



Joey
to the
World

FLESA BLACK

Loose Id

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and other situations some readers may find objectionable (mild domination/submission and ménage within dream sequences).

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-362-9

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Sherri Lynne
Cover Artist: Croco Designs



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Chapter One

"I'm Dr. Joey, and I'm here to listen. Give me a call at 888-555-WQJX and let me know your secret ... or your secret fantasy. Right now we have Rochelle on the line. Welcome to the program, Rochelle."

"He-hello, Dr. Joey. I listen to you all the time."

Joey smiled in appreciation, as she always did when a caller told her that. It was real gratitude she felt for the people that kept her on the air. Propping her arms on the table in front of her, she tilted her head and leaned toward the microphone.

"I'm so glad that you do. So, what is it that I can do for you tonight?"

"Well, I ... um, it's a little embarrassing."

Joey adjusted her heavy black earphones and gazed blindly at the gauges in front of her. "It's understandable that you feel a little uncomfortable, Rochelle, but I can promise you that you're in the company of friends. There's nothing you can say that any of us haven't heard. In fact, it's probably something many of our listeners have experienced, or are experiencing."

As it usually did, her soothing voice and soft assurances helped ease her caller into the conversation.

"Well, Dr. Joey, there's this man, this ... younger man. We work together; he started about two months ago. He's ... oh, Dr. Joey, he's hot. Really hot."

She grinned, charmed by the tone of the other woman's voice. "So far this sounds pretty promising. What's the problem?"

"Like I said, he's younger, much younger."

"Ah, and how much younger is he?"

"Ten years, three months, and four days."

Joey nodded her head, caught up in Rochelle's story. "I see you've given this some thought."

The caller laughed a bit self-consciously. "Yeah, I have. I'm not normally so ..."

"Timid?"

"Exactly."

She leaned back in her chair, stretched her legs out underneath the desk. "Tell me, Rochelle, if he were closer to your age, or even older, what would you do?"

"Ask him out."

"But his being younger is intimidating you. Or is it the idea of what other people might say or think when they see you together?"

There was a long pause on the other end as the woman weighed the question. "Honestly, that's ninety-percent of it."

"And the other ten percent?"

"It's ... um, well, I've had ... fantasies about him; incredible fantasies about what he would do to me if we slept together. They're not like anything I've ever fantasized about before."

Joey found herself smiling in illumination. "Tell me about these fantasies."

Rochelle hesitated a moment, then let out a long breath as she launched in, head first. "I imagine he calls me at work and asks me to bring some files to his house. He'd called in sick, but he needed the information so he could do some work at home. When I get there, he answers the door in a bathrobe. I don't say anything, I mean, he's supposed to be ill. Anyway, he invites me in; when I step inside, I realize he has the whole place lit with candles. I hear him lock the door, so I turn around, and he's looking at me like ... like I'm a piece of meat and he's starving to death. He takes the files from my hands and tosses them onto the coffee table, then he tells me he's been waiting too long for me to make the first move.

"He drags me into his arms and he kisses me, devours me. He takes my breath away, and I just fall right into him. He keeps kissing me and starts running his hands over my body, touching every inch of me; before I know what he's doing, he has me undressed. His hands go to my breasts, and he squeezes them, then tells me that they're magnificent. He kisses me again and steers me into his bedroom. I hold onto him, press myself against his body, and when I do I feel his erection. He's so hard and so ... large. He tells me he's going to love me, that he's going to make sure I won't ever want another man. He lays me down on his bed, a huge, massive bed with satin sheets.

"He starts licking down my body, like he's tasting every pore I have, and he tells me I taste like heaven. When he starts sucking my nipples, I completely lose my mind and start bucking underneath him. I'm so hot by this time that I can't think straight. Then his hands are running up my arms, bringing them over my head. It takes me a minute to realize he's

cuffed my hands to the headboard. I'm a little scared, but I'm also ... thrilled and turned on. He lifts his head and looks at me, asks me if I'm okay. I tell him yes, because I want him. I want him to be in control, I want to give him the gift of my trust. He smiles down at me and starts tasting me again, nipping my skin as he makes his way down my ribs. When he gets to my thighs, he nuzzles me, and it drives me crazy. I ... I pull on the restraints, but I can't get loose, and it makes me hot to feel that. Then I realize he's cuffed my ankles, too, and it makes me even hotter. He starts to licking up my legs, groaning and biting me. I can feel his noises all the way up my bones; and it's like nothing I've ever felt before.

"When he finally gets to my ... to me, he licks straight up, slowly, like he's tasting a delicacy. He tortures me that way, flicking, swabbing, and I'm wiggling, begging, sobbing; I want to grab him, but I can't. And I ... I like it, I really like it. The feel of the cuffs, the feel of him against me, the feel of his mouth on me. I want to ... um ... to orgasm, but he won't let me. He just holds me right there; then he slips his fingers inside of me. It's like an entire convulsion rips through me, and I can't stop shaking. I swear, it's almost like I'm being torn apart. Then I wake up."

Joey felt her toes curl in her tennis shoes as she took a long sip of water. It was part of her job to pull these secrets from her callers, to help to get to the root of their relationships, wanted and unwanted. Still, it didn't stop her purely feminine reaction to dreams like Rochelle's that were so sensual in nature.

"So, you have this fantasy about him taking control?"

Rochelle was silent for a moment, and she could almost picture her caller nodding her head.

"Yes, I do, I like it ... a lot."

"And this bothers you or intrigues you?"

"Intrigues me."

Joey crossed her legs and let the simmering heat slide out of her blood. "Let me ask you, Rochelle, are you in a position of power at work?"

There was slight hesitation. "Yes, I am."

"Well, it might surprise you to know that it's very normal for a woman or a man that is in a position of power to want to give that power away, even for just a few minutes. It's a way of letting go, a way of letting someone else have control. Just a moment ago you admitted that you wanted him to have that power, that you wanted to give him the gift of your trust." She paused and let that sit for a moment. "But you know, it's also a very liberating experience; you're giving away a very important part of yourself. You're showing that you're willing to trust this person to take care of you, to give you what you need. And it also empowers you, because you're allowing this to happen. You're giving yourself, and there's nothing more powerful than that."

“So ... so you’re saying that ... all of this is normal? I’ve never fantasized like this before, and it feels ...”

“Strange, exhilarating, stimulating?” Joey smiled as she linked her hands across her abdomen.

Rochelle laughed shakily. “Yeah, yeah, I guess it does.”

“Just imagine how much more exhilarating and stimulating it would be if it actually happened.”

“You think I should tell him?” she nearly squeaked.

“About your daydreams? Of course, but at an appropriate time. Why don’t you start by asking him for a cup of coffee after work? Or maybe ask if he’d like to have lunch, make it something casual.” She sat forward, her unseeing gaze on the glassed-in booth across from her. “I’ll bet that he’s more interested than you know.”

She smiled as her focus cleared, bringing the image of the man in the other room into sharp relief. She saw him motioning, spinning his finger in the air in a gesture she’d come to know.

“Good luck, Rochelle; give us a call and let us know what happens. I want to thank everyone that called tonight, and all of our listeners. That’s all of the time we have, but we’ll be back tomorrow. Remember, desire is healthy; it’s what you do with that desire that counts.”

She took her headphones off slowly, listening to the closing music and recorded tag. The man behind the glass gave her a thumbs-up sign, his silent way of congratulating her on a good night. Grinning, she levered herself up from the thinly padded chair and made her way toward the booth. She nodded as Gus, the host of *Conspiracies*, passed by her and slid into the seat she’d just vacated. She remembered the first time she’d met Gus Stevens, and how surprised she’d been that such a bland-looking man was the personality behind the wacky and controversial show. It was always the quiet ones, she thought as she slid into the glassed-off room.

The petite blond that was neatening up the control boards gave her a wide smile. “That was an amazing show, Dr. Joey. If Gus ever retires, I’m going to beg the station to let me work with you.”

“Watch it, blondie; you’re encroaching on my sacred territory.” The mocha-skinned man turned his attention to Joey, his brown eyes mild as he winked. “Shelly’s right, though; that was an incredible show. That last caller especially.”

“Well, Scott, I like to give the audience their money’s worth.”

She bent down to pick up her backpack purse, wincing in annoyance when the waistband of her pants bit into her. She’d imagined happily slipping into a smaller size by spring, but that was obviously a goal she wasn’t going to reach. Not that she wasn’t trying, but it was damned hard to stick to a diet when co-workers and family members were

barraging her with sweets and fried foods. The fact that her mother made prizewinning chocolate chip cookies and blue ribbon cherry pie didn't help, either. The moment the tinsel was strung, Constance Bingham was in the kitchen, whipping up sinful culinary delights even a saint couldn't resist.

The holidays were pure hell on someone like her. For most everyone else she knew it seemed to be all "Fa La La La La" and "Wassailing"; for her it was a full out assault. Joey thought, not for the first time, how much better it would be if she could just enjoy the festivities and the decorations without being tempted. It would've been so much easier if Christmas were celebrated with broccoli and tofu. But at least she was sticking to her exercise resolution for now: a daily walk on the treadmill that had been serving as a storage rack for too long.

"So, want to head over to McGivney's with me?" Scott asked, his face bright as they stepped into the hallway.

Music from a Christmas jingle feathered around them, soft and joyful, adding a bit of class to the fluffy silver garlands that suspended snowmen ornaments along the small corridor.

Joey cocked an amused eyebrow and shook her head as she shrugged into her long beige coat. "No, but thanks for the invitation."

"Oh, come on, it'll be fun. We'll have a few drinks, commiserate over the new boss, we might even manage to cop the dart board tonight."

She looked at her friend, took in the casual outfit of jeans and worn sweater, and knew in an instant that he was on the prowl. "Watching you pick up women isn't my idea of a good time, even though it is quite ... interesting to see, in a purely scientific sense."

He had the good grace to look guilty as he shrugged. "I can't seem to help myself. It's all this holiday stuff; it makes me want to be kind to my fellow man."

"Don't you mean your fellow women?" She chuckled as she plopped her felt hat on top of her head. She batted annoyingly at a strand of dark hair that danced in front of her eyes. "Don't let me ruin your plans, Scott. You go and see what you want Santa to stuff in your stocking this year."

Her friend shoved his arms into his dark leather jacket and grinned like a boy caught in the cookie jar. A boy that didn't look a bit sorry.

"All right, I'll go, but only because you told me to." He reached up, gave her uncooperative hair a tug, and turned toward the door. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car. Can't risk having my gorgeous partner in crime mugged or molested."

"The mugged I'll give you; I'm not so sure about the molested."

He paused as he held the glass door open for her, his gaze intent on her face. "Maybe you should reconsider coming with me. There are plenty of single guys scouting out the place."

“Um, yeah, all looking for Shelleys.” Before he could argue, she gave him a small smile and held up her hand. “Look, Scott, I realized a long time ago that I’m not a prime bar candidate, and that’s fine with me. I’m not a one night stand kind of gal anyway.”

“You underestimate yourself all the time. You know you shouldn’t compare yourself to all the other women in the world. You have a lot to offer a man, including good looks.”

Her smile deepened as they stepped out into the frosty night. Sliding her arm through his, she dropped her head on his shoulder and sighed. “Life would be so much easier if we were attracted to each other.”

“Easier? I doubt it. You’d make me work too hard.” He laughed when she bumped his hip with her own. “But I think any man that deserves a woman like you should have to work for it. Believe it or not, Josephine Bingham, you’re one hell of a woman.”

“And let’s hope the new owner feels the same way.” They stopped beside her compact car, the streetlight bouncing garishly off of the light blue paint. “I really don’t want someone to tell me to tone down my show ... or worse.”

Scott shook his head swiftly. “You have the top rated show in your time bracket, not to mention in this market. He couldn’t possibly want to change the show, not when it brings in the sponsors.”

She shrugged, shifting her weight as an icy breeze nipped at her face. “Who knows, he could decide he doesn’t like that kind of programming. It’s not like we have much of a say.”

“Still, I’ll place even money that he doesn’t do a damn thing to change the Dr. Joey Show.”

She didn’t reply as she pulled her keys from her purse and opened her door. In all honesty, she wasn’t sure what she could say to Scott. After all, it was her own dark bubble of uncertainty that was making her so edgy. It wasn’t fair to transfer that to her friend, not when he had such a fun night planned.

She slid behind the wheel and turned a sisterly grin to the man beside her. “Don’t stay out too late. We have the meeting with the new Mr. Winters tomorrow at ten in the morning.”

He gave her his best aw-shucks look before lifting his hand in a traditional Boy Scout salute. “I promise, big sister, I will be home in enough time to shower and shave.”

“No hangover, either.”

“I swear.”

She laughed as he shut her door, enjoying the banter and the lightness it gave her. Revving the car to life, she gave herself a moment to be sure Scott made it across the newly broadened two-lane road. Once he’d stepped inside the packed pub, Joey eased her way into the almost non-existent traffic. At this time of night, most people were either snuggled into bed or out bar hopping.

Leaning down, she switched on her radio, smiling when Gus's surprisingly deep voice resonated through her speakers. Silently, she planned out the rest of her evening, relaxing as she did. She would go home, slip into her plush robe and ratty cow print slippers, grab a cup of liberally brandy-laced hot chocolate, and check her fan e-mail. After that, she would feed her cat, Murray, curl up with the murder mystery she was halfway through, and settle in to fall asleep. What would have sounded like sheer boredom to most people felt like heaven to her. And even if her heart gave a little hitch because she had no one to share her homebody ways with, she was still happy. Really, she was. Very. She was independent, she made good money, she could certainly take care of herself. And maybe if she told herself all of this long enough, the small part of her that yearned for a warm body to cuddle with, to make love with, to simply be with, would go away.

Chapter Two

Sam stood at the long windows and stared down at the town below him. He didn't remember much about Atherton, only that it was a smallish community. He'd forgotten about the college, which had apparently grown exponentially over the years. He supposed that fact had kept the town from sinking into nothingness by pumping money into the restaurants and shops. Atherton now looked like Norman Rockwell meeting the twenty-first century, somehow maintaining the feel of classic Americana while it stretched to accommodate the need for growth. It was a far cry from his stoic townhouse in busy London.

Sighing, he shifted his weight and tucked his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants. Even as he watched, a slow drifting of flurries began to dance along the breeze, the promise of a light snowfall by sunset.

Damn it, he didn't want this radio station. But Charles Winters had wanted his grandson back where he believed his progeny belonged. And, by God, he'd managed to find a way to get what he wanted.

Sam had been tempted to sell the station outright, but his better sense had overridden his need for revenge. His grandfather had invested in the station wisely, using money to grease the right palms and up the wattage of WQJX. He'd slowly changed the formatting over from the very typical fare to unique programming, most of it risqué and controversial. It had done the trick. The station had solid ratings, and that translated into advertisers, which equaled money. The radio station had become a definite asset, one that had proven itself feasible if not wholly safe. He had to admire the old man for that.

A quiet knock interrupted his thoughts, bringing him around. He bit back a smile when a timid redhead stuck her head through the door, her glasses magnifying the round blue eyes that stared at him apprehensively. It was going to take a while to convince his grandfather's assistant that he wasn't going to take her head off.

“Yes, Marcie?”

“Your ten o’clock is here.” Her words were quiet and unsure.

“Of course, send them in.”

He’d lost track of time staring out at Atherton while his mind rambled. Surprised by his uncharacteristic action, Sam remained standing as Scott Moore and Josephine Bingham strolled into the office.

His first sight of her had his lungs standing still and his heart jittering. Good Lord, he had no idea Dr. Joey was a babe! And that was the only word his brain could wrap itself around. Babe. Complete. Total. Her long dark hair brushed against her shoulders, flyaway strands slipping around to graze her high cheekbones. Her eyes, a mesmerizing blue, met his, held, then slid away. Her skin looked soft as silk, touched with a gold tint that added to her wholesome but exotic look. And her body ... God in heaven, her body. It was a study of dips and curves, the kind that begged to be touched and stroked. The long-sleeved peach top did nothing to conceal her lush breasts, and her black skirt rode over her curvaceous hips down to her knees, where it left her smooth calves bare. He had the fleeting image of her sprawled across his bed, her hair spread on his pillow, her naked body pressed against his.

He shook himself out of his daydream, hurriedly sliding into the tall leather chair so he could hide behind the oak desk. He wasn’t sure how the woman would react to his obvious arousal. He needed to get the meeting back in the correct context; business, not wild sexual speculation, was what he’d called her there for. Though the speculation was certainly something he’d liked to delve into.

“Mr. Moore, Dr. Bingham, please, have a seat.” Sam was shocked that his voice was actually steady.

He kept his gaze level as the two eased into the chairs across from him. Quietly, he forced his eyes away from the drool-inducing doctor and focused on Scott. From his personnel file, Sam knew the lithely built man was in his mid-twenties, single, and had been a steady employee for four years. He’d been partnered with Dr. Bingham when their show first started, and it was obvious the two worked well together.

“I’m glad you could both make it.” Sam’s eyes strayed back to the woman across from him. “First of all, I’d like to assure you that I’m not changing anything as far as your show goes.”

He saw a flicker of gray flecks flash in her gaze and wondered if it was a sign of relief. Fascinating, he thought, and found himself falling further into the China blue depths. He watched her plush pink lips move to form words and felt a slow simmer begin in his blood, the sound of it nearly obliterating her voice.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

He cleared his throat, surprised his jaw hadn't gone slack. "Um, yes, well, I listened to you last night," *and very nearly swallowed my tongue*. "I have to admit, I was a little ... shocked by the content."

One finely arched feminine eyebrow lifted in question. "Does human sexuality disturb you?"

I didn't think so, but apparently yours does. "Of course not. It's just that the Dr. Joey Show wasn't what I'd expected. I had no idea my grandfather was so ..."

"Progressive?" she put in, her voice on the cool side.

"Yes, progressive. But he made an excellent choice when he hired you both. I have no intention of ruining something that's obviously working. The only thing I'm considering is having you both do some live remotes."

He saw her blanch and wondered about it.

Scott broke in, his voice pitched into friendly tones even though there was a distinct timber of warning. "Live remotes? But that would take away Joey's anonymity."

Ah, so there was the cause of her wince.

"It would also boost listenership," Sam argued back.

"People wouldn't feel comfortable calling me once they meet me." She tossed it in with a business like crispness. "When you put a face on the person you're confiding such important emotions to, it takes away the buffer of secrecy."

Sam leaned forward, clasping his hands together as he narrowed his eyes on her. "These people are calling a radio show, doctor; they have to know that thousands of people are listening to them."

"But that's very different. No one can see their face, no one knows who they are, and most of the time they don't even use their real name. They also don't know me; if they did, then I'd become more human, which means, in their minds, I'm more likely to be judgmental."

"And what do they do when they come in to talk to a sex therapist, Dr. Bingham? Do they keep their back to you? Do you put a sack over your head?" He saw the fire leap into her eyes and felt his cock harden against his fly. He wondered if it was perverted of him to be aroused by her temperamental spark.

"That's a very different situation, Mr. Winters," she argued in clipped words. "With therapy, you have as much time as you need to become comfortable with a person, to build a bond of trust. On the radio you don't have that luxury. You have a finite amount of time."

Sam wished he could push his agenda, and not just because he liked to have his own way. The way her face was flushed, the way her gaze practically burned him with its iciness, excited him in a way he'd never experienced before.

He leaned back in his chair, considering. "You have a point. All right, we'll scrap the idea of personal appearances ... for now."

Scott visibly eased as he nodded his head. "So, we're good to go?"

He couldn't help but smile at the question. "Yes, you're good to go. No time slot changes, no programming changes; I don't think you need them."

The young man grinned as he stood, plainly relieved the ordeal was over so quickly. Joey took longer to stand as she eased herself up. She didn't completely trust him, Sam thought. But then how could he expect her to? She didn't know him. She didn't know how he worked or what he was like. She had no clue that he was a hands-on manager and that he prided himself on improving companies before selling them, instead of simply disassembling them to up the sales cost. As the top on-air personality, she deserved some peace of mind when it came to her job and her co-workers. He decided right then that she should get to know him; he refused to listen to the little voice that said he was making the choice for purely selfish reasons.

"Dr. Bingham, would you care to join me for lunch today?"

She didn't so much as flinch, but he could feel the shock pouring off of her. He'd caught her off guard; he had the feeling that it didn't happen often.

"You want ... you want to have lunch, with me?" She stared at him as if he were some sort of strange specimen caught underneath a microscope.

"Yes, lunch, a business lunch," he hurried to add. He was afraid if he didn't he'd scare the hell out of them both. "I wanted to talk to you more about your show."

She tilted her head, seemed to weigh her options, and then finally acquiesced. "All right, lunch. Twelve-thirty at Rose's Café?"

He nodded shortly and stood, his gaze still on her. Did she have any idea how she was affecting him by just standing there? Good Lord, even her scent, a warm vanilla textured with deep musk, was stirring his libido.

Before he could think of a reason to keep her in his office, she was walking out the door, her movements graceful and measured. When the latch snapped shut, Sam let out a long, surprised breath. This wasn't something he'd expected. A sudden and overriding attraction for one of his new employees wasn't something he'd calculated into this unwanted deal. What the hell was he supposed to do about it?

Irritably, he raked his hand through his hair and buzzed Marcie's desk.

"Yes, sir?"

"Marcie, please make sure my schedule is clear from twelve to three-thirty. I have ... business that I need to take care of."

Chapter Three

Joey stepped into the café, breathing in the warm, pungent air as she slipped her hat off her head. The heavy scent of coffee and pastry wafted around her, mixed and mingled with the fresher aromas of sandwiches and the deep layers of homemade soups. It was a place that she was always relaxed in, a place where she always felt welcomed. A waitress breezed past, her black hair dancing in a ponytail as she sent Joey a familiar smile and a quick wave.

“Your usual?” she asked as she settled her tray on the lacquered bar.

“Yes, thanks, Tina. And if that’s clam chowder I smell --”

“One bowl coming up!”

Joey smiled as the young girl jotted down her order and slid it to the man behind the counter. With a quick thank you, she began to search the small crowd for her new boss; someone who looked like Sam Winters shouldn’t be hard to miss. It had been a mind-numbing shock to walk in and find a tall, well-built, dark blond gladiator instead of the frail, white-haired man she’d expected. When he’d asked her for lunch, she’d had a moment of excited butterflies; then he’d clarified it as a business lunch and brought her squarely back to earth. A man as handsome as him couldn’t possibly find her attractive, not when she was sure he had his pick of any woman he wanted.

She spotted him then, sitting in the corner with the winter sun splashing against his broad shoulders. He had the look of an infinitely patient man as he sipped his coffee and stared out at the sidewalk. And, sure enough, there was a table of college-aged girls casting glances his way, then back to each other to laugh and whisper.

Joey shrugged off her coat as she eased her way toward him, smoothing down her lavender sweater and second-guessing her choice of jeans. He, of course, was still in his dress shirt. Maybe she shouldn’t have gone home and switched outfits; maybe it would have been

wiser to stay in her black skirt and peach top. But her body had grown used to comfortable clothes, and so she'd given in to the need for the familiar.

"Right on time."

Her heart did a neat little flip as he smiled up at her. The sexy accent didn't help matters, either.

"I try to be." She slipped her coat onto the seat of one of the vacant slatted backed chairs and sat down. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"I just got here a few minutes ago, myself." He studied her for a moment and she felt the strange urge to squirm. "I wasn't sure what you'd like to drink, so I only ordered myself coffee."

"Oh, um, well, I appreciate the thought." She let her mind swirl with the idea that he'd considered ordering for her, then let it settle. As an independent woman, she couldn't decide whether to be offended, especially when her romantic side gave a silent sigh of bliss. "Did Tina take your food order already?"

He chuckled, lighting his bright green eyes. "She told me I'd be having what you were."

Joey smiled back and shook her head. "Well, she's worked here since she started college a few years ago; she tends to run over people who aren't sure what they want."

Sam gave her a strange look, something that looked almost like hunger, but it quickly faded, leaving her wondering if she'd seen anything at all.

"So, what is it I'm having?"

"Chicken salad on rye, a bowl of clam chowder, mint tea, and strawberry cheesecake for desert." She cocked her head, waited to see if he would say anything disparaging about her eating habits. Instead, he sat back and grinned.

"God, that sounds like heaven. It's been years since I've had a decent slice of cheesecake."

That smile again, the one that made her stomach bunch into knots and her insides go gooey warm. She blinked away the starry mist that was trying to gather around her and straightened her shoulders. For a near stranger, he was being awfully friendly, maybe a little too friendly, and she found herself becoming wary. She'd been used far too often in her younger years to leave herself open for that kind of abuse again. She would feel better if they put the situation back on business grounds. At least there she knew she'd have fairly even footing.

Slowly, she shifted her weight in the chair and leaned forward. "So, what was it you wanted to see me about? Is there something Scott shouldn't know?"

He let out a long, silent breath, as if reluctant to let go of the easy tone of their lunch. "Actually, no. If I have something to say that will affect someone, I tell them to their face."

He gave an eloquent shrug and took another sip of coffee. "I guess that's what this is about. I wanted you to understand where I'm coming from, and my tentative plans for WQJX."

Joey stared, flabbergasted. Why in the world would he feel the need to tell her what he wanted to do with the radio station? Had he singled her out, or did he have a string of business lunches and dinners scheduled with the other on-air employees? Tina saved her from stuttering like a fool when she floated back to their table to deliver their lunch. Once their plates were settled, she took a deep breath and blinked.

"You want to tell me what you plan to do with the station? Is that any of my business?"

Sam was rearranging his bread more securely as he answered. "Yes, it is. You're the host of the top rated show at the station; I have a feeling that where you lead, most everyone there follows. Whether you know it or not, Dr. Bingham, you are the person that the staff takes their cues from ... and not just because of the ratings. From what I hear, it's also about who you are, as well. It takes a hell of a person to remember everyone's birthday, and make sure they have brownies or cupcakes. You've also been known to send flowers to their sick relatives and give out money loans if you know it's needed."

"But I ... that's just being a good person."

"I agree, but a good person can be hard to find. And, let's face it, when someone is nice and still manages to work their way to the top of the dog pile, it's a bloody miracle." He took a bite of the sandwich and rolled his eyes to the back of his head. "Oh, they should patent this."

"Look, Mr. Winters --"

"Sam, please."

"Okay ... Sam, you've already told me that you don't have any plans to change my show. So what could you possibly want me to know?"

He stopped, his whole body going still as he speared her with his green eyes. Gone was the affable man of just a few seconds before. In his place was someone more intense, more focused, and much more intimidating. Her pulse leapt as her stomach gave an odd little somersault. The rest of the restaurant faded away into darkness as he held her gaze, leaving only the two of them in some strange little bubble.

"I don't back down from challenges. When I see something I want, I do whatever I have to in order to make it mine. And when I get it, I make sure it never wants or needs. I think it's important that you know that."

She couldn't move, couldn't blink, could barely breathe as she stared at him. She swallowed against the knot that had tangled in her throat, wondering if her face was as flushed as the rest of her body felt.

"Why ... why would I ...?"

The corner of his mouth quirked up, breaking the potent spell that he'd so easily woven. "For your own edification."

Humanity rushed back in a mass of sound, smells, and light, jerking Joey neatly back into reality. Her own edification? Exactly what did that mean? And dare she ask him?

“Lost your appetite?”

His words cut through her, drawing her attention to her lunch. “Oh, um, no, I was just ...” *Trying to figure you out.* “Waiting for you to finish your explanation.”

He nodded his head and looked down at his soup, taking away her chance to study his face and find the answer for herself. Was he deliberately trying to throw her off kilter, or was she reading far too much into the situation? That had to be it. Why would this obviously intelligent, sexy man be trying to lure her with words? It was ludicrous.

Ignoring the little feminine flutter of desire, she dove into her clam chowder and tried not to become lost in the awkward silence.

“So, tell me about Scott. He was fresh out of college when he came to work for the station. How did the two of you end up paired?”

Joey felt her body relax as he gave her a subject she didn’t have to navigate blindly. With a soft smile, she began telling him about how Scott had come to WQJX for any job he could find, only to be ambushed by Mr. Winters. As the conversation flowed into an easier bent, she ate and laughed along with her new boss. She felt the frisson of connection, surprised by how easy it was to simply talk to him. As the afternoon moved on, she lost track of time. For once, her schedule didn’t seem to matter so much.

* * * * *

Sam strolled into the lone recording booth in search of a place to think. His mind was so full of Joey. He wasn’t sure why this was happening to him, but it was hard fact that it was. He wanted to spend more time with her. He wanted to have a chance to talk with her -- open, honest conversation where it didn’t matter who he was. He was feeling so desperate that he’d already started formulating a shaky plan halfway through lunch. A crazy plan, one that was ludicrous and might make him lose his mind before it was all over.

The problem was, he didn’t have the resources he needed to implement it. There was no way he could question Joey without her becoming suspicious. But there were certain things he definitely had to know before he took a step forward.

The door opened and he found himself staring at Scott.

“Oh, sorry boss. I didn’t know anyone was in here.”

“It’s okay, I was just ... looking for some alone time.”

The other man lifted one eyebrow but didn’t say anything. “I’ll just be one second. I need to grab the tag we made the other day. Not that I couldn’t get Joey in to make another one. It’s not like she has a life or anything.”

Sam sat up in the swiveling chair, immediately alert. “You sound worried about that.”

"Huh? Oh, about Joey's non-existent life. Well, it's hard not to be concerned. I mean, a woman like that sitting around without a dozen men trailing after her it's just sad." As if sensing he'd said too much, Scott winced slightly. "You didn't need to hear that."

"I don't know, maybe I did."

That earned him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

Gus's head poked through the door. "Excuse me, but if you don't mind, Shelly and I need to borrow the booth to record a commercial. Nelson's Chevrolet is having their annual year-end sale."

"Of course." He stood up and motioned Scott out into the hallway.

Sam waited until the door was securely closed behind them before telling the other man his strategy. He blocked out the sound of the food critic that was currently on the air, concentrating on outlining his idea to Scott. Even as he said the words, he realized they sounded a little too close to extreme. But he couldn't afford to worry about whether Scott would call the men in the white coats to come and get him. For some strange reason time seemed of the essence. It was almost like a part of himself was straining on its leash trying to get to Joey, and it would strangle itself if he didn't hurry.

Sam cautiously watched Scott as the other man leaned back against the wall of the hallway. He crossed his arms over his chest in an indolent pose and stared hard at Sam, obviously trying to sort through what had just been said. Slowly, Scott tilted his head, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"This doesn't strike you as devious?"

Sam stared back with what he hoped was an honest look. "So you think it's a bad idea? Because I'm open for other suggestions. Look, Scott, I'm not doing this as some sort of prank. It's just that I got the feeling from Joey at lunch that she's ... reluctant to be anything more than employer and employee."

The other man's body tensed. "So you want to push her into something more?"

"Get this straight, I have no intention of forcing her to do anything. I'm going to try to ... to ..."

"Woo her?"

"Yes. And if I'm lucky, seduce her." He braced for a punch, but instead got an inquisitive look.

"Just why are you asking for my help?"

Sam tucked his hands into his pockets, the rolled up sleeves of his dress shirt brushing against his belt. "Because I need it. I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have told you, but you're her friend. And I guess maybe I'm feeling a little desperate."

Scott looked him up and down before he spoke again. "Why should I trust you? I don't know anything about you."

He knew the only way to answer was with honesty. "No, you don't."

There was a terse silence as Scott studied him. "Joey is like my sister; I won't be a part of hurting her."

Sam kept his eyes locked with Scott's, his gaze unwavering. "I meant what I said. I have no intention of hurting her. In fact, that's the farthest thing from my mind."

"But you could hurt her, you know. What if this whole thing backfires? Then what?"

"What if it doesn't? What if I can give Joey exactly what she needs? Because, for some crazy reason, I feel like that's what I have to do."

"I'll give you one thing, you're forthright. I guess that counts for a lot." His stance relaxed slightly. "She's a good woman, an *amazing* woman. You're right, she's my friend, one of the best, and I love her. I've been her friend since the beginning; I've watched her deal with men, and I've watched men deal with her. None of them deserved her, and she definitely deserved a hell of a lot better than them."

"I'm not saying I deserve her any more than any of the other men she's dated, Scott. What I am saying is that I want to get to know her. I want her to get to know me. I want us to have a chance."

He lifted an eyebrow at Sam's explanation. "This is awfully quick, isn't it?"

Sam shrugged and shifted his weight. "I wasn't expecting Joey. I wasn't expecting ... there's just something about her, something that pulls at me. It's something I can't ever remember feeling."

The other man seemed to take pity on him and nodded slowly. "So you want to really get to know her, to know the person she is inside. And you want her to get to know you. Do you really think this is the way to do it?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure, but it's the only thing I can think of. I can't think of any other way that she'd feel uninhibited."

Sam stood his ground, holding onto Scott's gaze, hoping that he could hear the sincerity in his voice.

"You're right, you know. Joey isn't ... well, she's not the most open person I know. Honest to a fault, very kind, more vulnerable than she'd like to admit, but she doesn't open up easily. You're gonna have a hell of a time with this."

"I know, but I don't care. I have to do it."

Scott shook his head and let out a silent sigh. "Maybe you're making me crazy, too, boss man. Okay, I'll help you. I'll give you everything you need. And I'll even wish you luck."

Sam's lips curled up as his tight muscles loosened. "I'll thank you for the information, and for the luck."

"But if you hurt her you're going to have the entire town on your ass. She's an important lady to a lot of people. If you do anything to make her cry ..."

Sam took the warning as it was meant and nodded his head in agreement. "Trust me, if I make her cry, I'll be the first in line to kick my own ass."

Scott pushed his back off of the wall, the garland above his head rippling as the heater kicked on. "This ought to be good."

Sam furrowed his brow. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, boss man, Joey is a stubborn woman. She doesn't know her own worth, and she has this nasty idea that she's not very desirable." He tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "She keeps herself shielded, hides that small part of herself because she's afraid. Because of that most men think she's cold when she's not. She's just ..."

"Lonely, scared, shy, smart, gorgeous, strong willed --"

Scott held his hand up to stop the barrage of words. "If you've already figured all that out, then I'd say you might stand a decent chance of getting through to her. Just remember what I said. She's a special lady, so you'd better tread lightly."

Sam nodded again, torn between relief and nerves. "Believe me, Scott, I don't want to screw this up. I'll be as careful as I can."

Chapter Four

“This is Dr. Joey, and I’m here to listen and help. If you have a question, please give me a call. Our next caller is Wayne. Hi, Wayne, and welcome to the show.”

“Hello, Dr. Joey. It’s really great to talk to you. I’ve been listening to you for years.”

Joey smiled as she leaned her elbows on the table in front of her. In the control booth she could see Scott answering the phone, his headset pulled off of one ear so he could hear the callers.

“And what prompted your call to us tonight, Wayne?”

As with most men, there was a long pause. She didn’t push, she simply waited, knowing he’d eventually tell her. After the barest of moments, he let out a soft sigh.

“I think I’m in love.”

The raw statement nearly jerked a laugh from her throat. He sounded so despondent, so completely lost, as if he’d just confessed that he’d broken all the cardinal sins in one night and wasn’t sure how to do penance.

“And this bothers you, Wayne?”

She heard the burst of air as the man made what sounded like a groan of frustration. She did smile then, because it was so obvious that he didn’t want to be in love, and because it was plain that he was.

“Come on, Dr. Joey, me, in love? It’s ... it’s crazy. I don’t even know if this woman loves me. I can’t stop myself from staring at her, from mooning over her. I mean, *moon*ing, Dr. Joey. I’m too old for this!”

“We’re never too old fall in love.” She pitched her voice low to soothe him.

“But this is crazy. I haven’t felt like this since ... well, since I was a teenager. That’s when I met my wife.”

Uh-oh, Joey thought; time to tread lightly. "Wife? Are you married?"

"Yes. Well, no, I'm not. I'm a widower."

Her mind shifted seamlessly as she closed her eyes and focused on the man talking to her. "You married your high school sweetheart, the woman that was the greatest love of your life?"

His voice was deeper this time, tinged with tears. "She was. I mean, I thought she was ..."

"Do you feel like you're betraying her by having these strong feelings for another woman?"

There was another pause, then a hesitant, "Yeah. I loved her, you know. And she made me feel ... whole. It wasn't just the sex, which was amazing; it was being with her, talking to her, just being in her company. It was everything."

Joey felt her heart twist for Wayne, and wasn't ashamed to let it bleed through into her voice. "But now there's someone new, someone that you're afraid will take her memory away? Maybe taint your marriage in some way?"

"I don't know ... I guess, yeah. I mean, it feels like I'm cheating."

She nodded her head, an automatic response even though he couldn't see her. "This new woman, she makes you experience things that you didn't think you'd feel again."

"Oh, yeah," he sighed. "It's crazy. Every time I look at her, all I can think about is kissing her, slow and long, so I can taste her, just taste her. But I know it wouldn't be enough; I'd have to peel her clothes away so I could feel her against me. I think about how I'd love to strip her inch by inch, kiss every piece of her skin that's exposed, make her moan for me. She'd strip me, too, just as slow, just to torment us. I imagine taking her to my bed, laying her down, and touching her, just touching her, for hours. I'd roadmap her body with my hands and my mouth, I'd find every curve on her and taste places she didn't even know existed. I think about how she'd wiggle underneath me, how she'd beg me for more, for everything. But I wouldn't give it to her, not just then, because I'd want to stretch it out, savor it."

Behind her closed lids, Joey could easily picture being the recipient of a man's languid desire. The feel of rough hands on her skin, the heat from his body, the sound of his harsh breathing as he made love with her ... It was easy, far too easy, to let the tingle sink from her skin and into her blood.

"Then she'd be touching me, running her hands over my body, digging her nails into my back and biting my shoulders. She'd want me so badly, she'd buck into me, grinding herself against me. I'd tell her to touch me, to touch all of me ... and she would. She would take me into her hands and it would be good, so good."

Joey's mind raced with bright images and arousing sounds. When her brain conjured the image of Sam Winters it seemed utterly natural. Her response was immediate and

undeniable. She felt her breathing accelerate, her breasts swell, and her thighs tremble. Moisture gathered between her legs, bringing a rush of quivers that was as unexpected as it was delicious.

“And when I’d finally take her, we would go wild, just completely wild. I know it would be good -- no, better than good, more like mind-blowing. I know I wouldn’t be happy just to feel her climax once; I’d have to feel her do it over and over again, listen to her yell my name every time. I’d hold back for as long as I could, and when I let myself go, she would go with me.”

Joey could feel her own body coil in the need for an orgasm, her toes curling in her tennis shoes as her nipples stiffened to hard peaks. And in her vivid imagination Sam was there, over her, inside her, filling her, pushing her to the edge time and time again. Quickly, she jerked her eyes open and took a deep, none too steady breath. It was ridiculous to put herself in the role of the one being ravaged, and even more ridiculous to imagine her new boss as the one doing the ravaging. Silently, she took a sip from her water glass and prayed her heart would slow its erratic beat.

“Am I crazy, doc? How can I want this woman so badly when I still care about my wife?”

“Wayne, you aren’t crazy; you’re human. When someone has loved before, truly and honestly loved, it’s more likely that they’ll love again.” She repositioned herself, ignoring the tiny currents that raced up her slit as she wiggled. “Your wife must have loved you very much.”

“Yes, she did, she really did,” he admitted with a tired voice.

“Then I’ll bet she loved you enough that, if she was standing right in front of you, she would tell you it was all right to move on. To love someone new doesn’t mean you’ll forget the first woman you shared your life with; it just means you’re opening your heart again. And I’ll bet if you ask this other woman you love, she’d tell you that she’s glad you had your wife. In fact, I’ll bet she would have probably liked her.”

He gave a deep, soft chuckle. “Sometimes I think they would have been good friends.”

“Which shows you have excellent taste in women.” She smiled, feeling the breakthrough with the man on the phone. “Wayne, love is a powerful and wonderful thing. Your wife would have never wanted you to lock your heart away, not when you have so much to give.”

“And the guilt?”

Joey twisted her lips in thought for a moment before she answered. “What I would suggest is a counselor. I think they would be able to help you let go of the guilt, and they could help you to understand that, even if you let the guilt go, it doesn’t mean you’ll be letting go of the memories. If you’ll hold the line, I’ll have Scott give you the number of a wonderful man that can help you. As for the woman you’re in love with, as a matter of opinion, I think you should tell her just how strongly you feel. If she’s half the person I’m

guessing she is, she'll be there for you. Now, you have to promise you'll make that appointment."

"Yes, ma'am, I will. Thank you for taking my call, Dr. Joey."

"It was a pleasure, Wayne." More than he could know, she thought, and battled back a fresh wave of tangled longing. "And that's all the time we have for tonight, but we'll be back tomorrow. Thanks to all of our callers and listeners. Remember, desire is healthy; it's what you do with that desire that counts."

Which was easier said than done, Joey thought as she sank back in her chair. What exactly was she supposed to do with this unwanted desire for her boss? The desire that she hadn't known was so potent until just a few minutes ago? Sudden physical attraction wasn't something she experienced every day; in fact, she'd never experienced it this strongly before.

* * * * *

Joey let out a deep breath as she closed her townhouse door behind her. Tossing her keys into the bowl on the small wood table, she smiled as she felt a warm body twine its way around her legs.

"Hello, Murray. Miss me? Or was it the call of the cat food?"

"Meow ..."

"Um, I thought so."

Letting her purse drop to the floor, Joey meandered through the living room to her right. She flipped the lights on, illuminating the matching Tiffany lamps that flanked the deep cushioned burgundy couch. Absently she kicked at the fringes of the Oriental rug that covered the wood floor as she made her way into the kitchen. A kitchen that her mother said was lost on Joey. All the modern conveniences and state of the art appliances, and she rarely found the time or inclination to cook or bake. Still, she enjoyed the sheer aesthetics of the pale blues and creamy whites of the eat-in kitchen.

She automatically went to the cabinet and took down a flat can with the picture of a pampered cat on the front. Murray was right underneath her, a loud purr emanating from his sturdy body.

"Starving to death, are you, baby?"

She chuckled as she popped the top and bent down to scoop the chunked goo into a ceramic bowl. Immediately satisfied, the cat dove into his food at a fever pitch, devouring it with small bites.

"Watch it, or else you won't be able to fit through the cat door."

She was ignored, of course; she hadn't expected anything less. Shaking her head, Joey went back through the kitchen, walking through the archway on the other side. She maneuvered around the oval wooden table that stood in the dining room and wandered through the den-turned-study. She didn't bother to turn the lights on as she went; she knew

her home like the back of her hand. Even as she trudged up the stairs to her bedroom, she was plotting out her evening. Another quiet one, just like the night before ... and the night before that ... and the night before that. Before she could begin to feel sorry for herself, she shoved her gloomy thoughts back with determination.

Half an hour later Joey was on her couch, her legs propped up on the coffee table, her long green robe billowing over her calves. Snuggling down, she balanced her laptop on her thighs and clicked on the link to Maison de Boheme, her favorite chat room. She loved to come here after her shows, particularly after a difficult one. And tonight had definitely been difficult. The little jolt of surprise when she'd fantasized about her new boss had been shocking at best, and it wasn't the pleasant kind of shock she might have liked to have had. After all, panting over a man that couldn't possibly be attracted to her was more depressing than exciting.

Shaking her head, Joey refocused on the screen and smiled as the white window popped up. The Play Room was brimming with people tonight, with messages scrolling quickly across the computer. She looked down the list of names to the right and found several that she knew, and a few that she didn't.

She tried to take a moment to catch up on the conversation, but before she could there were greetings called out to her.

"Hey there, Doc101!"

"It's Doc!!!!"

"WB, Doc"

"What's up, Doc?"

Joey grinned happily at the messages and began typing a greeting herself.

"Hello, all. What are we talking about tonight?"

"Why when a man has sex with a lot of women he's a stud, and when a woman has sex with a lot of men, she's a slut."

Joey laughed out loud at that statement. "Unfortunately, as much as society has changed, there are still certain unspoken rules that haven't. And, in fear that I'm going to duck some virtual tomatoes here, women also hurt each other by being verbally cruel. If we want it to change, then we have to stop holding women to different standards than men, and teach the people around us the same thing."

She watched as her reply popped onto the screen, cocking her head as she waited for more banter. It didn't take long.

"Once again Doc is the voice of reason. lol"

"I swear, I think you really are a doctor!"

"But I do hear my daughter calling certain boys himbos and male sluts. I'd like to think that it's changing, too, Doc."

Joey was nodding her head when a small chime sounded. She recognized the soft noise; she was usually privately tagged at least once in these chats. But she couldn't ever remember being tagged so quickly, and she didn't recognize the screen name, LonFog, that was on the small window.

"That was an interesting observation, Doc101. Makes me blush when I think I could be a male slut, myself."

She chuckled at the other person's comment. Obviously he was a man.

"Dare I ask how many notches you have in your bedpost?"

"More than I'd like to admit."

Joey's fingers glided over the keyboard as she shook her head. "But were they all special?"

"At the time, they were very special."

She laughed then, startling Murray from her spot on the couch. "Were they special for very long?"

"For as long as they wanted to be."

"Now, that's an interesting answer."

There was a pause before LonFog replied. "And why is it interesting? Does that mean my psyche is scarred?"

"No, but it sounds to me like you had some sort of respect for each woman that you slept with."

"Well, I don't sleep with women I don't like."

"I should hope not." Joey hurriedly typed, adding, "But I'm sure you've had one night stands."

Again there was a pause, and she knew she'd thrown him off his stride. Finally, a reply appeared.

"I've only had two one-night stands in my life. I'm only comfortable telling you that because you don't know who I am. As a man, I think they'd revoke my Man Card if I said this to another guy. But I actually regretted both of them. It made me feel ..."

"Cheap?"

"And tawdry. In both situations, it was the woman that left my bed and was gone before I woke up."

"And you're not the kind of man that appreciated that."

"No, I'm not. Oh, God, I sound like a total weenie, don't I?"

Joey bit her bottom lip in sympathy. "No, actually, you sound like the kind of guy most women are trying to meet."

"And are you trying to meet men like me?"

The question startled her. She blinked several times as she stared at his words, wondering why he wanted to know. He was flirting with a stranger, she assured herself. There wasn't any harm in that.

Feeling adventurous and in need of a little stroking after her evening, Joey decided to play along. "I don't know, are you offering me a one-night stand, or are you saying you'd like to respect me."

"Oh, I think I'd respect you, one-night stand or not."

"But you don't know me."

"Isn't that the definition of a one-night stand?"

She laughed softly and shifted her weight. "You have me there."

"I'm sure your husband would have my head on a platter if he saw that I'd mentioned a one-night stand."

"I'm not married."

Too late she realized she'd told this stranger something personal about herself. That was one rule she'd been careful to hold on to. Before she could analyze what she'd done, he was replying.

"Okay, your boyfriend or girlfriend, then."

In for a penny, she decided. "No significant other." She hesitated only a moment. "You?"

"With all this talk of sex? No. If I had a girlfriend or wife I'd be too busy with her to chat about my sex life. Which is pathetic right now."

"Pathetic? A smooth talker like you? I'm shocked."

"Not as shocked as I am that you don't have someone. Is it the men or the women that are blind where you live?"

She took a sip of her warm tea before she answered. "Men. I'm strictly a man girl."

"You never experimented?"

Joey wrinkled her brow slightly. "Are you trying to get salacious details for jollies?"

"Me? No, honestly, no. I'm just curious."

She worried the inside of her lip for a moment before deciding she'd already gone further in this short conversation than she had with anyone else on-line. "Yeah, I did experiment, once when I was a sophomore in college. My roommate's sister came to visit and she was just amazing. She was the coolest girl I'd ever met, and when it was just the two of us, I was the center of her attention. About a week after she came to visit, she kissed me. It was different than what I'd felt with boys. Not bad, just different. She gave me a chance to stop, but I was too curious. So we had sex. It was good, and I did enjoy it, but I knew that I enjoyed sex with men more. When she touched me, it was nice, and when she brought me to climax, it was good, too."

"But it wasn't the same as when you were with a man."

"Exactly. And she was wonderful about it. We talked afterwards and she was very understanding. We never told anyone, of course, but we stayed friends for a long time after."

"And you lived happily ever after."

"Something like that."

She waited for a moment for him to say something more. She was about to give up and go back to watching the main room when he finally chimed in again.

"I don't normally do this. Seriously, I don't. Okay, I'm sure you've heard that from plenty of people before, but I can promise I'm being honest about this. I have something I'd like to send to you."

She lifted an eyebrow and typed, "An e-mail?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind. I enjoyed our conversation, and I thought, if you don't care, that I might e-mail you."

She couldn't help but be a bit charmed by his request. After all, he'd only have to look in her profile to find her public e-mail address. Yet, he'd asked her permission. So many people didn't think to do that.

"Of course you can e-mail me." She typed in her address and smiled. "If you write me, I promise I'll reply."

Now why had she said that? Hell, why had she said half things she'd just typed? She hadn't told anyone, not even Scott, about her college experience. So why this stranger?

"Okay, I'll e-mail you," he answered. "I'll be looking for a reply. I have to go for the night; I have an early morning. But I'm really glad I hopped in here."

"I am, too." And she meant it with an honesty that surprised her. "Have a good night."

"You, too, Doc."

With that, he was gone, vanished from the board. She found herself hoping he was e-mailing her, then squashed the desire. If he did, that would be great. If he didn't, then her world wouldn't fall apart. She wouldn't set herself up for that kind of disaster.

Letting out a deep breath, she turned her attention back to the main chat room and jumped into the conversation. If her focus drifted once in a while, if her mind flitted back momentarily to the odd conversation with LonFog, then she forgave herself the momentary lapse. It had been a long evening, a strange evening, and she figured she was allowed some odd behavior. She would be straightened out tomorrow. After she checked her e-mail and found that LonFog hadn't sent her a message.

Chapter Five

Sam sat in a booth in the far corner of McGivney's, ignoring the curious and sometimes intrigued glances of the people in the bar. He wasn't interested in striking up a conversation with any of them. He wasn't even interested in the lukewarm beer he was sipping. His eyes were glued to the door, waiting anxiously for Joey to walk in and put him out of his misery.

She'd been open on the board last night; he'd been afraid she wouldn't reply to his tag, but she had. And they'd had a fun and interesting conversation. Hell, she'd even flirted with him. Good Lord, the whole conversation about her experimentation with another girl still sent hot waves straight down to his crotch. He'd gone to bed with a raging hard-on, finally having to take care of matters himself before he could fall asleep.

Phase one of his seduction of Josephine had begun. Now it was time for phase two. Of course, that wouldn't do any good if she decided she hated him. Not that he thought she did. After their lunch the other day, and especially after the way she'd almost melted when he'd told her he fought for what he wanted, and he took damn good care of it when he got it, he had a small hope that she was interested. Now he just had to nourish that tiny lick of flame into a full blown bonfire. God knew he was burning up with his need for her. It might bring a little satisfaction to see her just as hot for him.

He had checked his watch for the sixth time when he finally saw her. Scott was ushering her inside, his arms moving animatedly as he chatted. She was wearing her white coat again, the one with the matching cap that made her look like a snow angel. Lord, she was beautiful.

He gave them a moment to settle into a table, watching with hot eyes as she took off her coat to reveal her curves. It was a soft pink sweater tonight, the kind that buttoned up the front and made a man's fingers itch. He could only guess how her skin underneath the fluffy cotton would feel; like satin covering silk, he decided, and felt his cock growing hard

again. He watched, fascinated, as she carefully flipped her long hair over her shoulder, sending cascading waves down her back. He had the momentary fantasy of wrapping his fists in the soft strands and holding on as he ravaged her mouth. He bet that she tasted like creamy cinnamon, all delicate and spicy and warm. His erection strained against his fly and ground his teeth together. He hadn't had this kind of reaction to a woman since he'd been sixteen and lost his virginity in the basement of his private school.

Tipping back his beer, Sam took a long swallow before he stood up, hoping his arousal wasn't too obvious. As casually as he could, he made his way across the room, dodging bodies and wolf whistles. When she finally noticed him, he watched her eyes go wide for one indefinable moment. Something in that one look made his heart speed up like a trapped animal.

"Hey, boss! I didn't know you'd be here!" Scott looked up at him with an expression that was overly friendly.

"I heard that this was the place to be, so I thought I'd give it a try. I have to say, it's certainly got its share of interesting clientele." He sent them both a smile and hoped that Joey wouldn't hop up and make a mad dash for the door.

Instead, she blinked as if to clear her mind and gave him a wobbly tilt of her lips. "That's why we like it. We fit in."

Oh, he liked her. He really liked her, and that statement just proved why. He couldn't seem to be able to pull his gaze away from her; her creamy skin and startling eyes held him prisoner as he was jostled by a passing body.

"Why don't you join us?" Scott suggested. "It's getting packed in here; you probably won't be able to find a seat."

"Oh, I'm sure there's a pretty little blond somewhere that will gladly let him pull up a chair."

That little comment felt a lot like a jab to his gut. He couldn't decide if Josephine was teasing him or taunting him. Whichever it was, he didn't like the thought of it. Did she seriously think he was the kind of man who came into bars to pick up women? Hell, he'd just told her last night how he felt about one-night stands. Sam barely suppressed a wince as he realized it hadn't been him she'd been talking to, but his alternate identity. He'd have to prove to her that he wasn't the type of man that she plainly believed him to be.

Sliding into the empty chair between Joey and Scott, Sam sent the woman he was quickly becoming obsessed with a slow wink. "I prefer brunettes. Besides, I don't know these women."

She lifted an eyebrow and stared at him. "And you have to know them before you talk to them?"

"Wow, you make me sound petty. Actually, if I saw a woman that I thought I'd enjoy talking to, I'd be over at her table in a heartbeat, free chair or not."

He let his statement hang in the air, hoping she would understand that he'd done just that when he'd made his way to her. He held her gaze as she studied him, let her have her few moments of perusal as he fought back the urge to taste her mouth.

Scott cleared his throat, obviously feeling the tension that had gathered around the small table. "I'll, um, I'll just go get us some drinks. Joey, the usual?"

Sam smiled smugly when all she could do was nod. Good, he'd thrown her off balance again. He was going to need every advantage he could get.

"So, Josephine, how was work tonight?"

His question seemed to startle her, but she recovered quickly enough. "Fun, as always, and little bit sad, too. It surprises me that people have trouble believing that their fantasies, for the most part, are just healthy desires."

"No weirdoes tonight? No questions about ethically unacceptable sexual wants?" He infused enough of a good-natured tone that she grinned slowly at him.

"No, not one question about illegal sexual acts. Why, do you have one?"

He laughed at her question, warming when she chuckled along. "Well, I've been wondering about that Japanese bondage technique ..."

She tossed up her hand to stop his remark. "I'm a sex therapist, not a bondage expert. Though I have heard that when done right, shinju can be awfully stimulating."

It was his turn to lift his eyebrow. "You've studied the techniques?"

The thought of her looking at the books, of looking at the pictures, of wondering about being subject to bondage herself, nearly launched him right on top of her. He made a quick mental note to buy some specialty rope.

"What kind of therapist would I be if I wasn't up on those types of things?"

"A bad one." He licked his suddenly dry lips and took a long pull of beer. At this rate, he might need another bottle. "So, you come here often?"

The line was so dated and so cheesy that he grimaced. How the hell had that rusty jewel managed to slip out of his mouth? Because the brain in your crotch is engaged, not the one in your head, he thought.

She took pity on him and didn't make a disparaging remark about his question. "Scott and I usually come over a couple times a week. Sometimes it's nice to get out in a crowd and enjoy all the noise and activity."

"Um, I suppose, though I'm really more of a homebody."

Joey gave him an odd look as she cocked her head. "Really?"

He leaned closer to her and narrowed his eyes. "What, you thought I was more of a club hopper?"

She shrugged, looking the slightest bit embarrassed. "I don't know, maybe. It just surprises me that someone like you wouldn't be constantly out on the town."

"Someone like me? Is that a smack against my character?"

"No, no, it's just ... well, I mean, I'm sure your girlfriends like going out and ..."

"And you think I have a harem hidden away somewhere?" He didn't know whether to be upset or amused. "Trust me, Joey, I'm a one-woman-at-a-time man. I don't believe in dangling people."

"Okay, so, your girlfriend then."

"You really think I work that fast? I might have to be flattered."

He watched as she turned a surprising shade of pink. He had a feeling it didn't happen that often. Before he could tease her any more Scott was back at the table, sliding a thick glass in front of Joey.

"Your drink, boss lady." The younger man slid into his chair and leaned toward her. "I'm in need of an expert opinion, if you don't mind."

Sam watched as Joey's features relaxed into amusement. Apparently this was a ritual that the two had shared before. Probably every time they came in.

"And what woman are you scouting out tonight?"

"That pretty dark-haired one at the end of the counter." Scott nodded casually toward a striking female that was stirring her drink and looking bored. "She's been freezing out the other men."

Joey carefully swiveled her gaze around, so slow and easy that if he hadn't known, Sam wouldn't have realized what she was doing. She studied the other woman for a moment, her face unreadable as she sipped her yellow-hued drink. Finally she turned back to the table.

"She's not haughty; she's shy. See the way she's kind of curled into herself? That's a protective stance. She's not making eye contact with anyone, either. Her lipstick is still perfect, not a smudge out of place, so I'll bet that she's been playing with the same drink all night. Her dress is pretty, but fairly conservative, and so is her jewelry. She's not dressed like a woman out to pick up a man. I'd almost place money on the fact that a friend talked her into coming here tonight. If you want her attention, I'd try being casual about it. Sit beside her, let her get used to you there for a minute or two, order some food, a large portion. Ask her if she'd like to share, but be nonchalant about it. Tell her you only want half of your order, and offer to split it with her. Be your charming self, and don't let her shyness run you off. And, Scott, be nice. Most of the men in here aren't; they're just plain old pushy."

He gave her a wide smile and nodded. "I'm always nice, Joey. Women deserve to be treated nicely."

"Thus speaks one of the wisest men I know." Joey gave her friend a little salute with her glass. "Go get 'em, tiger."

Scott grinned widely, took a fortifying gulp of his beer, and sauntered over to the bar. Sam lifted an eyebrow as the younger man began his plan of attack, the very one that Joey had outlined.

His lips curled up in a smile of amusement as he turned his attention back to the woman beside him. "You help him pick up women?"

She shrugged absently and took another sip of her drink. "I figure if I can help teach just one man how to properly figure out women, the world will be a much better place."

He laughed softly and nodded his head. "You're probably right, doctor." He watched her for a moment, weighing his next move, before finally deciding to steer the conversation to his own agenda. "Tell me, in your professional opinion, how do you suppose I pick up women?"

She lifted one finely arched eyebrow as a smile played across her mouth. It really was a nice mouth, he thought, all full, moist lips, plump and shaded a deep shade of pink. He could picture the tender flesh swollen from hours of kisses, slackened in passion as he nipped at her breasts and skimmed her luscious curves with his hands.

"-- asking for advice?"

He realized she'd said something and he'd missed it. Damn it. What was she asking? What about advice? He had to stop fantasizing about her while he was trying to seduce her. Yeah, sure, and for his next feat he'd hold back the waves of the Pacific.

"No, no advice. I guess I'm just curious."

She cocked her head and lifted her shoulders in a barely perceptible shrug. "Well, I suppose you're not one to normally play games. I believe what you said earlier; you go right up to a woman, give her one of your killer smiles, and ask if she's alone or with someone."

Joey thought he had a killer smile? The thought warmed his heart.

"You're right, I didn't lie about that. But you make me sound like I have no finesse." He played at looking disappointed and knew he was failing miserably.

"Oh, I didn't say that. I just said you were more direct than most men, which can be a good thing."

"And you, Josephine, do you like the direct approach?"

Her glass stopped half-way to her mouth as she stared at him. He barely managed to bite back the grin that threatened to erupt.

Slowly, she set her drink back down. "I ... well, I guess I haven't been approached enough to know."

His mouth fell open in astonishment. He couldn't help it. It was like someone saying that Botticelli's classic *Birth of Venus* was a boring paint by numbers work.

"Hold on, you mean to tell me that ... that you've never been picked up? That no one's ever made a move on you?"

She looked around nervously, as if she were afraid someone had overheard. "I never said *no one* had ever tried, I just said that ... why are you looking at me like that?"

He worked to snap his jaw shut as his brow knit in confusion. On one hand, it gave him a kind of masculine satisfaction to think that she hadn't been picked up at bars. On the other, he felt an indignant anger that other men were too blind or stupid not to want her.

He quickly cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. "I'm sorry, I guess it's just astonishing. I can't imagine seeing you in here and not trying a line or two."

Her head jerked back like someone had smacked her. Her gorgeous blue eyes widened in shock and, for a moment, he wondered if she might fall off of her chair. Oh, yeah, he'd definitely tossed her for a loop.

"I ... that's ... that's kind of you to say." Her words were hesitant as she studied him. "But I'm sure with all the women in here that you --"

"Would have had the good sense to see you through the crowd and not be too terrified to at least try to buy you a drink or talk you into dinner."

Maybe he was moving too fast. Hell, he didn't want to scare her away, and it was painfully obvious that men didn't usually pay her this kind of attention.

He was trying to decide how to defuse the situation when Scott ambled back over, a mile-wide grin splitting his face.

"Thanks for the help, Joey. I got her number and we have a date tomorrow night." He slid into his chair, his gaze darting between Sam and his friend. "So, doc, you look about ready to drop."

"Yeah, yeah, I think I'm ready to leave."

She stood quickly, snagging her pretty white coat from the back of the chair. Sam stood as well, determined to ease the tension before she started to have a panic attack. He didn't want her to have any reason in her mind to want to stay away from him. Hell, he hadn't meant to go too far, but the look on her face told him plainly that he had.

"I was about to head home myself. Why don't I walk you out?" He said it more than asked, knowing if he sounded any less authoritative she'd find an excuse to scurry out the door without him.

She nodded her head, her eyes averted from his as she pulled her cap from her coat pocket and secured it on her head. He waited and let her maneuver in front of him, lifting an eyebrow at Scott's covert thumbs-up signal, which he was sure was meant to bolster his ego.

He stepped out into the cold night, the frigid air snaking down into his lungs like sharp talons. As casually as he dared, he laid a hand against the small of her back, making it seem like nothing more than the friendly gesture of a gentleman. The truth was he just wanted to have his hands on her. He didn't expect the pleasant jolt that shot up his fingers and into his blood. Apparently even the icy threat of snow wasn't enough to cool his libido down tonight.

"I'm glad we had a chance to talk tonight." He was shocked when his words came out smoothly.

"Um, yes, yes, it was ... nice."

He glanced down at her and smiled when he saw her gnawing on her bottom lip. Carefully, he looked both ways across the street, making sure it was safe for them to pass before propelling her forward with his hand. He took an awkward step, jostling her closer into his arms. He nearly groaned at the feeling of her. Her scent drifted up, warm and deep, the kind of aroma a man could get lost in, the kind that made him want to heat the woman up to see if it would intensify. His balls tightened and he began to worry that he wouldn't be able to walk normally for much longer.

"Oh, tomorrow afternoon, I'm having a contractor come over to the house to do some estimation work. He says he knows you, a Jack McComb."

He watched her features soften at the name and felt a stab of jealousy. Good Lord, a stab of jealousy over a man that was sixty years old and had talked about his wife like she was a goddess. Before this was all over, Sam was afraid he'd be elbow deep in a straight jacket.

"Yeah, of course I know Jack. When I was in college, I used to work summers in his office, doing the filing, running errands, that sort of thing. He paid me way too much because he knew I was trying to pay my way through college."

He felt his admiration for her go up another notch. "You worked your way through school?"

"My parents did what they could, but they weren't exactly the Rockefellers. Mom was a music teacher before she retired, and Dad was a landscaper."

"He's retired now, too?"

"Yeah, Mom convinced him to retire after his first heart attack. We almost lost him."

She swung her gaze up to him and he saw the sheen of sadness that settled over her eyes. He had the urge to make her laugh, just to see that grief disappear.

"I'm sorry," was all he could think to say.

She gave him a soft smile and he felt his heart contract. "Thank you. But he's a lot better now, even though he complains about his strict diet. He's a good man, and very patient. Very, very patient. He's had to be, with two daughters. Heaven knows we drove him crazy more times than I'd care to admit."

Sam found himself reacting to her amused voice. "Beating the boys off with a stick while the girls cried about how he was ruining their chances with the love of their life?"

Her lips tilted further up and he was inordinately pleased. "Something like that."

She stopped beside her car and turned to look at him, her delicate face lit by the harsh light of the street lamp. He wondered what she would do if he leaned down and tasted her mouth. Would she shove him away? Would she open her arms and welcome him? He was tempted to try, but more determined to win her trust. He had already pushed too far tonight in the bar.

"Thanks for walking me to my car. I'm sure Scott will be at McGivney's a little longer if you want to go back in."

"You mean if I feel like prowling for women?" He didn't know if he wanted to shake her or hug her.

"Or have another drink." She fished her car keys from her backpack purse, taking longer than she needed to find them.

He let out a silent sigh and leaned in just a bit closer, invading her space a fraction of an inch. "I have a long day tomorrow, Josephine. I meant it when I said I was heading home ... alone."

Her eyes rounded as if he'd stunned her. "Oh," came out on a soft breath.

"About tomorrow." He took a tiny step forward. "I was going to ask if you would mind coming over. I thought you might be able to translate whatever Mr. McComb says about fixing the house."

Her eyes looked a bit dazed as she stared up at him. "And ... and maybe smooth the way for you?"

He smiled down at her before repeating her earlier words. "Something like that. One o'clock? You know where my grandfather's house is?"

She nodded slowly before her tongue snaked out to wet her lips. He clamped his teeth together to hold back his groan. She couldn't possibly know how much she was torturing him.

"One, tomorrow, okay."

She turned and fumbled her key into the door. His hand was on the car door handle before hers, opening it for her. He was standing so that when she took a step back to avoid being hit, her back brushed against his front. He didn't want to analyze why he was being so masochistic to his poor body.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he managed through a tight throat.

She slid quickly into her seat, leaving behind her heat and her scent. He was shocked that his long coat wasn't standing out in a pronounced tent.

Joey lifted her eyes to him again and he could see that she'd slipped her composure back neatly into place. "Tomorrow. Have a good night, Sam."

He shut her door and stood back, watching as she revved her car and headed out into the night. He stood there long after she was gone, remembering the husky way she'd said his name.

* * * * *

Joey slipped into her white nightgown, ignoring Murray as she weaved around her ankles. Sam. Just his name made her body shiver. She certainly hadn't expected to see him

tonight, but there he'd been, large as life, and even larger than her imagination. And he'd flirted with her ... at least, she thought he'd flirted with her. The more she'd considered it on her way home, the more she'd begun to doubt it. After all, why would he bother with her when he could have been charming another, more attractive woman at the bar? No, he'd chatted with her, being nice to his employee, even friendly, because, as he'd pointed out, he had an early morning.

But then there had been that moment in the parking lot. She'd turned and he'd been there, watching her intently, much too close for her mental and physical comfort. His warmth had curled out and around her, and she'd been fairly mesmerized by his nearness and his searching hazel eyes. She could have sworn that he was going to kiss her. Wishful thinking, she decided as she slumped down in front of her computer. If she didn't stop mooning over her boss, and making him the star of her dark fantasies, she was going to be fired. Or go insane. Or maybe both.

Sighing, she flipped on her computer and stared blankly into space as she waited for it to boot. It was awfully hard not to think Sam Winters and his bright eyes, devastating smile, knee weakening dimple, broad chest, corded arms, tight behind, large bulge that filled out the front of his pants ...

She shook her head quickly, dispelling the mental image as the lingering heat curled neatly between her thighs. Okay, so it was going to be harder to dismiss her attraction to her new boss than she thought. But she didn't have to act like a star struck teenager. She was an adult; she could control her hormones. Really, she could.

She moaned quietly as the monitor flickered, calling herself a hundred times a fool. She'd gotten herself cornered into agreeing to going to Sam's house; of course, it was mainly because he wanted to use her connection to McComb Construction, not because he wanted to see her. She would have to remind herself of that before she left, and maybe make it a little easier not to drool like a sex-starved teenager.

Rolling her shoulders, she clicked on the internet icon, irritably shifting her weight in the plush chair. She would swear this chair was more comfortable last week. Maybe the cushioning was finally wearing out, she thought as the springs groaned. She didn't want to consider that it could be because of her behind. That was a depressing thought.

Sighing loudly, Joey logged onto her e-mail. She refused to admit that she was going to check for a message from LonFog. She conveniently ignored the fact that she'd already perused her mail earlier; she didn't want to think that she could be labeled just a tad desperate.

She plugged in her password casually, pretending her heart wasn't racing and her hands weren't shaking. She nonchalantly pressed the button to launch the program. Her eyes unceremoniously scanned the row of new messages waiting to be read. Whatever façade of cool collection she had was shattered when she saw his name and let out a little involuntary gasp of pleasure.

Smiling widely, she opened the note and leaned in closer to the monitor.

Hello, Doc,

It was fun chatting with you in the room the other night. I normally don't go around tagging and talking to virtual (no pun intended) strangers, but I really wanted to chat with you. I appreciate you letting me do that. If you'd ever like to talk off the boards, you can send me an instant message. My screen name is the same, LonFog and I'm usually on about the same time every night. Not that I'm stalking you. I'm not. Wait, isn't that what stalkers all say? Okay, you have my permission to immediately delete this e-mail if I'm freaking you out.

With that in mind, I'm not sure if I should ask this next part, because you don't really know who I am. But since I took the chance before, I thought I'd take the chance now, too. I have a book I'd like to send you. It's something I think you'll appreciate. If you aren't too uncomfortable with my mailing you something, would you send me your address? You don't have to give me your name, just a place where I can send it.

I hope to hear from you soon. I enjoyed our conversation and would like to have another, if you're up to it.

LonFog

Joey sat back and stared at the screen. This wasn't what she'd been expecting. Of course, she couldn't say what she'd thought he'd send her; jokes, maybe, or a quick hello. Maybe even some e-mail chain letter. But he was asking for her mailing address ... to send her something. The implications ran through her mind. What if he was lying about sending her a book? What if he sent her something horrible, like a severed ear? Or worse, what if he tried to send her a bomb or anthrax?

Rolling her eyes in disgust, she crossed her ankles and looked up at the ceiling. Could she be any more dramatic? Well, she supposed she could be her mother. So what if a man wanted to send her a gift. Was it any different than when women got flowers and candy from secret admirers?

Even though her logical side screamed no, another part of her, one that was still smarting from the thought that she was too attracted to her boss, egged her on. The devil on her shoulder won.

Propping herself back up, she typed back a response ... complete with her P.O. Box number.

Chapter Six

Sam paced in the front hall of the massive old Victorian, his mind more on the woman coming over than the revamping of his grandfather's old home. He hadn't planned to ask her to come; the invitation had just slipped from his lips as she'd stood there, looking infinitely sexy and staring up at him with dewy eyes.

There was an unfamiliar fear curling in his stomach. Fear that she'd changed her mind and wouldn't come. Fear that she would avoid being around him.

Time, he thought and let out a quiet sigh. He needed time to seduce her, to show her just how, desirable she was to him. Time to prove to her that he liked her, really liked her, as a person. Whether she realized it or not, there was a deep well of love inside of her; whoever tapped into it wouldn't ever want for anything.

He was impatiently shoving his hands into his jeans pockets when he saw her shadow through the stain glass windowed door. He held his breath as she rang the bell, waited a few beats, then swung the door open.

The first thing that hit him was her scent. Warm, heady, inviting a man to taste her skin. Then his eyes focused on her and his lips tilted up into a smile. Her face was a marvel of gentle curves and arched brows, rosy lips and wind ripened cheeks. He had the fleeting thought that he could happily spend all day just staring at her.

"Um, am I early?"

Her question neatly snapped his mind back to the present. "No, no, actually you're right on time."

He stepped away from the door, giving her a silent invitation to step inside. She moved past him and he couldn't stop himself from leaning forward so that she would brush against him.

"This is such a great house." She unbuttoned her coat and studied the entranceway. "I always loved coming over for your grandfather's parties."

Sam reached out and helped slipped her coat from her shoulders. He didn't wait but plucked the hat from her head. His fingers twitched with the idea of unweaving the French braid she'd worked her hair into.

"Are you fixing the place up to sell it?"

He had to clear his throat before he answered. "Actually, I was thinking of staying here for a while."

He watched her carefully, gauging her reaction. She seemed a little surprised by his announcement, but then again, so was he. His plan hadn't fully formed until this very moment. Now, suddenly, it seemed vital that he stay in Atherton.

"You are?" There was a husky tone to her words that made him smile.

"Yes, I am. And if I'm staying here, I'd like it to be more ... well ..."

"Your taste? I can't imagine why you don't care for the funeral home feel of the wallpaper."

He chuckled, relaxing a slight inch as he hung her things on the rack beside the door. "Life can be depressing enough. I like my surroundings to be a little more cheerful."

She cocked her head and nodded in understanding. "Are you going to try to refurbish the house? Maybe restore it back to what it was originally?"

"Is that what you would do?"

She nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. A very nice chest, he thought, and tried not to stare at the rounded mounds that pressed against the baby blue turtleneck sweater.

"I've always believed houses have their own personalities. This house has always struck me as a serene old lady, very soft spoken, but very warm and comfortable. She'd be happier if she were redone the way she was originally meant to be."

He felt another notch of fascination as she spoke. "Houses have personalities?"

He watched as a blush fought its way up her cheeks. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a woman blush. Maybe he'd just been around the wrong type of women, he decided.

She shrugged and turned away to look up the stairway. "I probably sound silly --"

"I never said that," he told her as he eased up behind her. "I think you're absolutely right. That's why I think people are so careful when they search for a house; they have to find a place that fits them, and that they fit."

And Josephine fit here, he thought. He could easily picture her gracefully descending the stairs on her way out, or sitting in front of a fire in the living room, or entertaining her

friends for their birthdays. Or in his bed, upstairs, waiting for him with her arms open and her body hot to the touch.

“Do you have plans?”

It took him a moment to realize she wasn't talking about his fantasies of her. “Oh, um, yes, I have some pictures in the kitchen.” He laid a hand against the small of her back, enjoying her skin underneath his fingertips. “I hope you don't mind, but I ordered Chinese for lunch.”

“Lunch?” She turned her gaze to him as he led her toward the back of the house.

“You already ate?”

“Well, no, but ...”

“Ah, good, then I won't have to try to force down two entire orders of sesame shrimp and vegetable lo mein, not to mention the egg rolls.” All her favorites, he knew thanks to Scott. He also knew her habit of eating a late lunch because of her schedule, so he'd been almost certain she wouldn't say no.

Sharing a meal in his home was another intimacy that would ease her into the idea of him he hoped.

He pushed open the swinging door and maneuvered her into the spacious kitchen. “I was happy to find out that there's a Chinese delivery place here. I'm a lousy cook, so I like to have options.”

She laughed softly and nodded. “I can empathize.”

He quirked an eyebrow as he started unloading small cartons onto the butcher-block island. “I thought you made cupcakes for the people at the station.”

“Oh, I do. But I don't always have time to actually cook.”

She moved closer, watching as he pulled out the food. When he held up chopsticks in a silent question, she nodded.

Once they had the containers in hand, he convinced her to walk around the house, eating and talking about the possibilities for the rooms. They wandered around, plotting and planning, letting their wineglasses rest on whatever surface was available. He picked from her container and she did the same with his. He thought it was an excellent step in the right direction.

When Mr. McComb finally dropped by he gave Joey a hard bear hug, engulfing her in his meaty arms as his voice boomed around them. For her part, Joey accepted his good-natured affection, treating the other man as if he were a part of her family and not a former employer. But then he'd heard that was part of her charm; and he'd seen it, as well, in the way she treated Scott and Marcie.

An hour later they were in the living room again, with the contractor taking the measure of the room.

“So, you want this wall taken down?”

“If it’s possible. I’d like to try to get this house back to what it was originally,” Sam explained.

“Um, you thinking about stained glass for in here, too?”

Sam turned to Joey and lifted his eyebrow in question. He wasn’t quite sure why he felt the need to get her input, but he’d lived for so long following his gut instinct that it seemed natural to obey it. She stared at him for a moment, her eyes blinking owlshly. Finally, she cleared her throat and pointed to the small arches over the far windows.

“I would do some stained glass there, just to add some color to the room.”

He smiled in agreement. That would have been exactly what he would have asked Mr. McComb to do.

The older man gave her a lopsided smile and scribbled in his notebook. “So, we’ll pull all these carpets up; I’ll bet you have some really nice wood under there. I can give you the number of a company that sells reproduction wallpaper. They’ll send you out a sample book and you can decided what you want.”

He paused and gazed over the house again, making a slow circle as he turned. “The moldings are in good shape, and we have someone that can come in and clean them, fix them if they need it. This’ll be the perfect place for a family.”

He gave Sam and Joey a pointed look and a sly smile. It didn’t take a genius to know what conclusion he’d come to. Sam didn’t see any reason to disabuse him of it. When Joey would have protested, he slid an arm around her waist and maneuvered her toward the front door. The contractor followed, busily adding more notes to his list. Joey glanced up at him, giving him a censorious, slightly confused look, and he simply smiled down at her. Let her wonder why he was enjoying the other man’s misguided thoughts.

“Thank you for coming over.” Sam stopped in the doorway, not bothering to fight his grin. “I know you’re busy through the holidays, but when do you think you’d be able to start work?”

Mr. McComb considered for a moment, then gave a curt nod. “Mid-January, if you decide to use us. And I think I can get you a deal on the kitchen tiling.”

“If you’ll send over the paperwork, I’ll get it signed and back to you before Christmas.”

The older man beamed happily and stuck his hand out. “You’ll get it all in a couple of days, Mr. Winters. Joey, you have a good man right here.”

Sam gave her waist a quick squeeze as he shook Mr. McCombs hand, silently quieting her.

“I, um, well, thank you.” She cast him a sideways glance but didn’t try to change the other man’s mind.

Sam shook his hand and smiled as he closed the door behind him “Well, that went a lot better than I expected.”

“He’s a good contractor; you’ll have the house exactly like you want it by the middle of next year.” She bit her bottom lip and sent his libido into the Lombada. “You didn’t ... I mean, when he ... why didn’t you tell him the truth? About us?”

Well, that was definitely direct. He’d better tread lightly, he thought, or else his whole plan would go skidding right off the precarious tracks.

“He likes you, and he wants to see you happy. I don’t know, I guess I thought there wouldn’t be any harm done in letting him think we were dating.”

She studied him for a moment, her eyes skimming over his face with curiosity and a healthy dose of skepticism. “And it certainly wouldn’t hurt your cause any if he thinks he’s fixing this house up for me, as well.”

He was, Sam realized, and nearly choked on shock. That’s why it had been so important to have her here; that’s why his subconscious had sprung into action and persuaded her to come this afternoon. It was a terrifying, but not wholly undesirable, idea.

“Sam?”

He shook his head and tried for a casual smile. “Wow, you think I’m that mercenary?”

“You’re a businessman, aren’t you? You buy companies, pretty them up, then sell them to the highest bidder. I would imagine it’s a very cutthroat career.”

He watched her for a moment, wondering exactly what was going on in her head. He very nearly missed the jump of uncertainty in her gaze, a flicker that looked very much like need and fear. There was some sort of decision weighing on his response. Silently, he moved to stand directly in front of her, careful not to crowd her too much, but still insinuating himself into her comfort zone.

“I’m not as cutthroat as you might think. Yes, I buy floundering businesses. But my company doesn’t just toss people out like old books. We try to make sure that as many employees as possible retain their jobs. Those that have to be cut leave with a solid severance package and, if they’ve been good employees, a glowing reference. When we do eventually sell the business, it’s to investors that like what they see. Usually they bring on more people, which means more jobs for the community. Can it get dirty? Of course. Do I play balls to the wall? When I have to. But we’ve had a damned good go of it. And I’ll tell you a secret, Josephine.” He leaned in closer, forcing the idea of intimacy. “I think I might be ready to retire from that life. Atherton is growing on me, and I’m enjoying running the station. My grandfather always told me there’d come a time when I’d be ready to really set down roots. I guess he was right.”

She stared at him, her blue eyes wide as her breathing became heavy. Lord, she was lovely. Shockingly, heartbreakingly, lust-inducingly lovely. He might’ve been able to pull away from temptation if her pink-tinted lips hadn’t parted slightly. He gazed down at them, his mind conjuring up the idea of what they would feel like. Then her tongue snuck out to wet the plump flesh and he forgot all about giving her time and space.

He took a small step forward, all the while his eyes focused on her mouth. When she didn't move, he leaned down, letting his stare flick for a moment to her rounded eyes. Then his lips were on hers, gently brushing, and he nearly fell to the floor at the sensation. She was sweet, so sweet, her mouth as delicate and fragile as his mother's bone China. He felt the hesitancy but didn't push, instead lightly grazing her lips again. Bright tremors pulsed through his veins and raced straight to his expanding cock. He fought back the need to touch her, instead letting his mouth do the gentle seducing.

She let out a small sigh and he felt her melt, going slack as his teeth nipped her sumptuous bottom lip. He was delving deeper into the kiss when she slowly pulled away. He blinked, trying to clear his head as he stared down at her. His whole body was aching, tight with desire and hard with need. But the look on her face, the dazed sensuality, the dreamy expression and shocked surprise, went a long way to making his suffering worth it.

"I didn't ... I mean, we ... oh ..."

He lifted a thumb and gently stroked down the soft skin of her cheek. "We did; and no, I didn't plan it; and I agree. Oh."

A reluctant half-smile lifted the corner of her delectable mouth. "That was ... a surprise. I'm not sure we should have done that."

He nodded slowly and dropped his hand to his side. "It was just a kiss, Joey. A really nice one, but still, it was just a kiss." He couldn't stop the smile at her slightly disgruntled look. "I'm your boss, and I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that."

"Taken advantage?" She tilted her head as her brow knit in confusion. "You think you took advantage of me? It wasn't ... I could've stepped back, you know. I could have said no."

"So, you took advantage of me, then."

Her lips twisted in indignation and she propped her fists on her hips. "Of course not! We were just ... I was there and you were ... and then it was ..."

He ran his tongue across his teeth and tried desperately not to laugh.

She lifted one perfectly arched eyebrow and gave a long sigh. "Sam Winters, I do believe you're teasing me."

"Really? Well, I think you might be right." He eased further away from her, both to give her a chance to gather herself and to take himself away from the tempting idea of tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her upstairs to his bed. "Thanks for coming over today. It helped to have an aesthetic eye looking over the place."

"You're welcome." She gave him a hesitant smile, then ran a nervous hand over her hair. "Well, I'd better be going. I have a few things to do before work."

"Of course." He took the few steps to the door and opened it a small crack. He forced his hands to keep still as she pulled on her coat and hat, denying himself the pleasure of touching her. "I hope you have another good night. I'll be sure to listen."

She nodded as she moved past him and out of the house. The moment she was across the threshold, Joey turned back and gave him a long look.

“I’m glad you’re thinking of staying. The station needs a good owner.”

With that she was gone, practically running down the steps toward her car. Sam brought his hand up to the doorframe and leaned against it, watching her with fascination.

He whispered, “The station needs me, huh?”

Chuckling, he stood and waited until she’d pulled out before closing the door. It had definitely been an eventful day, and very informative one.

Whistling a jaunty tune, Sam bounded up the stairs to continue with his preparations. Before this was all over, Ms. Josephine Bingham wouldn’t be able to stop herself from wanting him. He had more hope than ever, now that he wasn’t just being cocky or overly optimistic. Not the way she’d kissed him, not the way she’d responded. Joey wanted him. Now all he had to do was stoke that fire and enjoy the ensuing flames.

Chapter Seven

Joey balanced her mail in her arms as she opened her front door. It had been a long, very long, twenty-four hours. Every time she closed her eyes or found a quiet moment or stepped in the shower, or drove down the street, or sorted her laundry ... any time she did just about anything she thought about that kiss.

Irritated, she closed the door and leaned against it, letting out a long, annoyed breath. What was wrong with her? It had been a kiss, just a kiss, and not even a by-god-I'm-gonna-strip-you-naked kind of kiss. It had been gentle ... devastatingly gentle. For all its tenderness, though, it had stirred her up in ways she hadn't considered before. The simple brush of his lips over hers had made her randy, wet, and embarrassingly close to shoving Sam down in the foyer and climbing on top of his delicious body.

"Okay, Joey, I think that's enough."

But even her soft directive didn't do anything to stop the spiraling desire that kiss had started. Oh, she so didn't need this.

Absently, she walked into the living room and collapsed on the couch, letting the mail in her hands jostle on her lap. What was she going to do about Sam Winters? He'd been very casual about their kiss, even going so far as teasing her. And she'd done what she could to make him believe that it had been just as casual for her. She'd stood in his house, telling herself that it had just been an easy thing, trying to lie to herself even while her body had been quivering inside. She was glad he hadn't noticed; that would have meant too much of an explanation.

She wasn't going to dwell on it. That was all she could think to do. Okay, yes, they'd kissed. But it was only a kiss, for heaven's sake! Just a quick brush of lips across lips. It wasn't

as if he'd touched her, as if his hands had been splayed across her back, or skimming along her ribs, or cupping her bottom, or weighing her breasts, or ...

"Ugh!" She growled loudly and sat up straight on the couch.

The stack of mail beside her gave a listing lurch before sliding into a scattered heap. She watched as several envelopes fell to the floor, then lifted her eyebrow when a larger, heavier package smacked onto the colorful rug. Curious, she bent down and scooped the brown wrapped package up, weighing it carefully in her hands. There was no return address, and her P.O. Box had been typed out on a neat white label.

"Now, who --" She broke off when she realized exactly where it had come from. "LonFog."

Joey worried her bottom lip as she stared down at the plainly wrapped rectangle. What to do? He'd told her he was going to be sending her something. She'd assumed that it would be a letter or possibly pictures. But this felt suspiciously like a book. She wasn't sure what to think of that. Her mind flip-flopped with indecision. Open it, or send it back? Keep it, or throw it away?

Her fingers were poised over the seam of the wrapping when her phone rang. The dulcet chirping sent her jumping in the air, her heart smacking wildly against her ribcage.

"Damn it." With a long sigh, she laid the package aside. Ignoring her shaking hands she quickly lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Oh, good, darling, you're home."

Joey promptly oozed down into the sofa cushions and rolled her eyes at the ceiling. "Hi, Mom."

"Well, you don't have to sound so enthusiastic."

Her mother's tone brought a quick smile to her lips. "I'm sorry, I was just ... distracted."

There was a pregnant pause before her mother continued. "Distracted? I didn't ... um ... interrupt anything, did I?"

She sounded so hopeful that Joey actually felt bad that she would be disappointing her. "Sorry, no man on top of me, beside me, underneath me, or hanging from the rafters."

"And if there was, you know you could tell me."

"Mom, I don't care how liberated you are. I am not discussing my sex life with you."

"But you talk about sex with total strangers."

"Mother ..."

She let out a petulant puff of air and conceded. "All right, fine, we'll drop the subject."

"Is that my Joey girl?"

Joey smiled when she heard her father's booming voice in the background. Her grin broadened when her mother shushed him and flipped the phone to speaker.

"Now you can talk to both of us."

"Hello, Dad. What are you up to this afternoon?"

"Oh, just puttering around the workshop. Thought I'd make the grandkids rocking horses this year."

And they would be slightly crooked, one leg would probably be shorter than the other, and the runners would be overly curved. But they would be made with love, and the wood would be warm with affectionate sanding. Her twin niece and nephew would adore them.

"Speaking of Christmas festivities, the Winter Festival is in a few days. You're coming aren't you, darling?"

"Don't I usually?"

"Oh, good!"

Joey propped her feet on the coffee table and closed her eyes. "You sound way too happy about that."

"Well, I'm just glad you'll be there. I always love spending time with my girls."

"She's setting you up!" Her father's amused warning was exactly what she had feared.

"Henry!"

"Now, Connie, the girl ought to know what you're up to. It's not fair to ambush her. For all you know she might already have a date."

"If she had a date then I would have been interrupting something when I called."

"Mother!" Joey sat up, her eyes popping open in embarrassment.

"What? I'm not supposed to know my children have sex lives? I figured that out when you told me what you'd decided to study in college."

"Connie, you've got to stop embarrassing our daughter."

"Embarrass? You're not embarrassed, are you?"

Joey pinched the bridge of her nose. "Mom, I'm going to the festival. And no, I won't have a date."

"Oh, well, then I --"

"And I don't want a date," she enunciated.

She could practically hear her mother deflate. "If that's what you want ..."

"Do you think I can't be happy because I don't have a man?"

"Of course not! It's just that ... darling, I know you. And whether you want to admit it or not, I've seen the look in your eyes when you're around your sister and her family. I know it's something you want. From the time you were a little girl you would tell me how you were going to have a husband and three little babies. I just want you to have what you want -- what you deserve."

"Joey girl, your mother just loves you too much."

She let out a long sigh and let her head fall back against the cushions. "I appreciate the offer, but I want to do this on my own. If I happen to run into someone there, great. If he's the love of my life, even better. But let me do this, okay? In my own time, under my own steam."

"Oh, darling, you're limiting yourself and --"

"If that's what you want, Joey, that's what we'll do. Connie, let the girl be."

"Thanks, Dad. And, Mom ... thank you for thinking about me. I love you both."

"We love you, too," came her mother's shaky reply. "Now, we'll see you for lunch tomorrow, won't we? We need to discuss the Christmas Eve party."

"Sure, and bring your shopping list. I want to compare gifts and make sure we don't buy the same thing."

A moment later she hung up the phone -- and smacked the back of her hand into the brown paper wrapped package. Curious, she picked it up and weighed it in her hands. It was most definitely a book, she decided. But why in the world would he send her something like that?

She sat back up and studied the wrapping a second before tearing into it. When the brown paper was torn away she found herself staring at a bland cover. The kind of cover that belied the contents of the book.

She recognized the title, knew it as an erotic tale, and lifted her eyebrow. This, she decided, was definitely interesting. She turned it over carefully, noting the way the spine was creased and the pages were worn. Obviously it had been read before.

Cautiously, she began flipping through the story, pausing when she saw highlighted passages. She stopped and read one, only to feel the blood rush to her crotch and the tips of her breasts. It was a highly provocative passage, one that just hinted at the possibility of bondage and submission.

Joey blinked several times, letting out a long breath as she quickly flipped to the first page. There, tucked between the introductory and chapter one was a small note. She pulled it loose and unfolded it, slightly shaken when she realized it was a typed message from her on-line admirer.

Doc,

I sent you one of my favorite books with all the best parts highlighted. I hope you don't think this is too forward of me, but I felt that you and I probably have the same tastes in ... certain kinds of literature. I hope you enjoy the story as much as I do.

LonFog

What was shocking was that he was right. She did know this book. She'd had a battered copy of it for years, until it had finally fallen apart. But she'd never had anyone

show her their favorite scenes like this. It was titillating, a tiny bit intimidating, and nearly too intimate. And yet she couldn't bring herself to put the book down.

Instead, she found herself curling deeper into the couch and scanning the pages with avid eyes. She read the passages that were tinted in yellow, and felt her blood pressure rising with each word. The images the words evoked were highly erotic, drawing out all the heated fantasies she harbored in her own head. Half an hour later she was wiggling in her seat. An hour later she was breathing heavily and was almost mindless with need.

Joey stood quickly, deliberately taking the book with her as she hurried up to her bedroom. She barely paused as she reached into the bottom drawer of her nightstand and pulled out her favorite toy. She ripped her jeans away, rolled her panties to the floor, and slid onto her bed. With an efficient flip of the switch, she sent the vibrator humming.

She slid the quivering device slowly between her swollen folds, biting her bottom lip as the dildo flickered against her wet flesh. She moved it up and down, arousing herself to fever pitch with the possibility of orgasm.

Reaching over, she picked up the erotic book and turned to one of the ear marked pages. As she pleased herself she read the words that were neatly marked.

He grabbed her wrists and shackled them with the soft cuffs that hung on the wall. His fingertips skimmed her skin as he moved from one hand to the other, sending shivers of dark delight down her spine. When he repeated the procedure with her ankles, she nearly came. He stood up, giving her a knowing smirk as he stepped away.

"You want to be fucked. Say it."

"I ... I want to be fucked."

He stared at her with satisfaction and nodded his head. "You will be, and you'll love it. You will do exactly as I say, and you will come more than you ever thought you could. You will trust me to make sure you'll have pleasure. Say you'll trust me."

"I will, I do."

She waited for him to undress, or to begin caressing her. Instead he moved to the opposite wall and sank into a padded chair. Her nipples throbbed as he stared at her, her clit swelling and vibrating. Just the promise in his eyes made her nearly mindless.

When he pulled the velvet rope that hung down beside him, she licked her lips in anticipation. What was he planning for her now? She didn't know, but all of his other games had been so erotic and ultimately fulfilling that she waited patiently.

When the other man entered the room, she felt her heart trip. He was tall, well built, sleek and smooth. And completely naked.

"Raul, my playmate wants to be fucked. Can you do that for her?"

The other man smiled broadly and nodded. "I'll make sure she screams for you."

"You may touch her, but only the way I tell you to. You can only do exactly what I tell you to do."

She nearly came at his words. To be touched by another man, to have him instructed by the lover that had learned her so well over the past few weeks, it was almost too much.

“Raul, bend down in front of her. Yes, like that. She shaved yesterday, do you see how smooth she is? Now, slowly lick up her slit. Just like that. No, no, don’t lap her clit, just skim it.”

She screamed as his tongue rasped her, taunting her with an orgasm but not letting her fall into it. Oh, she wanted to come, she needed to ...

Joey rammed the vibrator between her walls as the book slid from her fingertips. She quickly reached underneath her shirt and tweaked her nipples, pulling at the pebbled tips. She kept the image in her head, imagining being shackled to a wall while two men made love to her, one with his voice and the other with his body. But in her mind it was Sam’s voice that was seducing her, and his hands and body that were shoving her closer to completion.

She felt her orgasm curl into a frayed knot, the edges snapping as her muscles tightened. She slid the dildo from her recesses and edged it toward the pulsating point of her desire. The moment the vibrating tip touched her clit she was over the edge, her body arching as the world shattered. She screamed, the noise slamming back into her ears as her orgasm ripped through her.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay on her bed, her toy resting quietly between her thighs as she tried to catch her breath. She’d never had an orgasm like that on her own, not ever, and she was sure she would remember something like that. Hell, she wasn’t even sure if she’d come so hard with a man before.

And all because of the book ... and because of Sam. The thought of his voice, of his touch, of his being there while she howled, had fed into the fantasy.

She didn’t know how she was supposed to face her boss now that she’d masturbated to his image.

Chapter Eight

He waited a full eight hours before he e-mailed her. He had deliberately taken one of the erotic books that he had enjoyed before, emphasized the passages that had made him hard with lust, and had packaged it. He'd been smart, though, overnighting it in a separate envelope to a friend out of state. A friend who, he was glad, hadn't asked any questions. She'd only chuckled and then sent it back next day mail. From there it was as easy as walking into the post office and telling them that he'd accidentally gotten the package in his mail slot.

Joey would have gotten it by now. How had she reacted to the book? Had he pushed it too far too soon? He didn't think he had; after all, she'd been very receptive to the idea of getting a gift from him ... or rather, from LonFog. They were virtual strangers, but Joey had been adamant in pointing out how much easier it was to divulge secret desires to strangers. Still, there was that nagging doubt.

What had she done when she'd gotten it? Had she read it? Was she waiting until later to open the package? Or had she started perusing the passages and found them as stimulating as he had? Just the thought of her becoming aroused, possibly even touching herself, or, God don't let his heart stop, bringing herself to orgasm made his cock as hard as marble.

He couldn't stop the images that popped into his head. Josephine naked, her glorious body spread open, ready to be touched. Her long hair would be loose, spread around her, tangling as her head whipped from side to side. That sun-kissed skin of hers would flush and a fine sheen of sweat would coat her flesh.

He let out a long breath as his shaft twitched against the confines of his jeans. Absently, he reached underneath the desk and began to stroke the hard length through the denim. But it wasn't enough, not nearly enough, and so he unzipped his pants and pulled his cock free.

With a sure hand, he took hold of the stiff muscle and began stroking. He eased back the hard padded chair, closing his eyes as he let Josephine's image merge completely in his

mind. He saw her so clearly, sprawled on his massive bed with her legs propped up and her thighs fallen open. Her fingers were at her nipples, plucking and pulling, while her teeth sank into her plump lower lip. While she gasped and mewed, her other hand snaked its way between her legs, nestling in the soft patch of curls.

Then she was rubbing gently, her fingers plunging between the swollen folds before sliding out and up. He could see how slick she was, and his mouth watered as he wondered about her taste. His hand pumped harder as her motion increased, felt the tightening and the electric tingle of his growing orgasm.

When her eyes opened and focused on him, he felt the shock all the way through his system. She was watching him, waiting, her gaze glazed with desire as her rhythm increased.

I'm coming ... oh, Sam ... I'm ...

Her voice was hitched and breathy as she stumbled over words. Her high-pitched scream shoved him over. His body tensed as he erupted and hot liquid poured over his knuckles. His heart paused for a moment as he emptied himself, his mind still filled with the image of Josephine coming for him.

He sat perfectly still for a moment afterwards, letting his breathing calm and his pulse ease. As his fantasy of Josephine faded, his head fell back and he let out a self-mocking chuckle. She was getting to him, much quicker and much more deeply than he'd ever thought. Here he was, as horny as a teenager looking to get laid, and with almost the same lack of control. How many times would he have to rely on his own hand to soothe him before this was all over?

"Not long ... it can't be long."

Because if it took more than a few weeks to seduce her, he just might have to buy a wrist brace and start worrying about Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

* * * * *

Joey checked her messages the moment she got back from the station. She told herself it was all part of her routine. But the truth was she was hoping for an e-mail from LonFog.

She didn't know why she felt the need to hear from him. After all, this whole thing was crazy. When she stopped and thought about it, really thought about it, it was reckless and foolhardy and ... well, somehow sadly desperate. This strange little arrangement with someone she'd only chatted with once on-line was pathetic. If a friend had come to her and told her what they were doing, she would have warned them against the dangers of this kind of thing. After all, he could turn out to be a married man, or a convicted violent criminal, or some sort of psycho stalker. If a caller had phoned this situation in, she would have advised them to chat a few more times with the stranger, to delve into what was important to them. To get to know the person that had sent the naughty book before it snowballed. She'd always made a lousy patient.

Gnawing on her bottom lip, she switched on the computer and listened as the fans and drives kicked in with a warm hum. She couldn't deny that LonFog's gift hadn't been ... welcome or enjoyed. Of course, her hormones had flubbed it up by putting Sam Winters' face on the stranger's body, and his voice in his mouth. Not that she could've helped it. God knew the man was a walking fantasy.

She'd missed him tonight. Another sad but true fact she wished she could avoid. She'd gone to bed the night before with the memory of his kiss, and had woken up to the memory of how he'd tasted. Which was why her imagination had stuck him neatly in the role of seducer. It was all perfectly logical ... and a perfect mess.

Sam Winters was an urbane man. He was well traveled, well versed, and, she was sure, well laid wherever he went. That little peck hadn't been anything more than affection. She'd be stupid to place any importance to it. She was sure that by now he'd found a woman that interested him. A woman that stimulated his brain as well as other parts of his body. She could imagine her now, all fluffy hair, pouty lips, and pencil-thin body. Why in the world would he even consider a dark-haired, stubborn-jawed, chunky woman with very little wanderlust?

"And you, Josephine Bingham, are being an idiot," she mumbled.

She firmly shoved the thoughts of Sam aside and clicked on the e-mail icon. The image of Sam danced into her conscious mind again, and she cursed as she focused on the messages that popped up.

When LonFog's name appeared, she let out a breath that she didn't know she'd been holding. He'd written her back. Thank God.

Quickly clicking on the note, she sat forward and read his message.

Hi Doc,

I was wondering if you'd gotten my package yet? If you did, I hope you like it. I wasn't sure whether to send the book or not, but I felt like we had a spark of connection when we chatted. You were very open minded, and very easy to talk to, so I hope I didn't overstep any bounds.

I'd love to chat with you more. I'm usually on late in the evenings if you're available then. I'd also like to send you something else, if you don't mind. It's something that I think you might like.

Please let me know about chatting and about both presents. I guess I'm just in the holiday spirit.

Take care and I hope to hear back from you soon.

LonFog

She read the note four times, and each time let out a much too girlish sigh of pleasure. It was almost like having a secret admirer, but it was somehow better. It was titillating, adventurous, and something that no one would suspect of her doing in a million years. She

thought about the old adage of forbidden fruit and smiled at herself. She already knew the answer to his questions before she replied.

LonFog,

Yes, I got your gift, and yes, I loved it. Maybe a little too much? Our tastes run to the same kind of erotica. I have that book and it's one of my favorites, though I've never read it quite the way I did this afternoon.

I enjoyed chatting with you. I have to admit that I don't normally have the kind of flirtatious conversation that we did, but it was interesting, and so are you. I can definitely be on to chat with you in the evenings. The time you saw me on the board is the time I'm usually on-line at night. I'll look for you tomorrow evening.

As far as another present, I hate to sound greedy, but I'd really like to see what it is that you want to send me. The book was a definite hit. I can only imagine what you might be mailing in another brown-wrapped package.

I can't wait to chat with you again. Take care as well.

Doc

There was a moment of doubt as the cursor hovered over the send bar. Joey quickly overcame it and clicked the button with a hard smack. She was not going to second guess herself about this. Cyber sex, or the idea of it, had been around for a very long while. And it was about time she caught up with a trend that she was sure was never going to go away.

Chapter Nine

Joey was still smiling when wandered into the store the next day. Her mother, acting in her usual invading Christmas army fashion, had given her a list of things she needed for her baskets. It was a noble endeavor, packing boxes with non-perishable foods and a few toys for families that were in need. She normally enjoyed doing this, but today she was practically floating along the toy store aisles.

She felt free, really and truly free, because of her decision. A no strings attached affair with a man she'd never meet face to face. It was the perfect setup. She didn't have to stumble over words or worry about the intricacies of a relationship. He didn't have to see her and be disappointed. Mutual sexual gratification without the entanglements. Until now, she'd never understood the meaning of sexual liberation.

She turned the corner, her mind still swirling with pleasant thoughts, and didn't see the other cart until she'd smacked into it.

"Oh, I'm so --" The apology died a painful death on her lips.

Sam Winters was standing looking at her with a wide smile. His handsome face said he was happy to see her, and, shockingly, so were his eyes.

"Well, hello, Joey. Out playing Santa's elf today?"

Her heart skipped like a trip hammer and her palms became moist with anxiety. Could he see it on her face? Could he possibly know that she'd actually pleased herself to his image?

"Um, yes, I ... yeah."

He nodded and lifted his own list. "Two nieces and three nephews, plus the toys to donate for the station." He was jostled from behind by a skittering fiftyish woman who hurried by. "You do this every year?"

The pained expression on his face brought a quick chuckle from her throat. “For my mother’s charity baskets, and for my niece and nephew.”

“You’ll be sainted when you die.” He umphed as a child pushed past him. “I’ve been ordering on-line for the past few years, but I thought I should support the local mom-and-pop stores this time around. Now I’m beginning to regret it.”

A little girl scurried by Joey, rustling her white coat a quick moment. Before either of them had a chance to react the girl was tumbling down, her hands and knees slapping against the hard floor with a resounding smack. Much to Joey’s surprise, Sam didn’t panic like so many other single men she’d known. Instead, he took a deep breath, squatted down to the befuddled child, and lifted her back to her feet. Before the girl had a chance to form tears, he gave her a winsome smile. The kind of smile that would have charmed any female from newborn to octogenarian.

“You have to be more careful. You don’t want to have broken fingers when Santa drops off your presents, do you?”

The child’s lower lip trembled, but she shook her head.

“Okay, good, now, where is your mom -- or dad?” He pulled his gaze away from the girl and scanned the fast moving crowd.

Finally a little finger pointed up and over, landing on a ponytailed soccer mom who was balancing a baby on her hip while a boy chattered on about baseball cards beside her. She seemed to be searching for her daughter, a slightly panicked look etched across her pert features. Joey watched as the girl ran toward the woman and mother and daughter were reunited. Between reassuring hugs she heard a stern lecture.

“You must spend time with your nieces and nephews ...”

“Um? Oh, yes, well, my sister loves to fly in to London during the summer. The rug rats come with her.” He pushed his cart closer to the end cap and leaned toward her. “I don’t suppose you’d mind helping me out? We could ... join forces, maybe? I’ll take the boy stuff and you take the girl stuff?”

His gaze was steady on hers, solid and breath stealing. There was no way she could say no, especially with the memory of what she’d fantasized about still in her head. “I guess that makes sense. Here let me see your list and I’ll write down the ages of the boys.”

He handed over the paper gratefully. “Sainted, I promise you. I can see it now, Saint Josephine of Atherton, Patron Saint of confused toy shoppers.”

She felt the corners of her mouth rise as she shook her head. A moment later she handed him back his slightly crumpled piece of paper. “All right, I’ll meet you at the front of the store in front of the train display.”

Close to an hour later, they were hefting their bags out the door. She’d been flabbergasted when Sam had begun dumping all their purchases on the checkout counter at one time, whipping out his credit card to pay for it all. When she’d tried to protest, he’d

simply shrugged and told her it would make the wait in line for other people that much shorter. She'd still been a bit unnerved when he'd grabbed the large plastic bags in determined hands. Then she'd laughed when Sam nearly toppled over with the weight of the packages.

"Okay, now we have to sort these out." He sighed. "How about we grab some coffee at Rose's Café and shuffle the toys around?"

She might have said no. She should have said no. She should have told him that they could go to her car and figure it all out there. But what she should have done and what she wanted to do were two different things. She blamed her sudden lack of caution on her newly budding, anonymous affair.

"All right, but we're going to need one of their large tables for all of this."

Her good humor was still with her when they sat down in the warm confines of the homey café. Sam ordered coffee immediately for them both then slid a hopeful look to the desert counter.

"Do you happen to have any cheesecake?"

The waitress, as immune to his looks as every other woman, gave him an indulgent smile. "Oh, I think we might have something back there."

When they were finally left alone, he gave her a warm look and sat back in his chair. "I blame you for my cheesecake craving, you know. I think I might single handedly keep this place in the black just by buying their cake."

She studied him for a moment before she spoke. "You're a really nice man, Sam Winters."

He lifted an eyebrow and a corner of his mouth moved up. "You say that like it's a shocking revelation. Did you really think I was that bad?"

"Honestly, we didn't know. All we were told was that the station had been willed over to a man that didn't even live in the states."

"Does it still bother you? Me being the new owner?"

She shook her head quickly. "No, actually, it doesn't. You listened to what Scott and I had to say, you made your intentions known, and you've been very careful to reassure everyone, including Marcie."

He gave a small smile. "Timid little Marcie. I'm afraid I'll look the wrong way at her one day and she'll faint at my feet."

"But you've been careful not to. That says a lot about your character."

The waitress returned, neatly slipping coffee onto the table along with a piece of cheesecake. Sam waited until she'd gone to pick up the conversation.

"I told you before, Josephine, when something becomes mine, I make sure it never wants."

The way he said her full name sent a hot shiver down the chords of her spine. She could swear she could feel each and every vertebrae tingle. It took everything she had not to sigh and pool onto the floor.

"You ... have a sister?" She looked down and stirred cream into her steaming mug.

If he knew she was deliberately changing the subject, he was kind enough not to point it out. Instead he nodded and answered her questions about his family. And when he began questioning her about her own relatives, she found herself relaxed enough to tell him about the small and slightly crazy Bingham clan.

When the cake had been demolished, Sam lifted one bag onto the table and gave her a wry look. "Now for the hard work."

She shook her head as he delved into the plastic, head first. When he came out with a dark-haired Barbie in a voluminous princess dress, he cocked his eyebrow.

"This is for my youngest niece?"

"Yep, and there's more. It was kind of a ... theme."

His hands dug past other toys as he began pulling out more. A play crown, a set of plastic jewelry, a jeweled purse, and finally a pair of golden ballerina slippers were piled next to the doll.

"You know your four-year-old girls."

"Well, I saw your notes about her being 'uber girly,' so I went from there."

He nodded slowly before he began taking more things out. She was impressed when he whipped out an electric car racing set, two strange looking transforming robots, and three new video games for her nephew.

She was even more impressed when he began showing her what he'd gotten for the baskets and for the toy drive. His eyes were bright with excitement, his hands were animated, and his voice was deep with anticipation. He hadn't skimped as so many people tended to do. He'd bought the name brand toys, had been careful about choosing baby toys that were educational, and had made sure that none of the small cars he'd bought were the same. She wasn't sure why she was so astounded by his honest generosity, but she was.

"Now, for the grand finale ..." He reached over and picked up the last bag, giving her a humorously stern look. "My twelve-year-old niece is very picky."

"Well, if she doesn't like any of it, she can return it."

"So say we all."

The first thing to come out was an electronic diary. "Voice activated for security," he read and grinned broadly. "Oh, she's going to love lording that over her little brother."

The next was a small manicure kit in a pretty little paint can. "Enough for a party, huh? She's going to be begging my sister for a sleep over."

The last thing he pulled out was a jewelry making kit. He placed it beside the other things and stared at it for a moment. Joey shifted nervously, afraid he wasn't happy with what she'd found. When he let out a deep laugh, she relaxed into her chair.

"I'm going to be the hero this year." He looked up, caught her eyes with his own, and obliterated the thoughts from her head. "Thank you, Josephine. You've saved me."

"I ... I just shopped."

"No, you didn't just shop. You gave up your time to help me, and I appreciate it." He leaned forward, his nearness wrapping them in a dark bubble of privacy. "Don't ever make light of yourself, Josephine. You're a beautiful, smart, caring woman, and you shouldn't shy away from those facts. You should be proud of yourself and of everything you do for the people around you."

She couldn't stop the mad scampering of her pulse as she stared at him. How did he do that? How did he say and do the very things that she didn't know she needed? She swallowed back a lump and looked away. She wasn't sure how much longer she could stand being in his presence and not become a wildly blubbing piece of female flesh.

"I, um, I need to get these things over to my mother's before work. She's already started putting the baskets together."

Even to her own ears it sounded like a feeble excuse. Luckily Sam didn't call her on it. Instead, he slipped his gifts into the appropriate bag and stood. Without a word he tossed down money, his easy manner belying the intense way he'd just spoken to her.

They chatted as he carried the bags to her car. She was sure to keep the conversation light, wary that Sam might fall into another subject that would completely undo her self-control. By the time she pulled away from the curb, she'd nearly convinced herself that the day with Sam hadn't been a mistake.

* * * * *

In a word, it had been perfect. When he'd talked to Scott at the station this morning, he'd let it slip that Joey would be shopping this morning. While the other man had continued creating new tags for the show, Sam's mind had started plotting.

Sam had felt like a stalker as he'd waited for her at the toy store, and he'd hated it. But being with her had been worth the uncomfortable feelings. He'd had to wonder if he'd lost all common sense. He'd never done anything like this -- ever. Another five minutes of waiting and the manager might've called the police to arrest the pervert lurking in the corner. But, God, Joey was worth any suspicious glances that were sent his way.

When she'd finally come in, it had all been worth it. Thank God she hadn't caught on to his orchestration. Bumping his buggy into hers ... it was a tired cliché. But it had worked.

Now he knew more about Dr. Josephine Bingham, and he liked everything he'd found out. The gifts she'd picked had been thoughtful, and, unlike other women he'd known, she'd

balked at the idea of him paying for her purchases. She'd even tried to write him a check as they'd stood at the counter.

Lord, she was charming. Charming and sweet and erotic with every move she made. He'd stood there and watched her covertly as she'd shopped, wondering what she would do if she'd known how he'd gratified himself just to the idea of her. True, she was a sex therapist, and she was plainly open-minded. Still, she had a quiet, unspoken way of setting lines for people she let into her life. And he was grateful every day that she seemed to be allowing him in. Inch by slow inch, with agonizing caution, but she was still letting him ease his way through.

He wondered if she would be on-line tonight. When he'd gotten her e-mail, he'd come close to dancing for joy. She'd enjoyed his book ... code, he hoped, for her doing exactly what he'd imagined her doing. She wanted to chat with him, which was, in his estimation, a very good sign. Before the holidays were over, LonFog was going to seduce Doc101 cross-eyed. He felt a rolling wave of satisfaction and smugly rode it. Josephine wasn't going to have any idea what had hit her.

Reaching over to the bedside table, he flipped on the radio and smiled as he heard the Dr. Joey music begin to play. As he stared up at the darkened ceiling, he felt his muscles hum with the anticipation of her voice.

When she began to speak, he closed his eyes and conjured her image. He figured she could read a list of cities and still sound sexy as hell. With a faint smile on his lips, he let her words pour over him while he plotted out his next move.

Chapter Ten

Joey cursed herself as she snuggled down with the laptop and waited for it to boot. She was acting like a hormone-crazed teenager, and there wasn't anything she seemed to be able to do about it. She found her mind wandering from her new boss to her on-line "buddy" at inappropriate times. Tonight when a woman had called in about a high school crush and a blind date, all she could think of were the passages in the book LonFog had sent. When she was driving home, her mind had been filled with the memories of Sam's kiss. And, damn it, the fact that she was starting to really like him.

She pushed away the thought of the presents upstairs, and of the day she'd spent with the burnished-haired man. He'd been ... sweet. She snorted and sank further into the couch cushions. Sweet wasn't a word she would ever think to associate with Sam. Hot, smoldering, intense, dominating ... all those adjectives and more was how she would describe him. It unnerved her to add kind to that list.

Murray leapt gracefully to the cushion beside her, letting out a large yawn as he pressed his nose against her elbow. How nice it must be for him, she thought as he curled into a fluffy ball.

"Not a care in the world, huh, big guy? I'll bet you had a hell of a love life before I had you neutered."

He let out a deep sigh and a stuttering purr. She smiled down at him, shaking her head as her laptop chimed. Nerves set in again as she clicked on her instant message icon. She'd told him when she'd be on. He knew her screen name. Would he be waiting? Or would she give up in a few hours and go to bed, caught between disappointed and grateful?

"Ridiculous," she muttered. "I am being completely ridiculous."

But her heart jumped when a small screen popped up with a tiny blip of sound. She stared at it a moment, trying to remember to breathe. So, he'd been here waiting for her.

“Hello, Doc. I’m glad you came on.”

She licked her lips nervously before she answered. “I try to hop on when I can. Nice to see you here, too.”

“It got your e-mail. I’m glad you enjoyed what I sent you.”

She felt a hot flush creep over her body. Well, she decided, in for a penny ...

“Yes, I did like it. I was surprised that you had one of my favorites.”

“Are you kidding? All that sexual discovery, the chance for her to find out what she liked and didn’t like. It’s always interesting to read about a woman finding real sexual liberation.”

Joey quirked an eyebrow as she read his comment. “Wow, most people wouldn’t read that much depth into the story.”

“Luckily I’m not most people.”

She had to chuckle at that. “Guess I’m not most other people, either.”

There was a slight pause as he typed. “I’m guessing that if you had the same reaction as I did that you found some sexual liberation yourself.”

So here it was, the chance to jump off the bridge completely or just flirt with standing on the edges. She figured you never really did learn how to swim until you dived in.

“I did.”

“And which part did you enjoy that much?”

“Her first experience with a ménage trios. When he was directing the other man on how to make love to her.”

“That’s one of my favorite parts, too. I’m going to have some interesting dreams tonight now.”

Joey bit her bottom lip, debating her next question. “So, did you enjoy thinking about me with the book?”

She knew he was considering her question, but still grew anxious as she waited for a reply. Finally, his message popped up.

“I did. I was a little surprised.”

She knit her brow. “You were?”

“I’m not going to say that I don’t masturbate, because I do. I haven’t gotten off to just the idea of a woman touching herself in a long time.”

“But you did, with me?”

“I did. And it was good.”

That sent a bolt of pleasure through her system. She felt the strange empowerment of a woman that had a sexual pull on another person. It wasn’t a feeling she was intimate with.

His next question sliced neatly through her growing warmth. "Did you think about me while you were reading?"

To lie or not to lie, that was the question. But she doubted Shakespeare ever had to deal with a situation like this. She gnawed on her lip again as she weighed her choices. She decided to go with the middle ground.

"But I don't know you. I have trouble creating faces and voices for real people that I don't know."

There was a long wait for an answer. "So did you fantasize about someone else?"

Uh-oh, caught against the ropes. "I had the book to think about."

"Nice side-step. Very diplomatic."

"Years of practice."

"I'm sure the people around you appreciate it."

She found herself shrugging at the screen. "Um, I suppose. No one's ever commented on it, actually."

"Well then let me be the first to say thank you."

She laughed softly, wriggling her toes against the coffee table top. "I was surprised to get the book. I wasn't sure what to expect, but an erotic story wasn't on the list."

"You sure you didn't mind?"

"Trust me, I was very happy to get it. Very happy."

She could feel his smile when he replied. "Well, then, I hope you'll like the next thing I send you. It should be there sometime tomorrow."

"But I haven't sent you anything."

"Let's make a deal. You enjoy the things I sent you in however many ways and however many times you want. You tell me all about how you enjoyed the gifts and we'll be even."

He was giving her the outline of the cybersex relationship he wanted. He would send her presents, she would use them, then she would help him find pleasure in relaying all the details. They would be strangers sharing sex in one of the most faceless, nameless ways possible. Somehow she thought the idea of it should bother her on one level or another. And yet it didn't. In fact, it was sending eddies of heat coursing straight to her core.

"Okay, LonFog, you have yourself a deal. Since I'll be getting the next package tomorrow, I'll be on-line tomorrow night to share it with you."

"If I was standing in front of you, I'd shake your hand. Or kiss you, whichever you'd prefer."

The teasing comment brought up the unwanted reminder of the soft touch of Sam's mouth. Swallowing against the tight band around her chest, Joey determinedly refocused on her conversation.

“So, tomorrow night, around the same time?”

His answer was nearly immediate. “Absolutely. See you tomorrow. Sweet dreams, Doc.”

With that he was gone, disconnected from the never-never land of the internet. Joey’s head slid down to the sofa’s plush back as she sighed and closed her eyes. For better or for worse, she had just hopped right into an affair.

Chapter Eleven

Joey tried to keep her mind focused on the show. Even as the opening music played through her headphones, she tried her best not to think about the gift she'd picked up at the post office just a few hours before. Unlike the book, it had been merrily wrapped in red and gold paper and had a card attached. It had simply said, "*On the second day of Christmas ...*" and inside there had been a gorgeous, silk kimono styled robe, the black material soft and slick against her fingertips. Another present she hadn't been expecting. It was sexy, one of the most sensual things she'd ever owned. It was something a woman would wear for her lover, something she would wear while she waited in bed. It was soft enough to wear against naked skin, and thin enough to cling to flesh. The image of Sam flashed in her mind, of him climbing the stairs in her townhouse directly to her bedroom. What would he do if he found her dressed in something like that, freshly bathed, lotioned, and powdered?

Turn around and leave, she decided. Even in her fantasies it was hard to believe that someone like Sam would find someone like her even remotely attractive. And, damn it, that kiss that had been "nothing" to him had only confused her more.

She shook her head as the music ended, trying her best to calm her wild heartbeat. Squaring her shoulders, she slipped into her no-nonsense skin, focusing her mind on business. Then her eyes fell on the other man in the sound booth and her thoughts ripped into tissue confetti.

She wasn't sure how long she sat staring at Sam, but Scott's wild gestating finally registered. Swallowing the stone that was lodged in her throat, she pulled her gaze away and stared blindly at the control panel in front of her.

"Good evening, this is Dr. Joey, and I'm hear to listen, and hopefully to help. Let's get straight to our first call. Hello, this is Dr. Joey, what can I do for you?"

"Hi, Dr. Joey, my name is Nate."

Luckily for her this caller didn't sound in the least bit uncertain. Which was a damn good thing, considering she was still having trouble thinking.

"Hello, Nate. What was your question tonight?"

"Well, my boyfriend and I have talked about trying something ... different in our sex lives."

"And by 'different' you mean ...?"

"We've considered different things. Toys, role playing, but we've really been interested in bondage."

"Bondage." Okay, she could handle this. This was something she could focus on. "Have you discussed how far into this want you to go?"

"Um, well, we've talked about the different levels of it, if that's what you mean."

"So you know that there is bondage, but there's also the discipline, sadism, and masochism aspects." She folded her hands together and let the professional side take over.

"I definitely like the idea of bondage."

Oh, God, so did she. Hadn't she gotten off to the imagery of it? Hadn't she imagined herself as the one tied up, being touched, giving her power over to a man?

Joey quietly cleared her throat. "There's definitely nothing wrong with enjoying being bound, especially when you're with someone you trust. Now, have you both discussed who would be dominant? Or will you switch?"

"Take turns. We both like the idea of being on top and on bottom."

Sam on top, giving to her, telling her what to do, how to move, where to touch. She felt herself dampen and her labia swell.

She licked her dry lips and hoped she didn't sound breathless. "It sounds like you've researched this, Nate. Was there a specific question you needed help with?"

"Oh, uh, okay, to be honest, we aren't sure how to start. I know it sounds a little ..."

"No, of course not. Even when you're with someone you want to experience bondage with, it can be a bit daunting. First I would suggest you browse a catalogue together. Pick out the things that you'd like to try, the things that you want to use on him and vice versa. Talk about what you'd do with them, how you expect them to be used, and how it will feel." Sam, with his hands on her, cuffing her hands and legs to the bed. She blinked rapidly and continued. "If you're comfortable enough, you can both go to an appropriate store, where you can have the chance to see and touch the things you're interested in. Sometimes what you see in a magazine is very different than what you get. Once you've gotten everything you'd like, then I would suggest that you choose what you would like to use first. If this is either of your first time in trying bondage, then start with something easy. The idea is to ease your way into it. Maybe wrist cuffing at first, then moving on to having your legs tied as well. From there you can decide how quickly or how far in you want to go with bondage. In fact, you both might find that you want to try something more. Remember, no one can

decide how much you and your lover decide to do or not to do. As long as it's consensual, and as long as it's what you and your partner both want."

And what her body seemed to want despite all her warnings was Sam's touch. Sam's mouth, Sam's hands, Sam's body pressed into hers. How was she supposed to function for the rest of her show with him a thin piece of Plexiglas away?

"Dr. Joey, thanks. I have to admit I was a little nervous about really starting all of this, but you're right. It's what we want."

She gave a quick and honest smile. "I'm always glad to help. Good luck, Nate."

And maybe she should think about taking her own advice, she thought. The little niggling doubts about what she was doing with a stranger should be firmly put to rest. After all, it was probably one of the safest ways to conduct an affair. As long as he didn't turn out to be a crazed stalker, or an inmate at a jail, or ...

She was being ridiculous, completely ridiculous. There was always a chance of any of those things when it came to any affair. At least this way she was fairly anonymous. While he might know her city, he didn't know what she looked like. And if some strange man was lurking around the post office waiting to see who opened her mailbox, well, then, she just wouldn't open it. Scott's waving hand snapped her back. She caught sight of Sam again and very nearly stuttered into the microphone. Just great, Joey, make an ass of yourself in front of the boss. Give him a reason to fire you.

She swiftly pushed back her wildly tumbled thoughts and straightened her back. Depressing the next flashing button, Joey turned her eyes away from the booth and smiled valiantly into the microphone.

"Hello, this is Dr. Joey. How can I help you tonight?"

* * * * *

She'd been brilliant tonight. The way she spoke to people, the way she treated them with unshakable respect and understanding, spoke volumes about who she was. It was odd feeling admiration mix with liking, odd and potent.

That first caller had been one hell of an opening for her night. He'd found himself watching her, imagining her being supplicant as he tied her up and showed her all manner of erotic play. Then he'd imagined her being the one in control and he'd nearly burst the zipper out of his jeans.

He had a suspicion that Joey had been as turned on as he was by Nate. He'd seen the slight flush in her cheeks, the telltale glaze over her eyes, and the slight trembling in her lips. It had taken all of his self-control not to barge into the middle of her broadcast, toss her up on the control board, and screw her brainless.

His mind conjured up the illicit pictures and held onto them as she slipped into the booth. He quickly shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight, hoping she wouldn't see his obvious state of arousal.

A small blond woman brushed against him, smiling absently as she apologized. He looked down at her, his brain too filled with Josephine to remember who she was. Sherry ... Sharon ... Shelby ... no, no, Shelly.

"I hope you and, uh, Gus have a good night, Shelly."

She nodded happily, her pert ponytail bobbing. "Thanks, Mr. Winters. It's going to be hard following up after Dr. Joey, but we usually manage. So, have you thought about shuffling people around --"

"Not funny, Shelly." Scott crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes. "You've been trying to poach on my property for too long."

The girl gave Scott a slow wink. "Never hurts to ask."

Sam's eyes turned from the exchange to land on Joey. She was standing just inside the small room, looking slightly out of place as she tugged on her green sweater. He nearly swallowed his tongue as the soft material pulled taut over her rounded breasts. Good Lord, did she have any idea what she did to a man's libido?

"It's, um, getting a little crowded in here," he managed through his tight throat.

With that he held the door open, ignoring Scott as he breezed by. His gaze was intent on Joey as she walked past, her warm scent swirling around him like the worst kind of temptation. He quickly shut the door behind them, cutting off the sounds of the booth from the corridor.

Scott gave him a bright grin. "Up for a drink, boss?"

"Actually, I think I'm ready to head home. It's been a long day." And it was going to be a long night. Unless, of course, Joey decided to chat with LonFog. Then he saw all kinds of possibilities.

"Joey? You up for a whiskey sour?"

She kept her eyes glued studiously on her friend, effectively cutting Sam out. "Um, I think I need an early night. I took tomorrow off to set up the carnival, remember?"

Scott nodded his head in understanding. "Oh, so we're using that excuse, huh? Okay, I'll let you go only if you promise to buy me a hot chocolate at the carnival tomorrow."

A soft smile played across her lips and Sam felt his heart do a little jig. "It's a deal. Have a good night, Scott."

She turned to move away, and Scott gave a quick hand signal of encouragement. He hurried to follow Joey, anxious for some time with her.

As he caught up with her, he casually helped her into her coat, enjoying having her so close to him. Damn, but he had it bad ... whatever *it* was. And he wasn't sure if *it* needed to have a name right now.

She stopped as they approached the door, her blue eyes mesmerizing him as she stared up. "You don't have to walk me to my car, Sam."

He lifted an eyebrow and shifted his weight. "I was heading out any way. You don't have a problem with my company, do you?"

"I'm sure there's someplace else you'd rather be than out in the snow seeing me to my car."

"Like where?"

She nipped her bottom lip and he nearly groaned. "Back in the studio, with Shelly."

What had she just said? Something about Shelly? "With Shelly? Why would I want to do that?"

She gave him a slightly amused and vaguely exasperated look. "I'm not blind, Sam. I saw the way you were staring at her."

"I was staring at her?"

"I can't blame you, she's very pretty. And she's available."

But Joey sure didn't sound very enthusiastic about his hooking up with the little blond. Biting back a sigh, he opened the door and waited until she'd stepped outside to answer.

"I have to admit, Shelly is a good looking woman."

"She's nice, too, and smart."

He tried not to smile as a touch of bitterness crept into her voice. Well, well, well, Dr. Joey was jealous. Now wasn't this an interesting development.

He wrapped his scarf around his neck and fought back the urge to whistle. "Too bad she's not my type."

She stopped dead and spun to stare at him, her lovely face set in lines of confusion. "Not your type? But she's ... she's young, she's pretty, she's ..."

"I thought we'd had this conversation before, Josephine. A nice package does not an interesting woman make. Okay, yeah, I won't lie and say that I don't enjoy watching women. As a matter of fact, the opposite sex fascinates me. The way you move, it's like warm water, and the way you speak, the way you smell ... it's hard not to find every female alive attractive on some level. But when it comes down to the women I date, I'm very picky. And Shelly isn't my type."

Her eyes had gone round and her luscious mouth was slightly agape. She let out a little, "Oh," then slowly began to walk again.

"I'm -- I'm sorry I assumed. I guess I just ... I mean you're a handsome guy, and you're ... I just pictured you with ..."

He decided to take pity on her and slipped a friendly arm around her shoulders. The better to bring her closer and enjoy the feel of her.

“Joey, you’re very good at reading your callers, but I think you need some practice in face-to-face analysis.” He gave in to temptation and dropped a quick kiss on her hair, careful not to jostle her cap. “You did a great job tonight. I have to say I’ve been thoroughly impressed with your show.”

He could tell the change in topics both confused and relieved her. Which was exactly what he had wanted.

“Thank you. Some nights I have the best calls in the world, interesting, funny, sad, complicated ... but challenging. I had one of those evenings tonight.” She stopped as they reached her car, slowly turning toward him. He noticed that she couldn’t quite meet his gaze. “I’m glad you’re happy with my work.”

But it wasn’t just her intellect and ratings he wanted. Not by a long shot. “I tell you what, Joey, you keep doing what you’re doing, I’ll keep doing what I’m doing, and I’ll place money on the fact that we’ll both have exactly what we want.”

If she heard the innuendo in his voice, she didn’t point it out. Instead, she gave a brief nod and unlocked her door. He couldn’t stop himself from touching her one more time. He laid his hand on top of hers as it rested on the doorframe.

“Have a good night, Josephine.”

“I, um, you, too, Sam.”

He stood in the drifting snow and watched as she pulled into the street. He was sure the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth was filled with satisfaction. He knew exactly where she was going. She was going home, to her computer, to chat with LonFog. And he was going to be right there to push the edge he’d found. Sooner or later Dr. Josephine Bingham was going to be his. She just hadn’t let herself realize it yet.

Chapter Twelve

“So, did you get your present?”

Joey stared at the message and smiled. This was what she’d needed, a little breather from her boss.

“I did, and it’s gorgeous. You shouldn’t have spent the money.”

“But I wanted to. I wanted to know what to picture you in when I’m thinking about you.”

She bit her bottom lip and felt herself blush. “You think about me?”

“All the time. And do you know what happens when I think about you?”

“Do I want to know?”

“Oh, I think you already know.” There was a slight pause before more of his words popped onto the screen. “I can’t remember anyone making me this crazy before.”

“But you don’t know me. You don’t even know what I look like.”

“I know how you think. In the few times we’ve chatted I’ve had the chance to enjoy you. Sometimes the brain can be the biggest turn-on.”

She knit her brow and stared at his words. She knew he was right. When it came down to it, it was the person inside that kept the fire going in a relationship. Still, the package had a lot to do with the initial attraction. She wasn’t stupid enough to deny that.

“If you met me on the street, I doubt you would look twice at me.”

Joey felt her heart pounding as she waited for an answer. It shouldn’t have mattered so much, but somehow it did.

“I don’t believe that,” came the quick reply. “I’m not the kind of man that passes judgments based on looks. Someone can be physically attractive outside and hideous inside.”

“You can’t say you don’t consider how a woman looks.” She held her breath and hit the enter key.

“I’m a man, sue me. Yes, I look at a woman’s attributes, but I like to think I look deeper.”

Joey gave a deep sigh and stared at his words. It was strange how they echoed her earlier conversation with Sam. Almost prophetic, really.

She hurried to push the thoughts aside. “Let’s change the subject.”

“Okay. Are you wearing the robe?”

Joey smoothed her hand down the soft material. “Yes, I am.”

“God, do you know that makes me hot? Are you wearing anything underneath it?”

“No, I just got out of the shower.”

“I think I might pass out.”

She laughed softly and shook her head. “Oh, don’t pass out. This was just getting good.”

“It was, huh? Would you like me to tell you exactly what I’m doing?”

She stopped and thought for a moment. Until now it had been playful teasing on-line. If he started now she knew it would push them into the next step. And what was wrong with that, her rebellious side wanted to know. She was a damn adult.

Finally, she typed her reply. “Yes, tell me everything.”

“I’m getting hard, which is uncomfortable in my sweat pants. So I’m going to take them off.”

Joey wet her dry lips with her tongue. Good heavens, were her palms getting sweaty?

“That’s better. No restrictions. I can touch myself while I think about you.”

She hadn’t ever thought she would enjoy helping someone masturbate like this. She knew other people did, but she’d never really been in the situation before. Now she found her blood humming at the possibility.

“Should I tell you about tonight?”

“Yes.”

She snuggled deeper into the couch and felt the warmth building between her legs. She would have to be careful not to get carried away and slip in a hint of who she was, just in case. “Someone talked to me about bondage. He asked about being bound up, and what I thought about it.”

“You’re boyfriend?”

“You know I don’t have one.”

“Good, so this guy talked to you about bondage?”

She cocked a suspicious eyebrow, but kept typing. "Well, I told him that if it was what he and his partner wanted, he should do it. But you know, all I could think about was being tied up myself."

There was a moment's blank page and she wondered if he was lifting his hand from his cock.

"Any particular fantasy?"

This was precarious ground, but she was more than willing to tread it tonight. "I imagined being bound, completely open, and having a man touch me. I thought about how his hands would roam my body, how his mouth would taste me. He would start with my neck, then my shoulders, while he pressed himself against me. I could feel his cock nudging me, so close, but too far away. But I can't move, because his weight and the rope are restricting me. Then his teeth clamp on my nipple and it's like having a hot poker spear right into my walls. I feel it when I start to drip down my thighs. He keeps sucking on me and I scream. He finally pulls away and looks down at me, and I can see that he's as turned-on as I am. He promises me it will be good, and I know it will. Then he licks down my body and I almost forget to breathe. He nuzzles my lips, teasing me until I'm crazy with it. I'm hurting so much, and my clit is throbbing. When he finally licks me, I come fast and hard, and I hear him moan like I've made him happy. My whole body convulses and my wrists and legs pull against the ropes. The feeling of being restrained makes me come again, and he pushes his tongue inside me, like he's tasting all of me --"

"acgrga r"

She stared at the garbled message and grinned like the Cheshire cat. Obviously he was having an orgasm and his hand had smacked at the keyboard. She gave him a moment to compose himself.

"Did you just do what I think you did?"

"Come like a prize stud? Yes."

She laughed out loud at that, and had the most amazing feeling of unadulterated power. She had done that to him. She had pushed him over the edge with her words.

"Doc, you should be paid for this."

"Um, well, maybe as a second career."

"Would like me to ...?"

She shook her head at the laptop. "No, I'm okay. You can owe me."

"And I plan to pay that debt as soon as possible. God knows I'd love to know you're getting off on the other side of this screen."

"Oh, I do, and I will. But I liked doing that for you."

"So you're a giver, huh? No one's taught you how to be a taker when it comes to sex?"

Joey would have been offended if someone had asked her that face to face. It sounded too much like an encroachment on her personal life. And it was too close to a truth that she wasn't comfortable in admitting.

"I've had boyfriends."

"Boyfriends, okay, but were they lovers?"

Strange that he should make such a distinction. Stranger still that he would launch into this conversation when she was sure he was still naked and recovering from his orgasm.

"It's getting late." She watched the screen and hoped he'd take the not so subtle hint.

He didn't comment on her skirting the issue. "I guess it is. And I'm a little messy over here. But I'd love to talk to you some more tonight, if you aren't too tired."

She should say no. She should be polite but firm and solid no. "I think I'll be okay for another hour."

"Great! Just give me a minute. I'll be right back."

Joey blinked at the screen and let out a groan. This was supposed to be a faceless affair. Now she was chatting with this man. It was like pillow talk, she tried to assure herself. Even when friends had sex, they chatted for a while after. This wasn't a one-night stand, she'd already figured that out when they'd started e-mailing. And what was wrong with connecting with someone via instant messenger? As long as she stuck to her careful rules, didn't reveal who she was, and remembered that eventually they would both walk away, everything would be fine.

Chapter Thirteen

Joey stared morosely at the dove gray pants she'd been hoping to wear to the city's annual Holiday Carnival. But even though the waist might have fit just fine, her bottom had been straining the seams. No use in being disgusted, she decided as she wiggled into her long-sleeved, wraparound red shirt. She would be just fine in her jeans. Wasn't the distressed look in, anyway?

She tried not to think about the promised diet that she'd been determined to stick to. Okay, so maybe she'd known she was going to fudge. But she'd been adamant about the exercising, and she'd been doing really well, too. Until her on-line time had begun to take up more of her calendar.

Sighing, she zipped up her pants and sat down, silently slipping into her ankle high boots. LonFog had kept her up a good two hours past when she should have been in bed. And, damn it, had been a nice conversation, too. He hadn't asked her anything personal, not after that crack about boyfriends and lovers. But he'd been funny and interesting, and very entertaining. It didn't surprise her when she found out they had similar tastes in movies and plays. She had been smart enough to steer them away from politics, knowing that once you bonded with someone over that fray, it was hard to go back.

She'd warned him that she wouldn't be on tonight, but he'd told her that she should have a gift waiting at her post office box anyway. And she had. The small box had been merrily wrapped in multi-colored paper, with a note that read, "On the third day of Christmas ..." Inside there had been an array of erotic body oils. Some were flavored, others were warming oils, and all were meant to arouse. Just the thought of using them on someone made her insides churn. Whoever LonFog was, he was damn good at getting a woman's juices flowing.

“And that’s as much as you’re going to think about him tonight,” she promised the image in the mirror.

Tonight she was going to mix and mingle with real-life people, not just the ones on-line, or the ones that called into her show. As enticing as the idea of cocooning herself away from the outside was, she knew it wasn’t healthy. Besides, she’d always thrived on observing other people. She wasn’t going to let her unsettled thoughts drive her away from being in the real world.

With a determined thrust of her shoulders, Joey headed downstairs to get her coat.

* * * * *

Sam stood and surveyed the town square. This was exactly Joey’s type of event. There was bright music, bright lights, bright laughter, and that was just at the funnel cake stand.

He had no idea why they had the festival in the dead of winter. It seemed odd to him to find carnival games stretched out along the snow, the workers red-nosed and layered in scarves and coats. But their spirits were still high despite the cold, probably because they were volunteers helping with their favorite charities.

Across the way, in the various storefronts that surrounded the square, the businesses were holding different activities for those looking to come in out of the gently falling snow. Everything from a cake walk to face painting to bingo could be had. He filed it away in the back of his mind for the station. Next year they would sponsor a booth, maybe one that gave away gloves and knit hats as prizes.

Absently, Sam stamped his feet to be sure the circulation was still flowing. He was considering a cup of coffee when he saw her. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to the way she stole his breath. He took a moment to watch her, saw the way she stopped to say hello, was impressed with her easy manner. After their unexpected on-line liaison the night before, he had dreamed about her. In lieu of sugar plum fairies, pictures of the fantasy she’d created had danced in his head. How was it possible that she made him crazy just by being in the world?

She came closer and he tried to blend into the small crowd. When she finally passed by, he eased up behind her, hoping their meeting would seem like a casual coincidence.

“Joey, hi.”

She spun in surprise, stopping so short that he collided with her. Having her curves pressed against him was the best kind of torture he could imagine. She pulled back too quickly for his taste.

“Sam, I didn’t know you’d be here.”

He shrugged absently. “I heard they were going to have one of those duck shooting games. Besides, it’s all for charity.”

She eyed him with suspicion, but finally conceded with a nod. "So, did you lose your date?"

"Nope. Lose yours?"

"I didn't have one."

"The men in Atherton must be idiots."

She went completely still, her eyes going wide and unblinking. He didn't wait for her to recover. "You said something about funnel cake yesterday. Is that true, or were you just teasing me?"

"Oh, uh, no."

"No funnel cake?"

"No, I wasn't teasing you." Her face became a lovely shade of pink as she stared at him. "Yes, there's funnel cake. The Kiwanis Club usually has the food booth with that."

He took a moment to look around the surrounding area. "And which one is that?"

She stood for a moment, obviously trying to decide what to do. Finally, she sighed. "Come on, I'll show you."

"You don't mind?"

She sent him a small smile and shook her head. "No, I suppose I don't."

"Because if you have something else to do --"

"Okay, are you going to stand there and argue with me, or are you going to take me up on my offer?"

He didn't have to be told twice. He ambled across the small square to where a small blue and white sign proclaimed "Atherton Kiwanis." He watched as she ordered a funnel cake and cotton candy, her smile friendly as she chatted with a white-haired matron and a handsome dark-skinned man. Her easy way with people amazed him. While they didn't necessarily know her as "Dr. Joey," they did know her as Henry and Constance Bingham's youngest daughter. Why they hadn't placed little Josephine Bingham as the person behind Dr. Joey he didn't know. Probably because they didn't listen to the show. Either that or, he supposed they were just too tactful to have a conversation about her career.

When they finally had their snacks, they began wandering across the thin layer of snow. He took a small bite of his cake then turned to watch as Joey plucked a feathery glob of pink cotton candy from a cardboard spindle. She popped the spun sugar into her mouth and turned a happy gaze to him.

"You know, every year when I was a kid I used to skip lunch and dinner just so I could fill up on this stuff."

She licked her lips and he had a shaky moment when he very nearly kissed the sticky substance off her mouth. She paused and cocked her head, her eyes slanting as she stared at him.

“Hold on, you have powdered sugar ...” She reached out and swiped delicately at the corner of his cheek. “There, much better.”

And just like that he fell. It wasn't a hard tumble. He didn't feel anything inside of him snap and shatter. It was more of an easy descent, like rolling down a warm hill of soft satin. He loved her. Where the realization should have scared the hell out of him, it only glowed like a heated promise.

“Are you okay?”

He blinked, pulling himself out of his thoughts. He felt a wide smile grow across his face and prayed she couldn't read what was behind his expression. “Oh, yeah, I'm fine. So, what games should I hit first?”

The rest of the night Joey ushered him around, taking him from stall to stall, then from store to store. He met her parents in the magic shop, where they were helping to host bingo games for the children's wing of the hospital. He saw where Joey had gotten her looks. Her mother, Connie she'd insisted he call her, was a vivacious woman with equally voluptuous curves and a smile that welcomed everyone into her circle.

They'd played two games, one of which he'd given up to the little boy sitting beside him. The kid was so excited about the possibility of winning that Sam just hadn't been able to cover that last number and call out Bingo while the boy was still searching it out on his board. And he'd been thrilled into giggles when he screamed out Bingo and waved his hands wildly.

They'd finally gotten to the shooting gallery, too, where he won a small keychain -- and Joey won a huge tiger. He had to admire her ability to aim at the constantly moving targets.

The best part of the evening, though, was their constant conversation. They didn't talk about anything earth shattering, but he found himself wrapped up in her stories. He learned so much about her, everything from her older sister who owned a bridal shop in a neighboring county, to the scar on her knee that she'd gotten from a fall out of a tree. The little pieces of information were interesting glimpses into her life.

By the time he walked her to her car, his mind was filled with her. His heart, too, he could admit now.

“This is becoming a habit.” She turned and leaned against the door.

His lips quirked up. “My parents instilled a definite sense of chivalry. Besides, is it really such a bad habit?”

She considered for a moment before finally smiling. “No, I suppose not. As long as it's not an obligation.”

“More of a privilege.”

Joey's lips trembled slightly as she looked him, a cloud of uncertainty hazing her eyes. Part of him was glad for her confusion. The other part wanted to sucker punch the men in her past that had made her doubt her attractiveness.

"How's the house coming along?"

Her change of subject didn't surprise him. It was obvious he made her nervous when things became even remotely intense. "Great, actually. They've set a start date for January fifth, and he's sent over plans for me to approve."

"Your grandfather would have liked that you're fixing the place up."

"You think?"

She tucked her hands in her pockets and nodded. "He was always telling me how important family and roots are. He'd be happy to see you making the house your own."

If he hadn't felt it earlier, he would have felt it now. Just like that she'd told him what he hadn't known he needed to hear. Sam felt his heart sink a little deeper.

"You should come by sometime and look at the plans. Tell me if you think it'll be as nice as it looks on paper."

She made a noncommittal sound as she shifted the large stuffed animal and slid her key into the lock. "I had a really good time tonight."

She looked bewildered by her statement and he fought back the urge to grin.

"I'm glad you did. So did I." He moved closer, a tactic that he'd learned could bring hazy awareness to her gaze. "I'm glad I came tonight, Dr. Bingham. I hope you are, too."

She nodded mutely, blinking several times before sliding behind the wheel. He watched in amusement as she tried to buckle the bear in with her. He didn't dare say a word as she struggled the large stuffed animal out of the way and into the passenger's seat.

Finally, she brought her eyes back to his. "I'll see you ... later."

"Later, definitely."

With that he shut the door, stepped back, and stared thoughtfully at her headlights as she drove away.

Chapter Fourteen

Three days, and she'd received as many gifts from the mysterious LonFog. She'd seriously considered sending them back, but couldn't bring herself to do it. For whatever reason she felt a connection to this man, and his presents were really quiet non-threatening. Scented candles, bath soaps and lotions, and a moody jazz c.d. weren't exactly Jack the Ripper type gifts. They were ... sweet, she decided as she stirred a pot of clam chowder. And they were, in their own way, very sexy. It felt so much like a slow seduction that even the thought of the still wrapped candles made her heart beat a little faster. It was almost as if he were sending her things to prepare for a man. To prepare for a lover.

They'd chatted frequently, teasing each other, flirting mercilessly, talking openly about what turned them on and off. They were always scintillating conversations, and once it had aroused her so much that she'd used her favorite toy to alleviate the tension in her body. She hadn't ever had something attack her libido like this. She found herself in a near constant state of desire because of LonFog's attention.

Joey let out a long breathe and reached into a glass-fronted cabinet for a bowl. The man she was carrying on a strange affair with was almost as confusing as the man she couldn't stop thinking about. Sam Winters.

He hadn't pushed the idea of her coming over to his house again. In fact, he'd only spoken to her in passing over the last few days. She had begun to wonder if he was regretting his light flirtation with her the night of the carnival. And she'd known he was flirting with her. There had been no doubt in her mind that he'd been playing gently with her all night. She'd reciprocated in her own way, telling herself that it was the night, the air, the time of year. Any and every excuse except the truth. She'd enjoyed being with him.

From the minute he'd spotted her to the second she'd sped away, she'd had a good time. Her mind, the traitor, had tucked away bits and pieces and replayed them at the oddest

times. The image of him squinting down a pellet gun as he tried to shoot a metal duck, the picture of him trying to look serious as Mrs. Wilson read his palm. The ridiculous way he'd asked the balloon manipulator to try to make more and more complicated animals. And how he had deliberately let the little boy beside him win Bingo. The last, and most potent, memory was of his closeness. How he'd leaned in, kept her gaze locked with his, and told her he'd had a good time. It was enough to make her feel like a giddy teenager with her first crush.

But she wasn't a teenager. She was an adult. A full-grown woman who understood that not every fun evening with a man ended with promises and happily ever after. Sam's seeming inattention the last few days proved her point. Hadn't she already told herself numerous times that she just wasn't his type? He belonged with a long-legged, fashionably slender, sleekly dressed blond. His world was jet setting and corporate takeovers and mergers. Hers was anonymity behind a microphone and evenings spent curled up on the couch with her cat as company.

She was happy with her life the way it was. She didn't want or need it turned upside down. If she met a man and fell in love, she was sure he would be the kind that shared her homebody tendencies. He would appreciate her mind, he would love her for the way she helped other people. He wouldn't necessarily go gaga over her body, but he would enjoy it and what they could do together. But never in her wildest imagination was her dream man ever in the same league as Sam Winters.

Annoyed with herself, Joey blew a strand of hair out of her face and ladled soup into the bowl. Standing in her house and talking herself out of being attracted to her boss wasn't going to cut it. What she needed was some time away. A few hours out of the house, away from the station, with someone who would listen and tell her the unvarnished truth.

She shut off the burner and stared at the phone on the wall. Her sister wouldn't be busy on a Sunday afternoon. She could be there in less than forty-five minutes. Besides, Kate always did love an intriguing story.

* * * * *

An hour and a half later Joey sat in her sister's sun-warmed kitchen cradling a cup of coffee as her brother-in-law hustled the kids out the back door. When the door shut behind them, Kate spun around and stared at her steadily. After a moment she cocked her head, sending her mahogany cap of curls tilting.

"Okay, he's taking them to Chuck E. Cheese's, so we have a good three hours. Why don't you spill it right now so we have time to pick the problem apart?"

Joey gave her a half-smile and slumped back in the wooden chair. "And I'm the therapist."

"Yeah, and I own a bridal shop. Trust me, I've seen enough trauma to know trouble when it's staring at me." She slid into the chair across from Joey and softened her voice. "You didn't just hop into your car on one of your days off and drive over here."

"You make it sound like I don't want to see you."

Kate lifted a knowing eyebrow. "You usually make it a point to call a few days ahead of time so we're prepared."

"Now I'm not being thoughtful?"

"No, now you're avoiding. Either you tell me why you're here, or I'm calling Mom and --"

"Uncle!" Joey let out an annoyed breath. "Wow, you just go straight for the big guns."

"So, tell me about the man."

"Man?"

Kate smiled gently and folded her hands on the table. "When a woman has that look on her face, it's always a man."

She hesitated, unsure how her sister would react to everything that had been happening. Still, she knew Kate wouldn't judge her in the same way other people might. It was possible she'd lock her in the upstairs bedroom "for her own good," but call her a tramp? Never.

"Okay, so, it's a man. Actually, it's two men."

Her sister's eyes lit up like the Christmas tree in the den. "Oh, now this sounds promising."

"More like messy." Joey spun her mug absently and tried decide how to begin. "I have a new boss."

"Right, Sam Winters, the old man's grandson."

"He's ... well, I guess I'm not sure what he is. A friend, maybe. He keeps popping up wherever I am, like I'm wearing some sort of tracking device."

Kate's brow knitted worriedly. "He's stalking you?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. It's just strange, I supposed. He was at the carnival the other night and spent the whole time with me. Before that I ran into him while we were Christmas shopping and we ended up splitting our lists and helping each other. I even ended up at his house helping him decide how to refurbish it."

"And he's just a friend?"

Joey shrugged at the doubt in her sister's voice. "He's never said anything otherwise."

"But he's doing all these things with you." She sat up and leaned her elbows on the table top. "And I'll just bet you've had at least two meals with him."

"Three, actually."

There was a deafening silence for a moment, and then Kate burst into a full laugh. “Oh, my God, Joey, he’s courting you! Don’t tell me you’re that blind.”

Joey squirmed uncomfortably in her chair. “That’s just it, I can’t tell if he is or not. I mean, it’s not like he’s a small town guy. He’s been living and traveling overseas.”

“And that makes him, what?”

“It makes him more ‘sophisticated,’ I guess. He’s used to casual physicality. A little kiss is just a little kiss to him.”

“He’s kissed you?” Kate’s smile grew exponentially.

“Oh, stop it,” Joey said without much heat. “The thing is, I’m attracted to him. I mean, really attracted to him. He’s smart, he’s funny, he’s cuter than any one man has a right to be, and he’s nice, damn it.”

“Poor baby. You’ve met Mr. Perfect and he’s wooing you.”

“But I don’t think he’s wooing me, Kate. I think he’s just being himself, and stupid me is falling for him.”

“Is this about him, or is this about you?”

The question was point blank and hit its mark with a hard thud. Leave it to her sister to boil her problem down to the very basic.

“He can have any woman he wants. Why would he want me?”

Kate’s concerned expression turned into a scowl. “Now who’s being stupid? Why wouldn’t the man want you, Joey? Look at you!”

“Exactly.”

Her sister plowed on, ignoring her. “You’re intelligent, self-sufficient, articulate, kind, big-hearted, generous, and gorgeous to boot.”

“I’m the ‘friend’ that the wingman has to deal with on a double date.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Kate crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “You know, some men like women with curves, Joey. You aren’t in high school anymore. You’re out in the real world, where real men with honest to goodness brains live. I swear, if one of them smacked you with a two-by-four, you’d probably miss it.”

“How am I supposed to fit into his world? He’s Mr. Hottie; he probably has a girl in every corner of the world. He’s used to five-star meals in luxury hotels and late-night parties with waif models. He says he’s a homebody, but his definition of homebody and mine are probably miles apart. I like my townhouse, I enjoy quiet nights at home, and I’m just about as far from a waif as you can get. He’s champagne, and I’m ginger ale.”

“Wow, you must have spent a lot of time coming up with that little gem.” Her sister’s face softened and she reached out to touch her knuckles. “Joey, you’re the kind of woman a man marries, not the kind he plays with. You’re the type that makes a man look twice, then turn around and look again. Okay, so you aren’t a Victoria’s Secret model, but I’ll tell you

something -- ninety-eight percent of us aren't. And frankly, you're far prettier than most of them. You've got to give yourself a break. You might be surprised to find out that you are way more attractive to the opposite sex than you think."

Joey gnawed on her bottom lip, but nodded. She knew Kate got annoyed with her self-perception, but she wasn't going to avoid the truth. Besides, there was one more little thing she had to tell her sister, and she was sure that was going to get her another kind of lecture.

"Now, you said something about two men?"

Uh-oh, shoved right into the sharpest edge of the conversation. "Um, yes, another man. He's ... interesting. I like chatting with him, he doesn't pull any punches with me, but he's not mean about it."

"So Sam has competition, huh?" Kate's lips tilted again. "Where'd you meet him?"

Joey lowered her gaze to the dark pool of her coffee. "I, uh, I haven't exactly met him."

"Huh?"

"We, uh, well, we're more like ... buddies. On-line buddies."

"On-line buddies? You met a stranger over the web and you're 'buddies'?"

Joey squared her shoulders and tried to look indignant. "Hey, you've made plenty of on-line friends."

"Yeah, but no 'buddies.' And just because I'm married doesn't mean I don't know what that really means. I watch those primetime news shows."

"It's safer than picking someone up in a bar."

"Not by much. At least in a bar you get to see the person face to face. You can get a gut feeling about them." Kate sighed heavily. "Not that I think you should be going around picking up men in bars every night. Getting phone numbers, definitely."

"Fog is nice."

"Fog? You don't even know his real name?"

"No, I don't, but he doesn't know mine, either. It's all very anonymous."

Kate groaned quietly. "I don't what's worse, knowing or not knowing who you're having cybersex with."

"Hey, I'm being careful. He doesn't know what I do for a living, he doesn't know what I look like, and he only has my post office --" Joey stopped herself, but not soon enough. She winced as her sister's eyes grew round.

"Oh, my God! Josephine Bingham, please don't tell me you gave him a mailing address!"

"Well, I ..." The only answer she could really give was a shrug.

"Good Lord, now he knows where you live! That's it, I'm calling Mom and Dad --"

"Don't you dare! Look, Kate, I'm a grown woman. If I choose to have an affair via my computer, it's no one's business but my own. Okay, so it probably wasn't the smartest thing

in the world when I gave him my P.O. box. But that's all he has. Atherton is large enough that he'd have a hard time tracking me down. Besides, all he's done is send me gifts."

Kate seemed to rein in her frustrated anger as she lifted an eyebrow. "Nothing like a severed pinkie, I hope."

"No," Joey pursed her lips in annoyance. "He's sent me perfectly normal stuff." She wasn't about to tell her now about the feeling of being slowly seduced. "We talk nearly every night, and he's never said or suggested anything that made me uncomfortable."

"So, you brought this mystery man up because ...? No, don't tell me. You're seriously considering falling for him."

"Okay, so when you say it, it sounds a little ridiculous. But, yeah, I think it would be easy to let myself cross the line over anonymous."

Her sister shook her head. "Joey, when you decide to have a love life, you make sure it's as complicated as possible. If you're looking for advice, and maybe even if you're not, I'm going to give it to you. Don't sell yourself short. You don't think Sam could be trying to date you because you don't think you're good enough. You're carrying on with a faceless man because he can't hurt you, not when he doesn't know you. Before you decide which one you're going to let completely into your life, you have to stop and consider something else besides your insecurity. You have to consider your heart. If you want a straight-out affair, with no strings attached, then you have one choice. If you think you're ready for some strings, then there's another."

Joey slumped down and let her fingertips drape over the cool coffee mug. "I guess I already knew that. I realize that I'm the only person who can decide what to do. I think I just needed to share and vent with someone who wouldn't think I was a complete nut job."

"Complete? No." Kate gave her a comforting smile and stood. "Come on, you can help me get the chili put up and tell me more about this gorgeous boss of yours."

Joey scooted out of her seat and moved toward the white-topped stove. No, her sister wouldn't tell her what to do. But she would definitely let her preferences be known. And right now Kate's preferences ran toward tall, blond men with the face of a Roman god, the voice of a consummate seducer, and a body that turned a woman's mind to mush.

Chapter Fifteen

He'd been patient. Heaven knew he'd been patient, and now it was killing him. He'd deliberately taken a step away from Joey as Sam to give her time to realize she missed him. As LonFog he'd gotten what he'd begun to think of as his "Joey Fix" at night via his computer. But it wasn't the same as being in the same room with her. He couldn't see her pretty face, hear her sexy voice, watch her lush curves as she moved. He wasn't sure if his body was in more pain than his mind, or vice versa. Wooing a woman wasn't as easy as some people made it look.

He rolled his shoulders and tried to dispel the foul mood that hung over him. He'd hoped going out in the cold and finding a tree for the living room would help. But all he could do was think of her as he watched smiling people happily bump and jostle through the streets.

He was considering turning back around when he saw her. Funny how fate had decided to step in and make this an actual chance meeting instead of a planned one. His feet seemed to freeze to the ground as he watched her help her mother load heavy bags into the trunk of her car. She was wearing long boots today, the kind that went up to her knees and hugged her calves lovingly. He started to salivate when he realized that she was wearing a skirt underneath her coat. When he realized she was kissing her mother goodbye, he jerked himself out of his shock and hurried over to them.

"Imagine this, running into the two most beautiful women in Atherton."

Constance turned and looked at him, her eyes warm. "Hello, Sam. What's brought you out this afternoon?"

"The office was getting too stuffy, and I had some shopping to do."

She patted his cheek affectionately and he felt a tug of appreciation. Here was a woman that made a house a home, a stranger a friend, and the sad happy. If she weren't married and he hadn't fallen for her daughter, he had the feeling that he might have pursued her.

"Don't stay out too long in this cold. You don't want to be ill during the holidays."

He smiled at her, feeling like a little boy. "I won't, I promise. I just need to find some tree decorations, and the tree."

"You'll want a tall one for that beautiful house. The Boy Scouts have a tree stand just a couple of blocks down. They'll even deliver it for you so you don't have to worry about it while you're finishing the work day." She turned to Joey and gave her a quick smile. "Take care, darling. And don't forget the Christmas Cantata at the college."

"I won't, Mom. Love you."

"Love you, too, little Josephine."

Sam watched as the older woman slipped behind the wheel of her sedate black compact and pulled out into traffic. He grinned when he saw the jaunty Santa cap perched in the back window. It was a flagrant driving violation, but he didn't think any cop with a heart would ticket her for it.

"Well, I guess I should be --"

Sam stopped Joey before she could move past. "You're out shopping again?"

She looked up at him, her face rosy from the cold breeze. "Actually I'm replacing some decorations. My cat decided to have a battle with the tree. Murray won."

He chuckled and rocked back slightly on his heels. "I hope he didn't destroy everything."

"Just a few things that I had on the mantle and most of what I had on the tree."

"So you know the best place to find all the things I need to trim the house."

She seemed to consider him a moment. He wasn't sure what was going on behind her blue gaze, but it looked an awful lot like an inner struggle. He had no idea if he should be glad about that or not.

Joey finally nodded. "I do, yeah, but I need some fortification before I help you shop. My mother can wear a tri-athlete out."

"Coffee and a pretzel?"

She gave him a slow smile of agreement. A few minutes later they were strolling down the snow-smattered sidewalk, munching food and sipping from steaming cups. He took a moment to watch her move, to appreciate the way her body, even under all that covering, swayed and shimmied. He caught a peak of red and black and realized her skirt was plaid. It was much too close to a schoolgirl's uniform for his sanity. It took him a full minute to push the image of her dressed like a naughty schoolgirl, complete with pigtails, to the back of his mind.

"You decorate your own house for Christmas?"

Her question jarred him out of his fantasy. "I do, why?"

She turned to look at him for a quick second. "I don't know. I guess I thought you might hire someone to decorate for you."

He lifted an eyebrow. "There're people in Atherton that do that?"

"Heck, if you paid Scott enough money, he'd probably show up and do it himself."

Sam smiled and shook his head. "No, thanks, I don't think I'd care for hot pink thigh highs hanging from my mantle."

"Ah, so you have particular tastes."

"Yes, I do. I'm very selective about everything in my life." He wondered if she would pick up the innuendo or simply take it as a teasing remark. "Now, back to why you'd think I would hire someone."

"You're a busy man, and you just pointed out you were picky. I supposed I thought you'd want everything to look just so."

"You mean all sleek and artfully matched."

"Something like that."

He took a contemplative sip of coffee before he answered. "Honestly, I prefer my sister's house when the kids have decorated it. It's bright and crazy and chaotic. It's perfect."

She took a small bite of pretzel as they stopped at the corner. He wanted to ask her what she was thinking, what she thought about his idea of what holiday decorating should be. Instead he waited for her to reply.

"I owe you an apology. I shouldn't assume things without all the facts."

She stared up at him with serious eyes, as if she were afraid she might have hurt his feelings. His heart squeezed as he looked at her.

"No harm done. Now that you know what I like, you can help me find what I'm looking for."

Her lips tilted up, slowly brightening her face like a miracle. "Bright and crazy and chaotic."

"Exactly."

He tossed away the empty wrapper and casually laid his hand against the small of her back. He loved the feel of her close to him, with her just a hair's breath away from being completely in his arms. As they crossed the street, he noticed a man waiting in his car at the red light staring at Joey. He knew that look. He saw it in the mirror every time he was shaving and thought of her. He glared back at the dark-haired stranger, hoping the barbaric explosion of territorial savagery showed on his face. It must have, because the other man turned away quickly.

“We’ll start in here,” Joey was saying, plainly oblivious to the exchange. “Dolly’s always has great sales on ornaments.”

* * * * *

She sat in front of the computer, wearing the robe LonFog had sent her, freshly bathed using the soaps and lotions that had also been a gift. She felt just the slightest bit ridiculous preparing herself to sit in front of a screen, but it also set a low rolling fire in her veins. It was the sense of danger, the sense of the unknown that was exciting her, she decided. So what if she’d been on the edge of desire ever since Sam had put his hand on her back.

He was just too handsome for his own good. He could make an avowed nun take a long look and jump straight out of her habit.

Growling in frustration, she flipped on the computer and ignored the little voice in her head. She was satisfied with the way her life was going. She didn’t need a disastrous crush on her boss.

As soon as the screen flickered to life, she found her instant messenger icon and clicked it. Here was where she was more comfortable. Here she couldn’t let a man down, because in his mind she could be exactly what he wanted.

“I was hoping you’d be on.”

She smiled when his message popped onto her screen. “Of course I would be on tonight. I wanted to thank you for the sixth day gift.”

“So you like it?”

“How can a girl not like a vibrating ring?”

“Have you tried it out yet?”

She bit her bottom lip and shook her head. “No, not yet.”

“Were you waiting for me?”

A good question, and she was surprised to find the answer. “I was.”

“I guess it’s my turn to taunt you into an orgasm. I hope you don’t mind if I have to pause for a few seconds to maybe join you.”

The idea of it thrilled her, actually. “Not at all.”

“Are you wearing the robe?”

“Yes.”

“Did you take a bath in the soaps I sent?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause before he replied. “I think I might pass out just thinking about you in the shower, running a sudsy sponge over your body.”

“It wasn’t a shower, it was a bath.”

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

She chuckled softly. “No, just give you something to think about.”

“Oh, you did, definitely. But now maybe I should give you something to think about. Are you ready?”

Joey eased back in her seat, parting the front of the robe slightly so she could reach her breasts and moist folds. “I am.”

“I’ll tell you what I’d like to do to you. I’d like to buy you a small butterfly vibrator, the kind that sits right against your clit. I’d have the remote controller for it, so I could turn it on and off whenever I wanted. Then I’d take you out.”

Oh, God, what a thought. Out where anyone could see her if she lost control. Out where he would be the one with the control. She licked her lips and slowly began to circle her nipple with a fingertip.

“I’d make sure we had a few private moments, just so you could tell me how it felt. I’d want to slip my fingers inside of you just to see how wet and hot you were. I’d like to pinch your nipples while I played with you, but I wouldn’t get you off like that.”

Joey’s world narrowed to the screen in front of her as she read. She could see it so easily, and in her fantasy Sam was the man making her crazy with lust. She slowly turned the small vibrator on and ran it along her lower lips.

“I’d take you shopping for clothes. Whenever you went into the changing room, you’d be able to see your face and your aroused body. You would see yourself sitting there on the edge of coming. I would turn the vibrator on so you could watch yourself flush. But you couldn’t scream, not where everyone could hear you.”

Her back arched slightly as she slid the toy over her clit. The feel was like an electric shock, ripping a moan from her throat. Her release was growing so quickly, tightening in her belly like an agitated snake ready to strike.

“Just when you think I’ll let you have an orgasm, I’d turn it off again. I’d ask to see the next outfit, and you’d have to cover your body with clothes. Do you know how the material would feel against your skin? It would drive you crazy to have it touching you, slipping over your nipples and bottom.”

She knew it would, she knew it would be exquisite torture. And she knew she would like it. The vibrator skimmed over her throbbing point of desire, the quick movement of the device curling her toes as she drew her legs up in the chair.

“I’d wait until we were in the car. I would want to watch you while you came, listen to you as you yelled for me. I would take us to a deserted road so I could reach out and rub your nipples while I turned the butterfly on. You would come so hard that you wouldn’t care if the whole world were watching. “

She felt her body stretch into a tight rope for a split second, then it was clipped, hurtling her toward star-studded blackness. She heard her own cries, her body contract over

and over as she orgasmed. When she finally came down she realized LonFog had stopped typing. She smirked knowingly as she turned the vibrator off, knowing exactly what he was doing on the other end. The thought excited her all over again.

A few moments later he was back. "I guess I couldn't wait."

"Don't be sorry for coming for me. I like the thought of us sharing an orgasm."

"In that case, we'll have to be sure that you have everything you need tomorrow night. After all, it'll be your turn to tell me a fantasy."

"I'll be sure to be prepared."

There was a paused, then his message. "I'm glad you enjoyed your present tonight."

"I've enjoyed everything you've sent me. I still have to wonder why you're doing it, though."

"Maybe because I want someone to spoil through the holidays."

She knitted her brow and tried to decide whether to delve into a totally different private side. What the hell, she thought. "You don't have anyone to spoil?"

"I meant it when I said that I didn't have anyone special. If I did, I'd be busy doing this stuff to them for real. Though I don't think I'd mind doing it to you for real, either."

Oh, no. Oh, no, please don't let him ask to meet. Hoping to diffuse the question, she changed the subject.

"Your credit card company reps must be having one hell of a time reading about your purchases."

With that, they launched into a more light-hearted conversation, involving sex aid sites, bad spam e-mail, and the titillating idea of a how to cybersex book. By the time she logged off and crawled into bed, the nervous knee jerk reaction to his nearly asking to meet had faded. Still, it stayed in the back of her mind, and she found herself tossing and turning with dreams of LonFog meeting Sam, and both having a good laugh at her expense.

Chapter Sixteen

Joey put the little ceramic gingerbread house on her mantle and took a step back. It had taken her all day to shop with Sam the day before, and she hadn't had the time to put anything up until this morning. Luckily Murray had decided he would do best to avoid her anger and had been a docile cat, lying on the couch while she fixed the mess.

"You do this again, and you're getting nothing but dry food for a month." She gazed over her shoulder at the cat. He looked at her and yawned, unimpressed.

Shaking her head, she took a step back and surveyed the living room. The tree had been righted and more bright red and green balls hung from the branches, the small ceramic houses had been arranged on the plant cart again, and the mantel was once again festive and happy with decorations. She reached out and touched the fuzzed top of a red stocking. She couldn't help but recall Sam's outrageous statement about ladies thigh highs being hung in front of his fire. He was right of course; Scott would have done it as a lark and been damn proud of himself.

Sam ... Sam ... her mind kept circling right back to him. Even last night, his face had been the one that had popped into her head. She wished she could get away from the sad facts, but she couldn't.

She was afraid she was going to regret her decision to play along in his flirtation. Shopping with him had shown her a very different side of the man who was her boss. It might have been easier if she hadn't seen that part, if he had stayed in his neatly placed pigeon hole as the hunky man that owned the radio station. But he'd snuck up on her, eased through the fringes and into her every day life.

Why? Why had he bothered to get to know her? What was the point? Because she was an asset to the station? Because she was an "in" with her co-workers? He'd admitted he liked

her as a person, as a friend, but he hadn't pushed it past that. She had no idea what she'd do if he did try. Possibly toss him down on the floor and have her way with him.

She turned a baleful look to Murray. "You men are all alike. You make a girl's life a mess and then wait for her to clean it up."

He simply blinked at her. Joey shook her head and let out a sigh. She was headed quickly into a full state of paranoia. She had to quit overanalyzing the facts. Sam was a touchy-feely person, his touches were casual, and even his kiss had been meant as nothing more than a friendly gesture. He wanted friendship, nothing more and nothing less. She had plenty of male friends; she could deal with this. Even if Sam was as hot as July on Venus.

* * * * *

Joey stared down at the gift in her hand. Another package that had been waiting for her at the post office. She didn't know whether to laugh or moan. She did both.

He'd sent her a Jackrabbit. It was an expensive one, too, made out of pink gel-like material. It had rotating beads and a vibrating clit stimulator softly molded in a phallus shape. She pulled out the controller and laughed when the device hummed to life. Apparently they'd included the batteries.

She took a moment to touch the vibrator, letting her fingertips trace the outline of it. She'd never owned a Jackrabbit before, though she'd definitely heard how extraordinary they were. She'd considered buying one, of course, but she'd just never really gotten around to it. Now, staring at it in fascination, she wondered why she hadn't.

She considered going upstairs and trying it out right then, but decided against it. Strangely, she felt like the first time she used it she wanted LonFog to participate. Her cyber lover would appreciate the gesture, and she would be treated to another delicious fantasy.

Tonight would be soon enough to play with her new toy. Until then, she would let the idea of it sit and stir her blood. She rose slowly, carrying the dildo with her as she headed upstairs. She would clean it, dry it, and leave it sitting out on her bed, ready for use. That way there would be no fumbling for it when she logged onto the Internet later. She had the wicked thought of taking it to work and setting it out on her desk. That would certainly make Scott stutter. And Sam, if happened to be there, just might get a little thrill out of it, too.

She immediately buried the idea. Friends, she reminded herself, didn't exactly whip out sex toys and smile suggestively.

* * * * *

Sam thought of her as he balanced the tree in the bay window. He wondered if he was being too obvious with her, then decided he wasn't. After all, if she really knew what he was thinking whenever he was close to her, she'd either smack him or kiss him. Or maybe both.

That thought led to the question, was he actually giving out signals and she wasn't catching them? And why wasn't she catching them? Could it be possible that she was completely oblivious to his overtures? Or was it that she was sticking with some ridiculous notion about who the type of woman he wanted to be with?

He remembered their conversations about his dating habits. She'd made a lot of assumptions, including the idea that he was interested in Shelley. Come to think of it, she'd pointed out all kinds of women, mostly blond, and usually so thin he was afraid he'd break them in two in bed. Was it possible that she didn't think she was attractive at all? Not just unattractive to certain men, but just plain out unattractive, period?

The idea rocked him back on his heels. "No way. There's no way she could think that. It's ... crazy. Just crazy."

But the more he thought about it, the more the thought took deep root. Absently, he slid down to the couch and stared blankly at the wall. Of course he'd known she was hesitant about being called pretty. He chalked that up to old-fashioned humbleness. He'd guessed that she was unaware of the stares she got, but he figured that was because she wasn't the type to fawn. She'd made a valiant argument in his office that first day about not wanting to go out into public. He'd thought she was nuts; if the men got a look at her, listenership would shoot out the roof.

He'd been puzzled, but aware of her lack of artifice. She didn't preen, or flaunt, or demand attention from the opposite sex. In fact, she seemed to avoid it. He'd been able to believe that she didn't really think of her looks, though God knew how she missed just how gorgeous she was when she looked in a mirror. But he'd never considered that she didn't think she was attractive -- at all.

"I'll be damned." He let out a long breath and fell back against the cushions. "She's not just being sweet. She's being an idiot."

Sam realized with dawning comprehension that he would have to ratchet up his romancing. He didn't have to be as careful as he had been. In fact, he'd probably need to be much more blatant. Blatant but easy, pushy but gentle. God, he was going to be nothing but a series of boat knots before he finally had her. But he couldn't think of a better way to be twisted than by the beautiful Josephine.

Chapter Seventeen

She was stepping out of the booth, listening to Scott talk on about his date with the hot woman from the bar, when she ran head first into a wall. A solid wall. A warm, wide, solid wall. Hands came up to rest on her shoulders and gently set her away.

"You must be in a hurry."

Joey's gaze traveled up to meet Sam's laughing eyes. Her heart did a little knock, and she felt a flush begin to heat her face.

"I'm sorry. I guess I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Hey, a pretty lady running into me is never a problem." He struck a casual pose, as if he were prepared to stand there all night in the hallway and chat. "Got a hot date?"

Hadn't he asked her that once before? She couldn't quite remember, not with her brain conjuring images of his hands doing unspeakably naughty things to her. "I -- uh, I was just headed home."

"A hot date at home? Lucky bastard."

Okay, was it her imagination, or was he really flirting with her? Not just the cute teasing, nudge-nudge-wink-wink flirting, but the full on assault flirting. She decided to change the subject -- fast.

"I'm surprised to see you here. Isn't a little late for paperwork?"

He arched an eyebrow and gave her a devastating smile. "What, I can't stay and listen to the steamiest woman on radio?"

All right, now she was befuddled. "Shouldn't you be listening to your own radio station?"

"I was."

She stared at him, lost for words. Behind her, Scott conspicuously cleared his throat. She could have sworn she heard laughter behind the noise.

“Well, boss man, boss lady, I happen to have a lovely woman waiting for me across the street. You two have fun.”

Joey bit back a desperate noise as her friend maneuvered around her. Behind Sam’s back, he gave her an encouraging double-thumbs up. She could have strangled him.

“So, Joey, you hungry?”

She let her eyes refocus on Sam, her brain swimming with questions and answers she wasn’t sure she could untangle. He was her manager, she reminded herself, a man that she’d been shopping with, eaten with, even helped come up with ideas for fixing his house. This shouldn’t be hard. Just take a deep breath in, slowly, now out ...

“Actually, I really was headed home. I’m really tired; I think I’d just like to curl up and relax for a while.”

He nodded as if he completely understood her sentiments. “You know, I could never convince my colleagues or my friends that most of the time, that’s exactly what I wanted, too. Sometimes you just want to be at home. Hell, a lot of the time I’d just like to be there, maybe playing a cutthroat game of Monopoly or watching an old war movie.”

Was he serious? No way, he couldn’t possibly be. The gorgeous Sam Winters, sitting at home, being so ... domestic. It boggled the mind. He seemed more the type to prowl the nightclubs and pick up the beautiful women who fell all over him. He’d told her he liked being home, but now he seemed so ... adamant about it.

He lifted an eyebrow and leaned closer. “Are you all right? You look a little ... white.”

“No, no, I’m fine.” She lifted her eyebrows and nipped her bottom lip. “I’m just trying to picture you being so docile.”

He laughed softly, sending a warm shiver dancing up her spine. “I’m docile when I choose to be, Josephine. But there are times when it pays to be a little wild.”

Like in bed, with his hands roaming her body, his fingers digging into her hips, his cock pressing against her swollen lips as he demanded everything with words and deeds. She swallowed the lump that had suddenly wedged itself in her throat.

“Wild, yeah. I’d better,” she motioned toward the front door.

“Right, the hot date.”

He shifted his weight and turned to leave. She didn’t really have a choice but to fall in beside him or stay behind.

“So, do I know this guy?”

“Huh? Oh, I didn’t say anything about a man.”

“No man? That’s probably the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.” He turned a quirked eyebrow her way. “Are you sure you’re telling me the truth?”

She thought of LonFog, and his newest gift, a little device that was called the Snugglepuss. It was designed to stimulate her g-spot and her clit at the same time, and she'd been literally wriggling with anticipation since she'd opened the package. She wondered if one would consider an anonymous on-line lover who sent her sex toys a "hot date."

"I'm not going out tonight." She knew it was a roundabout answer, and it wasn't entirely false. She didn't question why she felt like she couldn't lie to him. "You don't have to walk me to the car."

"You keep saying that, and I keep doing it anyway. It's become a tradition, Josephine. I look forward to it." He sent her a slow wink that made her inner walls twitch.

She didn't bother to try to talk him out of it. Following her sudden vein of honesty, she realized she didn't want to talk him out of it. She was beginning to anticipate his gentlemanly ways.

She shrugged against the cold air as Sam opened the door for her. Crystal shards of snowflakes fluttered around them, glistening against the streetlights as they settled onto frozen surfaces. It felt as if the town was being slowly turned into a fantasy never-never land, and with Sam beside her like Prince Charming, it was easy to believe.

When he reached out and ran his knuckles over her cheek, it seemed completely natural. She didn't react the way she normally would have. She wasn't sure why, maybe it was the night, or maybe it was the idea of what she was going to be doing later. Whatever it was, the heat that cascaded from his hand through her chilled skin set up a deep fire that didn't disturb her. Instead it set itself in her belly and the flames of it licked down between her thighs.

She turned slowly and gazed at him through suddenly hazy eyes. He stared back, looking as if he wanted to say something. But he didn't. And so they stood there, the soft snow swirling like magic around them.

She didn't know how long they might have stood there if someone hadn't set off a car alarm. The blaring noise cut through the moment like a jagged knife, ripping it down the middle. Joey struggled to pull air into her lungs, tangled and confused by what had just happened. Sam seemed to understand that she was unnerved, because he took a deliberate step away.

He lifted his hand and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Would you like to come by tomorrow and help me get my house decorated?"

She was too addled to speak, and much too addled to think to say no. Instead she nodded, not trusting her mouth or her mind. His lips tilted up into a lopsided smile and she felt her knees waver.

"Tomorrow, then. Just give me a call before you leave. Have a good night, Josephine."

"Good -- goodnight," she croaked as he walked away.

She fell back against her car as he disappeared, leaving her flustered as she watched him. Oh, God, had she just agreed to help him decorate his house? She had. Letting out a loud sigh, she covered her face with her hands. And how, she wondered, was she supposed to get through that without liquefying at his feet and blabbering like an idiot?

* * * * *

Sam stroked his erection as he stared at the computer screen. He'd been telling Joey exactly what he'd like to do to her, and exactly how it would feel to him. All the while he was imagining her as she used the toy he'd sent her, and he couldn't help but get as hard as marble.

Suddenly a garbled string of letters appeared in the instant message and he knew she was coming. It had become their way of letting the other know that they were straining into an orgasm. His balls tightened and tingled as his cock flexed against his knuckles.

He'd discarded his pants the minute he'd walked into his bedroom, knowing that they would only get in his way. Now he reached into his underwear and freed his erection.

"That was incredible," she typed.

"Really? Why don't you tell me about it?"

He didn't even need lubricant as he grasped his shaft. He was already dripping with his own semen.

"I thought I was going to explode the minute I turned it on. I actually screamed when I hit the button."

He could see it. He could see it so clearly that he was nearly cross-eyed.

"The little nubs inside hit my g-spot perfectly, and then the clit stimulator started vibrating. My whole body went nuts. My nipples got hard and rubbed against my robe. I just had to pull on them."

He pumped harder, slipping the long muscle between his fingers and palm as his mind conjured the image of her touching herself. He could practically smell the musk of her sex.

"Just before I came, my pussy tightened so hard that I could feel every nerve ending. I squeezed around the little nubs, and then I turned the vibrator up. I came so hard that I thought I'd pass out."

His head was filled with the picture of Joey coming, screaming for him as she masturbated. His entire body spasmed as he shot a hot load over his hand, jerking and moaning as he came. His free hand smacked at the keyboard, wanting her to know that she was bringing him to release.

When he could finally breathe again, he reached to pick up the towel he now kept handily beside him. He cleaned up quickly and began his nightly chat with her.

"You're damn good at this. Are you sure you've never done this before?"

"No, never." There was a long pause. "Actually, I'm really surprised I'm doing this."

"Really? That repressed, or that shy?"

"Oh, I'm definitely not repressed. Just shy I guess."

He hunkered down, ready to grasp onto the fragments she fed to him. "It's always the shy ones, huh?"

"Are you a shy one?"

"Sometimes. Mostly I think I'm picky."

"Picky? About women or all people in general?"

"People," he replied. "I'm always careful about the people I keep around me. I've always believed that old saying that if you lie down with dogs you'll pick up fleas."

"So you own dogs?"

His lips twisted up sardonically. "No, I travel too much. I don't even own a fish. You?"

"A cat. An annoying cat that destroyed my house the other day."

"Wow, you're a tolerant lady. You must have a lot of patience."

"I don't know, maybe. I've never really thought about it."

He lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "Seriously? No one's every commented about your patience?"

There was a moment of silence, and he wondered if she were remembering the day they'd shopped for toys together. He hoped that she was. He wanted desperately to be in her mind even while she thought she was talking to another man.

"Well, yes, someone recently told me I'd be sainted for it."

He grinned when he realized she *had* been thinking of him. "I'm sure you will. I'm glad you're letting me share the holidays with you, in a manner of speaking."

"Share? You're sending me gifts, but you won't let me send you anything."

"That's because I get all the enjoyment I need doing just what we did."

"I'd lecture you about that, but I'm enjoying this too much, also."

He chuckled at her admission. "Only seven more days to go. I hope you'll enjoy the other things I send you."

"If they're anything like what I've already gotten, I can guarantee they'll be hits. Hold on, phone."

He leaned back and waited for her to come back. He intended to go shopping again tonight for the next few presents, and he was thinking of getting a little more adventurous. He wanted her to be completely open with him when it came to sex. Once he confessed about who he was, he knew they would need that bond to help cement their relationship. And he was absolutely certain that they were going to have a relationship. He couldn't allow himself to think otherwise.

“Sorry, I have to go.”

Sam knit his brow together. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just ...”

He waited, knowing she was weighing whether to tell him something she considered personal.

“It’s just my mom,” she finally completed. “She’s on the line.”

“Checking up on you?”

“Something like that. I really have to go.”

“Not a problem. We’ll talk more tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“Definitely. Have a good night, LonFog.”

“Good night, Doc.”

He watched as she signed off, letting out a deep breath as her symbol blinked off his screen. If he hadn’t met her mother before, he might have thought that Joey was making an excuse to sign off. As it was, he understood that Constance Bingham was her children’s mother, and she took her job seriously. He only hoped that once all was said and done, she would still be willing to pat his cheek and treat him like a favored son.

Chapter Eighteen

Joey stood at the door and waited for an answer to her knock. She told herself for the hundredth time that this was a bad idea. A supremely bad, all bold print, idea. But he'd practically mesmerized her into saying yes the night before. There were times when she hated her libido.

She heard the lock turn and dutifully placed a smile on her lips. She shifted the wine she held and wondered again why she'd let her mother and sister talk her into taking a gift to her boss. A housewarming gift, they'd insisted. It didn't have to mean anything more. If they just happened to get tipsy on the burgundy and fell into bed together, well, all the better.

Then he was there, looking at her, his handsome face bright and welcoming. "Hi, I'm glad you could make it."

He held the door and stepped aside, giving her room to move past him. She thought fleetingly of escape, but called herself a coward. So what if his flirting had gone up a hard notch? So what if his attention made her whole body itch and ache? Thanks to LonFog, she now had a whole drawer full of toys to relieve that desire.

"My first Christmas gift." He nodded toward the thick bottle. "That should go perfectly with lunch."

"Lunch?" She sounded like a muddled headed fool. Great.

"Yeah, I couldn't ask you to work and not feed you."

He turned toward the back of the house and she followed him, glancing into the den as they past by. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said he needed help. It looked like the Christmas fairy had gone mad and strewn good will all over the floor and furniture.

"I had a craving for chili, I hope you don't mind. It's been stewing all night."

Joey sniffed the air with appreciation, twisting her mouth when her stomach gave a soft rumble. Luckily he hadn't heard, or he was too much of a gentleman to comment. The

moment she stepped into the kitchen, she bit back a sigh of pleasure. He couldn't have known that chili was one of her favorite winter meals, or that the sight of homemade rolls all ready to be popped into the oven gave her a warm glow.

"I thought you were inept in the kitchen. Where did you learn to make this?" she asked as he took the wine.

"Survival." He chuckled and turned to stir the tall copper pot. "My mother isn't the best cook in the world. I think she could manage to scorch water. My father was decent enough in the kitchen, but mostly we ate a lot of take out. I learned how to make a few things so I wouldn't starve to death. Nothing elaborate, and I'm definitely not a five-star chef."

"Your family didn't have a cook?"

His head swiveled around and he arched an eyebrow. "We had a maid who came in a few times a week, because both of my parents worked. Yes, my parents have money, but they aren't the type of people who hire cooks and nannies and butlers. They wanted my sister and I to have a good grasp of what the real world is. We had chores, we were expected to keep our grades up, and we were expected to learn how to be self-sufficient. Which is why they gave me cooking lessons as a birthday gift my last year of high school. They didn't want me to starve while I was in college."

She felt ashamed for all the incorrect assumptions she'd been making. She'd guessed that he'd grown up with plenty of money, and that had meant plenty of luxury. But obviously his parents had chosen to ground him in reality instead of spoiling him with all the things money could buy. Sure, he'd probably gone to a private school, and he'd probably had brand new clothes twice a year. But hadn't her own parents scrimped and saved so that she and Kate could go to Brighton Academy? And hadn't they done their best to make sure their children had nice clothes? So, when it came right down to it, their backgrounds weren't all that different. There wasn't as much distance between them as she'd thought. The realization nearly suffocated her.

"If you'd like, you can open the wine so it can breathe while the biscuits are finishing."

She blinked to clear her vision and found him gently sliding the silver tray of dough into the oven. Her heart gave a little shimmy as his jeans stretched across his bottom.

"Uh, the wine, yeah. The opener?"

"Second drawer to the right." He gave the direction as he reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a salad. "The glasses are in the cabinet over there."

They worked together in an easy way, moving as if they had been choreographed. By the time they sat down to eat in the cozy breakfast nook, the tension that had been building in Joey had eased to a dull thud. Sam kept the conversation light, for which she was grateful. When they moved into the den to decorate, she found herself smiling and easily. She didn't even flinch when he put on a bluesy version of holiday music.

"We should start with the tree." She stared at the tall Canadian Spruce, a bit envious. "Looks like you managed to at least get the lights on. When you said you liked chaos, I didn't think you meant like this."

His laugh was quiet as he moved up behind her. "Well, I've already told you I'm not very good at this stuff. I like it, but when it comes right down to it, I just don't have that decorator's streak."

"And because I'm a woman, I do?"

"No, I saw what you bought at the store, and you seemed to actually have a plan of attack. I usually just sort of ... sneak up on it."

She shook her head in amusement and turned to look down at the boxes of ornaments. He had almost every color and every kind spread across the couch and coffee table. She reached down and picked up a package that cradled the silver balls.

Popping the top, she handed it to him and nodded toward a box of hooks. "You do the top part, I'll concentrate on the bottom, and we'll meet in the middle. I'll grab the other box of silver ornaments, and when we're done hanging those, we'll tackle the next color."

They kept up a lively conversation as they transformed the tree into a landscape of color. He told her about his childhood Christmases and she reciprocated, chatting about the holidays she remembered.

She smiled over her shoulder at him as she hung a small golden bell. "One year, Kate and I almost burned down the house."

"Uh-oh, what did you two girls do?"

"Well, we decided that we should have a traditional Christmas tree. We went shopping and bought new decorations without letting our parents come with us. The night we did the tree, we closed the doors and made our parents swear not to come into the living room until we were done. So, we spent three hours getting everything just right. Then we lit the candles we'd managed to hook onto the branches."

"Candles?" His eyes were filled with horrified mirth.

"Of course. I told you we wanted a traditional tree. When we finally called our parents in, we waited for them, standing right in front of the magnificent decorating job we'd just done. We didn't understand why they were screaming until my mother yanked us out of the room and we turned around. One of the candles had sparked the needles, and the whole thing was about to go up in flames. My father grabbed the fire extinguisher from the kitchen, ran in, and doused it before it could catch completely. Luckily it caught toward the middle, so the fire didn't have a chance to jump over to the curtains."

"You two must have been a handful."

"What do you mean 'must have been'? We still are." She gave him a grin and turned back to pick up the silver garland. "Now, the next to final touch. Here, you take this end and drape it. I'll hold the extra while you go around the tree."

She followed behind him, watching avidly as his wide shoulders lifted and fell. She could just see the outline of his muscles underneath his dark turtleneck and it made her stomach clench with pleasure. She knew he was talking, but her mind was too busy filing away the bits and pieces of his image to register his words. Instead, she gave him what she hoped were appropriate answering noises. By the time they'd finally wrapped the branches, she thought her mind had melted.

"We have extra." He picked up another loose bundle of garland. "I guess it would be too dangerous to hang it near the fireplace. We don't want another Bingham decorating disaster."

She cocked her head and forced herself to relax again. "You're going to get a lot of mileage out of that one, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. Now, what's the final step?"

"Final step?" It took her a moment to remember what she was going to tell him. "Oh, a tree topper. You need one."

"What? But I have that bow ..."

"That doesn't count. You need a star, or an angel."

He moved a step closer and she felt her breath catch. "But I already have an angel." He picked up the garland and playfully whipped it around her. "A beautiful Christmas angel."

She felt the blush start at her toes and zip up to her cheeks. "Um, I think you might need your eyesight checked."

He sighed heavily and the smile that teased his lips slipped away. "Josephine, you are a gorgeous woman. I don't know why you can't see it, or why you won't believe it. You're so attractive that it can make a man ache."

She stared up at him, caught in his deep voice and web of words. He thought she was beautiful. He really thought she was beautiful. Suddenly she didn't know if she could breathe. Then it didn't matter.

As Eartha Kitt began to croon for Santa Baby, Sam lifted his hand and cradled her cheek in his palm. He hesitated, as if giving her a chance to step away. She didn't; she wasn't sure if she could even if she'd wanted to. When his mouth covered hers, she melted into him, pressing her lips against his as he tasted her. It was a savagely gentle kiss, with his teeth nipping the soft flesh and his mouth soothing the scrapes.

She moaned when his tongue snaked out to lave her lips. His thumb pressed down tenderly on her jaw, coaxing her mouth open. But he didn't need to ask. She readily gave in. The first swipe of his tongue was like a searing lick of flame, scalding every nerve ending in her body. He still tasted of the rich wine they'd shared, the deep texture mingling with his own to drive her crazy. He stepped even closer then, bringing her body flush with his and fitting her against his hips. She felt his arousal as it pressed against her belly, firm and large and insistent. It was almost too much for her.

Slowly, she lifted her hands to tangle in his hair, holding onto him as he deepened the kiss. She felt his free hand slide around her hip to the small of her back, his fingers splaying out across the sensitive area.

Their tongues met, touched, twined, mated, and Joey's mind became nothing but a blissful sea of boiling water. There was a groan, but she wasn't sure if it was hers or Sam's. When she felt the world tilt, she grasped his shoulders, sure it was her head spinning. But then she felt the soft cushions of the couch and vaguely realized he was laying her down.

His mouth continued to ravage her, his tongue plunging in and out in a heated dance. She gave a strangled cry as he fitted his body on top of hers, his hard muscles pressing against her much softer curves. Need clawed inside of her like a caged animal, keening for release. She arched her back instinctively, bringing her swelling folds against his hard shaft. Tiny thrills popped all along her veins like electric shocks. His hands stroked their way up from her hips, his fingers wiggling under the cable knit of her sweater to touch bare skin. She moved restlessly underneath him, silently begging him to continue. When his palms finally reached her breasts, she gave a long groan deep in her throat.

His fingers began kneading the soft flesh, molding her to his hands with mind numbing squeezes. She pressed further into him, encouraging him to do more, to take her further down into the sexual haze. He complied, pulling away the satin cups to expose her nipples.

"God, Joey ..."

His lips moved from hers to trail impatiently down her throat, scraping his teeth along her skin as he went. She hissed in delight as her head thrashed against the cushions, drowning in the rush of vicious desire.

Just as his teeth nipped her collarbone, his fingers plucked at her nipple. Tangled bolts of bright need raced directly to her core, intensifying the throbbing between her legs. He continued his assault, kissing, licking, pulling, until she was nearly sobbing with frustrated desire. When she thought she might die from his love play, one of his hands eased from her breast and snaked down to her pants.

She held her breath as his fingers slid past her waistband, slipping under the silky material of her panties. Her hips lifted involuntarily, inviting more. His hand cupped her, holding her in his big palm. He paused for a moment, his lips skimming up the column of her throat, tormenting her. Then one of his long, nimble fingers glided into her, moving smoothly between her aching walls.

Somewhere in the back of her mind a bell rang. It was a low, annoying buzz that was not quite drowned out by the rushing of blood in her ears. She clung harder to him, wrapping her tongue around his as she fisted her hands in his hair. She felt his finger ease in and out in the mock act of sex and she rose to meet him.

The damned bell started again. This time it was accompanied by a banging that was too loud to ignore. Sam's kiss gentled, reluctantly easing her back down to earth. It took her

several seconds to realize he was staring down at her with a look crossed somewhere between murderous and ravenous.

"The door," he managed gruffly. "I have to ... damn it."

He eased off of her, inch by slow inch, as if he didn't want to move from her at all. He held out a hand to help her up, but she waved him away. If he touched her now, she'd simply jump him, force him to the ground, and never mind about who was at the door.

She sat on the couch, trying to compose herself, as she heard Sam greet his visitor. Someone who didn't know better wouldn't have heard the edge of barely repressed anger. But she knew him, and she knew it was there. As quietly as she could, she straightened her sweater and her pants and ran a shaky hand over her hair. Oh, God, what had she done?

She was just standing when Sam came back into the room.

"Someone wanting a Red Cross donation," he explained with a pained smile. "I gave them a twenty so they would go away."

"Well, it's a worthy charity --"

"Why are you standing up?"

His question threw her for a quick loop. "What?"

"What are you doing? I believe I left you lying down on the couch, waiting for me."

She swallowed against her dry throat and tried desperately to maintain a cool stance. "Yes, well, I thought that ... it's not a good idea, Sam."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Not a good idea? What's not a good idea, Josephine? Making love on the couch when I should have you in a bed? Staying the night with me? Putting up red and green candy canes? What exactly isn't a good idea?"

She suddenly felt very close to tears but couldn't figure out why. "You and me. It's just not a good idea."

He gave her a hard look before he rammed his hand through his messy hair and let out a deep breath. "I'm not going to pretend that didn't just happen," he warned her. "You know damn well that you were as hot as I was just a few minutes ago."

"I didn't say that --"

"Hell, Joey, if we hadn't been interrupted I'd probably be sliding inside of you right now."

The image sent spirals of liquid desire straight to her sodden crotch. "Probably, yes --"

"But we're not a good idea. You can stand there and say that after what we almost did." He turned in a quick circle, staring up at the ceiling as if looking for divine intervention. "I can't believe you."

"It's just ... you're my boss." She let out a quiet sigh and crossed her arms over her stomach.

"Bullshit, and you know it. What exactly are you afraid of, Josephine? Is this really all about our not being 'suitable,' or is this about you being afraid?"

Her eyes went wide at his question. "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that I might actually know you, and I might actually really like what I know. Are you afraid to be the person I see you as?"

Because it felt too much like the truth she winced. "Sam, you want me. Fine, okay, so you want me. Obviously I want you, too. But in the morning you'll wake up, take a look at me, a *real* look at me, and you'll regret it."

He stared at her, looking completely aghast. "Do you really think so little of yourself? Do you think that a man can't find you sexy?"

"I didn't say that. It's only ... a man like you, Sam, you can have any woman you want. Sure, right now you think you want me --"

"I *know* I want you."

"But in a few hours, or a few days, or a few weeks, when you have to introduce me to your friends, to your family, you'll have second thoughts. You can't say that your friends won't look at you and me and think that you've lost your mind." She waited, but she knew there wouldn't be a denial. "I won't do that to you, or to me. And right now I'm not up for a physical affair that I know is going to end."

She made her way slowly to the front door, snagging her coat from the hook as she put her hand on the knob. His fingers grazed against her shoulder, but they didn't stay. It was a transitory touch, just like their brief encounter, just like their night together would have been. She didn't know why it was so vital for her to walk away now before she was hurt. She was an adult, and she was well aware of the needs of her body. But somehow the needs of her heart were getting in the way.

"Josephine, please ..."

She shook her head but didn't trust herself to speak. Quickly, she stepped out of his house and back into the cold light of day.

* * * * *

Sam sat and stared at the computer screen, willing her to log on. Damn it, he needed to talk to her. If not as Sam Winters, then as LonFog. At this point he didn't damn well care which. She'd left him in a prolonged state of sexual and emotional frustration, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

The worst part of it all was that some of what she'd said was true. His friends really would stare at him when he introduced her to them, but not for the reasons she thought. They'd be stunned because he had every intention of introducing her as Mrs. Winters.

She'd been dead wrong about his family, though. They would love her. His mother would admire her quick mind and open heart, his father would enjoy her wit and her banter,

and his sister would adore the way she kept him in line. They'd probably ask if he was good enough for her.

Okay, fine, so she wasn't supermodel thin. But, frankly, he couldn't picture himself coveting a woman whose stomach was concave. If he could count every rib and bone, he just couldn't get turned on. Hell, his bedroom had been adorned with posters of Marilyn Monroe and Sophia Lauren when all of his friends had been coveting the latest blond bombshell. He didn't want a fad; he didn't want an image. He wanted a woman. And the woman for him was Dr. Josephine Bingham.

But her damned low self-esteem was like a demon cutting into his path. What had she meant that he could have any woman he wanted, anyway? Didn't she understand that he wanted her? He thought he'd been painfully plain on that point.

Regret. She'd been convinced he'd regret it. It made him wonder if there had been other men that had been foolish enough to use her and toss her away. Just thinking about it made his hands fist and his blood boil.

Once he had her, and he would have her, she wouldn't ever go a day without hearing just how sexy she was. There wouldn't be a second of her life when she would second guess his attraction to her. He would spend his nights loving her body into submission, and his waking hours continuously wooing her. She'd be ninety years old and he would still be telling her how hot she was.

He was so lost in thought that he didn't realize she'd hopped on until he heard a familiar chime.

"Good evening, LonFog."

He swallowed and poised his fingers over the keyboard. Easy and light, he reminded himself. He wasn't supposed to have known what happened earlier. "Hi yourself, Doc. Have a good day?"

There was a hesitation before she replied. "I got your present. I have to say I'm intrigued."

So she was avoiding his original question. That was okay, he figured he could ease into a deeper conversation. "Well, we did talk about butterflies, didn't we?"

"Yes, but who's supposed to control it?"

"I guess you'll have to for now."

"Um, guess so. Maybe I'll wear it to a department store to try on clothes, in honor of you."

Sam's cock stirred from half-full to painfully filled. "If you do, you have to promise to tell me about it. I swear it's something I'd love to imagine."

"And have you been up to anything naughty today?"

He took a moment to decide how to answer. He knew she'd probably take his reply as a quip, but he typed it anyway. "I seduced a woman today. How about you?"

He waited, watched as the window said she was typing, watched it stop. She began a reply several times, but he was patient. If she needed time to think about how to answer, then maybe she'd spill something to his alter ego that she might not have spilled to Sam.

"Have you ever done anything that you regretted the minute you did it?"

Okay, so he hadn't expected that. "Yeah, I have, on more than one occasion. Why, are you regretting this arrangement?"

"No, it's not that." A long pause, then, "Today. Today I almost slept with a man."

"Almost? Why almost?"

"He's not ..."

"Not ...?"

"Not who I expected to have sex with. Not who I expected to end up with. He's different than any of the men that I've ever been out with."

Ah, now they were on to something. "How is he different?"

"You know when you're the geeky kid in high school? No one wants to hang out with you but other geeks. No one wants to date you but other geeks. No one outside of your little comfort zone ever talks to you or acknowledges you. Then out of nowhere the captain of the football team asks you out on an honest-to-God date. It kind of feels like that."

He squinted at the screen and tried not to be confused. "But wouldn't you be thrilled if the popular guy asked you out?"

"You hung out with the A crowd, didn't you? No, you wouldn't be thrilled. Well, maybe some, yes. But you'd really be suspicious. I mean, why would the cute guy be bothering with you? Is it some bet? Does he need you to do his homework or cheat on a test for him? Is he doing it so he and his friends can have a good laugh?"

Good Lord, she sounded convoluted. "But you aren't in high school, are you? That mentality doesn't apply."

"Maybe it shouldn't, and I know it's adolescent to feel it, but it does apply, however much I don't want it to."

"Did some guy do this to you? Did he date you, use you, and dump you?"

"We've all been used, LonFog. I've gotten over that. I've gotten over high school, to be honest. But this guy. For some reason, it matters with this guy. If I sleep with him, I have this awful feeling it'll be more than just sex. And if I get involved with him, I'm afraid he'll wake up one day and he'll realize he's with the geek when he could be with the homecoming queen. I don't know if my heart could take it."

He meant something to her. She was terrified to screw it up. Terrified to put him in a situation that would break both their hearts. He couldn't stop the broad grin that widened his face.

"If you love the guy, you should tell him."

He must have stunned her, because the screen was quiet for a few minutes. Finally, she answered.

“Oh, no, I’m not in love with him.”

He could practically hear the despair in her voice. “Is it so bad? To be in love with this guy, I mean? Is he a mean guy? Does he kick puppies and shove little old ladies around?”

“No. He’s perfect, damn it. Damn it.”

“Well, you’re no slouch yourself. I’m sure if you care about him like this, that he cares about you, too.”

“But he can’t! It’s ...”

He settled down in his chair, enjoying her discomfort. “You keep forgetting to finish your sentences.”

“He’s in a different league, you know? We’re from different places.”

“Are you really? He’s a career politician and you’re a career escort?”

“Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I? Or are you?”

He stumped her again. He thought he might just be enjoying this too much, but decided that he couldn’t help himself. After all the knots she’d tied him in, it was nice to see her maneuver through a few herself.

“Maybe I am being ridiculous. I don’t know. He’s a great guy, and God help me, my mother loves him. But it’s so hard for me to believe that he’d be interested in someone like me.”

“Why wouldn’t he be interested in you? You’re a great conversationalist, plus you can drive a sane man into a sexual frenzy. I think I’ve probably come more in the last few days than most men do in their adolescence.”

“But there’s more to a relationship than that. And I don’t know if I can be what he wants.”

His smile turned into a scowl again. “Look, if he already wants you, then obviously you are exactly what he wants.”

“Wants, sure, but love?”

Sam sighed to himself, relieved they’d gone around full circle, but annoyed that she’d only eased an inch in her stubborn self-esteem. “You sound like you need a friend more than a cybersex buddy tonight. Why don’t we put the sex thing on hold and you can ramble some more about this whole Romeo/Juliet, to be or not to be stuff.”

“To be or not to be is Hamlet.”

“Right now my eyes are rolling to the back of my head. Now, would you like my cybershoulder to cry on or not?”

Chapter Nineteen

She wasn't as thrilled as she had been when she first started going to the post office. LonFog had continued to send her gifts, and they'd continued with their affair. But she wasn't nearly as gung-ho as in the beginning. Somehow her enthusiasm wasn't what it had been.

They still found physical satisfaction through their chats, but it wasn't as playful for her anymore. It wasn't what she'd come to expect it to be. The sad part was she could pinpoint the exact moment when her affair had lost its luster. It was that day with Sam. That day in his living room. That day when he'd touched her and kissed her and told her he wanted her. That day he'd turned her world completely upside down.

Damn it, she felt guilty. She felt guilty every time she talked to LonFog now. It was almost like she was cheating. But she wasn't in a relationship. So technically she wasn't cheating. Even though Sam wanted her.

"Ugh!" She let her head fall on her arms as they rested against the steering wheel. "I am being so stupid!"

Straightening up, she wiped her hands down her face and readied herself to step into the cold. She should be looking forward to her next present. There were only two more left before LonFog's little game ended. Then it would be Christmas, and they would probably drop the whole affair. That thought made her even more depressed.

"Great, getting sentimental over a man you've never met. For all you know he could be forty, unemployed, mooching off his parents and living in their basement."

But somehow she doubted it. There was something about the way he talked to her, something about the way he communicated, that told her he was a self-sufficient man. That brought back the memory of Sam telling her about how his parents wanted him to be self-sufficient. And that brought along with it the images of what they'd done on his couch.

He hadn't spoken to her since that day. Hell, she hadn't even seen him. There was no accidental run-ins, no hands on management of her show. She should be happy that she'd convinced him of their incompatibility before they'd slept together. She should have been, but she wasn't. Instead, she was miserable.

Well, she still had her life. She still had her friends, her family, and, for now, LonFog. She wasn't going to second guess what she'd done, because, practically speaking, it had been the right thing to do. There were times when she loathed every fiber of her practical side.

Shoving her gloomy thoughts aside, Joey quickly stepped out of her car. She had a present to pick up and cards to mail. She didn't have time to worry any more about Sam and what could have been. She wouldn't give herself even a second to wonder.

* * * * *

He hated waiting, and he'd been doing a hell of a lot of waiting for Joey. It spoke volumes about her pull on him that he'd been as patient as he had. After the fiasco at his house, he'd given her space. Well, in real life he'd given her space. LonFog was hotly pursuing her, but he was sure now that she thought even her on-line sex buddy was going to dump her.

He was torn between being thrilled by what she confessed to his alter-ego, and being furious that she didn't come and tell him face-to-face. Either way, time was almost up on his charade.

There was another problem, how would she react to his being her on-line confidant? It wasn't going to be pretty, he was absolutely sure about that. But he could convince her, he could talk to her, he could be reasonable. And then he would be passionate, adamant, and demanding. Whatever he had to do, he'd do it, because he wasn't going to lose Joey now.

"Mr. Winters."

Sam looked up to see Marcie stick her head around the door, much like a turtle poking its head from its shell. He gave an inner sigh and motioned for her. She came a reluctant step in, nervously closing the door behind her.

"What can I do for you, Marcie?"

"Your ... your mother is on the phone. At least she says she's your mother, but you told me you didn't want to be disturbed, so I --"

"What did she say?"

His secretary flushed a bright, startling red. "She said that you would talk to her, or she would print your bare bottom picture in the newspaper."

He smiled and nodded his head. "That would definitely be my mother. You can send the call back. Oh, and Marcie, thank you for holding my calls and risking her wrath."

The young woman sent him an uncertain look in acknowledgement. Eventually he'd wear her down to casualness, he supposed. It would probably take a while, but God knew he'd been honing his patience the last few weeks.

When the phone on his desk rang he snatched it up. "Hello, Mom."

"Well, Sam, it's about time I got through to you. What do you mean making that poor girl tell people you're busy? She's probably been lambasted up one side and down the other by now, just because you're avoiding work."

"Gee, Mom, I miss you, too. Lots of love to Dad."

"You're being snide." She paused long enough to make him worry. "Something's wrong. What's wrong, Sam?"

"I'm fine."

His mother gave an inelegant snort of disbelief. Carolyn Winters wasn't easily duped. He'd learned that from his years of trying to evade groundings.

"I know my children, and you aren't fine. You aren't ill, are you? You haven't made yourself sick?"

He fought the urge to roll his eyes and let out a frustrated huff of air instead. "Mother, I am not sick. I'm not physically ill, okay?"

"Not physically ill? Then that means you're sick some other way." He heard her move and could picture her plopping down on the comfortable beige sofa. Settling in for an interrogation, he thought, and wriggled in his seat. "I know the station can't possibly be as stressful as your other ventures. If you were in financial trouble, you wouldn't be fool enough to try to keep it from us. That only leaves one thing."

"Mom ..."

"Who is she?" She sounded way too happy about it.

"I'm a grown man --"

"Um, yes, I imagine that's part of the problem."

He gave up. There really was no use trying to fight her. "She works here, on the air. She's gorgeous, she's smart, she's funny, she's sweet ... she's perfect for me."

"So what's the problem? Please tell me she's not involved with someone else."

"No, not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

He decided to skip that particular discussion and launched into the heart of the matter. "She doesn't think she's good enough for me."

There was a long pause and he knew his mother was weighing that information. "Is there a reason she wouldn't be good enough for you? Some vice that you aren't telling me about?"

"No, nothing like that. She's just ... she doesn't think much of herself. God knows why, because I've been on my knees since the second I laid eyes on her."

"So this is about her appearance."

"Exactly."

“Well, sweetheart, I can’t imagine she’s hideous. And so what if she is? If she’s everything you say she is, then you’d be damned lucky to have her.”

He let his head fall back against his chair and closed his eyes. “Try telling *her* that. I’ve been trying to worm my way into her life from the first day I saw her. I’ve rearranged my life to include her. But she’s afraid I’m going to look at her one day and I’m going to regret being with her.”

“A woman’s feelings are a tricky thing, Sam. I know you’ve had girlfriends before, but being in love is very different.”

“So I’ve found out.”

She gave a little chuckle and he found himself smiling. “Sweetheart, she’s obviously very special to you. As much as you may not want to hear this, I’m going to say it anyway. If you’ve been patient with her and she still has this notion in her head, then maybe it’s time not to be so tolerant. “

“Mom, I don’t want to scare her away.”

“Sam, sometimes what a woman needs is a man to toss her down on the floor and make wild love to her before she can think to tell him no.”

“Mother!”

“Oh, don’t be a prude. How do you think you and your sister were conceived?”

“But you’re ... are you telling me to make her ...?”

“Absolutely not! I’m not condoning force. If the woman wants you, but she’s afraid that you aren’t going to want her, then what you have to do is show her. You have to prove to her that she’s the most desirable creature on the face of the earth. And sometimes you just have to kiss a woman to shut her up.”

He sat in silence for a moment, debating his mother’s advice. He had to admit, it had its merits. But then, there was his alter-ego to contend with. He couldn’t let that lie between them.

“We’re going to come and visit you Christmas afternoon. I’d like to meet this mystery woman that’s driven my bullheaded son to such extremes. I think I already like her.”

“Good, you can see the old place before the contractor gets started remodeling.”

“Remodeling? Why Samuel Thomas Winters, I do believe you’re making a home, and all because of this woman. I take it back, there’s no think about it, I do like the girl.”

He chuckled as they said their goodbyes, promising to be ready for his parents’ visit. When he finally put down the phone, he found himself staring at the ceiling, considering what his mother had said, and deciding a course of definitive action. His parents would meet Joey, all right. And if he could convince her, they’d be here just in time for their engagement.

* * * * *

"This is Dr. Joey, and I'm here to listen and help. If you have anything you'd like some advice about, give us a call. Hello, caller, and welcome to the Dr. Joey Show."

"Hi, Dr. Joey," came the tentative female voice. "It's nice to speak with you."

She smiled softly "I'm so glad you called tonight, Laurie. What is it I can help you with?"

"I ... I've never had an ... um, an orgasm with my boyfriend."

"Have you spoken with your gynecologist about it? Sometimes there's a true physical problem that should be addressed."

The young woman gave a deep sigh. "I've talked to a few doctors, and they all tell me the same thing. There's nothing physically wrong, or chemically wrong. I'm just not --"

Joey leaned forward and shut her eyes, as she tended to do when she wanted to concentrate. "This is a very sensitive subject, so understand that when I ask you this, I'm not trying to embarrass you."

"Okay."

"Have you ever experienced an orgasm while you masturbated?"

"Oh, well, yes. Sometimes I ..."

She lifted her eyebrows and coaxed, "You ...?"

"I go home and finish up after I've been with him."

"Well, that's understandable. So, he does turn you on."

"Oh, yeah, of course. He makes me crazy."

She knew exactly how that felt. Hadn't she gone home and used one of her vibrators to find satisfaction after her tumble with Sam? "Where do you two have sex?"

There was a moment of silence and Joey wondered if she'd lost the girl. "His apartment, usually. A few times we've been out in his truck."

"So these are places where he's comfortable, but maybe you're not."

"I ... I don't know. I guess I never thought about it that way."

"Being comfortable is one of the things that you might need to look into."

But Joey hadn't been comfortable in Sam's house. On the contrary, when he'd touched her, she'd been wound up so tight she'd been afraid she'd come apart at the edges. Before, though, he'd had her laughing.

"You're saying I should have sex with him in my own apartment?"

The question pulled her back to the conversation. "That's one option, yes. Or you could try renting a hotel room. That would be neutral territory. Now, let me ask you this, Laurie. What do you fantasize about when you're masturbating?"

"When I'm ...? Oh, uh, well ..." She could hear the blush in the girl's voice and felt a rush of sympathy. "I think about him mostly, but I also think about ..."

“Go ahead, Laurie, no one is going to judge you here.”

The young woman paused. “I think about being with him and another man. I think about having two lovers at the same time.”

“And both are stimulating you at the same time?”

“Yeah, definitely. One is inside of me, holding onto my hips, and the other is ... he’s ... his tongue while ...”

Joey nearly groaned at the idea of it. It reminded her too much of her bondage fantasy, and was too close to the idea of having both LonFog and Sam. “I think we get the idea, Laurie.”

“It’s just amazing, you know, having two men give me undivided attention, wanting me to orgasm for them. Just imagining the feeling of it makes me ...” Her voice trailed away and Joey jumped in.

“Have you shared this fantasy with your boyfriend?”

“What? Oh, no, definitely not. I mean, it’s just a fantasy, and to be honest, I don’t think I’d want to really have two men at the same time. Well, I mean, not right now, at least.”

“Have you ever considered using a vibrator when you’re with him? Maybe have the toy take the place of the other man?” Heaven knew she did it, nearly every day now. She would imagine Sam, remember the feel of his hands on her bare skin, and hear his ragged breath. It was easy to picture exactly what he would have done to her, and how she would have reacted to his lovemaking. When she came, it was always with the image of Sam staring down at her with his green eyes hot as she cried out his name.

Laurie’s soft gasp echoed in her earphones. “I’ve never ... I mean, we’ve never talked about using stuff like that.”

She quietly cleared her throat and brought her mind back to the topic and the caller. “I’ll guarantee he’ll be receptive. Most people are a little nervous about mentioning sexual aids to their partner, out of embarrassment or because they don’t want the other person to think they’re inadequate. But the fact is, these things can enhance your love life. And you also need to talk to him about what is going on with you. He can’t be a good lover unless you help him. Communication is the best way to create a fulfilling, solid sexual relationship. Go and talk to him, Laurie, and let us know what happens. If none of this works, then I would suggest going to a one-on-one counselor.”

Even as she said it, she felt the words to her bones. Wasn’t she in nearly the same predicament? She was using LonFog and his gifts to satisfy her physical yearnings, but she didn’t dare to take the step too close toward Sam.

If she wasn’t careful, she was going to be the one on the therapist’s couch spilling her most inner secrets. She listened as the public service announcement bounced its way into an upbeat commercial and took a long sip of cold water. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Twenty

Joey stared at the black words on her screen and was absolutely speechless.

"I think we should meet."

How was she supposed to answer that? She'd thought of this as something anonymous. She thought of their affair as a brief encounter that would end without either seeing the other. She's said and done things with LonFog that she wouldn't have with anyone she knew. She suddenly realized she was sounding a lot like a hypocrite.

"Doc, you still there?"

"Yes. I'm just ..."

"Scared? Shocked?"

"Yeah, both." She sank back on the couch and felt Murray curl up against her thigh. "This wasn't what I was expecting. I didn't think we'd meet. I thought we were going to be faceless and nameless."

"I'd like to think we've become friends."

She worried her bottom lip as she typed. "I guess so, yes, but meeting, that's a huge thing."

"You don't think we'd get along? You don't think we'd click?"

No, that wasn't the problem. She was afraid they would. The thought blindsided her like a wicked right hook. Oh, God, she was going insane. She didn't want to bond with this man because ...

Oh, no. She wasn't. She couldn't be. She couldn't possibly be in love with Sam Winters. Oh, God help her, she was. She didn't want to meet another man because her heart belonged to the blond man with the killer smile and talented mouth.

"It's not a good idea," she replied.

There was a long pause and she cringed, wondering if he was angry. She recalled vividly the reaction Sam had had to those words.

"I don't bite, unless you really want me to. I'd like to see you, just once, and then if you don't want to see me again, I'll bow out of your life."

To see him or not to see him, that was the question. Even that little mental jab reminded her of Sam.

"Doc, I'm not a crazy. Okay, so crazies say that, too, but I swear I'm not."

That wasn't the problem, though it should have been. What would happen if she said no? Would it be fair to end something that he plainly thought could continue without an explanation? Would it be right to end this affair by simply dropping him? If she was smart, she'd tell him no and that would be the end of it. But then, being smart hadn't gotten her into this mess. She guessed she owed him the truth. After all, she'd shared things with him that she wouldn't have even considered sharing with the other people in her life.

"Okay, I'll meet you. I'm not sure how far away you live, or what kind of arrangements you need to make, but I think the sooner we meet, the better."

"How about tomorrow?"

The day before Christmas. One final gift from LonFog. "Tomorrow. You know the city I live in. I'll meet you in the town square, at one o'clock."

"Tomorrow, Atherton town square, one o'clock. I'll be the man with the red scarf."

"I'll be in a white coat."

"If I'm meeting you tomorrow, I have a lot I need to do. I'm really excited about meeting you."

And she was so anxious that her stomach was clenching unmercifully. "I hope you can say the same thing after we meet. Have a good night. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

She waited until he logged off to put her hands over her face. "Oh, Murray, just what the hell did I get myself into?"

She only got a sleepy purr in reply.

* * * * *

There was a voice in the dark, deep and sensual, speaking to her. She couldn't quite hear the words, but she felt it when his hands stroked down her arms. His fingers were long and warm, slightly calloused and erotically abrasive.

"You want us."

She nodded her head. She couldn't deny that she was unbearable aroused. Then his fingers skimmed up her ribs and over her bare breasts. She gasped when he tweaked the hard peaks between his knuckles.

“Let us take care of you, Josephine. Let us make love to you.”

He nuzzled just behind her ear, his warm breath cascading over her neck. She shivered as his body made total contact with hers, his hard cock pressing against her bottom. She bit her lip and nodded.

“You’ll love it, I promise. I promise.”

His lips connected with her shoulder, sliding along her skin as his fingers continued to pull at her nipples. Heat speared up in elongated bolts, spiking up her limbs and colliding between her legs.

When she thought she’d start begging for more, another male body slipped up, pressing against her front. She was gently sandwiched between two men, her curves pressed against muscle. Her mind splintered with dark delight, scorching and bright as another cock pushed into her apex.

“Let us show you. Let us touch you. Let us make you scream.”

The voice, dear God, she recognized the voice now. Sam. He was behind her, and it was only too easy to guess who was in front.

Sam’s arms reached around her, lifting her while her faceless lover wrapped her legs around his waist. His shaft was poised at her opening, teasing her with gentle brushes. She writhed in need, her skin sweating and her blood throbbing. Sam coaxed her back, so that she was supported by his torso. When his fingers slithered around her hip and slid between her wet lips, she bucked and moaned.

“This is what you want, Josephine. You want this.”

“Yes, Sam, yes.”

She woke with a gasping breath, her body consumed with licks of fire as she sat up in bed. She ran a shaky hand through her hair and tried to focus on the far wall. An erotic dream, how long had it been since she’d had something so intense invade her sleep? At the moment she wasn’t sure if she’d ever dreamed anything so ... blatantly stimulating. Sam and LonFog ... LonFog and Sam ... the two men that reached inside of her and made her crazy with sexual desire. They wouldn’t leave her alone.

Her clit was pounding, so tender and painful that she bit her lip against it. Her breasts were heavy, the pointed tips brushing against the soft material of her blue nightgown. The sensation ripped a moan from her throat and she knew there was no going back to sleep. Not without a release.

Quickly, she rolled over and pulled open the bottom drawer of her nightstand. She reached in absently, not caring what she came out with. She gave a soft sigh when she realized she’d pulled out the rubberized jackrabbit.

Joey lay back, bringing the toy with her, and slowly eased it inside of her. It was an easy fit with the moisture that was already beading on her thighs. The feel of the phallus

inside of her was heady. She quickly switched on the controls, bowing off the bed as it began moving inside of her and vibrating against her clit.

She closed her eyes and let her mind conjure up the dream she'd had. Her free hand skimmed up to her breast, kneading and caressing the swollen globe. She felt both men again, one in front and one behind. She heard Sam's voice, promising her everything her body could want while the other man tormented her with his cock. But this time he sank inside of her, expanding her walls as he filled her. Sam pulled on her nipples, kissing and biting her neck and shoulders while LonFog pushed in and out, in and out. The fingers on her clit were feather light and quick, drawing her up, pinpointing her need into that one tiny nub.

She quivered around the shaft inside of her, her muscles contracting as her orgasm tightened in her belly. She thought of Sam, thought of LonFog, imagined their hands on her and their bodies fulfilling hers. The edges of the world darkened down to what she felt and what her mind was picturing.

"Come for us, Josephine. Now."

She screamed her release, sobbing as she spasmed over and over again. Her body arched, her toes pointed, and her muscles tightened as she shattered.

It took her several minutes to drift back to reality. When she did, she shut the vibrator off and let out a long, soulful sigh. With all the orgasms she'd had lately, she was surprised she could come so hard. But then, she'd definitely had incentive. The thought of the two men in her life coming together to please her was a definite A+ fantasy.

Joey slowly sat up, bringing her toy with her. She stumbled toward the bathroom, her mind still blurry from lack of sleep and glazed with her release. She absently turned on the water and waited for it to warm. Looking up, she caught her reflection in the dull glow of the nightlight. She studied herself for a moment, saw the fatigue and questions in her eyes.

"Am I doing the right thing?"

But her reflection didn't answer. Instead it just stared back at her, mute, as unsure about the whole situation as she was.

"I guess you'll find that out tomorrow, won't you?"

Closing her eyes, she looked away from the mirror and stuck her hand into the lukewarm stream of water. Right or wrong, she'd made her decision. She wasn't going to go back now.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sam felt the biting chill of the winter breeze, heard the distant sound of the Red Cross Bell Ringer and the sound of Christmas music filtering through stores as their doors opened and closed. He barely registered any of it as he stood behind a thick oak tree and watched Joey. Lurking again, he thought, but for the last time. He wasn't going to fade into the shadows any more. No, he was going to tell her exactly what was in his heart, and she was going to listen to him.

She refolded her hands in the folds of her white coat, the only sign of outward nervousness that he could see. Her booted feet were perfectly still against the blanket of snow, her lovely face was the picture of a composed woman. Even with the wind licking at her hair she didn't shiver. He'd never been more intimidated in his life.

The clock on the courthouse struck one and he eased his way from behind the tree. Slowly he made his way up the path to where she sat, passing fast moving people who were hunkered down into their coats. The moment she saw him her bright blue eyes rounded in surprise.

"Sam, uh -- Hi."

Well, she hadn't smacked him; that was a good sign.

"Hello, Josephine." He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile before he slid down beside her.

"I didn't expect to see you here."

His eyebrows knit together as he turned to stare at her. "You didn't?"

"Look, Sam, I'm waiting for someone --"

"I know."

She blinked, looking completely confused. Then her eyes focused on his scarf. His bright red scarf.

“Oh, my God.” Her hand reached up to rest at her throat.

“Joey, listen --”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” She turned away from him and stood. “I can’t ... oh, no ...”

She began to walk away and he hurried after her, his heart beating wildly in fear and anticipation. “Joey, wait, let me explain --”

She spun on her heel and speared him with teary eyes. “Explain what, Sam? You must have had a damn good laugh at my expense.”

“No, it wasn’t like that. It *isn’t* like that.”

“I’ll bet you had me marked the minute you saw me.”

“Well, yes, but --” He reached out for her but she scooted away, dodging his hand.

“I can’t believe you could be so cruel!” She scowled at him, hissing through her teeth. Even furious she was arousing him, a state he didn’t need right now but should have fully expected. “You’re a bastard!”

She turned away again and he strode up beside her. “Stop it, Joey! Just stop for a second and let me --”

“Let you what? Let you convince me to fall into bed with you? Let you humiliate me some more?” She shoved him hard in the chest. “No fucking way.”

She marched away from him, the air around her vibrating with nearly tangible waves of rage. He ran after her, almost knocked over a black iron trashcan and paused to right it. By the time he caught up to her, she was standing at her car, using her door as a shield.

“Joey, stop! Give me a minute to tell you why I did it!”

“I’ve given you more than enough of my time, Sam. And I’ve given you more than enough of myself.”

She slammed the door in his face and skidded out of the parking lot, leaving him staring at her taillights.

* * * * *

Joey had just ripped open her first box of tissues when someone pounded on her door. She froze like a deer in headlights, fear, anger, and, worst of all, hope skittering up her spine. Carefully, she craned her neck around the corner of the living room and stared at the beveled glass. She knew it was him. She didn’t need to move the curtains aside or ask who it was. She could tell by his shadowed outline that it was Sam beating on the wood.

“Joey, let me in!”

She ignored him. She wasn't about to let him try to mend fences. He would just break her heart all over again.

"You're acting like a child! Open the door and let me explain!"

She was sure her neighbors were getting an earful, but at the moment she didn't quite care. Better they have some juicy gossip over their cornflakes than her have to sweep up the tiny parts of her heart.

"Josephine, please. Please talk to me. Please."

The pleading almost did it. Biting her bottom lip, she pulled back into the living room and slowly sank to the floor, taking the box of tissues with her. She leaned her back against the side of the couch and closed her eyes, willing him to leave. She didn't know how long she could hold onto her anger when he was just outside, calling out her name.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Josephine. I didn't mean ..."

He didn't mean ... he didn't mean ... he didn't mean what? He didn't mean what he'd said as LonFog? He didn't mean what he'd done as Sam? He didn't mean for her to take their affair so seriously? He didn't mean to kiss her, to touch her, to make her want him?

She sat on the floor, silently sobbing, until she heard him move back down the stairs. She stayed where she was until the mantel clock warned her it was time to get ready to go to her mother's. Resolutely, she stood on shaky legs and gathered the mound of used tissues. She'd cried all she was going to for Sam Winters. At least for tonight. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of any more grief. For the next few hours.

Sighing, she carried the tissues into the kitchen, dumped them in the garbage, and trudged her way upstairs to her bedroom.

* * * * *

"She looks awful." Kate whispered the comment to her mother over the kitchen island filled with finger foods. "She's trying too hard to be happy."

"She's hurt," Constance pointed out as she rearranged the fruit tray. "You know as well as I do that every relationship has its bad patches."

"Relationship? That wasn't a relationship, Mom; that was a farce."

Constance lifted her eyes to her oldest daughter. "Do you think he loves her?"

Kate snatched up a carrot stick and gave a disgusted sigh. "Yes. I want to hate him. I really, really want to hate him. But the fact that he called both of us and confessed to what he's done tells me that he's crazy about her."

She took a lusty bite of the vegetable and watched her mother flitting around, happy in her element. The annual Bingham party usually brought professors and students alike, along with people from her mother's community groups and her sister's co-workers from WQJX. It was normally a bright, happy event, but tonight a cloud of gloom hung overhead.

Annoyed with herself, Kate brandished the carrot in the air. "That man broke her heart. Why should we trust him?"

"Love can make us do stupid things, dear. You should have seen your father when he decided he wanted to marry me."

"What, did he go wild and carve your name in a tree?"

"No, he got drunk and had someone else carve my name in his derriere."

Kate choked on the food in her mouth and stared at her mother through watery eyes. "He did what?"

Constance gave her a smug smile, the look of a woman who knew she was well loved. "Well, you see, there was this other boy who was seeing me as well. He was in the Army, and he told me one night that he was so serious about me that he was going to get a tattoo over his heart with my name. Of course, I thought that was silly, if a bit flattering, but apparently your father found out about it. He was so sure I'd pick this other boy that he went out and got drunk. He decided that he was going to propose to me, and that he was going to prove that he loved me more. So he had my name plastered to his left cheek, then went across the street and bought me a ring."

Intrigued, Kate leaned back against the sink and crossed her arms over her chest. "And what did you do when he told you about all of this?"

"He only got the 'will you' part out of his mouth before he passed out in the driveway. Naturally I took him home, then went by the next morning to torment him with food and coffee. He proposed over dry toast. He admitted to the tattoo, though he wouldn't tell me where it was. I had a good idea when he had trouble sitting down." A dreamy look snuck into her gaze and she smiled. "I just rolled my eyes about it and decided that if the man was willing the scar his body for me, I should take pity on him."

"You didn't think it was a romantic gesture?"

"I thought it was the height of stupidity for him to make such a momentous decision while he was three sheets to the wind. And maybe I would have been upset if I hadn't decided not to be afraid to love him."

Kate cocked her head curiously. "You think Joey's afraid to love Sam?"

Constance lifted one elegant eyebrow. "You think she isn't?"

She slumped and shook her head. "Unfortunately, I think you're right. Sometimes I could just shake her for being so ... so ..."

"Stubborn? Blind? Unsure of herself?"

"Yes, yes, and yes. Oh, Mom, what are we going to do?"

Constance popped a sushi roll into her mouth and gave her daughter a saucy wink. "I think we're going to be sure everyone is out of here by eleven-thirty, then I think we're going to chat with Josephine until Santa delivers her present."

Kate's lips slowly pulled up into a full smile. "Whatever you say, Mom."

* * * * *

By eleven Joey was fading fast. She was exhausted from her crying jag earlier, and mentally strained over the lie Sam had told. A lie of omission, she amended, but still a lie. She felt betrayed and injured by what he seemed to think was a fun little fling.

She found her mother in the corner, chatting with a twenty-something man who was rosy with rum punch. She waited until there was a lull in their animated conversation.

"Mom, I think I'm going to head home."

"Oh, but darling, you never leave until the last of our guests are gone."

"I know, but I'm just really tired tonight."

She was scrutinized, from the toes of her red heels to the hem of her burgundy dress all the way to her upswept hair. Her mother gave her a sympathetic look and patted her hand.

"It's about time for the party to be winding down. Why don't you wait just a few minutes while your father and I push everyone toward the door."

Joey was too fuzzy headed to argue. She eased into the kitchen and wasn't ashamed to admit that she was hiding out. Absently, she nibbled on pieces of canapés and bits of fresh shrimp while she listened to the crowd slowly thin out. She was sipping at champagne when her mother and sister walked in.

"Where're Dad and Philip?"

Constance waved her hand as if in annoyance. "Oh, they went out to the wood shop. Your father wants to show off the rocking horses he made."

"Okay, well, I think I'm going to head home --"

Kate interrupted her with a suspicious smile. "What time are you coming back over tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I thought around ten-thirty so I could help Mom get everything set up for lunch. Why, do you need me sooner?"

"Oh, no, darling. In fact, you shouldn't worry too much about coming over early. If you need some extra sleep, we'll all understand."

Joey wasn't sure if it was exhaustion or too much alcohol, but the two women seemed to be acting stranger than usual. She carefully slid off the stool and headed for the swinging door.

"I'll be here to help, okay? I have a ton of presents for the kids anyway --" She stopped short as the memory of her shopping spree with Sam cut cleanly through her. She would not cry. She would not cry. Maybe if she said it enough it would be true.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" Kate suggested.

Joey turned and looked at her, dazed a bit as the Christmas tree lights reflected in her eyes. "I'm not drunk."

"No, but you're tired. That can be just as bad."

"I want to go home to my own bed. Besides, I don't have any clothes over here."

"But you can't go." She shook her head and took a quick step forward.

She drew her eyebrows together and slanted her eyes. "Exactly why can't I leave?"

There was a knock on the door and her mother sent her a much too serene look. "I'll just go see who that is."

Something was going on, and Joey was afraid she wasn't going to like it. The minute she saw the man in the red Santa suit, she knew. It didn't matter that his face was covered with a white beard and he wore a ridiculous white wig. Even the pillow-padded stomach didn't hide who it was.

"Sam."

Slowly, he sat down the sack he'd been carrying, letting it go limp beside the tree. "Hi, Joey."

"Go away, Sam." But her voice sounded weak even to her own ears.

He carefully pulled down the beard, keeping his eyes locked with hers. "I'll leave after I've said what I wanted to say."

"No." Then stronger, "No! I want you to leave! I can't do this. I just can't."

"Joey ..."

He touched her arm and she jerked away. Then he did something she wasn't prepared for. He grabbed her and slung her over his shoulder, hefting her like the sack he'd put down.

"Josephine Bingham, you are going to listen to me. If I have to kidnap you to make you pay attention, then that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Joey panicked, flailing her arms and wiggling her bottom. He gave her behind a hard smack.

"Stay still or you're going to fall and hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself? Hurt myself!" She gave a furious growl. "Mom! Kate!"

But her mother was holding the door open and Kate was pushing Joey's purse and coat under Sam's arm.

"Traitors!"

"You can hate us in the morning," Constance promised as they passed by.

"Sam! Sam, please ..."

"Begging right now isn't going to help. I recall begging you this afternoon."

"Is that what this is about? Is this some sort of punishment for my not letting you inside?"

He dumped her unceremoniously into the passenger seat of his luxury sports car. When he looked down at her, his gaze was so hot she was surprised she didn't hear the snow sizzle.

"Oh no, Josephine. I have much better ways of punishing you. Ways that'll make you beg for more than mercy."

She swallowed past the desire that plunged down into the center of her body. She sat back and tried to decide if she should make a run for it. If her legs would hold her up long enough to run for the house.

Then he was climbing in and revving his car to life. "Buckle up, sweetheart."

Without another word, he drove her into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sam cast a quick glance Joey's way as he pulled into his garage. She sat as silent and still as stone. She was still angry. No, she was more than angry. She was livid about being kidnapped. Well, she'd just have to deal with it for a few minutes while he explained his rash actions.

Silently, he switched off the car and climbed out. When he reached her door, she already had one foot on the cold concrete. He noticed she was very careful not to let any part of her touch him as she climbed out.

Letting out an exasperated breath, he went to the door and unlocked it. She waited until he'd turned the kitchen lights on and was well clear of the entrance before she stepped inside.

"Let's go into the den. It'll be more comfortable."

She nodded once, briskly, and again gave him a wide berth as they walked into the other room. Once she was inside, he knelt down to spark the fire.

"A romantic setting isn't going to help you."

"I was thinking that you were probably cold, since I didn't put your coat on before we left."

"Oh." The single word was small, as if he'd chastised her.

Irritated with himself and the situation, he struggled out of the Santa wig and coat then laid the padding aside. The fire was a hot presence against the white T-shirt he wore, giving him a little comfort as he stared across the room at her.

"Look, Joey, I need you to try to listen to what I have to say."

"I don't seem to have a choice."

"No, I don't suppose you do." He raked his hand through his hair and tried to remember the speech he'd rehearsed. His mind was completely blank now, but he supposed

honesty was a damn good starting place. "I've wanted you since the day you came into my office."

Her eyes went owlsh at his admission and he gave her a half-smile.

"I know, pathetic, huh? But it's true. My God, I had a raging hard-on the entire time you were sitting there, looking at me with those gorgeous eyes of yours. It was all I could do not to drag you onto the desk and have my way with you."

"But I ... it's not possible."

He watched her, saw the disbelief seep into her face. "Oh, it's possible, all right. Every time I'm around you, my body goes into this wild state of arousal. I've nearly embarrassed myself in front of you so many times I've lost count."

She cocked her head, looking completely confused. "No. There's just no way."

"No way what? No way I could want you so badly that I ache every second of every day? No way that I could need you so desperately that I'd do something as stupid as try to seduce you on-line? Well, it's true."

"You did that because you wanted me?"

"Yes, I did. I didn't know any other way to convince you that you are the most desirable woman I've ever seen in my entire life. I wanted to tell you. I wanted to ask you out, to, I don't know, woo you somehow. But you had these damned perverse ideas about who I should be attracted to. Not to mention, you had a chip on your shoulder because I'm your boss." He chanced a step forward and was relieved when she didn't skitter away. "Then there's this crazy idea that you have about your not being attractive."

She shook her head slightly and licked her lips. "I -- huh?"

"Is it because you're not what everyone tells you is the 'perfect woman'? Because I can tell you right now, Josephine, you are as perfect as they come."

Her soft features fell into stunned lines. "Perfect?"

"Yeah, perfect. You have all these dangerous curves, all these dips and arches, and my hands itch all the damn time just thinking about them. And your voice ... good Lord, your voice could make a saint turn to sin. You have this beautiful skin, smooth with just a hint of copper in it. I suppose you have to have some Spanish blood somewhere in your background, because your eyes, the way they slant just slightly, they make me want to fall on my knees whenever you look at me." He dared to let his fingertips scrape across her knuckles. She pulled back, but she didn't flinch. "You're perfect, Josephine. Perfect for me. The rest of the world might not see you. They might only see Dr. Joey. But I see Josephine. I see the incredible woman that deserves to be treated like a goddess and loved until she can't breathe every time she crooks her finger."

She turned away from him then, slowly moving across the room toward the fireplace. He waited, giving her the time he knew she needed to grasp everything he'd just admitted to her. When she circled back around, he saw the confusion banking the anger in her gaze.

"You confuse me, Sam. I honestly don't know what to say to you, or how to react to this. Five minutes ago I wanted to skin you alive and stake you out in the snow. Now ..." Her words trailed away as she shrugged. "Do you know I was twisted into knots because of you? Well, because of both of you. I thought I was having an on-line affair with this stranger, someone I didn't know, someone who didn't know me. I said and I did things with him -- you that I would've never said or done with anyone I knew."

"Do you think I do things like that all the time? I've never even considered it before. But with you, it was different. I wanted to make love with you, however I could. There's no reason to be embarrassed, sweetheart. You have plenty to blackmail me with, too."

She nodded slowly, her eyes slipping over to stare at the tree they'd decorated together. "Then there was you, here, in real life. Sam Winters, the man that was always there. I don't suppose all of those run-ins were just coincidences."

He'd promised not to hold back with her, so he didn't even think to lie. "No, they weren't. Just the day that you helped me shop for the Christmas decorations."

"So you planned and plotted, and I was the mouse running through your maze."

He took an involuntary step forward, fear twining up from his stomach to wrap around his throat. "It wasn't like that, Joey. I swear it wasn't. It was more like a starving man stalking a deer. It wasn't about using you or amusing myself at your expense. I would never do that. I *could* never do that."

She eyed him for a long moment, her face nearly unreadable. Finally, she picked up the red jacket he'd laid aside. "What were you hoping this would accomplish, Sam? What was this about?"

She shook it at him slightly, and only when there was a dull thud on the floor did she look down at it. Her eyebrows came together and she stared at the small velvet box that had bounced at her feet. When she lifted her eyes to his, he saw the question there and felt a shaft of panic. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. This wasn't how he'd planned it. But then, nothing had gone as he'd figured from the day he'd met her.

He watched with anxious eyes as she leaned down and picked the small box up. She stared at it as if it might lash out and bite her.

"What ... what is this?" she asked softly.

He closed his eyes for a second, gathering himself as best he could. He'd already jumped into the deep end. Might as well drown in the undercurrents, too.

"That's your Christmas gift. I bought something for everyone in your family. This one is yours."

She stared at him, as if she were terrified to look back down at what she held. "What's in here?"

"I think you already know."

She shook her head at him, backing away slowly. "No, no, you weren't."

He felt a shaft of determination bolt through his blood. He wasn't going to let her walk away. He couldn't let her deny him or herself, or deprive either of them of their future together.

"Yes, yes, I was. I wanted to. I told you I want you, and not just in my bed. I want you in my life." He took two strides forward until they were nearly nose to nose. "I love you, Dr. Josephine Bingham. I want you to live here with me, I want you to fix this house with me -- I want you to be with me. Whether you believe it right now or not, I love you. I will always love you."

He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but tears weren't anywhere on the list. When he saw them well in her eyes, he gathered her in his arms and began carefully rocking her back and forth.

"Oh, no, sweetheart, don't do that. Please, you're killing me. I didn't mean to make you cry."

Her answer was muffled in his shirt, the words garbled with tears and cotton. He didn't want to let her go, but he knew if he wanted to hear what she had to say he'd have to pull back. He reluctantly eased her away a few precious inches. When he looked down at her he saw that she was holding the ring box against her heart.

"Sam, I can't believe you would do this. I can't believe it." She hiccupped in a sob and her bottom lip trembled gently. "I should hate you, you know. I should slap you and tell you to leave me alone. I should leave this house and never speak to you again. I should threaten you with a lawsuit and force you to leave me alone at the station."

He ran a tender hand over her hair, terror and hope waging a war in his gut. "Yes, you probably should do all of that."

"But ... but I won't. I won't because I can't. I can't because I ... oh, God, I love you, too. Today, when I met LonFog, I was going to tell him -- you, that I was going to stop our affair. I realized I didn't want to continue, not even another day, when I loved you -- Sam. I didn't think I'd ever get to have you, and now, now you did this."

His body sagged with relief as elation sparked through his blood. "You love me? Me, Sam?"

"Yes, yes, you, Sam." She gave a small, watery laugh. "I thought I was crazy, falling in love with you. You're so damn handsome, so smart, just everything a man should be. I can't believe that you'd even give me a second glance."

He ran his fingertips down her cheek, erasing the lines of her tears. "Second, third, hell, a hundredth glance. You are everything I want, Josephine. Everything."

To prove it he kissed her, a gentle graze of lips against lips. He felt her sigh as her body melted slowly into his. His arms enclosed her carefully, pulling her further into him as he deepened the kiss. The current was expected and undeniable, coursing through him with mercurial speed.

Before he took the next step, he eased their kiss, gently pulling back to stare down at her. He didn't want to stop, God knew he didn't, but he had to be sure. He had to be absolutely certain that what he'd heard was what she meant. He didn't want either of them regretting tonight.

"Are you sure, Josephine? Are you sure you could love a screw-up like me?"

Her eyes, soft and genuine, gazed back. "Yeah, you screwed up, Sam. But I can think of one really good way you can apologize."

His body temperature shot up to full scorching as he watched her. With his eyes still on hers, he took the ring box from her fingers and slowly flipped the top up.

"Marry me, Josephine. Make me the luckiest man in the universe. I promise I'll spend the rest of my life making you smile ... and scream, in a very good way."

Her gaze didn't waver from his, not even to glance down at the princess cut sapphire that matched her eyes perfectly. He knew then that it wouldn't have mattered if he'd presented her with a Cracker Jack Box ring.

"With a promise like that, how can a girl say no?"

He lifted her hand, slid the ring in place, and tossed the empty box aside. "Let me get started on that right now, doctor."

She gasped when he yanked her completely against him. He lifted an eyebrow and sent her a lopsided smile. Ever so slowly, he ground his rigid cock against her, licking his lips when her eyes went hazy.

"Let me show you exactly what I've been dreaming about," he whispered.

He slammed his mouth on hers, unable to stop the bone crushing desire that rode in his blood. He growled low in his throat when she met him thrust for thrust, her tongue mating with his in a wild dance. He'd wanted to go slow, to savor the sensations, but he couldn't seem to be able to stop himself. When it came to his Josephine, she stripped him of all control.

Her hands moved around his waist, her nails scraping him through the thin material of his T-shirt. His fingers snaked up to her hair, plucking at the pins that held it in place. His hands were just delving in when her palms cupped his bottom. She pushed herself against him as she pulled his pelvis against hers.

"Oh, hell, Josephine, you're going to kill me before I even start."

She was grinning wickedly when he captured her lips again. His tongue delved between her lips, tasting her intoxicating flavor. It was easy to lose himself in her, to fall down into oblivion. And he knew now that she would be there with him, holding on as they tumbled.

He wanted to touch her, to feel her naked flesh underneath his fingertips. He'd waited his entire life to experience this, and he hadn't even known he'd been waiting. His hands reached around her to find the zipper of her dress. The sound of the metal teeth scraping

open was an erotic echo through the room. She moved back a nearly unbearable half-inch, just enough so that the burgundy velvet pooled at her feet. When she would have come back against him, he palmed her shoulders and held her still.

He looked at her, just looked at the exquisite expanse of flesh barely covered by a matching sin-red lingerie set and black thigh highs that made him drool. She was even more beautiful than he'd imagined. Words simply failed him in that moment. When he looked back at her face, he found her looking awkward and blushing. He trailed his hand up her throat and across her jaw.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever had the privilege to fantasize about."

She sent him a smile, a small one at first, then watched as it bloomed across her face. He leaned down and took her mouth gently with his.

She moaned against his lips, her fingers scraping around his waist as they worked at the fly of his pants. He wasted no time in helping to pull his pants down, his restless hands moving to fill themselves with her satin covered breasts. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough, and he thanked God for front-hook bras as he popped the clasp. The moment her flesh was free, he cupped the soft globes. Her nipples pressed against his palms, teasing him mercilessly with their tautness. He couldn't resist the temptation to taste her. He pulled his mouth from hers, nipping his way from her lips to the hardened peaks. She writhed against him, gasping when he took one tip between his teeth.

He groaned and sucked gently, rolling the pebbled flesh with his tongue. Her hips slapped into him, pressing erotically into his confined cock. Her fingers began a quick trip down his spine, sliding her fingers under the elastic band of his underwear. He shifted his weight as they struggled down his boxers. His cock stuck straight out, pushing against the warm material of her panties.

"You're too overdressed," he rasped.

She groaned a reply that he took as agreement. He shimmied the satin off her hips, stepped fully into her the moment they hit the carpet. He felt her moist curls against his cock and came precariously close to slipping into her right there. He attacked her mouth, putting all of his passion into that one act of passion. She reciprocated, tangled and sparring with his tongue as he swung her up in his arms.

He only carried her a few feet. He didn't think he could make it to the bedroom. When he reached the spot in front of the fireplace, he slowly laid her down. He took a long moment to appreciate the way the echoes of the flames danced across her skin. His shaft jerked at the sight, his balls tightening in anticipation. When he didn't immediately lie down with her, she lifted a hand to him.

"Just a second. A really quick second."

He pulled pillows down from the couch and grabbed the foil packet from his wallet. A high school habit he was never more thankful that he'd never broken. He stepped back to

her and leaned down, gently placing a stuffed cushion underneath her head. Only when he was sure she was comfortable did he join her, covering her body with his own.

The sensation of her skin against his was like sheer heaven. She fit perfectly, all those lush curves locking into him like a jigsaw puzzle. She was soft, delicate, smooth, and hot. Perfection.

“Sam ...”

His name was a sigh on her lips. Nothing could have been more provocative.

He kissed her again, long torturous tastes that filled him and left him empty at the same time. His mouth slid from hers to travel down her throat, licking at the delicious skin. She writhed underneath him, her naked body slithering in all the right places. His body nearly imploded with the feelings she was evoking.

He wanted to taste her, all of her, more than he thought he wanted his next breath. He made his way further down, pausing at her breasts. His lips and teeth took turns tormenting each nipple, every fiber of his body humming as her body bowed into him. He listened as she made deep, cat-like noises, reveling in the sounds as he continued his downward path.

When he reached her swollen lips, he took a moment to gently lave the tender flesh of her thighs. She jerked underneath him, gasping as her fingers dug into his hair. He didn't need any more coaxing. His tongue snaked out to lick her wet slit, working into her hot cavern with confident strokes.

He felt her tighten around him, continued to drive her up as she groaned in long, broken breaths. Gently, he lifted her legs, draping them over his shoulders so he could reach every part of her. He speared in and out as he slid his hands up her body. When he found the hard peaks of her breasts, he pulled at them at the same time he flicked across her clit.

She came up off the floor in a quick, desperate move. He held onto her as she lost control, licking and brushing against the rigid nub.

“Sam ... Sam ... Sam!”

She chanted his name, each time louder than the last. Then she was keening, her voice echoing through the room as she spasmed against his mouth and hands. He worked her as she came, made sure she held onto her orgasm while her hips pressed against him.

Several moments later he kissed her stomach as his fingertips stroked the delicate flesh of her breasts. There was a wild kind of pride in knowing he'd sent her into oblivion. He'd wanted -- no, he'd needed her to find a deep pleasure at his hands.

“You're incredible,” she breathed.

He chuckled softly and propped himself over her. “So are you.”

“How do you know?”

He wasn't sure if it was a tease or a challenge. A split second later he knew.

Joey flipped him over and slid off his body, holding her hand out for his. He gave her a wicked looking grin and stood, tangling his fingers with hers. She slowly led him up the stairs, leading him to the king-sized bed she'd thought about so often. The moment they were in the door, she pulled him into her arms, kissing his shoulders and his chest as they walked to the thick mattress. Then they were tumbling, Sam below her cushioning her short fall.

She laid a soft kiss on his lips as she straddled him. He growled in the back of his throat as she placed her body on his. Smiling to herself, she proceeded to nibble along the column of his throat. He had a strong, deep taste, elemental and rich. She savored his skin, gently biting and kissing his skin. When she reached his nipple, she flicked her tongue across it, moaning happily when his hips rocked up. She felt his shaft nudge at her bottom and teased him by grazing against him. The electric reaction was immediate, speeding to her newly throbbing folds and radiating out.

She quickly moved down, determined to prolong their lovemaking. She tasted his ribs, his stomach, circled his belly button with her tongue. His hands delved into her hair, his fingers digging into her scalp.

"Josephine."

It was a plea and a blessing, and she felt it all the way down to her bones. She brought her mouth to his thick cock and slowly surrounded it with her lips. Sam's long hiss of delight filled the air as she took him into her mouth. He was hard and hot, molten satin over double edged steel, and was as heady as the rest of his flesh. She sucked gently, rising up before easing back down. He didn't push her as other men had, instead letting her set the pace as his hands stayed entwined in her hair. She was slow at first, then picked up the pace, the feel of his shaft and the sound of his ecstasy swirling through her blood to intoxicate her.

She protested when he finally pulled her up.

"No, sweetheart, I want to be inside you when I come."

Her heart skipped a racing beat at his words. He tenderly slid her underneath him again, fitting her securely in his arms. He stretched his hand out, smacking at the floor until he had the small packet in his fingers. He fumbled it up and she gave him a smile. He was protecting her in a way she'd forgotten to consider. Sam had a way of making her practical mind turn to complete mush.

"Let me."

Her palms molded down his ribs, smoothing down his moist skin. When she finally reached his arousal, she caressed the hard muscle with her fingertips for a bare moment.

"Josephine," he begged on a shaky laugh.

She knew his desperation because it was in her own. She quickly unrolled the condom over his cock with sure fingers. The moment he was covered, he lifted her hands away and pinned them over her head. His gaze found hers and held her prisoner.

“I love you, Josephine.”

The words glimmered all the way down her spine, spiraling like a miracle through her veins. He loved her. She could see it in his eyes, could feel it in his hands and body. There was no denying what he felt for her.

“I love you, too, Sam. I love you, too.”

He slid into her with frictionless effort, fusing their bodies in one easy movement. She gasped as he filled her, mindlessly lifting her hips for his thrust. He held himself still for an endless moment, as if he, too, understood what this moment meant.

Finally he lowered his mouth to hers, sealing their lips together as he began to move. He withdrew, filled her again, pulled away. His rhythm was strong and steady, an age-old pace that drew her up with shocking ease.

She dug her nails into his back, held onto him as continued to push her further and further up. His fingers trailed down her arms, brushing across the sides of her breasts before settling on her hips. She felt close, so close, as the fiery devil of orgasm speared her directly at the point of her need.

When he pulled away and didn't come back, she gave a soft cry.

“Shh, sweetheart, trust me. Trust me.”

She did. There was no question of that now. The hands at her hips nudged her around, bringing her to her stomach. When he lifted her bottom, she felt a gush of anticipation.

A moment later he was easing inside of her again, this time expanding her in a very different, and extremely sensual, way. She felt him hit her hidden erogenous spot and nearly came undone. He stroked into her, over and over, his palms still wrapped around her hips. She felt him slipping into her, slipping out, all the while her hard nipples grazing the comforter. He hit the spot again, then again, and she nearly sobbed with the sensation.

Before she could think, he was spinning her over again. She stared at him, confused, hot, tightened, and crazed. He looked to be in the same condition.

“I thought -- changed my mind -- want to see you when you fall apart.”

“Oh,” was all she could get out.

Then he was slipping into her, driving her mindless as he moved. She wrapped her legs around his waist, holding onto him like an anchor in the storm. The wild riot of explosions ricocheted through her, small pulses that built on top of each other. Then they collided, cohered, and burst into a blinding blaze that swallowed her.

There was a scream, one she thought could be hers as she found her release. She felt Sam above her, felt the muscles underneath her hands bunch and hold.

“Josephine ...”

Her name was a strangled roar in the air. She floated down, her muscles turned to water and her bones to rubber. She sighed as he came down to rest on top of her, enjoying his weight in the aftermath.

Sam gently nuzzled her cheek. "If we do this every night for the rest of our lives, I'll never get tired of making love with you."

"The rest of our lives?" She felt a wide smile spread across her lips. "I really like the sound of that."

He lifted his face and stared down at her, his eyes filled with so much love that she thought she might suffocate with it. He really had seen her, seen past the persona, seen past the snipping remarks, seen past what she'd wanted him to see. He'd found her, Josephine, and he loved what he'd found.

"I want to marry you as soon as I can. How does tomorrow sound? My parents will be in tomorrow, your family will all be together. We can find a judge, or a pastor, or whatever we need. Okay, so it won't be really legal until we have the license and the blood work, all that bureaucratic crap. But this will be for us, for our families. Marry me tomorrow."

As the clock on the mantel struck twelve, she shook her head. He looked crushed and confused until she laid a hand on his cheek.

"It's midnight, Sam. I'll marry you today."

He laughed, low and deep and full, and rolled to his side, bringing her with him. "You'll be the best Christmas present I've ever gotten."

"Um, just wait until our almost honeymoon tomorrow night."

At her promise he groaned, dropping a kiss on her lips. "I love you, Josephine Bingham."

"I love you, too, Sam Winters."

 THE END 

Flesa Black

Flesa Black is a married thirty-something mother of two. She lives near Atlanta, Georgia, where she is lucky enough to frequently enjoy Braves baseball games and tours of antebellum plantations and historic homes, including Margaret Mitchell's house. Flesa has always been a determined writer ever since she learned how to hold a pencil. She particularly enjoys romance genres and the freedom they give her to create interesting characters and intricate worlds. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading romance and science fiction novels, playing numerous board and card games, wandering in the woods and fishing. She is currently hard at work on her next book.

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