream! She didn't need to have those images popping into her mind today, not on the day of her debut. This was something she'd been striving for most of her life, and she'd be damned if her vivid imagination and memories of her ex were going to ruin it. She was contemplating taking care of her rather painful predicament herself when a smart rap sounded on her door. Snarling, she barked out what passed as a greeting.

"What do you want?"

"Ah, Sleeping Beauty rises in her usual chipper mood. Was that another clock I heard hitting the wall?"

She sent a killing glare towards the teasing male voice, blurrily making out the image of her roommate, Guy. At least he wasn't doing something horrifically obnoxious, like singing.

“Yes,” she mumbled, pulling her green sheets over her head to shut out both his cheerful expression and the sun pouring through the window-lined bedroom.

She heard him chuckle as she snuggled deeper into her bed, hoping to clear her mind a fraction before he pulled her from under the covers. Guy knew how grumpy she was when she woke up. After a year of living with her, the “see how long it takes Rachel to murder unsuspecting furniture” game had become a kind of strange spectator sport.

“I swear, if you keep this up, Rachel, I’m going to have to invest in Timex. Have you ever considered a second career as a product tester? Because if their clocks can stand up to you, they’ll last past a lifetime.” He paused before continuing. “Glad to see there isn’t a hole in the wall this time. I’d hate to have to explain to the super why he has to smear on more plaster again.”

She pointedly ignored his presence, hoping he would give up his incessantly pleasant chatter. Then the mouth-watering aroma of clam sauce floated into her nose like a long lost lover. An involuntary sigh spilled from her throat. The sound of Guy’s soft laugh made its way into the rest of the room.

“Wake up, Princess Rachel,” Guy called in a singsong voice. “You aren’t a big time diva yet, love. The opera won’t wait for you.”

The combined smell of her late lunch and her roommate’s reminder of the opera brought Rachel fully awake. She sat up, knowing she looked as irritable and cranky as she felt, and shoved the long waterfall of dark brown hair from her face. She blew at a few rebellious strands that were dancing across her nose, finally giving up when they refused to budge.

“The only reason you’re not injured is because I like you...plus you have a plate of food in your hand.” She shifted on the sheet-tossed bed and grumbled quiet curses of annoyance.

“Uh-huh, I’ve heard that one before,” he replied good-naturedly. “But I have to admit, I’ve survived six government coups, dodged thousands of bullets, lived in jungles and deserts for weeks at a time...and you’re still the only thing that’s ever really scared me.”

Rachel gave him a wry look as she flung her legs out of bed. “Good, you *should* be afraid. I have my mother’s temper.”

“God help us all,” he muttered with a grin.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Move it, hot buns, I have to eat, shower and be at the theatre in two and a half hours.”

“Need a lift?” He tossed the question over his shoulder as he spun out of her room, moving quickly enough that she didn’t step on his heels.

“Hey, that would be great, but won’t you be bored waiting around for the opera to start?” She stumbled behind him groggily, following him into the spacious kitchenette area that provided a view of the balcony and courtyard. As she slid into a padded wooden chair he slipped silverware in front of her.

“Actually, I thought I’d bring my camera and snap a few shots backstage,” he said, setting her plate down on the small, round table.

“Uh, did you pass that by the director?” She eyed him dubiously as she plunged her fork into her linguine, her mouth watering.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” He raised an eyebrow as she stuffed a wad of noodles between her lips. He didn’t quite bite back his laugh. “Slow down, would you? There’s

no way you can appreciate the nuances of the sauce eating like that. Besides, you'll make yourself sick."

Rachel took a sip of red wine, acknowledging his statement with a short nod. "Oh, I set out an outfit for you. It should be comfortable enough for you to work in."

"Fashion sense, another thing I'm glad you've added to the blend. Then there's the way you feed my caffeine addiction with perfectly made coffee." His lips curled up. "Mostly though, I think it's because you keep me well-dressed. You'd think I'd be able to match a shirt with a pair of pants."

"Yeah, you'd think." She flashed him a teasing look and twined more pasta around her fork. "Come on, we have to finish lunch. It wouldn't look good for me to be late."

He twirled noodles on his fork expertly, his brown eyes twinkling at her. She'd lucked out when she'd found Guy as a roommate. Actually, she'd been fairly lucky when it came to her life here in Athens. A few years ago if someone had told her she'd be living in Greece singing with the opera, she would have laughed and called them crazy. But here she was, with the balmy Mediterranean breeze tickling her shoulders. After her time traveling with the LaRussa Opera Troupe, this apartment was a little piece of heaven.

She'd been withering in the traveling opera group. At twenty-seven, what she needed was the normality of regular living, but she also needed her singing. Luckily for her, when she tired of being a part of Giana LaRussa's group, the Greek National Opera Company offered her a position. She snatched at the chance to sing and live in the beautiful city of Athens, even though it was a far cry from her small hometown of Breckenridge, Nebraska. A far way away from the flat plains of the mid-west, a long way away from her family, from what she'd known...from the man who had broken her heart.

Shaking off the gloom that tried to settle on her shoulders, she looked absently around to the living room and smiled. Her gaze traveled over the various pieces of camera equipment left lying on the oak coffee table and overstuffed floral couch. It was the clutter of her life now, the kind of barely organized chaos that let her know she was living in a home, and not just an apartment.

"You still haven't unpacked," she commented, giving Guy a long look.

He shrugged and took a sip of his wine. "I just got back last night, love. I'll get it all picked up tonight."

"I've heard that before. Twenty minutes later you get a call from some magazine or newspaper and off you go, globetrotting again".

He winked at her, his fork poised over his plate. "Such is the life of a freelance photographer. It pays half the rent and living expenses, so you aren't allowed to complain. Besides, I'm good at what I do."

"Even if you do say so yourself." That earned a roll tossed at her head. She dodged and caught the warm bread before it hit the floor.

"Don't disparage my work," he said, sending her a mockingly harsh look.

"When it pays for my linguine in clam sauce? Never!" She took another bite of her late lunch and hummed in appreciation. After another drink of wine, she tilted her head. "So, how was Australia?"

"Beautiful, sad, interesting." He reached across the small table and tucked a strand of her loose hair behind her ear. It was a gesture he'd adopted at the beginning of their friendship. "I can't believe what the Aborigines are going through. It's terrible."

“Trying to save the world one picture at a time again,” she said philosophically. “That’s one of the things I admire most about you.” She waited a full beat before continuing. “And how is Patrick?”

She watched his body tighten in frustration but ignored the silent warning. “You two were paired together for this story, weren’t you?” she prodded.

“Yes, we were, and no, we didn’t figure anything out,” he said through gritted teeth. “I don’t know why I bother with him.”

“Because you love him, you dolt,” she teased. “Besides, he’s perfect for you and you know it. You’re both stubborn, headstrong, willful, and way too nice for your own good. Not to mention, he’s hotter than a daytrip to Venus.”

Guy laughed, his broad chest rising and falling with chuckles. He shook his head, dislodging a lock of black hair as he leaned back in his chair and lifted his glass, holding it halfway to his lips. “We always did have similar tastes in men. Thank heavens poor Patrick isn’t bi. He wouldn’t stand a chance if both of us decided we wanted him.”

Rachel twisted her lips and lifted her eyebrow slightly before getting back to the matter at hand. “Seriously, Guy, you’re so in love with Patrick that you can barely see straight. Don’t you think it’s about time you told him that he was more than a fling?”

“I’ll tell him when I’m damn well ready and not a day before. And what about you, Rachel Connelly? Did you go on a date while I was gone?”

She turned her eyes away from him, trying to hide the pain she feared would be there. Guy had jabbed his pointed question directly into a raw spot, one that throbbed openly after her dream just a few minutes before.

“I went to the bistro with Dimitri Angelis, but it was pretty forgettable,” she admitted.

“That’s what you say about all your dates. I don’t think a Greek god himself could make a lasting impression on you. You’re still hung up on Ben Slater.”

“I am not,” she bit back, irritated enough to cast her friend a slanted look. She couldn’t be hung up on her ex-lover. It would be just too pathetic. “I’m just picky. After all, I have a demanding career and a busy social life. If I’m going to let someone in, it’s going to have to be someone very special.”

Thankfully Guy lapsed into silence instead of pursuing the conversation. She still felt inexplicably vulnerable whenever Ben’s name was mentioned. She never tried to delve too deeply into the fact that she hadn’t had a serious relationship since leaving Breckenridge. She didn’t even want to consider the box of trinkets and mementos that stood in the back of her closet, memories that she refused to let go. Memories of her life back in the states. Reminders of what she’d once had and ultimately lost.

Growing uncomfortable in the quiet, Rachel cleared her throat and looked back at Guy. “Are you looking forward to the opera tonight?”

He lifted his eyebrow at her change of subject but didn’t comment. “Are you kidding? I get to see the amazing Diva Connelly in her first supporting, up front role,” he answered with a grin. “So, who are you slaughtering tonight, love?”

“I’ve only been practicing my part for weeks now,” she chided. “We’re doing *Don Quixote*, and if you don’t stop saying I mutilate the music I sing, I might end up with a complex.”

“The great Rachel Connelly with a complex? Inconceivable.” He picked up a roll and buttered it. “Come on, you don’t have that much time before we need to leave for the

theater, and I know how long it takes you to wash your hair.”

She shook her head at him. She wasn't sure how'd she'd ended up with someone like Guy as her roommate, but she was thankful that she had. The fact that he'd become her best friend was only an added bonus.

Swallowing another mellow drink of red wine, Rachel turned her thoughts to calculating just exactly how much time she had before Guy would be standing at the front door yelling for her to get her butt moving.

Chapter Two

Rachel sat at her dressing room table, her body still buzzing with the electricity of a perfect performance. Well, perfect on stage at least, she amended. Thank God the backstage drama hadn't spilled out into the opera itself. Of course, even if it had, the fiasco would only have managed to make the performance just that much more memorable.

She was wiping off the last of her caked on make-up when a quick knock sounded on her door. Grinning widely, she launched herself from her chair and yanked the knob, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she found herself face to face with a large bouquet of Gerber daisies and irises with long legs.

"They're beautiful!"

"Well, I couldn't very well bring a grubby little mum into the hallowed walls of your dressing room." Guy moved the flowers away from his face, his dark eyes dancing with the same kind of excitement that she felt. "You were wonderful."

Rachel took the large bouquet in one hand and pulled him into a fierce hug with the other, embracing him with all the exhilaration running through her body. Leaning back, she gave him a friendly kiss on the lips while he stroked her gently waved hair.

"Oh, God, Guy, it was flawless, wasn't it? I hit every note, caught every cue, nailed every mark...I'm flying!" she exclaimed.

"You were absolutely perfect, love," Guy acknowledged happily. "I'm so proud of you. Oh, and I recorded the whole thing for your family."

"You are the perfect man, aren't you?" She laughed, releasing his neck so she could grab his hand. "Since you've brought a gift, I suppose you can come in."

Dragging him the rest of the way into her small dressing room, she waited until Guy perched uncomfortably on the edge of her tiny couch. He looked distinctly out of place among the pieces of strewn lingerie and frilly pillows, his masculine lines at odds with the pervasive femininity of the room. Swiftly, she sank back onto her spindle-legged chair, her bottom bouncing on the overstuffed padding as she placed her flowers on the scarred wood tabletop.

"You missed the real action," she said with a conspirator's wink.

"The real action, eh? Was it better than the infamous LaRussa lipstick scandal?"

"That was just a three hundred dollar tube tossed into the Thames. *This* was two women trying to rip each other's hair out."

Guy lifted one curious eyebrow and adjusted his weight on the sofa. "Do tell."

"Well, apparently Therese and Adella were up for the same part, but of course Adella landed the role. We all wondered how that had happened, considering Therese not only has seniority, but twice the talent of Adella. So, half an hour before curtain, there was a huge brouhaha. Seems Therese walked into the director's booth and caught Adella on her knees, giving Dante the time of his life!"

"You're kidding! On her knees? She was actually giving him a blowjob in a nearly public place?" He stared at her, his eyes wide.

"My hand to heaven," she said, then laughed. "So Therese grabbed Adella by the hair and dragged her, I mean *really* dragged her, down the hall. She was screaming the

whole time, yelling about Adella seducing her boyfriend. It was shocking! We had no idea that Dante was even dating Therese!”

“Guess that explains Adella’s sudden luck.”

“And it explains her black eye, missing hair, and stitched arm. Dante didn’t escape her wrath, either. He has claw marks down his face and bite marks on both arms. Needless to say, she called him a son of a bitch and told him to pack his bags.”

“Wow, I *knew* I should have come backstage. Imagine the money I’d have made selling photos of two vicious divas tearing at each other’s throats. I guess I’ll have to suffer in poverty for a few more years.” He sighed, shaking his head miserably.

Rachel chuckled as she tossed a white hand towel at his head. “Oh, yeah, you’re languishing. All those awards, all those books, the love letters and large checks...how *do* you survive?”

“Cheeky woman.”

“Unfashionable man.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark,” he teased. Spying the open champagne bottle on the side table, he reached over and poured himself a flute full of bubbly wine. “So, what are we going to do to celebrate?”

“Um...dancing? No discotheques, though—I don’t think I’m up for a crush of people.”

Another knock rapped the door and Rachel turned to give the thin wood a curious look. Standing, she tightened the belt of her silky peach robe and reached for the knob, making sure her ample cleavage wasn’t exposed. When she opened it, she lost the feel of the room around her. Her heart stopped for an endless moment as her lungs froze and her brain seized. It was a nightmare, or maybe it was a fantasy. Or just maybe it was a bit of both.

“Ben,” she whispered.

“Hello, Rachel.”

At the sound of his voice her heart suddenly began again, kicking into a quick cadence as she stared into the face of the man she hadn’t seen in two years. He was standing in the doorway, his black suit impeccable, his burnished hair barely subdued, and a clutch of lilies in his grasp. What was he doing here? Had he actually gone out of his way to find her? But why? What was the reason? Why had he bothered to come after all this time? No, no, it had to be a coincidence. There was no way he would fly across the ocean just to see her.

“I—uh, hello,” she replied feebly, hating the way her words wavered.

She tried not to blanch as he studied her, his haunting green gaze going over every piece of her body. She fought down the immediate heat his perusal brought, trying valiantly to forget her earlier dream of being under his hands. Shock sent cold fingers down her spine in stark contrast to the fire curling around the juncture of her thighs. *Ben...Ben...* was all she seemed to be able to think.

Rachel didn’t hear her friend ease up behind her, but she was grateful when she felt his arm slide casually around her waist. She wasn’t sure if she would have been able to stand for another second if Guy hadn’t come to support her. She was trying to form a coherent thought when she saw the strangest tic in Ben’s jaw. Before she could analyze it, the man beside her spoke.

“Hi, I’m Guy Nomikus.” He stuck his hand out casually. “It’s nice to finally meet

you, Ben Slater.”

Chapter Three

Rachel sat at a small table in Thaa's Bistro and fought the urge to throttle her friend. What was supposed to have been a celebratory dinner and dancing had turned into a living nightmare for her. She was still trying to figure out how Guy had managed to invite Ben to their favorite haunt right under her nose. One moment she was shell-shocked, staring into the eyes of the man who'd broken her heart, and the next she was sitting here with Guy to her right and Ben in front of her. It was like some ridiculous forties movie starring Cary Grant, with her as the put-upon costar.

She was considering trying to make a getaway when Guy oh-so-casually slipped an arm around her shoulders. He rubbed his fingertips negligently over her bare skin and she fought the desire to roll her eyes. Ever since Ben's shocking appearance at her door, her friend had been touching her as much as possible. When he wasn't stroking her back, he played with her hair or nuzzled her cheek. And the whole time he kept a smugly serene face in place. What he was doing was ridiculous and unnecessary. Well, maybe just ridiculous.

Guy's nose met her jaw line and she gritted her teeth. She refused to jerk away from him and start berating him with questions. His actions were not just confusing, they were down right befuddling. Why in the hell would he playact with her like this? No, she wouldn't smack him around and demand answers right now. She was more mature than that; she'd wait until they got home to start her interrogation.

One of the biggest problems was the way her body reacted to Ben's closeness. It was like her skin and nerves had a mind of their own. She found her gaze straying over and over to her old boyfriend, taking in his tousled dark blonde hair, moss green eyes and lopsided smile. It just wasn't fair that he could make her heart accelerate without even the slightest effort. She should be filled with loathing and disgust, not curiosity over whether he still touched and made love with the same deep intensity. Then there were his hands, so large and long-fingered. When her eyes fell on them, she replayed the vivid dream she'd had only a few hours before, the very one she'd been fighting from the moment the alarm clock had yanked her awake.

She wasn't going to do this to herself, she swore silently. She wasn't going to torture herself over Ben Slater, not after all she'd gone through to try to recover from her pain. She'd been hurt for so long, and then only sheer strength of will had forced her to finally get back into life. But this damn physical desire wasn't helping matters at all. Determined to keep her attraction to Ben under control, Rachel took a silent breath and forced herself to tune back into the conversation.

"So, Ben, I have to admit that I'm surprised to see you in Athens," Guy was saying in a friendly voice. "Can you tell us what brought you here, or is it some top secret business?"

Rachel watched as Ben stared at her friend, his eyes cool as he assessed him. She wondered what exactly was going on behind his gaze, and what he must be thinking about Guy...and about her. Suddenly his eyes shifted from her friend and landed squarely on her. She felt the jolt all way to her marrow and barely checked the urge to gasp. The depths of his eyes were warm but harsh, a question clearly imprinted in the bright green

irises, though she couldn't quite decipher what it was.

"Okay, so it's hush-hush." Guy's smooth voice interrupted the electrical silence that had descended around the table.

"Oh, uh, no, no it's not a big secret." Rachel was grateful when Ben turned his attention back to her companion. "I'm here to present a proposal to Le Dolce Seafood. We'd like Slater Enterprises to be the importer of their food for the Midwest. My father started looking into it before he died a few months ago. If we become The Midwestern distributor for Le Dolce, it would triple our customer base. My father really wanted this." Ben leaned back and sipped his cappuccino.

Rachel felt an immediate rending in her heart. She remembered Jack Slater, the tall, barrel-chested man who had as strange a sense of humor as his son. He had always been on the move, always working or doing things with his family. She'd been so envious of Ben and Grace when she was younger because of their relationship with their father. She had cried large, silent tears when she'd found out that the boisterous, good-humored man had died so suddenly.

"I heard what happened, Ben. I'm so sorry," Rachel finally spoke, hoping her words of condolence didn't cause him any more pain.

He gave her a curt nod and fidgeted with the handle of his cup. She'd upset him, she thought with a cringe. Underneath the table, Guy gave her knee a small reassuring squeeze.

"Your father must have had a lot of faith in you to leave his company in your hands," Guy said.

Silently, he pushed his half-eaten slice of chocolate mousse pie toward Rachel and she, without hesitation, took a small forkful. It was a ritual between the two—they always split desert, saving each other from half the calories and fat they'd feel obligated to consume if they didn't share. She focused on the thick white plate in the hopes of avoiding Ben's hard gaze.

"Um, Guy, I hate to use a trite line, but don't I know you?" Ben asked casually.

"You might have seen my pictures." Guy smiled benignly and stirred his coffee. "I'm a photojournalist."

"Oh, don't be modest," Rachel scolded, pointing the fork in her friend's direction. "The fact is, Guy is an award winning photographer. His pictures have been all over magazines and newspapers. He photographs controversial people and situations."

Ben's brow wrinkled as she praised Guy's work. She remembered that look—it was irritation, but at what? She watched him study her friend, his eyes slanting slightly as he seemed to fall into some sort of deep concentration.

"You have a book out about the wild wolves of the world," he said, a tinge of addled recognition creeping into his voice. "My older sister, Grace, has a copy. She preordered it just before it came out last year. She'll be impressed that Rachel's new boyfriend is one of her favorite photographers."

Rachel felt the icy shock of his words to the tips of her toenails. Until that moment she'd held out hope that he'd summarily ignored her friend's wayward act.

"I loved doing that book, even if I had to sleep in the snow and the desert to get the shots." Guy shook his head and chuckled. "When I saw the pictures, I knew it was worth it."

The table settled into an uneasy silence again. Rachel squirmed in her chair. She'd

finished the dessert and now had nothing to keep her hands busy. As Ben stared between her and Guy, she felt a blush creeping up her neck and over her face, a sign of uncertainty he was sure to see. She wanted nothing more than to crawl under the table and disappear into the earth. But Guy wouldn't let her do that...he was far too sadistic. When her friend finally turned his dancing brown eyes her way, she sent him a look of warning. She only hoped he didn't say or do anything that would dig her in too deep. He merely sent her a tilted, impish smile and picked up his small cup of coffee. *Oh, no*, she thought desperately. *He's going to stoke the fires.*

"So, Ben, I was surprised to see you at the opera house tonight," he said nonchalantly. "Rachel didn't mention you were in town."

"She didn't know I was here." Ben shifted in his chair, his gaze intent as he stared at her friend. "I was reading the paper over breakfast this morning and saw an article about the performance tonight." His eyes swung her way, catching her off-guard. "Rachel, I have to admit I was stunned when I saw that you were going to be one of the stars of the show."

"Well, you know her. Once she sets her mind to something, she doesn't stop until she gets what she wants. And she wanted that role." Guy sent her a wink and an indulgent smile.

"She didn't bloody anyone's nose, did she?"

Rachel very nearly groaned out loud at Ben's amused question. She knew exactly what he was talking about, and she hated him for bringing it up. Beside her, Guy raised a curious eyebrow. "Bloody anyone's nose? Why am I suddenly thinking she's done that before?"

"Once, when she was around thirteen, her junior high school decided to put on a musical. Naturally, Rachel went out for the lead."

"Naturally," Guy agreed with a salute of his cup.

"Ben, really, I doubt Guy wants to hear..."

"Oh, but I do! I want to hear all about you before you were the great diva you are now." Guy's look was amused but earnest, and she came perilously close to sending her high heel into his foot. He turned back to Ben. "Please, go on."

"Well, the only problem was, the mayor's daughter decided she wanted to be the lead, too."

"Snotty girl couldn't stand to think someone else was better than her," Rachel muttered. Both men ignored her.

"Of course, the other girl got the role, even though her voice wasn't even half as good as Rachel's."

"That doesn't seem very fair." Guy's brow knitted as he took a sip of coffee.

"Fair didn't have anything to do with it," she put in quickly.

Ben nodded in agreement. "Politics was the bottom line, so the other girl got the lead, and Rachel was made her understudy. The day of the play, Rachel was helping with the props. The mayor's daughter decided she needed to rub her role in Rachel's face again, so she started following her around, talking about her costume and how her father was going to tape her performance and send it in to an agent. Rachel kept her cool though. She just bit her tongue and kept working."

"Such self-control at thirteen," Guy teased. Rachel lifted her cup to her lips and kept her snide comment to herself.

Ben continued. "So, when she saw that Rachel was ignoring her, the other girl started singing, which wasn't exactly the most wonderful thing to hear. Rachel turned around to leave. The problem was, she turned too fast. Her shirt caught the branch of a fake tree and pulled it off balance. The whole thing fell right on top of the mayor's daughter."

"Oh, no." Guy eased back in his chair as he turned his eyes her way. "I bet you didn't know whether to be horrified or thrilled."

Rachel felt her mouth reluctantly twitch as she remembered that long ago day. "Actually, I felt both."

Ben chuckled and tucked his napkin under his plate. "The other girl's nose was broken, and Rachel went on in her place. The play was a hit. Even the mayor had to admit it was better without his daughter in it."

Rachel felt her muscles relax fractionally as they all laughed, but only for a moment.

"Rachel, love, we should have Ben over for dinner," Guy said offhandedly. "Maybe I can make the clam sauce you like so much."

Her entire body tightened as she turned to scowl at him. How could he even think about inviting her ex over to their apartment? It was her sanctuary, her little corner of the world. Ben would be invading her space. And here Guy was, offering the beach up to the invaders without even token bullet fire. She took a quick second to imagine a few nefarious ways to off him and hide his body.

"Oh, I'm sure Ben is going to be much too busy for social visits. Working for Slater Enterprises takes up so much of his time."

"Actually, it would be nice catching up with you," Ben put in. "I mean, I have to eat sometime."

Rachel studied Ben's face, trying to read into his statement. As usual, his features were set in stoic lines. She definitely didn't relish the idea of having Ben in her home. Of course she missed being around him, missed his horrible jokes and his laughter, even his carefully placed barbs. She grieved for their lost friendship. But no matter how much she missed all of that, she just didn't know if she could risk the pain again. True, they'd been childhood friends well before they'd begun dating in college, but she didn't know if she could go back to that after being his lover. Before she could make a counterattack, her friend doused the fires of war.

"Good, then. Why don't you stop by on Sunday evening? That's Rachel's night off." Guy smiled warmly at Ben, as if he'd just made a new buddy.

Her friend wasn't a stupid man. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was pushing his own agenda, forcing her hand in a game she wasn't ready—or willing—to play. She wondered if a jury would convict her if she strangled Guy with her napkin.

She smacked the toe of her shoe against her companion's shin instead. He didn't even give her the satisfaction of a flinch, damn it. If they stayed here any longer, she was afraid he'd be asking Ben to spend a cozy weekend in Barbados with them. He was going to pay when they got home, she decided, seething. How, she wasn't sure, but she would come up with something excruciating in the car. Thinking quickly, Rachel gave a delicate yawn that she hid behind her hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but it's really late. Guy and I had better head home. I don't want to be tired during tomorrow's performance."

If Ben knew it was an obvious out, he didn't call her on it. Instead, he nodded his head and gave her a small smile. "Well, Rachel, it was wonderful seeing you onstage

tonight. Your performance was amazing. I guess that time with LaRussa paid off.”

“Oh, I think our beautiful star’s voice would have developed to its current remarkable level no matter where she had been. Even if she’d stayed in Breckenridge, I believe she would have become a full blown diva,” Guy said.

Rachel knew full well he was twisting the knife of what could have been in Ben’s gut. She wished she could have convinced her friend that it didn’t matter. That it never would.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Ben admitted.

Rachel watched while he carefully unfolded himself from his chair, his muscular build and height stealing her breath all over again. As he stood, he looked down at her and then Guy. With a quick flick of his wrist, he tossed money on the table for his part of the meal along with a small card.

“My hotel phone number,” he told them. “I’m in room four-two-three. Thanks for including me in your celebration, Rachel. Good luck tomorrow night.”

With that, he walked away from the table, weaving in and out of the small crowd before disappearing out the door. Silently, she cursed the feeling of deflation that seeped into her blood.

“Wow, he’s cute,” Guy commented. “So, is he as good in bed as he looks?”

Turning a narrowed gaze to him, Rachel pursed her lips and shook her head. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“You’ll thank me for it later.”

“Umm, well, just remember that you have to sleep sometime,” she muttered. “I can have my revenge and you won’t even see it coming.”

He gave her a wide, incredulous look before bursting into laughter. “Come on, love, I’ll take you home where you can give me a proper tongue lashing.”

“I thought I wasn’t your type,” she quipped, grasping Guy’s hand as he helped her up.

“Oh, she’s on a roll. How long until the steam runs out?”

“Another two hours at least.”

“Hum, then you’ll need to make coffee when we get home.”

Rachel gave him a swat on his arm as he led her out into the night, her sullen mood lifting. She had her friend to help her through this, and as soon as she proved to him that she could get over Ben, she was going to do a little tinkering of her own in Guy’s love life.

* * * *

Rachel stood under the hot spray of the shower and let her anger and frustration spiral down the drain along with the excess water. Sighing, she rolled her shoulders and talked herself out of screaming at the blue tiled wall. It had definitely been one hell of a night.

She’d thought she was going to be so happy, that tonight was going to actually give her the feeling of fulfillment that she’d been missing for so long. Instead, it had turned into some kind of strange operatic comedy. Her ex-boyfriend, who had been her first lover, first real best friend, first man to hold her heart and, fatefully, the first man to break it, had met her gay friend and roommate and assumed they were an item. And Guy had encouraged the misconception. She’d been chomping at the bit to demand what Guy

thought he was doing, but she had been so stubborn in her fury that she hadn't opened her mouth to ask for specifics.

Shaking her head, she dislodged the encounter from her mind. She didn't need to wrap herself in the memories his presence forced. She didn't want to remember the relief on Ben's handsome face when he'd found out she was leaving Breckenridge...or the way he'd confessed that he was too young to consider staying in a serious relationship with her.

Rachel closed her eyes and mentally pictured her worries falling away from the screens in her head, each anxiety tumbling away one by one to reveal a black background. Finally, her thoughts became blessedly empty, leaving her with exhausted limbs and a groggy head. Then, from out of nowhere, the memory of the shower in Ben's cozy house drifted into her mind's eye.

Beveled glass covered the front of the cubicle. It always fogged with steam, distorting any pattern that might have been behind the door. She knew that door well, too. She had braced herself against it more than a few times when she and Ben took showers together. Well, maybe 'shower' wasn't quite the word for what they had done there.

As she stood under the pulsating jet of the spray, Rachel allowed herself the pleasure of remembering Ben's hands on her body. The way he would whisper suggestively in her ear, telling her scandalous things, outrageous and possibly illegal in most states. His words sensitized her flesh with the images they created. He would run his large hands down her soapy back and over her rounded bottom, squeezing and kneading her soft flesh rhythmically, sending trembles of passion through her. He made her feel like a woman, a real woman, one that was desirable and insanely sexy.

His attention drove her crazy, making her wet and swollen, ready and needy for their joining, but Ben always prolonged it. He would pull her fully against him, pressing his arousal against her plump derriere and grinding slowly, driving her mad. His palms would ease around her ribcage, finding her hip-bones and holding her against his rigid cock.

She remembered letting her head fall back against his chest, stretching her body out so the spray pounded against her heated breasts, swollen slit and quivering thighs. He would encourage her, telling her how arousing she looked in her excitement, how he wanted to watch her face and body flush as she climaxed for him.

As her body writhed, his hands would skim over her wet skin, going up her back, then down her neck to her breasts where he scraped the hardened center buds with his knuckles. She would gasp in pleasure and he would hiss out his delight, then work her nipples again, this time pinching and pulling with a sweetly demanding pressure. When she cried out his name, he would let his hands move on, sliding over her stomach and down to the scorching folds of her inflamed sex. She would be ready for him, slick with desire when he probed her tender flesh and found the swollen point of her need.

As he pleased her with his fingers, flicking and plunging at a wild rate, he would tell her his deepest fantasies, sending her tumbling towards fulfillment. She would make mewing noises in the back of her throat, the timbre rising as her body climbed higher and higher, making the eventual plummet back to earth more shattering with each step up. When he finally begged her to let go she couldn't do anything but comply—the world would disappear from under her feet as she finally, gratefully, allowed her orgasm to overcome her.

Suddenly, she wasn't just finding release in her memories, but in the present as well. Dimly, she was aware of one hand cupping her sex, her fingers gently massaging her hardened core as her skin sizzled with heat. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip as her inner walls quaked and contracted, her release washing over her.

The icy fingers of harshly cold water coming from her shower yanked her cleanly from the soft afterglow of her climax. Her free hand slid over her midriff over and over again, trying to contain the raging need still pulsing through her blood. The orgasm was only a small release when what she truly craved was the expert hands and body of her ex-lover. It didn't take long for the frigid water to cool her increasingly out of control hormones, though.

With a blistering curse, she shut off the spray with a quick jerk. This was the second time that day that she'd fantasized about Ben Slater and what they used to do together.

It wasn't a good sign, she decided, taking her long hair in her hands and smoothing the water out. She had to get him out of her mind, had to create some kind of closure that wouldn't wound her even more.

Chapter Four

Rachel stood inside the little bakery, adjusting the strap of her peach tank top and staring at the different muffins through the counter glass. Truthfully, she wasn't that hungry, but this was a Saturday morning ritual that she and Guy had shared for as long as she'd lived with him. They'd get two cups of the Manos' Café's coffee, two blueberry muffins and one chocolate chip pastry to share, and they'd drive out for a picnic on the beach, barring inclement weather, of course. If it was nasty outside, then they would take their breakfast somewhere that had a beautiful view inside, usually a tourist trap. Today, though, was gorgeous, which explained why there were no parking spaces in front of the bakery. Poor Guy drove round and round in his sleek silver Jaguar, circling until she came out. Of course, she couldn't feel too sorry for him, not after what he'd done last night.

She wasn't as angry with him this morning as she probably should have been. After all, she loved her friend and she knew he was doing what he thought was best for her. He was forcing her to face her past and put a lock on it. And she would.

She would forget those talented hands that could drive her to fever pitch, she would banish all thoughts of his mouth and the way his hot breath had felt against her damp skin, she wouldn't think about the naughty things he'd whisper to her, propelling her deeper into the dark abyss of sexual stimulation even as he was...

No, damn it! This wasn't helping at all; it was making her crazier than ever. Shaking her head to clear it, Rachel turned her attention to the man behind the counter and smiled warmly.

"Ah, Miss Connelly. But where is Mr. Nomikus?" the burly proprietor asked.

"It's too crowded today, Dino. He's driving around until I pick up our order," she explained.

"Ahhh..." He held up his forefinger as he leaned behind the counter. A moment later he produced a small paper bag and a cardboard carrier containing two tall, insulated cups. "Your usual."

"Dino, you are my favorite person in the whole world." She slid her money across the counter and reached for the bag.

"You say that all the time, but still you go back to your Guy. When will you leave him for me, huh?" he teased.

"Two men fighting over me...what more could a girl ask for?" She gave him a grin and laughed warmly. "I'll see you next Saturday, Dino."

"It will be a pleasure," he replied, beaming as his favorite customer spun around.

Rachel turned, her good mood returned, and maneuvered her way around the small crowd toward the door. She was going to enjoy her morning, no matter how many times her traitorous mind turned to what Ben could, and had, done to her.

* * * *

Ben stalked down the street, determined to sweat out the reaction his body was having to the erotic images that had plagued him all night long. Rachel, it had all been

Rachel—again. Rachel in a tight white tank top, laughing as he dunked her in the pool; Rachel in her black bikini, sunbathing on the beach; Rachel in red satin underwear, adjusting her ample breasts in the cups of her bra; Rachel stripping for him, gyrating as she gave him a predatory smile that promised him a night of unimaginable passion.

He felt himself harden against his jeans and gritted his teeth in frustration. He'd been an idiot thinking he could be in her life as "just a friend." Sure, he'd done it before, but back then he hadn't had a taste of her or known how damn hot she would be when she was awakened sexually. And he hadn't known what it would be like to be the center of her heart. He hadn't experienced her loving attention, her single-minded way of caring and giving. But now he knew...and every time he thought of Guy, his gut wrenched, because the other man was now the one basking in her talent and her sweetness both in and out of bed.

Cursing under his breath, he turned the corner and forced himself to pay attention to the building numbers. The concierge had sworn that the Manos' Café had the best coffee in Athens, and Ben sure as hell needed his fix this morning.

After he had breakfast, he intended to call the Greek National Opera Company and leave a note for Rachel telling her that he would not be coming for dinner. He wasn't about to subject himself to seeing the woman he loved cozy and comfy in a love nest with another man. A man that, Ben admitted with a snort, he actually liked.

When he saw the picture window of the café he was looking for, he gave a sigh of relief and hurried to the door. He was a step away when it opened and someone nearly walked into him.

He gave a deep *umph* as a soft backside collided with his crotch. He didn't have to see her face to know who it was. He could tell by the sexy smell of her skin and the way his body came to full and painful alert.

He stepped back and watched as Rachel juggled the things in her hands. She turned slowly, an apologetic smile on her lips. He knew the moment she realized who she'd bumped into, and he could tell by her wide-eyed look that she was as surprised as he was.

He cleared his throat and crammed his hands into his jeans pockets, afraid he might touch her if he didn't. "What a coincidence. I had no idea you would be here."

She simply looked at him for a moment, her face slipping into an unreadable expression. Finally, she shifted her weight and spoke. "Ben, what are you doing here?"

"I was told that this was the best place for coffee in Athens. If you're here, then it has to be."

She gave him a wan smile as his gaze landed pointedly on the cups in her hand. Two cups, of course, one for her, and one for Guy...for her lover. The epithet echoed in his head like an acidic curse. Once upon a time it had been him sharing breakfast with a cheerful, humorous Rachel. At least, she was cheerful and humorous after her first cup of coffee.

Her voice broke cleanly into his thoughts. "Um, yeah, the Manos' are wonderful pastry chefs, and they certainly know their coffee beans. Oh, uh, there's Guy. I'd better..."

Ben nodded in understanding as her sentence trailed away. He slowly stepped to the side so she could walk around him. As she passed by, he took a deep breath, catching the scent that still haunted him at the oddest moments. She'd always smelled of vanilla and cinnamon, all warm and cozy and spicy. When she was aroused, the aroma became

thicker, headier, filling the air with the intoxicating fragrance. He closed his eyes for a split second, battling away the hot cloak of lust that threatened to envelop him.

"I'll see you Sunday," he said abruptly, startling himself.

He could have sworn he saw her physically start at his statement, but if he'd shocked her she recovered well.

"Oh, um, yeah, tomorrow night. Guy will call and leave the details for you," she replied, then rushed to the shiny Jaguar waiting for her.

He watched her slide into the expensive car and couldn't stop his gaze from skittering up the long leg revealed by her thin peach skirt. If he'd been a wiser man, he would have torn his eyes away. But he couldn't. Instead, his gaze locked on until she was tucked into her seat, the door to the sports car closed firmly behind her. Then Guy eased into the traffic, leaving Ben standing alone on the busy street corner.

Why the hell hadn't he canceled their plans for tomorrow night? Why hadn't he thought up some excuse? He was insane, that was it. He was crazy with a capital 'C'. Bold-faced, red letter, send-me-to-a-therapist crazy. He'd been lured by the idea that he could capture a few more moments with Rachel; that he could gather a few more memories to greedily stash away. She was like a drug that he couldn't seem to be able to say no to. Too bad there wasn't a twelve-step program for it.

* * * *

Rachel sat beside Guy on a small overhang with a view of the water, the morning breeze wafting the sound of laughing children and screaming gulls around them. The sun beamed down brilliantly on the coast, promising a warm, cloudless day. It was a shame that she couldn't enjoy it. She felt her friend's eyes on her and knew he was studying her as she stared out at the sea and tore apart her blueberry muffin.

"You know, Ben seems like a nice guy."

She tightened her jaw and kept mutilating her muffin.

"The sexual tension between you two is so thick that anyone could touch it and send it rippling," he continued softly. "As much as you deny it, you still want him. I wish that sexual compatibility promised a good, long relationship, but I know better than anyone that it doesn't."

She looked down at her feet, taking a deep breath to clear the tears that suddenly threatened. She hated when he was right, hated even more when he had a point.

"Rachel, do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what, Guy? The fact that you invited my ex-boyfriend to dinner tomorrow night when you know damn well that I'm still hurting because of him? Or the fact that you gave him the impression we're live-in lovers?"

She sat in silence and waited for an answer. She knew she'd backed him into a corner and he had very little choice but to give her answers or say nothing at all.

"Rachel, I didn't mean to hurt you," he said after a few moments. "you were in complete shock when you saw Ben again. I know that feeling, love, and I know it's not an easy emotion to deal with. You still love him, whether you want to admit it to me or not, and you'll never really be able to let go of it until you close that chapter in your life. How do you expect to move on when the baggage you're carrying has shown up at your doorstep?"

She nodded, knowing that he was right. Damn man and his easy way of seeing

straight through her.

“As for the other,” he continued, “I did it because I knew you’d want a modicum of protection. If Ben knew that I was gay and we were strictly friends, you would have nowhere to hide from him. But, with me as your pseudo-boyfriend, you can always fall back on our supposed relationship. I was simply giving you breathing room, Rachel. I just wanted you to have some closure with him, but still have some sort of protection. I’m sorry if you feel insulted by that.”

The way he explained himself made her feel like a heel. A very low heel. A heel that had been caked in mud and had a piece of chewed gum on the sole.

“No, no, I understand,” she said quietly, her cheeks heated with shame. “You have valid points, Guy, and even though I really hate to say it, you’re right. I have to prove to myself and to Ben that I can and do have a life.”

Guy reached across their blue blanket and tucked a piece of stray hair behind her ear. Smiling gently, he picked up a piece of her discarded muffin and pressed it carefully against her lips. A few beats later she opened her mouth and he popped it in.

“You have to keep your strength up, love, you have a performance tonight. It would be a huge scandal if you fainted on stage, even if I would get big bucks for those pictures.”

“Always looking out for me,” she retorted sarcastically, finally turning her eyes to him.

“Always.” He gave her a wide smirk and a wink.

Guy was always good with other people’s problems. He knew exactly how to take care of his friends and family. When it came to his own life, though, he sucked. He was as blind and lost as the rest of them. Which was why, she supposed, it fell to her as his best friend to do a little meddling of her own. She took a breath and prepared to launch.

“And as your friend, it’s my job to look out for you, too.”

He eyed her dubiously and took a sip of his coffee, looking just worried enough to make her want to laugh. “What is it you’re trying not to say?”

“Patrick...”

“Oh, no, uh-uh,” Guy interrupted, ripping his gaze from hers. “We’re not talking about him right now.”

“So, my love life is open for dissection, but yours isn’t?”

“Exactly.”

“Wimp.”

“Smartass.”

“Patrick loves you,” she continued gently. “I can see it in his eyes every time he looks at you, and I know you care about him, too. So why are you doing this to him—and to yourself?”

“It isn’t that simple, Rachel.” Guy took a deep breath as he hung one arm over a bent knee. “We had that one night, and then...nothing. Patrick didn’t want to talk about it; he didn’t want to mention it. I’ve been through this before, and I won’t do it again. I won’t play anyone’s behind the scenes interest. It hurts too much.”

“But if you open up to Patrick, I’m sure he’s more than ready to talk about what happened...”

“Look, I appreciate that you’re trying to help me, love, but the fact is my situation is different than yours. It’s more complicated, even though I wish it wasn’t.” Taking

another long breath, he turned his attention back to her as his lips made a faltering attempt at a smile. “Besides, your circumstances are way more interesting than mine.”

“Interesting, yeah.” She decided to drop the subject for the time being. “Thanks to you, it’s a regular soap opera.”

“But an Emmy nominated one, Rachel—your little web is strictly first class.”

She watched him a moment, her lips tilting at the corners just before a laugh escaped. Shaking her head, she tossed a wadded up napkin at him and he playfully dodged it. Rachel felt the tension slowly roll from her shoulders as he tossed it back. She would deal with Ben and her lingering feelings for him later, when she wasn’t so high-strung. And, for today at least, she wouldn’t bring the subject of Patrick up again. Right now, they both needed to enjoy their day together. They definitely deserved at least that much.

“Okay, fine, so I’ll be great entertainment tomorrow night.” She pointed at him. “But I swear if you start snapping pictures, I’m taking your ass down.”

“Please, you’re not as photogenic as you think,” he teased back, chuckling when she let out a mockingly indignant gasp. “Now, eat up. I have to get you home before you burn. I don’t think the company wants a red tomato performing onstage.”

Chapter Five

Rachel stared at her reflection in the cheval mirror and tried to decide whether to change—again. Maybe her strapless turquoise sundress was too much—after all, she desperately wanted this dinner to seem casual. Reaching for a button at the top of the bodice, she began to undress, her mind on the pair of paint-spattered jeans hanging in the back of her closet.

“Hubba, hubba,” Guy commented from the doorway. “You look great.”

Rachel caught his gaze in the mirror and let out a pent up breath. “I don’t know about this,” she muttered, letting her hands fall to her sides. “Ben coming over here could be a huge mistake.”

“What, you don’t want to prove to him that you’ve been fine without him? Are you willing to admit defeat to the man who hurt you so badly? Look, Rachel, we can always call this off. After all, it was my idea, not yours. If you’re really not comfortable being around him...”

“Are you trying to taunt me into this?” She spun around to assess him with narrowed eyes.

“Who, me? Never.”

He plopped down on her bed and patted the mattress with his hand. Rachel walked across the room, eased down beside him and rested her head on his shoulder.

She took in a slow breath before she spoke. “You know I love you, right? You’re the best friend I’ve had in, well, in years, and I know you only want me to be the best person I can be. I guess I’m just afraid of...”

She stumbled for the right words but couldn’t find them. She was grateful when Guy picked up the sentence and finished her thought. “You’re afraid that you’ll figure out you can’t let go of how you feel, but that he already has. Being in love sucks, doesn’t it?”

Rachel laughed softly. “Yeah, it does. Why are both of us so unlucky?”

“Because we’re fools, love, complete and utter fools, and because Ben and Patrick have some kind of weird mutated powers and have psychically mesmerized us into loving them, no matter what.”

She swatted him playfully and stood, looking down at him sympathetically. Even though Guy had tried a teasing tone, she knew exactly what he was feeling. She could see the sadness lingering in his warm brown eyes; the same sadness she knew was mimicked in her own.

“We’re quite a pair, huh? They’ve already put our pictures beside the word ‘pathetic’ in the dictionary.” She smoothed her dress then reached out to him with wiggling fingers, asking him for his hand. “Now, come on, Ben will be here soon. Hey, who knows, if this goes well, maybe I’ll invite Patrick over next week for dinner.”

He lifted an eyebrow in warning as he rose and gave her loose hair a tug. “Do it and I’m calling your mother to tell her that Ben is back in your life.”

“Oh, no, anything but that! She’ll be renting the wedding hall and ordering invitations before you even hang up,” Rachel groaned.

The buzzer on the stove sounded, calling them both into the kitchen.

* * * *

Rachel was busying herself in the kitchen when the low bing-bong of the doorbell sounded. Behind her, Guy gave her waist a squeeze of reassurance.

"It'll be fine, love, you'll see."

She was thrilled her friend had so much confidence, because she certainly didn't. At this point, all she wanted was to make it through the evening without looking like a fool...or pooling like a load of warm blubber at Ben Slater's feet. She turned to the refrigerator and dug through containers of fresh vegetables, searching for what, she didn't know. But at least she wouldn't be staring into the living room when her ex walked in.

"Ben, you're right on time." Guy's cheerful voice filled the air.

She wished she had the willpower to keep her head buried, but she didn't. She looked up slowly and saw Ben walk through the marble-floored foyer, his eyes scanning the apartment in that thorough way he had. She knew what he was seeing: an expensively appointed flat and casually elegant furnishings, a large living area, French doors open to the breeze, the gauzy curtains dancing aimlessly. His gaze skimmed across the stone fireplace, past the open balcony doors, and landed squarely on her. She was held in place like a deer in headlights—the quick slam of awareness reminded her of being hit by a semi. There was a breathless moment before he moved on, taking in the tiled kitchen and expensive cooking equipment. She didn't breathe until his gaze wandered to the hallway beside the kitchen.

"Come on in," Guy invited, breaking into the tense silence. "Would you like the grand tour?"

"Uh, no." The words were clipped, even a bit terse to her ears.

"Oh, you brought wine, wonderful. Rachel, love, why don't you show your friend to the balcony while I bring our dinner out?"

She'd hoped to hide in the kitchen until dinner, then eat with as much haste as possible so that she could excuse herself to do the dishes. She knew it was cowardly, but frankly at this point she didn't care. Guy, though, had called her bluff. She could have happily pulled her friend's hair out with a few harsh jerks. Plastering a smile she didn't feel on her face, she slid off her white apron and came around the counter.

"Hello, Ben," she said, amazed her voice was even. "I'm glad you could come. We thought that since it was such a nice night, we'd eat outside."

She felt him staring at her and hoped that he didn't see the nerves underneath the sheen of forced ease. He handed the wine to Guy, then she led him out through the glass doors, the whole time calling herself a world-class fool. Her stomach danced with nervous tap shoes, leaving her afraid to be alone with him. God only knew what she might say or do. She definitely didn't relish the idea of looking like a fool in front of her ex.

She'd been through this before, of course, when she'd had a mad crush on him in high school. But fighting desire after the fact, now that they were older, was very different. Being his friend hadn't been hard when she was dealing with teenage relationships, but having a platonic connection to him now would be hell. Maybe she could talk herself out of her need to be with him, maybe she could convince herself to leave him alone after tonight. Maybe she could have this one meal with him and let go of the unnerving emotions the thought of him still evoked. Maybe she could convince herself that she was fine without him in her life...and maybe the little green men who

lived on the moon of cheese would come down and proclaim her their queen. Ben had his hooks in her and she'd never gotten herself loose.

"Rachel! Rachel!" a child's voice called from below.

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she watched a thin, seven year old boy scamper into the lush courtyard. Leaning over the waist-high stone wall, she smiled down at the garden two floors below.

"Pietro! What are you doing still playing? You should be having dinner!" she called back.

"Mama's having her baby!" the boy cried happily. "I'll be a big brother soon!"

"Oh, oh! That's terrific! You let us know when your sister is here and then Guy and I will come visit her in the hospital!" she yelled back.

"Who was that?" Guy asked as he came out with a large glass bowl of green salad in his hand.

"Pietro. His mother's having the baby!"

"Hey, that's wonderful news. Her favorite flowers are tulips, right? We'll have to go visit once the baby is born."

"I was just telling him that." She laughed, relieved that he'd come out to the terrace so quickly.

Rachel turned to see Ben watching them, taking in what must look like a very domestic scene. It probably appeared all sweet and cozy and perfectly normal for a happy couple. So why had she thought she'd seen a flash of something dark behind his placid green eyes? Curiosity, she decided. He must be wondering about what kind of man she would have found a relationship with when he hadn't wanted one with her himself.

"Well, Ben, I was able to talk Rachel into making her world famous Italian salad for us," Guy was saying as he placed the bowl in the middle of the table. "Have you ever had it?"

"Um, no, actually the only thing she used to be able to make was popcorn and hot chocolate." His gaze cut to her and then away.

"Really? Huh, that surprises me. She's always puttering around the kitchen, coming up with different concoctions and using me as a guinea pig," Guy joked.

Rachel felt the strain rolling off of Ben's body, the waves of his animosity striking her like emotional fists. It confused her that he would be upset like this. Or maybe it shouldn't, she decided. Maybe he simply didn't want to be here with them, maybe he didn't want to be saddled playing 'gracious guest' to the woman he'd dumped two years before.

"Why don't we sit down and eat," she said softly, determined to break the friction in the air.

Rachel was just dishing out the salad when the phone rang. She looked at Guy curiously, but he shook his head. Their unspoken conversation was a luxury she was grateful for. At the moment she wasn't sure if she could come up with the correct words to form a question.

The answering machine picked up, the volume loud enough for the trio to hear the recorded voice of Guy followed by the sound of a harried female.

"Guy? Guy Nomikus, are you there? Come on, I know you are, pick up," the woman pleaded.

Sighing in resignation, Guy tossed his white cloth napkin on his plate and stood.

“Please excuse me. That’s the editor of one of the papers I do freelance work for.”

Rachel kept a tight rein on the panic riding up her spine as Guy disappeared into the apartment. She hadn’t counted on being alone with Ben for more than a few moments, but here she was, sitting across from him with no one to buffer the conversation. And if the woman on the other line was as desperate as she sounded, Guy would either be on the phone quite a while, or he would be sent out that night. Swallowing her anxiety, she realized she had to do something, and fast, before Ben asked too many questions or figured out that she still fantasized about him.

She took a slow sip of wine. “So, Ben, how are your meetings with Le Dolce going?”

“The negotiations are slow, but I think we’re making headway.” His gaze slid across her face before darting down to his salad.

“How—how is Grace?”

He didn’t seem to hear her, instead glaring down at the plate in front of him as if it were a mortal enemy. She cocked her head, waited a beat, then cleared her throat.

“Ben?”

He jerked his head up, his eyes hot for a moment. He took a long swallow of wine, his gaze cooling as he stared at her.

“Sorry, I guess my mind wandered to business,” he finally replied. “Did you ask me something?”

“I asked about Grace. I wanted to know what she’s been up to,” Rachel repeated.

“You’d know if you’d ever bother to call or write.”

“You’re right,” she admitted slowly, “and I actually did call her a few times. She just never called me back. I guess I figured...I don’t know, I guess I assumed that she had gotten on with her life, and I wasn’t included in it.”

Ben flinched slightly and she knew he felt contrite about his biting remark. Of course he would understand why she would assume she was forgotten so quickly—after all, wasn’t he the one she’d confessed her fears of abandonment to? She’d been overlooked numerous times in her childhood while her parents had strove for their careers, leaving her with a babysitter or at a friend’s house. Her father had missed her plays and music recitals and, even though her mother had always found a way to carve out the time to be there, there was still an empty spot where her father’s rejection lived. As a child and teenager, she’d been an unseen shadow, hiding behind a quiet shield of desperation and stillness. Yes, it was true she had matured and grown up, but no matter how often she was told she was loved and wanted, there would always be that insecure voice in the back of her head telling her it was all a lie.

“You’re going to kill me,” Guy said as he strode back through the doors.

“Oh, no, don’t tell me.” Rachel sighed, knowing that her worst fears were about to be realized.

“I’m so sorry, love, but there’s been a bomb threat at the courthouse. Word is they’ve found something.”

“I know you have to go. It’s okay, really.” She sent him a slightly wavering smile.

“I’ll wrap up a plate for you and leave it in the fridge.”

“You are the most understanding woman.” Guy leaned down and gave her a quick kiss on the lips before turning to an obviously uncomfortable Ben.

“I apologize for leaving like this, but duty calls. You stay, enjoy dinner.” He turned to Rachel again as he continued, “The manicotti is in the oven, love, and the cream sauce

is simmering on the stove. I'm not sure when I'll be back..."

"Go, go, go," she shooed, waving her hands. "We'll be fine. Be careful, okay? I know what a daredevil you can be."

"I will be, I promise. Ben, have a good night," he called over his shoulder as he rushed back inside.

A few moments later they heard the front door slam shut.

Chapter Six

Ben and Rachel stared at each other for an endless moment, then turned to their salads at the same time.

Rachel poked at her lettuce with her fork, absently spearing red onions and croutons then letting them fall off the prongs. She could feel his eyes straying back and forth, first to her, and then to something over her shoulder. *This is ridiculous*, she thought with an inward sigh. They had been best friends at one point in their lives. It made her sad to think it had come to this.

“So, Rachel, what, uh, what brought you to Greece?”

The sudden question startled her, making her jump in her seat. Taking a calming breath, she assumed the same relaxed attitude he had.

“I was touring with Giana LaRussa when we stopped here. I loved it, even though I didn’t really have a chance to see much of Athens. Anyway, after I’d toured with her troupe for about a year, I got tired of traveling. I wanted to stay in one place for more than a week or two at a time, I wanted a...a home. I remembered Greece and applied to their company here in Athens. I must have made a good impression because they remembered me from my performance and they offered me a position. I’ve been mainly in the chorus and a few small supporting roles—not that I minded, really. Friday was my first performance in a leading role.”

Ben nodded, his gaze intent. “I really like Guy. He seems like a great person. How exactly did you meet him?”

Rachel took a sip of wine, soothing her dry throat before she began. “Well, I was accepted quicker than I’d expected into the Greek National Opera Company—I hadn’t even found a place to live. I didn’t have enough money to stay in a decent hotel while I waited to find a nice apartment or house, so I asked some of the people I was working with if they needed a roommate. The director knew a friend who had a friend, who turned out to be Guy, that needed someone to move in right away and apartment sit. He was off on assignment at the time. I talked to him on the phone, he agreed to put me on the lease because he liked the sound of my voice, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Of course that history didn’t include a mutual attraction, or the friendship set on fire that she and Ben once had. She had no right to think about Ben this way, but she couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t block the memories constantly assaulting her—the erotic images of them wrapped together, touching, tasting, and experimenting with each other. His sweet smile of contentment, the intense way he’d treasure her, the way he would revel in her seductions when she would wrest control from him.

Pulling her mind back to the present, Rachel watched Ben glare angrily at his blue bowl again, as if attempting to melt the stoneware with his eyes. Trying to relieve some of the tension, she decided to ask a few questions of her own. If she had eased his curiosity, the least he could do was appease hers.

“And how about you, Ben? I heard you’d moved in with your father and let Grace have the family farm not long after I left. Are you still staying on the estate?”

Ben gave her a startled look, as if he hadn’t expected her to ask him about that. But then, why wouldn’t she? It was a fairly mundane topic...at least she thought it was.

“Yes and no. The main house was just too big for one person, so I moved into one of the smaller guest houses. I can’t decide whether I want to sell it or not—after all, it *is* part of the family’s inheritance. Mom is very adamant about keeping it for ‘future generations.’”

She couldn’t help but smile when he said that. She knew the kind of woman Helen Slater was. She was grounded in her family and determined for her children to have the happy marriages and fulfilling lives she’d never had. It was really quite strange for the content divorcee to be so single-minded about her offspring marrying, especially after her own disastrous experience.

“But you and Grace are running Slater Enterprises together, right? I’d read in the paper that the company had been left to both of you, a fifty-fifty split.”

“Yeah, we’re both in charge and we actually agree on most things, if you can believe it,” he replied with a lopsided grin. A sexy grin, really. Much too sexy.

“You two never did see eye-to-eye on most business dealings,” she said softly, letting her mind drift back to when she had played the buffer between Ben and his sister.

“Well, my life has been boring compared to yours,” he said as he sat back.

“Traveling with Giana LaRussa must have been exciting. Tell me, is it true what they say about her temper?”

“Worse.” She swirled the red wine in her glass, smiling as she thought about her time with the statuesque redhead. “You could almost set your watch to her fits. She went through three personal assistants in the year I was with her. The last one we picked up in Edinburgh was still with the troupe when I left. Madame LaRussa hired her while we were putting on *Faust*.”

“The one about the infamous pact with the devil,” Ben put in.

“The poor assistant thought *she* was the one who’d signed her soul away.” Rachel’s mind drifted to the chaos that the burdened blonde had to put up with during their travels and let out a low chuckle. “On the second night of her employment, Giana called her up and told her to go into town to find a bottle of Cognac, a cat of nine tails and vanilla scented candles. Don’t ask,” she said when she saw his confused look. “It wasn’t bad enough that she had to find all of that, but it was also three in the morning. After that night, her cell always said ‘Hell Calling’ whenever Madame LaRussa phoned.”

Ben let out a loud, appreciative laugh. “How did you manage to survive?”

“Oh, I found out that year that I could survive more than I’d ever imagined.” Her heart contracted when she realized what she’d said. But she wasn’t going to take it back, not when what she’d told him was the unvarnished truth.

She waited for him to reply, but he didn’t. Instead, his eyes clouded with thoughts she couldn’t decipher and his body tensed again. Realizing the conversation had suddenly run into a brick wall, Rachel chose that moment to clear the table.

“I’ll just go get the manicotti,” she muttered, stacking their bowls in one hand and carrying the salad in the other.

Rachel didn’t want to think about that time again. She didn’t want to consider the future she and Ben might have had if he’d felt differently. No, she was living happily in Greece, pursuing her career, enjoying her friends and her life. So what if she didn’t exactly have a love life to speak of? For now she was content with what she had. She was. Really, she was.

She hurried off the balcony, carefully balancing the dishes as she made her way into

the kitchen. After putting her load into the sink, she reached into the oven and pulled out the pasta, placing it on a trivet on the counter. Sighing to herself, she stared down at the casserole dish and tried to gather her strength. It was going to be a long dinner, but they could carry on a civil conversation. At least, she hoped they could keep up the congenial façade for another hour or so. If not, she supposed her neighbors would get quite a show of broken dinnerware and raised voices.

Clearing her head, she looked around the counter for the multi-colored serving dish she intended to spoon the manicotti onto, but couldn't find it. *Great*, she thought, *just great*. Guy had forgotten to get it down before he left. Reaching over to the utensil jar, she pulled out a long pair of tongs.

Balancing on her toes, she stretched up, opened the cabinet door, and raised her arms over her head. She spotted the edge of the platter and tried to grasp the lip of the dish with the tongs. When the metal clanked against ceramic, she gave a soft exclamation of triumph and began to pull, waiting for it to fall into her palm. She didn't see the gravy boat perched on top of the platter until it was too late. Her eyes involuntarily slammed shut as the smaller dish hurtled towards her. But instead of a blinding knock on the head, she felt a warm body press against her back and heard the distinct thunk of a stoneware container hitting a hand. She also heard a sigh of relief as Ben set the gravy boat on the counter.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a gruff voice, his body flush against hers. "I nearly didn't...if I hadn't caught that, we would have been making a trip to the hospital for stitches."

"I...I didn't know..." she stammered, her heart racing from the near disaster.

She felt him take a deep breath, knew he was trying to bring himself back under control. He stayed behind her for several seconds, the quick rise and fall of his chest a stilted staccato against her shoulder blades. His next rasping words sent her pulse skyrocketing.

"Oh, God, Rachel, you feel so good."

Rachel opened her eyes, her body humming with sexual recognition as her back molded itself to Ben's front. Her limbs weakened. Her blood boiled with a need that hadn't been satisfied since she'd left him in Breckenridge.

He inhaled and let out a deep, barely audible moan. She felt him harden to marble against her, his rigid length mind-numbingly erotic as it pushed against the plump flesh of her bottom. His arms rested on the counter, encircling her without touching her, his muscles visibly contracting as he surrounded her. He leaned down, gently nuzzling her ear, sending waves of searing electricity through her limbs.

"Rachel," he breathed. "Oh, God, Rachel."

"Be...Ben," she sighed, and let her head fall back onto his shoulder.

"I have to...oh, God, I have to touch you."

When she didn't protest, he lifted one hand to rest on her waist and the other to her face. Tenderly, he traced her features, slowly working his way to her throat. He ran his fingertips down the column of her neck, causing her nerves to coil as the air thickened around them.

Rachel felt herself fall into the velvety cavern of sensuality that only Ben could create. She'd thought she'd known the depth of her need, but now she realized it was deeper than she could have possibly measured. She didn't want to think anymore, didn't

want to decipher her swirling emotions. She only wanted this moment...for as long as she could have it.

She was floating in a sexual haze when his hand cupped her breast, kneading it with barely restrained fervor. Her throat constricted and heat, white hot and lightning fast, shot through her veins straight to the juncture of her thighs. Moisture gathered in her silky panties, the slick essence coating her quickly swelling folds. He moaned hoarsely, the sound skittering up her spine, adding another notch to her need for him.

Ben lowered his head and trailed his lips along her throat as he moved the hand that rested on her waist slowly down her thigh. She tilted her head so he would have more flesh to touch and taste, her heartbeat tripling as his erection expanded against her.

"Oh, Ben," she gasped, grinding her bottom against his arousal.

"Yes." He spun her in his arms.

They stared into each other's eyes for a split second, then their mouths met and fused. Their tongues tangled in a sensual battle, stroking and curling. Though it had been years since they'd touched, Rachel's body remembered the pleasure he could bring to her and tingled in anticipation.

Rachel felt herself being swung around as they attacked each other. Her hands scraped down his broad chest, clawing at his shirt until she reached the waistband of his worn jeans. She yanked his t-shirt out of his pants and worked it frantically over his abs. He reached between them and grasped the thin cotton material, thrilling her as his knuckles brushed across her hardened nipples. He pulled away from her only long enough to toss his shirt aside. Then they were linked again, nipping and gnawing at each other's lips and tongues.

She couldn't think straight—hell, she couldn't think at all. His fingers dug into the pliant skin of her butt, pulling her as close to him as she could get. She desperately wanted him to touch her, feel her, quiver in her arms as he exploded with his orgasm. The thought speared her loins and her movements became even more frenzied.

His hands squeezed her bottom in a soft rhythm, driving her mad. He lifted her against his erection, sliding her up against the thick edge of his cock. She writhed restlessly and purred deep in her throat, letting him know that he had found another pleasure spot on her body. With a heavy growl, he picked her up, holding her as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Spinning them around, he braced her back against the cool wall.

"Ben...Ben...Ben..." she breathed between short, deep kisses.

She was melting, pooling inside as she felt his heavy arousal press against the damp barrier of her underwear. She wriggled against his crotch, pushing herself against him in a vain attempt to calm the throbbing between her legs.

He let out a husky snarl of approval as he continued to devour her mouth, her jaw line, her naked shoulder. She needed him to touch her bare skin, had to feel him against her without any obstructions. His fingers began to work the clear buttons loose from the front of her dress and she moaned in mortal need.

Mentally she begged him to hurry, desperate to have his hands on her. When her breasts were finally uncovered, she arched her back, silently pleading for his touch. He obliged, cupping the soft globes and the strapless satin bra that covered them in his palms.

"You're magnificent, Rachel," he whispered just before his mouth descended to her

smooth flesh.

She hissed in delight as he nipped and laved across her throat. When his lips touched the delicate skin of her breast, she let her head fall back. Her hands reached up to curl in his unruly burnished hair, holding him close as his mouth latched onto one of her erect nipples, pulling at the sensitive nub through the thin material of her bra. She thrashed against him, pushing against his hard shaft, gasping when he grazed her with his teeth.

The sound of the platter crashing to the floor shattered her sensual fog. They pulled apart, their breathing ragged as they stared, shocked and shaken, at each other. Ben was the first to speak.

“Rachel, I...oh, hell, I’m sorry,” he apologized in a raw voice.

“No, no, I...I don’t know what happened...” Rachel said unsteadily.

Ben took a half-step back, letting her slide from his body. He bent down, sweeping up his shirt in one graceful move before he turned away from her. What was he thinking? What had *she* been thinking? What had she just done? She’d thought she had more control over her base instincts than this. She had thought she was old enough to keep herself in check. But she should have known better. Where Ben was concerned, she’d always had tangled feelings, both physical and emotional.

But he’d responded to their lovemaking, she knew she hadn’t been fantasizing about that. He’d touched her, stroked her, and his swift and decidedly hard response told her that he’d enjoyed it. So, why had he stopped? And why was he getting dressed? She pushed away from the wall, buttoned her dress, and watched, her breathing hitched and sporadic, as he jerked his t-shirt over his head. He turned to spear her with his eyes, his jaw tight and his gaze harsh.

“I was out of line. I just...” His voice trailed away as he shoved a hand through his mussed hair.

“Please, Ben, don’t...”

“Don’t what?” he snapped, his voice coated with anger. “Don’t say I’m sorry for intruding on another man’s territory? Don’t apologize for taking advantage of you after I made you remember our past? Or don’t tell Guy what just happened?”

She stared at him, shocked at his outburst. She couldn’t figure out why he seemed so furious, or why his temper was so hot. But her body still buzzed with the feelings he’d stirred and she couldn’t quite grasp her own muddled thoughts. It didn’t help when he stood so close to her, his face taut and flushed with desire and his hands fisting and opening at his sides. He spun away, leaving her staring at his broad back.

Stunned and unbearably hurt, Rachel reached for him, but he was too fast and her hand only touched air. She listened with a sinking heart as the door to her apartment slammed shut for the second time that night.

“...don’t go,” she whispered, finally finishing her sentence.

Sinking to the kitchen floor, she let the tears fall.

Chapter Seven

Guy sat at the dining table and sipped his coffee, staring into space.

He'd come home to find Rachel slumped on the kitchen floor, crying pitifully. The manicotti was still sitting on the counter, ice cold, and the cream sauce on top of the stove was scorched and stuck to the bottom of the pot. She had to have been sitting there for hours.

He'd carried her out of the kitchen and into the living room, cuddling her on his lap while her body shook with silent sobs. Finally, after several minutes of his soft assurances and promises of understanding, she calmed down enough to tell him what had happened. Once he heard the whole story, he hated himself for misleading Ben and letting the charade about his and Rachel's relationship go as far as it had. What should have been moments of finding each other again had become something twisted and wrong. He tried to tell her that it was time to come clean to the man she still loved, that she was hurting herself now more than she was helping herself. But she hadn't listened.

Instead, her face had suddenly cleared, the bitter sadness gone and replaced by a cool demeanor. She told him she'd come up with a plan, then she explained exactly what she was going to do. He was flabbergasted.

He tried to talk her out of it; he tried to convince her that she was only doing this out of desperation. But she hadn't listened to him. No, stubborn, strong, had to have her way. Rachel went to her room, came out a few moments later in a long black trench coat, and disappeared out the door.

She was going to break her own heart, he thought, then took a gulp of coffee. He only hoped she and Ben could survive the aftermath.

* * * *

Rachel slipped into the darkened hotel room, closing the door silently behind her as her eyes adjusted to the blackness.

Maybe Guy had been right, she thought on a sudden wave of indecision. Maybe this wasn't a good idea. After all, she had made her decision in sexually and emotionally charged haste, her heart determined to have more of a taste of the man she'd never stopped loving. Who was to say that her ex would even agree to her suggestion? She could turn around and go home, talk this out some more with Guy, maybe even gather enough strength to simply avoid the man that still held the most vital part of her heart. Ben didn't know she was here yet. She could leave just as easily as she'd come and he wouldn't even know she'd been here. The sleepy receptionist at the front desk probably wouldn't bat an eye if she returned the key with the excuse that her 'husband' had found the missing one.

As she pondered what she should do, she heard him moan in his sleep, the rustling of the crisp sheets as loud as a scream in the quiet room. Intrigued despite her misgivings, she moved to stand beside the bed, her eyes fixed to the figure on the mattress. He moaned again, a heated, desperate sound that shot through her like a hot bolt. She watched, mesmerized, as he flipped over to his back. The cover caught under his hip,

anchoring it so that his broad chest was exposed. He was sweating, she realized, her mouth going dry as the moonlight spilled over him.

“Rachel,” he whispered on a ragged breath.

Her eyebrows shot up when her name came out of his mouth. She couldn’t stop the slow descent of her gaze as it took in his muscled torso and finally came to rest on the large tent that had formed over his crotch.

She hadn’t been wrong, her plan would work; it had to. She would do this, and then she would finally have her closure with Ben while her pride was still intact. Taking a deep breath, she let her doubts fall away to pool on the soft carpet. She stripped out of her coat quietly, barely feeling the cool material as it scraped over her sensitive skin and dropped in a heap to the floor. She stood, nude and vulnerable, staring at him.

“Ben,” she called softly, seductively, and waited.

His eyes opened gradually, the depths still fogged with sleep. When he saw her, he absently reached out for her.

“Rachel?”

She smiled slowly, her lips turning into a Cheshire cat grin as she held his sleepy gaze.

“It’s me, Ben, I’m here.”

“A...a dream...touching me...your taste...” His head lolled to the side, his gaze glazed. “You’re so beautiful, so...oh, I want you, Rachel.”

She slipped under the sheets, absorbing his body heat, and rolled to her side, propping herself on her elbow as she stared down at him. The look of desire etched so plainly on his features set her resolve. Reaching out, she began to trace the contours of his face, gently scraping one manicured nail over his skin. She saw his eyes flame with passion and knew she had him exactly where she wanted him.

Her body felt like it was on a funeral pyre, the fire licking and burning her soul as it began to consume her. He was here, naked underneath the sheets, his body open to her as his eyes begged silently for her touch. She leaned down slowly, her fingers still cradling his face, and she heard him draw in a quick breath of air. When their lips made contact, her world imploded and all she had to hold onto was the man she loved.

Rachel melted into his mouth, warring with his tongue as she purred in pleasure. Their lips fused, molded, let go, then came back again. She felt her body turn into liquid mercury, flowing into him as she lowered herself over him. They gasped at the same time, the sound caught in their kiss.

“Rachel, ahhh, Rachel,” he whispered.

This was exactly where she’d longed to be—in the position of control. She released his mouth and nibbled her way down his strong jaw then over the cords of his throat. She felt a surge of lust and power roll over her as his body arched up involuntarily, his breath hitching as she sucked and gnawed on his skin. His rock solid erection nudged at her warm curls, the tip of his shaft sliding against her erotically, drawing a jagged moan from her throat.

She slid down his torso, licking the sweat from his overheated skin as she went. His head began to thrash with slow, almost drunken moves, and her muscles quivered at the heady power of sexual control. She flicked her tongue over his nipple and smiled in satisfaction when he drew in a breath and threaded his fingers through her hair. It had always been this way, from the first to time to their last. She loved giving him pleasure.

In fact, it made her hot and needy in a way that she couldn't explain. She moved across his body and took his other nipple into her mouth, gently rolling it between her teeth.

His rigid erection pressed urgently against her stomach, its length tantalizing her as she wiggled on top of him. Oh God, he was a glorious specimen of a man. He seemed to be perfectly willing to let her torture him in any way she saw fit, his restless growls the only things telling her he was fighting for control. The moment she began to kiss down his abdomen, though, he took advantage of the hold he had on her hair and pulled her back up to his lips. He kissed her nearly mindless before drawing back.

"Rachel, as much as I love your mouth on me, if you do that right now I won't be able to keep myself from coming." He held her gaze with his intense green eyes, his face set in harsh lines. "And I don't want to rush this, not when your body is telling me you need me as much as I need you."

He captured her mouth again, practically devouring her as he flipped her over in one quick, fluid movement, and pulled her snugly under his slick body. He broke their kiss for a fraction of a second, easing away a few precious inches as he studied her face with hot eyes.

"You've always been beautiful, Rachel, but you've always been the most breathtaking when you're underneath me," he rasped. "I want you, Rachel, I want you right now."

"Yes, Ben, yes," she chanted, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Please, please...I want you, too."

He groaned at her confession, and she felt his heartbeat quickening against her breasts. Rachel rolled her head to the side as Ben's mouth descended to her throat, sucking and nipping on her tender flesh. The deep demand of his kisses raised her passion, bringing it to the surface of her skin with sure and steady speed. His cock pressed against her, the hot skin pushing against the fold of her thigh as she rocked against it. She'd wanted him desperately before, but what he was doing to her now made her think she might not be able to breathe for much longer.

He nuzzled and licked his way to the hollow of her throat, his teeth scraping her tender flesh as the musky scent of sex began to envelop the room. She growled in pleasure and he returned the sound, his mouth sliding down the deep hollow of her cleavage, then across the creamy skin of her breast. With a male grunt of satisfaction, he sucked one hard, peaked nipple between his lips.

Electricity shook her limbs and shot into her swollen folds, pulsing straight into her thrumming clit. He rolled her nipple against his teeth as she whimpered, her fingers brutally digging into his hair. When he let go, she felt his absence acutely; but she wasn't lonely for long. A few seconds later, his mouth covered her skin again, laving and nibbling her sensitive stomach as he continued his descent. She knew where he was heading, but she still wasn't prepared for the feel of his mouth as he captured her engorged lips.

"Oh, oh my God!" she gasped, burying her fingernails in his shoulders.

He stroked her with his tongue, delving into her with expert speed, sending scorching waves of ecstasy through her veins as he lapped and flicked. She felt herself quake around his tongue, nearly screamed when he licked up, deftly finding the swollen, hardened nub. Skillfully, he began rotating and licking, spearing and sweeping, as she came undone in his arms.

“Oh, oh...Ben, yes...Oh...” she murmured, her voice raw even to her own ears.

Her eyes rolled to the back of her head as his mouth worked its magic, sending shivers and humming vibrations spiraling down her spine then out to her muscles. She felt herself rise to the top of the wave that was crashing through her, wanted desperately to careen off the peak and fall into the abyss of satisfaction, but Ben wouldn't let her.

He slowed, then moved away, laving the soft inside of her thigh before he covered her quivering body once more with his.

“I'm going to take you now,” he told her in a sex-ravaged voice. “I'm going to take you and I promise, you'll scream for me before I'm through.”

“Yes, yes.”

He slid his knee between her thighs, prodding them further open to make room for his body. She obliged, wrapping her legs around his waist in a familiar but exciting position. He poised over her, his erection nudging at her wet entrance.

“Tell me you want me, Rachel,” he demanded.

“I want you.”

“Say my name,” he ordered.

“Ben,” she whispered, letting it tumble out on a long sigh.

“Say it again.”

“Ben,” she obliged, the last of his name lowering to a moan as he eased in.

She held him against her, marveling at how he filled her to breaking point. She had forgotten how complete she felt when he was inside of her. But she wanted more, craved the feeling of tumbling off the edge and slamming into an orgasm. She began to move in tiny lunges, begging him to join her.

His body instantly responded, and he began thrusting, setting a searing rhythm as she bucked underneath him. They pushed each other slowly at first, then they increased the pace, their movements causing a passionate friction where their bodies joined.

Incredibly broad sensations snaked through Rachel's blood to wrap around her core. They brushed and settled, ebbed up then down, all the while thrumming against her clit. Suddenly the strong pad of Ben's fingertip covered her, whispering butterfly touches over the erect flesh.

“Oh, oh, yeah, that's...Ben, yes...” she stammered, her voice rising in pitch as she felt herself peak.

The world constricted to a tiny pinprick, then swiftly exploded, shattering, hurling her up into the stratosphere while her body squeezed and thrashed in an intense orgasm.

“Ben! Ben...oh, yes! Yes!”

“Rachel! Oh, God, Rachel!” he shouted, arching as he spilled himself inside her.

A moment later, he collapsed on top of her, air struggling in and out of his lungs. The aroma of their sex filled the air completely now, pungent and deep, an aphrodisiac all its own.

“Oh God, Ben,” she breathed, gently wiping his damp hair from his forehead. “I knew but I...I didn't remember.”

He dropped a tender kiss on her lips, seeming to revel in the afterglow of their lovemaking as much as she was. Slowly, he rolled off of her, keeping her tightly in his arms.

They were silent for several minutes, their sweat soaked bodies cooling in the air-conditioned room. When thoughts of real life began to seep back into Rachel's sex-

numbed brain, her heart sank. He was going to question why this had happened and why she had chosen to come to him tonight. If she told him the truth, she didn't know if she could survive him walking away again. But her plan, the one that made her so bold, didn't seem as wonderful an idea as it had a few hours before.

"Rachel," he said softly, "why are you here?"

His question crushed any lingering hopes she had that he would fall asleep. To lie or not to lie, that was the question. Too bad Shakespeare had never concocted a play that would answer her dilemma.

"I...Ben, I don't want to talk..."

"Too damn bad," he said lightly, "you're here and I want to know why."

She took a deep breath and swallowed against her dry throat. Part of her wanted to flee the room, leaving him with the memory of their night and nothing more. But she knew he wouldn't be satisfied until she had given him a story he might believe...no matter how much of the answer was a lie.

"I wanted you," she said simply.

"And what about Guy? Have you forgotten about him?" His voice was tinged with an inexplicable heat.

"No...no I haven't forgotten about Guy, He's...he's still out, taking pictures, developing them, dropping them off at the paper."

"So you decided you wanted a distraction."

"No! It's not like that! It's just...oh, I don't know how to say this."

She hesitated, gnawing her bottom lip in indecision.

"Just say it, Rachel."

"I want to have an affair. With you."

"An affair?" he questioned, his voice incredulous. "You want to have an affair with me?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous. I know that you...oh, never mind," she sighed, sitting up and tossing the sheet off her body. This was *not* going to work. She'd been a fool to think it would. "Just pretend I never said anything."

"Just wait a minute." He reached out to lay a large hand on her shoulder. "I want you to explain this to me, Rachel. Tell me what you're thinking."

She let her body slump as she gazed down at the plush carpet of the dark room. There was no way out of it now. She'd already dug the ditch and was halfway down the slope. It was now or never.

"You and I...we agree that we're over what we had, right?"

"Um, yeah," he agreed, a little too readily.

Rachel felt her heart drop to her lap. She'd held onto the thin thread of a chance that he might have a scrap of love left for her. What was it they said about fools in love? Probably that their I.Q.'s sank to the low single digits. Straightening her back, she continued.

"But, uh, we agree that, no matter what our problems were when we were dating, we were always good in bed together."

"I think we just proved that theory," he said without humor.

"Well, the fact is...Guy and I, we're not...we're not really..." She stopped for a moment to collect herself before she finally blurted out, "Guy and I have an understanding."

“Understanding? What do you mean...” Ben’s voice trailed away. Then, as if the truth had finally dawned on him, he continued. “You have an open relationship?”

“Well, yes,” she whispered, agonizing over what she was telling him. “I mean, it’s not like we sleep around all the time. We...we love each other, and we’ve always said that if we...if either of us...we’re not married, so it’s not like...”

She turned back to find him staring at her in abject horror. He hated her now, she thought, and swung her gaze away. She couldn’t blame him.

“I...oh, my God, Rachel,” he spit out. “I can’t believe that you and he...that you actually...hell, have you done this with other men besides me?”

“No!” she exclaimed, turning her flaming face to his. “I’ve never...I mean, it’s just you...this was a bad idea.”

She launched herself off the bed and began searching for her coat, frantic to leave. Why had she ever thought this would work? What the hell kind of bug had gotten into her butt to make her think that he would grab the possibility of an affair with her? After all, he had a longstanding sleeping arrangement with the town’s biggest snob, one that had started barely two weeks after she’d left. Why would he need her?

She heard him shift in the bed just before a soft click sounded and the room flooded with light. She glanced over her shoulder at him and found him staring at her bare bottom. She remembered him telling her over and over again how much he loved the way her bottom rounded when she bent over, how sexy and delectable he thought her derriere was in this position. She licked her lips as his eyes stayed on her, watching her move. He must have finally realized that she was leaving, though, because he slid out of bed to join her.

“Stop, Rachel, hold on. You just...you have to admit, what you just told me isn’t something most people would ever think they’d hear from you.”

“I know, so if you’d please just forget it...”

“I will, if you really want me to, but first, let me try to understand what you’re saying.” He pulled her gently down to the mattress. “You and Guy have decided not to have an exclusive relationship, even though you’re living together. You each have permission to date—no, I’m sorry, to have sex with other people. But you haven’t taken advantage of this little agreement...until now. So, you want to continue this, um, arrangement for as long as I’m in Athens. Is all of that right?”

She stared at him, appalled by how ludicrous the lie sounded. She nodded slowly, expecting him to break into laughter or kick her out in disgust at any second. Instead, he studied her closely and, amazingly, nodded.

“We always were good at sex,” he conceded with a devilish grin. “I have to admit, I’ve missed you in my bed. No one can live up to you when you’re...properly stimulated.”

She wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry, so she simply sat silently.

“Okay, Rachel, you and I, sleeping together, but nothing else. Now, how do we do this? Do we let Guy know that we’re, uh, ‘special friends,’ or is he the jealous type?”

“I—I don’t really want anyone to know that we have an arrangement,” she said slowly. “I don’t want to have to answer any awkward questions or deal with any gossip.”

“Hey, a secret affair...even better,” he said as he trailed a finger along her shoulder blade. “So, why don’t we start tonight? It’s too late for you to go home, and besides, you told me that Guy would probably be out all night. Why don’t you stay here and I’ll take

you to your apartment tomorrow morning? I would take you out to breakfast, but I think they frown on nudity in public places, even in the open-minded city of Athens.”

Rachel gazed at Ben, confused by her conflicting emotions. He was willing to have a no strings attached affair with her, use her, sleep with her, and leave her behind. Part of her had wanted him to tell her no, to prove to her that he still cared for her by denying a meaningless affair. But then, this had been her idea. She had trapped herself in her own web...and she hated the feeling of being tangled in it.

“Okay,” she finally agreed. “I’ll stay. I’ll call before we leave to see if Guy’s at home. If he is you can drop me off at the door and I’ll make an excuse about going for an early morning walk.”

He nodded then pulled her into his arms, fitting her snugly against his chest. Carefully, he laid them both back down on the bed and covered them with the white sheet before switching the lamp off. She couldn’t help but give a quiet sigh as he cuddled her under his chin. She was content here, wrapped in his embrace. She felt as if she’d always belonged just like this, naked and secure against his body.

“Goodnight, Rachel,” he whispered before dropping a soft kiss on her head.

“Goodnight, Ben.”

Despite the unsettled feeling inside her, she curled further into his side as he drifted into sleep. It was a crazy plan, one that shouldn’t have worked. But it had...too well. It stung to know that what she’d believed these past two years was true—Ben really hadn’t loved her the way she’d loved him. She was glad she had decided not to tell him what was in her heart. At least, in some small way, she would be safe. And she would have closure.

Liar.

Resolutely ignoring the small voice in her head, Rachel slammed her eyes shut and determinedly slid into sleep.

Chapter Eight

Rachel slipped into her apartment the next morning, shutting the door behind her before leaning against it. She'd left Ben in his rental car with a quick kiss and a promise to meet him later, after her show. It was insanity, sheer insanity, for her to be doing this. This wasn't who she was, but somehow she'd managed to let herself fall into the allure of sex with Ben, a chance to have a few memorable nights with him without the risk of him knowing he still held her heart. But now...well, she wasn't so sure. She couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was behaving like a cheap tramp.

"Rachel?" Guy called from the kitchen.

Pushing herself off the door, she wandered to the kitchen.

Guy slid a freshly poured mug of coffee across the tiles. He studied her and she knew he saw the dark circles under her eyes, the tangle of her hair, the wrinkled state of her coat. She tried not to wince when he smiled grimly.

"So, you went to Ben last night."

"You knew where I was going when I left."

"I was hoping you would change your mind." He leaned against the island and stared at her. He let out a quiet sigh and she bit her bottom lip. "Oh, Rachel, no. You actually did it, didn't you? You told him that ludicrous story."

She felt her face flush. "I don't know why you're so upset. After all, you're the one who started this."

"I started this?" he asked, glaring at her. "All I did was give you a chance to get yourself together. I was only trying to give you some room to breathe, you know that. I understand how you feel, I'm right there with you as a matter of fact. But I never meant for you to take it this far, Rachel. I only meant to give you a day or two to figure out what you wanted to do about Ben, and maybe give him a swift kick in the ass when he realized what an idiot he'd been."

"He doesn't love me," she said in a heated voice, her heart cracking another small fissure as she spoke the words out loud. "At one point in time he might have believed he did, but now we both know better. He didn't call, didn't write, didn't even e-mail, plus there were those awful rumors about him and Marianna..."

Guy shook his head as her voice trailed away, catching on a sob as she looked down at her coffee. She heard him let out a soft curse before he set his mug on the counter. His pajama bottoms rustled as he made his way around the counter to sit beside her. Placing an arm around her shoulders, he pulled her into his chest and rocked her while she silently wept.

"Rachel, you have to know this lie is going to unravel," he whispered. "How long do you think you can make him believe that he's just a fling? That you have completely turned away from the woman you were when he knew you, that you've become a woman that is willing to have an open relationship with her live-in lover? Your heart is on your sleeve, love, and sooner or later it's going to pull loose."

She nodded her head against him but refused to look into his handsome face. He was right and she hated him for it. He wanted the best for her, including true love, and she loved him for that. Damn, even her male friends were apparently put on the earth to drive

her crazy.

“I—I’ll be fine, Guy, I swear I will. I just...I need this. The last time...before I left Breckenridge, before I went on tour with LaRussa, I fought to stay with him. I wanted to be with Ben forever, to stay in the states and have my life with him. But he told me that he was relieved, that he hadn’t been ready for a permanent relationship and...well, you know how I felt. The decision was made so suddenly, I left so abruptly, and then...then I’d thought he’d stay in touch. After all, we’d been friends for years before we started dating. But he didn’t ever contact me, so the last few days and nights I had with him, those few hours that we were together, I didn’t really hold onto. I didn’t know. I had no idea that those would be the last days we’d ever spend together. This time I know it, though. This time there’s a time limit, a date that will put an end to our affair. I can create memories, I can hold onto the time we spend together and know that...that he’ll leave me. I’ll have a chance to really say goodbye to him. That’s why I lied, Guy. I want to close that chapter of my life, put ‘The End’ at the bottom of the page and move on.”

“And if he figures out that you still love him?”

“That won’t happen.” She pushed herself upright. “He doesn’t love me, Guy, and as long as I don’t tell him, I’ll be safe.”

He raised a doubtful eyebrow, but didn’t say anything. Rachel knew she was being naïve about the situation, but she desperately needed to believe that this lie would give her the chance to say goodbye. She doubted if anything Guy said would change her mind. She just hoped he would be here to help her through the repercussions.

* * * *

Ben sat on a small bench waiting impatiently, the red tinted lights that lit the Parthenon a bright backdrop as he watched for Rachel’s approach. He’d been disappointed this morning when he had to drop her at the front door of the apartment building, but he’d comforted himself with the fact that they’d see each other tonight. When she’d first mentioned an affair that would end with his leaving, his immediate reaction had been denial. But then his manipulative side had kicked in, working to weave a plan that might very well bring Rachel back into his life forever. Affairs were tricky things, especially with ex-lovers, and he knew that this was his chance to make her remember everything they’d had together. Secret meetings would heighten the excitement, their lovemaking would shake her foundation, and his constant companionship and shared confidence would help to reform their bond of friendship. Yes, he liked Guy, but he loved Rachel, which was why he would have an affair with her.

Part of him couldn’t help but feel like a piece of meat, as if he was only prized for his body instead of the whole package. But the other part didn’t care. If having a chance to convince Rachel that they were fated to be together meant going along with her proposition, then he’d do it. After all, he did, in a way, deserve some sort of punishment after the way he’d treated her.

He’d broken her heart with just a few sentences, and he’d known it. He’d watched it shatter at his feet and he hadn’t done a damn thing to comfort her. He’d spewed platitudes about still being friends and knowing she would be a great opera star. After she’d left, he hadn’t stayed in touch with her, even though he’d promised he would. He’d blamed her for that, too, to make himself feel better, but he knew he should have been the one to try to find her. Not only had he been the one to hurt her, but he knew Rachel had

been busy with her career, moving from place to place every week or two, having little to no access to a computer. She'd tried to contact Grace, and when his sister hadn't called her back, she had feared the worst. Rachel had good reason to believe she'd been forgotten by everyone...including himself.

Last night should have proven to her that he hadn't gone a day, hell, even an hour, without thinking about her. He had been sure that, after the way he'd worshipped her body last night, she would have known that his heart still lay with her. Instead of a profession of love, though, she'd propositioned him...and he hadn't been able to say no. He might have waged a harsher fight with himself if her taste hadn't still been on his tongue, if her naked body hadn't been glowing in the lamplight, so smooth and enticing as she sat on the edge of his bed.

Ben ran his sweaty hands down his jeans and let out a pent-up breath. He didn't know how much longer he could sit here with a pounding heart and a raging stiffness in his pants. He saw Rachel then, ascending the path of the Acropolis. The breeze caught the lavender cotton of her empire style dress, sending ripples through the delicate material as it danced around her knees.

He stood to greet her, mesmerized as the lights caught and radiated around her. She was like a sensual goddess come down from Olympus to grace mere mortals with her presence.

"Rachel," he said into the darkness, holding his hand out to her.

She slid her palm against his, yielding as he pulled her into his arms. He gave her a sweet, lingering kiss, savoring her lips for a long moment.

"Ben," she whispered, staring into his eyes with an adoring expression. "I'm sorry I'm late—the director stopped me just as I was headed out the door."

"Remind me to thank him. It seems that it's too late for anyone else to want to come up here."

He continued to hold her as she looked around, her blue eyes sparking as she turned back to him. "Wow, we really are all by ourselves."

"It's a beautiful spot with all those lights from the city glowing in the dark." *Very romantic*, he thought, but didn't voice the sentiment.

"Well, I'm glad you're here." She snuggled against him. "I really wanted to see you tonight."

"I wouldn't miss a minute of being with such a...sexy woman," he whispered in her ear. "Do you know that when I got back to the hotel room this morning I could still smell you in the air? The sheets, the pillows, even the towels you used this morning, were still there. I wanted to drag you back across town and toss you into my bed."

He heard her suck in her breath and knew she was remembering last night. If her memories were as vivid as his, and he was sure they were, her blood was probably already boiling with desire. He moved slightly, gently pressing his growing erection against her belly, showing her that he still wanted her desperately.

Tenderly, he began to nuzzle her ear. "Do you see what you do to me, Rachel? I can't stop wanting you or thinking about you. I get hard just imagining what we'll do together next."

She let out a tiny gasp. She needed him, too, just as much as he needed her right now. His hands stayed firm on her hips as she leaned back, capturing his gaze with hers. He could see the sexual heat rising in her face to light her eyes.

“The hotel,” she barely breathed.

“I don’t think I can wait.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the Parthenon.

He didn’t want her to think, was afraid she might say no if she had a moment to consider what he was going to do. He jerked her into his arms and smothered any protest she might have been about to make with his mouth. Her body caved inward as she melted against him, her tongue met his, long thrust for long thrust. He attacked her mouth with the same ferocity she gave, absorbing her moist heat even as he backed them into a corner.

He felt her capitulation and moaned his happiness. It was exactly as he thought—she wanted him so badly that she didn’t attempt to fight him or insist they go back to his room. He felt a hard shiver rack her body and responded with a quake of his own. He tangled his hands in her loose hair, holding her head captive as her back collided with a wide pillar.

He nuzzled her jaw, teasing then nipping as his mouth moved down to her throat. Her head fell to the side as he tasted her. She came alive in his arms, vibrating against him like a live wire as he made love to her. She was as ready for him as he was for her, her husky moans and indrawn breaths telling him that her desire had catapulted to near madness just as quickly as his had.

“You taste so damn good,” he rasped.

His head was floating in the clouds, his mind fogged with the feeling of his hands on her and their mouths fused together. She groaned her appreciation when his palm cupped her pliant breast, kneading the soft flesh. His fingertips found her hardened nipple through the thin material of her dress and pinched it. He caught her long hiss against his lips. She pulled away, her tiny gasps driving him crazy.

“Ben!”

“I can’t wait,” he whispered more to himself than her. “I have to have you, Rachel, I have to have you now.”

“I can’t wait, either. I...I want you. I want you.”

His mind whirled with her confession, his limbs and sensitive skin throbbing with the knowledge of what Rachel was allowing him to do, of what she could do to him. The knowledge that they were in public, that someone could see them if they walked around the corner of the building, made him more frantic to be joined to her.

Ben lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist, pulling her against him for one torturous moment. The solid ridge of his shaft slid against her steaming crotch, the heat so intoxicating that he growled. He watched through heavy lids as Rachel sank her teeth into her bottom lip, carefully balancing herself against the stone pillar as her legs tightened around his middle. Desperate to feel more, he moved his hands along the bottom of her thighs, then groaned like a dying man when his fingers collided with the moisture spilling down her delicate flesh. Reaching up, he rubbed his thumb against her swollen lips, his eyes locked to hers while she bucked into his hand. Moving past the wet juncture of her thighs, he hooked the top of her underwear and pulled, ripping the satiny material. He whipped the mutilated pieces away, leaving her open to his assault.

Her eyes churned with wild passion, and he was smugly pleased that he could bring that flushed, uncontrolled look to her face. Then she twisted restlessly against him, her lush body moving and teasing him in the way he’d never forgotten. He was close to losing his mind. Unable to wait any longer, he pulled his hands away from her waist,

trailing gentle kisses along her jaw as her legs slid back down his. He unzipped his pants and freed his cock, the hard flesh touching the heated moisture on her thighs. He lifted her again, careful to keep her back solidly against the pillar, and slid the rounded tip of his erection against her opening.

His mouth slammed down on hers, biting and sucking as he poised at her entrance. Then, following the motion of his tongue, he slid into her body in one smooth stroke. Her back bowed, taking him in as deeply as she could while her breath caught on a long gasp. He gritted his teeth against the moan threatening to escape. The feel of her scorching walls encasing him nearly sent him to his knees. He filled her, bumping into her womb, and stopped so she could adjust to his size. When she bucked against him, he began moving in long, solid thrusts, taking and giving as her slick cavern welcomed him.

Rachel went with him, moving with as much eagerness as he, meeting him lunge for lunge. He heard her breath, ragged in his ear, and knew he sounded just as winded. He pushed them both higher and higher, deliberately rubbing against her throbbing core as he slammed into her. His body filled with melting, fluid heat, pooling his insides as it tightened and swelled in his testicles. He thrust harder, longer, frantic to feel her orgasm before he lost all control. He reached between them and found the raised nub hidden in her folds.

She sobbed into his mouth, her high-pitched cries muffled as her walls began squeezing his shaft rhythmically. The blistering liquid of her release coated him, making his thrusts nearly frictionless. He held her as he let go, crashing into her in the last few strokes that took him over the edge. The wave of his orgasm flooded through him, consuming his body in mind-numbing eddies. Her name rose into his throat, lodging there as he ground his jaw tightly and filled her with his release.

They stood, unmoving, as each tried to catch their breath. Their bodies were still joined, slick now with sweat and sex. Finally, they heard the sound of footfalls and hurriedly pulled apart.

Ben looked down at her and smirked wickedly, pleased with himself for causing the utterly satisfied look on her beautiful face. Bending down, he scooped up her ruined panties and stuffed them into his pocket.

Rachel watched him move, the high color in her cheeks bringing on the desire to touch her again. With a cocky wink, he re-zipped his pants. He lifted his eyebrows when she chuckled quietly, and let his gaze roam over her as she straightened her dress and smoothed her hair.

The thought that they had just made love in the middle of the Parthenon, lit with bright red lights while people in the city stared up at the hill, ignorant of what was going on behind one of the pillars, caused his body to buzz with excitement again. He'd never known he was an exhibitionist before, but he had a feeling that he'd be willing to do almost anything if it meant he could touch her, taste her...make love with her.

He nearly choked when she licked her lips, her eyes brightening with a distinctly naughty sensual light. He studied her for a moment, then gave a soft laugh. "Oh, no, young lady," he warned, wagging his finger, "once a day in public is enough for me. Now, if you'd like to go back to my place..."

The sound of a man clearing his throat caught their attention, swinging both their gazes to the figure standing just a few feet away.

"Excuse me, sir, madam," the security guard said, "can I help you with anything?"

“Uh, no, no, thanks. We just wanted to enjoy the...view,” Ben replied.

He took Rachel’s hand in his, and pulled her toward the path.

“I’m starving,” he said conversationally. “Guess it must be all the strenuous activity I’ve taken up.”

He wasn’t even close to hungry, but he knew that she had to be. Plus, it would give him more time with her, more time to talk, more time to try to heal the rift.

“Dinner sounds perfect,” Rachel replied, her grip tightening around his fingers.

This was one of the moments he’d been hoping for—a chance to feel bonded with her both physically and emotionally, and he was willing to do whatever it took to hold onto it for as long as he could.

Chapter Nine

Rachel hurried towards the nearly deserted beach, her normal self-consciousness nearly forgotten. Guy had given a wolf whistle when he'd seen her try on her red bikini this morning, assuring her that Ben would fall to his knees when he saw her. Just a few weeks before, she wouldn't have dared to step foot outside of the apartment in a one piece bathing suit without a wrap, much less a bikini. But Ben made her feel...womanly. He made her feel wanted, and gorgeous, and infinitely beautiful. He praised her lush curves, enjoying her voluptuous figure with such abandon that she felt guilty for daring to cover herself after their lovemaking. It was something she missed with him, something she never experienced before or since they were together. It was glorious, liberating, and extremely arousing to know she could make Ben want her with just a swish of her rounded hips.

Making her way towards the beach, she thought of the handful of assignments they'd had, of how sexually fulfilling they were, and how incredible it was to be with him again. It wasn't just sex, though the sex had definitely been awe-inspiring. It was also the times between, when they were simply together, talking, sharing jokes, exchanging stories and memories. She wasn't sure if she would have been able to continue with the ruse if he hadn't opened up to her. But those moments were too precious for her to walk away from.

As if her thoughts had conjured him, she saw him sitting in front of the water, his body bare save for his dark swimming trunks. Smiling to herself, she waved her hand over her head and called to him. "Ben!"

He turned when he heard her. Slowly he stood, his bright green eyes going over her body with his heated gaze as she ran toward him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry I'm late. I went to visit Pietro's mother and the baby and I lost track of time."

"Don't worry about it. I haven't been waiting too long. How are your friend and her baby doing?" He took the wooden picnic basket from her hands and placed it on the peach striped blanket.

"Wonderful. I can't believe how tiny the baby is. I mean, my cousin Jack was little, too, but he's so big now..." Her voice trailed away as she thought about the people she'd left behind.

"It must be hard being so far away from your family," Ben said. "When you were with the Giana LaRussa troupe, you were at least able to see them a few times a year."

Rachel took his statement as a chastisement for leaving, and felt resentful. He was acting as if she'd bounced on the bus of her volition, carelessly tossing her family to the wayside.

"Yes, well, as I recall I didn't actually have much of a choice about whether or not I really wanted to join her troupe. I was forced to make a decision without being able to research it properly. I was never able to sit and consider whether or not I wanted to travel so much or put up with her temper."

He stared at her, his moss green eyes filling with questions. "You really feel that way?"

“Yes, yes I do. I know that when we—when we broke things off you said you wanted what was best for me, because you were still my friend. But you didn’t bother to listen when I tried to explain all of this to you. I guess you were just ready to get me out of Breckenridge.” Not to mention how he’d wanted a clear path for his affair with Marianne.

“What?” His brow knitted as he leaned closer.

“Nothing, nothing.” She waved him off. “I just...I’m a little grumpy. I didn’t get enough sleep last night.”

His face turned stony and his jaw clenched as he looked down at her. “Late night with Guy?”

Well, this was certainly interesting. Was he...? No, of course he wasn’t.

“Actually, I had a hard night on stage last night,” she explained. “Then afterward, the director decided he needed to have an emergency meeting with a few of us. I guess he was hoping to smooth some ruffled feathers.”

Ben’s face softened, his eyes warming again as he squeezed one of her hands. “Backstage drama, huh?”

“Drama isn’t the word. I think it’s more like trauma. One of the women loosened the threads on one of the other lead’s bodice and her breasts almost burst out when she hit her first high note.”

“Wow, I’ll bet that would have brought ticket sales up.” He chuckled and ran his knuckles gently down her cheek. “I had no idea there was so much intrigue behind the scenes.”

“Well, really, most of the people are very nice. I’ve never personally had a problem with anyone there. Guess I know how to duck and cover better than others.” She gave him a lopsided smile as she shifted her weight. “Honestly, it’s just a few that make the whole basket of apples smell bad.”

He pulled her into his arms, keeping his eyes on hers. “I know how to cheer you up,” he whispered huskily.

“Oh, you do, do you?” she asked, her voice deep even to her ears.

“Hmmm...a nice swim.” He swung her up and cradled her against his chest.

She squealed with mock indignation as he carried her to the water, her playful swats and protests overridden by her laughter. He didn’t toss her in, but rather held onto her as he moved into the ocean.

“It’s nice out here. I can’t believe this beach is just outside of the city and it’s nearly deserted.”

“Um, well, it’s a little bit of a drive, but the locals all think it’s worth it. They tend to keep it a secret so it won’t be overrun.”

“It’s warm today,” he murmured, lowering them until only their heads were above the water.

“I know, it’s amazing how extreme the weather can be in Greece.”

The weather? Was she really so starry-eyed and befuddled that she was talking about the climate? Yes, she was.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think we can find something better to talk about than the weather, sweetheart,” he joked, letting the old endearment slip from his lips.

She loved the sound of the pet name, took a moment to soak it in as his eyes twinkled down at her.

“I think I’d prefer to talk about what I’d like to do to your delectable body,” he elaborated. “You know what I’ve always wanted to do with you? I’ve always wanted to touch you in the water. We never did that...unless you count hot tubs and showers. But the ocean, now that’s something I used to dream about.”

She gazed up at him, the glare of the sun blinding her to anything but his face. “You...you wanted to make—have sex in the ocean with me?”

“All the time,” he replied.

He took a moment and looked around. “No one close.”

Rachel glanced over his shoulder. He was taking her into a covered enclave, the stone shaped into a cave by time and water erosion. There was only one way in and out—in here, they would be safe from prying eyes. She wondered how he’d found it, but her curiosity quickly faded. It didn’t matter. When she was this close to Ben, it wasn’t just her body that turned into hot, melted wax, but her mind as well.

“Have you ever done something like that?” he asked, his gaze intense as he stared down at her.

“No,” she admitted, not even considering lying to him.

He gave her a predatory smile and maneuvered their bodies toward the rocks.

“You’re going to like it, I promise you, Rachel. I haven’t thought about anything else but having you.”

Her breath caught at his admission, then tumbled out on a long sigh when he let her go, her limbs sliding down his, buoyed slightly by the warm water. He held her eyes for a moment, then lowered his mouth to hers. It was a torturous kiss, the lazy, easy moves of his mouth driving her mad, pulling the passion up from the tips of her toes to zip through her veins. She tried to strengthen the kiss, clamoring to have more of him, but he kept it under control.

He pulled his mouth from hers, his breathing as shallow and rapid as hers had become. “I want to hear you beg me, Rachel. I want you to call my name, to gasp for me...to come for me.”

Her body melted at his words, her bones and skin faded into each other as her blood turned into molten lava. He moved them further in, until Rachel butted up against the hard rocks at the back of the small cave. They were now deep in the horseshoe shaped enclave, and Ben took her mouth again.

Rachel’s hands moved down the front of his bare chest, brushing a long trail through the water droplets. She let her nails scrape over his hard nipples, reveling in the sexual spear of power as he sucked in a breath.

“Oh, God, Rachel,” he breathed, releasing her lips.

He nipped his way across her jaw to her ear, sucking on her soft lobe and swirling his tongue around it. She gasped in raw pleasure, her hands digging into his chiseled stomach muscles. Her leg rose of its own volition, hooking around his hip as his mouth began a long, agonizing trip down the column of her throat.

He nuzzled and savored her, their bodies absorbing the heat of one another as the water lapped gently around them. Her crotch braced against his thick arousal, rubbing against his hard flesh as the ocean moved her up and down. He growled, sending a shiver down her spine as he wound the strings of her top around his fingers. Pulling them down slowly, he released the scrap of red material, leaving her breasts free. He cupped them reverently, weighing them in his palms, molding the pliant flesh with his fingers.

He licked the pulse at the base of her throat, the abrasive feel of his tongue arousing in the extreme. His grip on her supple globes tightened, then his thumbs flicked over her pebbled nipples, ripping a gasp from her as the sensations swamped her body. The warm water was like a second lover, tenderly touching her in splashes and gentle smacks.

She writhed in his arms, her hands sliding up his shoulders as he continued his assault. A moment later he took a pert marble nub between his teeth, nipping and rolling it while his fingers worked on her other breast. Her head thrashed back and forth, and her hands slipped down and clawed into his back.

She was going to explode from her body, hurl into space and never come back...and she didn't care. She just wanted him, wanted the kind of release only Ben could give her. She crawled as close to him as she could get, rubbing herself against his cock in a mock action of lovemaking. It didn't matter if her actions seemed too much like begging—she had no pride with Ben, she'd given it up for him a long time ago. Then, just as he'd promised her, she pleaded.

"Please, Ben...oh, please."

His body seemed to coil tighter, his touches more frantic. She pushed into him again, mindlessly rocking against his erection.

He moved his hand from her breast, exploring her sensitive skin, caressing her ribs and gently rounded belly. When he ran into the barrier of her bikini bottoms, he simply slid inside, groaning when his hand finally cupped her.

"Damn, Rachel, you are so hot," he rasped. "Have you been thinking about this, about us?"

"God, yes, Ben. I can't stop thinking about what you do to me."

He took her nipple back in his mouth, gasping against it when her engorged folds contracted in his palm. With a husky moan, he slid a finger inside of her, pushing her swollen walls open as he probed her. But his attention didn't give her relief, it only drove her higher.

"Ahhhh..." she sighed, her hands moving to latch onto his butt.

He moved his finger slowly in and out, scraping her tender inner flesh as her hips jerked in accord with his ministrations.

"More, more, please, Ben."

"Yes, sweetheart." He removed his hand from her, staving her protests with his questing mouth. She felt him pull his swim trunks down, pushing the waterproof material to his thighs. The knowledge that his shaft was free in front of her was too much of a temptation. Before he could position himself between her thighs, her hands covered him, stroking the rigid muscle with deft fingers.

"You are so hard."

"It's all for you." He captured her sex-glazed gaze with his.

He watched her for a moment, his eyes flaring as she touched him the way she knew he liked. She heard him growl just before he leaned down to attack her mouth. She accepted his assault with a pleasure filled moan, her palms still stroking his cock. He yanked one set of laces on her bikini bottoms, leaving the other side attached to her hip.

"Now, Rachel." He moved her hand away and brushed himself against her swollen core.

The tip of his erection grazed over her once, twice, then finally, slowly, he sank into her.

She let out a long moan. He filled her completely, his width and length stretching her. She could feel her body clench with the fiery fists of a knotted climax, the orgasm hovering on the edges, waiting to be freed.

His arms tightened around her, one hand moving to hold her thigh up with his palm, his other hand resting on her hip. She nearly came undone as he began stroking inside of her to the rhythm of the waves.

She bit her bottom lip as he eased in and out, churning the ocean, melting them into the waves as he drove into her. He was so hot, so large, the friction of him sliding, her wetness surrounding him, made her breasts swell and rise as the tension inside of her grew.

"I want you to scream my name," he whispered gruffly.

Scream his name, scream his name, she thought, but she didn't think she had any air left in her lungs. She was like a smoldering torch, the passion flaming up her veins to boil and burn her blood. His breadth and length penetrated her over and over again, expanding her, setting her teetering on the brink of explosion.

She clutched him, her body smacking into his as he picked up the pace. Suddenly, he shifted his weight, angling her perfectly while he drove into her with a steady, sure rhythm. Her lids fluttered closed and her eyes rolled to the back of her head as her orgasm rushed over her.

She didn't scream his name, couldn't, but the guttural sounds she made seemed to be enough. As her body contracted and quaked, she felt his fingers dig deep into her thigh. He responded to her climax with animalistic noises of his own, his cock slamming into her one last time before he spilled himself inside her.

She held him as he shook, clasping him tightly as he found his release. She felt his heart pounding against hers, his slick body wrapped in her arms as they floated in the frantic haze of completion.

A few moments later they stood on the rough silt, still entwined, breathing heavily as their bodies cooled. Ben held her against his chest, and she snuggled into him with a soft sigh. She didn't want him to let her go, balked at the idea that he would release her too quickly. She wanted him to toss her over his shoulder and take her back to his hotel room, where she could forget everything else in the world except him and the way he made her feel. Unfortunately her logical side slowly began to kick in again.

"Ummm...Ben, this is so nice," she whispered. "But, do you think someone heard us?"

He chuckled, stroking her hair. "Don't worry, this area is deserted. I don't think anyone was close enough to hear our little, um, rendezvous over the waves."

"I hope not. I'd hate to be a glib note in the lifestyle section of the Sunday paper," she joked, carefully pulling herself away.

She looked at him, at his glowing eyes and lopsided smile, and felt her heart flip over. She was doing this to say goodbye, she reminded herself. She was only involved with him on a physical level. After all, she already knew what would happen if she gave him her heart, and she couldn't afford to have her life shattered again.

"The picnic..." she murmured.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, the picnic," he said vaguely. "I guess we'd better go eat it before someone else decides to. Besides, we need to keep our strength up."

She raised an eyebrow and slyly bit her bottom lip, jumping when he smacked her

bottom.

"Come on, sweetheart, we can't have you waterlogged during your performance tonight."

She nodded, reaching up to tie her top as he wriggled back into his trunks. She could do this, she assured herself. She could take what she needed and let him go...again. She could keep her heart safe, keep herself sane, and enjoy what Ben was willing to give her. Really, she could. Maybe if she said it enough she would obliterate the little voice of doubt nagging her.

They returned to the deserted beach and slid down to the blanket. Ben pulled out two carefully bundled sandwiches, the shrimp salad stuffed between the soft bread slices bulging out the sides. He grinned as he handed her one, then pulled out a tall bottle of strawberry flavored water. She accepted both silently, battling the sudden uncertainty creeping into her thoughts.

"So, you enjoy living in Greece," Ben said. "I can't blame you. It's beautiful here."

"Yes, yes it is." She took a long draw of water, giving herself a moment to compose her thoughts. "I was extremely lucky that the Greek Opera took me so quickly. They were my first choice, you know."

"You want to live here the rest of your life?"

Now that was an interesting question. If she chose to take it the wrong way, she just might think that he was asking for personal reasons instead of making congenial conversation.

"I'm not sure," she admitted with a shrug. "Athens is wonderful, but..."

"It's not Breckenridge," he concluded. "I always thought you wanted to get away from our little town."

She wrinkled her brow. "What made you think that?"

"All those posters of Paris, Milan, Switzerland, Moscow and England that you had on your bedroom walls were a big clue. Then there was the passport you carried in your purse."

"Um, yeah, I guess I was pretty obvious. But just because I wanted to travel doesn't mean that I didn't want to go back to Breckenridge. My family is there, and...well, I guess I may still have some friends there, too."

"I can't imagine Guy living in a place like Breckenridge," Ben said absently.

Rachel licked her suddenly dry lips and looked down, busying herself with unwrapping her sandwich. Instead of answering his comment, she made one of her own.

"How is Marianne?"

Ben choked on his water as his eyes grew wide. "Marianne? Why..." He paused to clear his throat. "Why would you want to know about her? You two aren't exactly friends. In fact, I remember when you told me what a bitch she was."

Oh, yes, Rachel remembered it, too, which was why it hurt so badly to know he'd turned to the tiny blonde for comfort. She would have liked to vent her vehemence at him, but instead, she shrugged her shoulders and tried to look nonchalant.

"That was a long time ago, Ben. I guess I'm just curious about the rest of Breckenridge." She pulled a piece of her sandwich loose and popped it into her mouth, watching him from beneath lowered lashes.

"Um, well, she's fine. She has her own dance studio now, where she teaches." Apparently he didn't want to talk about the other woman because he immediately

changed the subject. "You know, Grace has really missed you."

"I've missed her, too. I guess I just thought...well, I guess I was wrong." She stopped to take another sip of water. "I'll call her tomorrow. It'd be nice to catch up with her."

"She'll like that. I'm sure she'll enjoy talking to you just as much as I have."

The unknowns of the conversation were suddenly there between them, beguiling her into thinking there were underlying meanings. But she wasn't going to fall into that velvet trap again, no matter how enticing it might be.

"Well, it's always fun to learn what your friends have been up to," she said casually, trying desperately to keep within the boundaries of their affair. No ties, no recriminations, that was what they'd promised. She wasn't about to step outside of that because she knew without a doubt that she'd end up burned, and she liked her non-charred skin.

"It's getting late," she announced, rewrapping her sandwich. "I guess our little, um, swim took longer than we thought."

Ben didn't push her for more time, for which she was grateful. She wasn't sure what she'd do if he pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she lost all track of time. She would have gladly lain right down on the blanket and made love with him until she was rubber-boned and exhausted. But then she would have been too tempted to admit that what they'd had, what they *still* had, was a hell of a lot more than friendship for her. Her confession would have broken the fragile tie they shared and, masochist that she was, she just wasn't ready to sever their relationship just yet.

He shifted his weight, sat up and screwed the top back onto his water bottle. "Okay, Rachel, let's get you back to your apartment. I wouldn't want you to be late for your performance." He stared across the blanket at her, his green eyes hot and unreadable. "I'm glad you came today."

Her lips twitched at his double entendre and he gave her a wicked wink. Taking her hand, he pulled her up and, in easy companionship, they repacked the picnic basket.

Chapter Ten

Rachel stood on the spacious stage, the last echoes of the chorus of voices fading as the rehearsal came to a grinding halt. She stifled a sigh and shifted her weight on her tennis-shoed feet, the faded cotton of her jeans rubbing between her thighs. Behind her, Roberto, the co-star, was huffing and whining yet again, having a fit over his cues and where he was being forced to stand. Jacques, the male lead, shot her a look before rolling his brown eyes to the ceiling over the other man's theatrics. She swallowed a laugh as the director bounded on stage to smooth Roberto's very ruffled feathers.

"I mean it, Dante! That woman steps on my toes every time!" Roberto wailed as he turned to glare at the eternally pouting Adella. "She does it on purpose!"

"Why would I do something like that?" the plump brunette asked bitingly. "It's not my fault if you can't hit your spot on time!"

"Now, please, let's just calm down," Dante began.

"Calm down? Calm down!" Roberto slammed his fists on his hips and pursed his lips in irritation. "Just because she is your latest fuck buddy doesn't mean I'm going to put up with her attitude!"

Adella gasped and Dante visibly blanched.

"Oh, for God's sake," Jacques sighed. "Roberto, that's quite enough. The rest of us have been more than tolerant of your tantrums, but I think we've all had our fill. I'm sure we all have someplace else we're ready to be, in fact, my anniversary is tonight, and my wife is waiting for me at home. If you have any other complaints, I suggest you keep them to yourself until we get to the end of this damn scene. Adella, don't even try to deny that you haven't at least thought about trouncing Roberto's feet. God knows the rest of us have. But for the sake of all our sanities, would you please restrain your size nines until we're done? Now, are we through with this?"

Dante relaxed as Roberto nodded guiltily and Adella turned to sulk at the set behind her.

"Alright, everyone, from the third verse please..." Dante directed, hurrying offstage.

The music swelled again, and their voices rose to mingle and fill the air with beautiful, layered sound. That was when Rachel saw him, easing out of the shadows of the back of the theatre. Ben...it couldn't be anyone else. She recognized the body, recognized the way her pulse leapt and her skin began to tingle. Somehow Ben had managed to slip into a closed rehearsal.

She tried not to fumble, but her fingers trembled as she took Jacques' hand. She felt like a teenager with her first, unbearable crush. God help her if he decided to send her one of his heart-stopping winks—she'd probably fall flat on her face. The rotund dark-haired man gave her a curious look as he continued with the song, encouraging her with a gentle tug as they walked further upstage. Forcefully, she shoved the thought of Ben watching her, listening to her, out of her mind. If his presence eked its way back into her thoughts every once in a while during the rehearsal, she tried to cover it. But the look on her fellow singers' faces told her she was doing a lousy job.

Two hours later, Dante called a halt to the torture. Rachel gave a relieved sigh and made her way backstage, maneuvering around the general chaos of the cast. Beside her,

Roberto leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“That’s a tasty looking man out there. Too bad his eyes were only on you.”

She gave him a wan smile and hurried as quickly as she could towards the seats, her mind whirling with implications she couldn’t quite put into coherent words. By the time she reached him she was out of breath and beaming like a lunatic.

“Ben! How did you get in?”

He pulled her into a deep hug, tucking her head against his black collarless shirt. “It helps when you know people.”

“And just who do you know?” she asked, her voice muffled against his chest.

“The janitorial staff,” he admitted, chuckling. “They let me slip in when I told them I came to see you. They like you, you know.”

“Well, they’re all very nice.”

“Yes, they are. Now, after that trauma of a rehearsal, I think you deserve a nice dinner.” He slipped his arm through hers and led her out the heavy metal door. “I’ll even take you dancing...and I promise, I won’t trounce on your toes with my size twelves.”

* * * *

Rachel laughed as Ben spun her in his arms, the sounds of the mellow jazz ensemble a sensual background for their dance. He gently pushed her out, then quickly tugged her back into the circle of his embrace, fitting her snugly against his chest. The dim glow of the lighting seemed to halo the rustic, French style bar, the patrons spoke quietly so as not to disturb the atmosphere. It was the perfect setting for a wonderful evening, the kind of evening she’d daydreamed about when she was a little girl and had still believed in happily-ever-afters. Inside, a little voice insisted that she still did. She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment to dispel the thought.

“Thanks for coming to dinner with me,” Ben said softly. “I wasn’t sure if you had plans tonight.”

Rachel swallowed a ball of guilt that tried to lodge in her throat. It wasn’t fair, really, for him to make her feel badly for this ruse. After all, he’d been the cruel one in ending their relationship. And yet she couldn’t help but feel a stab of regret. Damn man, damn heart...damn world.

“Well, the rest of the cast is too tired to do anything but go home and soak in a hot tub,” she explained, pointedly avoiding saying anything about her roommate.

“And Guy was busy,” Ben surmised quietly. “You know Rachel, it seems to me that he spends an awful lot of time away from you.”

She bit her bottom lip, caught between defending her friend and keeping her lie secure. She wasn’t about to admit that her whole plan had turned into one huge fiasco. Finally she shrugged, the gesture rubbing her shoulders and chest against his warm body.

“He has to go on his assignments, that’s how he makes his living,” she pointed out. “When he’s in Athens he spends as much time with me as he can. It works for us.”

Ben didn’t say anything, so she swallowed her fear and peeked up at him through lowered lashes. His face was hard, his jaw tight as a muscle flexed underneath his skin. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say he was furious.

She didn’t have much time to wonder. His gaze caught hers and his expression softened immediately, his bright green eyes easing as he lifted his hand to her cheek. He ran gentle knuckles down her jaw line as his lips tilted into one of his killer, heart-

stopping, lopsided smiles.

“So, a long soak in a tub, huh?” he asked. “I don’t think I want to picture Jacques in a bath with his wife.”

She gave him a grin of her own. “I know, it’s kind of like thinking of your parents...”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence.” He gave her a mock look of panic, drawing a laugh from her. “You know who I’d like to see in a tub full of water? You.”

The statement sent a bolt of desire zipping through her veins. A familiar heat tingled between her legs and the breath in her lungs caught on a wild hitching sound. If he was trying to make her crazy, then he was most definitely succeeding.

“Me? In a tub?”

“Yeah, you, in a tub. Lots of bubbles, your skin warm and slick, your breasts barely covered, your head lying back against the rim. Every time I go into the hotel bathroom I think about you like that.”

His voice was growing thick and heavy, and his fantasy drew desire up through her so quickly she wasn’t sure if she still had the ability to move, let alone breathe.

“You do?” She sounded rusty, even to her own ears. “You think of me...like that?”

“God, yes,” he hissed, jerking her hips into his.

His arousal was obvious, the thick ridge cradled against her stomach as he continued to sway them to the velvety music. She felt herself quicken, knew her panties were growing damp.

“I want you, Rachel,” he rasped into her ear. He gave her lobe a long, slow pull with his teeth before nuzzling the sensitive flesh. “I want to take you back to my room and touch you, I want to watch you come, I want to taste you, I want to take you and feel you when you let go again.”

How was she supposed to say no? As if she’d ever want to say no to Ben.

Mutely she nodded, giving him permission to do whatever his wicked mind could come up with. She gasped out a laugh when he took her hand and jerked her unceremoniously from the dance floor, barely pausing long enough to toss money on the table and grab her purse. Before she could speak, he had her in his rented car, hurrying along the busy streets toward his hotel. She barely took in the passing lights and buildings as they sped past—his hands were far too much of a distraction as they rubbed up and down her thighs, his fingers moving tantalizingly close to her already damp crotch. She tried to wriggle closer, desperate to have some sort of relief, but he apparently wanted to torture her.

“Not much longer.” His voice was rough, sounding as needy as she felt. “Oh, God, Rachel, not much longer.”

She moaned and bit her bottom lip, the fact that he was as turned on as she was drove her passion up another notch. She reached out, stroked up his leg and felt the muscles beneath her fingertips tighten. A moment later she trailed her hand up as she leaned across the leather seat and cuddled against his throat, inhaling his warm scent just before licking the heated skin behind his ear. She nipped his earlobe and cupped his engorged cock.

“Rachel, if you keep that up, I’ll...oh, holy hell...” He sucked in a gulp of air.

He whipped into an empty spot of the parking garage of the hotel, slamming the car into park in the same moment that he ripped the keys from the ignition. She yelped as he

jerked her across the seat, popping the seatbelt lock a split second before it would have strangled her.

He pulled her through the lobby, his jaw set in a tight line as the bright lights overhead glared down on them. Her vision was glazed with red passion when he led her into the elevator and punched the number for his floor. The doors had barely slid closed before he grabbed her and pushed her against the mirrored wall. His mouth covered hers, swallowing her lips and sucking her tongue into his wet orifice. She fell into him, her body molding against his as his hands fisted in her hair.

She'd never had this kind of reaction to any other man, ever, and the skyrocketing heat that scorched through her veins was enough to make her forget there had been anyone but Ben. She lifted her leg, let it drape over his waist as she rubbed her swollen center against his rigid shaft.

"God, woman, the things you make me do," he panted against her lips.

A moment later his palm smacked over the red stop button of the elevator, leaving them suspended mid-floor. She didn't care, couldn't care. With his hands on her, skimming up her ribcage, grasping her breasts through her sky-blue pullover shirt, she couldn't even reason out how in the world she was still breathing.

The heat built quickly as he ravaged her mouth, and she wasn't at all surprised when her jeans seemed to simply disappear off her body. A split second later she felt his bare phallus nudge against her exposed folds, the sensation of his near invasion sending a tremble through each inch of her body. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

He pressed her against the side of the elevator, propping her on the thick handrail that ran around the wall. With a smoldering look, he sank into her, his fingers digging into her hips as she clung to his forearms. She felt her walls stretch, the liquid that coated her easing his way inside. A rumble escaped him as he held her still for a moment, giving them both time to savor the feel of their joining. But it wasn't enough, not nearly enough, and her hips began to move of their own volition.

He went with her, his cock sliding in and out at a frantic pace that had her panting and bouncing. The smell of their sex and their sweat began to saturate the air of the small elevator, the scent familiar and lust inducing as it pervaded her senses.

Her body began to vibrate with the first tremors of orgasm, her limbs shivering with tightened muscles and desire.

"Ben, Ben, please..." Her voice sounded raw and needy, even to herself.

He answered her plea by slipping out of her. Her cry of protest became a gasp of delight as his mouth covered her aching folds. His fingers parted her, giving his tongue access to her swollen nub. He began to lick her, his butterfly light touch flickering and laving until she thought she'd die. Her knees quaked as her muscles tensed in anticipation of climax. Then his fingers were sliding into her, pushing and prodding as he stroked her into mindless oblivion. She shattered, fell into fine edged pieces as her hands gripped the rail and she chanted his name. He kept his mouth on her until she'd quieted, then stood and brought her legs back around his waist.

Her arms snaked around his shoulders as he eased back inside of her, the feeling of his heavy shaft exquisite in the aftermath of her release. He held her for a moment before he began moving, pressing in, pulling away, stretching her as his teeth bit into her shoulder. She was surprised when the familiar throbbing began again. The desire was there, thrumming between her thighs as he kept his pace, the brutal rhythm pushing her

cleanly through the ceiling of another climax.

It rolled over her in sudden, sharp waves, nearly suffocating her with its heat and intensity. She cried out, her body shaking as a world of color exploded behind her closed eyelids. She felt his cock as he rammed inside of her, widening her even as she burst into one long flame of completion.

She was floating, balanced somewhere between heaven and earth, when she heard his first strangled growls. She grasped him around the neck, hanging on to him as he plowed inside of her one last time. She felt his shaft push against her womb, reveled in the feel of his hot, long eruptions as he spent himself.

They stayed tangled and breathless for several minutes, wrapped in each other to the exclusion of the rest of the world. It was the muted sound of a sedate ring that finally caught Rachel's attention.

"I think they're trying to reach us," she said against his shoulder.

His answer was a grunt. She laughed softly and gently pulled away, her eyes going down to where her jeans and black high cut panties hung off her ankle. God only knew where her shoe had ended up.

"I guess I'd better answer that," he said with a sigh. "Then as soon as I can convince them that we're fine, I'm taking you to my room where I can do exactly what I had planned before we left the club."

"Do I even want to ask?" she teased.

"A bath, sweetheart." He lifted her chin with a tender tug. "I'm going to put you in the Jacuzzi bath, with a ton of bubbles, and I'm then I'm going to clean every crack and crevice on your delectable body."

"You...you are?"

"Oh yes. I am," he replied, his voice pitched low and predatory. "And then I'm going to have a hell of a good time dirtying every part I washed."

Chapter Eleven

Guy juggled his take-out bag from Thaa's as he strolled down the sunny street, his mind preoccupied with his friend and her growing predicament. Right now she was off on an island after being swept away the afternoon before, ensconced in a hotel bedroom with a man that was crazy about her—and she was too damned stubborn and insecure to see it.

She was going to hurt herself, he could see it coming from a thousand miles away. Rachel had set herself up for another major heartbreak with her plan to protect herself. If he thought she would listen to reason, he would have tried to talk her out of this 'affair.' But pushing Rachel Connelly was like waving a raw steak underneath the nose of hungry lion and expecting not to be bitten. No, she would continue with this arrangement until Ben either left her when his business was done, or he figured the whole damned thing out. God help them all if his friend's lover found out what was going on before Rachel told him. He was very much afraid the fallout would be on par with the last world war.

Well, there was nothing he could do right now, Guy reasoned. All he could do at this moment was hope Rachel was having a good time, and that all hell wouldn't break loose while she was on her little getaway.

Guy was too busy turning his thoughts back to the prints in his darkroom to notice the man who had stopped in front of him. He plowed into a solid body with a loud 'oomph,' cursing silently as he tried to keep his fish from smacking onto the sidewalk.

"Sorry," he mumbled, looking up...and meeting a familiar pair of hazel eyes. "Patrick."

The other man gave him an assessing look, his patrician features set in easy lines as the breeze lifted his light brown hair from his forehead. The man he loved, the man he wished he could stop wanting. A spiral of razor sharp desire lacerated his gut with bull's eye precision. His heart squeezed so hard that he nearly choked with it. God, how could it physically hurt to see him? It was ridiculous, really, but there it was.

"Ben, I didn't know you were back in Athens."

"Yeah, I finished my assignment early. I had no idea you were in Greece." *Easy*, Guy thought, *remember to sound as relaxed and act as unaffected as Patrick is*.

"Working on something here?"

"Just covering an archeological dig for *National Geographic*," Patrick said, sticking his hands in the pockets of his khaki pants.

"Nice assignment. Well, um, I'd better..." Guy held up the brown bag in his hand as if in explanation. He hated using an excuse to get away. He hated being so weak. But, unlike Rachel, he wasn't anywhere near being ready to get close to Patrick again. Not yet at least.

The other man nodded but didn't move, instead giving him a long, intense look. Finally, he said, "I've been thinking about...about Sicily..."

"Yeah, we got a great story there," Guy interrupted.

"Great story, sure," Patrick drawled. "Look, Guy, what happened..."

He shrugged negligently. "Hey, don't worry about it. We had great time, didn't we?"

The brunette man nodded, his gaze never wavering from Guy's face. "I did have a

great time with you. And that's what I need..."

Much to his relief, Patrick's phone rang, breaking off his thought mid-sentence. Taking advantage of the moment, Guy eased around the other man and tried to lose himself in the busy crowd. No, he wasn't ready for a confrontation with the man he kept thinking about, the man who seemed to have taken up permanent residence in his thoughts, matching curtains and all. He needed time, he needed space...and most of all, he needed to consider what might happen if he ever let Patrick finish that sentence.

* * * *

Rachel stood on the postage stamp sized balcony of the hotel room and watched the late August moon rise over the island of Zante. She'd been thrilled when she had found out she'd be able to have a long weekend break from the opera, and even more ecstatic when she found out that Ben had planned this little excursion. On the street below, a crowd of people danced in the streets, celebrating the anniversary of the island's patron saint, Dionysus. The music rose up into the night sky, echoing off the buildings around her. The other balconies were dotted with curious onlookers, all laughing and staring down at the festivities. This was exactly what she needed, and Ben had instinctively known that.

She sighed and turned her attention back to the luxurious hotel room, listening for his movements. She heard the shower shut off and smiled to herself. She could still feel that connection they'd always had, the slim silver thread that drew her to him, that told her where he was at any given time. She'd thought it had been severed years ago, but here it was, as bright and clear as ever. It was completely disconcerting.

They'd been having their affair now for over a month, but still he showed no sign of tiring of her or their arrangement. Whenever she asked about Slater Enterprises, or questioned him about the progress he was making with Le Dolce, he changed the subject. It was odd, this feeling of reconnection, and it was going to break her heart when he left.

She'd tried to keep herself from opening to him, from letting him into her life too much, but she hadn't been able to succeed. He was always there, whether physically or in the spiritual sense. There was always a bouquet of fresh, crisp lilies in her dressing room after every performance, he made sure to be in the little pastry shop every Saturday morning, and there were the calls at night when they weren't together, his husky voice telling her goodnight over the line, wishing her sweet dreams. It felt as if he were courting her instead of having a tempestuous affair with her.

Her thoughts scattered when she noticed the lights that had been spilling from the room had suddenly disappeared. She jumped when she felt his hands on her hips, holding her bottom still in his grip.

"You wore the little blue sundress I like," he whispered from behind the billowing gauze curtains.

"Um, well, it's, uh, it's warm," she said, not willing to admit she'd brought the dress for him.

"Ummm...then remind me to thank the weather gods," he chuckled.

She laughed softly, enjoying the feel of his palms splayed across her hips. His fingers trailed up to the small of her back, bending her just a bit further down against the railing.

"Do you know how much I want you right now?" he asked huskily. "I was in the

shower, wishing you were in there with me, imaging what I could do to you...what you could do to me...remembering our night in the bath..."

Rachel felt her breathing accelerate, her body flushing with need. It was crazy, this pull he had on her, the way he made her lose control. She knew that he could make her do anything just to have him touch her.

She shivered when one of his hands roamed from her hip to skim down her thigh, pushing the skirt of her dress up as he caressed the tender, quivering skin. He sought her out, groaning in pleasure when he rubbed against her already damp panties.

"Oh, God, Rachel, you are so damn hot," he murmured, squeezing her pliant bottom with both hands now.

"Ben, ohhhh..." she whispered, trying to keep her features schooled so their neighbors wouldn't guess what he was doing behind the curtains.

He took a step closer to her, snuggling his arousal, free from clothing, against the juncture of her thighs.

"I want you, Rachel, I want you right now," he said. "I want to take you just like this. No one can see me, not with the light off, but they can see you. You'll have to be quiet, you'll have to be careful or we'll be caught. But I promise you that you'll never forget what it feels like, that you'll fantasize about this for the rest of your life. You want me to do it, don't you Rachel? You want me give that to you...say you do."

Her body was quivering, her thighs moist just from the thought of him taking her from behind while the rest of the world around them celebrated, unknowing. She had never thought the idea of something like that would turn her on, but it did, more than she'd ever imagined it could.

"Yes," she rasped, her throat dry with need.

"Yes, what, Rachel?"

"Please, Ben, please take me right here," she begged, biting her bottom lip as he slid his length against her now blazing apex.

He growled in answer, then gently rolled her silky underwear down her legs. When they were discarded, he moved against her again, and this time her bare buttocks rubbed against his naked torso. She realized he had never dressed after his shower, that he was completely nude in the room behind her. She sighed over the thought, then held back the urge to moan.

He rested his stiff erection against her inner thigh as his fingers stroked down her rounded bottom, working their way to the curls between her legs. She heard him suck in his breath when his palm cupped her, her engorged folds tightening as he held her. He curled his hand against the damp flesh, sending her blood into a wild rush through her veins. Her back bowed, her nipples hardening against the cotton of her dress as she arched into him. With a decisive motion, he slid a finger just inside her. Gently, she began rocking over the pad of his finger, shuddering each time it flicked over the hard nub between her legs. He worked her carefully, gently pushing and pulling to maximize her pleasure, and she readily let him set the pace.

The people below them whistled and sang to the loud music, whirling and dancing as Ben made love to her with his hand. The sounds became nothing more than a muted background to the mad pumping of her heart. She was building quickly, balancing precariously on the edge of an orgasm, the promise of her climax curling headily around her.

Rachel almost cried when his hand disappeared; she was so damn close that her body hummed with frustrated anger. Then she felt him slip slowly inside of her, filling her as he dipped inch by inch between her swollen walls. Her eyes rolled back in sheer pleasure, her need peaked now as he sheathed himself completely and stood, unmoving. It was an exquisite feeling, his rigidly stiff cock expanding her as he hid behind the curtains. She wanted, needed, more. She rotated her hips, trying desperately to force him to move, but he only chuckled.

"Oh, no you don't, sweetheart. This is going to last longer than two seconds," he whispered.

She leaned forward over the railing, curling her knuckles against the warm metal as she waited impatiently.

Finally, he began to move with carefully measured strokes, his length rasping her tender inner skin. She swallowed another moan, and her lids fluttered closed, her body melting and quickening at the same time. Colors danced behind her eyelids, swirling shades of red and silvers mixing and eddying as he sank into her. She wanted to thrust harder, drive the tempo to a quicker, more satisfying rhythm, but she couldn't, not when she was surrounded by strangers.

He continued the torturous pace. She heard him groan as he glided in and out, pulling her release closer and closer to the surface. Her walls tightened and squeezed around his thick shaft as he slid between her swollen lips. She barely held onto a scream, wanted to find the orgasm that was clawing for release, but at the same time she wanted him to keep the game going, to fight off his orgasm for as long as he could so she could enjoy his wild ride. She heard him growl deep in his throat, just before he smacked her bottom lightly, sending ripples through her sensitive skin and straight into her already thick blood.

"Ah..." she gasped before she could stop herself.

Her one moment of lost control was enough to send him over the edge. She listened as he struggled to keep his screams muffled in his throat, knowing his orgasmic sounds would bring everyone's attention to their tiny balcony. Ben clung to her hips, holding her tightly as he rammed once, twice, into her, then seated himself firmly inside of her, the waves of his release surging against her walls.

She waited for a moment, trying to allow him a few seconds to compose himself. But the spring was wound so tightly inside of her, her need to reach climax caused her to wriggle against him with desperate little gesticulations.

"Let me help you," he whispered, pulling her past the blowing curtains and into the room.

In one sure, swift move, he sat her on the plush bed then eased her back so that her legs dangled over the side. Before she knew what was happening, his hot, searching mouth was on her, his tongue laving her engorged skin in a quest to find her hardened center. The moment he brushed her clit, she bowed almost completely off the bed, her heaving breath caught in her lungs. White, scorching electricity speared through her, arching her feet as her toes curled into points. The bundle of colors and sensations merged into one, scalding her, slamming their fists into her body. She hissed and twisted, urging him on as her hips angled closer to him.

"Be—Ben!"

Her voice bounced off the walls as she called for him, incoherent in her passion as she poised on the high summit of a bone-shattering orgasm. She moved with him, her

hips bucking as he pushed her toward the ultimate end, his tongue and mouth working her expertly. She felt herself straining, reaching, and then he slid two fingers inside of her, breaking the thin thread holding her to the earth with one thrust. She yelled his name, just as he had promised, the noise nearly incoherent as her voice rose to a high crescendo.

She panted and sobbed in sexual release, her head thrashing back and forth as she fell and splintered apart. The world cascaded around her in full, hot waves, pulling her along as the shudders eased. She felt Ben gentle his touch as she came back down, waiting until her back relaxed and her limbs turned to jelly before letting her go. Slowly, he stood, his eyes seeming to devour each inch of her sprawled body.

Laughing softly, he gathered her in his arms and arranged their sweating bodies on the spacious bed. She loved the weight of him against her, the way his heart sounded loud and steady against her ear as she tucked her head under his chin. She had missed this, hadn't even realized what a cold, distant world she'd fallen into until they'd found each other again. That was why she had taken advantage of him by lying to him about her relationship with Guy. At this moment she could fool herself into thinking that he was wooing her again, trying to show her how good they still were together. What she wouldn't give to know that this would end with them together, forever.

"Rachel..." His soft voice scattered her increasingly depressing thoughts.

"Ummm?" she murmured against his skin, afraid to speak for fear that her feelings would bleed cleanly through.

"Rachel, I...I, uh..."

A quick, loud, pop and hiss interrupted him. She wasn't sure what he was going to say, but she didn't want anything to ruin this perfect moment. It was a scene she'd keep in her heart once he was gone, and she didn't want anything marring it. She was afraid he'd say something about Guy, or about his trip back to Breckenridge, and those topics would definitely scar her memory. Instead, she held onto what they'd just done, to the sensations coursing through her like warm mercury, and focused on the here and now.

Ignoring the niggling fear that Ben might ruin their night unwittingly, she sighed contentedly and spun in his arms so that she was spooned against him, her eyes on the still open terrace doors. The glittering shimmer of bright blue filled the room and Rachel chuckled.

"The fireworks have started."

She felt him let out a long breath, as if he was letting go of whatever it was he wanted to say.

"Wrong, sweetheart, the fireworks started about twenty minutes ago," he teased, wrapping an errant strand of her long hair around his knuckles. "But we can certainly see if we can keep up with the ones in the sky."

She turned back, the sly, sexy sensuality he always elicited sending a thrill through her system. Moving with slow, deliberate action, she straddled his lap and stared into his sparkling green eyes.

"Hmm, why don't we see if we can?"

* * * *

Rachel leaned against the wall beside the front door, sipping her coffee as she watched Guy stack his camera equipment in preparation for his trip. She'd only just made it in from her long weekend with Ben when she'd picked up the message for Guy about a

freelance opportunity. Of course, she'd only given her friend half of the message. If he knew the whole truth, he wouldn't have taken the job.

"So, you'll have the apartment to yourself for a few days. I suppose you and Ben are going to make good use of the time." Guy straightened himself and sent her an amused look. "I swear, I don't think newlyweds are as sexually driven as you two."

"What can I say? I'm irresistible." Crossing her free arm over her bathrobe-wrapped waist, she cocked her head to the side and flashed him a grin. "You're just jealous."

"Yeah, well, Ben's a good looking man," he replied with a cheeky wink.

She laughed and shook her head, handing her friend her mug and watching as he took a long, fortifying drink. She had a quick moment of guilt, but the urge to tell him what he was walking into quickly passed. After all, hadn't she warned him that she would be sticking her nose into his love life?

"Well, while you two are having fun chasing each other around the apartment, think of poor me being drenched in London, working my ass off," he lamented as he handed back her coffee.

"Yeah, right, poor, pathetic you." She gave him a hard hug. "I'm gonna miss you."

"I'm sure Ben won't."

Rachel sighed and pulled away, knowing her friend was gearing up for a lecture. There was no way out of it.

"You have to tell him the truth, Rachel. He's going to find out."

"No, he won't," she insisted, ignoring the flips and knots of her stomach. "He'll be leaving soon, going back to the States and to...Marianne. He'll forget about me soon enough."

"You think you have this all figured out, don't you?" When she didn't answer, he simply shook his head. "For a smart woman, you're acting like an idiot."

"Oh, let's not start name calling," she warned. "I seem to recall someone who's been acting like a jackass when it comes to a certain man named Patrick."

He quirked an eyebrow and twisted his lips in irritation. "Fine, set and match, Rachel. Just...be careful, okay? I don't think this is going to end the way you believe it will."

"The point is, it will end, Guy." She reached up and brushed a stray lock of black hair from his eyes. "Let's not argue. You're getting ready to leave, and I'm going to go into clam sauce withdrawal."

"There's a container in the freezer." He gave her a wink. "I made enough for two."

She laughed and lifted herself to her toes, brushing his cheek with a kiss. "You're the best, Guy."

"That's what they say." The doorbell rang and Guy gave her another quick hug. "I'll be back in a few days. Take care of yourself, Rachel, and try not to slaughter any songs while I'm gone."

She shoved him in the shoulder as he reached over to open the door. A harried, burly man nodded in greeting, and she took a step back to give the men room to gather Guy's bags. She was going to miss his company...but the apartment was going to be her own little paradise with Ben, and that thought alone lifted her mood.

Chapter Twelve

Guy ran a tired hand over his face as he slumped in a sumptuous chair of his hotel room. Blindly, he stared out at the night sky, its stars obliterated by the city lights of London. He wanted to go home. Not because he missed his friend, or because he missed Athens, but because he wanted to be hundreds of miles away from here...and Patrick.

When Rachel had told him that the editor from *Technology Explored* had called to offer him the freelance job of photographing the inside of England's latest and greatest warship, he had jumped at the opportunity. What he hadn't known, at least until he'd gotten here, was that they had hired Patrick to write the article...and he had a terrible, sneaking suspicion that Rachel had known all along. How in the hell was he supposed to deal with a situation he'd tried so hard to stay away from? He'd pled headaches for the past few days, avoiding Patrick's invitations to lunches and dinners, even though they were supposed to be business meals. If he hadn't known Rachel was having the time of her life playing house with Ben, he might have been tempted to call the whole assignment off.

Before he could let out another frustrated sigh, a staccato knock sounded on the door. Thinking it was room service with his dinner, Guy strode across the room, a scowl still etched on his face. When he swung open the barrier, he found himself gazing at the man he'd tried so hard to avoid, looking tousled and hectic.

"Patrick."

"Guy, can I come in?" the other man asked, brushing past him. "I think we need to talk."

"Look, if this is about the article..."

"Screw the article," Patrick bit out, his hazel eyes pinning him. "This isn't about work, this isn't about pictures or titles or any other damn thing that has to do with the magazine. This is about *us*."

"Us?" Guy stared at him, his heart hammering as he tried to sort out his now raging thoughts. "There's not an us."

"Like hell there isn't." The other man ran a frustrated hand through his hair, disheveling it even more. "There's been an us even before Sicily. When we worked together before, you felt the spark as much as I did. Don't try to lie about it, Guy, because I felt it, too."

"I never said I didn't." Guy crossed his arms over his chest defensively. "As I recall, I wasn't the one with the problem."

Patrick had the grace to look ashamed. "I made a mistake."

"I'm sorry that night was a mistake for you."

"No, that's not..." Patrick let out a long, irritated breath as his gaze held steady on Guy. "Maybe mistake was the wrong word."

Guy simply lifted his eyebrow, waiting for Patrick to continue. If he was going to be forced into this confrontation, then he damn sure wasn't going to be the only one squirming and stuttering over answers.

"Look, Guy, that night...I wasn't expecting it. It wasn't something that I thought...I don't regret it."

“But you don’t want to talk about it, do you? I mean, you weren’t exactly telling everyone how happy you were about it. As I recall, I woke up to an empty bed, and then an empty response when I saw you that morning at breakfast.”

“Guy, I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Patrick said softly.

“Fine. Now, leave.”

“If that’s what you want.”

No, no, it wasn’t. What he wanted was for Patrick to tell him that he loved him, for them to actually be a couple, to go out, to show affection, to have a life together. But Patrick hadn’t been ready for that kind of relationship before, and the way he was acting now, so confused and baffled, only made him believe that the other man was still unsure.

Patrick’s hand was on the doorknob when he turned suddenly. “I think about you all the time. I think about Sicily, about the times before that. About how good we were together. I miss what we could have been...what we should have been. Think about that, Guy.”

Guy stood silently as the other man eased out of the room, leaving him to the stillness and the sound of his own twisting heart.

* * * *

Rachel stood under the shower spray and smiled contentedly. They’d had the apartment to themselves for three days now since Guy went off on his last minute assignment. The past forty-eight hours had been a little taste of heaven. Still, part of her kept creeping up to remind her that it was all based on a lie. In those moments, she felt horrible for deceiving him like this, even if he’d jumped at the chance to have her to himself for so long with her supposed lover out of town. She couldn’t decide if she was angry with him for so willingly playing along with their affair, or if she was happy that he was taking advantage of the opportunity. Of course, he’d had practice sneaking around with Marianne. She’d been engaged for a good six months before her affair with Ben was outed by the local gossips.

Scowling at the fluffy sponge in her hand, she imagined the blonde’s face and squeezed mercilessly. While Rachel had been sobbing in her Cheerios, Marianne had been fucking Ben. She’d been sharing his bed, his bath, every damn flat and not so flat surface in his house...and probably his office as well. She’d bided her time and struck when she knew that Rachel was well and truly away and had no hold over Ben anymore. Rachel was so caught up in her anger that she didn’t hear Ben come into the bathroom and drop his robe to the floor. She might have ripped the unsuspecting sponge in two if he hadn’t climbed stealthily in behind her and run his hands around her soapy waist.

“Ummm, just what I was dreaming about this morning,” he murmured in her ear. “A shower with a hot woman.”

Her anger immediately went the way of the draining water. She leaned back against him, snuggling her bottom against the already rigid arousal between his legs. She smiled in satisfaction when she heard him groan and felt his head drop to her shoulder.

“I can never get enough of you, Rachel,” he mumbled against her water drizzled shoulder, nipping it lightly.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she laughed, spinning herself in his arms.

He rested his hands on her hips and stared at her with hot eyes. “Did I say it was?”

She made a feminine noise in her throat and leaned up to capture his lips. Their

mouths fused together, his taste mingling with hers as their tongues met and tangled. Immediately heat shot up her legs, down from her head, and melted together to pool in the juncture of her thighs.

Ben reached around her and she could hear him take the bottle of her raspberry scented liquid soap from the shelf. He intensified their kiss, sending more jolts through her system as his hot, now wet body molded to hers. Carefully, he rubbed his hand down her back, palming small circles on her skin as he worked the gel into a lather.

Rachel felt her blood pressure shoot up. His hands, so large, so strong, gently massaged her skin, sliding over her body with slick ease. When his fingers played down her ribs and eased over her bottom, she drew a deep breath into her lungs.

"You like that, huh?" he teased. "Let's see if you like this, too."

His palms moved from her butt to her hips, then skimmed up her ribs, hesitating a tantalizing moment before cupping her full breasts. The soap on his hands seemed to heighten the sensations, causing her body to swirl with warm, dark awareness as her eyes rolled back in pleasure.

When he flicked her hardened nipples, she hissed in raw desire. The pad of his fingertips rubbed them again and she felt his eyes on her, watching her wanton reaction. Then his thumbs took over, causing constant slick friction against the nubs as they ran in tiny circles over the raised skin.

"Ben..." she breathed, her body quivering under the hot spray.

"I love to hear you say my name when you're like this."

She whimpered in protest when his hands slid from her breasts, only to gasp when he firmly cupped her engorged slit, caressing the small patch of curls.

"Open for me," he whispered.

For a moment she was too caught up in her passion to think. Then he repeated his request. A thought skittered into her mind, and when she cracked her eyes open she saw this gaze flare and knew that her intentions must be glowing in her eyes.

"Rachel?"

"Shhh." She ran one long fingernail down his chest.

He groaned in surprise and pleasure when she leaned into him, her mouth following the trail her finger had blazed. When she sank to her knees she heard him gasp and felt it all the way to her toes. She remembered taking him this way, knew how good he felt and tasted against her tongue. His body trembled in anticipation and she smiled to herself. Slowly, she took him in, moaning as his hard shaft glided into her mouth. She sucked gently, drawing a long, stuttering sigh from his throat. She continued to administer her own special brand of torture, speeding up then slowing down, driving him mad as she held him on the peak of his release.

He pulled her up, jerking her hard against his soaking skin. Slamming his mouth on hers, he lifted her wet body, wrapping her legs around his waist like a human vice, and carried her to her bedroom.

Rachel kept her eyes shut, absorbing the shudders of their locked bodies, the blood in her veins pounding thickly with desire. She clawed at his neck and shoulders, begging in her own silent way for physical satisfaction. When he spun them around, she expected a quick fall to her mattress, but instead he sank into the plush reading chair in front of the fireplace. The warmth from the embers embedded itself into her already heated skin. She hadn't felt so completely like an inferno since the first time they'd made love and he'd

taught her, very thoroughly, exactly what her body was capable of.

Pulling away, she gave him a wicked look. "You are an imaginative man, Ben Slater."

He moaned as her folds ground against his erection, her crease so slick that he slid with easy strokes. His fingers dug into her bottom, pulling her closer as he maneuvered himself into a more comfortable position. Leaning his lips into her neck, he licked up the long, wet column of her skin to her ear.

"That's because I have a sexy woman to satisfy," he teased, nipping her earlobe. "You will let me satisfy you, Rachel, won't you?"

"Ooooo...oh, yes," she breathed, melting into his wet body.

"Because I'm the only one who can make you feel this. I'm the only one who knows exactly what you like and exactly what you need, right, sweetheart?" he prodded, tasting the delicate skin of her collarbone.

"Yes, Ben, only you."

He groaned again, and gently lifted her, supporting her weight for a moment before slowly sliding her down over his shaft, impaling her.

She whimpered as he filled her, his arousal pushing and stretching her. She sat still for endless seconds, her walls expanding as she adjusted to the new position. Waves of pleasure coursed through her, rolling from her core and out into her trembling limbs. Riding the waves of dark desire, she began to rock back and forth in long, slow movements.

Ben held onto her hips as she slid up and down, her back arching as she made little gasps of passion. Her breasts thrust into the air, her nipples hardening as torrents of molten sensation swamped her. He gave a low, feral snarl before he latched onto one dark tip and sucked. She felt her walls squeeze involuntarily at the sudden assault, tightening around his cock.

Her head began to spin and she feared she'd pass out in his arms. His hardened length barely left her body, rubbing persistently against her painfully aroused core. Her climax began to coil deep in her stomach, the tendrils of release snaking out to snap and tease her with the promise of an orgasm. Picking up the pace, she rode him harder, clutching his head to her breast as she moved rapidly.

She hissed and moaned, and her rhythm staggered as she was pushed to the edge. Suddenly her orgasm rushed over her like a scorching wave of sensual lava, burning her with pleasure as it coursed down and through her body.

"Oh, Ben! Oh, oh, Ben!" She recited his name like a blessing, her nails biting into his shoulders as she clung to him.

His fingers dug further into her hips, slamming her down in one final, hard push as he buried himself against her womb. With a loud, satisfied shout he emptied himself, gripping her as his body arched and tensed.

Slowly, they descended back into the conscious world. Ben grunted as Rachel collapsed against his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. He laid his cheek against her damp, tangled hair and she felt her heart melt. What she wouldn't give to be his, just his. She loved him, she had always loved him, that hadn't changed...and it never would. But thinking that way was only going to serve to hurt her even more when he climbed on the airplane and left her behind.

"I am so tired." She snuggled closer, purposely burying her bruised emotions.

“Um, gee, I wonder why?” he joked, running a soothing hand up and down her back.

She simply grunted, ignoring his question as her eyes drifted shut. He took pity on her and laid her on the plush rug in front of the fire. He pulled the brightly colored quilt from her bed and covered her with it, laughing softly with amusement as she burrowed into the soft material.

“You stay here and I’ll go get us some coffee,” he said.

She nodded with her eyes closed and sighed in utter contentment.

Ben threw on his jeans, which had been lying on the floor since the morning before, and wandered out toward the kitchen.

He stopped short when he saw Guy standing in front of the coffee maker, grumbling irritably.

Guy turned when he realized someone was watching him. Giving Ben a groggy smile, he looked him up and down and then captured his startled stare.

“Good morning, Ben. Would you like some coffee?”

“Uh...I, uh...you’re home,” Ben stuttered, his heart pounding as he waited for the other man to physically assault him.

“Yeah, I got back around three this morning.” Guy turned back to rattle the top of the coffeemaker. “Damn thing won’t cooperate. Please tell me you know how to make this work.”

“Well, I...uh, yeah.” Ben said, not quite sure how to take Rachel’s lover’s casual attitude.

Moving into the kitchen, he waited until Guy was on the other side of the bar before saying anything. “Rachel and I didn’t hear you come in.”

“No, I imagine you were too busy,” Guy mumbled, running his hand under his robe and rubbing his bare chest.

“You, uh...listen, you’ll have to forgive me, but I don’t understand your attitude,” Ben admitted, turning away from the coffeemaker as it began to hiss and spit. “I mean, when Rachel and I were together, I would have killed any man for just suggesting they should have an affair with her.”

He watched Guy let out a long breath and wasn’t sure what to make of the sound. Was he irritated, annoyed, or royally pissed? He’d never been in a situation like this before—hell, he’d never even considered that he could be. But here he was, making coffee for the live-in lover of the woman he loved. He liked to think he was as progressive as the next man, but this was an extremely bizarre predicament.

“Well, Rachel and I...we have a, uh, a special relationship,” Guy said.

“I’ll say.” Ben snorted and crossed his arms over his bare chest. “Can we talk honestly?”

Guy nodded and motioned his hand through the air, silently telling him to continue.

“I still love Rachel,” Ben said bluntly. “I’ve always loved her, even when she got on the bus to leave Breckenridge, even when she was traveling with Giana LaRussa...even when she thought I didn’t want a lifelong commitment with her. There hasn’t been a day that’s gone by that I haven’t thought about her, wondered about her...dreamed about her. I can give her a good life, Guy; I can give her everything she’s always wanted. I know you want her to be happy, so do I, and *I* can make her happy.”

“Are you saying that you want to take her away from me?” Guy asked, his lips lifting into something between a smirk and condescension.

Ben felt himself bristle and fought down the urge to punch the other man. “Look, I love her, and it’s obvious that you don’t. I’ll leave the ultimate decision up to Rachel, but, yeah, I’m gonna ask her to stay with me, exclusively...for good. I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

Silence hung like a heavy, suffocating blanket in the air, neither man moving as their eyes clashed. The ringing of the doorbell broke the tension, evoking a long-suffering sigh from Guy.

“What now?” he muttered. He slid off the stool and strode to the door. When he flung it open, he froze in place, his back going straight and rigid.

“Guy, I...you left without telling me.”

Ben lifted an eyebrow as a male voice floated into the apartment. A moment later, a handsome-looking man pushed his way in.

The stranger kept all his attention on Guy as he stopped and turned. “Listen, what we said the other night, what we talked about...I can’t just let it go, okay? I have to know how you feel...”

The tall, athletically built brunette who had interrupted his confrontation with Guy broke off, his gaze landing on Ben. Ben shifted his weight, watching the other two men with narrowed eyes.

“Oh, I—I’m sorry. I didn’t know...well, I guess that answers my question,” the stranger muttered, then turned to leave.

“No, no, Patrick, wait!” Guy called, chasing after the other man. “Damn it!”

He turned to Ben, the look on his face telling him the truth about who he really was.

“I have to go, I can’t...you need to talk to Rachel. You have to tell her exactly what you told me...and then you need to listen to her.” Guy grabbed his coat from the overstuffed chair and ran out the door.

Ben watched him go with dawning comprehension and felt his temper begin to rise. Yeah, he and Rachel most definitely needed to talk.

Chapter Thirteen

Guy caught up with Patrick just as he was rounding the corner. Stretching out his hand, he grabbed the other man and spun him around.

"What you saw, it wasn't what you think," he panted. "Ben is Rachel's boyfriend, not mine."

Patrick swallowed audibly and cast his hazel eyes down to Guy's bare feet. "Okay, he's not involved with you. I guess that means I don't have to find him on some dark street corner and threaten him."

Guy stared at him, not sure how to take that last comment. He was adamantly opposed to unneeded violence, and yet the thought of someone fighting for him sent an odd shiver of dark satisfaction through him.

"Patrick, why are you here? Why did you come?"

He watched as the man he loved turned tortured eyes to him, the look on his face more eloquent than words.

"What I said to you in London... I meant it," Patrick confessed in a raw voice. "I think about you all the time. I can't do anything without wondering where you are, if you're all right...if you've found someone else. That night in Sicily meant more to me than I could admit at the time. You were—are an amazing man, Guy, and frankly, you scared the hell out of me. I wanted you so badly, and then I had you, and I was afraid...well, I guess I was afraid that you didn't, you couldn't, feel the same way for me as I do for you. I wasn't sure what to do with the feelings you stirred up, so the next morning...the next morning I pretended not to care." He sighed. "I'm not proud of myself, Guy. What I did was cowardly and just plain wrong, but at the time I had the idiotic thought that I had to protect myself. I didn't want to risk my heart, but the problem was...I'd already risked it when we made love. I put it out there, and you took it."

Guy could only stare at him, completely at a loss for words. It was like Patrick had reached into his fondest desires and had pulled out exactly what he needed and wanted to hear. "Are you saying you...that you love me?"

"Completely and miserably."

Guy was stiff for a moment, then slowly, surprisingly, a nearly hysterical chuckle bubbled in his throat. "I can't believe this! I can't...oh, my God, I can't believe this! I thought...I thought you were *ashamed* of being involved with me...with a man. I thought you were trying to stifle or hide what could have been a relationship."

"You thought I was *ashamed* of you? Are you crazy? How could any man be ashamed to be with you?" Patrick asked, his face incredulous.

"Oh, trust me, they're out there. It happened to me once before, someone hiding our relationship out of fear, and I knew I couldn't do that to myself again. I thought...I thought you were afraid of everyone knowing that you were involved with a man."

"And I was afraid I wasn't good enough for you, that you would hurt me." Patrick shook his head. "But none of that is true, Guy. I hurt you because of irrational fear, and I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry. I need you in my life—I don't think I can keep pretending I'm just fine when inside I'm only half a man. I love you, Guy, I love you, and I won't ever hide that."

To prove it, Patrick stopped a passing pedestrian. "I love this man," he said, then moved on to the next unsuspecting person. "I'm in love with this man," he told the elderly lady, who gave him a sweet smile.

"How nice," she replied, giving them both pats on their arms.

"I love Guy Nomikus!" Patrick shouted, then pulled Guy into his arms. "I love you."

Guy leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on the other man's lips. "I love you, too, Patrick. I love you, too."

* * * *

Rachel was lulling happily on the carpet in front of the fireplace, her body sated and relaxed. She didn't realize Ben was back in the room until he spoke.

"I bring sustenance," he said softly, moving to sit in the chair they'd made love on.

"Mmm." Rachel sat up, holding out her hand in request. She sighed as he slid the warm cup into her palm, then took a slow, sweet sip of the only drink that could drive her eyes open.

"You," she murmured, "make the perfect cup of coffee."

"Yes, well, you're biased. I'll wait until Guy has a cup and ask him what he thinks."

His statement, said so casually and coolly, brought her to full attention. The thick white mug stopped halfway to her mouth as she turned to assess him. He leaned back in the plush chair staring at the fire, his eyes shuttered, his jaw tight, the skin over his cheekbones taut. *He knows*, she thought desperately. Somehow he'd found out about Guy and the scheme she'd been pulling.

"You, um, you saw Guy?"

"Yep, I sure did. As a matter of fact, I saw Guy and Patrick," he said, his eyes still turned away from her.

Her stomach lurched. "You...you saw Guy and...Patrick...together."

"I have to say, it was...educational. It's amazing what I've learned this morning."

Rachel licked her suddenly parched lips and moved her gaze to the quilt covering her, picking absently at the material as her mind raced with explanations and excuses.

"I never thought you had it in you," he said softly, menacingly. "Really, I thought you were the same straightforward, no holds barred, shoot straight from the hip girl you were in Breckenridge. Obviously Greece has changed you."

Rachel felt tears well in her eyes but blinked them back, determined to keep her composure.

"I didn't think you had it in you either, Ben," she responded. "How long did you wait until I was gone before you fucked Marianne? A day? A week? Or did you wait a whole month out of respect to our...love?"

"We aren't talking about Marianne right now, we're talking about you and Guy...or rather, what you and Guy aren't," he said. "It's obvious Patrick cares about your roommate, the question is...does Guy feel the same? Is he bisexual, Rachel? Is he gay and using you as a cover, is that why you needed me to fulfill you sexually? Or has this whole affair been nothing but a lie?"

She thought of lying, of saying her friend liked both sexes, but she knew she couldn't. No matter what happened after this, she wouldn't keep the truth from Ben.

"Guy is in love with Patrick," she said softly. "They've had...they've had problems. Patrick wasn't ready to admit he loved Guy and Guy needed to have that."

“So you and I, all this time, you’ve been using me? Why, Rachel?” he bit out, the grip on his anger obviously slipping.

“Because...because I didn’t want to be hurt so badly again,” she admitted. “I wanted a chance to close the door on our past. But I wanted—I needed to be in some sort of control. I needed to be able to walk away when...I had to.”

“So instead of telling me the truth, you came up with this...scheme, to sleep with me, use me, then what? Were you ever going to tell me, Rachel? Or were you going to just watch me fly back to Breckenridge and never let me know who Guy really was?”

His questions came at her like bullets, each query puncturing her heart. “I was...I was going to watch you leave. I wasn’t going to tell you...not ever.”

“I thought...I wanted to believe that we were starting over again, that even though this was an affair, you were falling in love with me again. That we could have a life together again,” he rasped.

“A life?” she asked, letting her pain and fury rise to the top. “You wanted a life with me? You could have had that before, Ben! You could have had me, but you chose something else...someone else! You made your decision, and it didn’t include me. Now I’m supposed to feel guilty for keeping myself away from any emotional entanglements with you? How dare you, Ben Slater! How dare you come here and judge me! How dare you make everything land on my shoulders when you’re the one who tore us apart in the first place!”

His eyes blazed dark green as his gaze bore into her. “I loved you, Rachel, and I wanted you to have your dream! I didn’t want to keep you from that!”

“Oh, my God! Don’t you dare throw that into my face! You could have called, you could have e-mailed, you could have come to visit...you could have cared! I tried, I really tried! I was busy, you knew that, and I was never in the same place for more than a week!”

“I was busy, too! I had a business to run!”

“Bullshit, Ben! That’s exactly what I think of your excuse! Running a business shouldn’t keep you from the person you love. And it shouldn’t shove you into the bed of Marianne Heath! No, don’t touch me!” she yelled, standing to pace the room naked. “Do you know what I dreamed about, Ben? Every night I dreamed that you would come, that you would knock on my door, say you couldn’t live without me, and beg me to marry you. But I didn’t get that, did I? Instead, I got hometown gossip from my mother and newspaper pictures of you with another woman...a woman who is notorious for sleeping around.”

“Don’t turn it back on me, either, Rachel,” he warned, his voice low. “You lied to me, used me, and I thought...I can’t stay here.”

He jerked to his feet, slammed his cup down on the end table, and strode to the door. He put his hand on the knob and paused, turning to spear her with shards of green ice in his eyes.

“You aren’t the person I fell in love with, Rachel. You’ve become someone I don’t know...and that breaks my heart even more. I don’t want to see you again...ever.”

She watched him go, waiting until the door clicked quietly shut behind him. She sank to the floor, sobs overtaking her body.

* * * *

Guy stumbled into the apartment, exhausted from his long talk with Patrick. After their conversation on the street, they'd settled into Patrick's hotel room to hash out all their feelings and the consequences of them. It hadn't been an easy discussion, it hadn't been pretty at times, and it had certainly become bitter once or twice. But, in the end, they'd finally come to the conclusion that their newly confessed love was stronger than any angry words they'd spewed and the hostilities and hurt they'd caused.

Sighing, he tossed his coat over the recliner and thought about his empty stomach. He was considering lunch when he heard it. Someone was crying in soul-shattering howls and sobs, the sounds wrenching through the quiet apartment. He made his way to Rachel's room and cracked her door open, stunned when he saw her sitting in front of a dead fire, her body covered with a man's shirt as she rocked and cried. He moved to her, his heart breaking as he watched her fall apart. Gently, he slid his arms around her, resting his head on hers as she snuggled into his chest.

"He found out, huh?" Guy asked softly.

"H...h...he did. I...tried to ex...ex...explain, but he...he...he didn't care," she wailed, her body racking. "I...I wanted him to...to say that...to say he...loved me."

"Oh, honey, he didn't tell you?"

"N...no! He...he called me a...a...liar and said I...I'd used him! And he...he...was right!"

Guy shook his head in frustration and sadness. Leave it to his friend to fall in love with a man just as stubborn as she was.

"Rachel, you should go to him. You should make him listen to you."

"H...he...hates me," she hiccupped then sniffed. "He does...doesn't want to s...see me a...a...again."

"Yeah, well, we've already established that Ben's been an idiot in the past," Guy mumbled. "He loves you, Rachel, he told me he did."

"H...He did?"

Trying hard not to smile, Guy nodded.

"Th...that was b...before he kn...knew," she stuttered, pushing herself off his shoulder. "I...have to get ready for the show. I can't...I won't let him take my...my music from me, too. He...he already has my heart."

Guy watched with a heavy heart as Rachel wandered into her bathroom, quietly but decisively shutting the door behind her.

They had to get past this, he thought, because if they didn't, neither of them would ever be completely whole. And, since it had been his idiotic idea to pretend to be her significant other in the beginning, he supposed it was up to him to help end the situation the way it should: with Ben and Rachel living happily ever after.

* * * *

Ben crammed more clothes into his suitcase, not caring whether they were clean or dirty, not caring if they became hopelessly wrinkled.

Rachel's words kept playing in his head, like a torturous tape that wouldn't stop. He'd hurt her badly when he'd broken off their relationship—she'd been so wounded that she hadn't trusted him with her heart again. He'd done that to her, he knew he had. In a way, he'd been responsible for this whole fiasco. Still, she had admitted that she was going to watch him go and never tell him the truth. She couldn't possibly feel the same

kind of love for him as he did for her if she was willing to let him go like that. Could she?

He swore under his breath and went into the bathroom to grab his shaving kit. He had to get out of here, he thought, he had to leave. He couldn't stay in Greece a minute longer. The contracts with Le Dolce had been signed days ago, the deal sealed with a handshake and a signature. The only reason he'd stayed was to be with Rachel, and now that didn't matter.

Cursing, he slammed the top down in his bag and jerked up his cell phone, determined to be on the first plane out of Athens. He'd wait in the terminal until they were ready to take off. The sooner he left, the better.

A quick, hard rap on the door broke into his hurried preparations, and he yanked it open, scowling.

"What?" he ground out.

A young, very nervous, bellhop stood in the doorway, staring at him with wide brown eyes.

"Excuse me, but this was left downstairs for you. The gentleman said it was extremely urgent," he squeaked, holding out a white envelope.

Ben took it with an irritated sigh and shoved a wad of money into the young man's hand. Shutting the door without a thank you, he ripped the top of the thick white paper open, hoping it wasn't work related. Pulling the folded sheets out, he was taken aback when a heavy key plopped on the carpet at his feet. More curious than he should have been, he unfolded the note and read it.

Ben,

I know you hate me right now, and you have every right to. But the fact is Rachel loves you more than anything in this world. After what you told me this morning, I know you feel the same about her, even if you're upset with her right now. I also know you're going to leave town; that's the only thing that would make sense for you to do at this point. Before you leave, though, I want you to do one thing. Take this apartment key, go into Rachel's room and look in the back of her closet. There's a box there, hidden, one that she hasn't been able to put into storage or throw away. Look inside of it, and if you still want to leave, then go. Because if you can't admit that you want her just as much as she wants you after seeing what's in that box, you don't deserve her.

Guy

Ben bent slowly and picked up the brass key, weighing it in his hand as he tried to decide what to do.

Chapter Fourteen

Rachel meandered into her apartment and flung her coat on the couch, her heart heavy and her spirit wounded.

She had given quite a performance tonight, she thought with a derisive snort. She'd sung the sweet, sad, wrenching songs in a way she hadn't in a long time. Normally after such a wonderful night, she would have gone out with her friends in the opera company. They would have drinks, maybe do a little dancing, and she would burn off the excited energy riding in her blood.

But not tonight. No, tonight she didn't feel that need. She was so exhausted and so heartsick that nothing seemed appealing to her other than coming home, curling in bed with Ben's discarded shirt and crying all the water out of her body.

Sighing, she opened her bedroom door—and stopped in cold shock when she saw the man sitting in the now infamous reading chair.

"Ben?" she whispered. "What are you doing here?"

He turned to her, his foot absently kicking the large cardboard box at his feet. Her eyes strayed down, and when she realized what he'd found, she took in a sharp breath.

"You kept it all," he stated quietly, holding up a little stuffed giraffe. "The flowers I picked for you on our first date, all the birthday cards I gave you, the Christmas gifts...you even kept the dinky little toys I won out of the crane machines at the arcade. I...I don't know what to say..."

Rachel couldn't move, could barely even breathe as tears once again filled her tired eyes. There was no way to explain those possessions away, no way at all, not without revealing her heart.

"And the postcards," he continued softly, his agonized gaze holding hers. "You bought me a postcard from every place you've ever been and you wrote to me about what was happening, about how you were feeling. But you never sent them."

She watched him as he waited for an answer, for an explanation as to why she had secreted these things away and refused to store them anywhere that wasn't close to her. She couldn't seem to find words, let alone air; she felt her bottom lip begin to tremble and bit it to stop the telltale sign of emotional upheaval.

"Oh, sweetheart," he murmured.

She didn't move as he closed the space between them with measured steps, keeping his eyes firmly latched to hers as he did. When he reached her, he lifted his thumb to her cheek and tenderly brushed away the tear trailing over her skin.

"Please, Rachel, please tell me why you kept all of this," he pleaded, the lines of his face contorted with confusion and need.

"I couldn't let it go," she croaked. "I wanted...needed to have all that near me because I...I still love you."

He let out a deep breath after she made her confession, the softening of his gaze telling her that she'd said exactly what he'd wanted to hear. Well, she'd done it, for good or bad, her feelings were laid bare on the floor at his feet. Now he had a chance to shatter her completely if he chose to.

His next words came out in raw syllables. "Oh, God, sweetheart, why didn't you say

anything? Why didn't you...?"

"Because you dumped me." Her heart hammered in a hard, painful staccato. "You told me you weren't ready for a long term relationship, but that was all I'd ever wanted from you. And there was Marianne. You and she...my mother told me about what everyone was saying, and I was so hurt..."

"Rachel, shh, sweetheart, just...oh, hell," he breathed, wrapping his hands gently around her arms. "I won't lie to you, Rachel, not ever, and not about this. Marianne and I...we...well, I almost slept with her once. She's tried again, several times, but I haven't touched her since that one time, I swear it. I didn't, I couldn't, take her to bed. I've always regretted that one time. I wish I'd never even looked in her direction. I was just so upset because I wanted to be with you. I had seen your picture in the paper and had read about your performances with the LaRussa Troupe. Your mother kept telling me how happy you were, how you were living your dream, and it crushed me. I had no right to be hurt like that, not after the way I pushed you away, but I was."

"Everyone knows how Marianne is, hopping from one man to the next, pretending she's better than any woman ever put on earth. It was only natural that you and she...that the two of you..."

"No, not ever," he promised her, his voice and gaze intense. "Never, Rachel, never. She isn't you...and you are who I want."

Rachel let the breath she'd been holding go slowly, feeling her body begin to relax as Ben lifted his palms to cup her face gently in his hands.

"I wanted to ask you something, to tell you something really, before I found out about Guy this morning," he said softly.

He took her hand and led her to the bed. With a tender nudge, he pushed her to the mattress, then knelt on the floor in front of her. She stared down at him, her heart racing wildly as her mind whirled with the implications of Ben down on one knee. He wasn't...was he? He couldn't possibly be...could he?

"Rachel Connelly, I've never stopped loving you and I know I never will. I want you to have your dreams...but now I want my dreams, too. And they include you, sweetheart, you and me and everything we have been and will be. I don't want to go back to Breckenridge without you. I don't want to go anywhere without you, to tell you the truth."

She swallowed against her tight throat, not quite believing what she thought he was trying to say. The wings of hope stretched and fluttered in her heart as his green eyes began to swim with innumerable emotions she couldn't name.

"Ben, what—?"

He shook his head, laughing softly as he gently kissed her knuckles. "Just, let me say this. It's not as easy as I thought."

Finally, with his clear green gaze bound with hers, he asked what her heart had hoped for all those years ago.

"Rachel, will you marry me?"

She gasped, not sure if she'd heard him correctly. But his face, the set of his jaw, the love in his gaze—she hadn't misheard. "Oh, Ben, I...I..."

His grip tightened around her fingers and he hurried to reassure her. "I'll stay in Greece as long as you want to or need to. If you need to serve your notice and work an extra month, I'll be right here...or, if you want to live in Athens, then I'll just have all my

stuff boxed up and shipped over. I'm never letting you slip away again, Rachel, no matter what it takes."

She let her forehead fall to his as she closed her eyes and savored the moment. "Ben, I love you, and wherever you are is my home, even in Breckenridge. All I ever really wanted my whole life was to be loved, truly loved. That was my real dream; only I didn't realize that until I thought I'd lost you. I want to be with you, too. Yes, Ben Slater, I'll marry you."

He tilted his head up to capture her lips in a tender kiss.

"I love you, Rachel, I love you," he whispered, his lips tracing the outline of her face.

She basked in his attention, letting her body fire with need and want. She felt whole, real, and complete for the first time since she'd been separated from Ben. With a heavy sigh, she fell into his kisses, letting him pull her into the dark abyss of lovemaking.

Ben roamed her skin with his mouth, tasting and nipping as she writhed underneath his touch. He unbuttoned her shirt, trailing his tongue down her exposed flesh as she gasped in delight. With a predatory smile, he let the silk fall to the bed, leaning in to nuzzle the rounded globes of her breasts.

Rachel's world began to swirl at his tender ministrations, her body heating as it always did whenever he drove her slowly up. She moaned in delight when his fingers flicked her front hook bra open, the satin sliding away as her nipples hardened in anticipation.

He took one rigid peak in his mouth, carefully slipping it between his teeth. She wriggled on the quilt as liquid hot need rose to engulf her limbs.

With a low purr, Rachel pulled him up to her, firmly placing his rigid body over hers as they laid back and their mouths met and molded. With desperate hands, she pulled at his shirt, popping buttons across the room in her haste to feel his flesh. She wanted to go faster, reach higher, but he slowed her movements, commanding her without words to take her time.

She groaned when his fingers slid down her neck and over her swollen breasts, dancing down her ribs before working their way to the waistband of her jeans. He played with her patience, skimming the delicate skin of her stomach, dipping a bit lower to pull at the elastic of her dark panties, then pulling back. She bucked under him in frustration, only to find herself rubbing against the hard rigid outline in his pants.

She began to move, riding the contours of his erection. She was quickly shoving herself past self-control, making her blood race through her body. It didn't seem to matter how many times he took her, she could never seem to get enough.

With a feral sound, he ripped at her pants, his need for her obviously overriding his good intentions to take their lovemaking slowly. She raised her bottom as he jerked away the denim and satin covering her sensitive skin.

He pulled away only long enough to strip her bare, then he was back, the material of his pants rubbing erotically against her rosy flesh. She wrapped her legs around his waist, lost in her passion as he gripped her hips and let her set a rapid, heady rhythm.

"Oh, Ben, please...oh, please..." she begged against his lips, her fingernails digging into his back.

"Yes, Rachel, yes..." he promised, then jerkily pulled off the rest of his clothing.

Then they were naked, their bodies engulfed in a mutual inferno. He slammed his

mouth to hers, rumbling his approval as she rested her feet over his hips. He entered her slowly, filling her with his cock as she moaned into his mouth. He seated himself completely, the tip of his shaft just touching her womb. Stopping for a moment, he released her mouth and rested his forehead against hers. She knew he was trying to hold onto his composure, trying to stretch out this beautiful moment, but her body was on fire with desire. She writhed against him, needing him in a way that only he could create.

Finally, he pulled away, then sank back to her, his mouth moving to claim hers again. He eased out, then back in, his tongue mimicking his thrusts, rising and falling together.

He pushed against her sweltering, swollen walls, the abrasive invasion pressuring her up toward release. The feelings swallowed her, their scorching need overwhelming any thoughts as they moved slowly, then quickly, then slowly again. He took her to the edge of her orgasm then held her there with expert movements, the pleasure-pain of her near climax scorching her like molten fire. She began thrashing, her long hair spilling over the bed as she held onto him and spiraled toward the deepest red hues of desire.

Ben let go of her lips and bit her jaw, her neck, her shoulder. He seemed to be everywhere, touching her from the inside out. The feeling was indescribable, so sweet and so erotic at the same time that she thought she might incinerate on the bed.

She felt herself begin to quake, the muscles of her body tightening in agonizing pleasure. Stars shattered behind her eyelids as she splintered the ceiling of heaven, its warm shards of light raining down on her as her body bowed.

She felt her release gush around him, and knew she was pulling him into completion with her. He clutched her to him as he let go, holding onto her as if she were his anchor while he tumbled into the abyss.

They lay in sweaty satisfaction for endless moments, neither able to speak as they glowed in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Finally, Ben rolled to his back, curling his arm around her as he pulled her to his chest. Absently, he toyed with her hair while she leisurely drew circles on his abdomen with her fingernails.

"You know I love you," he said softly, his eyes straying to her face.

"Uh-huh."

"And you love me...right?" he prompted.

"Uh-huh."

"And I want you to be with me forever," he added.

"Yep."

There was silence for a moment, then he flung her on top of him, tickling her back and ribs mercilessly. She giggled, squirming against him, trying to get away.

"Say it, Rachel!" he demanded, laughing. "Say it!"

"I love you, Ben!" she gasped. "I love you."

He stopped tickling her and raised an eyebrow. "No more torture?"

"Well," she drawled, "only if it's a mutual thing."

He growled at her innuendo, tossing her down and rolling on top of her. "Why don't you show me exactly what you mean?"

And she did...well into the next day.

The End

About the Author:

Flesa Black is a married thirty-something who has been addicted to books since reading about “Dick and Jane.” She considers herself lucky to live in the South, near where her favorite writer, Margaret Mitchell, lived and wrote. Her works include “Refuge Book 1: Fortress” and “Refuge Book 2: Sanctuary.”

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