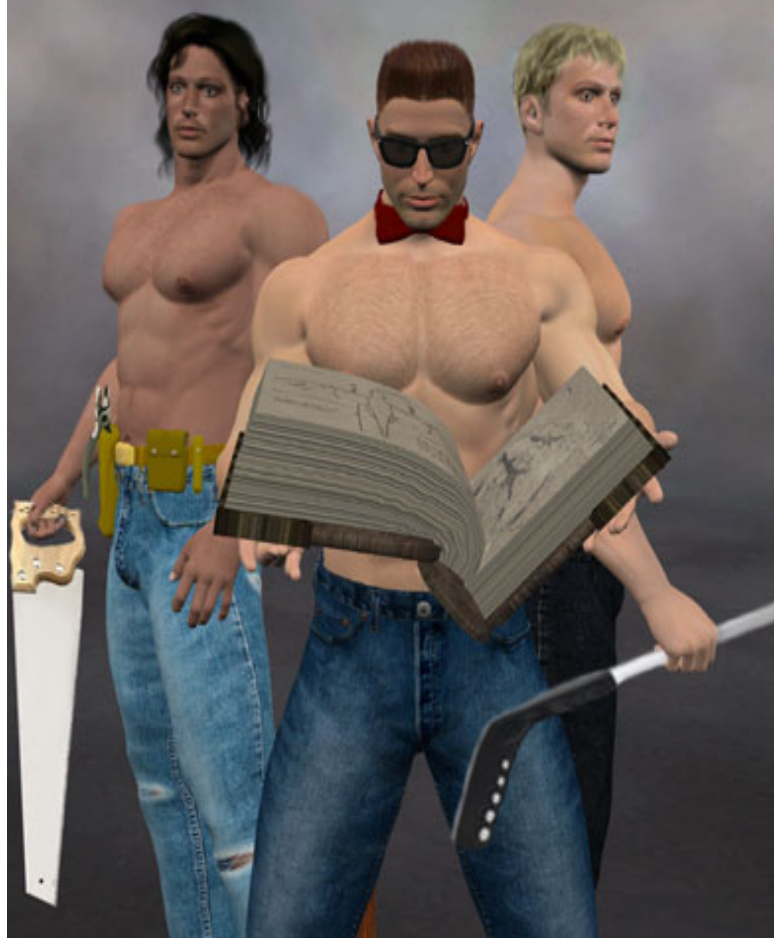


BEANTOWN HEAT

Jaxine Daniels



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Thanks to Donna, Melody, Lori and Candy—the mornin' coffee group who helped brainstorm, helped edit and just generally helped.

The Professor And Maryann

Chapter One

On her way into the Boston College registrar's office, Maryann Lithgow slowed to savor the warmth, unusual even for the end of May. Avoidance behavior, probably. This was a fate worse than death.

Okay, so that might be a bit overly dramatic. But she could have had the coveted business degree a year ago had she forced herself as she did now. With gritted teeth, she handed the registrar her payment for the one remaining class that stood between her and the piece of paper that would get her the promotion and a move to corporate. The class that she'd been putting off for two years.

The class pissed her off. Why in God's name did a person getting a business degree need to know how to write fiction? Maryann sure as hell knew how to *sell* books. She didn't need to know how to *write* them!

Fiction Writing 101. Michael Fraser's favorite class. Second favorite, actually—but a close second—to Mythology. He leaned back in his chair, unbuttoned his suit coat, and closed his eyes.

Truth be told, he had a love-hate relationship with this class. Frustration when he failed to inspire the students to better writing, elation when they dug deep inside and poured themselves out. Part of the challenge was proving trustworthy to look inside these student's souls.

He pulled off his glasses and pinched his nose, allowing the tension to dissipate.

The first night of class was never boring. It took a good half hour to get past the nerves, even now. Tonight had been no exception. Twenty-two faces showing a variety of expression - from eager anticipation—the ditzzy chick in the front row—to disdain - the skeptic in the back row. Chicky gave off please-take-me-to-bed vibes while Ms. Texas in the back row couldn't get out of there fast enough when ten o'clock came.

A motherly woman sat halfway back, taking furious notes, admitting after class that she was working on her first romance novel. Michael had managed a polite smile and wished her luck.

His thoughts returned to—he swung forward in his chair and put his glasses back on, and searched the class list for her name—Ms. Lithgow. Likely close

to his age, early thirties, her accent made him think of longhorns and wagon trains. She was kind of cute, though not strikingly attractive. Shoulder-length auburn hair and maybe green eyes. She might be pretty if she smiled. So far, no evidence of even a smirk.

No matter. Michael scooped his papers into their file folder and shuffled the pile into his briefcase. Before he could escape, Darcy Douglas stuck her head into the room.

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself."

"Class okay?" she asked, stepping inside.

"Yup, you?"

"I sometimes wonder if I turn into the wicked witch of the west when I get into my classroom."

"Nah, I've seen you there. It's not you. It's chemistry. The subject inspires fear."

"Good. I was scared."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

Darcy slid over to where he sat and ruffled his hair. "You up for beer and jazz?" Her voice lowered to full-on flirt.

"Why? You after a musician now?"

A hurt pout took up residence on her perfect face. "Can't a girl just enjoy an evening with a friend?"

"Sure, Darc, but you can't." At her indignant huff, he got to his feet and put his arm around her. "Lead the way, darlin'," he said, grinning at his silly accent.

The first few classes confirmed Maryann's suspicions. Professor Jamison, who was thirty-something going on eighty, with his wire-frame glasses and English countryside suits, even in summer, was a total loser. The guy was so shy he couldn't even maintain eye contact. In an environment where words were the vehicles for thoughts and emotions, Maryann thought the word 'nerd' didn't even do him justice. The only time he even remotely resembled a living being was when he read to the class.

"The book has many good examples of good fiction writing, so I thought I'd just share some poetry..."

Gag!

And after three classes, if she had to hear him go on about choosing words loaded with feeling, using all the senses, provoking emotion in your reader, she thought she might consider murder. *Was there a word, Professor Plod-Along, for killing your teacher? Instructorcide?*

The thing that started her really wondering though, was the effect that Old-Before-His-Time had on the other female students. What were they thinking? Probably nothing. They were barely past infatuation with the Back Street Boys. But their behind-the-hand whispers drove her to reconsider. Was there anything at all attractive about the man? At least she could evaluate that as he prattled on about crisis, resolution and whatnot.

Yada, yada, yada.

Michael Jamison — Dr. Jamison — wasn't

unattractive. He just wasn't anything special. His dark hair was cropped close, not unlike most of the guys in the class. While other professors dressed casually, though, Dr. Jamison looked like he'd just stepped out of *Wuthering Heights*. The movie, not the book.

He wore British-looking suits and ties that likely cost a fortune but somehow didn't fit on a college campus in the new millennium. They were all the same color, brown, tan, browner. At least they fit him well, despite the obvious fact that the man wasn't the type to hang out at Gold's Gym.

His voice flowed smooth like satin. In another setting it would be seductive. But, here, the classroom, it was just quiet enough that one didn't dare stop listening.

And while most other professors encouraged their students to call them by their first name, Dr. Jamison was never addressed so. He didn't insist on being addressed more formally, but no one made the jump to familiarity with him.

Maryann jabbed the point of her pen against her note pad as Michael—ha, take that, *Dr.* Jamison—launched into a discourse about motivating your characters internal emotions and how words have different connotations depending on a character's back story.

"Anyone have any examples of words that might provoke emotion dependent on how a character grew up?"

Miss Sitting-in-the-Front-Row-I-Totally-Want-to-

Please threw her hand dramatically into the air. "How about 'hillbilly', Dr. Jamison?"

I'll do anything for you, Dr. Jamison. Please smile at me Dr. Jamison. Take me home and make LUV to me, Dr. Jamison. Could she be any more obvious?

Jamison muttered his approval and several others threw out answers as well. Maryann nudged her sleeve up so she could peek at her watch. Ten more minutes.

"How about 'fat'?" Michael was saying. "I was a fat little kid," He leaned against the edge of his desk, crossing his arms, smiling. He sure as hell wasn't fat now. "It wasn't until I got to college that I lost my baby fat. That's probably why I love books so much. They were my friends growing up."

Whoa. Way more information than Maryann wanted. Nine minutes and counting...

"The point is that someone making fat kid comments would strike a chord in me that it wouldn't in someone that never had a weight problem."

Michael pushed off from his perch and rubbed his hands together.

"So, in conclusion, remember to choose words carefully. Use words that provoke emotion. Say more than you're saying. But you've heard that before. For next week, pick one of the writing assignments from this chapter and read the chapter on character development."

Yada, yada, yada.

Chapter Two

Michael lost his train of thought, derailed actually. He smiled to himself, focused on a spot on the floor. When he couldn't grab it back, he looked up.

"Sorry, folks, what was I saying?"

The group laughed with him.

She sat near the back of the room. She wasn't smiling. Tough case. She wasn't even paying attention.

But he was. Obviously, he wasn't paying attention to what he was saying any more than she was, but he couldn't help paying attention to her.

Tonight she wore a light green sleeveless sweater thing. Whatever. But the color set off her eyes in a way that made him want to lay her down in a soft blanket of grass and...

Damn, he needed to get his act together. Ideally, he hadn't been caught staring. Back to the subject. Right.

Clustering. Freewriting anything that came to mind in one and two word bubbles. As he talked, he freewrote in his head.

Unbuttoning her sweater.

Hands on her breasts.

His tongue bringing her nipples to hard peaks.

Cupping her round bottom.

Pulling her tight against him.

Whoa. Knock that shit off, Michael. Or everyone in the room would know what he was thinking about.

He slid off the edge of the desk and turned toward the board. There he scribbled bubbles with plot ideas for Moby Dick.

Finally, on a roll, it became easier to just teach. He chided himself for letting his lower brain take him where he daren't go.

Once class was over, his upper brain considered Maryann Lithgow. It wasn't just that he wanted to screw her. She was kinda cute. She was so animated, without trying to be. Likely, she didn't even see it in herself. She was the last one to sit and the first to get up when they took a break. Constant motion, as if the room couldn't quite hold her.

She gave the impression that she was none too impressed with this class either. Like she didn't have time for it. It was probably something she was forced to take. It would be interesting to see how she did in the class.

"So, Bosslady, how was the professor last night?" Shelly, Maryann's intrepid assistant, bounced into the office. As usual, she was dressed in a skirt that just barely covered her crotch, with killer heels.

"Provocative," Maryann answered blandly.

"Really?"

"No."

"I'll bet I could provoke him." Shelly perched on the edge of Maryann's desk, stretching one leg out, wiggling her foot.

"I doubt it."

Shelly purred. "He is a guy, isn't he?"

Maryann had work to do and the dregs of the headache she'd woken up with. "Not really."

Shelly shrugged, clearly getting the message and sashayed into the hallway. At the door, she turned, "I still bet I could provoke him."

Maryann tossed the nearest pencil at her. "You could provoke anyone. Close the door behind you."

For the next two hours, Maryann puzzled over inventory numbers, tossing back another dose of ibuprofen with a slug of coffee. When the phone rang—two quick rings, an internal call—she leaned back and sighed.

"Yes."

"I think you need to go look at the security camera, Bosslady." Shelly was whispering. "You may reconsider your earlier statement."

"What?"

"Just go look. Now!"

Whatever.

Maryann pushed out of her chair and went across the hall to the security office. Why they needed an entire office for one fancy VCR and TV was beyond her. She flipped off the light, so she could make out

the image on the screen better.

"And?" She said to Shelly's back, who was moving like molasses to ring out her customer. "Oh!" Realization sucked the breath from her lungs.

There in the middle of the screen was a completely different version of Dr. Jamison, one that she'd never have guessed existed. Same short dark hair, same wire-frame glasses. But this Dr. Jamison was wearing jeans and a black BC College T-shirt that fit like a glove. Jeans? His biceps rippled as he reached for his credit card and again when he slid his wallet into his back pocket. It must have been the shirt and the name on the credit card that caught Shelly's attention.

"Holy shit," was about all Maryann could say.

This imposter smiled—who knew he had a hint of dimples?—and spoke to Shelly, wearing a flirty look. Then he picked up his books and left the store.

Maryann still stood mesmerized, when Shelly burst into the room.

"That's Dr. Jamison, Boss? He's good enough to eat."

Maryann turned, looking for words to reply.

"I can't believe that you never mentioned his blue eyes. Bedroom eyes."

"Oh, please, Shelly. Get over it. He's not anything to write home about." At least the man who preached about sight, sound, smell, touch and taste wasn't. And Shelly was acting like Miss Teenybopper-Pick-Me in the front of the classroom. Maryann turned and stalked from the room.

"Sorry to disagree, Ms. Lithgow, but that is one

studly professor. I wouldn't throw him out of bed for..."

Maryann slammed her office door on the thought.

Maryann took a seat along with the other students. The room was eerily quiet. Dr. Jamison sat with his head bowed, his glasses perched on the top of his head. He didn't say a word, didn't look up.

If he was trying to be dramatic, it was working.
And then he spoke, still not looking up.

*Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss her in the weeping of the rain;
I want her at the shrinking of the tide;
The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year's bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide*

*There are a hundred places where I fear to go,
—so with her memory they brim
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell her foot or shone her face
I say, "There is no memory of her here!"
And so stand stricken, so remembering her!*

Silence. And then he looked up. Just for an instant. Shelly was right, he did have gorgeous blue eyes.

"My apologies to Edna St. Vincent Millay for

changing genders." He stood and walked around his desk. "So? Emotion?"

The class sat mute for a few moments, even the guys shaking off the effect of the words.

Maryann, not given to bouts of sentimentality forced the lump from her throat. She couldn't deny the effect of the words. But...

"Ms. Lithgow?"

"It wasn't just the words, though, Mi...Dr. Jamison. It was your delivery."

"Thank you."

Now that she actually had those blue eyes smiling at her, she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. When he again lowered his gaze, though, Maryann was almost disappointed. Damn it.

"You're welcome, but it's cheating."

"Is it?" Again his eyes flashed at her.

"Yeah, it is."

He held her gaze for a moment more before looking away.

"Class? Was it cheating?"

Miss Hottie-Pants nearly jumped out of her chair.

"No, Professor, it wasn't cheating. If the emotion weren't there in the words..."

"Exactly." He cut her off.

"Convinced, Ms. Lithgow?"

When she didn't answer, Michael moved into the lecture without allowing Maryann any semblance of saving face.

Maryann twisted the deadbolt, dropped her book bag on the floor and flopped on the couch, all without turning on the lights.

A “C” – he’d given her a fucking “C” – along with his now familiar scrawl in red ink across the top. “Sight, sound, smell, touch, taste.”

She couldn’t remember ever getting anything lower than a B+. Not even in junior high. And the last class she would ever take, she’d be lucky to pull a “B.” “B” for “Bastard.”

Okay, so she was a numbers person, a practical person. Art? Please. She couldn’t even make a decision on what to put on the walls of her apartment. She was too jumpy, too noncommittal. Decorating would be pointless. She’d just want to change it next week.

The only thing she’d committed to in her whole life was being the best at what she did. And now that was circling the drain. “B” was for Michael the Bastard.

He refused to cut her any slack. Her smarts were analytical, not artsy-fartsy. Deliver her from evil! Like God cared. If you needed something done, do it yourself. She’d find a way to deliver herself from the devil.

Chapter Three

Shelly was already in when Maryann dragged herself to work. At Shelly's concerned look, Maryann simply pulled the offending writing assignment from her bag and held it up.

"Ewww."

Maryann kept walking. Once in her office she dropped the paper on her desk and dissolved into her chair.

"So the studly professor isn't easily impressed?"

"Not by me."

"Hey, kiddo, don't take it personally. I'll bet you could impress him plenty, given the opportunity. I mean, so you're not a great writer. So what?"

"So? It only means that my 4.0 GPA is no more."

"Oh, who cares anyway? You're not trying to get into Harvard or into Gamma Phi Beta or anything. GPA's are for teenyboppers and snobs anyway."

"Thanks, I think."

Shelly left and returned with a large latte and an obscenely over-sized muffin. Comfort food. Just what Maryann needed.

Maryann spent the morning avoiding work,

playing spider solitaire, all the while nursing her muffin, her latte and her wounded ego. With effort, she pushed herself out of her chair and out into the store.

Double-shot latte in hand, Michael moved into the bookstore. Murphy's Law was alive and well, it was Monday and there, across the room was his balky student. Not only that, but she wore a name tag that identified her as 'store manager.'

He could turn around and go home, avoid her like the plague, or he could walk over and confront her. Both choices sucked. So, while she was turned the other direction, Michael sauntered over to the history section.

Maryann pointed out books on the Federalist papers, smiling at the paunchy older gentleman who needed directions. He was overjoyed. For a moment, Maryann wondered if there was any section of the store that overjoyed her. Maybe the business section, economics. Her favorite section, but not orgasmic.

She turned again at the throat clearing behind her, ready to help the next customer.

"Michael." It came out in a whoosh, before she could correct herself. "Professor."

"Ms. Lithgow."

"Maryann," she corrected. "Something I can help you find?"

Her insides fluttered uncomfortably.

He smiled cordially. "No, thank you. But you can tell me why you hate my class."

Maryann choked on the wad of air she sucked in. She sputtered, then laughed.

"Direct, aren't we?" she said, still laughing.

"It's Monday," he said flatly, as if that would explain it. "Why do you hate my class, Ms.—Maryann?"

She felt the color crawl up her face and searched for a way to answer the question, suddenly unwilling to offend him.

Up close, he was amazing. Maryann was tempted to jog down the row of books to see if he was less than amazing from a distance. Sitting in the back of his classroom, she'd obviously missed something. Sudden awareness ambushed her.

"I don't hate your class."

"Really."

"Yes, um, no. I just hate failure."

Michael was speechless. Unusual, but true. The way she stood, spine erect, head high, confident yet vulnerable, determination written all over her face... she wore a lemony perfume... distraction. He shook himself back into the conversation.

"And why would you fail?"

Her eyebrows shot up and her lips twitched. "Because I haven't an artistic cell in my body."

"Taking the class, then, why?"

"Simple. To get a piece of paper that will get me the hell outta here."

"So you can go back to Texas?" He dragged the

word out, too late realizing that he sounded like he was from Mississippi, not the longhorn state.

"Cute."

"Sorry."

"The only good thing about being from Tay-yex-sus, as you say it, is that you can get away with saying y'all. I have no intention of ever going back."

"Can I buy you a latte?" *Danger, Will Robinson.*

"What?"

"C'mon, I'll buy you a latte and we can maybe find another reason for you to not fail my course."

He hadn't intended that to sound as suggestive as it did. The look on her face was priceless.

Maryann couldn't find her voice. The sheepish expression on his face told her that the offer hadn't come out the way he meant it. He was so obviously embarrassed by the implication. His blue eyes darted around, and the professor regressed again into shyness.

For an instant she was tempted to say yes. But then she saw herself acting like a ninny in class and melting in a puddle when he looked her way. Repugnant. Ridiculous.

"Sorry, Professor. I'm afraid I have a lot of work to do. Thanks for the offer, but I guess I'll just have to muddle through the best I can."

Wow, that sounded totally bitchy. But it was said and done, so Maryann turned on her heel and headed for her office.

Michael left the store wondering if he were grinning like an idiot. God! She hadn't said yes to

coffee — which was probably better anyway — but she had finally smiled. And her smile was worth the wait.

After lunch, Shelly slid into the office and shut the door behind her. Mischief lit her face.

“I have a plan.”

That was never a good sign.

Heaving a sigh, closing the accounting software, Maryann turned in her chair to face her fiery friend.

“Do tell.”

“Well, I think you should go to his house and read him this.” With a flourish, Shelly produced a book from behind her back and laid it reverently on Maryann’s desk.

“Erotica? You want me to read him erotica?”

“Yup.” Shelly dramatically fell into a chair.

“Why?” But even as Shelly wound up to explain, Maryann felt a growing surge of excitement.

“Because it’s provocative. We can find the most outlandish, trashy story in here and you can re-type it so it looks like you wrote it. And then you can go to his house and read it to him. And if you wear a slinky black dress and lacy red undies, more’s the better.”

“That would be plagiarism...and it’s a totally ridiculous idea.”

“Well, not exactly since you wouldn’t turn it in as an assignment.” Shelly paused. “Besides, plagiarism would be the least of your worries. Sexual harassment might be a problem. But you wouldn’t be doing it to

bring your grade up. It would be strictly for revenge.” She waggled her eyebrows. “And for fun.”

“So you want me to go have sex with Michael Jamison.”

“No, I want you to go read to him. If sex is the result, who’d bitch about that? I’m tellin’ ya, Maryann, that is one hot professor.”

Michael swung through the administration building to satisfy his curiosity. Indeed, Maryann was not used to failing. She had a 4.0 GPA and had taken some pretty impressive math and economics classes. He was genuinely sorry that he would be the one to end her perfect record. In the greater scheme of things, it was inconsequential. But, he could definitely understand that it wasn’t trivial to her.

Maryann punched the pillow that was wadded at her back in an attempt to give it new life. She’d read three really raunchy stories and two that were, to say the least, provocative. If that was what Dr. Michael wanted, then this was surely good stuff.

Again, her little voice reminded her that the entire idea was preposterous.

The stories ranged from one by a woman who rambled on and on about loving to fuck to one that deliciously resembled a Julia Roberts chick flick that

she'd seen a dozen times. Only this story was much, much more seductive.

When the hero backed the heroine into the elevator, hit the stop button and began sucking the heroine's breasts, Maryann's own nipples tightened. When his hands cupped her bottom and pulled her hard against his erection, Maryann felt herself get wet. And, when he ripped off her panties and lifted her onto his cock, Maryann had to stop reading.

The next morning, as she poured her second cup of coffee, she picked up the book again. Of course she wasn't going through with it. But if she were, then, for the plan, she would stick with one of the raunchier stories. For one thing, guys got turned on by different things than women. Besides, the last thing she needed was to collapse on Michael's floor in an orgasmic heap. And if she read him that last story, that's exactly what would happen.

Just once in her life she'd like to have elevator sex like that. Hard and hot and frenzied. If she never saw the guy again, that was okay. Just to have that kind of sexual tension with a total stranger, the kind that wouldn't let up for a second until after he'd done time between her legs.

Maryann was almost shocked at the urgency those thoughts brought with them. Her fantasies had never been quite so...so...lewd before. Whether that was good or bad remained to be seen.

The idea of going to the professor's house and reading this stuff to him was utterly absurd. By her third cup of coffee, Maryann was ready to chuck the

plan. Not the book, but the plan. As soon as she got into the store this morning, she was going to pick up one of those book cover thingys so she could read on the subway. Now there was a provocative thought.

Every time Maryann saw Shelly on Thursday, Shelly grinned. At one point, she stuck her head in the office and asked which story Maryann had decided on.

"I'm not going to do it."

"Yes, you are. Tomorrow night."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." With that, she smiled and skipped out, her laughter echoing down the hallway.

As Maryann left for the day – on her way to class – Shelly got in a final zinger.

"Now, tonight at class, Boss lady, make sure that you don't think about how your professor looks underneath that stuffy suit. Concentrate on class. Have fun."

Maryann just held up her hand and waved as she left the store.

Don't think about pink elephants. Think about anything but pink elephants. And Michael's rippling biceps and his hands as he made some point or other. If Maryann didn't start paying attention and stop this line of thinking, she'd end up failing this class. Then she'd have to take it over again.

And that would be bad...why?

What was wrong with her? She was positively losing it. When he turned and began writing on the blackboard, her resolve melted. Holy shit. His ass was fine! Images flashed through her brain. Getting up and walking up there. Reaching around and smoothing her hands over his crotch. Feeling him get hard.

By the time class ended, not only was Maryann certain that she couldn't go through with Shelly's cockamamie plan, she was positive that she wanted to.

Friday dawned, dark and rainy. Maryann expected a lightning bolt to strike her dead sometime during the day. In a way, she'd welcome it. She was on her way to making a big mistake. And Shelly was pushing her out the door. Every few minutes, the phone would ring with another helpful hint from the peanut gallery. You weren't planning on wearing panty hose were you? Guys love garter belts. Pearls, you have to wear pearls. Which story are you going to read? Make sure you wear lip gloss. And on it went.

Chapter Four

Slinky black dress, pearls and thigh-high black hose in place, in addition to the lacy red undies and black heels, Maryann made her way up the walk to Michael Jamison's brownstone. She carried the carefully typed version of 'Please fuck me,' the raunchiest story in the bookstore.

As soon as her finger left the doorbell, Maryann froze. A stunt like this could get her thrown out of school, not to mention how completely humiliated she suddenly felt. As she waited for Michael to answer the door, she glanced at her car, measuring how long it would take to get there if she made the mad dash now. Seconds ticked by. Maybe he wasn't home. If only he weren't home. But his car was parked right in front of hers.

Just as she turned to make a getaway, the door swung open and there he stood.

Mr. Old-Before-His-Time had been working out! He wore gym shorts, a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off and a towel hung around his neck. He didn't wear his glasses.

A smile played around his lips. "Ms. Lithgow."

Cripes. What had she been thinking? Where the hell was the lightning when you needed it?

"Professor Jamison."

He said nothing, but Maryann watched him take in her appearance. When the silence became unbearable, she asked if she could come in.

"By all means," he answered, his eyes never leaving hers. His normal hesitance to make eye contact was gone. It was disconcerting.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Lithgow?"

Maryann followed him inside. He walked to the kitchen, all smooth-like, his muscles rippling as he moved. For an instant, she wondered if Michael Jamison were twins. Or maybe this was Jekyl's Hyde. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottled water, taking a long draw.

It was the most seductive move she'd ever seen. Water escaped down his chin, trickling down his chest, disappearing beneath the white cotton. Maryann cleared her throat and, in self-defense, looked away to survey the surroundings.

Nothing fancy, yet very neat. Everything had its place. She could see into the gently lit livingroom, decorated in dark browns and light blues. It was warm and inviting, but not in a Country Living sort of way

"Can I get you something. A beer? Water?" He peered inside. "I'm out of wine. Sorry."

"No. Nothing." Whose voice was that? It had come out in a croak.

"Well, then, please come into the living room." He

led the way. "Have a seat."

"No. You have a seat, Dr. Jamison. I have something I want to read to you."

He swiped his hand through his damp hair and sat on the couch. Several locks rebelled, falling back onto his forehead. Maryann nearly forgot why she was here. She nearly forgot who this man was. Professor Michael Jamison, Dr. Michael Jamison, completely disguised as a very hot *guy*.

She took a deep breath and unfolded the paper.

"Please fuck me," she read. As soon as those words came out of her mouth, she felt herself get wet. It hadn't happened when she read it yesterday or the day before. But here, now, and out loud, things were different. She'd intended to look at him as she read. But now, she couldn't peel her gaze from the paper that shook in her hands.

The only thing to do was to read on.

"Please suck my nipples till they're swollen and sore. I want to feel you hard against me..." On and on it went. What had been only a few paragraphs this morning now felt like *War and Peace*. The further she read, the more intense the ache inside her, the more her hands shook. By the end of the page, her carefully chosen lacy red panties were soaked.

"I...uh...wanted to see if I could get to your emotions," she said, her voice coming out in a whisper. Finally she looked at him.

His blue eyes blazed with challenge and pure desire. His lips curved in a slight smile, cutting his cheeks with dimples.

"You didn't write that, Maryann."

The way he said her first name distracted her for a moment from what he'd said.

She lifted her chin. "What makes you say that, *Michael*?"

"You don't write that well."

"Thanks a lot. But did the words grab your emotions?" This thing was going down hill fast. Her knees grew weak. She didn't dare sit.

"You were trying to reach my emotions with that piece? Really?"

Maryann was now the one who couldn't make eye contact. Michael rose from the couch and glided toward her. He stopped centimeters from her and took her hand. She gasped when he placed it on his hard and ready cock.

"Look at me." His voice was easy, velvet.

Reluctantly, she brought her gaze up to his. It burned with primal fire.

"Is this the reaction you were looking for? It's not very emotional, I assure you."

He removed her hand from his crotch, bringing it to his lips. He kissed her palm and ran his tongue to her wrist.

"In order to touch the emotions, Ms. Lithgow, you need the five senses. You know the ones. Sight..." He ran his tongue along the base of her thumb.

"Sound." Up her index finger

"Smell." Along her middle finger.

"Touch." Her ring finger.

"And, taste." Now he pulled her pinky into his

mouth, his eyes flaring. He sucked for an instant before releasing her hand.

"Just because you can fuck, Ms. Lithgow, doesn't mean you can write."

"Now, Maryann, if you want to learn about the five senses, sexual harassment notwithstanding, come back here tomorrow evening about this same time and we'll...talk."

That said, he crushed her up against the foyer wall, his body hard against hers. He reached behind her, pulling her hips tight against him, his erection pressed into her stomach. His lips closed on hers. His tongue teasing.

And then he pulled back enough to look at her.

"That is, unless those really were your words and you do want me to fuck you right here, right now. But then, you wouldn't get to learn about the senses, would you?"

Michael took a step back. Maryann nearly slid to the floor without his weight to hold her against the wall. He reached for the doorknob.

"Good night, Ms. Lithgow."

"...You want me to fuck you right here..." Maryann's whole body trembled as she maneuvered the streets to her house. What had become of the mild-mannered, shy man who taught her writing class? She'd gone there to show him - why had she gone there? Now she struggled to even drive home, wet

and humming with desire.

"Come back here tomorrow evening..." No way in hell was she going to do that! Making a fool of oneself once was quite enough.

Yet, she couldn't quite shake the enticement of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

After a hellish night—one in which Maryann felt like she was being torn in two, by humiliation on the one hand and by desire on the other—she almost didn't turn on the lights when she entered her office. It would be nice to just sit in the dark, like a mushroom.

If she'd done that, though she'd have missed the single red rose waiting on her desk, with a note attached. Warmth spread through her as she pulled the small envelope from the clip with hands that shook.

"Ms. Lithgow. I apologize for my lack of discretion last evening. I'm afraid I was thinking with the wrong brain. I hope you'll consider postponing our meeting until after your class is over rather than canceling it altogether. I look forward to hearing from you then."

Maryann tried to convince her quivering knees that it was relief, rather than profound disappointment that sent her reaching for her chair. She sank down with a sigh, wishing again that she hadn't gone there last night, and excited at the prospect of doing so again. She mentally calculated. Seven weeks.

Her fingers tingled as she remembered him pulling

each one into his mouth. His eyes had sparkled with playfulness and his whole body had oozed heat. She ached at the thought. For an instant, her hand slid to her crotch, but then she shook herself.

Now there was a fine career move—get caught pleasuring herself in her office. Good grief! What had gotten into her?

Well it had to stop! She couldn't spend the next seven weeks on the verge of losing control. And she'd be damned if she'd become a babbling idiot in class. The entire episode was best forgotten.

She spent the day distracted. Every longing glance toward the rose brought her new humiliation and new longing. And if Shelly pestered her once more about the details of last night, she might fire her!

The next class was excruciating. Maryann snuck into the classroom surrounded by others and slunk into a seat in the back row. Like that would help.

But maybe it had, because the one and only time Michael even glanced in her direction, his gaze slid by without hesitation. He either possessed acutely good manners, not wanting to make her feel embarrassed, or, he had so blown off Friday night as to not be at all affected by it. Maryann wasn't sure which she preferred.

She reminded herself that she was resolutely putting it all behind her. Damn it. But even amidst her resolve, she longed for a look, one from eyes so

blue you could drown in them, one that said he remembered, that he wanted her, that the wait was driving him insane. God, she sounded like some romance novel full of clichés and ripped bodices.

Please, just one look.

Michael followed her into her dreams. They were in the classroom, but he wore faded jeans and a white tank top that accented his bronze skin. His biceps rippled as he crossed his arms and leaned back against the desk, his denim-encased legs crossed at the ankles. His lips straightened in a stern look, even though his eyes still held a hint of humor.

Maryann wasn't sure which made her more nervous.

"Ms. Lithgow, I'm very disappointed with your latest work." He turned and reached for a stack of papers. "You simply aren't putting the kind of effort into this class that I demand."

"I am trying, Professor."

"Really? This is your best effort?" He handed her the last short story she'd written.

She could feel the color creep into her cheeks. She'd tossed off this assignment the night before it was due, resenting every word of it. But she had hoped that it wasn't so bad as to call special attention to it. Yet here she was, kept back after the class had left.

At his steady regard, she stammered out a pitiful

excuse.

Finally, he spoke in a calm voice.

"Maryann, what will it take to get you to put some effort into my class?"

She pushed out of the chair and glided up to where he half-sat on the desk. Pulling up close to him, her thigh against his, she purred. "I guess you could punish me."

His eyes got wide, his lips twitched with a half smile.

"Really?"

His hands came around her and he ran his hands down the small of her back, stopping to cup her bottom through the airy rayon sundress she wore. His lapis gaze seared into hers and her stomach fluttered with anticipation.

"You want me to spank you, Maryann?"

"Maybe it would help." Her words came out in a whispered squeak.

He stood slowly, taking a moment to press his erection up against her hip. Then he moved back a step and turned her toward the desk. His hand on the small of her back, he gently pushed her to lean over the desk.

She hummed as he slowly raised her dress, feeling the soft fabric caress her calves, her thighs, then her bottom. And then the cool air took its place.

"You forgot to wear panties, Ms. Lithgow." Michael crooned and his hands roamed, featherlight on her bottom. Then his fingers dipped between her legs and rubbed her slippery wetness up to her clit.

"You really do want a spanking, don't you, Missy." It wasn't a question. "Well, if you insist that it will improve your work."

With that he raised his hand and brought it down on her backside, just hard enough to sting ever so slightly. The sound reverberated in the empty classroom. Maryann sucked in her breath and waited. His hand came down two more times.

It wasn't really pain, it didn't really hurt. But if she wasn't wet before, which he'd proven she was, she was gushing now. His hand came down again and she wiggled and pressed herself against the desk. The fire built faster than she knew possible.

"Sight," his hand came down to punctuate each word, "sound, smell, taste and touch."

And then he stopped.

Maryann waited. The only sound was her own rapid breath and the sprinklers out on the lawn. Funny time to water. And then she heard the distinctive sound of Michael unfastening his belt. Fear washed over her for a moment until that sound was followed by the sound of a zipper.

And then he was behind her, plunging deep inside, banging hard against her, pushing her rhythmically against the desk.

Maryann woke with a pulsing orgasm, trying desperately to sort reality from dream. The only thing she knew for sure was that she'd never, in a million years want anyone to spank her. Especially not Professor Michael Jamison. At least she was pretty sure that she was certain.

Michael was up well before dawn, unable to stare at the ceiling any more for one night. His entire body hurt from the effort he was exerting to remain professional in the classroom. The only way he was successful is if he could completely ignore Maryann.

Not an easy task. He couldn't even think her name without his cock getting hard. Not only that, but his heart would get soft. When he held her papers in his hands, they trembled. He couldn't concentrate on her written words. All he could hear was her shaky voice, "*Please fuck me.*"

Wearing nothing, he trudged to the kitchen and snagged a bottle of OJ from the fridge, downing it in one tip of his head. Four thirty in the morning. This was fucking ridiculous. Maybe a cold shower would help this time.

Not bloody likely.

Class was getting more and more difficult to sit through. Michael's voice was hypnotic, caressing her with his lessons on simile and metaphor, charging the room with his admonitions to get to the heart of their characters.

When he graced the class with a smile, lighting his eyes with mischief, Maryann wept inside. Her high school crush on Tony Taylor was nothing compared

to the ridiculous way she felt now. Now, not only did her heart betray her, her body joined in. She regularly felt dampness between her legs. Her fingers ached for his mouth and her lips burned with longing for his. She could only imagine the rest.

And imagine she did.

Non-stop.

And she was nearly flunking his class.

And Shelly teased her constantly.

And she couldn't concentrate at work.

Her life was in shambles, all because of Professor Michael Jamison and his mouth.

And his dimples.

And his hands.

And his ass.

Three weeks till class would end. The closer she got to the awaited day, the more tense she felt. Shelly had stopped teasing out of self defense and now stood in the doorway offering to take Maryann out for drinks after work.

"You need to loosen up, Boss lady. C'mon, it's Friday night. We'll go to the Last Hurrah, it'll be hoppin'."

Great. The Last Hurrah. Somehow the name of the place suited her mood lately. Gallows humor. At Maryann's scowl, Shelly continued.

"We'll pick up some hot guys. Make you wonder what you ever saw in the professor."

Maryann was too tired, too frazzled to argue. They

settled on Shelly picking Maryann up a little after seven.

“Wear something hot, Boss.”

At seven-fifteen, the doorbell rang. Maryann buzzed Shelly up, leaving the door ajar while she went back to take the humongous curlers out of her hair. She flipped her head down, massaged styling goop into the roots and flipped back up. That would have to do.

Whatever.

Shelly bopped into her room, looking perfect as always, her long, wavy, chestnut hair sweeping down her back. Any guy that saw Shelly at the Last Hurrah would instantly want her. She wore a slinky red hankie masquerading as a dress and red spike heels with ankle straps that curled up her long legs.

Maryann wore her black dress, damn it all, it was the only thing she had that was even remotely sexy. She couldn't resist a momentary remembrance of the last time she wore it. This time, a concession to not remembering, she wore a plain silver chain instead of the pearls. Silver hoops dangled from her ears.

“You look great!” Shelly gushed and began prancing around singing, “We’re gonna get lucky tonight!”

Maryann just rolled her eyes and snagged her black clutch bag from the dresser.

Chapter Five

The Last Hurrah was jumping, just as Shelly had promised. Heads turned when they entered from the Parker Hotel lobby. Being with Shelly had some distinct advantages. Maryann felt like the little engine that could, repeating the mantra – *I think I can – I think I can.*

She'd never felt so unsure of herself before, never cared so much about having a man in her life. Well, there were a number of them here tonight. Maybe, indeed, she'd get lucky, whatever that meant.

Shelly smiled broadly and waved to someone at the back of the room.

"Someone you know?"

"No, just giving the room a show."

Only Shelly could pull that off. She could flirt with an entire room at once. Maryann wavered between wanting to be just like her and wanting to disappear completely.

Michael tugged his vest down and straightened his bowtie, threw on his jacket and grabbed his keys.

Darcy better be ready. He hated being late. At least he wasn't getting an award tonight, only giving one. Like he was someone special, because he liked to read.

The whole thing made him uncomfortable. At least there was no pressure with Darcy. She loved these things and was going with him so she could, if all went well, leave with someone else. Weird behavior for a chemistry professor.

When Darcy opened the door, he knew without a doubt that he'd be leaving the Parker alone. She looked damn fine, her long blonde hair tousled like she'd just had great sex. Her blue eyes sparkled with sexual energy and she wore a come and get me posture that even Michael wasn't immune to.

"You look mah-ve-lous, Mikey," she purred, as she fastened her earring.

No one else could get away with calling him Mikey. Only Darcy. They'd tried sex a couple times but, overall, they were better at being friends than anything else. So, he'd take her to this bash tonight on his arm, show her off, and let her go with his blessing when she found her next victim.

Maryann still held onto Shelly's optimism as she stood, sipping her white zin and gazing out the huge picture window. Within the last few minutes, the royalty had begun to arrive. They looked like royalty anyway. The men wore tuxes and the women were

arrayed in their finest. Someone behind her mentioned some civic awards ceremony being held in the rooftop ballroom. Maryann had never been there.

There was something wistful about watching the parade of elegantly dressed stars walk by, like you were watching the red carpet arrival of Oscar hopefuls. Maryann recognized a few people, the mayor, well, really, just the mayor.

She took another sip and started to turn away when she saw them. Professor Jamison, dressed to the nines, with a very glamorous blonde attached to his arm. They were laughing. Then he slowed, nuzzled her neck and whispered something that made the trophy girl blush. They continued into the hotel and Maryann lost sight of them.

But the image wouldn't fade. She was glued to the spot, staring into oblivion. He was gorgeous! Navy tux, no tails, satiny lapel that matched the vest. Black bow-tie. Sparkling white cuffs at his wrists...

"Boss lady." Shelly's whisper cut through her fog. She felt herself pulled around to face the other direction. "Look at those babes over there."

The *babes* were nice. One was blonde, wore a business suit, with the collar and tie loosened and smiled at his friend as he sipped the head from his beer. The other had light brown hair that swept his collar and was dressed a bit more casually.

But neither compared. And neither would. If Shelly had seen what she just saw, she might understand. But then the nagging would start again. Better to just play along. And just who was the bimbo attached to

his arm, anyway? She looked vaguely familiar.

Maryann shook free of the thoughts—again—and accompanied Shelly on her expedition to the back of the room. With no effort whatsoever, Shelly swooped on the 'babes' and, within three minutes, they had joined the men at their table.

They spent the next two hours talking and dancing and laughing with Glenn and Jim. The guys were nice enough. Jim, the blonde business-suit one, was obviously after Shelly and Glenn seemed content to be with her. Maryann really tried hard to get into it.

Glenn kept offering to buy her more wine, but after two, Maryann knew to quit. When he pulled her close on the dance floor, it felt nice. No fireworks, but nice. When he slid his hand over her thigh, she didn't protest. Fireworks would have been nice.

Michael did his duty, giving out a special award for teacher of the year or something. He escorted Darcy, smiled at her jokes and made her feel invincible. But he'd have much preferred to be home—or anywhere but here.

Seeing Darcy safely ensconced in the care of another man who made her glow, he excused himself and left. But once in the lobby, he couldn't quite get past the bar without stopping for a cold microbrew.

He found a small table near the front of the bar and sat down with his back to the wall. He dragged off his bowtie and opened his collar. When the waitress

finally got round to him, he ordered a large draft and an order of onion rings. The food upstairs had been fancy, good, but not enough of it.

The waitress returned quickly with his beer. He smiled tiredly and thanked her, then looked up in time to see Maryann waltz onto the dance floor. She wore the same dress, the dress that haunted his dreams, the dress he longed to take off her.

She wore a phony smile plastered on her face. Michael resisted the urge to cut in but still, he couldn't take his eyes off her. As he watched, he realized that this woman was more to him than just someone he desperately wanted to screw. He was charmed by her inability to write anything worth a damn and her frustration at getting crap for grades. The fluster that overcame her when he walked into the classroom, the way she tried so hard to ignore him.

And now she danced with some idiot who, obviously, had no idea the treasure he held in his arms. Luckily, the song ended and they returned to their table, joining another couple—the female half being the clerk from Maryann's bookstore. Michael didn't know whether to be relieved or distressed when she took a seat that left a perfect line of sight for eye contact.

It wasn't long before she saw him. She was the first to break away when he took a lazy sip from his glass, his gaze not budging.

Maryann couldn't breathe. Michael lounged in a chair directly across the room, still wearing the tux, sipping a beer with his perfect mouth, his eyes saluting her. And he wasn't looking away. She quickly lost track of the conversation at the table, her hand idly playing with the chain she wore around her neck.

Every time she glanced up, he was looking at her. It was all she could do to sit there, knowing his eyes were riveted on her. She couldn't leave without walking right past him, though, so she sat and tried to be good company.

But it wasn't working. Shelly soon followed her gaze and a small gasp burst from her. It wasn't enough for Glenn to notice and stop talking about his computer problems at work. Blah, Blah, Blah. But then Shelly grabbed Maryann's knee and squeezed hard enough to leave marks. The yip that Maryann let out stopped Glenn.

"What?"

"Nothing." She glared at Shelly, whose eyes were wide with 'the look.'

Shelly squeezed again and her eyes flickered over Jim's shoulder. Stomach in knots, Maryann slowly turned to see Michael walking toward them. If Shelly didn't let go, she'd be bruised for weeks.

"Ms. Lithgow."

"Professor." It came out in a croak.

He held out his hand. "Dance?"

Glenn stood to protest. Big mistake. Michael was a good four inches taller and with one 'professor' look

had Glenn shut up and seated again.

Maryann took his hand and, with a deep breath, allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor.

With a gentle tug, Michael swung her into his arms and began moving in time with the music. Slow, sultry music.

A hint of a smile turned up the corners of his mouth and he looked down at her. He held her close, but not seductively so. His look was completely proper. He could have been dancing with his sister.

Maryann began to wonder if she'd misunderstood the look he'd shot her across the room. Why had he asked her to dance, anyway? Being that near him, even with his indifference, was turning her knees to mush. She was almost grateful when the song ended and he politely returned her to his seat. Almost.

And then, just before leaving her there, he took her shoulders from behind, leaned close and whispered against her hair.

"Three weeks, baby, three weeks." And aloud, "Thank you, Ms. Lithgow, for the dance." Then he was gone.

When Maryann could speak, she turned to Shelly. "I have to go home."

The sign said "Professor Jamison's infamous presentation of the Passion of Hamlet. Come see Hamlet like you've never seen him." The Mel Gibson version would be shown after a brief discussion of the

various views of the Shakespearean classic. The event was to be held in the large theater/classroom in the Carney Hall on Wednesday night.

Maryann didn't know if she could stand to go. Then again, could she stand not to go? Course, what all American girl could refuse a free showing of Mel? She'd pencil it into her oh-so-busy social schedule and see if she got any better offers. *Uh-huh.*

In the meantime, she needed to finish the stupid story for class tomorrow night. She had two out of ten pages written and didn't have a clue what the plot was. Tonight she'd drag herself to her laptop and pound out the rest of it, even if she had to stay up all night. Three weeks. Thank God.

Three weeks. What had Michael meant when he'd whispered that in her ear? Did it mean what she wanted it to mean? That there was something there? One could only hope. More than likely, he was just looking forward to not having to read any more of her crap.

Her mind screamed, "but, but, but."

She felt like a junior high girl. The insane thoughts never far from the forefront, the longings when you glimpsed him, wanting to talk to him, scared shitless to do so. It was so ridiculous. And on top of it all was the horrendous cloud of humiliation that followed her like Pigpen's dirt.

It was nearly two in the morning when Maryann

finally switched off the laptop. Done. She'd even dramatically typed THE END.

Her story was titled 'Never Forget,' It was a sappy tale of a small child who loses her mommy to breast cancer. Maryann held the pages in her hands as if they might break, like the words might fall off the paper if she didn't handle them with the utmost care. With a loving touch, she selected a pink paperclip, for little girls, and slid it into place.

Never in her wildest imaginings had she expected to produce something she actually cared about, something that was real.

With a sigh, she slid it into her backpack. Dr. Jamison would likely tear it to shreds. And if he did, her heart would be torn as well. This piece was a part of her. She was beginning to understand.

When, on Tuesday night, it came time to hand the papers in, to pass them to the front, Maryann had to fight both the temptation to walk to the front of the class and put her baby in Michael's hands directly and the urge to never let him see it. The thought sideswiped her as she pictured him holding a real baby in his arms, his eyes shining with emotion. God, she was truly losing it.

Chapter Six

The seats of the auditorium were filling fast. She'd heard rumors that this was Dr. Jamison's favorite presentation. Apparently, it was an annual occurrence. It had nearly reached cult status. Rumor also had it that Dr. Jamison had played Hamlet in college, USC to be exact, and had been offered a film contract because of his performance.

Maryann fingered the program in her hands, trying hard not to stare at his picture on the back flap. It was an oval, with the edges blurred. Even in black and white his eyes cut right to her center, leaving her quivering inside. To avoid becoming one big puddle, she eavesdropped on the conversation behind her.

"...is such a hottie. Too bad he's taken."

"By whom?"

"By Darcy Douglas, the chemistry professor. They've been together for years."

Maryann could only hope they weren't talking about Michael but that hope fizzled as the girls went on.

"She should be here somewhere. She never misses his Hamlet. The ad was right, you'll never see Hamlet

the same way again."

Michael and Professor Douglas. Of course, the stunning blonde with him at the Parker Hotel. Heartbreak lodged inside her. Together for years. Where was this Darcy the night Maryann had been so stupid and gone to his house? Maybe they didn't live together. Maybe that was against the rules. God knew Michael was a stickler for the rules.

If the lights hadn't dimmed just then, Maryann would have left. Her face burned again with mortification.

Michael thumbed through his notes, even though he knew this presentation by heart. It had turned into something of a tradition, with some folks coming back year after year. Kinda like Rocky Horror Picture Show.

This was one of his favorite discussions. Shakespeare was valuable to these kids. Not for the reasons most people thought but because there were cultural references that you just didn't get if you didn't know the Bard and his stories. It was the same with mythology, another of his favorite classes to teach.

But tonight was about making Shakespeare more appealing to the kids that thought it was all just stuffy nonsense. Mel Gibson could help. Michael could help.

God, how he loved Hamlet. Every emotion imaginable was played out in the prince. Love, hate,

fear, grief, family, friends. Playing Hamlet in L.A. had been Michael's entryway into life. Before then, he'd stood on the sidelines, allowing others to determine his course. Once on stage with the prince, though, Michael had become real somehow. He'd found his anchor and he'd found his wings.

He smiled to himself. He knew that, as soon as he walked out there, the crowd would go wild and he'd wish he could dissolve into the carpet. It wasn't hard when he'd been Hamlet, but it was excruciating when he was Michael Jamison.

Maryann sucked in her breath at his entrance. No old man suits this time. He wore a light blue collarless dress shirt and a navy blue sports jacket. Even from the next to the last row, Maryann could see how the blues set off his eyes. Glasses couldn't hide the man behind them.

The ovation throbbed outrageously. She clapped right with the others though. It embarrassed him. He hardly looked up from the lectern and when he did, he wore the cutest aw-shucks expression. "Thank you."

Again the crowd, mostly female, roared. Again, he looked down, then up, sheepishly. When the clatter died down, he continued.

"Welcome to the Passion of Hamlet."

More like welcome to the passion of Michael Jamison. He spoke of Hamlet's fear, his fury and his

infatuation with Ophelia. The crowd was enthralled.

When he got to the subject of Hamlet's relationship with his mother, he mentioned the view of Freud that Hamlet had sexual affection for his mother. He grinned.

"'Course, Freud saw sex everywhere, didn't he?"

Snickers from many of the girls.

"Some say there is a sexual undercurrent to the entire scene in the Queen's chamber. That's one of my favorite scenes."

Then, without warning, he became Hamlet.

"Nay, but to live—In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed—Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love—Over the nasty sty,"

Michael smiled. "Then the queen begs our boy to shut up. But he's on a roll."

"A murderer and a villain; A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings—A cutpurse of the empire and the rule—That from a shelf the precious diadem stole—And put it in his pocket!"

The room was pin-drop still when he was finished. And then he smiled again.

"What a great story. Salut, William." Michael held up his water bottle in salute. For the next fifteen minutes Michael held the crowd in his hands as he discussed varying views on the play and seamlessly recited passages to illustrate his points.

"Without further nonsense from me, let's see if Mel can pull off another spectacular performance. I'll bet he can."

The professor stepped from the stage to raucous applause and walked about a third of the way up the aisle. Then he stopped and slid into the aisle seat beside Darcy Francis, who leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Maryann's heart broke in half and tears blurred her vision, with a lump the size of Maryland in her throat. She'd never be able to blow off the whole Michael/Darcy sitting right down there thing and enjoy the always provocative sight of Mel Gibson on the screen. And when the bedroom scene, Michael's scene, played out before her, she wouldn't have to grab her backpack and run from the room.

Michael stood before the throng again, thanking them for coming, thanking them for the reception they gave him.

Maryann was gone. When had she left? Why did he care?

He'd planned on stopping her on her way out. He'd read her story this morning. He wanted to tell her that she'd done a good job, that she was improving, that he was proud of her.

Now he'd have to wait until tomorrow night. The way she'd sprinted from the classroom the last few weeks, he doubted he'd get a chance to talk to her alone, even then.

On Thursday night, Maryann dragged herself to class. Why bother? She'd argued with Shelly about it earlier.

"Boss lady, you need that class."

"I'm just going to flunk it anyway. Why bother going?"

Shelly had closed her office door and leaned against it.

"What's really going on?"

Maryann couldn't answer. Unshed tears clouded her vision.

"The professor?"

Maryann nodded. "I can't face him. Seeing him just makes me..."

"Aw, hon," Shelly approached with poor-Maryann written all over her face. That was the last thing Maryann wanted.

"Don't." Maryann held up a hand to stop her. "I'm fine." She stood and stiffened her spine, walling off the sorrow, sucking in the tears. "I'll finish the class."

"So, what happened, Maryann?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened. The good professor is quite attached and has been for a long time. I made a huge mistake by going over there. I made a fool of myself. End of story. I may not be able to write a story, but I sure as hell know the end when I see it."

"I'm sorry, Boss."

Maryann shrugged. "Water under the bridge." With a big sigh, Maryann walked to the door and opened it.

"Let's go have a latte with plenty of whipped cream. Yes?"

"Yes!"

So here she sat, trying not to look up, struggling not to focus on his voice. When he handed her 'Never Forget', with a very deliberate "Well done," she looked up to see him smile and she was stuck. Seconds felt like hours. With another grin, he led her gaze to the papers she held. "B". It was a "B."

Never in her life had she been as thrilled with a grade. Even if it was a "B."

"Thank you."

Michael nodded. "You earned it." And then he moved on, his face closed.

Maryann did the math. Only four more classes and the last one really didn't even count. They'd likely just be turning in their final assignment. She could do it, couldn't she?

It was a perfect Boston day. Not too hot, just the right amount of rain had left things green and blooming.

Maryann walked along the sidewalk in the quad taking in the sights and sounds around her. She loved this campus. She imagined that Oxford felt this way. Regal somehow. Old. Almost holy. She was nearly sorry that this was her last class.

Unless she flunked out. Course she could drop out. Take another creative writing course from a different professor. But then, she'd have to wait again to put in

her resume to corporate. She'd just hang on, hoping for a passing grade and be done with it all. She could take some fun course here down the road.

Since she wasn't in a hurry, she took a detour and found a hunk of shade in which to plop down. She sat cross-legged in the grass and pulled a Hershey bar from her pack.

Watching students talking on the stairs, others riding bikes, some lazing as she was on the grass, books open. It all took her back to her childhood, to one summer when she got to take a college course for extra high school credit. She'd been so excited, could even now feel the tension in her stomach as she remembered.

As she sat thinking back, the blonde hair and fluorescent pink dress of Professor Douglas caught her eye. She walked to a bench across the commons and sat, opening a bag of food she carried.

Maryann watched with interest. Darcy Douglas was a lovely woman, but Maryann had imagined someone a little different for Michael. Well, herself for one. But even if it wasn't her, someone less flamboyant than Darcy.

As if she'd conjured him, Michael joined Darcy on the bench, pulling his food from her bag as well. He had a burger and fries while Miss Chemistry USA munched on a salad. Every now and then, she'd reach over and steal a french fry from Michael.

Maryann couldn't have looked away if she'd tried. Watching them sent a knife through her, but she was completely taken in. They smiled, they played. Seeing

this side of Michael both warmed her heart and left her cold.

Before this moment it had been about sex. Hadn't it? She'd been drawn to him but only by the way seeing him brought heat to her insides, the way he took her breath away. Yet this very moment, there was no heat. Well, just a bit, but mostly it was the warmth of his smile, his laughter.

Every fantasy up to this moment put Professor Jamison between her legs. Now, though, as he scrunched his nose at a proffered bit of Darcy's salad, as he playfully slapped her hand when she snatched another french fry, Maryann's fantasy turned to one of white picket fences and porch swings.

She hadn't had that fantasy for years. Not since Jason, who offered her everything she thought she wanted. The only catch had been that she move back to Texas and put on an apron

She'd escaped with only a twang left to remind her of heat waves shimmering off brown dirt. She wasn't going back to be Sally Homemaker. Not for Jason, not for anyone. Not even for Michael Jamison.

Immersed in thoughts of longhorns and dust, she almost missed the third person who joined Darcy and Michael on the bench.

An elegantly dressed man slid down beside Darcy, put his hand on her neck and pulled her into a not-for-public-consumption kiss. Maryann almost missed the cheerful roll of Michael's eyes and the shake of his head.

When the blonde stranger pulled Darcy to her feet

and walked her away, hand on her waist, Michael laughed and waved goodbye.

It took a moment before Maryann could look away, wondering what the hell had just happened. She searched the blades of grass around her for the meaning of what she'd seen.

Michael stuffed the last two fries into his mouth and wadded the bag of trash into a ball, tossing it at a nearby garbage can.

"Score."

He stood and took a pull on the straw in his cup. That's when he saw her.

Maryann sat across the way intently inspecting the carpet of grass beneath her, obviously ignoring his presence.

Yeah, right. Like she'd been watching him and was now dying for his company. Uh, huh.

She was irresistible, though, sitting in the dappled light. Her hair shone softly, the golden highlights dancing. She'd taken off her shoes. It was almost more than he could take.

He'd headed in the direction of Carney Hall and ended up standing next to her. Obviously his lower brain had taken him hostage. He hated when that happened.

"Ms. Lithgow."

Maryann looked up to see Michael standing next to her. He looked like the angel Gabriel or something, the sun shining beyond him, holding him in profile before her.

"Professor."

"Nice day."

"Yup." Her tongue felt fat, her brain sluggish.

Michael lowered himself to the ground a few feet away, and leaned against a tree.

"You taking another class, Ms. Lithgow?"

"No." Maryann searched her brain for an excuse to be here. She couldn't tell him that she'd spent most lunch hours sitting here just to catch a glimpse of him. It was just so junior high and way too embarrassing.

Maryann wasn't normally tongue-tied. But here she sat, struck dumb.

"Just on your lunch break?"

"Yes." It occurred to her that he acted like he was having difficulty as well. The thought made her smile.

"And I really need to get back to work."

Maryann pushed to her feet and Michael followed suit.

"Have a great afternoon, Professor."

Maryann turned to leave, but Michael's voice stopped her.

"Darcy isn't my lover."

She turned, her face growing hot. "What?"

"We tried it once, but decided that we do friends much better."

His eyes were so sincere before he looked away, suddenly shy. It reminded her of the times in class when he'd talked about being the fat kid that everyone teased.

"Okay."

Now it was his turn to blush. Too cute.

Maryann let him off the hook.

“Have a good one, Professor.”

Chapter Seven

Time seemed to slog by. Two weeks seemed like two years. Overstatement. Cliche. Pathetic.

But every waking moment he was thinking about her. About making love to her. About seeing her smile.

And when he graded her final paper, which he'd hand back tomorrow night—the last night of class—he couldn't stop himself from grinning.

He'd had brilliant students before. She wasn't brilliant. But she'd dug deep and surprised him. Probably surprised herself as well.

He wanted to put an A+ on the top of the first page, but he couldn't. He settled on an A-.

Maryann sang along with the song that played on her clock radio as she pulled on grey slacks and a pale yellow blouse. She was still humming as she fit the back on her pearl earring. She wanted to look her best for the last night of class.

Silly, really. By tonight, the slacks would be

wrinkled and the blouse blah. Maybe she should come home between work and class...

She clucked her tongue at the idea. It wouldn't matter what she wore if she again made an ass of herself. Get a grip.

Shelly wore a shit-eating grin when Maryann walked in. But she was on the phone and just waved off Maryann's look. One look at her desk revealed the answer.

A dozen roses. Card attached.

"Friday night. My place. Seven. Bring a rose. Can't wait!"

Michael smiled to himself. Two people never had to work so hard to ignore each other. He was sure of it.

Maryann sat in her usual spot, but only occasionally looked up. Even when he commended her on her good work. Of course, who really knew since he was doing his best not to look in her direction either. Maybe it was obvious by omission. He hoped not.

One thing was certain, he couldn't remember ever being so relieved to have a class end.

Let the games begin.

By the end of the day, Maryann found that she had planned what to wear and was anticipating the drive

to the professor's house.

At six-fifty-eight, Maryann took a deep breath, grasped the rose in her hand and scaled the stairs to Michael's front door. Panic climbed in her throat as she got near. But what moved her forward was so primal, so deep inside that she couldn't have stopped had she tried.

Then, there he was, standing in the doorway, a smug smile on his face. He was fully dressed this time, wearing charcoal grey slacks, pleated at the front, and a black button up shirt. From where she stood, it looked soft, almost velvety. Again, he didn't wear his glasses. Maryann hesitated. If he was going to gloat...

But when he reached for her hand and brought it to his lips, something inside her broke. And the smile that followed was dazzling. His blue eyes glittered with fun.

He said nothing, simply moving aside to let her inside, his hand hovering at the small of her back.

What now? Maryann had never gone to a man's house just to have sex. Well at least not so blatantly. There was always the illusion of an excuse. Sure she'd invited guys in after they brought her home. *For coffee.*

Michael cleared his throat and spoke at last. "Wine?"

"Please." It came out in a throaty whisper that Maryann didn't think could be hers.

"Ever had Auslese?" he asked as he pulled the cork from the bottle and poured two glasses.

"Umm, not that I know of."

He handed her a glass, pausing to touch her hand as she took it. Her breath caught in her throat.

"It's a German wine, made from hand picked, perfectly ripened, very sweet grapes..."

His voice was low, caressing the words he spoke. As she lifted the glass to her lips his hand intercepted.

"Taste it. Really taste it."

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked.

"Because you rush through things, honey." His hand came away, leaving the glass hovering at her lips. "Close your eyes and take a sip."

For a fleeting instant, Maryann wondered if she could get the glass to her mouth with her eyes closed, especially with his fixed on her. But she did, managed not to spill, and tasted.

When she opened her eyes, he took a sip, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Well?"

"It's wonderful." Sweet, bright, truly wonderful.

"Yes, it is. But, alas, taste doesn't come first, does it? What comes first, Maryann?"

"Sight."

He stepped close, reaching behind her to set his glass on the table. Then, he took hers and did the same, all the while hovering close enough that she could feel his heat. He picked up the rose she'd left on the table and backed up only a bit.

He brought the rose up and ran it lightly along her bottom lip, sending bolts of desire through her. All the while, he smiled. Then, he leaned forward slowly and followed the rose trail with his tongue. The

Auslese on his breath tantalized her, warm and moist. Before leaning back again, he kissed her, softly, and took her hand.

"Sight," he reminded himself. "What's the most sensuous sight you can think of, Miss Lithgow?"

To speak, Maryann needed to find her voice. He began moving, leading her by the hand, the rose still in his other.

"You, the last time I was here."

"Really." He laughed, his eyebrow shooting up. "Well, I intend to show you something way better than that."

He led her down a short hallway, into a large bedroom that flickered with the light of candles. Votives, columns, even tapers in understated pewter holders. Vanilla. And something else. Chocolate? Soft music played on an invisible stereo.

The room was a synthesis of the two personalities she'd seen in Dr. Michael Jamison. It was furnished with dark cherry bed and dressers, all shining in the dim light. The dark chocolate sheets were turned back on the bed. Other than the candles, there was little clutter. And yet, on the walls were elegantly matted and framed photos of race cars. Maryann smiled and, closing her eyes, inhaled the scents.

Michael tugged gently on her hand, and in time with the music, twirled her around and into his arms. He pulled her close, swaying for a moment with the music. Then he danced her over toward the wall, turning her so she leaned against him, facing a huge, full-length mirror.

Without a word, his eyes bright as she watched him, he ran the rose along her neck and down the front of her blouse. She'd chosen purple silk, and a short black skirt. Under, she wore black lace. Thigh high hose, topped with lace and black heels.

"Kick off your shoes," he whispered, his breath hot against her neck. She did so. The result was that his chin now just grazed the top of her head. Still his gaze didn't leave hers in the mirror.

He handed her the rose and she felt him unzip her skirt. It fell in a puddle at her feet, leaving her wearing the blouse, which hung just to her hips. Then, his hands reappeared and oh-so-slowly he began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Did you know that a woman's skin is far more sensitive than a man's?"

Her blouse slipped down her arms. His touch followed. Down her arms, up her sides, grazing the lace at the top of her bra. Feather light.

"When you touch me this lightly," he paused to place a kiss on her shoulder, "I can't feel it."

Her breath came out on a sigh. If the sensations he was creating weren't enough to drive her mad, watching his hands move on her body was, indeed, the most provocative thing she'd ever seen. She smiled at the thought. Like one could put the emotions he was evoking into words. Like one even cared to. She laid her head back on his shoulder.

"Uh-uh, baby. No relaxing. Watch."

With an effort she raised her head and opened her eyes. With little movement and no effort, he

unfastened her bra and took its place with his hands. She watched as he circled her nipples with his thumbs, making them peak and harden. Sensation shot through her, pooling between her legs. Her hips tilted forward invitingly. She dropped the rose.

When she looked up at Michael, his sapphire eyes were riveted to hers. He'd not been watching his hands. He'd been watching her face. His gaze was sharp, not missing a thing.

Maryann's breath came out in tiny gasps as his hands moved lower. Long, elegant fingers, dipped into her crotch, over the slippery black fabric of her panties. He teased her clitoris, making her arch into his hand, begging for more pressure.

A hoarse laugh rumbled in her ear and he swept her into his arms and slowly deposited her onto the bed.

"Don't move," he said, going back for the rose, "and close your eyes now."

She felt the bed shift as he sat beside her. He tickled her nose and lips with the rose.

"Smell nice?" he crooned.

"Ummm."

He dragged the rose down her chin, her neck, and tortured her, dragging it down between her breasts, her belly and across the top of her panties. She moved, arched, ached for more.

"You're not holding still." His voice was tantalizing. "And do you find this more provocative than if I read you the piece you read me that night? Please fuck me... Shall I read it to you?"

"No. But please fuck me."

"In time, baby, in time."

He hooked his fingers in her panties in pulled them slowly down her legs. As they dropped away, his hands slid up her legs and paused at the tops of her thighs. She still wore her hose. He ran his fingers along the lace and finally his hand was where she wanted it. Again he chuckled.

Starting with one finger, he spread her slippery wetness over and up, staying only a moment on her clitoris. She moaned.

"Ahh, sounds. Another sense."

Now two fingers were deep inside her. She could feel herself clamp down on him, aching for his cock inside her. But then he leaned down and began sucking and licking her, as his fingers moved slowing in and out. In and out.

He moved back up, his mouth just a breath from hers.

"Now, taste your own passion."

His kiss was warm and wet with her pleasure. His tongue teased her lips, her tongue. She kissed him back, pulling him hard against her.

"Please..." The fire built and banked, built and banked. He was inside her head, inside her body. How else would he know when she edged near explosion? He wouldn't let her go. And then he was gone.

Maryann watched him come back into the room with the wine bottle and glasses. He set them on the bedside table and stood, looking at her. He smiled

and cleared his throat. For a moment she saw the shy professor standing there, almost unable to make eye contact.

She knelt on the edge of the bed and reached for his belt, tugging him closer.

"My turn, Dr. Jamison."

She ran her fingers down the front of his shirt. The fabric was even softer than it looked. Her fingertips tingled as she ran her hands around and up his back.

With a growl that was wholly not from the sophisticated Dr. Jamison, but rather from his alter ego, he ground his lips onto hers with a fierceness that rekindled the fire inside her. His tongue ravaged her mouth, her lips. When he began trailing his mouth down her neck, she gently pushed him back a bit.

Then, with the same look he'd given her, she began unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it from his waistband, and pushed it from his shoulders.

If seeing him in a cut up T-shirt that first night was hot, this was blistering. Dark, springy hair began just above his naval and disappeared beneath his slacks. The rest of his chest was smooth, little hair, and defined with a hint of a six-pack.

She heard him blow out a breath when she lowered her mouth to his nipple. Turnabout. Then, her hand wandered, cupping the bulge in his pants. Again, he groaned.

"Sound. Good." She grinned.

Maryann's hands shook with anticipation as she unfastened his belt, and lowered his zipper. She

wasn't disappointed when she slid her hands down, ridding him of his clothes.

His cock was magnificent! Bigger than average and hard as a rock. Who said size doesn't matter? Seeing him nearly pushed her to the edge. But when she ran her fingers over the length of him, she nearly combusted.

His hands were shaking too, when he reached into the drawer and pulled out the foil package.

"Allow me," she said, in a husky voice that she didn't recognize as hers.

Deliberately, her hands lingered as she rolled the condom down, enjoying both the feel of his cock in her hands and control she had over him. Before she could get to his testicles, though, he pounced and she found herself on her back, her hands held above her head. His face hovered for a moment above her, his eyes alight with lust.

His mouth descended on hers even as he spread her legs with his knee. His free hand took her with urgency. She pressed against his hand, wanting all of him inside her.

For milliseconds, she teetered on the edge of orgasm, her legs spread, her hips thrust forward, begging. As she came, he moved and pounded into her.

Houston, we have ignition. Ignition, detonation, explosion. Mild mannered English professor, Michael Jamison was dynamite in bed. The scholarly man who could barely look you in the eye in the classroom was an all-American guy in the bedroom. He fucked her

hard; it felt beyond good.

Every drive impaled her further, touching places she didn't know she had. A whimper of pure elation escaped her throat. Had she ever made noise before? Had a guy?

Michael finally came in a rush that left him spent and motionless on top of her. His weight even felt good. Maryann buried her nose at the soft hollow of his throat, kissing his moist skin and inhaling him. She ran her fingernails up his back, eliciting a flinch at his flanks. The professor was ticklish. Somehow that information was as valuable to her as was his prowess in the bedroom.

"Holy shit," he whispered into the pillow.

"Oh, professor, such language."

He pulled up onto his elbows, grinning at her.

She put on her best stuffy voice. "One shouldn't need to resort to profanity when expressing themselves. One should..."

He kissed her to silence, then rolled to the side, his hand sliding onto her belly. Eyes closed, he stroked her absently, a Cheshire smile playing on his lips.

"Dr. Jamison?"

It took him a second to answer, like his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. "Seems like you could call me Michael."

Maryann laughed. "Michael?"

"Hmmm?"

"Is there a limit? One to a customer?"

He opened one eye and his smile broadened into dimples. A wayward lock of dark hair fell over his

forehead. He couldn't have been any sexier in that moment.

"You wanting more, Ms. Lithgow?"

"Yes, Professor, I am."

He came up onto one elbow and reached across Maryann, retrieving one of the wine glasses. He took a sip and gave one to her as well. Then he set the glass back on the table.

"Can I take you to dinner tomorrow night?"

"Well, that depends on two things."

"Oh?"

"First, can I have you again tonight?"

"Oh, I suppose." He leaned down and pulled her nipple into his mouth. "And two?" he asked, and returned to sucking her.

"It depends on the grade you gave me."

His head shot up with a popping sound as he released her nipple. His brows drew together.

The laughter that filled his eyes just a moment before was gone. At last he answered soberly. "Maryann, I've already turned in the grades. And, I can't give you an 'A' you don't earn with your writing. I'm sorry."

With that he launched himself over her and off the bed. He snagged the wine bottle and tipped it to his mouth. Maryann followed.

From behind, she slipped her arms around his waist, planting a kiss on his shoulder blade. He stood stiffly, as if waiting for her to quit.

"And did the grade I got only reflect my writing?"

"Yes." It was more of a rumble in his chest than an

actual word.

"Good."

His breathing stopped for an instant.

"Then you're just the kind of man I'd want to go to dinner with."

He took a breath and snorted.

"I ruined your four-point-oh GPA, Maryann."

"Well, then. I guess if I ever take another writing class—from a different professor—you might just have to tutor me."

"Excellent."

He turned in her arms and pulled her tight against him. His erection was just beginning, but it was a good sign. She wasn't going home just yet.

Desire Delayed

Chapter One

Sad, Dad, Bad, Had. Dad is sad. Very, very sad. He had a bad day. What a day Dad had!" Desiree Bishop recited the line as she pulled her Lexus into the alumni lot at Boston College. It had been at least fifteen years since she'd read Dr. Seuss to Trent, maybe more. But, invariably, when she had the day from hell, those words came sing-song out of her mouth.

It had, indeed, been a very bad day! She glanced at her watch. If she was lucky, the board members were still milling about, exchanging pleasantries and hadn't actually deemed her late.

Getting out of the store late, for the drive to Boston, had been the first disaster. Change that, the second. Having fifty nightgown and robe sets show up all in one color and size, instead of in the variety she had ordered... that had been the first disaster.

Of course, Murphy's Law was at work—when

wasn't it?—and she'd inched through stop and go looky-loo traffic on the freeway.

So, here she was, the notoriously early Dee Bishop, late for a board meeting. What else could go wrong? She cringed at the thought. Famous last words.

Dee managed to get up the stairs of the athletic building without falling, ripping her nylons or losing a shoe. If she could get to the conference room...

No such luck. The door to the hallway swung toward her just as she reached for the handle, catching her left shoulder and dumping the Trent Bishop Foundation scholarship file onto the floor.

"Damn it." Dee backed up to avoid getting conked in the head. But when she looked up to the offending door opener, her day went from bad to worse.

"Ms. Bishop..."

That voice, deep, just a little raspy. There he stood, Ryan Magnussen, Coach Magnussen, dressed in cargo slacks and a Boston College Athletics polo shirt. Light brown, the same color as his whiskey eyes. Her stomach lurched and her body threatened to give up vertical.

"I'm sorry."

The slight curve of his lips and the mischievous sparkle in his eyes belied his words.

Dee knelt to pick up the scattered papers. He crouched beside her just as she reached and she ended up with her hand on his thigh. Instantly, she pulled it back.

"Apology accepted, Coach. Please excuse me, though, I'm late."

Ryan got up, sauntered a few feet away and reached down to pick up a few scraps of escaping paper.

"So, how's Trent?"

"Fine, Coach. Just fine."

Actually, considering how many times she'd been in this building over the last eight months, it was quite amazing that she hadn't run into him before. The last time she'd seen Coach Magnussen had been at Trent's bedside, while they all held their collective breaths. That was three years ago.

"Good, I'm glad. I got the invitation to his wedding. Thought it might be some mistake."

He handed her the remaining papers. She shoved them into the file and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Look, Coach, neither Trent nor I blame you for his injury. Hockey's a tough sport and it was a bad hit. Nothing more. And if you still blame yourself, well then, get over it."

That said, she reached for the door. He beat her to it and swung it open for her.

The smile had vacated his face, leaving behind only rugged planes and a grim expression.

"I guess you told me."

Dee stopped halfway through the door.

"I'm sorry, Coach. As I said, I'm late and I've had the day from hell." Her voice still held the same tone, though. She didn't sound very sorry either. She tried to lighten it up. "And, frankly, I've yet to be at a board meeting that wasn't yawnsville. And that's with me in charge." She tried on a smile. "But you are

most welcome at the wedding."

"Thank you. I'll try to make it."

It took a few moments for Dee to catch her breath. The last thing she needed was to walk into a room full of staid Boston alumni with a teenybopper flush and nipples like rocks poking at her silk blouse. *He'd* probably noticed. Damn that man.

Filling a vacant position on the board of directors should have been a simple deal. But today, nothing was simple. It was a runaway train over which she, as chairman, had no control. She only got a vote in the event of a tie. No tie today. Piling on, that's what it was. It looked like the board members had used her tardy time to plan a strategy. And then they'd pulled it off.

It was a four to one vote: the next member of the board of directors was to be a sports person, preferably one involved with hockey. And Dee was in charge of finding someone. Not only that, but one member had spoken with Trent's father, Greg, and he had expressed interest in the position.

Welcome to the Twilight Zone. Images swirled around in Dee's brain: Greg calling her Desiree D'Lisch in front of everyone, grinning his condescension, telling her publicly that she'd be better off not thinking, what business did she have even being on the board, everyone knew what she was good for. The past thirteen years would have

been for nothing. He would undo her in minutes.

On a less personal note, it was a good thing that Trent had not been at this meeting. He'd have been livid at the thought of his dad sweeping away all their hard work. Almost as bad though, would have been his insistence that he knew the perfect person for the job. The cure was almost worse than the disease.

The drive home wasn't too bad and, by the time Dee stepped into her office, she had a list of nine hockey jocks to approach about the position. By God, she'd find someone to take that position. And it wouldn't be Greg. And it sure as hell wouldn't be Ryan Magnussen.

"What did that dart board ever do to you, Coach?" Mark asked from his spot behind the bar, in a way too perky voice.

Ryan just looked at him for a moment, then went back to launching missiles at the bull's-eye. His usual opponents gave him a wide berth and conveniently found other amusements. One even feigned intense interest in the highlights of the International golf tournament in Denver that occupied the screen above the bar.

Mark sent another beer over without Ryan asking, possibly by way of a truce. Ryan grumbled his thanks. When his shoulder began to ache, he grabbed his beer and wandered over to the bar to perch.

"Gotta be a girl," Mark muttered from down the

bar a ways.

"No shit." Ryan felt like stone. He tried to smile but failed miserably. One glance in the mirror behind the bar revealed that his face was nothing short of grim.

Why the hell did he let her do that to him? And how in God's name was he going to go to that wedding? How could he not?

Trent felt like his kid. Had since before Greg walked out on his family. He'd watched Trent grow up, always from an anonymous distance. But he'd pulled strings to help the kid every chance he got through the years.

Ryan pushed away the thoughts of the mother. At least he tried. An old battle. But no one had ever come close to the feelings he'd carried for her. Likely no one ever would.

'Course, by the same token, if he hadn't loved that kid so much, he wouldn't have been so anxious to reward his hard work. He wouldn't have put the kid in the game that nearly got him killed and ended any hopes the kid had of playing pro hockey like his dad.

Mark interrupted his thoughts. "Maybe it's not a woman. I've never even seen you with one a second time, have I, Coach?"

With a sigh, Ryan again tried to smile.

"Nope, Mark, you haven't. But you are right, it is a woman."

A woman he'd loved from afar for way too long. A woman he'd never approached - every time he'd had the opportunity, she was in the middle of a crisis.

Right. Who was he fooling? He'd never made the opportunity either, had he? What a pussy he was.

"Who is she?"

Now Mark was right there, rag in hand, polishing the bar in front of Ryan.

"Desiree Bishop."

Mark thought for a moment: then a slow whistle.

"The Bishop kid's mom?"

"The one and only." More truth to that than he'd ever admitted.

"You played hockey with the kid's dad, didn't you?"

"Right again." Ryan pushed his empty glass toward Mark.

"And?" Mark took the glass. "Another?"

"Please."

"And?"

"And there's nothing to tell. She's a beautiful, courageous, determined woman. And I got to watch her jerk of a husband fuck around on her until he finally left her for some bitch with bigger tits. He thought Dee was stupid and said she was only good for one thing. And there was nothing I could do to stop him. He's an asshole."

So how come you didn't move in on her?"

Why, indeed? Ryan considered for a moment before answering. "I guess the timing was never right."

Mark wandered away to serve some other customers. On his return, he asked what about this woman had Ryan so wound up tonight.

"I ran into her today. Literally." Ryan laughed with

no humor whatsoever. "Trent is getting married in October and I'm invited to the wedding."

"Shit."

"No shit."

Over the next two weeks, Dee must have made a thousand calls. It felt like it anyway. Some she'd even seen in person.

Each time, she explained who she was: Desiree Bishop, the mother of the BC hockey player injured three years ago in his first game. Invariably, she'd have to refresh their memory. Trent was the one who suffered the severe concussion after a fluke hit against the boards. Oh, yes, they remembered. And how was Trent now, they'd ask. Then she'd launch into the discussion of post concussion syndrome, PCS and the disorders caused by traumatic brain injury, which had left Trent unable to endure crowded, noisy places and a noticeable hesitation in his speech.

She'd called Bobby Orr, Ray Bourque, even the guy who did the Bruins radio broadcasts. Everyone was already overwhelmed with charities that they'd been involved in for years or, for a hundred other really good reasons, they weren't available. They were all extremely sorry and wished her luck.

And every time the subject came up when she spoke with Trent, she'd cut off the conversation before it turned to the inevitable suggestion.

Even now, Trent idolized Ryan Magnussen. It was

only a matter of time until he insisted that she call Coach. She'd so hoped to find someone before that happened.

Chapter Two

Two days passed and Dee hadn't made a single phone call. But the Scarlett O'Hara method of dealing with the situation couldn't go on. Hockey players were not breaking down her door begging to be on the board of directors. And now she had only ten days.

Why was she so desperate to not have Ryan Magnussen on the board? He was certainly qualified.

He'd retired from the NHL after eighteen years. Anyone who knew hockey knew Ryan Magnussen. He'd played with Boston for fifteen years, then been traded to the Sharks for his final three years.

During the Boston years, he'd been Greg Bishop's roommate. At least, up until the time that Greg self destructed, leaving Dee with a one-year-old, and taking up with a lawyer from New York. After a requested trade to the Rangers, he only played another year before a drug conviction ended both his career and his new marriage in New York.

All that time, she'd known Ryan. He was always a complete gentleman, always offering to help her out in any way. He'd made her feel significant, smart.

How many times had she called to speak with Greg only to have Ryan stutter some weak excuse for why Greg was not available? Poor guy. Greg was a jerk to put him in that position.

Once Greg was out of her life, though, so was her Bruin family. At first, she had too much to accomplish in too short a time to miss having them around. It was years before she even realized that, aside from Trent, she had no one whatsoever in her life. By then, it was too late.

And it was years before she saw Ryan Magnussen again. And then, luckily, it was from a distance.

By then, Trent was headed to college and enlisted Coach's help to get in to BC. Ryan took Trent under his wing, even getting him a scholarship. During that time, Trent had talked non-stop about Ryan. Coach did this. Coach said that.

Coach *was* pretty remarkable. The way he interacted with the kids. His reputed quick temper never made an appearance during the practices that Dee watched. He was serious, yes, but always with a hint of good humor. He laughed with them, teased them to excellence, and skated circles around them.

When Trent was injured, Ryan was grim. He hardly spoke to anyone but seemed to hover in the corners, watching, waiting. Dee knew he felt that he was at fault. But she never got a chance to tell him that she didn't blame him.

Maybe she'd just never wanted to get that close. Maybe she didn't want to now, either. Close proximity to Ryan Magnussen had never failed to

leave her shaken, trembling, out of control. Unacceptable feelings.

And yet, he was likely the best candidate for the position. He was strong, charming and not unaffected by the issue.

The jangling phone made her jump.

"Heavenly Sensations, this is Dee Bishop."

"Hey, darlin'. How are your undies?"

Greg. Dee's stomach clenched.

"What do you want?"

"Relax, darlin', don't get your panties in a bunch."

Greg laughed at his own joke. "I just wanted to see what time the big meeting is on Monday. Want to be on time, don'cha know."

Dee nearly choked.

"Darlin'."

Dee cleared her throat, hoping for sound when she answered. "The meeting is at ten, Greg. Though, for the life of me, I can't imagine why you'd want to be there..."

Dang it. The last thing she needed was to challenge Greg to a duel. She took a deep breath and, with purpose, relaxed the death grip she had on the phone.

"The meeting starts at ten and it's in the athletics building. Third floor conference room."

"Thanks. See you Monday, Desiree."

It took a minute before Dee caught her breath. Nausea threatened to send her running from the room. But she'd be damned if she'd just roll over and play dead. She grabbed the phone book and looked up the number.

"Boston College, Athletics Department, how may I direct your call?"

"Coach Magnussen, please."

"One moment."

It was then that she realized that she'd jumped in without a plan. What the heck would she say when he answered? Cripes. What was she thinking?

"Hi,"

Dee searched for something to say.

"This is Coach Magnussen. I'm not in at the moment..."

Thank God. Dee hung up and pulled her hand away from the phone. She checked her watch. Before she called back, she'd have a plan.

But first, she needed a latte.

Dee arranged the papers on her desk and placed the pen neatly beside. She scooted her stapler over so it was just the right distance from the scotch tape holder. Then, she squared her shoulders and dialed the phone.

As it rang she rechecked her list.

1. *Be matter of fact.*

2. *Flirt*

3. *Beg*

In order of need. She knew damn well, though, that if number one failed, she'd absolutely skip number two and go straight to begging.

"Hello."

Of course, he wouldn't answer with his name. Too laid back.

"Hi, Coach. This is Desiree Bishop, Trent's mother."

A coughing spasm filled the phone line.

"Sorry," cough, sputter, "coffee down the wrong pipe." Cough sputter. "Sorry."

"Are you okay, Coach?"

"Yeah, thanks. No need for paramedics."

One last spasm then laughter.

"I'm so sorry. What's up?"

Now his voice took on it's usual deep caress, the one that left her weak. Almost enough to make her forget why she'd called.

"Well, Coach..." She checked her notes.

"Dee, why so formal? After all these years? It's Ryan."

"Ryan. Of course. Sorry. I, um..."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, uh, no, nothing."

"Okay."

The silence rose up around her, nearly choking her.

"I'd like to take you to dinner, Coach, uh, Ryan."

"Really?"

The word slid out, slow like. Suddenly, he was in full flirt mode. Damn him. Dee squirmed in her chair. How did this call go so wrong?

"Dee?"

"Yes. No. I mean..."

God, she was babbling.

"You don't want to take me to dinner?"

And she couldn't quite reach the controls.

"No. I do."

At his chuckle, she bit the bullet and continued.

"I want to take you to dinner — say, Tuesday night. But it's not like that."

"Like what?"

At last she smiled. Ryan was *so* teasing her.

"Never mind."

"You're not taking me to dinner."

"No, I am."

She might as well just jump in all at once. This inching in was killing her.

"I have a proposition for you."

"I like the sound of that." His grin was audible.

"As I said before, it's not like that. But, if you would meet me at, say, seven, at Fiore's. If you can't make it, I'd appreciate a call." She gave him her cell phone number.

"Oh, I'll be there, Dee. I wouldn't miss it for the world. Bye, Dee."

"Bye, Ryan."

Dee set the receiver in its cradle. It felt like she was letting go of his hand.

Ryan leaned back in his chair and hooked his heels on the corner of his desk. Someone needed to pinch him. Hard.

He was having dinner with the most beautiful woman on earth. In just over forty-eight hours. She

had a proposition for him. But not that kind, whatever that meant.

It probably meant that she was not going to hand him the key to her room and ask him to make sweet love to her. She probably was not going to kneel in front of him...

Well, shit. A guy could dream.

The reality was that she had never given any indication that she felt the same electricity he felt whenever he was within two miles of her. So, whatever her proposition was, it was definitely something completely proper and likely totally boring.

Reality sucked.

On the other hand, in just over forty-eight hours, he was going to have dinner with the most beautiful woman on earth.

Fiore's was one of the most elegant restaurants Dee had ever been to. If you really wanted to impress the hell out of someone, this was the place to bring them. She wasn't sure why, exactly, she'd chosen it.

The reason wasn't important.

Yes, and the pope wasn't Catholic.

She did want to impress Ryan. She needed his respect. She'd dressed in her best linen suit. She'd picked the best restaurant and she would lay cash down on the table when the bill came. He'd better be impressed. Impressed enough to at least take the

position on the board.

The waiter brought her a glass of merlot while she waited. She checked her watch. Six fifty-three. She took a sip, forcing herself to breathe.

Chapter Three

At precisely seven o'clock. Ryan Magnussen walked through the door. Man, could he enter a room.

He looked magnificent, in a classic grey-green suit, maybe Brooks Brothers. His shirt, light green striped, with stark white collar and french cuffs. A hunter green tie with his Boston College tie tack finished the look. God, she sounded like a fashion catalog. But he looked so good, moved so smoothly. Were there any clothes that he didn't wear well?

The corner of his mouth kicked up when he spotted her and he waved off the maitre'd as he moved to the table.

Dee's mind went blank. Did ladies stand when gentlemen approached? She couldn't for the world remember. She opted to stay seated, not willing to try standing on legs turned to jelly.

"God, you're beautiful," Ryan breathed as he slid into the chair opposite her.

No 'good evening' or 'hello'—just a whispered compliment, leaving Dee speechless for an instant. His eyes tinkled green in this light. The normally

sharp lines of his face were softened by his smile and candlelight.

"Coach," she said at last, hoping her words could be heard over the thumping of her heart.

At his lifted eyebrow, "Ryan," she added.

"Scotch, rocks," Ryan said to the waiter as he picked up his menu. "Have you ordered?"

"Not yet, just wine."

"I haven't been here before. What's good?"

Such a Ryan Magnussen thing to say. Stick him in a five star dining experience and he still sounded like a jock. Dee smiled. Normally 'jock' wasn't complimentary in her mind. Maybe tonight would change that.

Dee ended up ordering a primavera pasta dish and Ryan decided on filet mignon.

"Can't go very wrong with a filet."

As they waited for their dinner, Dee attempted small talk. It was an utter failure.

Finally, Ryan took over. She was obviously flustered, having difficulty looking him in the eye. She seemed pale, yet flushed if that was possible. The only way he could help her relax was to ask about her favorite topic.

"So, Dee, how is Trent doing? Really." She'd told him 'fine' when he'd run into her at the college but there was bound to be more to the story.

"He's good."

"Details, Dee."

"Okay." She took a sip of wine. "He still has trouble in crowds, can't go to the mall. He's most disturbed

about not being able to go to a hockey game."

"Geez. That's bad."

Dee nodded at his interruption, then continued. Ryan struggled to concentrate on her words, his gaze drawn to her lips.

"He, um, still has some difficulty with speech. It's much better. He can communicate just fine, just a bit slower than most of us. It could be so much worse." Another sip of wine.

He wanted to lick it from her lips. Concentrate, you fool.

"Do they expect any improvement?" The kid was such a go-getter. Sometimes life just sucked.

"No. Basically, what you have at the one year mark is what they think you're stuck with."

She looked away briefly and took a deep breath.

"But if anyone can prove them wrong, it's Trent."

"He's an amazing kid, Dee."

"Yes, he is."

Having exhausted that topic, they slid into silence once again. Ryan tired of the anticipation. His other brain continued to react to her every movement and, if his cock had its way... He pulled himself back with effort.

"So, Ms. Bishop," he smiled, "what is your proposition for me?"

If his lower brain had a tone of voice, that was it. He hadn't meant it to come out that way. But before he could stop it, on his cock spoke.

"Did you, by chance, want to take me to your room and ravish me?"

Shit, what was he saying? The expression on her face confirmed that he'd just blown it - big time.

"Typical jock," she spat, disgust written on her face.

Sure, he'd been flirting. But did his comment deserve that? It ticked him off.

"Excuse me?"

"I ask you here, to a beautiful, expensive restaurant. I had a perfectly innocent request to make..."

"I'm sorry."

It was like she didn't even hear him.

"You, you're all dressed up, looking respectable and classy. But underneath the suit and the smile, you're just another jock asshole with only one thing on your mind."

That definitely wasn't called for. Jock asshole? Ryan's insides boiled.

On she went.

"I suppose the only way I'm going to get a favor from a guy like you is to spread my legs."

"That's enough, Dee."

Dee cringed at his growl. What had she done? In one brief moment, she'd just nixed any chance of Ryan Magnussen taking that board position. More than that, she'd allowed poison she didn't realize was there to pour out onto a guy who had done nothing wrong.

Ryan leaned forward, his voice going quiet and hard.

"You, sweetheart, have me confused with another jock. I will admit to wanting you from the moment I

first laid eyes on you. But did I jump your bones when you were married?"

Dee's throat closed.

"Did I?"

"No." She clenched and unclenched the napkin that still occupied the center of her plate.

"Did I jump your bones when he walked out on you and Trent?"

"No."

"How about when Trent played for me, or when he was hurt? Did I back you up against the wall and nail you? No? It sure as hell wasn't because I didn't want to."

Ryan was ticked. He deserved to be. She'd been a complete bitch. But his words did more than make her quiver in fear and remorse, they made her quiver with desire. And she was not going to allow that, no matter what.

"I'm sorry."

Now he couldn't stop. "Desiree Bishop, you are a beautiful, intelligent, wonderful woman. And while I would dearly love to strip you naked and kiss every inch of your body, I'd also like to spend days, weeks, months even getting to know you better. I may be a typical guy and think about sex every four point five seconds, but it's not all I think about and I'm not Greg."

Before she could speak, he shoved his chair back and stood up. He pulled his wallet from his pocket and tossed a hundred-dollar bill on the table.

"Enjoy your expensive, beautiful dinner, Desiree."

This well-dressed pig is leaving."

With that he downed his scotch, set the glass down gently, turned on his heel and left the restaurant.

Dee sat, stunned, staring at the hundred-dollar bill that lay on the table. If she'd had legs, she'd have left too, maybe tried to catch him, apologize. As it was, she just stared.

Her vision blurred and she swiped away an errant tear. Her thoughts were interrupted by the waiter, setting her food in front of her.

"And the gentleman?" he asked.

"What?"

"Did the gentleman leave?"

"Yes." The gentleman, the one she'd insulted so thoroughly, had, indeed, left.

"Would you like me to wrap up his food, ma'am?"

"No, thank you. Please just take it away." She waved her hand at the offending dish, catching herself, for an instant not wanting to insult his food as well.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Thanks."

Dee sat in abject misery, pushing her pasta around on her plate. Another sip of wine. Had he really said that he'd wanted her for all these years? He had.

In hindsight, she knew that. There had always been a certain electricity in his eyes, even while she was pregnant with Trent. He'd always treated her with the

utmost respect, with kindness. Even if he had wanted to... again the image of him 'nailing' her against the wall gave her a shiver.

He'd also said that he wanted to spend time with her, getting to know her better. Right before he threw the bill on the table, and taken 'the well-dressed pig' out of the restaurant.

Damn.

Ryan swung the Spyder into his parking place and unfolded from the car. He hauled his stupid ass up the stairs to his apartment and sprawled on the couch without flipping on the light.

He'd really unloaded on her. How many times had he heard that his temper would, one day, get him into deep trouble. That day had come.

Sure she'd been wrong to heap all that shit on him, but he understood it. He had flirted with her, but that shouldn't have caused such a violent reaction. Not unless she carried way more baggage than she let on.

His heart ached a bit for her. He'd obviously pushed the wrong button. Innocently, yes, but pushed it nonetheless. So much for a nice dinner with the most beautiful woman in the world.

Jerk.

The message light blinked into the darkness when

Dee got home. She was too tired to get it. Weary, exhausted, discouraged.

But she couldn't leave it. Try as she might.

Throwing off the covers, she wandered to the living room and pushed the button.

It was from Trent. She could tell from the pause before the voice spoke.

"Mom," the message unfolded slowly, "hope it went well tonight. Call me in the morning."

At least it wasn't Ryan calling to—to what—yell at her some more? He wouldn't do that. Apologize? She didn't deserve an apology. More like she needed to give one. Ask her out? Right.

She didn't want that anyway. Maybe it was just as well. At least she knew what to expect from Greg. If he got that position, at least she wouldn't turn to mush every time he entered the room. Just as well.

Dee sat at the kitchen counter, not even tasting the chocolate-vanilla coffee in her mug. She'd had exactly zero sleep. Unless the fifteen minutes between two-oh-five and two-twenty counted.

She had to call Trent or he'd be calling her. What could she tell him? That Ryan had put a move on her and she'd blown up in his face. Not exactly true. He'd flirted with her. Horrors, Trent. You understand why I did it, don't you? Sure he would.

When the phone rang, she nearly tipped off her stool.

"Hello."

"Hi...Mom."

Dang.

"Hi, son."

"Last...night?"

Trent had a bad habit of abbreviating his communication to save time. She usually called him on it but didn't today.

"It didn't go well, son. Ryan won't be on the board."

"His reason?"

"Um..."

"Mom?"

Dang, he knew her too well. She had a tough enough time lying to strangers, but it was near impossible to lie to Trent.

"Okay, the fact is that I didn't get to ask him."

"Why?" Trent's voice was loaded with suspicion.

"Well, we had a argument of sorts and he left before I could ask him."

"Mom!"

"Son, I can't call him again. I can't."

"Yes!"

"No, son."

"Mom,"

Even angry, his speech was halting.

"I... can't...do...Dad."

Message clear as hell. She didn't have a choice.

"Okay, son, I'll try again."

"Good."

Ryan raked his hand through his still damp hair and stepped out onto his balcony. He set his coffee mug on the banister and gazed off toward the ocean. Not that he could see the water from his balcony. He didn't make enough money to be able to do that.

It wouldn't be long until he could no longer enjoy his coffee out here, dressed only in his gym shorts, his feet bare. Soon enough the geranium plant that his sister had brought him—shouldn't he have watered it recently—would need to come back inside the slider or it would freeze its cajones off. He shrugged and took another slug of coffee. Plants did not have cajones.

Another summer nearly over. Almost time to go back to work for real. At least he didn't have classes to prepare for like some did. But it wouldn't hurt to get out on the ice, loosen up the old knees. How many more years of hockey did those old knees have in them? Shit, that was a depressing thought.

On a blown out sigh, he snagged his cup and meandered back into the house. Maybe he would spend the day at the beach.

Chapter Four

The beach was one of his favorite places. He'd always loved it. Growing up in Wyoming, he'd thought as a kid that the mountains were in his blood. That may have been true at the time, but the moment he saw the ocean, with its blues and greens and the rise and fall of the waves and the sounds and smells, he was hooked. He'd often thought that the best of both worlds would be if the west coast did, indeed, drop off into the Pacific and Wyoming and Colorado would have beach-front property along the foot the Rockies.

The only problem with going to the beach was that it was not nearly as much fun alone. Every chance he got, he'd kidnap his niece and nephew and they'd go to his favorite spot on Cape Cod to play in the surf and boogie board and build sand castles and collect sea shells. Those were things that a lone, middle-aged man looked pretty silly doing by himself. The most he could get away with if he went today was a good hard swim and maybe reading the latest Ludlum book that he'd picked up the last time he'd been at the

mall.

His thoughts drifted, invariably, to a certain dark haired woman who, no doubt, in a bikini, would look good enough to eat. That thought led him further down the road not traveled till he was anchored between her legs, his hands on her delicious ass and his face buried... And that thought led him right back to the realization of how alone he truly was.

With a growl, he set his cup in the sink and headed into the bedroom to throw on his swim trunks and his favorite goofy Hawaiian shirt.

Dee spent the morning calling Ryan. At his office - no, Coach wasn't in today and wasn't expected to be in - at his house - hello, you've reached me, leave a message, blah, blah, blah.

She wondered vaguely if he had a cell phone. Didn't everyone? Ryan seemed like the exception, though. He'd be the guy that steadfastly refused to be available twenty-four-seven. He'd stand on principle even if it was inconvenient.

Ryan Magnussen and his principles...

You, sweetheart, have me confused with another jock. I will admit to wanting you from the moment I first laid eyes on you. But did I jump your bones when you were married?"

"Did I jump your bones when he walked out on you and Trent?"

"How about when Trent played for me, or when he was hurt. Did I back you up against the wall and nail you? No?"

It sure as hell wasn't because I didn't want to."

Ryan Magnussen was, indeed, a man with integrity. A man. No doubt about that. She tapped her pen on the desk and tried to concentrate on the spreadsheet that lay before her. Earnings and costs and profits and future estimates all ran together, blurred. All she could think about were his flashing eyes, green then, and the way he'd walked, tall and proud, right out of the restaurant—but not before paying for the meal, plus some.

Integrity.

And she'd pretty much called him a pig. Even if she didn't still need him on the board, she knew she had to see him again. Just to say she was sorry.

I...can't...do...Dad.

Dee was running out of time.

She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hearthstone Inn, this is Elaine."

"Laney, Dee Bishop. Any chance I can come for the weekend?"

"Just tonight and tomorrow?"

"Um, well, how about through Sunday night?" She had to be in Boston on Monday anyway for the danged board meeting. She could use a mini-vacation. And the Hearthstone Inn on Cape Cod was just the ticket.

Once she had settled things with Ryan, she could sit down on the back porch, watch the surf roll in and totally unwind. It would be her end-of-summer fling.

She stopped.

"Can't you do that, Laney?"

No need to make plans 'till she knew.

"Actually, I can. Shall I juggle folks around so you have the Hibiscus Room?"

"Absolutely. Thanks."

The upstairs room had a window seat that overlooked the bay. From there, you could see a distant lighthouse and sail back to the eighteen hundreds. Yet, the room had its own hot tub. Fully twenty-first century. The best of both worlds.

And tonight, she'd be there. She'd pack books and candles and wonderful bath salts. Anticipation nearly had her humming.

Maybe she could even get the business with Ryan out of the way yet this afternoon. Then she could truly enjoy the getaway.

Dee arrived on Cape Cod around four, having blown off most of the day and leaving work at noon. She checked in, hiked up the stairs and deposited her things in her room. Snatching up the phone book, she headed for the window seat. She needed Ryan's home address. The window was opened for her and, as she leafed through the M's, the sounds of marine life filtered in to her. Sea gulls squawked. A distant bell. The gentle, reliable roll of the waves. She let the music outside calm her, closing her eyes and breathing in the salty air. Please, God, let Ryan say yes.

Ryan pushed his door open with his hip and headed straight for the balcony to deposit his beach chair, letting the book under his arm slide onto the couch. Then he emptied the cooler and left it upside down in the sink to dry.

He was hungry, but wasn't up to cooking an entire meal. Maybe tomorrow night. He'd been anxious to try out a new recipe he'd copied from the latest issue of Gourmet magazine. Maybe he could invite Renee and Chris and the kids over. 'Course then he'd have to hear how he was a better cook than her and that he was spoiling the kids for her mainstay: macaroni and cheese and hot dogs.

Whatever.

Right now, all he wanted to do was to pop open a brew, plunk down on the couch and watch Stargate. Another exciting Friday night for Coach Magnussen. Maybe he'd have two beers. Hot damn!

But first, he'd haul his ass to the shower and wash off the salt and sand.

The address Dee had was obviously for the entire apartment complex. She pulled the Lexus into the parking lot and cursed her stupidity.

She could call him from her cell phone and ask him which apartment he lived in but she wasn't sure she wanted to give him the opportunity to hang up on her. What kind of car did he drive? How should she

know? She idled down the first row in the lot. She could maybe find the mailboxes for the complex. But before she could go with that plan, she spotted it.

A Toyota Spyder with license plates that said BCHOCKEY. She smiled. That was so his car. It was even Boston College maroon and gold. The car was parked in the spot marked 3C. Ideally, it was in the right spot.

Dee pulled into a visitor space, checked her lip gloss in the rearview mirror and, with a deep breath for courage, got out of the car. She tucked her hair behind her ears nervously and started up the stairs.

Then she knocked.

And nothing happened.

She knocked again.

Nothing.

His car was here. That had to be his car. Even if it weren't, 3C's car was here and this was 3C.

One more knock, this time hard enough to hurt her knuckles.

A voice inside.

"Hang on, I'm coming."

And then the door swung open to a very wet Ryan Magnussen, wearing nothing but a towel.

Ryan, a second ago irritated at the incessant racket at his door, now smiled as the color drained from Dee's face. Ha! Served her right for not calling first.

"Are you going to just stand there and drip, or are

you going to invite me in?"

Ryan gritted his teeth on the reply that itched to be made. But the last time he'd allowed himself to flirt hadn't gone well, had it? So, with as much control as he could muster, he stepped back and motioned her in.

"Obviously, I wasn't expecting company. Help yourself to a drink from the fridge, have a seat, and I'll be right back.

He padded away, no doubt leaving a trail of water behind him.

Most guys, most people for that matter, when they apologized for not expecting company, were making excuses for clutter and debris that littered their house. Not Ryan. His house barely looked lived in—not unlike hers.

On one wall, he had hockey pictures. Action shots of him when he played for Boston, some when he played for San Jose. He had pictures of friends, Brett Hull, Joe Sakic, Doug Gilmore, surrounding the largest one, of Ray Bourque kissing the Stanley Cup. He had a picture of Chris Drury, a BC boy, holding the Hobey Baker Award and another of Chris holding the Calder Trophy.

Another wall was occupied by a big screen television and a surround sound system. A leather couch and chair, glass coffee table. No knick-knacks to speak of.

Oddly, one corner of the room was occupied by a small bookshelf devoted to cookbooks. Strange enough for a bachelor, but stranger still, these cookbooks looked to be in perfect shape. Cookbooks, even her cookbooks, not that she had many, normally had rough bindings from being propped open with rolling pins, were spattered with unidentified goop and definitely looked used. His didn't. As she stood pondering this, Ryan came back into the room.

He wore blue jeans and a lightweight tan sweater that clung to him like soft skin.

"Did you get a drink?" He asked.

She shook her head, still absorbed in the mystery.

"You just buy cookbooks? You don't use them?"

She followed him into the kitchen.

An embarrassed laugh echoed from behind the open refrigerator door.

"I have beer and Coke and, I think there's a diet something in back. What'll you have?"

"Nothing. Thanks. I'm fine. You didn't answer my question."

He shut the door, beer in hand, twisted off the top and tipped it to his lips. Then he walked over to a cabinet by the stove and pulled out a tattered binder, handing it to her.

"I'm kinda anal about my cookbooks. I just photocopy any recipe I'm interested in and stick it in there. Don't want to get them dirty." He shrugged. "It's a quirk."

Then he smiled and led her back to the living room.

"So, to what do I owe this visit, Ms. Bishop? I admit, I'm surprised to see you."

Surprised was a minor understatement. He'd nearly choked when he opened the door to see her standing there.

He'd had to take extra time throwing clothes on in order to avoid showing off his hard on.

Dee sat down on the couch and crossed her perfect legs. The slide of her stockings froze Ryan for a moment, until he could summon his hide-and-seek control.

"Well, first of all, I wanted to apologize to you for being a bitch to you on Tuesday."

Cool. He waited. When she didn't go on, he broke the silence.

"Go ahead."

He watched her play absently with the face of her watch. He liked knowing that she was nervous.

"Go ahead?"

"Yeah," Ryan said, easing himself into the plush chair a few feet from her, "go ahead and apologize."

He knew he was torturing her but couldn't quite bring himself to stop. The color stood bright on her cheekbones and her hand just might have been shaking.

"Oh, I thought that's what I'd done."

"No."

"No?"

"No. To be precise, you said that you'd come to apologize. So, go ahead and apologize."

He could see her tense, like she was debating whether to get up and leave in a huff or whether to ride out the storm. But she was a tough lady, not one to run from a fight.

"Okay. I'm sorry, Ryan," she spoke slowly, evenly, with effort, "for acting like such a bitch on Tuesday."

Her gaze came up to meet his, challenging him.

"Okay. I accept your apology. Continue." He tried hard not to grin but wasn't sure he'd been successful.

"Well," De said, sitting forward, uncrossing her legs, again with the swish of nylon or silk or whatever, "I still have a proposition to make you."

"Really." How he truly struggled to not smile, to not be a pig.

Dee stood up and began pacing.

"Yes. I'm sure you're aware that Trent and I started a foundation to educate people on the dangers and effects of concussions, especially in sports."

She didn't wait for an acknowledgment, but went into what appeared to be a pre-rehearsed sales pitch. If she'd been selling cars, he'd have gotten out his checkbook. But the desperation in both her voice and the size of her hand movements made him pause. At last, she quit talking and stood, hands clasped, waiting for a reply.

"Let me see if I have this straight. First you took me to dinner - well, tried to take me to dinner - and now you're here in my apartment," he paused for effect, making her squirm, "in order to ask me to fill a

vacancy on the board of directors of the Trent Bishop Foundation?"

Instead of just saying "yes", though, she began babbling again. About how much they needed him, why his position as Trent's coach at the time of the injury would add so much to the effort. On and on she went, leaving Ryan's head spinning. Why on earth was she so frantic about all this? It was baffling. On the other hand, there was one part of him that wasn't confused in the least. Watching her move around in his apartment left his cock knowing exactly what it thought. He gritted his teeth and concentrated.

"Dee. Stop."

She stopped in mid-sentence, mid-step, and stared at him, with just the hint of tears in her eyes.

Ryan patted the couch where she'd been sitting.

"Sit down."

She did. Well, she was sitting on the outside.

"Why are you so desperate for me to take this position?"

"I'm not." The words came out in a whoosh and she started to get up.

Ryan put a hand on her knee, making her stay put. She looked at his hand, then into his eyes. He couldn't tell for a moment if she wanted to slap him or kiss him. That wasn't an issue for him.

"Yes, Dee, you are. And I can tell you this much. Unless you tell me why, I won't even consider the position."

This time, hand or no hand, she launched herself

off the couch and into full defense mode.

"I'm not desperate. I just thought you might like to make up a bit for Trent's injury."

Ryan let that go. He knew damn well she didn't mean it like it came out.

Her voice rose higher as she went on with her duty and honor speech, jumping from one extreme position to another. Ryan just sat back in the chair and let her play herself out. When she finally offered him money, whatever he wanted, he jumped out of the chair.

"Knock it off, Dee. Now you're insulting me."

She stopped, her mouth still open, ready for the next volley. When he approached, putting his hands on her shoulders, he could feel her slump a bit in defeat.

He lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"Tell me the truth."

Tears filled her eyes and Ryan melted—he was a sucker for tears—and pulled her into his arms. He held her as she fought silently for control. Then she pulled away and went to stand before the sliding glass door, staring out towards the sea.

Ryan left her for a moment, went to the kitchen for a glass of ice water. When he came back, he moved past her and slid the door open.

"C'mon. Let's sit out here. Then you can tell me everything." He handed her the glass and took a seat on the balcony. Very quietly, she joined him.

It was a few minutes before she spoke.

"If you don't take the position, Greg will."

Well, there it was. The truth. The mention of the jerkwad twisted Ryan's guts. The guy didn't belong on a foundation. More like he belonged *under* one. But that still didn't really explain her desperation. Not entirely.

"And?"

Again, silence encompassed them.

"And I don't want Trent to have to deal with him."

Ryan could certainly understand that. Fleetinglly, he wondered just how many times Trent had actually seen his dad. During the time that Trent spent at BC, Ryan had never seen the sperm donor. Not once. Dee was definitely protective of her son, but the emotion she'd displayed convinced Ryan that, even now, she hadn't given him the full scoop.

"And?"

Now Dee's foot began tapping and she drummed her fingernails rhythmically on the arm of her chair.

With a deep sigh, she pulled herself from the chair and went to the bannister. Ryan allowed her the digression.

"If Greg takes that position..."

Thirty seconds passed before she went on. "Then it's only a matter of time until he has the entire board calling me Desiree D'Lisch and wondering if I'm capable of anything more than..."

Her voice wavered.

"...than what I can do flat on my back."

Chapter Five

Ryan didn't know what to say. It wasn't the first time he'd heard Greg's nickname for Dee. It wasn't the first time he'd hated it. Cocksucker Greg had always said that Dee was only good for one thing. He'd never give her any credit at all. And that had pissed Ryan off beyond all reason.

And she was right. Greg would, no doubt, do that. And more.

Ryan got to his feet and joined Dee at the banister. He took her clenched hands and brought them to his lips.

Dee fought to stay standing. His touch was nearly her undoing. Her insides clenched with desire and longing. The warmth of his nearness touched her heart, softening it somehow. His aftershave was subtle, just barely there, but overwhelming nonetheless.

She couldn't do this! She had to stop it before... before she *was* only Desire D'Lisch, before all the years of struggle and hard work and denial lay crushed at her feet.

Ryan Magnussen had the power in his hands to be

her downfall. And that was not going to happen.

"Stop it!" It came out almost in a shriek. She pulled her hands away and moved aside, hugging her arms to her chest, as if she could protect herself from this one man.

But he didn't retreat. He pulled closer again, taking her shoulders and turning her to face him. She had nowhere to go. She'd moved as far as the side wall would let her. And here he was, gazing at her with that look, that smoldering look he'd had before, for years, the one he'd carefully hidden many times. He didn't hide it now.

"So," his hand came up to touch her face, brushing a stray hair back from her eyes, lingering there.

She couldn't breath.

"...you're telling me that you don't feel this thing between us," his thumb traced her lower lip, "this charge that's been here, right here..." He lowered his mouth to hers, his lips just barely touching hers. "...for the last twenty years? You can't convince me you don't feel it too."

And then he kissed her again. No soft, sweet kiss this time. His hands still held her face. His tongue swept aside any protest she might have summoned. He kissed her full on, a kiss that jeopardized her soul.

Oh, God.

She shoved him away with the little strength she had left.

"Oh, God."

He stepped back a bit, not nearly far enough, but still his hands hovered on her arms.

"So, you do feel it."

She pulled herself together to stand as tall as she could—he still towered over her—and took in a breath.

"Of course I do. But I have rules."

With a short laugh that held zero humor, he turned away, leaning on the banister, and ran a hand through his hair.

"Rules."

The way he said it left no doubt how he felt about the statement.

"Yes. Rules. Rules that kept me going for the last twenty years. Rules that got me through. Rules that made me who I am now."

She could feel the hysteria rising. She tried to lower her voice, to speak slowly.

"Rules that kept me from being...what Greg thought I was. Rules..." Now her voice nearly failed her, "... that you make me want to break."

She didn't dare look at him. Yet, she could feel him relax beside her, almost feel him smile.

"I like breaking rules, sweetheart," he growled.

For an instant his tone reminded her of Han Solo. The way Han would get in Leia's space, finger in her face and tell her off in no uncertain terms, yet all with the underlying promise of hot sex. Any other time, she might have smiled. She couldn't now.

"Well, I don't."

Dee turned from the banister and walked into the house, heading for the door. As an afterthought, she turned back.

"So, Coach," she said at the doorway.

He stood facing her now, leaning against the banister with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Will you take the board position?"

"I'll think about it. When do you need an answer?"

"Monday morning, ten o'clock."

She turned to leave.

Then changed her mind again.

She stomped up to him, her own finger at his chest.

"You said if I told you the truth, you'd take the position."

Ryan let her jab him several times before he took her wrist in his hand.

"No, sweetheart. What I said was that if you told me the truth, I'd *consider* it."

He smiled at her and pulled her hand again to his lips.

"I'll consider it."

She yanked her hand away and spun away. When she got to the door, she spoke again, without looking up, in a small voice.

"I'll still pay you."

"I'll still consider it."

"I'm at the Hearthstone Inn on Cape Cod if you make up your mind."

He knew the place. It was on the beach, not far from where he took the kids to play, not far from where he swam today.

"For how long?"

"Until Monday morning."

That said, she walked out, closing the door softly

behind her.

Ryan stayed on the balcony, pretty much frozen in place. Revelations had his head in a tail-spin. He didn't even turn to watch her walk to her car, but he heard her pull away.

At last, he worked his way back into the living room. He collapsed onto the couch in defeat, having passed through a fog of her perfume.

That perfume, White Shoulders - it was really the only perfume he knew the name of. And that was only because he'd been with Greg once, a lifetime ago, when he'd bought it for Dee - that perfume was inexorably linked in his soul with adoration. And now he sat, slugged back the last of his beer and allowed his heart to weep. Weep for a woman whose heart had been so damaged by someone she trusted that she'd walled herself up in a dungeon of efficiency and feigned success. Weep for this precious woman who had probably never known true love and had, no doubt, never experienced the wild abandon of mind-numbing sex. If she had, it wouldn't have been so easy to turn it all off.

He scrubbed his hand over his face.

Maybe it hadn't been easy.

He sat up.

And, if he had any say in the matter...

He stood up.

...it wouldn't be easy now.

He swiped his keys from his desk.
In fact, it would be damned near impossible.

Dee lit the candles that she'd spread out around the room. She laid out the bath salts and shook the seal from one of the fluffy purple bathrobes that matched the decor.

The entire room was done in purple and yellow. The curtains were calico, the bedspread striped. A Tiffany lamp, with a full spectrum of lavender to royal purple glass occupied the corner behind the easy chair.

This was her favorite room here. The others were mostly decorated in nautical themes—not unattractive—but this one felt like home. In fact, she'd told the owners that, if they ever planned on extending the nautical design to this room, she'd buy it.

"The whole room?" they'd said, aghast.

"If you'd let me." Dee had smiled at the misunderstanding and assured them that she just meant the furnishings.

But now she sat in that overstuffed chair, just sat with only the light from the candles. Sat in her blouse and slip and panties. She hardly had the energy to fill the tub and finish undressing.

Startled from her inaction by a knock on the door, she managed to throw her skirt back on and padded to the door in bare feet. She opened the door a few

inches and peered into the hallway.

Ryan watched her as she realized it was him. The room flickered and silhouetted her in soft light.

Confusion. Her lips pursed and her brows drew together.

Then recognition.

And awareness.

"May I come in?" He tried hard for an innocent tone, not sure he succeeded. For a minute, he thought she was going to refuse. But then she stepped back and opened the door.

"Did you make a decision?" she asked, gently closing the door.

"Yeah, I did."

She stood in the center of the room, barefooted, blouse untucked, hands clenched with apprehension. And Ryan thought that maybe, just maybe, she'd never looked so good. It was all he could do to tell and not show—to talk to her instead of backing her toward the bed and kissing her 'til she couldn't breathe.

"I decided to take you up on your offer to pay me."

She swallowed, then let out a relieved sigh.

"How much do you want?" She crossed to the dresser and opened her purse.

Ryan followed her, taking her hands and turning her toward him. They'd been here before, hadn't they?

"I don't want your money, Dee."

Confusion skittered across her face, replaced by surprise. Then suspicion.

"Here are my terms."

They were inches apart. He could hear the breath catch in her throat.

"I will take your board position. In return, you will be mine until Monday morning."

It took a second for his meaning to sink in. Well, maybe not his true meaning, but what she thought he'd meant.

He'd expected a reaction.

Maybe she'd slap him. No doubt she'd be pissed. And she'd absolutely rant at him for being a typical jock - whatever that meant.

But he hadn't counted on what he saw now.

Stark terror.

Animal caught in the headlights terror.

And, again, he turned to mush. But this time, he carefully hid it.

"Dee." His voice sounded oddly calm even to him, "I would never hurt you."

She stepped back, still trembling.

"So, you'll take the position," she said, her voice little more than a whisper, "if I have sex with you from now till Monday morning."

Shit, shit, shit.

That's probably what his proposition *had* sounded like. He'd never been great at putting what he felt for her into words. A point he was proving right now.

"Hon, this isn't just about sex."

At the *yeah sure* look she gave him, he continued.

"Oh, it is about sex, but not *just* about sex."

She arched a brow. *I told you so.*

"It's about the person that you are, and the person you should be. It's about how I've spent twenty years wanting to say things to you and touch you and make love to you, but the timing was never right. Or maybe I was just the biggest chicken shit on the planet."

He paused, trying to gauge her reaction, all wide brown eyes and pale porcelain skin. She squared her shoulders and smiled ruefully.

"I guess you've left me no choice."

He wanted to tell her that there was always a choice, that he'd never force her to do anything - especially have sex - hello, that was *rape* - that he was a complete marshmallow if she cried or even looked scared.

But he was on a roll, and she was getting ready to say yes. So, he shut the hell up and let her accept.

Dee couldn't believe her reply. She'd just given Ryan Magnussen carte blanche to have his way with her. He could rip her clothes off right here, right now and push her back onto that beautiful bed and screw her. She'd given him permission to use her in any perverse way his fantasy took him.

He could even hurt her.

And yet, the look in his eyes as he eased toward her said none of that. There was hunger, yes. Hadn't he said he'd wanted her since he first laid eyes on her? But his eyes, warm brown in the candlelight, said only one thing—she could trust him. He moved

closer, closer still, his hands coming up to cup her face.

She closed her eyes and he kissed her, a soft, lingering kiss that only promised passion. When he pulled back, and she opened her eyes, he grinned at her, his eyes all twinkly with mischief.

He cleared his throat and held out his hand to her.

“Well, then, let’s get started, shall we?”

Chapter Six

Panic surged through her for an instant. Panic and more than a little anticipation. Anticipation that made her heart beat faster, her cheeks feel hot and her insides melt.

With grim determination and a courage born of desperation, she took a deep breath and put her hand in his.

Still with the mirth in his eyes, he brushed her hand with his lips, then began to lead her toward the bed. But, when he got there, he merely leaned over and blew out the candle. He pulled her gently around the room, extinguishing each candle without a word. Stopping at the Tiffany lamp, he leaned back and turned it on low, then led her to the door.

"My shoes..."

He just shook his head and kept moving. Out the door, down the hall, down the stairs and through the dining room to the back door.

Before they left the back porch, Ryan stopped, letting go of her hand for a moment, and tugged off his shoes and socks. Then he took her hand again and led her out onto the beach.

They'd walked, hand in hand, for maybe five minutes before he spoke.

"Where'd you grow up, Dee?"

Dee smiled to herself. It was a completely hokey thing for him to ask, so lets-get-to-know-each-other-better. And yet, walking in the dark, the warm sand squishing between her toes, his hand holding hers, it felt so good.

"Kansas."

He laughed. "Funny, you don't have a Kansas accent and you don't have hay in your teeth."

"City. Kansas City. My ma and pa didn't have a corn farm," she said with her best yeehaw accent. "I've never been on a horse and I don't eat black-eyed peas and ham hocks on New Year's Day."

Ryan blew out a laugh.

"I think that's Tennessee, hon," he said as he dragged her to the water and led her ankle deep into the surf.

Ryan held her there as she shrieked and tried to pull away. The water soaked the bottoms of his jeans, but it was so worth it.

If he hadn't been so determined in his game plan, and if she hadn't had on an obviously expensive skirt and blouse, he'd have laid her down right there, right where the water lapped at their feet, and made love to her.

Instead, he led her further down the beach pulling her hand into the crook of his arm. He had lots of questions he could ask, but purposely avoided talk that could lead her mind back to Greg.

"Never been on a horse, huh?

"Huh-uh."

"We'll have to do that some time." Oops, that might have been the wrong thing to say. He hurried on, mentally sorting through questions for something innocuous.

"And you?" she asked before he finished.

"I've been on a horse."

She laughed and squeezed his arm.

"Where did you grow up?"

"Wyoming."

"Oh, then, I guess you *have* been on a horse."

"Cheyenne, the city. My folks didn't raise cattle and we didn't rope them doggies and I ain't never been in a rodeo."

"Touche."

They walked on in such perfect tranquility that Dee was hesitant to break it with words. Music from a restaurant down the way drifted out on the breeze. The Righteous Brothers. It was almost surreal. Who plays the Righteous Brothers any more? Dee wondered for an instant if Ryan had arranged it. She dismissed her suspicion with a small laugh.

"What?"

"Nothing."

But the silence had been broken and now, Ryan steered her around, back toward the bed and breakfast.

"The music."

He, too, chuckled.

"It felt for a moment like we had walked through a

time warp there.”

Dee didn’t dare speak what she was thinking. How different her life would have been... actually, she didn’t even dare think that.

A profound sense of loss swept through her for a moment as they approached the back porch of the inn. That was instantly followed by an even more acute sense of impending doom.

Ryan would lead her back to her room. He’d look at her with that steamy, flat-out-can’t-wait-to-have-you-naked look and she would freeze, inside and out. And then he would either take what she’d promised or he’d finally understand and the deal would be off. He’d laugh sarcastically and walk away. Both eventualities made her feel sick inside.

But, then, he stopped at the top step of the porch and sat down. The soft light from the back door made him look about twenty-five as he smiled up at her and patted the step below him. Then he oh-so-tenderly tugged her down to sit down between his bent knees.

“The moon should be rising soon,” he whispered and pulled her back to lean against his chest. “It should be almost full.”

Dee smiled as a new, sweet honey coursed through her body, filling her with something she’d forced herself to think long dead. Even as she smiled and wondered at the feeling, it was overshadowed. First by the determined fear that had guarded her for so long, and then by something else, something even more primal.

Desire.

His arms around her, his breath against her hair, the hint of his cologne which mingled with the scent of him. He hadn't touched her in that way, his hands were clasped around her, and yet the pull inside her was overwhelming.

Without thinking or planning, she laid her cheek against his arm and watched the moon rise, his lips warm against her neck.

Ryan was not at all sure he would not explode right there. If she couldn't feel his cock hard against her back, she wasn't paying attention. And yet, he knew from the way she was breathing that she was most definitely paying attention.

His every instinct raged against the game plan. Through sheer force of his will, he unfolded himself from the stairs and held out his hand to help her up.

"It's late."

The dreamy look in her eyes fled, replaced with wariness. Again, he led her by the hand, this time up the stairs to her room.

At the door, he steeled himself, and reached up to cup her face again in his hands. She closed her eyes and her body leaned into his. Even if her head wasn't in the game, her body sure as hell was.

Game plan. Game plan. Game plan.

Ryan hovered there, his lips so close to hers, with what felt like a civil war going on inside him, before he quickly ended it by kissing her on the forehead and stepping back.

"Tomorrow night, dinner at my place. Be there at six."

He took the key from her breast pocket, opened the door for her and slipped it into her hand.

Before the southern confederacy could muster their forces for a new battle, Ryan did an about face and left her standing there.

Dee closed the door behind her and collapsed against it. For a moment there, she'd expected him to kiss her, really kiss her. For a moment there, she'd expected him to sweep her up into his arms and carry her over to the bed. For a moment there, she'd actually wanted him to.

And now she leaned heavily against the door, listening to his Spyder roar to life from below the window and she wondered if she had the strength to walk over to the chair.

When she finally made it over there, she sagged down, and leaned back, pulling the throw pillow to her chest. Her head swirled around what had just happened.

She'd offered herself to this man in exchange for his agreement. And then he'd flipped everything upside down and shown her the most romantic evening she'd ever had, the stuff of Bogart and Bacall. And if, when she'd made the deal with the devil, sex had been the absolute last thing she wanted with Ryan Magnussen, now, it was at the top of the list. And yet he was right about one thing. It wasn't just about sex.

Ryan pulled into his parking place, turned off the engine and sat there, head against the steering wheel, just trying to get his bearings. The confederate general down south had pestered him all the way home, nearly forcing him to turn the car around.

He'd managed to follow the game plan, ideally leaving her wanting more. He sure as hell wanted more. The amazing thing was that not only did he want her in bed under him, on top of him, didn't matter—he wanted to again hold her hand, to just spend time with her.

It was something he'd pretty much given up on over the years. And yet it certainly hadn't taken much encouragement for the dream to retrieve a pulse, one that pounded within his every cell.

Six o'clock tomorrow night seemed like eons away.

Dee thought that spending time in the hot tub would help her relax, eventually help her sleep. She couldn't have been more wrong.

The hot water swirling around her only intensified the maelstrom of yearning that she'd been sucked into.

She found herself wondering how long it would take Ryan to get back here if she called him, begged him to unlock her prison.

It wasn't a prison. It was her salvation. That safe place had allowed her to venture out and take command of her life. Because of that place, she had

proven that she was intelligent, savvy, and successful. Without it, she'd have been nothing more than a whore.

A whore?

Why would she be a whore? It's not like she ever would have had casual sex at every opportunity.

Ryan Magnussen would never have called her a whore.

As she sat in the fragrant water, bubbles tickling her nose, she had a moment of true clarity.

This was not about her.

This was totally about the man who had nearly ruined her.

And she'd nearly let him.

The light bulb moment did nothing, though, to ease her fears. She had unequivocally walled off that area of her being. Ryan seemed certain that the brick and mortar could be demolished.

Dee wasn't so sure.

Chapter Seven

Remarkably, the sunshine peeking through his shades woke Ryan after seven in the morning. He obviously had slept.

A half hour and warm shower later, Ryan took the Globe and his coffee mug out onto the balcony. He turned first to the sports section. On his way, though, he had to pass the entertainment section and his attention was drawn to the headline "Road Trips Galore." He paused, an idea taking shape in his head.

With a shrug, promising himself to consider the possibility, he continued on to the box scores.

Dee pulled the blanket up over her head in an attempt to ignore the knocking at the door. Relaxation and revelation had done nothing to help her get to sleep and she remembered seeing midnight, one and two o'clock. And it was only nine now.

With a moan, she tugged the extra pillow over and pressed it to her ears.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

Ryan's voice found a way through.

"We're going on a road trip."

Ugh. Come back after noon, crazy man.

"Desiree," he crooned.

"Go away."

"Not gonna happen, hon. We have a deal." His voice held a certain warning. "Now, get up. I'll wait down in the dining room. You have half an hour."

Dee crawled out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. Her hair stuck up in ugly spikes and mascara smudges gave her a ghoulish look. One of the great mysteries in life: when you slept well, your makeup looked okay in the morning, when you hardly slept, all mascara evacuated your lashes and took refuge under your eyes. If Ryan could have seen her, he'd run screaming from the room.

A half hour. Surely he jested.

Two blueberry muffins and forty-five minutes later, Dee made an appearance. She looked completely beautiful and totally out of his league.

He wore jeans and a polo shirt.

She wore a light yellow linen dress and fancy shoes to match.

He rose at her approach, but with the lump in his

throat, he couldn't manage a smile.

She wasn't really smiling either, it was more like a grimace.

"Not a morning person, hon?"

She flopped down and gave him a look that would have made an Eskimo shiver.

Coffee, she needed coffee.

"Tea, I need tea."

The breakfast attendant brought her tea and replenished the muffins.

"Ma'am, would you like some eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, anything else."

The same look silenced her.

"I think our girl here wanted to sleep the day away," he said by way of apology.

"I'm sorry," Dee said to the girl. Then she turned back to him and stuck out her tongue.

He just raised an eyebrow at her and refused to say what popped into his head.

"So, don't you have any decent clothes."

She nearly choked on her tea, looked down at her dress and up at him.

"Excuse me?"

"Jeans, something comfortable. Something for a road trip."

She threw back her shoulders as if he'd insulted her. "Of course I have jeans."

He lifted his hand indicating how she was dressed.

"And?"

In her prim way, she tipped her nose up and reached for a muffin. Oh-so-delicately, she cut it in

half and buttered it. Then she took a dainty bite, all the while ignoring his question.

"Dee?"

"Hmmm?" She smiled sweetly as she chewed.

"Jeans?"

She swallowed. "Didn't bring any with me." She took another bite and chased it with a sip of tea.

Okay, this could be remedied.

"Fine, we'll stop and get you some."

Again with the insulted look.

"You're going to buy me clothes?"

"No, I'm going to buy you jeans and a T-shirt. I'm sure you thought that our deal meant you'd spend the weekend naked, and much as I'm looking forward to that, for now we need to get you some jeans."

Ryan tossed the bag that held her yellow dress and shoes into the back and he dropped into the seat without opening the door.

Dee, on the other hand, opened her door and lowered herself into the passenger seat, dressed now in Wranglers, a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, and Nikes.

Once she was awake, things improved. In the store, they'd actually laughed and had a good time when she'd insisted on socks to match Mickey. When they got to the check out and he pulled out his wallet, she'd swatted him and insisted that she could buy her own clothes, thank you very much. He'd finally relented.

Ryan had steadfastly refused, though, to tell her where they were going. He just smiled and drove.

And before long, Dee forgot to ask.

It was a beautiful day, perfect for going anywhere in a convertible. Dee laid her head back and closed her eyes, letting the wind blow through her hair, inhaling the salt air. Ryan had the stereo cranked, playing oldies and whistling along.

He was a very good whistler.

When she looked over at him, he shrugged.

"I learned to whistle 'cause I can't sing a note."

Ryan's hand was poised on the gear shift and Dee had an overwhelming urge to lay hers on top of his tanned, strong one.

She was so engrossed in those thoughts that she jumped when he spoke.

"You can change the channel if you like."

She just shook her head and closed her eyes against the pull. She clasped her hands in her lap in self-defense.

At last, Dee felt the car slow and pull to a stop. She tugged her eyes open, not able to remember the last time she was so relaxed.

They were in the small parking lot of a tiny café that overlooked Cape Cod. The sun reflected off the waves, making her squint. It was lovely.

"We're here. You ready for the best hot dog on the East Coast?"

"Sure. Yum."

Not normally a hot dog kinda gal, but it actually sounded great.

He never touched her. Not once. They laughed. She dared him to sing along with the Beach Boys. He did. She cracked up. She took the returned challenge and sang every word.

They stopped on the way back at an adorable little shop on a quaint street. They bought homemade fudge, which he fed her in excruciating leisure as they sat on a park bench in front of the store. Ryan pulled off tiny bites of chocolate, holding them to her lips and grinning when she took them into her mouth. Their eyes locked, and for several moments, the world faded away. Then, he tossed the rest of the fudge back into the bag and led her back to the car.

When Ryan stopped in the middle of the street to rescue a runaway shopping cart, Dee laughed till she cried.

They argued about politics, CNN or Fox news, Democrat or Republican, and decided to move on to a safer subject.

They discussed the Revolutionary War.

They debated the virtues of banana splits over hot fudge sundaes.

Yet, all that time he never touched her. Never held her hand. Never took her arm. Never kissed her.

He dropped her back at the B&B, urging her to grab a cat nap and reminded her to be at his house at six for dinner.

Ryan Magnussen was a pathetic moron. That's all there was to it. He'd used his advantage to bribe a beautiful woman to spend time with him. How pitiful was that?

He'd spent the last twenty years comparing every woman he dated to this woman, a sad state of affairs. He'd never had the balls to go after what he really wanted. Spent all that time lonely.

And now he'd managed to prove to himself that she really was as sweet and funny and smart as he'd thought. But, if given an opportunity, she'd pass on dinner tonight, pass on spending the rest of the evening having hot monkey sex and pass on the fantasy that Sunday could have been.

For crying out loud, what kind of a guy forced his affections on a woman?

"Loser. Loser. Loser." Ryan pounded his right-handed 'L' against his forehead.

Sometimes integrity was a damn fool thing to have.

Ryan picked up the phone and dialed the bed and breakfast.

"Hearthstone Inn, this is Elaine, may I help you?"

"Yes, would you please connect me with Dee Bishop's room?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir, our rooms don't have phones. It's a b and b thing."

"Of course." Damn it.

"I'd be glad to take a note up to her room, if you like."

Crap. How do you put that into a message? Dee, you don't have to be my sex slave for the next few days. That would be great. Or, Dee, I'm a complete jerk and you don't deserve this kind of treatment and the deal is off, but I'll still be on the board if you want. Not.

"I'll just call her cell phone. Thanks anyway, Elaine."

"You're welcome."

Ryan depressed the hook and then tried her cell phone. When the voice mail picked up, he was still unprepared to leave a message.

Wing it.

"Hey, Dee. Listen, I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about the deal we made. Much as I'd love to have you for dinner—oops, I mean, over for dinner and, well, frankly I had in mind to spend the rest of the evening and into tomorrow making love to you. But it was a jerky thing for me to do to you. So, if you still want me on the board, let me know. I'd be honored to do that for you. Well, have a great time at the Inn. It's a great place. Again, I'm sorry."

He hung up the phone and, with a strangled growl, kicked hope in the ass. Then he went to the kitchen to sort out the groceries he'd bought.

The problem with sleeping in the middle of the day was that, invariably, you dreamed. Or at least she did.

When her cell phone vibrated across the dresser,

she woke up. But still in the gloom of the dreams, she didn't get up right away.

It was like carrying ghosts around in your head.

Her mother's ghost, mostly.

The one that she could still conjure up when she put on a new dress, the one that wouldn't let her sit down until after she had been on stage, for fear she'd muss the ruffles.

The ghost that never said a word but always looked so danged disappointed when Desiree walked away with only Miss Runner Up, which, to that ghost, meant Miss Failure.

The ghost that insisted that Desiree *liked* being a beauty queen and that it was all about positioning for the future.

The ghost that, even now, made Dee wonder why she'd been cursed with this face and that body.

The body that Greg had insisted could get her anything she wanted. Money, fame, the adoration of any man. Except he always smirked when he told her that what she really wanted was to get a degree in business and work her way up to CEO somewhere.

Once he'd told her that she could more realistically screw her way to CEO. But, what the hell would she do once she got there?

Dee sat up and scrubbed her hand over her face and through her hair.

She had gotten her degree, her MBA in fact, and she *was* CEO of her own company. She'd taken the job that Greg had ridiculed—a lowly clerk in a small lingerie shop, he thought she should model the

inventory —and she now owned the store and had branched out into two other cities. Boston was next on her list.

And she had never had to sleep with someone to get what she wanted.

She threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

Never.

She took a deep breath and lifted her chin.

Well, not until now.

She sank back down on the bed.

Not until now.

Chapter Eight

Ryan stood staring at all the makings for Salmon Olympia. Maybe if he went ahead with cooking it, he could get his mind off being a colossal failure.

With a renewed mission—cook dinner—that's as far as he dared go—he grabbed his apron and began slicing the lemon.

Dee stood in the shower, letting the water run over her, imagining. The reality was that she longed to be with Ryan again. The deal was perfect.

The fantasy of his hands on her face, on her breasts, moving down her stomach - like the water did right now - was something that she realized was not foreign to her. She'd carried it with her for years.

And now she had the perfect opportunity to find out. The perfect excuse. Thank goodness for the deal.

When she came out of the bathroom, her cell phone beeped, reminding her that she had a message. She tucked the towel in at her breasts and retrieved the

noisy little bugger.

Even before he'd said three words, she was hooked. Anticipation coursed through her, leaving her warm and weak and wanting.

And then the voice said the deal was off.

It said that he wanted to spend the evening making love to her.

It said that the fantasy was just that - a fantasy that was not going to become reality.

And the parting shot was that he'd still do what he'd promised. No strings attached.

She pressed the off button without deleting the message.

The evening and weekend stood stark before her. What once had been a promised time of relaxation and recovery, now assured her only the desolation of being alone.

Soaking in the hot tub, filled with sweet smelling bath salts, now seemed only a way to kill time. The books she'd brought now only a idle occupation that laid between now and Monday morning.

Empty.

Boring.

And way too many hours before she could see him again. She hated that.

If she let it, her life would go right back to where she left off. To the safe place, where safety meant no one getting near, no hot dogs at beach, no long hand-

in-hand strolls on the beach, no one to whistle along with the oldies station.

Even if she could have—and she didn't think she could—she was absolutely, dead-on sure that she didn't want to.

And so she went to the closet and selected the prettiest, dreamiest sundress she'd brought with her. She dabbed White Shoulders on her pulse points, fixed her hair, put on her pearl earrings, and, with no regrets, she drove to Ryan's.

Ryan checked his watch and flipped on the oven. It was almost six. Preparing the salmon had been only a momentary distraction. So, too, cutting the asparagus.

The chocolate-raspberry torte he'd bought at the bakery still sat on the counter, mocking him.

He had so wanted to watch her eat that. The fudge this afternoon had opened a window into her soul. She adored chocolate. Feeding it to her, bit by scrumptious bit had been a totally sensuous experience. The torte had promised ecstasy.

He'd be in chocolate heaven alone, though.

Alone.

Bereft.

Forsaken.

Desolate.

Loser with a capital L.

The doorbell interrupted further self berating.

Maybe it was the paper boy, collecting his three

dollars. Maybe *he* liked salmon and asparagus with hollandaise. Maybe *he* became orgasmic over chocolate. Eww. There was a horrible thought.

Wiping his hands absently on the apron, Ryan went to the door and pulled it open.

His brain stopped working.

Dee stood there smiling.

And if tears and fears turned him to mush, that smile nearly knocked him over.

She wore a swishy, sweet, flowy dress that left her arms and neck bare. She smelled like feminine perfection. And she was smiling at him.

Holy shit!

Holy shit was right. She must not have gotten the message.

Panic rose in his gut. Now he'd have to turn her away in person. When she looked so good.

Damn it all!

"Can I come in?"

Regardless of the answer, she swept under his arm and into the room.

He still couldn't move, though, and spoke directly into the hall.

"You didn't get my message?"

"Oh, that. Yes, I did."

Well, then, what the hell...

"I decided to come anyway, see if you could cook better than you sing."

Ryan coughed and closed the door.

Hope, with its fairy tale facade, had dragged itself up from the mats and was standing now, defying

him. And, he couldn't come up with a coherent thought.

Dee's heart was in her throat. When she'd come busting over here, it hadn't occurred to her that she might not be welcome. Now it did.

Ryan stood like a statue, turned halfway around, not quite making it all the way to face her.

A flash of pure humiliation swept through her, leaving her blushing and shaken. Greg's condescending smile.

"Is that okay?"

She had to know. If she'd managed to completely screw up, she needed to know this minute so she could back out of the room — flee to safety.

Except there was no safety. Not any more.

An eternity passed while she waited for some movement, something, anything. Metaphorically speaking, she was standing there with her johnson hangin' out, as Trent so loved to say.

"Ryan?"

"Huh?"

"It is okay that I'm here?"

Finally he moved, turning to face her. He looked adorable with the apron and the expression of pure delight on his face.

She could let out her breath now.

"Yes, it's fine. It's more than fine. It's..."

He stopped and considered.

"You're sure you got my message?"

He was backpedaling, making sure there was no misunderstanding. It was so cute and so honorable.

She jumped in further.

"You mean the one that said that you had in mind to, um, how did you put it, have me for dinner?"

"Uh..."

"And perhaps spend the rest of the evening and into tomorrow making love to me? That message?"

"Yeah," he whispered, as if his voice wouldn't quite work.

"Oh, well the, yes. I got that message. And it all sounded way too good to pass up."

Ryan watched her sweep toward him, the lump in his throat the size of Texas, all girly flowers and sweet smelling skin. Somebody definitely needed to pinch him.

"I don't smell anything cooking, Ryan. But you look adorable in the apron."

Now she was right there, right in front of him, smiling up at him, her hands at his waist.

Uh, food. Yeah. Okay. Salmon. Right.

"I was just preheating the oven," he managed.

He definitely needed to regroup, get control, get his voice back. He had to get a grip on the insane urge to dance. He closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, placing a kiss on the top of her head. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

She stepped back and let him move toward the kitchen.

"That would be perfect."

Dee followed him into the kitchen, admiring his ass on the way. He really was built. He still wore the

jeans and polo shirt from earlier, but now his feet were bare and he'd added the apron. It was plain white, nothing cutesy on it like 'kiss the cook' or maybe she would have. She might anyway.

It stunned her a bit that this side of her personality, the sensual one, the one she'd worked so hard to wall up, had come to life with such a vengeance. Yet, the feelings were so new, so almost fragile, that she hesitated to give them voice. She wasn't sure she knew how.

Taking a sip of her wine, she headed for safer waters.

"So what are you fixing?"

Ryan straightened up and closed the oven door.

"Salmon Olympia, asparagus with hollandaise, basmati rice and this," he held up the most perfect chocolatey dessert this side of Gourmet Cooking magazine.

"Salmon Olympia, like Washington State?"

"You'd think. But, alas, no. It was so named for a friend of mine who blew out her knee. We called her Queen O-lymp-ia. It was her recipe."

"Ahh. Well, I can't wait."

Dee watched him work, immersed in what he was doing. No recipes, just Ryan doing what he knew to do.

His hands.

God.

"You know I'm not very good at this."

He looked up from his hollandaise.

"At what?"

"At flirting. At being available."

This time he didn't flinch, didn't cough, didn't even blink. His gaze burned into hers.

"Is that what you're doing? Flirting? Making yourself available?"

Wow. Who knew that the question, put out there so bluntly, would leave her shaky. It took a moment to think clearly. Well, more clearly anyway.

"When I listened to your message I knew that you were letting me off the hook."

He was back to his sauce.

"And then I realized that I didn't want to be off the hook."

"Really? How come?"

He was again making sure that she knew what she was doing. Or at least she thought so.

"Because I enjoy your company." That sounded better than "because I have a gigantic crush on you, Coach."

He pulled the small pot from the burner and walked around the island. She turned to face him.

"Dee, I enjoy your company too. More than anyone I've ever met." He ran a finger across her bottom lip and his smile kicked up a notch. "But you don't have to have sex with me in order to spend time with me. I'm sorry I made you feel like you did."

This time, she kissed him. Up on tip toes, she laid her hands on his chest and kissed him. And the kiss ignited.

He pulled her in tight against him, tight enough that she could feel his erection against her belly. His

tongue ravaged her mouth, then he slid his lips to her neck, kissing, licking, dragging... and then he pulled back.

"No sense ruining dinner," he said so damned matter-of-factly that Dee wondered if she'd imagined the heat, his body, hard against hers.

She hadn't imagined it, though. Her body was wet and ached with need. Her heart raced.

"I think you're *very* good at it."

At her unspoken question, he just waggled his eyebrows and returned to stirring the sauce.

Chapter Nine

Dinner was perfect, if he said so himself. The salmon mouth-watering, thank you Queen Olympia, the rice mixed well with the asparagus and the sauce.

But the piece d'resistance was the dessert, which he couldn't take credit for.

"Can I help you?" Dee asked, as Ryan began clearing the table.

"No, you just sit," he said with a smile. "More wine?"

"Sure."

After filling their glasses, Ryan set about cutting the most scrumptious looking cake thing. It was all chocolate and raspberries and whipped cream, with shaved chocolate on top.

"Did you make that?"

After a meal like that, he was a keeper. If he could whip up chocolate heaven, though, it was time to move in. The thought stuck in her throat, thank God.

"No, sorry. Can't compete with Margie over at the Corner Bakery. Ever been in there? You'd think you'd died and gone to heaven."

Dee smiled at how near his words had come to her thoughts.

"Well, I guess I can forgive you, then."

"You won't be sorry."

With all the flourish of a five star waiter, he set one plate between their places and two forks beside.

"More fun this way," he added at her quizzical look.

When he came around the island, he slowed and ran his lips down the back of her neck and across her shoulder as he passed by.

"It's a toss-up," he whispered, and moved to sit down.

"What's a toss-up?"

She knew exactly what he meant but didn't know what else to say.

"You or..." he glanced at the torte, "this."

"Oh."

"I'm thinking both."

Ryan hoped his hand wasn't shaking when he picked up one of the forks and slid it slowly into the cake.

"Close your eyes..."

It was almost his undoing. There she sat, eyes, closed, waiting, her perfect lips parted expectantly. Holy shit. With an effort, he lifted the fork to her lips.

"Open." It came out on a strangled breath.

Then he guided the fork into her mouth and she took the cake. An instant later she let out a sigh that, again, took him places he wasn't quite ready to go. Well, he was ready, had been for days, but he wanted

to lead her there slowly. She was sure as hell worth the wait.

"Your are so goddamned beautiful." It came out without him willing it to.

She didn't open her eyes though, just savored the cake with the hint of a smile.

"More." Her voice was husky.

"My pleasure."

This time he purposely aimed a bit high, so that just a bit of the whipped cream grazed her lip. Then he leaned over and kissed it away.

His tongue touched her lips. Just getting that bit of whipped cream. *Oh, baby.* She didn't move away. Not even a flinch.

She oh-so-softly, closed her lips over the tip of his tongue and teased it with hers.

She might as well have sucked every last bit of breath from his lungs, from his soul.

He pulled back just enough to whisper, his lips right against hers.

"If you do that again, hon, we're skipping the rest of the cake."

She whispered back.

"Well, that would be a shame."

She leaned away, her eyes now open, but shining with innuendo.

"My turn."

And then she was feeding him, slowly, seductively, their eyes locked. She swiped a flake of chocolate that fell from the fork.

Then she licked her lips and brought her finger up

to his lips.

She had him and he knew that she knew it.

Languorously, he took her finger into his mouth and, closing his eyes, he licked along the tip.

Her answering whimper did it.

He pulled her hand away and tugged her over to him, his mouth finding hers in an explosion of the passion he'd been holding in for days, months, years. His tongue plunged into her warm mouth.

"God, Dee," he said against her neck as he trailed his lips across her shoulder. His finger caught in the silky strap of the dress she wore, moving it aside as he descended.

Dee's breath caught in her throat. Now he stood, his mouth trailing fire across her collarbone, one of his hands just grazing her breast.

She couldn't remember ever wanting someone so much. Without any thought, her hands tangled in his hair and her head fell back.

He growled and his lips brushed the neckline of her dress.

Dee slid from the high chair and pressed herself against him, looking up into caramel colored eyes ablaze with want.

And the most amazing thing was that she wanted him just as much. Or maybe more.

"The cake can wait."

His nostrils flared almost imperceptibly and a grin played at his lips.

"You sure?" he whispered.

"Absolutely."

And then he swung her up in his arms and strode through the living room and into his bedroom. He put her down on the edge of the bed and stepped back.

Clearing his throat, he moved away and lit the candles that sat on the dresser. The dark navy curtains were closed, leaving the room lit only by the flames. A diamond shaped mirror over the dresser reflected the flickering light.

Ryan returned to the bed and knelt on the floor at her feet.

He took her sandals off and set them aside. Then his finger trailed up her calf and came to rest on her knee. He leaned over and placed a kiss there, just above his hand.

For a moment, he seemed stuck, not moving, as if deep in dilemma. Then his head came up and he smiled, rocked back on his feet and stood, and held out his hand to her.

She took it and he pulled her to her feet.

His hands went around her and came to rest on her zipper.

"May I?"

She was completely unable to utter a sound, but she nodded a bit. Again, their eyes met.

With a swish, her dress lay at her feet and she stood, wearing nothing more than bra and panties. Her very best bra and panties, to be precise. The yellow ones she'd brought home from work to match the dress. The ones that could have been priced by the inch.

Ryan sucked in his breath. God damn she was

beautiful. He couldn't quite believe that she now stood before him, wearing only scraps of delicate yellow lace. If he'd had to speak, he'd have died, with only awe on his lips.

Her body was curved in all the right places. Her hips, her abdomen, her breasts. And at this very moment, he couldn't ever hope for more. She was his. His hands moved, almost with their own will, to her shoulders, and he fingered the straps there.

"Wait."

Agony stabbed through him at the word, but then he looked into her eyes. What he saw there eased him.

Her hands moved to his waist, taking hold of the tail of his shirt, and she smiled enchantingly before pulling his shirt up and over his head.

"Fair play and all," she said, and her hands trailed down his chest, cool against his skin.

Dee sighed at the sight of him, all muscle and warm skin. No doubt now about the jock under the clothes, not that there was much doubt before.

Her fingers trailed down his chest, coming to stop where a light brown fuzz began between his nipples. But her gaze got caught at his shoulder.

A scar, probably ten inches long, ran from his collarbone, just above his armpit, out onto his upper arm.

His breath caught audibly when she traced it with her index finger.

"Hurt?"

"No." His answer came out with a rush of air.

"Rotator cuff surgery?" She'd been there, done

that, with Trent, just last year.

"Uh-huh." He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips, grazing his tongue against the palm. "Career ending surgery."

What he was doing with his mouth left her weak, wet.

"I'm sorry," she managed.

"I'm not," he said against her hand, his breath warm and moist, "It was time."

His words hung there, sounding for the world like a come-on.

She stood on tip-toe and kissed his chin, running her mouth down his neck, past his adam's apple, down to the dip just above his sternum. Then she pulled her hand free and proceeded to unhook his jeans.

Ryan opened his eyes and watched her.

They didn't fall gracefully to the floor like her dress though. With a wink and a smile, she slid her hands down his backside, over his shorts, easing his jeans down over his thighs.

And then, God Almighty in Heaven, she dropped to her knees and tugged his jeans off, one leg at a time.

Her hands crawled back up the backs of his calves, the backs of his thighs, up under his boxers, and cupped his butt.

He had to move away. Right this second. He gritted his teeth and pulled her to her feet.

A brief glimpse of uncertainty and hurt crossed her face. There weren't any words he could get out, so he

kissed it away and eased her down on the bed.

Dee closed her eyes as he placed a flawless kiss on her forehead. His descent began there, kissing her eyes, her nose, stopping briefly to make love to her lips, then on it went.

Down her neck, along her collarbone, down her breast bone, hovering at her breasts, kissing through the lace.

She arched, her body torn between the aching need for him to stay there and the even more desperate urgency for him to hurry.

He laughed and moved back up, looking at her with adoration. It was a familiar look from him, she'd seen it time and again over the years, but it was loose now, not walled up with denial. Her heart nearly burst.

His thumb brushed her lips and she kissed it.

He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. With a tiny chuckle, he shook his head and kissed her briefly before moving down to kiss her belly.

His hands splayed at her waist, he hovered there, kissing, licking, stopping to look up at her.

She watched him, fascinated.

And then he moved lower, nuzzling into the fabric of her panties.

Ryan's cock throbbed as the scent of White Shoulders gave way to the scent of pure woman. Her panties were damp with it. And he was near to bursting.

But he was determined to wait.

With fingers that nearly trembled, he caught the

yellow lace and ripped it away.

Chapter Ten

If anyone had told him three weeks ago that he'd be here in his bed, nestled between the legs of the one woman he'd wanted all his adult life, well, it would have been a pipe dream. A fantasy consigned to never-never land.

Yet, God in Heaven, here he was. Able to touch and kiss and lick every beautiful inch of her.

And about the time he lowered his mouth to her, she arched up, let out a strangled moan, and came for him. It was damn good thing, too, because he couldn't have waited another minute.

While she still throbbed, he moved above, and sunk his cock into her. And then he, too, exploded.

Dee was so relaxed that he thought she might be asleep. But when he eased off her, she murmured something unintelligible and turned onto her side, her hand resting on his chest.

One glance.

She was smiling.

He lifted her hand to his lips.

"Next time we'll go slower."

She opened one eye.

"That wasn't slow?"

Good grief. What kind of partners had she had? Suddenly he knew, though, that he hoped with his entire being that he would be her last.

"No, hon, that wasn't slow. I just couldn't hold back another instant." He kissed her hand, then laid it back on his chest, his own covering it.

They lay there, not moving for minutes, hours, who knew? At last, Dee stirred. She shyly admitted that she needed to use the bathroom and got up.

Every movement of her body as she walked away brought new torture, new pleasure inside Ryan. He smiled and launched himself out of bed.

When she came out of the bathroom, he handed her one of his shirts and suggested that they have another glass of wine and finish the torte they'd left.

He knew it was cheesy, but the contentment and joy he felt seeing her in his shirt and nothing else nearly overwhelmed him.

The last time a woman had worn his shirt—must have been six years ago—had left him cold and running. But she'd been the one to pick up the shirt and put it on. And somehow it had been totally presumptuous.

Dee was anything but presumptuous. In fact, she seemed a bit shy now, like she so didn't know what to say, what to do.

So he refilled her glass, fed her chocolate and took her back to bed. Words weren't necessary for any of that.

For the next two hours, he made love to her, the

first time slowly, oh-so-sensuously. The next time — God, when was the last time he'd had sex three times in one night? — was hot and sweaty and loaded with need.

In the morning, he fixed french toast. She again wore his shirt and all was right with the world.

Until the phone rang. Why in hell had he picked up?

Dee watched from her perch on the arm of the couch, noting the way his shoulders slumped as he talked.

"Today?"

He paced, didn't look at her.

"I know. Okay."

He turned and, with a sigh, laid down the phone.

"Duty calls?"

He shook his head and collapsed on the couch, pulling her down on his lap.

I have to drive to Worcester to see my top prospect. He's considering turning BC down and going to UMass.

"That would not be good!"

He nuzzled her neck. She could feel him smile against her.

"No, it wouldn't." His hands slid up under the shirt, teased her breast to a hard rock. "I'd take you with me but Dave, the Athletic Director's, driving. He's picking me up in an hour."

She laid her head back and enjoyed the feel of him getting hard against her, enjoyed what he was doing with his hand.

"It's okay, Ryan," she said, turning to face him, straddling his waist. "I'll just wait for you at the Inn. When you get there, we can..."

She lowered herself down onto his cock. Now it was his turn to lay his head back. She ran her fingers down his cheeks, marveling at the angles, now smoothed. The laugh lines were still there, deep ridges against her fingers.

His breathing was ragged as his hands settled on her hips, guiding her movements.

He was so handsome, so perfect. And her heart was so full.

"... um, we can get in the hot tub and..."

The thought wasn't finished but close enough. It didn't matter.

Dee came again, right before him, then collapsed against him, her chin against his shoulder.

She didn't look much different leaving than she did when she arrived. Maybe her hair was a bit more mussed. Maybe she carried the scent of arousal. The big difference was one no one would see, but Ryan would think about for the next few hours.

Under the pretty yellow flowered sundress, the woman wore no panties. Her panties lay in pieces beside his bed.

"I'll be waiting for you, she whispered as she kissed his neck. "Don't hurry on my account."

His only answer was a groan.

Dee felt herself flushing as she waited for the light to change. She had never gone without underwear in her life—wouldn't be now if Ryan hadn't...the thought sent shivers through her.

The last few minutes at Ryan's house had been a frenzy. Ryan had showered in two minutes flat after they had 'wasted time' on the couch. Never had there been such a sweet waste of time.

He'd hurriedly dressed, his eyes never leaving her. When she'd slid into her dress, he'd just grinned. He didn't say a word, but it was written all over his face.

It would be a long afternoon.

Waiting.

Dave droned on and on about the imperative nature of their mission. They simply *had* to get the Clark kid to sign with BC. He was the best high school hockey player this side of the Canadian border, or so Dave said.

That might be a bit of an overstatement, but there was no doubt the kid was good. And BC's program could use all the good blood it could get. More important to Ryan was that he believed that the

BC program could really help the boy become great.

But, at the moment, Ryan had trouble caring.

Dee was, by now, back at the Inn, probably in the shower. The water running down her back, over her breasts, down her legs.

Shit.

This was pure hell.

Sweet agony, with an angel waiting.

It was hard not to smile.

Please, God, don't let this ever end.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Ryan pulled the Spyder into the parking lot. He'd called Dee's cell phone from Worcester to say that Dave had insisted on taking the Clark family out to an early dinner so they could talk college hockey. She hadn't answered. He hoped she'd at least picked up the message so she would know he'd be late.

The living room area of the Inn was occupied by six or seven folks who all turned and stared when he came through the door. He waved off their attention but they proceeded to watch him ascend the stairs.

He could smell vanilla and maybe clove as he approached her door. He knocked quietly, somehow unwilling for the busybodies downstairs to hear.

She opened the door and smiled. That smile would be the death of him yet. But he'd die happy.

"Hi, hon."

"Hi, Coach."

Whoa, the way she said 'coach' — not like he'd ever heard it said before. She wore a light purple — did that make it lavender? — night gown.

"You look... amazing."

She shrugged.

"The competition."

He was headed to kiss her but stopped mid-stride.

"Huh?"

"I was forced to stop at the competition for this."

"Well, sweetheart, it's nice. But you'd look great in anything...or nothing."

He completed his mission, wrapping her in his arms and kissing her hard.

The room was alive with the flickering of candles, maybe even more candles than the other night. Was that only Friday?

"So, am I too late for the hot tub thing? By the way, did you get my message?"

"Yes."

"Dang." It was only just after eight.

"Yes, I got your message." She smiled and moved toward the bathroom? "And no, you are not too late."

She pushed the bathroom door open showing that the candles were lit there as well.

"I'll start the water."

Ryan loosened his tie as he marveled at the sight of Dee walking away in that long satiny thing she wore. He absolutely could not wait to touch it, and her so he followed her into the other room.

From behind, he slipped his arms around her, sliding along her hips and up below her breasts.

"I missed you." Danged if he didn't sound like some high school kid with his first crush. Danged if he didn't *feel* just like that.

She turned in his arms and laid her head against his chest.

"I missed you, too." Then she pulled back, "And you have way too many clothes on." She reached up and tugged his tie loose, her eyes dancing. Then she pushed him back out into the bedroom and slid her hands up to his shoulders, divesting him of his suit jacket.

Dee sucked in her breath as she joined Ryan in the tub. The water was almost painfully hot for the first minute or so. Her gown lay in a heap by the tub and she lay between his outstretched legs, the water playing around her nipples.

It felt way too good to be reality. She could stay here for the rest of her life. Anxiety coiled in her belly at the thought. She wasn't sure which she feared more, though, that he might stay forever or that he might not. Part of her wanted to tell him how she was feeling, part of her was terrified. She was so not good at this.

"Not good at what?"

His voice made her jump. She'd said that out loud, hadn't she? What could she say now?

She settled on the truth.

"So not good at playing games."

"Me neither," he said and kissed the top of her head. Then he said nothing and the silence became unbearable.

"I'm actually a big chicken."

At that he laughed and slid his hands down her arms.

"Not the Dee Bishop I know. She's fearless."

Her turn to laugh.

"You must be hallucinating."

"I hope you're kidding, hon."

At her silence, he continued.

"When Trent was in the hospital, you were formidable, Dee."

Now his hands moved up and cupped her breasts. She smiled at the swelling of his cock beneath her.

"I watched you take on doctors that scared the be-jesus out of me. You were strong and courageous and a flat out warrior. You were gracious and elegant with the press, soft and solid for your son."

His voice got husky as he spoke. Dee's throat closed on the emotion inside. No one had ever...

He cleared his throat. "You impressed the hell out of me, babe."

And then, as if to dispel the mood he'd created, his hand slipped between her legs and he brought her to the edge several times in the warm water before letting her come.

He took her again in the overstuffed chair, muttering something about the bed looking too perfect to mess it up.

But when Dee dozed off in his arms, he gathered her up, tucked her in the perfect bed and kissed her good night.

"I'll call you in the morning," he whispered, then

shut the door behind him.

The lights in the downstairs were all off and there was, thankfully, no one in the living room to ogle him on his way out.

Chapter Ten

Once home, Ryan slept like the dead and only woke up when his phone rang in the morning.

Ten oh two, to be exact. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept that late.

The phone rang again.

He was almost afraid to answer it. Note to self: get caller ID. If it was Dave, he was screwed. But it might be Dee.

He picked it up and grumbled a hello.

"Ryan?"

Thank God, it was Dee.

"Hi."

"You were still asleep, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I, uh, was wondering... well, Trent just called. He and Kirsten are coming down today and want to meet for lunch. I didn't know what, if anything, you had planned..."

Her voice drifted off.

"... Oh, crumb, I'm sorry, this is too weird..."

"Dee, stop. You know what?"

"What," she said quietly, with a little-girl quiver.

"You do suck at playing games."

She laughed.

"But that's okay. I love that about you. Could we just agree to not play games? To just say what we mean? That would be great for me, too."

Again she laughed, this time a bit less forced.

"Now, start over, hon."

She took a deep breath.

"Okay, Trent and Kirsten are coming to town and want to have lunch. Is it okay if I go? You want to join us?"

His turn to chuckle.

"Is it okay if you go?"

"Well, we had a deal."

"That I cancelled. Of course it's okay. And, yes, I'd love to. Shall I come get you?"

"Sure. I'll call him back and set it up. Come on over when you're ready."

"I'm ready *now*."

He grinned.

So did she, by the sound of her silence.

"How do I dress?" he asked.

"Don't." Her voice dripped humor.

"Ha. ha." He sat up and swung his legs over the edge, shoving his hand through his hair.

"Slacks and a polo, then. We'll go to my favorite place."

"Which is?"

"Your house. So we'll go to my second favorite place."

"Oh baby."

"I'll see you soon," she said, ending the chitchat.

"You will indeed."

The day was perfect for taking the top off the Spyder. He briefly wondered if Dee would mind - what the hell - live dangerously.

Dee liked that he'd brought the convertible. Maybe the wind through her hair would ease away the oh-so-horrible case of nerves. She should not have invited Ryan to go with them.

And yet, the idea of spending that much time away from him felt awful too. So here they were, only minutes away from seeing Trent. What would she say. Hi son, you remember Coach Magnussen. I'm sleeping with him. Some things your son didn't need to know. Or maybe, hi son, you remember Coach, the man I want to be with every moment from here on out. Yikes.

Ryan said something that she was too absorbed to understand.

"Huh?"

"I asked you how you wanted to play this, with Trent."

"Oh, well." He'd read her mind. "I'm not very good at playing games with him either and I'm a terrible liar."

"Then can I tell him that I'm in love with his mother?"

He said it so nonchalantly as he pulled into the parking lot. Was he joking?

He pulled into a space and turned off the car.

Dee didn't know what to say. It was such dangerous ground.

He chuckled and got out of the car, coming around to open her door. She took his proffered hand and he helped her to her feet. He didn't let go, but just looked at her, his eyes almost green. He smiled and kissed her cheek.

"I'll handle it, hon."

Trent and Kirsten were already seated at a table on the patio, looking over the Cape. Ryan guided her to their table, his hand at her waist, then pulled out her chair for her. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass her.

"Trent," he said leaning across to shake hands, "it's great to see you."

"You...too."

Dee introduced Kirsten, a lovely young girl with long red hair and freckles.

"Nice to meet you, Coach. Trent has told me so much about you."

Ryan sat down.

"Trent, I don't know what your mother has told you but," he said, swallowing what he really wanted to say, "she has asked me to fill the vacancy on the board at the foundation."

"Yes."

"Did she tell you that I'd accepted?" He glanced at Dee and smiled, hoping that his face didn't show what he was thinking.

"Yes. Thank you."

"So, that's okay with you?"

"Yes, it's great," Trent answered haltingly but no less sincerely.

"Good. Thanks."

"Thank you."

The look in the kid's eyes spoke volumes. He was as desperate as his mom had been to keep his dad off that board. What a sad deal. Greg had no idea what he'd lost.

Dee enjoyed lunch immensely. She loved this patio, loved watching the boats on the water, loved the food. It was one of the few places that Trent could come as it was open and airy and there wasn't any real crowd noise.

Being here with Ryan made it even better. She needn't have worried about improprieties, he was the perfect gentleman and carefully worded his responses. Only once did he move his leg to press up against hers. He was in mid-sentence, talking hockey, with the flicker of a smile on his face. She blushed furiously but, luckily, no one was watching her at the time.

After lunch they all walked down by the water. When Trent asked Ryan to walk with him alone, Ryan caught Dee's eye and shrugged. She tried to smile, then turned away to talk with Kirsten.

Ryan had taken about ten steps when Trent spoke.

"Don't hurt Mom."

Well, the kid certainly didn't beat around the bush, did he? Dee had mentioned his use of 'shorthand' when he talked to her. She wasn't kidding. Either Trent, though, had an even shorter way of speaking

or he felt comfortable with Ryan.

That was likely a good thing, wasn't it?

Ryan had been half-joking when he'd suggested this conversation with Trent. But if Trent wanted to have it, then they'd have it. No short hand, no innuendo, no stalling. "Why would you think I'd hurt your mom?"

Trent walked on. Ryan kept up. The kid seemed to be measuring his words. Maybe he was sorry he'd brought it up. But Ryan sure as hell wasn't about to be frightened off by anyone, even the young man walking beside him.

"She loves you, Coach."

"Really? She told you that?" A sense of giddy excitement shot through him.

"No. But she does."

Ryan considered this.

"The way she looks at you."

"Ahh. And did you by chance pick up on how I look at her."

"Maybe."

Now the kid was smiling full-on. He looked for the world like his dad. Back in the better days, when hockey and his family were all he ever wanted. Actually, that time was very brief, maybe a year. Ryan wasn't sure if it had even lasted until Trent was born. He could remember thinking that he was more nervous and excited when Trent arrived than Greg seemed to be. He remembered the excuses.

"So, Trent. How do you feel about that?"

"Does it matter?"

The kid wasn't only like his father though. He'd gotten a lot of spunk and courage from his mother. He stood tall, not apologizing to anyone for who he was or for who he wasn't.

Again the thought skittered through Ryan's heart. He'd be proud to call this kid son.

"Yeah, actually it does matter."

Trent raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I have no intention of letting you tell me I can't be with your mom."

The eyebrow descended and his lips played at smiling.

"But I would like to think that you approve."

"Of what."

The kid was baiting him, prodding him to put it into words. By God, then, he would.

"Of me marrying your mother. I'd very much like to ask her to marry me."

There it was. The fantasy, the wish, the pipe-dream. Twenty odd years of longing were imprinted on those words. Now, the only thing that could have been worse than this anticipation was if he were waiting for *her* answer to the question.

Trent stopped walking and turned to face Ryan. "When I was a kid..."

He was still a kid.

"... I imagined my dad was you."

From the railing on the walk above, Dee watched

them move down the beach. So much alike. So different.

Both were jocks, built like jocks, walked like jocks. Both were breathtaking when they smiled - even when they didn't.

Ryan's face showed years, but nicely - with deep-cut laugh lines and the hint of creases on his forehead. Trent's face, still young and smooth, yet bearing the suggestion of sadness way past his years, was so like his father's. Minus the mean. Minus the haughty.

As they walked, Dee conjured a brief illusion from a very different past.

She was brought back to now when the men - God, she loved them both - turned to walk back, a hint of tension in them both.

Well, hell, he hadn't expected Trent to say that. Suddenly he couldn't answer. It was odd, like for an instant they'd touched and been burned.

Now Trent turned and headed back in the direction they'd come. It was as if he felt it too. Too much said, too many feelings out there between them. But Ryan couldn't let him go without any response.

"Hey, Trent."

That stopped him, but didn't bring his eyes up.

"I feel the same way."

Trent smiled, and began walking again. "Cool."

About a hundred yards later, Ryan ventured the question again.

"So, it's okay if I ask her to marry me?"

"Yup."

"Thanks."

Ryan's heart skipped in his chest and he looked up to the railing where Dee and Kirsten talked. Her eyes were on him and she smiled.

He smiled back.

They were almost back to the Inn when Dee's phone rang. She fished it from her purse and answered it on the third ring.

Brows knit together, she handed the phone to Ryan.

"It's Trent. He wants to speak with you."

Ryan took the phone.

"Hi, Trent."

"Coach, Kirsten."

There was a pause and Kirsten came on the line.

"Coach."

"Uh-huh." Ryan could sense secrecy so he was careful.

"I'm talking cause Trent's too slow on the phone."

There was humor in her voice.

"Okay."

"Trent wanted to see if you want his grandmother's engagement ring. His mother gave it to him to give to me. It's what he used when he proposed."

He hesitated. Dee was watching him. Kirsten continued.

"I wanted something different so he still has it. He says he could bring it to the meeting tomorrow."

"Thanks, Trent. I appreciate it. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, bye, Coach."

"Bye."

Very cool.

He handed the phone back to Dee.

"He just wanted to thank me again for taking the position." That was kinda true. It was entirely possible that she didn't believe him. But that was his story and, for now, he was sticking to it.

They spent the evening in her room, talking, making love, eating fruit that Dee insisted they buy on the way.

She was quieter than she had been, almost withdrawn. It wasn't so much a 'something's wrong' kind of quiet. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Would you like more wine?" She got up from the chair they'd been sharing and filled her glass.

"Nah, I'm good."

She didn't answer but walked over to the window seat, took a few sips and gazed out.

Bittersweet. That's how it felt. Melancholy, somehow.

He joined her at the window, standing behind her.

"I love the view from here."

Ryan's stomach lurched. She might as well have said 'I don't want this to be over.' It wasn't even well hidden in what she did say.

He knew exactly what she meant. He didn't want it

to end either. But he knew things she didn't. He was so not ready to tip his hand, though.

He wanted a ring. He wanted some special place. He wanted the music and the flowers and the romance. Or at least he wanted that for her.

He also longed to end her misery. Danged if that wasn't presumptuous. What made him think she'd even accept? Suddenly he felt the melancholy himself and he wrapped his arms around her and held her, staring out at the water and the lone boat that remained there.

Chapter Eleven

Dee didn't know how long they'd been standing there. It may have been hours for all she knew. She was never very good at having things end. If they were going to end, she had this illogical need to get on with it. The idea of enjoying last minutes, hours, was almost foreign to her. If misery was coming, then bring it on, then get past it and on with living.

So here she stood, right where she wanted to be, wishing he'd just leave so that she could learn to live without him. Dumb. Really dumb.

He kissed her hair and she closed her eyes, blinking away tears along with the vision of that lonely sailboat on the horizon. Think about how good it feels. Think of anything but that tomorrow is looming so close.

Ryan felt the tear land on his arm but didn't move, didn't speak. He so wanted to believe that this wasn't ending, but rather just beginning. Even if the answer simply confirmed his greatest fear, at least he'd know.

Ghosts of uncertainty, the same damned ghosts that he'd been losing to for years, hovered so close,

though, that he couldn't bring himself to ask.

Damnit, not knowing was easier.

And so, he kissed her hair, inhaled her perfect scent and turned her around.

"I need to go."

Her nose was pink and her eyes shone with recent tears.

"Okay."

He kissed her, a kiss full of sad, sweet longing and fear.

"I'll see you in the morning." He cleared his throat.
"At the meeting."

She broke contact, looking down.

"Okay."

And then she just lowered herself to the window seat and turned away.

Ryan sat in his car a long time before finally turning the key. This afternoon when he'd talked to Trent, he'd been filled with hope and confidence. He'd even told Trent that he wasn't about to let him talk him out of being with Dee.

So what had happened? Why was it all so far away now? Trent was bringing him a ring tomorrow.

That was why he waited. He did want everything to be perfect - for her. And there was nothing - nothing - wrong with asking her to marry him. Not now. He wasn't betraying his friend or taking another man's wife or taking her away from her son.

He wasn't chickening out either.

She had her board member. Greg wouldn't be taking it. Trent wouldn't have to deal with his dad. Neither would she. She'd gotten exactly what she'd gone after. End of story.

It was raining when she checked out of the Inn and loaded her things in the Lexus. There wasn't a boat in sight. The drive to BC was filled with the thumping of the wipers, splash back and utter desolation.

Dee didn't have a clue how to act when she got there. The easy camaraderie of the last few days—the looks, the touches, the things of lovers—didn't seem appropriate now. But neither did a stiff, business-like approach. Friends? Maybe they could just be friends.

Trent met her in the parking lot, looking his normal handsome self, offering her room under his umbrella.

"You're beautiful, mom."

She glanced up at him. He was grinning. It was almost irritating. No. On him it was just wonderful. She never tired of seeing him smile. Not after the injury.

"I saw Coach. He's upstairs."

She and Trent were actually the last board members to walk in. Most of the others were seated already, as if there were some hurry today. Only one stood and chatted with Ryan.

Ryan looked magnificent, again wearing an expensive suit, this one blue. When their eyes met, he nodded. When he didn't smile, she looked away and took her seat.

She had just called the meeting to order when the

door opened.

"Sorry I'm late."

Greg.

Dee looked at Trent, who stared straight ahead, his hands clenched on the table.

"Desiree, Trent. Good God, Ryan Magnussen, as I live and breathe."

Ryan's face had gone cold, his eyes hard. She thought she'd seen him angry the day he'd walked out on lunch. But this was something far more.

And then it was gone. Ryan nodded an acknowledgment and Greg sat down beside Trent.

"Hiya, son."

Trent opened his mouth but no sound came out.

Before the meeting could erupt into something awful, Dee spoke up.

"Has everyone read the minutes from the last meeting." She paused and looked around the room. "Well, then, I'll entertain a motion..."

Ryan listened as best he could with the animosity beating inside him. A moment before, the big distraction was the ring box in his pocket. Now, that took second place.

The bastard had showed up after all, cock-sure that he'd be appointed to the vacancy on the board.

The way he'd said Dee's name, leering and contemptuous. Ryan had forced himself to clamp down on the rage. But then, he'd almost let it go again when the jerk sat down beside Trent. The war played out on the kid's face. The child who'd been abandoned and just wanted his dad's approval set

against the man he'd become, who wasn't about to play this game with this man.

Trent looked across the table, his eyes locking with Ryan's. Easy kid. We'll be fine. You watch my back and I'll watch yours. Losing it would only hurt your mom.

One slight to Dee, though, and all bets were off. Likely for both of them.

'Course, who was to say that the guy wouldn't get the seat on the board. Who the hell knew what had gone on behind the scenes, behind both Trent's and Dee's backs. Ryan wasn't familiar enough with corporate legalities to know how much actual power Trent and Dee had. It was entirely possible that Trent only had one vote and that Dee, being the chairman, could only vote in the event of a tie.

It didn't take long to find out. Filling that vacancy was the first official point of business. Dee opened the floor to nominations.

Before Trent could speak, the older lady down the table confidently nominated the sperm donor. Ryan looked down the table at her and noted the flash that passed between her and Greg. Nothing like the obvious.

Shit.

How different was that than what he and Dee had done?

Damnit, it was a lot different. Night and day. He sat up straighter and told his ghosts to shut the fuck up. He caught Trent's eye and smiled.

It's gonna be fine, kid.

Trent smiled back.

One of the other members seconded the nomination.

"Ryan Magnussen," Trent said, totally calm and composed.

"I second the nomination," said the man sitting next to Ryan.

When there were no further nominations, Dee passed out slips of paper for voting. Ryan breathed a sigh of relief that they hadn't been asked to step outside. Decking the jerk out in the hallway would have been poor form.

It seemed hours before the slips were passed back down the table. Greg sat back in his chair, a smirk painting his face. He leaned over and whispered something to Trent. Ryan couldn't hear it, but Trent visibly paled.

Again, Ryan bit down on explosion.

Dee unfolded each slip of paper then finally spoke.

"The new member of the board is Ryan Magnussen."

Okay. That was good. Still, what would Greg do?

For a few moments, no one moved. The whole room held its breath. Then, Greg pushed back from the table, stood up and strode from the room. Trent closed his eyes and exhaled. Dee smiled broadly.

"Well, then, welcome to the board, Coach Magnussen."

"Thanks."

"Now, I think we can move on. We do have a bit of old..."

The door opened with a crash.

"So," Greg's eyes flashed with malice, "did you finally sleep with my wife, Magnussen?"

Collective gasp.

Ryan tensed, ready to pounce. Trent stood. Careful, kid. Greg was the kind of guy who baited you into a fight then pressed assault charges.

Ryan stood, and began to move around the table to intercept Trent. But then he saw Trent straighten his shoulders and he knew. The kid - correction - the man was not going to play Greg's game.

"She's not your wife. Now, please leave."

"You'd defend him after what he did to you? This whole thing," he gestured to the entire room, "is his fault."

"You're wrong. Please leave."

Bravo, kid.

Greg wilted at Trent's quiet strength. With one last look at Dee, a look that held an edge of accusation, he turned on his heel and left the room. This time he didn't return.

The rest of the meeting went without a hitch. Ryan had a tough time concentrating on financial reports and fund raising issues. All he could think about was the velvet box that burned in his pocket. About how much he wanted both Dee and Trent to be his. His family.

He twirled his pen though his fingers, forcing down impatience. When his gaze caught on Trent's, he smiled stiffly at the gleam in the kid's eyes. Gotta quit calling him a kid.

He clicked off agenda items and when the meeting eventually adjourned, he flipped out his phone and dialed, asking for lunch reservations at Fiore's.

Ideally, this lunch would go better than the last one.

He wandered over to Trent and shook his hand.

"You were great."

"Thanks."

"Listen, I'm taking your mom to lunch at Fiore's. Would you like to join us?"

"Nah, you already *have* my answer."

Trent extended his hand again.

"But good luck, Coach."

"Thanks."

As the last board member left, Ryan caught Dee's hand.

After much cajoling, he overcame her lotsa-work-to-do objections and convinced her to let him take her to lunch.

First obstacle overcome. At least in theory, she didn't seem thrilled at the thought. Again, in the parking lot, he had to use every trick he could think of to get her to leave her car and ride with him. Still she was quiet and withdrawn.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly."

"It doesn't matter, you know."

"What?"

"That whole thing with Greg. He's an ass, plain and simple. We shouldn't be surprised when he acts like one."

"But..."

"What he said was just his own bitterness over losing that seat to me. And, in the end, it was more credit to you the way Trent handled it. He was amazing."

She turned slightly and smiled.

"He was, wasn't he."

"Yes. He's a wonderful man, Dee."

She didn't answer. She turned back around.

"Do you think the others believed what he said."

"You mean his implication that I slept with you to get the position?"

"Yes." It came out in a whisper. She was blushing.

"Does it matter what they think?"

"Kinda."

"It shouldn't."

She got quiet again.

"Ideally, by the next meeting, it will be obvious that that's not the case." Open mouth, insert foot.

She just looked at him.

"Because I love you and, by then, I'd love to be Mr. Dee Magnussen."

That wasn't at all what he'd planned. But there it was, hanging out there in search of a "yes."

"You're going to have to do better than that, Coach."

That sounded like a delayed yes to him. He smiled.

"How about this. You look really good in this car and I either need to give it to you or you need to marry me."

That one had come to him in the middle of the

treasurer's report.

She laughed.

"That one is worse."

"Fine."

He pulled the Spyder into the parking lot then walked around the car and helped her out.

"Fiore's, huh? You sure this is a good idea?" Her voice was laced with humor.

"Nowhere to go but up."

"True."

He couldn't wait. When were you supposed to do this anyway? After the wine but before the appetizer? Just before dessert? After the check comes? If she'd just answered the question in the car, he wouldn't be having to do this at all.

Aw, hell.

Ryan set his napkin back on the table and took a sip of wine. Then he stood and moved over beside her.

He got down on one knee and took her hand in his right, while he fished out the box with his left. When he looked up he had the answer.

She was smiling sweetly, waiting, but her eyes were twinkling.

"Dee Bishop. I love you. I've loved you since the first moment I saw you. At the time you belonged to someone else. Since then, I've just been too chicken to make a move. That stops right here, right now."

He took a breath for courage and opened the box.

"Will you marry me, Dee?"

She laughed and took his face in her hands.

"I sense a conspiracy."

She kissed him.

"What did Trent say?"

Obviously she recognized the ring.

"He said 'good luck'." He hesitated then continued. "He also said that when he was a kid he imagined that his dad was me."

She kissed him again. Saints be praised.

"He's not the only one."

Dee couldn't make him wait any more. It might have only been a few days. But it was so much more. It was years, a lifetime.

"Yes, Ryan, I'll marry you. I love you, too."

Almost An Ingenue

Chapter One

Victoria Lynn Scott pulled her beat-up Subaru wagon up in front of the beach house and let out a ragged breath. It wasn't like she'd driven a long distance to get there—only about an hour, actually—but the getting there seemed to have taken years.

Tired. Bone tired. Soul completely depleted tired. If she had to care about anything or anyone right this minute, it would kill her.

It was even up in the air whether she had the energy to get into said beach house and fix a cup of coffee, much less carry all her stuff in.

She unfastened her seat belt.

The groceries had to go in.

Practicality won out, as it always did. She was tired of that too. It had been years—four years, two months and twenty-two days to be exact—since she'd done anything spontaneous, anything just for the hell of it,

anything fun. Correction: anything fun that didn't involve tricycles, sipping imaginary tea, or Blue's Clues.

She opened the car door.

Let the games begin.

Bucky Buchanan looked up from the board he was cutting when Finn began his sporadic ruffing. When the car first pulled up, he'd glanced over but, when the driver didn't get out right away, he went back to work. Now, Finn alerted him to the imminent danger posed by the woman getting out of the car.

"Yeah, you're a tough guy."

The woman turned as she shut the door, and lifted her long dark hair off her neck absently.

Bucky recognized her immediately and smiled to himself, memories of adolescent fantasies swirling through his brain. Damn, she looked good. Still.

She looked up at him and smiled stiffly, an obligatory smile, certainly not one of recognition.

Finn began barking in earnest and her smile disappeared.

"Finn. Knock it off."

There must have been an unusual urgency in his voice, because Finn didn't normally give his orders a second thought. This time, though, he trotted over to Bucky's feet and sat down, only an occasional woof escaping.

Note to self: take Finn to obedience classes when you get

home.

For the next ten minutes, Bucky watched Victoria make trips into the house, carrying groceries, boxes of household goods and suitcases.

To his offer of help, she let out a crisp 'no, thank you'. That surprised him a bit, since she really looked tired, her walk slow, her shoulders sagging. But if she didn't want help, she didn't want help. He had work to do.

As soon as she had the cold stuff put away, she dug through the boxes and found the cappuccino machine. Before leaving Boston, she'd swung by her office and snatched it. If she had one obsession - she didn't smoke, didn't drink, hadn't had time to have sex in forever—it was coffee. French roast was her biggest weakness, followed closely by her mid-afternoon breve with a splash of hazelnut flavoring.

She'd fix one right now, sit on the porch swing and sip it. Then, maybe, she'd have enough buzz to unpack all the boxes.

Sitting in the shade of the front porch almost required a sweater. Victoria hugged her mug to herself and watched the hunky young man who worked next door. It was an incredible indulgence. One she hadn't taken in a very long time. One that made her smile.

Even the racket that his circular saw made couldn't steal the pleasure of watching his muscles flex as he

cut the boards. His arms, his broad back, browned by the sun, his long, strong legs. Young, muscular, men in tool belts... nice.

The house next door looked different, smaller than she remembered. How long had it been since she'd been here? Twenty years? Maybe. The front yard should be bigger. She could almost see the kids playing in the sprinkler. What were their names?

The oldest one was Robert. He must have been ten or eleven that last summer. The little girl—Annette, was it?—was about six. That left the middle boy. For the life of her she couldn't remember his name. They were cute kids, all of them, easy to baby-sit.

With a sigh, she took the last sip of her breve, licked the cream from her lip and headed inside to get to work.

It took two hours and twenty-seven minutes to unpack. The sounds of construction had long since quieted. Victoria measured her weariness against her hunger. Hunger won, but not by much. Only by enough to throw together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich—who was she kidding, she loved PBJ's—and collapse in front of the TV until it was time to go to bed at eight o'clock. Some life.

Calvin. That was his name. Calvin Buchanan. Robert and Calvin and Annette Buchanan. That was a relief.

The clock on the bedside table glowed two seventeen.

Victoria turned over and went back to sleep.

It seemed like only minutes later—maybe not, it was light—when the grating, whining sound of power tools woke her.

Damn it all. How incredibly rude. Victoria pulled the pillow over her head but it didn't help. She'd just doze off again and that sound, that horrible sound, would begin again.

"Argh!" She let out a yell and threw off the covers. Without hesitation, she stomped to the front yard, over to the fence and yelled at the top of her lungs before he turned around and shut off the racket. But then the yapping of the dog took its place.

"Finn. Stop."

Bucky pulled his T-shirt off the ground and wiped his face.

Holy smoke.

There stood Victoria, hands on her hips, wearing sleep shorts and a crop top—obviously her pajamas—screaming at him about rudeness, obnoxious animals, and how dare he at this hour of the morning.

Her hair was mussed, her mascara smudged under her eyes and she looked good enough to eat. Hell, she must be forty years old. And yet, just as he had when she was twenty and he was eleven, he wanted to kiss her. Course, an eleven-year-old kiss and a thirty-year-old kiss were two entirely different things. His cock sure as hell knew the difference.

He glanced at his watch. What the hell was she so pissed about?

"It's after noon, ma'am."

Ma'am? Where had that come from? Fine Kansas upbringing, no doubt.

Victoria stopped in mid-rant and blushed furiously. She raked her fingers through her hair.

"It is?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh." She shook her head and half-smiled awkwardly. "Sorry."

There was nothing else to say. This cute carpenter was obviously well into his workday and she had just neglected to look at the clock before coming out here and making a complete fool of herself.

It took a good hour before Bucky could get the image of Victoria in her pj's out of his head. A classy woman like her—according to his mom, Victoria was a history professor at Boston College—should sleep in luxuriously wispy, silky things from Victoria's Secret, not in cotton shorts and a crop top. Last he'd heard she was married and had a teenage daughter. 'Course, he couldn't quite remember when the last time his mom had filled him in on the Brandenburg family gossip. It wasn't a subject that came up frequently. Could have been years for all he knew.

When she came out again, this time to sit on the porch and eat lunch, she was wearing a light blue flowered sundress that was nearly as scrumptious as her pj's. The sight made him hungry, so he flipped the saw off, unbuckled his tool belt and went inside for

lunch.

It was after dark when Bucky snagged a beer from the fridge and set it on the counter beside the laptop. By the beginning of week two, he'd hoped to have the front siding up and be working on the back. The sides were done. The front wasn't. It was so unlike him to miscalculate.

He usually beat his schedule. It had been years since he was over budget or over deadline. Maybe that was the problem.

He didn't have a deadline now. Nor did he have a regular check from the owner. He *was* the owner.

Shit.

Adjust the plan.

Tomorrow he'd start earlier and work later and by Saturday, he'd have made up the time and be ready for the back. Actually, he did have a deadline of sorts. His plan was to be here in the Cape until the Fourth of July, experience Independence Day in Boston, then get back to Kansas by mid-July. It wasn't a set in stone schedule but, by July, he'd be more than ready to have sex. Deprivation sucked.

But that was five weeks away and he seriously had to stop thinking about that.

With a new plan and a shrug, he meandered to the living room and flopped onto the couch, beer in hand. With the other hand, he picked up the remote and began surfing.

Victoria spent the next few days doing a whole lot of nothin'. She walked on the beach, got sunburned, came home, slept in the hammock in the back yard, ate a bit, slept on the couch, had a breve, walked again on the beach - this time with sun screen, came home, had supper and watched TV till she went to bed.

And still she was tired. By Saturday, she had about admitted that all the sleep in the world wouldn't help.

For the last four years, two months, blah, blah, blah, she had just poured herself out. And now she was empty. Used up. Old. This kind of void would not be filled by sleep.

She either had to find something to take interest in—something all her own—something new and exciting, or she had to take drugs. At this point, the drugs sounded much easier, but she knew herself better than that.

It was Sunday morning before anything even resembling inspiration hit her. Maybe it was watching hunky boy next door working up a sweat in the back yard. Who knew? But by noon on Sunday, she'd been to the hardware superstore and was now the proud owner of a six-foot stepladder, five gallons of paint to start—peace river was the color, a light bluish-green—and assorted brushes and rollers.

Bucky had watched Victoria leave and come back with all the stuff to paint her house. She still looked

tired but at least had a bit more spring in her step. He wasn't about to rain on her parade by announcing that the old paint really should be scraped off first. She'd either figure that out for herself or she wouldn't.

Besides, their working relationship consisted of her saying a polite hello when their eyes met. Oh, and she had stopped glaring at Finn when he announced her arrival out of doors. She still had not recognized him and likely wouldn't at this point.

Why should she? He might have been nine when she saw him last. And if her updates of the Buchanan bunch were as regular and detailed as his of her family were, she would only know that he lived in Kansas. Not Cape Cod.

He'd been surprised that the Brandenburgs still owned the house next door. It likely hadn't occurred to her that a Buchanan still owned his.

Again, Bucky offered to help her unload her car. Again, she'd declined. But this time she'd done so with a warm smile—the first one he'd seen since she arrived. God, she was hot.

"C'mon, Finn, let's go have lunch."

Chapter Two

Sunday lunch. Before her life took its fateful turn, she and Bryce had always gone out for Sunday lunch. Brunch, actually. They'd try to leave the house by nine thirty so as to miss the church crowd. Sometimes they'd go fancy and sometimes they'd just go to IHOP. But it was always special. Breakfast was definitely her favorite meal to eat out.

Sunday lunch. For the last few years it had been a meal of pancakes with cherry eyes and a whipped-cream mouth. It all seemed like so much effort for nothing. The best she could do today was a turkey sandwich on a paper towel. Anyway, she had a new project to get started on.

She crumpled the paper towel and tossed it in the trash can. Then she went into the bedroom and changed into her cutoffs and a worn BC T-shirt. It was her favorite. It said "Harvard and MIT, because not just anyone can get into Boston College." She got it for Mother's Day from Brittany Lynn three years ago when Brit was one.

She also threw on her very worn tennies. From

now on, these would be her painting clothes. She smiled and pulled her hair back with a large clip.

After intense analysis, which took exactly two minutes, Victoria decided to start with the edges. That way, when she was finished with all that, she could just roll on the rest. It was a good plan, a fine plan. She'd start with one of the brushes. She'd start on the right side of the back door and work her way around to the left side of the back door. A plan.

Bucky tossed the last bit of his burrito to Finn, rinsed off his plate and put it in the dishwasher.

"Back to work, bud," he said as he headed for the back door. "C'mon." He opened the screen door and stepped out. Victoria stood perched on a ladder, engrossed in outlining her back door with her brush. Finn followed him out, stood for an instant on the porch before going off like a shot, barking like a banshee at the dangerous woman next door.

Everything went into slow motion then. Bucky noted in the expanse of time that Victoria was so completely absorbed in what she was doing that she didn't even look up when he and Finn came out. But, as Bucky watched, in that pre-crisis reaching to do something moment, she was totally startled by the barking banshee.

She fell from the ladder with a thud.

Time resumed to normal.

Now it was Bucky's turn to leave the porch in a shot. He was over the fence in one smooth movement, getting to her before she even opened her eyes.

"Victoria?" Bucky crouched and took hold of her

shoulders.

Thirty seconds passed. At last, she blinked, her gaze at first unfocussed, then sucked in her breath, tears springing to her eyes. She bit her lower lip and rolled away from him, a fragile moan escaping her lips.

"Don't move again. What hurts?"

"My arm," she hissed, her breathing ragged.

Bucky pulled his cell phone from his pocket then hesitated. Cell phones could route nine-one-one calls strangely.

"Victoria, is the phone inside hooked up?"

She nodded but didn't speak.

"I'll be right back. Don't move, okay."

She nodded again.

"Nodding is moving. I'll be right back."

He threw the back door open, spotted the wall phone right away, and called for an ambulance. It might be overkill, but falls could be serious and he knew enough to let the professionals make that decision.

"Ok, Vic, the ambulance is on its way."

She rolled onto her back.

"I don't need an ambulance."

"You don't listen very well." He again put his hands on her shoulders. "Now, don't move again."

The medics spent several minutes examining Victoria and asking her questions. At last, they agreed with her that she didn't need an ambulance.

But she sure as hell had a broken right wrist. They splinted it and allowed her to refuse transport when

Bucky told them he'd take her to the hospital.

"I am so sorry," Bucky said as he helped Victoria into the pickup. He fastened her seat belt, bringing him much too close to her. Noted but set aside for another time. Asshole.

She didn't even look over at him, just sat cradling her arm, her lips pressed together. She was so pale, it was scary.

The next time he glanced over, she had closed her eyes and laid her head back. When they arrived at the emergency entrance, Bucky came around again and helped her inside, tossing the truck keys to the valet.

She swayed a bit when she stood up, her eyes seeking his for reassurance. The look she gave him sent regret pulsing through him. Damn that dog.

Once inside, it took almost two hours before they actually got out of the waiting room and into the ER. At first she sat stiffly beside him in the hard plastic chair—hers was the second one from the wall in a row of five connected chairs. He sat beside her, taking the seat next to the wall. Before long, though, he turned to lean against the wall, put his arm around her and pulled her over to rest on him.

He tried not to pay attention to how long it was taking, but, by God, there better have been people dying back there. Occasionally, she'd reach up with her good hand and swipe a tear from her cheek. When she didn't, the tear would drop onto his shirt,

each a silent condemnation of him.

At last they were called back—Bucky nearly sneered sarcastically at the guy who called them but it was so not his fault—still it was hard to be cheerful.

Victoria answered all the questions she was asked with her jaw clenched on the pain in her arm. But, she steadfastly refused any pain medications, insisting that they made her dangerously goofy. After a battery of x-rays, they re-splinted her wrist and sent them on their way with the name of an orthopedic doc to cast it and a prescription for Percoset, just in case.

Before leaving the hospital, Victoria had to make a pit stop. When she didn't come back out quickly, Bucky began pacing, weighing if it would be worse to go in there himself or to get a complete stranger to go in there. Her re-emergence ended the debate but began a new one—one that involved how he could possibly make this up to her.

She was starkly pale, the dark circles under her eyes almost looked like she'd been punched, and tracks of recent tears gave away the struggle she'd had in the ladies' room.

Back to the car.

"I think we ought to stop and fill this prescription, Victoria."

She shook her head, a confused look on her face.

"What?"

"How do you know my name? And... why don't I know yours?"

"You do."

She just blinked.

"Bucky Buchanan."

Nothing.

"Calvin Buchanan."

That clicked.

"Calvin? Seriously?" She almost smiled.

"Yup, seriously."

"Wow. You grew up." Her voice was again flat, her eyes again closed, her head against the window.

He pulled in to the drug store just down from the house. She opened her eyes but didn't move.

"Don't bother, Bucky, I won't take them."

"Why not?"

"Because,"

God her voice sounded so despondent, so like someone who'd given up.

"...last time I took a pain killer I ended up walking down the middle of the street and nearly got hit by a bus."

"Oh. Well...never mind, then."

He put the truck in reverse and took her home.

They were on the way into the house when he knew he'd made a huge mistake.

"Wait, wait, wait," she said, almost in a whisper, and turned to sit down on the top step of the front porch. Then she put her head between her legs and took huge gulps of air.

Bucky sat beside her, holding on to her, his face against the top of her head. Her hair smelled so good and his cock had a mind of its own.

It wasn't bad enough that his dog had caused this whole thing. Now he couldn't even help her without

thinking of how much he wanted her. God.

"I just quit."

She spoke so quietly that he barely heard her. And then she began to sob.

Bucky wrapped her in his arms, pulling her to nearly lay on his lap. She shook with the force of her tears. They must have sat there for ten or fifteen minutes, her crying, him nearly joining her. Helpless to do anything else, he just smoothed her hair back, shushing her and letting her let go.

Soon, though she began to relax against him and the sobs turned to occasional hiccoughing gasps as she caught her breath.

Once she was tucked in on her couch, Bucky excused himself, assuring her that he'd return shortly.

Then, he went first back to the drug store and second, to the grocery store. If he could coax her into taking the painkillers, he'd be damned if he'd leave her alone for a minute. He'd need food for at least a day, play it safe, for two.

Back at the house, he unloaded the groceries and then took her drugs.

"No."

"Yes."

"I mean it, Bucky. I can't take those."

"Yeah, well, I insist. I promise to not let you get hurt again. I'm staying right here. So take them."

She did, but only with a good deal of balking.

Over the next eighteen hours, Victoria either slept or cried. It was obvious that she was at the end of her rope. It wasn't obvious why.

Bucky's instinct was to hold her or touch her when she cried but, after the episode on the front steps, she didn't let him.

She'd simply scootch as far to the end of the couch as she could get, curl up into a ball and weep. When she ran out of tears, she'd sleep. Between, she'd apologize.

He did convince her to move from the couch to her bed for the night, after coaxing another dose of percoset down her. She even let him help her get undressed, which totally blew his mind. He helped her out of her cutoffs and into her sleep shorts, trying hard to preserve her modesty. When they moved to her T-shirt, it was her who saved him. She insisted on keeping her sports bra on, thank goodness.

He bedded down in the easy chair, his legs stretched out in front of him. Every few hours, he'd peek in to make sure she hadn't escaped to go stand in traffic. She actually slept well by all appearances.

The next morning, Bucky was up early, a mean crick in his neck from trying to sleep in a chair. If this went on, he'd be forced to take the couch.

Chapter Three

About ten, Victoria wandered out of her room, looking like death had even rejected her. She held her splinted wrist to her with her left hand, nodded to him, and turned toward the bathroom.

They had a one o'clock appointment with the orthopedist to get her wrist set. Over breakfast, which Victoria actually ate, if it was with her left hand, she again apologized for her ridiculous behavior.

"It's the drugs, Vic, don't apologize."

She smiled sadly and nodded.

He so didn't want to push her, but he did want to let her know that he'd listen if she wanted to talk. The drugs may have accentuated the outward show of her pent up emotions, but something told him that the hopelessness was very real.

"Victoria,"

Now that he'd started, he wasn't sure how to finish.

"I, uh, just want you to..."

"You're really Calvin?"

He couldn't tell if she was just avoiding what he was trying to say, if she was letting him off the hook,

or if she just wasn't even listening.

"Bucky. I prefer Bucky."

"Calvin Buchanan."

She was looking at him, but maybe she'd suddenly gone deaf.

"Victoria?"

"Hmm?"

"Bucky, please. I hate Calvin."

"Of course."

She got up from the table, took her plate with a shaky left hand and put it in the sink, then walked back out of the kitchen.

He washed their few dishes and when he came back into the living room, she was just sitting on the edge of the couch staring out the window. She had her hairbrush in her left hand.

When she didn't look over, didn't move in any way, he wandered over and crouched in front of her. Still she looked away out the window.

"Victoria." With a finger to her chin, he pulled her around to face him. He waited as her eyes focused on him.

"We have an appointment with the doctor at one."

"Okay."

"How's the pain? Do you want another pill?"

"It hurts like hell," she said with a sigh, leaning back into the couch, "but no, no more pills. They make me too goofy."

"Goofy? Not hardly, Vic. More like suicidal."

She just gaped at him.

"Really," he said.

Her brows drew together as she processed what he'd said.

"Why would they make me suicidal?"

"I don't know, Vic, you tell me."

After moments of further consideration she lifted her injured arm and answered.

"Maybe because this feels kinda like the last straw."

Bucky sat back against the end table, his arms resting on his knees. He didn't look at her, hoping to encourage her to talk.

"You want to tell me why?"

She got to her feet awkwardly.

"No, Calvin. I don't."

With that she headed toward her bedroom.

"Bucky. It's Bucky."

"It's Victoria."

She shut the bedroom door abruptly.

Again, she tried to brush her hair. Again, she failed miserably. If she could just get it brushed out, maybe she could braid it or something that took less care.

She almost laughed. And how would she do that? If she couldn't even brush it, how would she braid it? She flopped down on the bed in defeat.

Tears flooded her eyes, but she willed them back. She could vaguely remember crying on the porch. Calvin – Bucky had held her. He'd felt warm and safe and...

She launched herself off the bed. If there was one thing she absolutely did not need - even more than not needing to break her wrist - it was to have that kind of feeling for a guy young enough to be her son.

She worked her sleep shirt off, suddenly aware that he'd helped her into it. Hell's bells. In fact, he'd helped her into the shorts as well.

Okay, so not young enough to be her son, but young enough to be married to her daughter.

But still...

Still nothing. Calvin Buchanan was simply a nice guy who kinda got wrangled into helping the neighbor lady who fell off a ladder. Hell, it was his dog that started this whole thing.

Victoria was losing her mind. Certainly. Her thoughts were so muddled and babbly.

Was that a word? Babbly? If not, it should be.

Back on track. She needed to get dressed. It was nearly noon.

When she came out of the bedroom, she wore jeans and a light blue button up blouse. She still, or rather again, carried her brush.

"I can't zip my jeans."

His eyes dropped down, then returned to her face. She blushed.

And he grinned. Shit. He grinned. He forced himself to bite the insides of his cheeks as he walked over.

As he got closer, she looked up at him, her face frozen with a look that any other time, he'd have thought was anticipation. It was *that* look, the one that nearly always preceded either a kiss or a fit of coughing. Cripes. A shock went through him as he reached for her zipper. Couldn't have been more real had he stuck his finger in the socket.

In sudden desperation, he broke eye contact and glanced down so he could see what he was doing. His hands were shaking. Cripes.

Normally, one didn't help a gorgeous female *on* with her jeans.

His fingers grazed her belly as he took hold of her waistband. He gritted his teeth against what his cock was doing. He glanced up at her and found her watching his hands and holding her breath.

Suddenly, she pushed away.

"Never mind."

She turned abruptly, went back into the bedroom and slammed the door.

This time, when she came back out, she was wearing a light green flowered sundress. Their eyes met and she smiled a bit, twirling around, still holding her splinted arm against her body.

"More practical, don't you think? This way, I won't need to take you to the bathroom with me."

And he didn't have to feel the soft skin of her belly any more, or fight the urge to nail her against the wall. Except that he'd still have to fight that urge. It seemed *it* wasn't going anywhere.

"Fine. You ready to go?"

"I guess. Oh, wait, let me go get my sling."

It took her forever to get the sling in place with hands—one hand—that still shook. His hands on her skin, like fire, sucking the air from her lungs.

"Damn it."

She'd gotten the danged thing on backwards. Being this helpless sucked. Bucky stepped over and, without a word, helped her get the sling in place. She tried to ignore his touch on the nape of her neck, his carefully moving her hair aside. It wasn't easy.

The last time Victoria felt this crazy, this stumbling, stuttering kind of attraction was...when? Had she ever felt it with Bryce? Maybe in the beginning, when they first met. But, even at their wedding, had she felt this?

They'd had a good life. They'd laughed and cried together over the years. They'd raised a daughter together. They'd enjoyed each other.

This kind of stop-don't-stop thing was just schoolgirl silliness. It wasn't what lifetimes were made of. It was the stuff of one-night stands.

For a moment, though, a one-night stand with a hot younger man sounded pretty good. Yes, indeed. Casual sex with a guy she babysat twenty years ago. Casual sex with a broken wrist. Yes-sir-ee-bob.

"Thank you, Cal... Bucky." She looked up at him, catching his expression of concentration. He *was* trying so hard to be helpful. "You know," his eyes met hers, "I really do appreciate all your help."

"No problem."

He took a step back and reached in his jeans pocket for his keys.

"It was my fault."

"What? No it wasn't."

"My dog caused you to fall."

She'd thought the same thing, and not too long ago. But now, looking at him, seeing the subtle drop of his shoulders, she couldn't quite bring herself to blame him.

"No, Bucky. There's no fault to be placed. I was pretty zoned out and your dog – what's his name?"

"Finn."

"Finn was just doing what dogs do."

Suddenly she was embarrassed by all the attention, uncomfortable with Bucky's sense of obligation, almost disappointed.

"Listen, Bucky, when we get back from getting this thing set I'll be able to take care of myself. You can get back to work even later today."

He was shaking his head the whole time she was speaking.

"Don't argue with me, Calvin Buchanan."

He just looked at her.

"I'll kick your ass." It might have been a huge mistake, but she slapped his butt with her good hand. It gave her words an unmistakable something - something she hadn't exactly intended.

He laughed.

"Sure you will, Victoria. Sure you will."

Bucky hated the dreaded silence. Silence in and of

itself wasn't horrible, but this overwhelming silence was another thing. It demanded words - small talk, even.

"So, my mom tells me you're a professor at Boston College. History or something?"

"American history."

"Impressive."

She just laughed.

"I like history, history is good." God, that sounded pathetic.

"Excellent. All history or just certain history."

"Uh, all history, I guess. But maybe I like the history of the second world war more. I read a lot of books." Marginally better, but still pitiful.

"Me too."

Well this was going nowhere. He clamped his mouth shut on the next question. Better not ask about a husband. The traffic light turned green.

"I'm a professor of American history at BC. I have a twenty-year-old daughter and a four year old granddaughter."

The way she said it, like it was meant to shock or something, made him look over at her.

"Wow." Another really intelligent thing to say. "What are their names?"

"Alison is my daughter and Brittany is my granddaughter. They lived with me until a few weeks ago. Alison just started a great job after getting her degree in January."

"That must be a change."

"Huh?"

"Having them move out. Must be a change."

"It's nice, actually. It seems like all I've done for the last twenty years is take care of people."

Bucky just kept quiet, allowing her to say more if she liked.

"First it was Bryce."

Again she was quiet, looking out the side window.

"We were married eighteen years."

"What happened?" Bucky pulled the truck onto the freeway.

"Cancer."

"I'm sorry." Stupid, empty words.

"Two months after he died, Alison turned up pregnant. She was sixteen."

"Ouch."

"There were times I wondered if I'd live through it."

Again he felt the need to reach over, to touch her. He stifled the urge.

"You did make it though."

"Barely."

She didn't speak again until he pulled into the parking lot at the doctor's office. He came round to her side to help her down from the truck. She took his hand readily and, again, thanked him for the ride.

"You're welcome."

Once inside, Bucky wasn't quite sure what to do. He could wait in the waiting room while the doc set Victoria's arm or he could go back with her. Or so he supposed. With a shrug, he decided that he'd go back unless she objected.

She didn't, so he did.

Chapter Four

The nurse had her lay on the exam table, and, after taking all the required pulses and blood pressures and the like, she began unwrapping the wrist.

It was cold in the office and before sitting down beside her, Bucky plucked a blanket from one of the shelves and covered Victoria's legs. It was either very chivalrous or it was an attempt to divert his attention. Of course, it was chivalry.

Nevertheless, she gave him a thankful smile when he returned to her side. The smile faded quickly, though when the nurse finished unwrapping her wrist and began poking and prodding. At that point, the patient turned ghostly white and Bucky grabbed for her free hand.

"You okay?"

She looked like she was fixin' to pass out or maybe upchuck and then pass out. But, she nodded, pressed her lips together, closed her eyes and hung on to his hand.

Bucky's hand, warm and strong, felt like a lifeline at the moment. The pain screamed up her arm and

into her shoulder every time the nurse even looked at her. Or so it seemed.

She'd held plenty of hands in similar scenes, but she'd always been the strength giver, not the strength needer. She'd held Bryce's hand right up until the end and Alison's as she delivered Britt. Through the end of life and through the beginning.

If she gave either of them the support and comfort that she was getting from Bucky's hand right now, then...well...it was just something very special and very good.

A tear snuck from her closed eyes at the thought.

Bucky must have taken that as an increase in the pain - how could the pain have been much worse? - and brought his other hand up as well. Now he held her cold hand—it must have been cold 'cause his felt so warm—in both his hands.

Throughout the setting process, the nurse and doctor both encouraged her to relax. Not the easiest thing she'd ever had to do. But each time they did, Bucky renewed his efforts. By turns, he massaged her hand and rubbed her forearm.

"This will hurt a bit, Mrs. Scott," the nurse said just before the doctor began his particular brand of torture. She opened her eyes for a moment and sought out Bucky.

His clear, blue-gray eyes locked with hers for an instant and then he stood up. Still holding her hand, he leaned over, close enough that she could feel his breath on her cheek.

"Hang on, Vic. You're doing great," he whispered,

"Close your eyes, baby, just feel me touching you, listen to my voice."

Time seemed to stand still and the pain, while it didn't stop, took a back seat to his voice, his hands, his breath against her ear.

On he talked.

"Take a walk with me on the beach, Vic. Finn will go along to protect us,"

She could hear him smile.

"No evil sea shells or looming sand monsters will get us with Finn along."

His hand moved so softly up and down her arm, like a feather.

"We'll feel the sand between our toes and the sun, warm on our skin. The waves will creep up and splash against our legs."

He paused and brushed his lips against her cheek.

"Of course, our stalwart protector will bark at the waves, so they'll retreat with fear and trembling."

The way he talked, whispered, whatever it was, it was as if they were the only people in the world. His words were innocent enough, but there was so much more.

"You're almost there, baby. Good girl."

For an instant, Victoria wondered what the nurse and doctor were thinking. But in the next moment, she was again lost in his voice.

When the nurse finally spoke, breaking the spell, Victoria pulled herself back into the room and opened her eyes.

Bucky again kissed her cheek, then winked at her,

eyes smiling warmly, and returned to the stool beside her, never letting go of her hand.

"You're all done, Mrs. Scott."

Bucky helped her sit up, yet never moved away, his hands on her shoulders, making sure she was steady.

"Um, sir," the nurse said, she was actually blushing, "I need to put this sling back on."

"Okay," he said, clearing his throat, and moved out of the way, hopping up on the table beside her.

Bucky fixed dinner in Victoria's kitchen, occasionally wandering into the living room to see if she'd moved.

She still sat where she'd collapsed, in the overstuffed chair that Bucky'd slept in last night. He rubbed his neck in remembrance.

She had her sandals off, her bare feet tucked up underneath her, and her head propped up on her left hand. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"How's your pain?"

"Throbbing at about a six."

They'd started using the pain scale that the docs at the ER had used. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst pain you've ever had...

"A six, huh. That's not acceptable. You want another Percoset?"

"No, thanks."

He wandered closer and crouched down beside the chair.

"Vic, really, you shouldn't have to deal with that much pain."

"I'd love to just take a hot bath after dinner. Maybe that would help."

"Maybe," Bucky considered that for a moment, "I don't know if that's going to do much for pain. But we can go get in my hot tub if you want."

"Umm, that's tempting."

Bucky stood up and headed back to the kitchen.

"Dinner's ready in five."

He'd expected to bring the dinner to her, but as he was dishing it up, she joined him in the kitchen. She came to stand beside him, peeking around him to see the food.

"Smells wonderful."

"Chicken enchiladas. One of my specialties."

"Yum." She grabbed silverware and went to the table to sit. "Hey, Bucky, do you know how to braid hair?"

"Huh?"

"Braid hair, do you know how to braid hair?"

"Um, no. Why?"

He brought the plates to the table, returning to the fridge for a tub of sour cream. She explained her thoughts on the possibility of just keeping her hair braided for the next few days at least. Low maintenance for the handicapped.

"I'll be glad to learn, Vic..." At her look, he finished, "... toria."

"Maybe I could teach you on the fringe to the blanket on the couch, Cal...vin."

"Sorry. It's just that Victoria is so long, and you are so not a Vickie."

"Thank you. I think."

"I'll try harder." He lit on an idea. "What's your middle name?"

"Lynn. But I'm not crazy... "

"Victoria Lynn. I know that name."

She laughed. "Yeah, you and everyone else who's seen Lethal Weapon. But I had it first."

"Rigg's wife, huh."

"Yeah, the dead one."

He wrinkled his nose at that and took a bite.

"Never mind."

Victoria tried to help with the dishes, but only succeeded in confirming how helpless she actually was without a right arm. He shooed her into the living room after, again, suggesting that they hit the hot tub.

"Maybe later."

For the next couple hours, though, they just watched TV. Victoria insisted that, before he settled down beside her, he go get Finn. It wasn't fair to leave him all alone for this long.

So Finn joined them for reruns, alert to an opportunity to bounce up on the couch. At last, Victoria nodded to him and up he came, finding a comfortable spot beside her, his chin resting on her leg.

"Now you've done it."

She just smiled.

"You'll never get rid of him now."

"Who said I wanted to." She hadn't really meant it to sound like a come on. Even so, her mouth got dry and her heart picked up.

Apparently Finn, who was acting distinctly like he owned the place, didn't like being crowded between his new queen and the carpenter guy next door, because he soon moved to the other side of her, turned around three times and plopped down. Now his head rested on her other leg, as if offering her an armrest for her purple wrapped cast.

"Traitor," Bucky muttered.

Victoria laughed.

The plans for a later trip to the hot tub never materialized.

Between eight and eight-thirty sometime, Victoria slid over, laid her head on Bucky's shoulder and went to sleep.

She protested feebly when he insisted that she take drugs before going to bed. She didn't want to put him out any more by making him stay another night.

"Besides, I don't want to get goofy again... or suicidal for that matter."

"Well, I think I have to stay to serve my master Finn anyway."

They ended up with a compromise. He and Finn would stay - this time he'd sleep on the couch. She'd take half a Percoset.

"And I'll get my own pajamas on."

"You sure?"

"For now."

The couch was only more comfortable than the chair by degrees. The games his mind played - reminding him frequently of Victoria's legs, her arms, her eyes, kept him tossing and turning.

At a little after three, Victoria wandered out of her room, headed for the bathroom. There was enough light in the house for him to see her clearly. More encouragement for his libido.

"You okay?"

"Yes," she said and promptly staggered into the bookcase.

Bucky flew off the couch, nearly tripping over the dog, and grabbed her before she could fall. She looked up at him, her focus glazed.

"Where're you headed, babe?"

"Huh?"

"Do you need to get to the bathroom?"

Slowly, she processed his words. Then she shook her head.

"What do you need?"

She backed up slightly and looked him up and down. He wore only his boxers.

She smiled and put her hand on his belly, just above his waistband. Her fingers, grazing the hair below his belly button, were cold. Her eyes, though, were hot.

"You, I need you."

"Shit, Vic," he said, backing up.

She moved forward, pressing up against him, her

good hand sliding around his back.

"I want you, Bucky."

"Yeah, well," this time when he stepped back, he took hold of her wrist, keeping her away.

She pulled her hand away hard enough that she became unbalanced again and stumbled back to lean against the hutch.

She glared up at him. Then her eyes filled with hurt and embarrassment. She went to push around him, to go back into the bedroom, shoving him with her casted arm.

"Oh, ow," she cried, grabbed her arm and slid to the floor, crumpled in a heap.

"Vic!" He crouched down to pick her up but she pushed his hands away.

"Leave me alone." Her voice broke on the words.

"Let me get you back to bed, Vic."

She nodded and allowed him to help her up and walk her back into the bedroom. He tucked her into bed, tears still streaming down her face. He wiped them away with his thumbs.

Then he lost his mind for a minute and kissed her. Her lips trembled beneath his. It was enough to bring him up short.

Damn it. What was he thinking? Easy answer: he wasn't.

But as he pulled back, the look on her face - fragile hope—warmed him, nearly drove him further. Instead he kissed her forehead.

When he got to the doorway, he turned around. She still watched him.

"Ask me again in a week," he said, and smiled at her.

"If I remember," she answered weakly.

Bucky woke just after dawn, having only slept fitfully at best. He let Finn out and staggered to the kitchen. He didn't drink coffee, so he went to the fridge and grabbed his morning Coke. He took a chance and went into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. Not normally the fastest in the shower, this morning, he broke records, not wanting Victoria to need either him or the bathroom.

But he needn't have hurried. Victoria slept another two hours before showing up in the kitchen, looking for coffee.

Bucky was sitting at the kitchen table reading one of her books. She waved off his help to make the coffee. She needed to be able to do this by herself. The cast would be on for six weeks at least. He couldn't stay with her for that long, much as she'd like that.

Rats. Their three o'clock interaction came flooding back into her memory. She turned to look at him, hoping her face didn't give her away.

He was dressed, thank God. Of course he was dressed. It was her that wasn't dressed, exactly. Rats. Without a word she went back into her room and put sweat pants and a real T-shirt on.

"So, what're you reading?" she asked as she came back into the kitchen. The coffee pot was half full—

good enough.

"Band of Brothers."

"Ahh, great book."

She poured a cup, left-handed only splashing a little over the side, and joined him at the table. He read on, not looking up. It was totally uncomfortable.

She'd really blown it last night. Not that she was totally in control. If a whole Percoset made her suicidal, a half made her insane.

Okay, he had kissed her. God, what a kiss. Warm, and wet with her tears. He'd told her to ask again. Likely when she wasn't zonked on pain killers. She smiled at the thought.

So, he didn't particularly want to have sex with a drugged out grandmother. How odd.

He'd left her with a promise, though. A promise that, if she asked again, he'd make love to her. A week, he'd told her to ask again in a week. For the moment, though, there was something completely awkward between them. Either he regretted what he'd told her and he was embarrassed by her behavior or he was just nervous.

She couldn't blame him for that. Time would tell. Having him here with her, in her house, in her space, would definitely make it a long week.

"Go home, Bucky."

He looked up from the book.

"Really. You've got work to do and I need to get used to doing stuff for myself. I promise to holler if I need you."

Chapter Five

Bucky had allowed Victoria to chase him off. He wasn't quite sure why. Maybe it was just as simple as she didn't really need him hanging around any more. Maybe not.

He still couldn't quite believe what he'd told her last night. He had so hoped she wouldn't remember the conversation. But the awkwardness that hung between them this morning dashed any hopes he had of that.

Then she'd asked him to go. She'd been polite enough, but he still wondered if he'd totally stepped over the line.

And now, as he nailed boards into the house, he couldn't think of anything but her. Her smile, her tears, her lips.

Edgy. So damned edgy. Or maybe it was just horny. Either way, when he noticed the most recent board had been put up a good eighth of an inch off, there was nothing careful about the way he tore it off. Ripped the board. Wasted it. Yet, it felt kinda good.

There was still plenty of daylight left when he threw in the towel for the day. He should have

worked until it got too dark. He was behind schedule. But, instead, he found himself standing on her front porch, knocking on the screen door.

"Come in, Bucky."

He found her sitting on her bed, her shoulders slumped, her hair brush in her hand.

"Problem?"

She looked up and smiled.

"This just sucks."

He walked over and sat on the bed beside her.

"I'm so sorry."

"Didn't we already cover that?"

"Yeah, I know. So, what sucks most? What can I do to help?"

She shook her head and pushed up off the bed. "I'm just so not left handed."

"And?"

"And I need a shower and to do something with my hair."

"Okay, so lets wrap your arm and you can go shower. Then, I'll braid your hair if you like."

"How come you're not working?" She'd come back to sit beside him.

"Don't ask."

Between them, they managed to get her arm wrapped up. His duct tape, her plastic wrap.

"That should work," he said.

"Fine work if you ask me."

"Yeah, well, I'm remarkably good at things that involve duct tape and WD-40. Everything else, I'm mediocre at best."

He returned to the kitchen and opened the book he was reading this morning, concentrating on the war within it's pages rather than the war within him. He had to re-read page thirty-seven four times.

When the shower shut off, Bucky willed his ass to stay in the chair. He closed the book in defeat though, and scrubbed his hand through his hair with a growl.

How he longed to get up and go back to the bathroom, see her, naked and wet, to run his fingers up her arms, over her breasts, down her belly. There was something about wet skin...

Damn... it... all.

He sucked in a breath and let it out slowly, hoping to exhale the tension in his body.

By the time she walked into the kitchen, her hair still wrapped in a towel, but fully dressed, he had some measure of control.

"So," he said pushing himself up to stand, "what do you want done with your hair?"

"I can just tie it back when it dries. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried," he said as he approached her. "Live dangerously, let me give this braiding a try."

She shrugged.

"Okay. Hang on." She went back to the bedroom returned with a brush and comb. She tugged the towel from her head and her hair fell down past her shoulders.

After a brief explanation of the process, she sat in a kitchen chair and he pulled another up close behind her. Victoria sat stock still as he first used the towel to

dry her hair. Soon, though, the motion of the brush through her hair relaxed her. The tension left her shoulders and took up residence elsewhere.

He brushed her hair, running his fingers through it, trying to get it to dry. She smiled at the thought of giving him an hour or two to quit. It felt so good, seductively good.

"Your hair is so soft," he said, behind her, almost in a whisper.

On it went, his finger combing her hair, massaging the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine and right to her clitoris. She thought about stopping him, considered getting up and running from the room, but she was completely at his mercy.

But, if this kept up, if he didn't stop, then waiting a week to throw herself at him was out the window.

"Um, Vic," he abruptly stood up, "I can't do this."

He leaned over her shoulder and very carefully placed the comb and brush on the table.

"I'm sorry."

Bucky had never wanted a woman more in his life. The sensation of her damp, silky hair against his hands had brought his earlier condition back with interest. If he didn't get out of here right now, he'd be hard pressed not to nail her right here on the kitchen table.

Damn... it... all.

Before he got to the door, though, she spoke.

"Bucky..."

Something in her voice stopped him dead. His

throat was so tight he could barely breathe, much less speak.

"Don't go."

Cripes.

"Please."

She sounded as desperate as he felt. But for the life of him, he couldn't turn around. His insides screamed at his statue routine.

For an instant, he was transported back in time, in this very kitchen, an eleven-year-old kid with a huge crush on the babysitter. She was no less beautiful now than she was then. And this was no crush he had.

This was raw let's-have-hot-monkey-sex-on-the-living-room-floor attraction. Okay, so her smile made him giddy with something very junior high, but, ultimately, it was about the indescribable urge to bury himself within her. So, why the hell couldn't he turn around?

It must have been the blood throbbing through him that kept him from hearing her get up. The next thing he knew she was right behind him, her left hand on his shoulder.

"Please," she begged, again in a whisper. That was all she could get her voice to do.

If he walked out that door, she would most assuredly lose her nerve. As it was, she was teetering on the edge. She'd be surprised if she could look herself in the mirror later.

Right now, though, pure need pulsed inside her. She was a forty-year-old widow and he was thirty-two. Completely crazy and so not what forevers were

made of. Needing was a harsh mistress.

Bucky turned at last, and his eyes burned with that same need. Then he lowered his mouth to hers, his hands tangling in her hair, pulling her hungrily to him.

The road to hell was paved with good intentions. That's what Mrs. Buchanan frequently told her children. The road to hell, indeed.

No way this was hell, but Bucky'd had good intentions. First he'd intended to refrain from having sex with the beautiful Victoria Scott. Then, he'd intended to *only* help her out, since he was partly responsible for her injury. This morning at three a.m., he'd intended to put her off for a week, with hopes that she'd be more rational then, but still want him. Five minutes ago, he'd intended to leave and two minutes ago, he'd intended to make it to the bedroom before ripping her clothes off.

Victoria's good hand grasped the back of Bucky's neck as she perched on the edge of the kitchen table. She arched in his arms, her eyes clouded with desire.

He plunged inside her.

No, definitely not hell.

He ran his tongue down her neck and paused at her left breast, sucking and licking it.

She moaned and let go of his neck, putting her left hand back to prop herself up. His hands tugged her hips closer so he could sink deeper inside her.

She closed her eyes and threw her head back, her hair grazing his hands as she did.

She hooked her feet behind him and rocked with

each thrust.

Then Victoria Scott, the girl from his adolescent fantasies, now a hot, gorgeous woman, came for him.

"God, Bucky," she said, collapsing back onto the table, still very much hooked around him. It took maybe four more thrusts till he exploded as well, his knees nearly giving out.

"Jesus, Vic," he said, holding himself up above her.

When Bucky could move again, he scooped her up, still straddling him, and moved into the living room, collapsing with her into the overstuffed chair.

"God," she said, her face tucked against his neck, "I can't believe I did that."

"Why not?"

"Because..."

He knew what she was going to say.

"...because you're nine years older than me?"

"Partly."

He pulled away to look at her.

"Partly?"

"Okay, mostly," she said moving back in too close to see his next look.

There was a definite I-told-you-so voice in the back of her head. She shut it up by running her lips against his shoulder. It had been worth any accusation her rational mind could come up with.

"And what, exactly can you find wrong with two adults having consensual sex?"

She started to answer but he continued.

"Unless the sex isn't good. Don't think that'll be a problem here. Do you, Vic?"

"Uh-uh," she said, breathing in the scent of his sun-bronzed skin.

"Good..." He pulled her casted hand to his lips, kissing and sucking the tips of her fingers. "... 'cause I'm getting hard again."

When he started to get up, to head to the bedroom, she shook her head, her lips never leaving his neck.

"Here, right here. Maybe we can get to the bedroom later."

He laughed. "Can't argue that."

She turned so she had her back to him, her head laid back on his shoulder.

He grazed his hands up to cup her breasts, kissing her shoulder, his fingers circling her nipples. She could feel his erection, hard and hot against her butt.

Then his hand slid lower, dipping into her to pull their mixed moisture up to slip against her clitoris.

I am fucking the babysitter.

The thought erupted from his evil side, the side that said crude, rude, guy things.

How cool is that?

With a bit of effort, he shut up the voice and simply enjoyed the feel of her slippery wetness and he coaxed her to another orgasm. Quickly, she rose up a bit and slid onto him, sheathing him with that same wonderful, wet, warmth.

God damn, she was hot. Hot enough that he couldn't even imagine doing anything but this for the rest of his life.

To hell with siding the house. To hell with ever going home to Kansas. To hell with eating...

He smiled at the last thought.

... unless he was eating *her*.

When they were both spent, Victoria turned on his lap and lay in his arms, sated for the moment.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed there, nearly napping before she reluctantly lifted herself from the chair. Bucky opened one eye and smiled lazily.

"You wanna shower?"

Actually, that sounded wonderful. It was hot and sticky in the house and they were both covered with sweat and sex.

She just smiled and held out her left hand to help pull him from the chair.

"I have the Saran Wrap. You have the duct tape."

He pulled up close and kissed her.

"That sounds kinky, babe."

She just laughed and led the way. He was too concerned about her arm getting wet to start trouble in the shower. She resisted the temptation that was all too present, watching the water run down his back.

Bucky insisted on grilling hamburgers on his back porch. She didn't need to bring anything but herself, he told her on the way out the door. The door hadn't even closed when he returned and pulled her into an incredible kiss.

She let him go, but not willingly, running her hand down his arm, feeling the muscles ripple beneath her fingers.

Bucky was flipping burgers and Finn was sitting alert at his feet, waiting for anything that might come his way. He glanced momentarily at Victoria, assessed that she wasn't a threat, wagged his tail a couple times and went back to his vigil. The danged dog was smiling.

"Well, apparently Super Finn here is remorseful about barking you off that ladder, or you are his new queen."

"Gosh, Finn's queen. I'm not sure I'm worthy."

He leaned over, spatula in hand, and ran his tongue over her lips, finishing in a kiss.

"Oh, baby, you're more than worthy."

"For an old lady."

Rats, that sounded horrible and insecure and... horrible.

He frowned.

"Don't say that again, your Highness, or I'll have to hurt you."

His tone was playful, but there was an underlying message that came through loud and clear. He really didn't think of her as old, even if she did.

Victoria smiled.

"Sir, I do believe that my trusty canine would nibble you to death if you hurt me."

He sighed.

"Alas, I believe you are correct, fair maiden. I withdraw my threat, but not my displeasure at your implication."

She surrendered.

Closing the lid to the grill, he walked over to her

and pulled her against him.

"You are so not an old lady, baby."

She could feel his erection against her belly.

"And, apparently, I can't get enough of you." He grinned, kissed her forehead, and backed away.

"Beer? Wine? Coke?"

"Um, ice water."

"One ice water for the queen."

She'd never given it any thought. You need two hands to eat a hamburger. You only need one to eat chips, though. So she started there, pondering whether to get up and get a fork.

Bucky watched her as she considered her food. As soon as he took his first bite, he realized that there was a problem. Finally, she looked up to see him watching her and he smiled.

"How about I cut that thing into fourths. I think you might be able to pick up the pieces then."

She nodded, still gnawing her bottom lip.

An hour later, they sat in the hot tub. The feel of the jets eased the knots from her shoulders and the wine he'd brought out made her languorous and sleepy. It felt so good.

Again she was struck by the way the water dripped from his hair after he dunked beneath the surface. But now, she was too comfortable to do anything about it.

Bucky made sure Victoria got out of the hot tub before she boiled her brain. Good thing, too. If she'd had to be responsible for her own safety, there would have been Victoria soup in the morning.

He walked her home and poured her into bed. Then he kissed her and left.

"Finn, buddy," he said as he stepped back into his house, "that is one fine woman."

Chapter Six

It was raining when his alarm went off in the morning. So he punched the snooze button and slept in, wishing he wasn't alone in bed.

He was awakened again at seven-thirty by the Finnmeister barking furiously at the front door. The doorbell followed.

Bucky stumbled to the door in his boxers, running his hand through his totally trashed hair.

A look of shock and embarrassment on the face of a pretty blonde girl greeted him when he opened the door. She hurriedly stepped in front of the small person—maybe a little girl, he didn't really have time to see.

Bucky was tempted to just close the door, go throw his jeans on and start over. But the damage was done. Anyway, it wasn't like boxers were indecent.

"Can I help you?"

The girl blushed. "I'm, um, looking for my mother."

God, he hated it when his brain was mush. If he'd gotten up when the alarm went off, he'd have been fine. But now he was having a bit of trouble waking

up.

"Who?"

"My mother, Victoria Scott."

"Oh, she's not here."

The girl started blankly at him with big blue eyes.

"Where's Grammy?" said a tiny voice from somewhere behind the girl.

"Just a second, sweetie."

"Oh, shit. Sorry. You're Vic's daughter. Alison, isn't it? Right." On top of his game this morning for sure. "She lives next door." He pointed to his right like an idiot.

Now he sure as hell wanted to close the door and have a do-over. He needed caffeine bad.

The girl stepped back and looked again at the house number. "Oh, this is twenty-seven-thirteen. I'm so sorry, sorry to have disturbed you."

"It's okay. But Vic...toria may not be up this early."

At her curious look, Bucky decided not to finish his thought. Victoria would likely not want her daughter to know she'd been screwing the boy next door. That thought made him more uncomfortable than he would have expected. Not the screwing part, but the part about her maybe not wanting Alison to know.

When he didn't expound, Alison turned, picked up the munchkin and, apologizing once again, made her way next door.

Bucky made his way to the shower.

Victoria wasn't expecting company, but it was nice anyway. Once she was up and dressed, at least.

Alison stopped Brittany before she could throw herself at Victoria as she usually did.

"Baby, Grammy hurt her arm. We have to be careful."

"I'm sorry, Grammy."

Victoria knelt down and scooped the child in with her left arm.

"It's okay, Britt."

"Hey, Grammy, Mommy said we could go to the beach for little while if it stopped raining. It stopped raining on the way over here. Can we go to the beach, Grammy?"

"Sure, sweetie."

Alison led Brittany to the kitchen table and pulled out a coloring book and crayons for her while Victoria made the coffee.

"So, why does the guy next door call you Vic?" she asked.

Victoria spun around and looked at her. Her voice hadn't held suspicion and now that she looked at her, all she saw was confusion.

"Bucky?"

Brittany interrupted.

"Grammy, there's a dog next door that barks a lot."

"Yes there is. His name is Finn." Victoria turned back to Alison, "When did you talk to Bucky?"

"Just now. We went to the wrong house. We woke him up, I think. Somehow I pictured the man who took you to the hospital as someone older."

She said it very matter-of-factly, no overt judgment in her voice. Yet, Victoria felt like she was somehow on trial.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"Which one?" Victoria pulled her favorite coffee mug from the cupboard. "You want a cup?"

"No, thanks." Alison bent to pick up the burnt sienna crayon that had rolled off the table. "Why does Bucky call you Vic?"

"I don't know. I guess it's just his way of getting around four syllables. At least it's not Vicky."

Alison laughed harshly.

"Mom, is there something I need to know?" Now her voice was loaded with suspicion.

The fact was that there really wasn't anything that Alison *needed* to know. Victoria resented the question.

"No, Alison. There's nothing you need to know." But she couldn't turn around, couldn't look her in the eye.

"Good." She paused for a minute. Then in a quiet voice, "He sure is cute."

Zing. Victoria felt that one as if she'd been slapped. An insane urge to defend both herself and Bucky nearly overwhelmed her. It was awful.

"So, Mom, how's the arm, really?"

"It's okay. Fine. Aches a bit." She caught herself before saying that Bucky was taking good care of her.

"You feel up to taking a walk on the beach?"

Brittany's hand stopped and her little face lit up as

she waiting for Victoria to answer.

"Sure. We can go to the beach for a while."

The beach was only a long block away. If they didn't take anything along, a cooler, chairs, and the like, they could just walk.

Brittany and Alison put their suits on under their clothes so that they wouldn't have to carry them. Victoria put on shorts and a tank top, but her arm would keep her out of the water. No point in putting her suit on.

The sun was shining through the wispy leftovers of rain clouds. When they passed Bucky's, Finn got all riled up and Bucky came out to see what the commotion was all about.

Brittany giggled at Finn's efforts to get over the fence, not at all put off by the barking.

"Finn. Shut up."

"Can Finn come to the beach with us?" Brittany asked Bucky.

Alison blushed. Victoria coughed.

"Not without me, he can't."

Bucky smiled down at the little girl. She looked so hopeful, her blue eyes shining with expectation. Suddenly she got shy.

"You could come with us if you wanted to." Then, in afterthought, she looked to her mother, same beautiful blue eyes, for permission to ask what she'd already asked.

Bucky laughed.

When the rain had stopped and the sun had come out, he'd begun to plan his day's work. Victoria had

company so he had a chance to get a bunch done.

But now, all he wanted to do was to go to the beach. With Victoria.

"Well, I guess Finn and I could come to the beach for a little while. That is if you'll throw his Frisbee for him."

Again the pixie looked up to her mother. At Alison's nod, she jumped up and down and clapped her hands.

"Finn, you can go to the beach."

"I'll get his leash."

Victoria sat in the sand and watched the kids play.

Bucky, the typical boy next door. Not strikingly handsome but so cute he turned her to mush. Nothing hidden about Bucky. He was just Bucky.

Yet, he was all male and all sex. And here he was, showing Brittany how to throw the Frisbee for Finn, laughing and tickling the little girl, having almost as much fun as Britt was.

He'll make a wonderful dad.

Ugh.

He looked great with Alison. They'd make a perfect couple.

Bucky teased Finn by throwing the Frisbee to Alison. She had to jump to catch it.

"Eww, dog slobber," she said, her blue eyes—so like her father's—dancing. She tossed the disc back and wiped her hands on her thighs.

Bucky grabbed Brittany, holding her high enough so she could catch her mom's throw. All three were laughing and Finn was barking.

Picture perfect.

Victoria suddenly felt tired and maybe a bit sick to her stomach. Tears blurred her vision. She looked away.

Bucky noted the change in Vic from the corner of his eye. It sent a stab of dismay through him.

If it hadn't been rude or way too obvious, he'd have jogged over to put his arm around her. Vic might very well not want her family to pick up on what was going on between her and Bucky, though, so he steeled himself to continue playing.

At one point, Finn got distracted by chasing the waves. Brittany giggled hysterically at his antics, completely forgetting the Frisbee. Alison and Bucky stood together laughing at Britt.

He took the opportunity to slide over to where Victoria sat and pull her to her feet.

She objected.

But he was bigger.

So he drew her over to the water's edge and held her in place as the water barged up over her feet, up to her ankles.

She smiled up at him, but it was such a reserved smile that it hardly qualified. It was as if something had drained out of her as she sat on the sand. Whatever it was, he missed it.

"C'mon, Brittany. Come out here with Grammy. The water feels good."

With little hesitation, Britt kicked off her flip-flops and dashed out into the surf, which came halfway up her tiny calves. She took Vic's hand and danced

around in typical little girl fashion. Bucky, however, couldn't take his eyes off the grammy.

Victoria tried desperately to ignore Bucky's nearness. She laughed and danced with Britt. She chatted with Alison about her new job, her new apartment, her new life. Alison was so animated as she spoke of all the firsts in her life. And Victoria watched Bucky watch Alison. With a sigh, she mentally moved on.

It wasn't long before Brittany began to wilt. Lunch and naptime neared. Alison scooped her up and they all began walking home. Soon, Bucky took Britt into his arms and, by the time they got back to the house, the child was asleep on his shoulder.

Victoria watched him deposit his burden into the car seat, careful not to wake her up.

"Thank you, Bucky," Alison said with a goofy smile, her eyes wide.

"Any time."

Alison stopped and hugged Victoria on her way around the car.

"I'll call you later, Mom. Get some rest. You look tired."

She hadn't said anything wrong or mean, but Victoria sucked in her breath at the feeling in her belly, as if she'd been punched. Alison was right about one thing, though. She was tired. And if she looked like she felt...

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to stem the tears that threatened.

"I will, thanks."

Alison drove off, leaving Victoria standing way too close to the darling boy next door.

"Well, then," he said turning toward her, "first I feed you. Then I take you to bed..." He grinned, then added, "...so you can take a nap."

"Bucky..."

"No arguments, *Grammy*." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "C'mon, get in the truck and I'll take you out for a real meal."

Victoria just stared up at him. He just didn't get it, did he?

"Bucky, you got it right. *Grammy*. I'm that little girl's grandmother." When he didn't even acknowledge her words, just wandering over and opening the truck's passenger door, she was obligated to explain further.

"You should be with someone your own age. You and Alison..."

She couldn't even finish.

He stood with his hand on the top of the door, gaping at her.

"You're kidding, right?"

She had no fight in her. Shaking her head, she turned for her house.

He caught up to her before she'd even made it to the steps, taking her by the shoulders and turning her around.

A lock of dark hair fell over his forehead, taking the edge off the dead serious look in his clear blue eyes.

"Victoria Scott." He kissed her quickly. "I enjoyed

spending time with your family today. I like Alison and Brittany very much." Another kiss. "Very much." He stuck up one finger delaying her response. "Hold on, Vic. Don't give me that look. Let me finish."

Victoria didn't want to hear the rest. She tried weakly to back away, but he held her firmly. Again, tears blurred her vision. Bucky pulled her into his arms, holding her, one hand in her hair and one on her back. She could hear the soft, steady thud of his heart. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world and it broke her heart.

"Victoria," he whispered, "I enjoyed them because they are *your* family. If not for their connection with you, they'd just be a lady and her little girl."

Until it came out of his mouth, he didn't know it himself. He was falling in love with Victoria Scott. Well, maybe not falling in love. That took a long time. But he definitely cared, definitely wanted more from her than sex. Though sex was a great start. Ah, hell, he was falling in love with her. Sex was one thing. This falling for her shit was quite another.

Damn it all, he was only here for a few more weeks. Longer if he didn't get back to work. 'Course that was kinda hard when all he could think about was making love to this beautiful woman.

With a sigh, he pulled back from her.

"Let's just go get something for lunch, okay, Vic?"

Victoria nodded and wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. This whole thing was way too complicated to deal with with both an empty stomach and no energy.

She'd eat, she'd sleep, she'd think about it all later. That philosophy had gotten her through the last four plus years. It could get her through the day.

"Protein, Victoria. You need protein for that arm to heal. How about a nice t-bone steak?"

Victoria wrinkled her nose.

"You don't eat steak?" He looked horrified, like she'd just said she didn't believe in apple pie or baseball.

"Not for lunch. Can I have chicken instead?"

"I suppose," he answered with an exaggerated sigh.

While they waited for their appetizers, Victoria kept the talk away from anything significant. She elicited updates on his folks and brother, Bob, back in Kansas and sister Annette who lived with her husband and one point five kids in upstate New York.

He must have been feeling the same way because he asked her about her job and her favorite periods of American history.

"So, if you weren't able to teach history, what would you be doing, Vic."

She barely flinched at the name thing, which surprised her.

"I'm not sure. I never gave it much thought. I think somewhere along the way I gave up daydreaming."

"Wow, that's a shame. We're going to have to fix that."

His use of the word "we" made Victoria all warm inside, in spite of herself.

"So daydream a little now. Let's just say that you

have used up your time limit for teaching history. You can do anything you want to do." He snapped his fingers several times. "Quickly, off the top of your head, what do you want to do?"

"Become an astrophysicist."

"Really? How come?" He took a bite of his burger.

"I...um...think that space is fascinating. You know, suns exploding, black holes, alternate universe theories..."

"Star Trek, Babylon Five, Stargate SG-1..."

She laughed. "Oh, yes, I've had oodles of time to watch TV. What about you?"

"What do I want to be when I grow up? You don't think that being a carpenter is my ultimate dream?"

"Oh, no. Bucky. I didn't mean..."

"Relax, Vic. I know you didn't. I really do love being a carpenter. I love being outside, working with my hands." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "If I couldn't do it any more, though, I guess I'd study languages. That is if I didn't need to make a living."

"A terrible necessity that making a living thing."

"No kidding. Dessert, my sweet?"

She waved off even the idea of more to eat.

She was stuffed. She was sleepy. And her arm ached. The idea of a popping some ibuprofen and going to bed sounded better by the moment.

"Alright then. We'll have something yummy after dinner. It's nap time."

"Yes, I think it is."

Bucky wasn't content to just hear that she was going to go nap. He wanted to make sure. She

insisted that over the counter pain killers were fine - she didn't need the good stuff.

He found the ibuprofen in the third cabinet he looked in. He checked the label, then took two pills and a glass of water in to Victoria.

He spent a few minutes working the muscles in her shoulders and neck until he felt her relax against his hands. Then, he kissed the top of her head and pulled the covers up, leaving her to sleep.

Cutting boards made noise. Nailing boards made noise. So, without any other options, he ended up painting. Her house. Not his. At this rate, he'd get back to Kansas by Christmas instead of after the Fourth of July.

Chapter Seven

Days passed easily. Victoria went into each morning with great intentions, convinced that this thing between them was wrong. By nightfall, though, she was only sure of one thing. Having Bucky around, seeing his smile, laughing at his jokes, touching, being touched... It all felt so good.

One evening they made love in the hammock in her back yard. The gentle swing of it was seductive by itself. With Bucky's hands on her breasts, circling her nipples with his thumb, his fingers exploring between her legs, inside her, driving her to the edge before pulling back and kissing her. It was something out of a fairy tale. Magical.

Two days later, after driving the last nail in the new siding, Bucky and Victoria sat on the steps of her back porch, enjoying the cool breeze. The edge of heat was abating as the sun slipped beyond the angle of her roof, leaving the back yard bathed in shade. Thunder rumbled off in the distance, not a threat for a while

yet.

Bucky wore shorts, his long tan legs stretched out in front of him. He'd pulled Victoria down on the step below to sit against him. Now his arms crossed in front of her and she rested her cheek against his hand.

He had beautiful hands, strong, dark, worker hands. He fought to keep the roughness that accompanied his occupation at bay and was pretty much successful. And what he could do with those hands!

The very thought made her moan quietly.

"Are you having dirty thoughts, Professor?"

"Absolutely."

It was almost embarrassing having conversations like this. But the only way to keep it from happening, she'd have to keep her distance. She wasn't doing a very good job of that right now, was she?

He pulled her tight against him and she could feel how hard he was.

"Me too," he whispered against her ear, sending shivers down her entire body.

It wasn't until Brittany bounced out onto the back porch that they knew they had company. And it was too late to move.

"Hi, Grammy!" The tyke squeaked and threw herself at Victoria. Bucky caught her before she could do any damage.

"Whoa, there, remember Grammy's arm, munchkin."

He turned in time to see the look on Alison's face. Victoria got to her feet, and blushed furiously when

she caught the narrowing of Alison's eyes.

"Mom. Bucky." She snapped her mouth shut on the words and looked away. "I'm sorry. I had no idea." Her voice was flat, steely.

Bucky felt immediately riled, defensive of Victoria. He opened his mouth to protest to tell the girl she needed to get over it. But a warning look from Victoria clamped him down on the retort.

"Would you guys like some lemonade?"

Britt answered for them both. "Sure."

"Well, then, have a seat and I'll get it." She turned and walked up the steps and into the house, her head held high.

Bucky followed her in without excuse.

"You want me to leave, Vic?"

"I don't know," she said, but she wouldn't look at him. Then she reconsidered. "Please."

He stepped up behind her, his arms going around her waist. She froze.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart—for the awkwardness, for you having to feel this way, but not for being here with you. Not sorry about that at all." He kissed her neck and stepped away, letting himself out the front.

Victoria carried three glasses of lemonade out onto the back porch. She set them on the table and took a seat across from Alison. Brittany was attempting cartwheels in the grass.

"C'mere, Britt, and give Grammy a kiss."

The little girl flew up the stairs but slowed as she approached. Then she turned to her mom to explain. "Bucky said to be careful of Grammy's arm." Then to Victoria, "How is your arm, Grammy?"

"It's healing well, baby. I'll be out of the cast in no time."

Britt crawled up on Victoria's lap.

"Grammy, what does mutchking mean?"

"Mutchking?"

"What Bucky called me – mutchking."

Victoria couldn't help but smile. "Munchkin, sweetie, he calls you munchkin."

"That's what I said. What does it mean?"

"You haven't seen the Wizard of Oz yet?" Victoria looked from Britt's questioning face to Alison, who looked away. "Well, we'll just have to do something about that."

After three slurps of her lemonade, Brittany was off to play on the swing, also known as the hammock. For a moment, memories made Victoria smile wistfully.

"Mom!" Alison almost hissed.

Victoria pressed her lips together trying hard to keep her emotions in check. The mortification of being caught by Alison was slowly giving way to outrage. Outrage at herself for being in that position to start with, but even more outrage that Alison thought it was any of her business...

"You're having an affair with Bucky. You're old enough to be his mother!"

With a sigh and a reminder to keep her cool,

Victoria answered.

"First of all, it isn't an affair. We are both single, consenting adults."

She continued even in the face of Alison's fury.

"And second, I am most assuredly not old enough to be his mother."

Brittany had stopped swinging and was looking over to where they sat, a puzzled look on her face.

Victoria pushed out of the chair. "And even if I were that old..."

She didn't finish. Alison looked ready to explode, so Victoria just shook her head and sauntered down to join Brittany in the hammock.

They swung for a little while before Alison stomped over, ordered Britt to kiss Grammy good night, and ushered her from the yard. Victoria lay back in the hammock. Hugging herself, she allowed the tears to flow. Visions of mothers hurrying their children away from the scarlet woman chased each other through her head.

Bucky heard the front door slam next door and watched through a slit in the curtain as Alison hauled her child to the car, then drove away. The defensive instinct from earlier had given way to guilt. Guilt that he'd put Vic in this position. Guilt that he'd be leaving next week. Guilt that he hadn't been strong enough to stay away.

Chapter Eight

The Fourth of July in Boston. It was probably the biggest celebration in the country, lasting for a week. Historic reenactments, tall ship tours, concerts. And on the fourth itself, the fireworks, the harbor, Boston Pops.

Victoria and Alison had always watched the fireworks together from a friend's house near the harbor. When Britt was a baby, they stayed home, afraid that the loud noises would scare her. But last year they'd reinstated the tradition. Britt was so excited that Victoria missed most of the fireworks themselves in lieu of watching her little face light up.

But she'd been calling Alison for two days, trying to make plans for the fourth, leaving message after message. Nothing. Alison never returned her call.

So she was stuck.

Bucky was leaving in three days. Going back to Kansas. There was nothing Victoria wanted more than to spend every minute between now and then in his arms. Then again, that would just make Thursday that much harder.

Thursday and the day after and the day after. Then

there was August to get through. And September, October, November...

This was ridiculous. All good things came to an end - always. This thing between her and Bucky was no exception. She should be grateful. She was alive again, after a very long time. She again knew what it felt like to have someone light up her life, actually what it felt like to light up someone else's life. Amazing. His smile when their eyes met, the delicious shiver of anticipation when they touched, his weight on top of her.

Victoria poured herself another cup of coffee.

Soon she'd feel the emptiness of loss, turn around and see the spot where he should be, listen in the night for his breathing.

Ahh, the heights and depths of love.

Geez, what was she thinking. She refused to be in love. At least not with Calvin Buchanan.

He was too young. He was too good a man to give up the American dream of a house and two children. And he was leaving in three days.

"C'mon, Vic. Humor me. When are you ever going to get the chance to watch the fireworks from the deck of a Boston Whaler? Besides, I paid a fortune to rent the danged thing. Don't make me go out there by myself."

He stuck his hands in his pockets.

"I have champagne...fancy crackers, expensive

cheese."

He stepped closer, and leaned to whisper in her ear.

"I want to make love to you on the boat. I want us to lay in each others arms, our skin slick with sweat as the sky above lights up. Please, Victoria..."

She was weakening. He could feel it.

The Conquest bobbed happily on the Charles River, not far from its neighbor.

"I told you so," said Victoria when Bucky expressed amazement at the number of vessels crowded on the river, from million dollar yachts to dinghies.

He brought his beer to his lips and downed a swallow. Then he ran the cool bottle along Vic's shoulder.

"Guess we'll have an audience, then."

She just laughed an in-your-dreams laugh.

"Good thing I brought some tarps and blankets." He kissed the moisture left from the bottle and slipped his hand around her, snaking it up under her shirt, his fingers skimming the smooth skin of her belly.

She was holding her breath, trembling at his touch. God, he loved being able to do that to her.

It was like being naked in public and hiding in the bushes. Victoria lay on the pillows underneath the makeshift lean-to that Bucky had arranged. Feeling a bit scandalous, she traced her finger along his waistband.

"You can't mean to allow me to be the only one arrested for public nakedness."

He gazed down at her, his blue eyes nearly black with desire. When she grazed the tip of his erection, his breath left in a whoosh and he closed his eyes.

Even for all his big talk, he'd never made love on a boat, actually never been with a girl on a boat - other than his sister on a fishing trip. But the gentle up and down motion was both relaxing and exhilarating.

Vic popped the button on his jeans and, with excruciation deliberation, she slid his zipper down. His cock sprang free, as if with a mind of its own.

He opened his eyes.

Vic was grinning at him as she slid her fingers around him, spreading his drop of moisture around.

"You are so beautiful, Calvin."

He didn't have a voice to correct her.

"I want you in me, hard and large, pounding."

He groaned hoarsely.

Bucky wanted that more than he could even say, but he wanted her to come with him. And that meant that he needed to pull away a bit, out of her grasp.

At her hurt look, he just smiled, waggled his eyebrows at her and then lowered himself between her legs.

God, she tasted good. Warm and wet and musky

with need. Her legs trembled and she was making the sexiest little whimpering noises. Her hands clenched and unclenched the pillows around her before she moved them to his head, guiding him to her most sensitive spots.

Her breathing sped up as he flicked her with his tongue. Then she arched her back and exploded.

“Please — Bucky — please.”

If he’d had handles on his shoulders, he was sure that she would have grabbed them and yanked him up to her. He grinned at her desperate attempts to get him to move.

At last he moved up, kissing his way up to her lips. She nearly devoured him and he loved it. The staid history professor was the hottest woman he’d ever been with.

In one move, without breaking the kiss, he rolled her on top of him.

Victoria looked down at him, at his sweet face, his sexy smile, his blue eyes.

His hands circled her breasts and he froze when she rubbed herself along the length of his cock.

Their eyes locked, his hungry with need. But even then, they glittered with humor.

She adjusted her angle so he slid inside.

Amazing. Breathtaking. Astounding.

It felt more than great. It felt complete. Having him inside her flesh, in her head, her heart, her soul.

She held still, balanced on him, for a moment, enjoying the motion beneath them. He grasped her hips and began thrusting.

Slowly at first, then faster.

Until, with a scrumptious groan, he came, pulling her down to hold her in his arms.

Supper consisted of white wine, a variety of cheeses, crackers and grapes. Clichè, maybe, but not in a bad way.

Bucky had slipped back into his jeans—commando. He'd insisted that Victoria could get away with wearing his T-shirt and nothing else—if anyone was paying attention, they'd just think she wore her swim suit underneath.

She wasn't that uninhibited though so she sat next to him fully dressed, sipping wine and watching the sun go down.

Music and disembodied voices from the Esplanade drifted out to them on the water. In the waning light, they opened the champagne and laid out the food. Then they snuggled down on the deck amidst pillows and blankets.

Bucky'd had in mind having mind-blowing sex as the 1812 Overture finished and the light show began. Instead, they just lay together, covered by a blanket, whispering memories between them. It was as good, if not better than what he'd had in mind.

When the fireworks started they didn't move, just stopped talking of necessity. Between each explosion of the pyrotechnics themselves there was a constant roar of approval from the crowd every direction.

Victoria felt safe and warm and completely content huddled under the blanket, her head on his shoulder, his hand on her thigh. Every now and again, he'd turn to her and kiss her.

It was like he was reminding himself that she was still there.

Soon he wouldn't be.

Victoria swallowed against the tightness in her throat, squeezing her eyes shut against the sudden rush of gloom that swept over her.

The instinct to not get too comfortable and the desire to soak up each moment, each touch, each kiss – warred inside her.

The irony was that no matter how hard you held on to the moments, once they were gone, when they were needed to fill the ache of emptiness, they were so very difficult to grasp.

Each time they'd made love became one more moment closer to the inevitable. Bucky's body had felt heavier and heavier as the hours passed, as if he were willing his body to stay. Some things, though, just weren't meant to be.

The outskirts of Boston blurred and his stomach lurched. Bucky clenched the steering wheel harder and gave the truck more gas.

"Alison. If you're there, please pick up." Victoria paused. Nothing. "I just want you to know that I miss you and Britt. Bucky is gone. Back to Kansas. I... please call me or come by."

Victoria hated that her voice had wavered at the end of the message. If she could have, she would have erased it and started over. Instead, she hung up the phone and wandered out onto the back porch.

It had been three days. Three really long days. And she'd made a dozen lists.

Lists of projects to accomplish around the house.

Lists of books she'd like to read.

Lists of events she wanted to attend.

They lay piled on the kitchen table. She'd get to them later. Later.

Later seemed to be gobbling her alive. If she didn't get a grip...

She launched herself from the top step and strode into the house. By God, she would have a new beginning. That's what coming out here for the summer was about in the first place. Damned if she'd let herself waste away. Bucky had shown her that she was really, truly, alive—and that was not to be taken lightly.

Picking up her lists, she leafed through them 'til she came to the one that enumerated the events she wanted to attend.

Tomorrow night.

On campus.

Professor Jamison's Hamlet.

She'd heard great things about it. And every year,

she'd had some family obligation or other that kept her from it.

With a smile, she set the papers down.

She'd go this year.

It would be a celebration to boot. Her cast was due to come off tomorrow morning.

A new beginning.

Just what she needed.

It wasn't like Bucky didn't have a million things to do. Hell, he had work leftover from before he went to the East coast.

He'd promised Mrs. Fletcher that he'd come by when he got back and finish the trim on the south wall of her addition. She'd wanted to play with the wallpapering and wanted him to wait on the trim.

He had a signed contract to start a kitchen remodel and six messages waiting from a guy he'd spoken with about turning his carport into a garage before winter.

There were many other first calls to return as well.

But, for the life of him, he couldn't get motivated. For a minute he considered taking Finn to the park for Frisbee, but even Finn seemed kinda mopey.

"What's wrong with us, buddy?"

Finn didn't get up, didn't even open his eyes, but his tail did thump twice against the floor. So at least the mutt hadn't gone deaf.

The phone rang but Bucky didn't dash to get it.

"Hi, son, it's Mom. Thought you might like to come to dinner and tell us about your trip. Call me."

Yeah, that's just what he wanted to do, spend an evening talking to his mother about Victoria Scott. What he really needed was to have somebody kick him in the ass and get him started. His mom was fairly good at that. But in order for her to do it, he'd have to reveal way more information about his time in Boston than he cared to. That was just not going to happen.

Jet lag. That's what it was. Car lag? Maybe he'd feel like getting back to work tomorrow.

Victoria rushed to get into the house before the phone stopped ringing. She was clumsy with her new arm and dropped the keys not once, but twice. She leaned her head against the door with a sigh and listened to the sound of silence on the other side of the door. It was then that she realized that the only person that she'd be that jazzed to talk to was the last person to call her. She wasn't even sure he had the number.

Once inside, she retrieved the message from Alison—that was a good thing, wasn't it?—and poured herself an iced tea. There was a slight hesitation in Alison's voice, but other than that, she sounded good. It was a start.

Victoria had hoped that Alison would go with her to Hamlet, but she had other plans. So Victoria went by herself.

It wasn't as hard as she'd thought it would be. She ran into several of the other professors and they'd all sat together, right behind Michael and Darcy as a matter of fact.

Michael had been amazing. He was normally so shy and almost ill at ease, even in the gatherings she'd attended. He wasn't shy tonight. At least not while he was on stage.

What a cutie. Victoria could certainly see why all the girlyies were all a twitter.

The drive back to the beach house was long. She'd get used to being alone. This was just a delayed reaction to having Alison and Brittany move out. She'd had a buffer in Bucky. Now empty nest slammed her hard.

She would survive.

Actually, she enjoyed being alone, liked being able to do what she wanted when she wanted.

If what she wanted, though, was no longer an option, she'd just have to want something else.

Having her cast off gave Victoria a new lease on life. At least that's what she told herself. She was ready to take on the world. She was ready to finish painting the house.

Yet, when she gathered the paint and brushes and rollers, regret stabbed through her.

He'd cleaned the rollers much better than she ever had. He had the patience for that sort of thing. He had

patience for a lot of things.

And when she climbed up on the ladder she looked over her shoulder, wishing for a frantic Finn to yap at her. If Finn were there, then so would his owner.

But he wasn't. And he wouldn't be.

That last morning had been torture. Bucky had packed up his truck the night before and they'd spent the night together. They'd made love once, then laid awake for hours talking, touching. There was even laughter. But, somehow it was hollow, painful.

Morning came way too soon—like something out of Romeo and Juliet—announced by light peeking through the curtains of her bedroom, they both got up. He showered in her shower and she made coffee.

But there were no words. Every thought, every movement just delayed the inevitable. And he put them both out of their misery and pushed away from the kitchen counter.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

"Please don't come outside. If you do, I won't be able to leave."

The obvious reply hung unspoken in the air between them.

He tipped her chin up and kissed her briefly.

"So long Victoria Lynn."

She hadn't stepped outside. She'd just listened as his diesel roared to life and he drove off.

Wrapping her hands around her coffee mug and closing her eyes, she momentarily saw the ending

scene of the movie Shane.

"Come back," she whispered.

Even now as she pushed the paint roller through the paint, the tears welled up in the pit of her stomach. She was getting so much better at not letting them get to her eyes, but that didn't mean they didn't threaten.

At night, she'd sit in the hammock and sip creme soda and wish there was a place that she didn't think of him. She considered finishing up the painting and going home, where she was safe.

Chapter Nine

Mrs. Fletcher's trim was done. The kitchen remodel was a bust—the client had changed her mind. He wasn't in the mood to push the legalities of breaking the contract, so he moved on to the carport.

That was a ten-day job, tops. He promised himself that, once that job was done, he'd start a house. That way he'd be committed to staying in Kansas and not be tempted every second of the day to grab Finn, jump in his truck and drive due east.

The unavoidable dinner with the parents went okay. Bucky kept his mom talking with questions of his own and didn't give her a chance to ask about Boston. On his way out the door, his dad has asked if he was okay.

"Sure, Dad. I'm fine."

Guy's night out with his buddies helped take the edge off his loneliness. This stupid disease he'd picked up hadn't made him immune to stupid guy stuff that made him laugh or to the hot women they continually surrounded themselves with.

He would recover. He was feeling better already.

In the spirit of new beginnings, Victoria set the radio to a country station. That lasted about thirty minutes. Songs about lost love and found love were a bit much. The soft rock station was almost as bad. Adult contemporary? It lasted a bit longer—a day and a half.

Finally, with a distinct sense of defeat, she switched back to the classical music station she'd listened to for years.

Who was he kidding?

If anything, by the time he'd finished the damned garage, he was thinking more about Boston and boats and the beach than he was when he got back. Each thought led right to a picture indelibly cut into his brain: Victoria in her pajamas. And that image tripped the slide show that always followed.

Time heals all wounds.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Tried and true statements.

Complete bullshit!

Tim McGraw was a prophet.

Why the hell had they said goodbye?

He'd stopped counting the times he'd picked up the phone, only to set it down again. Maybe it was better this way.

On September first, Bucky turned in the keys to his apartment, tied a tarp over the belongings in the bed of his pickup truck, whistled for Finn and turned his life east. Come what may.

On September fourth, he pulled up in front of the house, a block from the beach. The house next door was now blue-green in its entirety, but no one was home. The hammock no longer hung out back and the patio furniture had been put away.

But that was okay. He knew where she'd be.

The first rose arrived on the fifth day of September, just as Victoria left her office to teach her first class. There was a note attached that said: "Someday, after we have mastered the winds and the waves, the tides and gravity, we will harness the energies of love. And, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

Victoria smiled. Love and fire. The fire part he'd gotten right. The love part? She wasn't so sure. Cancel that. She was absolutely sure. She couldn't be in love with Bucky and he couldn't be in love with her.

But the fire part he'd gotten right.

She smiled for the rest of the day.

The next day, another flawless red rose. "Finn misses you." She just shook her head and laughed. Then she slid the card into the pocket of her sweater.

The next day, it was "So do I."

"I miss you too, Bucky."

"Who's the guy, Professor?"

Victoria nearly jumped out of her skin. She looked up to see her student intern standing in the doorway, holding a stack of papers in her hand.

"What?" She hadn't meant it to come out so snappish, but Melanie took a step back and looked away.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Victoria interrupted her. "No, Mel, I'm sorry. That came out wrong. What can I do for you?"

"Your quizzes?"

The infamous Professor Scott first day of class pop quizzes. Victoria's traditional way of finding out how much the class knew and how much they thought they knew. Mel had taken the stack yesterday afternoon to check them.

"How were they?"

"Not bad, actually. Some of them actually got the trick question right as well."

"Thanks, Mel." She picked up her lesson plan book and walked around her desk. "Just lay them on the desk. I don't think I have anything else for you today."

She scooped past and was well on her way out the door when she stopped and turned around.

"What did you mean, Mel, the 'who's the guy' question?"

"Oh, sorry. It's just that you've gotten three roses now and when I came in you were looking so, I don't

know, dreamy or something. You're smiling a lot, that is, when you aren't looking totally bereft."

Victoria stood in stunned silence as Mel pegged her to the wall. Was she really that transparent? She didn't like the implication. The sophisticated Professor Scott wandering about like a love sick teenager. Middle ground. She needed to find middle ground.

Bucky had never enjoyed biding his time, had never been any good at it. Finn was doing better than he was. He raced around the yard chasing imaginary monsters and didn't even seem to notice the absence of life next door.

There was so much to do. He'd about decided to finish the touch ups and sell the house. He wanted to buy a boat. To be honest, he wanted to live on a boat with Victoria and Finn. Okay, so it was a fantasy. But what a great fantasy.

One thing was certain, he needed to find some work. His savings couldn't last forever, even if he didn't have to pay rent. He needed to get cards printed, arrange for advertising, the whole nine yards.

But first, he had to see Vic.

The history department was located in Carney Hall.

Bucky'd gone to college for a year at a community college in KC before dropping out to do what he really wanted to do. He had never regretted his decision.

But, man oh man was that a different world than this. The buildings here - God they were beautiful - made him want to become an architect - seemed to ooze knowledge. It was like just walking across the quad or through the halls made one a scholar. He almost expected to speak with an accent.

He opened the door to her office and met up with a twenty-something girl with shoulder-length red hair sitting behind the desk that was clearly marked as Vic's.

Before he could say anything—and test his accent theory—the girl looked up and spoke.

“Can I help you?”

“I was looking for Vic, er, Professor Scott.” Nope, no accent.

“You're the guy!”

“Excuse me?”

“You are so the guy.”

Bucky glanced again at the name plate on the desk to make sure he was in the right office - on the right planet.

“I'm sorry...”

The girl smiled brightly.

“The roses are beautiful.” She swept her hand toward the window, where the vase with now four roses sat. This morning's message had said “The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be

loved in return." Kinda hokey, he knew. It had been a momentary lapse into mushy sentimentality. He'd given them a weeks' worth of cards. Some were better than others. He shrugged.

"Um..."

"They've made her smile." Now the girl's voice was lower, like she was spilling the proverbial beans. "When she's not grinning, she looks sad and lost."

Luckily the girl realized that she was totally out of line and stopped talking.

"Sorry."

She pressed her lips together as if trying to keep her mouth from running amok again.

"She's not here?"

She shook her head, then with a huge breath, allowed herself to speak.

"She's got class for," she said, glancing at her watch, "another forty minutes. Then she doesn't have another until three. She'll come back here before going to lunch. She always does."

"Thanks."

"You can wait here if you like. I was just leaving."

"O—kay." Bucky's mind was just catching up to this girl's mouth.

She stood.

"I'm Melanie Rosinski, Professor Scott's slave."

She held out her hand.

"Bucky Buchanan." He shook the proffered hand then stepped back.

"I've got some work to do in Professor Stafford's office down the hall. If you decide to leave, just come

down and get me so I can lock the door."

"Fine."

"See ya," she said and skipped out of the office. Bucky was pretty sure he'd heard her giggle on the way down the hall.

His stomach growled as he walked to the window. Lunch sounded like a good idea. He hadn't really planned anything except for coming here and seeing her.

He wandered around the office, reading the titles of the books in the shelves that took up one entire wall. There he found Band of Brothers. It still held the scrap of napkin from her kitchen.

He ended up back at the window, watching the kids, appreciating the fall colors and the way the sun shone on the old stone buildings.

Victoria entered her office and put her books down on her desk without even looking up.

Like a lightning bolt hitting her, though, she realized that he was there. She was frozen in place, conflicting thoughts racing through her head. It was one of those out of time moments, when everything is both crystal clear and out of focus at the same time.

She could smell the roses over on the table. She could feel the sunlight from the window, see the dust motes floating in the air.

He was here.

Her heart raced.

It became hard to breathe.

Yet, a pain so utter cut through her at the same time. What they'd had together was perfect just as it

was. Even their goodbye. Anything more was bound to fail.

So many complications, roadblocks.

But he was here, in Boston, for her. Maybe that was all that mattered.

Slowly she lifted her head and turned around.

Chapter Ten

How could she be suddenly shy? After all they'd been, and done?

Victoria felt a blush creep up her face as she stood facing him. He stood in the corner, leaning against the wall, his arms—tan, strong, smoothly muscled—crossed over his chest. He wore jeans that hugged him like skin, and black, well-worn cowboy boots.

Only a hint of a smile touched his lips but his eyes—those clear blue eyes—danced with pleasure.

And then he was beside her, holding her as if he'd never let go.

Until that moment, Bucky didn't realize just how important she'd become to him. It was like coming home to Kansas after being trapped in Oz.

When the door opened, he didn't let go, just swung them both around.

"I see you found her," the girl said, beaming.

Vic tried to pull loose from his grasp, but he didn't let her.

"Way to go, Professor! Oops, sorry. I'm so outta here."

Victoria hid her face against his chest. At the rumble of laughter inside him, she lifted her gaze to meet his.

"Sorry."

He kissed the tip of her nose.

"Don't be. I guess I'll just have to get used to being Professor Scott's boy toy."

Victoria stepped back.

"Bucky..."

He closed the distance again.

"Vic, don't worry about it. I'm right where I want to be. And I'm a big boy. I'm fully capable of making my own decisions."

This was not the time or the place for this discussion. But, apparently, the discussion had other ideas.

"Bucky. You deserve a family of your own, kids of your own, to be with someone your own age."

Again he drew her into his arms, locking his arms around her.

"Victoria Lynn Scott, you'll have to do better than that. I'm here, and with you, because I can't think of anything I want to do more."

He held her away and smiled down at her. Then he kissed her, warm and soft and wonderful.

"I have no intention of ever letting you go, Vic, so maybe you should just shut up and let me take you to lunch."

Victoria knew when she was fighting a losing battle and she was losing this one. Not that she really wanted to win.

"Kiss me again and I'll think about it."

"Okay, if you insist."

He did.

And instead of thinking about it, Victoria stopped thinking at all.

Before they crossed the line, right here in her office, Bucky ended the kiss.

"Lunch?"

"On one condition."

"And that is?"

"Dinner at my place."

"I thought you'd never ask."

Victoria hooked her finger in the collar of his T-shirt, pulled him close for one more kiss, then tugged him toward the door.

"C'mon, boy toy. I'm starved."

About the Author

Jaxine Daniels lives in the high mountains of Colorado. She's an Emergency Medical Technician and huge hockey fan. She's the mom of three grown children, one of which is a mom herself. Technically, that makes her a grandma who writes erotic romance, plays hockey with the kids and runs on the local ambulance.