Ellora's Cave Presents To Cure an Session

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To Cure an Obsession

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TO CURE AN OBSESSION

Elyssa Lynne

Dedication

For my husband – research assistant extraordinaire

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Chapter One

Only eighteen days. Two and a half more weeks. Rebecca Carlisle hugged the financial projection report as she strode down the corridor. She would not really miss working for Lanzenger Enterprises, she reassured herself. She had learned a lot but it was such a huge organization, she tended to feel overwhelmed by it all. A few of the people, though, were another matter. She enjoyed her boss. And her assistant Meghan she considered her best friend. And then there was Mr. Sexy, her mystery man, who emerged at rare, random intervals from the depths of the Research and Development department to wreck havoc on her libido.

Ah Mr. Sexy. How he –

Oh god. She came to an abrupt halt and her composure evaporated like water boiling onto a red-hot burner.

A tall figure—his figure—emerged from a side passage. Garbed in jeans and an open-necked white Oxford cloth shirt, he stood out, a maverick in this haven of suits and ties. His thickly curling dark hair, cut short in front and brushing his shoulders in back, hung loose today, not tied in the ponytail he sometimes wore to annoy the stuffier executives. The jeans clung to his lean hips in a manner that riveted her gaze.

God, how good he would look coming out of them, the heavy denim sliding down those long, muscled legs, revealing...what? Boxers? Briefs? Nothing? She liked that last idea. Nothing but every sensual inch of him. Just for her. In a shower, maybe, with the rivulets of water trickling over the curling hair that showed at his open neckline, down his chest, over his abdomen and lower, over his groin, over the steel-hard rod poised and engorged just for her. For one long, lustful moment, Becka savored the prospect, longing to feel that penetrating thrust, that lunging deep inside her.

Elyssa Lynne

Then the real man, the man of flesh and blood and pure, unadulterated masculinity, walked out of her fantasy and straight toward her. Panicking, she buried her face in the report she carried and ducked down another corridor. She did not look up until she reached the safety of her own office. Shoving her way through the door, she threw the folder onto her desk then flung herself into her chair, leaned forward and banged her forehead against the oak surface.

"Let me guess." An amused voice sounded from the doorway. "You just saw Mr. Sexy and didn't dare speak to him? Again?"

Becka leaned back, gazing at the petite blonde figure of her assistant. "Why, Meghan? Why, why?"

"Because you're a coward?" her friend suggested.

"I mean, why does the mere sight of that damned man reduce me to a nervous wreck?"

"Because you're female and he's a gorgeous hunk of male?"

"You're married," Becka reminded her.

"And he's the only one who's ever made me regret it." Meghan settled in the chair across the desk and studied the arrangement of bronze and gold chrysanthemums that stood near the corner. She tweaked one back into position.

Becka sank her face into her cupped hands. "Oh god, why can't I get him out of my mind? Do you realize it took me weeks longer than it should to finish the budget review? I'm making the stupidest mistakes. I can't concentrate!"

Meghan shifted a branch of baby's breath. "You're obsessed."

"Really? You think so?" Sarcasm dripped from Becka's words.

"Worst case I've ever seen."

"It's never happened to me before." Becka sighed. "What do I do?"

"Only one cure for an obsession like this," Meghan assured her.

Becka looked up. "What?"

"Get him in the sack. Jump his bones. Screw his brains out. And yours."

A half laugh escaped from Becka.

"Besides, your brains are already turning to mush because of him. Why not have some of the fun as well?"

Becka shook her head. "It's against company policy to date fellow employees."

"So what? You're leaving in just over two weeks. By the time anyone found out, you'd be gone."

"Which means it's too late. I can't start something with no future to it."

"Why not, for god's sake?" Meghan made no attempt to hide her exasperation. "Not every relationship has to be permanent. You've got what, seventeen or eighteen nights to exercise that unbridled lust of yours. What are you waiting for? Make a few memories."

"What, I should just walk up to him and say 'Hi, I'm only going to be here for a few more days. Want to spend them—'" She broke off.

"'Fucking' is the word you're looking for. And yeah. Sounds good to me. Only when you say it to him, make your voice sultry and add a little body language."

"I can't say anything like that! Not to him." Then she added, her voice lowering, "Not to anyone."

"So don't be you. Pretend you're someone else."

"Pretend—" Becka broke off, shaking her head. "It's not that easy. I'd know I'm me. He'd know I'm me."

"Which is a damned sight more than he knows now."

Becka threw her friend a helpless, hopeless look.

"So wear a mask." Meghan sounded exasperated. "Hell, the stores are full of them. It's Halloween in two days, after all."

"It would have to be a full costume for me to do anything like that."

"So why not? Halloween. There, you've got yourself a deadline."

"I couldn't!" Then, "Could I?"

Meghan laughed. "Think about it. Think about him. Think about how much you'll regret it if you never make your move. And," Meghan added as she headed for the door, "you'll be gone in two and a half weeks. No risks of embarrassment."

Becka sat in silence for a long time, thinking about Mr. Sexy, about masks and costumes, about Halloween. About possibilities.

She could not do it.

But if only she dared, just to speak to him, touch him. He must be a fantastic lover. No man could look like that, could exude such raw sexuality, without being unbelievable in bed. Or anywhere else. Hell, her desk would do just fine if she knocked off a few of the sharper objects. Or the floor. Her gaze lowered to the carpet. She would pull the pins out of her French twist, let her hair fall below her shoulders. It would spread out dark and alluring across the oatmeal carpet, across her bare skin. And what of him? Would his chest be as tanned as his throat? Would that slow, sexy smile devour her as he bent his head to nuzzle her neck? Would his hands be strong as they caressed her breasts? She longed to discover for herself just how large and powerful that cock of his was.

Oh to hell with these erotic daydreams. She still had work to do.

A few minutes later she strode once more down the corridor and into the executive suite only to pause, looking for the administrative assistant who should have been sitting behind the desk. Two computer monitors, seven towering stacks of papers and folders, a huge Boston fern in imminent danger of being pushed over the edge and a large ceramic jack-o-lantern filled with candy corn cluttered the surface. Then movement caught her eye and she glimpsed Sue's short brown curls peeking above one of the screens.

"Is he busy?" Becka called.

Sue never looked up from her work. She merely waved a hand, which Becka took to be an open invitation. To the accompaniment of the clicking of the keyboard, Becka crossed the plush carpet to the door marked Vice President of Operations, knocked lightly and swung it open.

A large man with salt and pepper hair, still heavy on the pepper, sat at the acre of mahogany he called his desk and studied a handful of papers through thick glasses. The scent of lemon oil lingered in the air, counteracting the chemical smell of the rug shampoo the cleaning crew favored. Becka closed the door behind her. "Morning, Charlie. Finished with the budget, yet?" She went to stand at his shoulder.

Charlie Davenport peered at her over the top of his glasses. "Great job. I think it'll fly. Hadley made a few comments but feel free to ignore them. I usually do." He sorted through several bound reports, then handed her the one with her label on it.

She accepted the hefty weight with both hands. "I'll try to have the final copy to you by Thursday."

"Good. I've got something else for you."

"Something short, I hope."

He shuffled through the loose papers on his desk, picked one up, frowned at it then cast it aside. In another moment he found what he sought. "Here. List of names. They're all suspected of some sort of financial fraud."

Becka took it. "Six? No one I know, luckily. What've they done?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot. Possible crimes run all the way from padding travel expense reports to faking an entire project."

"Faking —" A gasp of laughter escaped her. "Now that would take some nerve."

Charlie grimaced. "All suspicion at this stage. I'm giving you the authority to requisition any documents or files you'll need. So have at it."

She hesitated. "Will I have to interview the people?"

Charlie shook his head. "You just list facts, both for and against each person. We'll do any confronting that's necessary to give them the chance to explain."

"I'll get right on it." She started for the door.

"Becka?" he called after her. "One more thing."

She turned, eyebrows rising in question.

"You can't quit. I forbid it."

She shook her head. "No choice. But thanks for the thought."

He continued to watch her, a slight frown creasing his brow. "You'll hate Phoenix. It gets too hot there."

"I grew up in Phoenix. And Chicago gets too cold for me."

"Well, if things improve out there you can come back you know."

She hesitated. "It's cancer, Charlie. He may only have months, he may have years. Or he could beat the odds and go into full remission."

"It happens," Charlie assured her.

"But not overnight. It takes time. I can't leave my sister to cope with this alone. She's got four kids under the age of five, for god's sake and the youngest are twins. She's overwhelmed. And Ben has been her whole life since they were both fifteen. She needs help. And there's no one but me."

He sighed. "Well, if you're half as efficient with family as you are with money, you'll pull them all through. But we'll sure as hell miss you."

She nodded, forcing a smile though she really felt like tears and left the office, clutching the budget and the list to her chest like shields against the cruelties of the world. By the next corridor she had recovered her poise. By the time she reached the vast common area, where hallways branched off to the various departments, she could exchange greetings and jokes with her normal ease. Social masks made life easier.

Once again in the sanctuary of her own office, she tossed both the binder and the paper into her in-basket, then sank onto her chair. Eighteen days. She had a lot to accomplish in that time. She really had better get started. She picked up the paper again. Quickest first, she decided. She would start with Virginia Westram and her suspected expense report padding and work her way up—or down—to Garrett

McBride and his missing million dollar project. She hoped she could prove them all innocent. But human nature tended toward laziness and greed. With a sigh she reached for her phone and began the search for financial records and supporting documents.

She left the office a few minutes early that evening, armed with a briefcase she knew she would not have time to touch that night, not with her class. She found an inconspicuous corner of the lobby and sat on one of the benches, opening the case and pretending to look through the folders. All the while she kept her gaze glued to the elevators. People streamed out in endless lines. Soon. He would come soon.

And there he emerged at last, his dark head inches above his hovering attendants. He walked at their center, the others buzzing like insects about him, vying for his attention. If only she had the nerve to be one of them. An image rose in her mind of all of them naked, fawning over him, herself among them, an orgy of writhing bodies, all striving to press against him, feeding off one another's erotic hunger, flaming each other's passions, all to entice this one man into their moment of climax. Heat flamed through her, setting her breasts tingling, causing an unbearable ache of longing between her legs.

Damn it, Meghan was right. She really was obsessed. She could barely function through the fog of lust that engulfed her at the mere sight of him. But could she take Meghan's solution?

The group hovering about Mr. Sexy reached the door, exited onto the sidewalk. Another opportunity to enthrall him lost. Becka leaned back, allowing her head to rest against the cold polished marble of the wall.

What would make a gorgeous man like that look at someone as plain as her? What could she do to intrigue him? All right, she had one talent, one hobby guaranteed to make a man give her more than a passing glance. But she could hardly show up at work dressed in her belly dancing outfit.

Unless it was Halloween, of course.

No, not even then. Of course she did not have to wear it at work. Much better not to. She was not brave enough to let him know who she was. But he often went to a bar for a drink with his coworkers when he left the office. She could go there.

She rode the El the short distance to where she had taken a large studio apartment when she first came to Chicago. She had intended to move when her salary increased but it had become home. Besides, Sam liked it. Sam, that furry black tyrant who slept on her pillow and yowled if she tried to feed him anything but canned albacore. Sam, who lounged on her sofa as she let herself in, glaring at her with that "why haven't you been here to cater to me" look on his face.

She opened the albacore and served it. He sniffed then deigned to eat.

"Sorry, it's my night out," she told him. She tossed a light salad for herself using the remainder of Sam's tuna.

If Mr. Sexy sat opposite her right now, she would not waste her time with food. She would be masked, anonymous, a fantasy, his erotic dreams come to life. She would dance for him to the sultry tones of Middle Eastern music, perhaps turning it into a striptease. Oh god yes. And not here but a suite in some exotic hotel. She would pick him up in whatever bar he and his friends visited, fascinate him... Well, she would think out the details of how, later. After all, she would not be herself. She would be that alter ego she created when she danced. She would be her own fantasies. She would seduce him and run her hands and mouth all over his taut body and he would throw her onto the huge bed and thrust that giant shaft of his deep inside her...

If she kept this up she would have to take a cold shower before going to class.

She pulled on her jeans and a sweatshirt, picked up the bag containing her belly dancing outfit, stroked Sam's fur, then headed off to the dance studio that Fatima, the teacher, always converted into a fabric-draped tent strewn with pillows and beaten brass decorations. Atmosphere, Fatima insisted, was everything.

Becka stopped, her finger halfway to the button that summoned the elevator. Atmosphere. Easily created atmosphere, at that. The tent was nothing more than fabric draped over a framework of PVC pipes. She had helped put it up and take it down dozens of times. With its small segments and numerous connectors, it could be reduced or expanded to fit any size room. The fabric merely straightened or gathered as needed.

Atmosphere. With the right atmosphere, anything might be possible. Even plain, practical Rebecca Carlisle could become a particular man's erotic fantasy.

A slow smile tugged at the corners of Becka's mouth as a plan began to form. If she were going to be obsessed she might as well go all-out.

That might be the only way to free herself from its brain-strangling hold.

Chapter Two

Garrett McBride tilted his tumbler and studied the golden liquid as it swirled over the ice cubes. Bourbon was simple, straightforward, honest. You could trust it. Not at all like people—or at least not like a corporate hierarchy. He took a mouthful, holding it there, savoring the smokiness before swallowing.

Enough of this stuff and he might be able to forget, at least for a little while, that something was not right at work.

"Hey, man, relax. Time to unwind." Paul, who practically lived in the computer department pounding out code at incredible speed, lifted the eye patch he wore as part of his pirate costume. "It's Halloween, remember? We're in a bar?"

Garrett shoved back the brim of the felt cowboy hat he had settled low over his forehead. "And here I thought you just liked dressing like that because it's kinky."

Paul grinned. "That too. Damn it's noisy in here. Hey, Evan," he added to the leering devil who sat next to him. "Check out the boobs on that dancehall girl. Think they're inflatable?"

The devil snorted. "Want to go check 'em out? We could do a touch test."

Evan grinned. "I'll go for the taste test."

Tony, on the far side of the table, twirled the ends of his fake Snidley Whiplash mustache. "Hula dancer at three o'clock. My three, you idiot, not yours," he added to Paul. "One less thread and she wouldn't be wearing a bra at all."

"So go pull it out," Paul told him.

But Tony's gaze had moved on. "Oh man, how about that Elvira? I wouldn't mind getting that ass into bed."

Garrett gave an exaggerated sigh. "Being with you guys is like being with high school freshmen. Don't you ever think or talk about anything but sex?" He raised his glass.

"Hell no," all four chorused in unison, meeting his glass with their assorted ones. They all laughed, settling back in their chairs.

Garrett took another swallow of his bourbon. Being around his three friends made worrying difficult.

But he was managing it anyway.

Something was wrong at work. And he had no idea what.

* * * * *

This whole mask and costume thing made Becka feel unrestrained. Not at all herself. Like she had slipped off her leash of propriety and could now run free, barefoot through the grass. Or nearly naked through a bar.

Men did more than just look at her. they explored every part of her body with their eyes. Only it was not prim proper Rebecca Carlisle they mentally stripped and caressed. It was this glorious alter ego, this fantasy persona.

Fantasy. She liked that. It would do for a name if anyone asked. And Fantasy could exult in the way men looked at her and wriggle her body in a manner that invited closer scrutiny. God, to think of all the Halloweens she had wasted.

The bar had gone all-out for the occasion. Jack-o-lanterns filled with flickering candles stood on every surface and ghosts made of stiffened cheesecloth hung from the ceiling. Dim lights, the smell of beer and whiskey, spooky music and almost everyone in costume. Just the setting she needed to do something completely outrageous and not at all like herself.

She swayed through the crowded room toward the corner where Mr. Sexy sat with three of his coworkers. He made a magnificent cowboy – pure unadulterated male as he leaned back in his chair, his long jeans- and chaps-clad legs stretched under the table,

his booted ankles crossed. With one lazy hand he tilted his felt hat lower over his eyes then raised the tumbler for a long swallow. Whiskey, she bet. What would it taste like on his mouth? And what a glorious sensuous mouth he had.

His companions seemed engrossed in a cheerful argument. He took no part, as if he sat separate, alone. Available? Would he be willing to leave them or had all her preparations been for nothing?

A girl dressed as Catwoman slowed as she passed their table, looking over all four of the men with an appraising eye. Becka froze. How could any woman still breathing not focus on Mr. Sexy? Oh there was nothing wrong with his companions. The red-haired programmer made a dashing pirate, another a leering, X-rated devil and the third man, Tony she thought his name was, presented a Snidley Whiplash for whom women would fall willingly on the railroad tracks. Damn it, no, Catwoman was eyeing Mr. Sexy, the tip of her tongue outlining her reddened lips.

Becka fought her panic. Should she dash forward, claim the cowboy first? Make a complete fool of herself?

Tony, unaware of Becka and her indecision, came to the rescue, making up Catwoman's mind for her. He rose, twirling one side of his villainous mustache and swept her a deep bow. As he led her off, one arm encircled her waist, the hand sliding down to caress the leather-clad rear. A very small one too. Becka's had too much padding.

"One down, three to go," remarked the pirate. "Damn I want to get laid tonight."

"So go find yourself a piece of tail," said the devil. "Me, I've got my target all picked out." He nodded toward a French maid whose breasts spilled out the top of her uniform.

"What about you?" the pirate asked Mr. Sexy. "Spotted anything yet?"

Mr. Sexy shook his head.

The pirate gave a short laugh. "You're too picky."

The devil frowned. "Time to make my move if I don't want Zorro over there to beat me to it. See you guys tomorrow." He strode off and a minute later he was standing before his French maid, studying her displayed assets at close range.

Becka bit her lip. Others paired off as well all over the bar. If she delayed any longer it might be too late. If Snidley had not intervened it might have been already. She downed the last of her wine for courage and approached her target. She kept her voice husky, almost a whisper. "Hey cowboy."

Mr. Sexy turned his head and his eyes widened. Slowly—very slowly—his gaze roamed from the top of her head to the toes of her sandals, then back again, resting on her hips, then her breasts, then her face. She shimmied, setting her coin belt jingling, and his scrutiny dropped once more to her hips.

A thrill of pleasure raced through her. She had captured his attention. He actually looked at her. Well, not at her. At Fantasy. Her dancing costume always transformed her into something far more exotic than she really was. She shivered her shoulders and the coins and sequins glittered from her bra. Her stomach muscles rippled, emphasizing the large red jewel glowing at her navel. Her long skirt did little to hide her legs as she had made it from a semi-transparent material. A shawl of the same fabric draped about her shoulders, not quite concealing the rounded mounds of her breasts. She had stood in front of a mirror for a long time, adjusting it for just the right impact. She had finished off her disguise with a cotton-lined velvet mask that blurred her cheekbones and jawline. That and the bright pink stripe that now highlighted one side of her loose dark hair. She hoped the effect was saucy and sexy. But what if it merely looked silly?

Mr. Sexy continued to stare at her. All of her. Her breath quickened. She bounced one heel, causing that hip to make a very provocative movement. She tried the tantalizing smile she had practiced in the mirror. "Care to dance?" She raised her arms and backed away from the table, swaying her shoulders and hips.

Mr. Sexy gathered his long legs under him and rose, pushing back his chair.

"Don't worry about me," called the pirate. "I'll be just fine, sitting here all alone. See you tomorrow."

Mr. Sexy did not answer. He followed Becka, a gleam in his eyes that set her pulse racing. It was only the flickering candles, she told herself but wanted to believe otherwise. She wanted—needed—to be the cause.

She knew how to belly dance, had worked hard to tone the muscles of her stomach and thighs and arms. She used them now and saw his raw desire flame. She looked down to his groin, trying to detect a bulge in his jeans, an arousal created by her. He followed the direction of her gaze then looked up, his eyes challenging.

Becka would have blushed and stammered. Fantasy thrilled with it. She added a teasing note to the huskiness of her voice. "Nice chaps."

His slow grin could have melted a glacier. "Like to try them on?"

"Maybe later. Will you join me for dinner? I have a table waiting for us at a nearby restaurant."

"For us?" He emphasized the pronoun.

She swayed closer, raising her arms to drape them about his neck. She lifted her head until her forehead brushed the evening stubble on his chin. He smelled of bourbon. Masculine, enticing, mingling with the scent of raw sexuality. If she were any more enticed she would rip off his clothes and lie back on the nearest table. Right here. In front of everybody.

With an effort she brought herself under control. "For us. I don't choose just any man." She pressed the spangles on her bra against the thin cotton of his shirt. "I've had my eye on you for a long time now."

"You know me?" He frowned as if in an effort to place her.

"You wouldn't know my name or face," she assured him, still in that husky whisper. "But I want to know you. Every bit of you." She took his hand and led him

through the tangle of dancers on the small floor, back to the crowded mass of bodies and chairs and tables. "Do you believe in dreams?"

"I believe in making them come true," he said. He snatched up a sheepskin jacket from where he had been sitting. The pirate had gone.

She stopped at a coat rack and picked out a woolen wrap. He helped her into it, his fingers lingering on the bare flesh of her shoulders, sending a hot shiver of desire through her body. With hands that trembled she belted the woven garment about her waist. Then she led the way into the wind-whipped night, pressing close to his side, feeling the warmth of his body, aware of the pulsing of lust through hers. Not yet, she reminded herself. Soon. In the meantime she had to struggle with herself to keep her hands from guiding his to her breasts, then down her stomach and lower, to quench the throbbing between her legs. Tonight. Later. She had to have him.

She had arranged dinner, first, though. But why had she bothered? She had an appetite only for him.

So the sooner she got the food out of the way, the better.

She stepped to the edge of the sidewalk and signaled a cab. The third pulled over and she climbed inside, beckoning for Mr. Sexy to follow. "Do you know The Marrakech?" she asked the driver.

"Sure thing." The man barely waited for the door to close before shooting into traffic.

Mr. Sexy shifted his position, his leg pressing against hers. The haunting note of his aftershave surrounded her, one more proof that this was real, not just another of her increasingly erotic fantasies. A thrill of excitement, of fear, of sheer desire raced up her spine, setting her trembling.

"Cold?" He slid closer, his arm encircling her to pull her tightly against his side.

She closed her eyes and nestled her cheek into his shoulder. This was real. She kept telling herself that. This was real. And the night had barely begun.

Only a few minutes later the cab pulled over to the curb. Becka drew the fare from the pocket of her wrap before Mr. Sexy had done more than reach for his wallet. He looked surprised, even a trifle disconcerted.

Smiling, she gave him a gentle shove. "Shall we get out?"

He slid from the backseat and helped her to the sidewalk after him. Before them stood a Middle Eastern restaurant, one she had chosen with care. No neon. No blaring sound system. Just the subtle strains of exotic music, the aromas of Moroccan cooking and soft candlelight flickering in discreet booths. She led the way inside.

"What name?" he asked as they approached the *maitre d*'.

"Mystery."

He glanced down at her. "That's what you booked the table under?"

"Umm." She ran a slow tongue over her reddened lips. "Shall we have some wine while we wait?"

She ordered a bottle of burgundy but before they had taken more than a sip from the glasses the waiter poured, the *maitre d'* approached bearing menus. As the man escorted them deeper into the den, Becka cast a covert glance at her Mr. Sexy. Did he like the place? He looked down, catching her watching him and she felt heat blazing in her cheeks. She had him intrigued, of that much she was certain. She had to keep him that way. All night long.

As they reached their booth she took off the wrap, then slid across the bench with a deliberate swaying of her shoulders and breasts. His gaze, she noticed, followed. After a long moment he seated himself opposite.

"Try the lamb," she suggested.

"You've been here before? Then order for us."

She did and the waiter bowed and left them with their wine. She took a mouthful, rolling the liquid over her tongue, over the roof of her mouth before swallowing.

Savoring it, as she savored the man who had obsessed her thoughts and dreams for the last several months.

At last he set the glass before him, both hands wrapped about the stem. "I want to know your name."

She shook her head. "No names. Either of us. I'm just your fantasies."

"Fantasy, then. I thought it was dreams you wove."

"What are fantasies but dreams we don't act on?" she countered.

He leaned back against the cushions. "I hadn't thought of it that way. To me, fantasies are pure pleasure."

"So are the dreams that really matter to us."

A slow, pleased smile lit his eyes. "If we're not careful, this may turn philosophical."

"Philosophy is all too often just another way to rationalize not acting on our dreams."

"Cynical."

She laughed. "No, a dreamer through and through. Tell me about your costume. That's no rental."

"Neither is yours."

She shrugged and reveled in the way his gaze riveted on her breasts. "You're a real cowboy?"

"Born on a ranch in Montana. But I discovered I was better at gadgetry than cattle."

"So your dreams led you here?"

He hesitated. "My family's dreams, more like."

"They wanted you to be a gadgeteer?"

He laughed. "Good name for it. No, that's what I wanted. They just wanted—needed—money. There was more of that in a major corporation than in...than in Montana."

"You were going to say something else," she pointed out softly, then held her breath. He would probably tell her to mind her own business but she plunged on anyway. "What's your real dream?"

He drank from his glass then abruptly tilted it back and drained it. "My own gadgetry engineering business," he said after he swallowed. "To sink or fly on my own."

"You'd soar." Oh hell, that sounded trite.

"Someday I'll jump off that cliff and see what happens. When I'm free."

He spoke the last words so softly she could not be certain he had said them at all.

Their meal arrived in a wave of succulent aromas. Yes, every bit as good as she remembered. The meat melted in the mouth, the spices intrigued the taste buds. And Mr. Sexy talked. That was the greatest miracle of all. Silent, loner Mr. Sexy, relating humorous tales about his family's ranch, about his younger brother and sister, about the gadgetry he had designed to make the work easier.

"GPS tracking systems for cattle?" she demanded in disbelief.

He grinned, boyish, delightful. Sexy. "Hey, you try searching a few thousand acres of snow for strays. And once word got out it eliminated rustling too." He swallowed a forkful of baklava, reached for another, then stared at his empty plate. "I've talked all night," he said, sounding abashed.

Rebecca Carlisle could never have said the next words. But Fantasy could. "The night isn't over yet."

His gaze intensified. Heat surged through Becka, burning, demanding. He said nothing. He just rose, going around the table and holding out his hand to her. She took it, found his clasp warm, strong. Possessive.

She slid along the bench and stood facing him, so close her breasts brushed his chest. She trembled with the nearness, with the longing for so much more.

"If that waiter—" he began.

"The bill's already been taken care of. Will you come with me?"

His voice took on a husky note that rivaled hers. "Where?"

"Not far." She turned away, leading him from the restaurant, into the street.

He offered his elbow and she slipped her hand through the crook. He covered it with his free one. "You're cold." He rubbed warmth back into her fingers.

He drew her closer against his side. Oh god, there was that breath of bay rum, a touch of leather from his coat, a hint of something masculine, something uniquely him. She trembled again, her longing unbearable, her absorption in this man so complete it set every part of her aching.

Only a short block to go. She had selected the hotel partly for its location, partly for its ambience, mostly for its quiet, understated elegance. Nothing new and modern, not for tonight. This establishment had drawn its clientele from the wealthy, from the privileged, around the turn of the previous century.

They crossed a lobby all brass and oak and ferns with the occasional discreet pumpkin. Canned music played softly in the background but it could not compete with the rhythm of the Moroccan drums that throbbed through her body. She did not bother to stop at the desk, she had spent most of the afternoon in the room that awaited above, preparing for a night she could not be certain would happen.

But it had. He was here, with her, accompanying her to the elevator.

She could sate her lust, then perhaps start acting like a mature intelligent human being. It would be a relief to be able to think clearly, again.

And she needed a clear head if she were to complete those six fraud investigations before leaving for Phoenix.

Chapter Three

Garrett leaned his chin on the top of his belly dancer's head as they waited for the elevator. Her cheek rested against his shoulder, snuggling there. The scent that clung to her hair intrigued him. He did not try to name it, he just relished it. As he relished the yielding warmth of her. He pulled her closer against his side, his hand pressed against the woolen fabric that covered her rib cage.

Pretty soon, if all went as expected, that damned cloth would no longer be in the way.

Of course he would not be wasting his time with her rib cage, either. The swell of her breasts called to him. He could spend a considerable amount of time exploring them, squeezing them, pinching the tips of her nipples, taking them in his teeth. And there were other parts of her he intended to delve into in great depth. His swollen cock already pressed against the fastening of his jeans.

Damn she was a sexy armful. Sexy and warm and easy to talk to.

What the hell had she done to him? Woven some spell? He had spilled out his life story to her over dinner and he never talked about himself. Ever! If the meal had lasted any longer he might have confided even more to her, about his growing concern that something was wrong at work, about the odd behavior of the project supervisor.

With her nestling against him, though, his concerns seemed very far away. And very unimportant.

She stirred against his shoulder and the metal spangles on her bra brushed his arm. Definitely that was in the way. He wanted her naked. Naked and belly dancing as she had in the bar. And then he wanted her to lie back, spreading those wonderful legs, opening to receive his cock, which now throbbed with anticipation.

Who the hell was she? She said she'd had her eye on him for some time. She must be another habitué of that bar. He went there several times a week with his friends. So why had she not approached him before? Or was the answer to that obvious? She must have been there with someone else.

Well she was with him now. And he intended to drive out the memory of every other man she had ever known.

And to hell with any other consideration tonight.

* * * * *

Becka closed her eyes as the elevator started its upward journey. She was with him, her Mr. Sexy.

Mr. Sexy. She wanted to know his real name, wanted to savor it on her tongue. Hell, she wanted to savor him on her tongue.

But much better not to know his name. Or anything else about him, for that matter. Each detail he had revealed over dinner had been ecstasy, agony. She knew things about him she had never dreamed she would. But it had fed her obsession. And the whole point of tonight was to cure that—that obsessive obsession.

And to have a hell of a lot of fun.

And one wonderful memory.

Only that, she reminded herself. No future. Tonight was for the present and making the most of these few hours they had together. Tonight was for building memories, not for anticipating regrets. She reached down to her belt pouch, fumbled it open and found the plastic card that would let them into the room.

Eighth floor. Her heart beat faster, she could feel it thudding in her chest. What if he did not like what she had done? What if he thought all that effort was just foolishness?

The doors slid open. Either she got out now or they could ride up and down all night. She stepped forward and he followed. Glad? Regrets? No. She would not call off this night for anything.

She added a sashay to her walk as she preceded him along the corridor. Was it her imagination or could she actually feel his gaze caressing her bottom? She hoped it was real.

Just ahead, now. Room 821.

She paused before the door and her companion held out his hand. "Allow me."

She relinquished the card, noticing the strength in his hand, how tanned was the skin, work-roughened. She liked it, liked the fact he was active. Liked the fact he was not boring or pampered or one-faceted.

He pushed the door wide and the soft beat of Middle Eastern music greeted them. She stepped over the threshold into the entry hall and as he followed she closed the door. She moved aside to give him a clear view of her preparations. The effect impressed her and she had put it all together.

The exotic red and gold fabrics that adorned the dance studio now covered the walls and ceiling, drooping in folds as if this really were a desert sheik's tent. A pile of large purple and burgundy pillows lay on the floor and a beaten brass ewer and matching shallow bowl stood on the table. She had dragged the blankets and coverlets to the foot of the bed and spread the king-sized mattress with more of the cloth. Battery-operated candles flickered, lending an exotic glow to the room. The subtle scent of cinnamon and allspice tantalized the nose.

Beside her, Mr. Sexy drew a deep breath, only his head moving to survey the room. At last he turned to her. "I-" he began.

She held up one finger to his lips, silencing him. She tossed off her wrap, missing the dresser but that seemed incredibly unimportant at the moment. Slowly she backed away from him, dancing, dipping her shoulders and hips, enticing. With one hand she beckoned him.

A slow smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He watched her a moment longer then pushed his cowboy hat back from his forehead and sauntered forward. She had almost run out of room. Another couple of steps and she would have to sit on the edge of the room's desk. And she wanted this to go on, just the way it was, for a very long time. The expression in his eyes thrilled her. The aura of unvarnished sexuality that exuded from him intoxicated her like no drink on earth. She raised her flimsy shawl, holding it before her face, teasing him with glimpses before swirling it back and forth.

With a sudden lunge he caught both ends. His grin broadened as he looped it over her head, lowering it until it caught on her hips. He tugged, pulling her forward until she pressed against his groin. "There's too much metal around here," he murmured.

"What are you going to do about it?" Had she really said that? She was completely caught up in this fantasy she had woven to ensnare him. And loving every moment of it.

He dropped her scarf and felt for the fastening of her coin belt. Oh god, she could scarcely breathe. She had succeeded in seducing him. Plain pragmatic Rebecca Carlisle had the sexiest man on Earth undressing her.

And suddenly, as far as she was concerned, he could not do it fast enough.

She caught the brim of his hat, pulled it from his dark waving hair and tossed it, not caring where it went. She felt the buckle on her belt give and the heavy mass of coins jingled to the floor. With hands that trembled she shoved the sheepskin jacket from his shoulders. He pulled his arms free and tossed the garment toward the bed where it dropped to the carpet. He had knotted the scarf loosely around his neck. She undid it, then her fingers trailed along the thickly curling hair at his throat, down to the buttons of his shirt. She only stopped long enough to slip her arms from the heavy bra as he pulled it free. Before she heard it land she was tugging his shirt loose from those tight well-worn jeans.

For a long moment he stood there, unmoving, his gaze resting on her breasts. Why didn't he touch them? Were they too small for his taste, not living up to the promise of the swell of her hips? Her breasts were the one place where she lacked padding. And he

was so perfect, his pecs so well developed, his abs enticingly defined. He stepped back and a wail of despair stirred in her stomach.

He sank onto the edge of the bed, stretching his long legs in their suede chaps before him. "Help a guy with his boots?" he suggested.

His lazy smile held all the reassurance she could desire. She sank to her knees, her legs too wobbly to hold her. The heel she grabbed felt rough, well-worn. She eased it from his foot, bringing the sock mostly with it. She pulled that free too.

Oh god, even his feet were sexy. Large, solid, with dark hairs on the toes.

The next boot took a little more effort. She fell back as it came loose at last and by the time she had righted herself he had tossed the sock away and stood, unbuckling the leather strap that crossed his groin, unfastening his chaps. This free, he twisted then stooped as he unzipped first one side, then the other, up the backs of his long legs.

"Come here." He helped her to her feet then pulled at the elastic waistband of her skirt and panties, easing them down until they dropped to her feet, leaving her naked except for the large red stone jutting from her navel. As she stepped out of the pile of fabric he unfastened his jeans, pulled a small packet from the pocket then dragged off both the pants and his boxers.

The bottom half of him was as perfect as the top. Her gaze moved up the muscled calves, the strong thighs, those lean tapered hips. And settled on his erection. Anticipation throbbed through her. It would be as hard as steel, as soft as velvet, as wild and determined as a piston...

Oh damn, she had been reading too many novels and not experiencing enough of the real thing.

He tore open the packet and eased on the condom. What a shame to cover anything that marvelous. She stepped forward, pressing her breasts against his rib cage, rubbing her stomach against that rock-solid rod.

He reached for her mask and her hand flew up, stopping him. "That stays on."

"Why? I want to see your face."

"It's more of a fantasy this way."

"I prefer reality." He tried again for the mask.

"If it comes off I'll turn into a pumpkin."

His brow wrinkled as he studied her. Slowly he nodded. "You haven't done this sort of thing before, have you?"

She hesitated but somehow she could not lie to him, not about this. "No."

"Then we'll make it something you'll want to do again." His arms encircled her, his fingers a feathery touch as he stroked down her back, across her buttocks, up her sides.

A sigh escaped her and she wrapped her arms about his waist, holding them together. Her fingers traced circles up his spine, savoring the feel of him, of his touch on her. This could not be real. She could not actually be here with him like this. She had dreamed it so long, craved this contact. If she closed her eyes would he disappear?

Her face brushed the skin just below his collarbone. He smelled of leather, of bay rum, of pure masculinity. She kissed the spot, her tongue darting out to test a hypothesis. Yes, he tasted as good as he smelled.

A low chuckle set his body shaking, doing wild things to his erection. "Turn around," he murmured.

She did and nestled her rear against him. He would cup her breasts, now. They tingled with her anticipation.

Instead, he caught her waist between his hands and picked her up, carrying her to the bed where he set her on her knees. "Lean forward onto your hands," he told her.

Part of her brain told her she ought to be alarmed but she could not be, not with this man. Anything he chose to do to her she would welcome.

She did as he told her, waiting, too far gone in desire to care for anything other than the hard thrust that would come at any moment. Only it did not. His fingers teased along her ankles, around her insteps, up her calves, then back to the more sensitive flesh near her feet. Then they touched the insides of her thighs, inching up to the one place she wanted them. Only they skipped that pulsing spot, coming so near she moaned with her longing, then they traced along her stomach, around the jewel, up her sides. He leaned over her back, his stomach pressing against her bottom as he reached forward.

Oh yes, he would cup her breasts now and his fingers would –

No, they teased along the sides not touching the full swells, not pinching or even brushing the hardened nipples. He reached her neck, then down the insides of her arms, up again to her lips. From there he traced a line straight down her throat, between her breasts, all the way to the jewel in her navel.

Now, oh please now. She did not know if she spoke the words aloud or just in her mind. She felt herself opening, throbbing, burning for his thrust.

He kissed the base of her spine, his hands caressed her insteps, that soft tissue just below her ankles as he began that slow torturing tease along the most sensitive areas of her thighs. This time as he leaned forward his fingers trailed circles around her breasts, moving closer and closer to the points she ached for him to touch. At last his fingers closed about her nipples.

She gasped, then moaned as he tugged and twisted with a gentle firmness. Thought spiraled from her as her world narrowed to encompass nothing but sensation, nothing but his touch. His torso brushed along her back, then one of his hands dropped away. The other arm pressed against one breast while reaching across to cup the other. His free hand moved down her body, caressed her mound then went searching beneath in the soft folds that protected the center of her throbbing desire. His fingers found her nub and she cried out as contraction after contraction seized her and her entire body exploded in sensation.

She became aware of his fingers thrusting into her, of his thumb caressing, of his other hand squeezing her breast. His breath came hot and heavy on her back. Her own breathing came in gasps, slowing as the intensity eased away. A soft laugh of pure

satisfaction escaped him. She shifted, preparing to get off her hands and knees, to lie down.

"Easy, there. Don't move," he breathed. "You're going to have that again." His hands ran up the insides of her thighs then he grasped her hips. She gasped as the full length of that incredible erection thrust inside her, then pulled out so gradually that her desire, quenched only moments before, roused once more. He eased inside again with exquisite slowness, setting up a steady rhythm that beat in time with the music.

She wanted to move, to use her hands and fingers and mouth on him as he had done on her, then he turned his attention once more to her breasts and she gave up thought and allowed herself to sink into pure sensation. His strokes quickened as did his breathing and a gasp escaped him, followed by a low moan. One hand clutched and thumbed a nipple, the other did the same to her nub. Then he exploded inside her, each thrust caught in her own contractions as they climaxed together.

For a long moment he leaned on her back, then he wrapped his arms about her waist and rolled them both to the mattress where she sprawled across him, not wanting to move. He kissed her hair, her mouth, then gathered her close. She nuzzled her mask-covered cheek against his shoulder, awed by the rush of emotion.

She never wanted to move. She wanted to lie like this forever listening to the beat of his heart, feeling his chest rise and fall. His breathing slowed, deepened and the arm that held her slackened. She hesitated, not wanting to disturb him, then she moved away to stare down at that long lean body. She had dreamed about him for months, wondered what he would look like without his clothes, whether his kiss would be sweet or hard or if he would use his tongue. Her thoughts had concentrated on a hard fast encounter. She had never imagined lying like this, sated and complete, happy just to be near him, to feel possessive and possessed.

It frightened her.

Abruptly she reached for the blankets and pulled them to cover him then over her own shoulders. She rolled away onto her side and wondered just what she had unleashed in herself.

Chapter Four

Becka drifted slowly, languidly, on the verge of dreams, becoming aware of the sensation of hands caressing her stomach. Her eyes fluttered open to a room lit by flickering candles. Electric candles, she remembered. She turned to see the dark shape of her Mr. Sexy, his eyes gleaming in the light as he stroked her body.

"You're awake." He sounded satisfied.

He pulled her against his side and tilted her head up. His mouth lowered to hers, the pressure gentle. His tongue outlined her lips, which she parted for him with a soft moan of surrender. He caught her lower lip with his teeth then released it to pursue further explorations. His hands stroked her throat and her shoulders and she ran her fingers through the thick curls covering his chest.

"I'll have to leave for work in a bit." He murmured the apology against her hair.

"But there's one thing I want before I go."

Her breath quickened and she rolled to her back, pulling him to come with her.

He resisted. "Later. You promised you'd try on my chaps. I want to see you in them."

She smiled as awareness of what he had in mind dawned on her. It showed in that sexy grin, in the way his gaze devoured her.

Only a little over an hour remained for them to share together. She would make the most of it.

She swung her legs from the bed and spotted his chaps. She picked them up but they appeared to be nothing more than two long wide flaps of suede leather connected by a thick strip in the back. "Allow me." He rose, tall, glorious, not the least embarrassed by his nakedness or the very impressive erection that preceded him.

He took the chaps from her, shook them so they fell straight then wrapped them about her bare hips and hooked up the front buckle, pulling it as tight as it could go. The chaps drooped, their strap coming to rest on her mound. His mouth twitched in a slow smile as he dropped to one knee, hooked in the zipper on one side and pulled it all the way down the length of her leg. When he had the other side fastened he stepped back then sank onto the footstool. "Not bad," he drawled.

She glanced around, spotted his felt hat and placed it on her head. "Should I tilt it back more? Or forward?"

He placed his hands behind him, leaning back and grinning. "Perfect as it is."

"Mmmm." She swayed her hips, feeling the suede loose about her legs. They had fit tight on him. Tight and sexy. Like that incredible cock between his legs. "Cowboy up," she murmured.

He glanced down. "Looks like it needs to get dressed to go riding."

"Bedside table." She ran her tongue over her lips as he leaned across and opened the drawer to find the several wrapped packets she had placed there. "Let me."

She sashayed forward, selected one and ripped it open. She had never done this before but she wanted to now, more than she could have believed possible. Gingerly she set it in place then unrolled it along the hard huge length. Oh god, it did feel like velvet. Such a shame to sheathe it like this. Someday—

No, there would be no other days or nights like this. She was getting him completely out of her system. This last time would—had to—do the trick.

"Cowgirl up," he said and patted his lap.

She straddled his legs and sat, allowing him to maneuver her until he slid inside. She gasped at the size, the hardness, the pulsing burning desire that focused every fiber of her being on that one area, on the shaft that seemed to swell even more now that she engulfed it.

"Wrap your legs around me," he told her. His mouth latched onto one breast, his fingers sought the other nipple and he began to rock gently, her nub pressed hard against his groin, held there by the enormous force of his erection.

She moaned again, wrapping her arms about his shoulders, hugging him tightly with her legs. That shift in her position sent fantastic ripples through her. He straightened, finding her mouth, parting her lips with his tongue, kissing her with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes. She entangled her fingers in his hair, memorizing the thick texture, the masculine scent of his skin, the sweet taste of his mouth.

And still they rocked, swaying together, intertwined, as her awareness heightened and focused on the rising tide of erotic sensation deep between her legs. Her breathing quickened as her head tilted back. He kissed her throat, his fingers drummed at the base of her spine and he convulsed, pulsing over and over within her.

A gasp escaped her as her own release came with his. For a long moment she arched against him as contraction after contraction sent her off in dizzying spirals. Then she sank against him, arms about his neck, clinging to him, holding him close.

"Oh my love." The words, no more than a whisper, caressed her ear.

He held her as tightly as she did him, she realized. He found her mouth, kissed her gently. Then his lips brushed her forehead then found her mouth again. At last he shifted his hands to her shoulders and eased her back so he could look down into her face.

"It's no longer Halloween. Time the mask comes off."

"Do you really want the fantasy to end so abruptly?" She kissed his forehead, started to ease off him.

He let her stand then caught her hand. "What about your name?"

"I'm your fantasies, remember?"

"You're all that but you're also more."

She shook her head. "Just keep calling me Fantasy." Or his love. That made her feel all weak and melted inside.

But that was not what she wanted—or needed. Only a wonderful memory to take with her to the stressful times awaiting her in Phoenix. It was not fair to either of them to imply it could ever be more. She turned away and fumbled to take off the chaps.

* * * * *

Garrett frowned at Fantasy's back. A very sexy back, at that. But damn it, he liked honesty and openness in people. He came from a world where men said exactly what they meant and a handshake was as binding as a written contract. So why did her insistence on remaining a mystery intrigue him rather than make him walk out the door?

Because she was a woman. A fantasy. His fantasy.

But he still wanted—needed—honesty from her.

He came up behind her as she straightened and caressed her shoulders. "At least give me your number."

She shook her head. For a moment she swayed back, leaning against his chest, then pulled away. His groin tightened. Damn, he wanted to take her again, right now, thrusting into her over and over. But he had a meeting which meant he had to get home and change. Or he could always walk into a gathering of Lanzenger Enterprise's top brass still wearing his cowboy gear. That would not go far in reassuring them of his capability, not to mention his dependability.

Hell, another round with Fantasy, plunging into her, hearing her moan, feeling her writhe with ecstasy, would be worth it.

She pulled free, walking several steps away, her arms folding across her abdomen.

Morning after regrets? A return to her own worries? At the moment only one thing concerned him. "If you don't give me your number, how can I call you later to tell you how fantastic you are? And how I want to spend every night with you like this?"

"No." Her voice trembled.

He frowned. What troubled her? "Then take my number. Call me." He strode to the desk, found a pen and scribbled on the notepad. He ripped the sheet free and held it out to her.

She kept her gaze lowered as if not daring to look at the paper.

"Call me." He made it an order.

She glanced up and away again at once. The longing in her eyes, the—hell, torment was the only word of which he could think—tore at him.

"Come on, a guy likes a phone call after a night like that. Don't women realize it?" He waited, number extended. "I'm not leaving here until you promise you'll call this afternoon."

"I-" She broke off, shaking her head. "I can't."

"It's my turn to take you to dinner. Promise, or neither of us is leaving here."

She hesitated then gave a surrendering shrug. "All right." She took the slip but he kept his grip on it.

"Promise you'll call this afternoon. And look me in the eyes when you say it."

She looked up, meeting his steady gaze. For a long moment she said nothing but her expressive eyes, peeking through her mask, showed her uncertainty. At last she said, "I promise."

A slow smile tugged his lips. "That's my girl," he said with a slight emphasis on the pronoun. "Now I've got to get home and change. I've got a meeting this morning. Shall we dismantle your sheik's tent?"

"I'll do it. You'd...you'd better go."

* * * * *

Becka stumbled into the bathroom, took her robe off the hook then hugged it to her as tears filled her eyes. She felt deceitful, a fraud. She should go back in there, right now, tell him the truth, tell him they could never see each other again, that she was leaving Chicago in just two weeks.

So why didn't she? This was supposed to have been a one-night stand. Get all hot and sweaty and screw and screw until she had sated her lust and gotten him out of her system. Only it had not worked. She still wanted him.

And he said he still wanted her, that he wanted to see her again, wanted to repeat tonight over and over.

No, she could not think about that. He did not really mean it. She had swept him up in exotic trappings and costumes. Reality would cool his ardor faster than pouring a glass of ice water over his rock-hard erection. Plain Rebecca Carlisle did not rouse such passion in a man. She did not want to destroy the fantasy she had created, destroy her wonderful memory.

So she had better get him out the door before she did anything stupid such as storm back in there, shove him to the floor, throw herself on top of him and beg him to pound into her again and again until she they both cried out in ecstasy.

Damn. Lust fogged her brain, making it hard to think clearly. She had to focus on the truth and how angry he would be if he found out she had tricked him, put him in violation of his contract with Lanzenger. The bigwigs he liked to annoy could fire him if they found out he had spent last night with a fellow employee.

He must never learn who she was. And that meant she could not risk any further contact with him.

She pulled on her robe and returned to the bedroom. He had already dragged on his jeans and shirt and now folded his chaps. She watched, memorizing his movements, the tilt of his head, the strength of his hands.

When he had at last pulled on his boots he gathered her into his arms. "This afternoon. Call. You promised."

She nodded. "This afternoon." A lie but far better for them both than the truth.

He kissed her, slow and hard, his tongue caressing her lips, her teeth, drawing a moan from her. Then he released her, taking one step backward, then another, his gaze holding hers. "This afternoon," he repeated. At last he turned, opened the door and exited the room.

And her life. She crumpled the paper with his number and threw it into the trash can. She had a lot of work to do to get this room back to normal, to drop off all these stage dressings, to check on her cat and get to work by noon.

She reached for the nearest cloth-covered PVC pipe then turned back to the trash can and pulled out the man's phone number.

She had promised she would call. She would.

Then she would throw out his number.

He had written something else as well, she noticed. A name. Garrett McBride.

Her brow furrowed. It sounded familiar.

Well, that was entirely possible. They worked for the same company. She handled financial records for —

Garrett McBride.

That name had been on the list Charlie gave her. The man suspected of embezzling a million dollars in a project fraud.

The blood drained from her face and she sank onto the edge of the bed, staring at the paper, at his name, feeling her glorious fantasy dream crumble into a nightmare.

Chapter Five

Garrett leaned back in his chair, tapping his pencil on the edge of the graph pad he balanced on his knee. They had been in this damned meeting only twenty minutes and already he wanted to throw paper airplanes at the assembled bigwigs. Meetings had to be the single biggest waste of time ever invented.

He itched to reach for his cell phone. It was probably still too early for Fantasy to have called but he wanted to check for a message from her anyway. If the supervisors did not start the project overviews in the next few minutes he would set off his beeper and pretend some problem required his immediate attention.

For that matter he really did have a problem. Her name was Fantasy. Why had she been so reluctant to take his number? Why had she refused to take off her mask? Shyness? That could be it. He had sensed moments of uncertainty from her. But he had also experienced her wholehearted warmth. A woman like that...

His groin tightened and his cock swelled and pressed against the zipper of his jeans. He wanted her right now, wanted to plunge into the warm moistness between her legs, feel her thighs press against his hips, hear her moan, feel her clenching contractions as she exploded in orgasm. And afterwards he wanted to hear her gasping breaths, feel her arms clinging to him, drawing him closer while she buried her face in his neck. He had truly possessed her last night and again this morning. She had given all of herself.

Except her identity.

Well, that was all right if she needed to keep her name and face secret. When he saw her tonight he would compliment her, reassure her, not give up until she trusted him enough to just be herself. And then—

Jim Bradley, his project manager, cleared his throat. "I'll give the rundown today." He shuffled the papers Garrett had given him only minutes before and started reading.

Garrett straightened. Jim never gave the reports. He always left that to Garrett. Hell, he left anything that involved actual work to one or another of the team members.

And Jim, Garrett suddenly realized, had not looked at him once since they had filed into this room. Normally he leaned over to ask questions, make comments, give conflicting orders.

Something really was wrong here at work.

And there was another man, the Vice President of Operations, Charlie Davenport. He had never come to one of these overview meetings before. Yet there he sat, halfway around the table as if he were not the highest ranking executive present, taking no part, just listening. And several times Garrett had caught the man staring at him.

He glanced up quickly. For a brief moment his gaze met that of Charlie Davenport before the man looked away. Definitely something was going on here.

And he was going to find out what.

* * * * *

Becka hurried along the corridor from Personnel. She felt exposed out here. She wanted the shelter of her office. She did not want to accidentally run into Mr. Sexy.

Mr. Sexy. Oh god. Garrett McBride, she meant. What an unbelievable mess she had made. Why the hell had she ever listened to Meghan—or rather, to her own raging, obsessive lust for the man's bod?

To approach a man with such a blatant come-on, making herself vulnerable, had been bad enough. To do so with a fellow employee had been against rules, a fireable offense for them both and she had known it. But with a man she was investigating for fraud—that was unforgivable.

And if he ever found out she was the investigator he would never believe she had not known who he was, had not seduced him on purpose. Had not betrayed him with deliberate, calculated cruelty.

No, he must not ever find out. Thank god he would never recognize her. She had returned herself to her normal boring appearance, slicking back her hair into its French twist, donning the glasses she did not really need, wearing the protective camouflage of a navy business suit with a pale blue silk blouse and flat-heeled pumps. Even if he looked right at her he would never suspect her for the belly dancing Fantasy of the previous night.

Still it would be best if he never got the chance to so much as glance at her. For the next fifteen days she would hide in her office, avoid any corridor in which he might appear. And then she would be gone, safe on a plane to Phoenix. Never to encounter him again.

She rounded a corner and there, not twenty yards away, Garrett McBride stood in conversation with two other men. One she recognized as the pirate from last night. The other hovered just around the corner, barely visible.

Oh hell, it was not fair. The damned man was even more devastating now she had seen him without his clothes. She knew what lay beneath those tight jeans and that long-sleeved Oxford cloth shirt. She knew that ruff of dark hair peeking out from the unfastened top button ran all the way down his chest, his stomach and oh god, what it covered—and revealed—beneath that. Six foot two of pure masculine heaven, topped by a three-inch ponytail that must have irritated whomever he'd had that meeting with this morning.

She clenched her hands on the report folder she carried to keep from running them over her body, touching her breasts, which ached with the memory of that morning. It took an effort to slow her breathing, to control the desire that burned between her legs. Seeing him naked, feeling him hammering inside her, was supposed to have cured this frantic obsession, allowed her to think professionally again. Yet all she wanted was to

tear off all her clothes right here, now, in front of everyone and drag him down on top of her. Wouldn't that add a bit of entertainment to an ordinary business day for her coworkers?

The erstwhile pirate waved and strolled off and the third man shifted his stance, coming into view. Charlie? What did the Director of Operations want with Garrett McBride? Or was it the other way around? Had Garrett gotten wind he was under investigation? Was he trying to cover his tracks? Or did he remain oblivious to the Sword of Damocles that hovered over his head by such a slender thread?

No. The top brass had nothing more than suspicions about him, she reminded herself. Nothing concrete, just an irregularity that might be easily explained. He had to be innocent. And she had the authority to prove it.

Or to prove him guilty.

As she watched, Charlie returned to his office. As soon as the door began to close behind the executive, Garrett dragged something from his pocket as if it burned a hole there. A cell phone. He flipped it open, frowned then snapped it shut.

Did he check for messages? From Fantasy, perhaps? Her other concerns faded beneath the thrill that she—she—might have created such an impression on that glorious hunk. How often had he looked at his phone today and been disappointed? It was only a little after one o'clock.

He looked up and she buried her face in the report folder. He strode along the corridor, his long legs eating up the carpet. A frown creased his brow and he did not so much as glance at her as he passed. Worried about an investigation? Or preoccupied with the memory of a certain belly dancer? She turned to watch his retreat, pretending to flip through the pages but her gaze remained riveted on his marvelous backside. Only when he turned a corner out of her sight did a long sigh escape her.

What a fool she was being. What a complete and utter idiot. She continued into Charlie's outer office, dropped the file on Sue's desk and retreated to her own domain.

Once safe inside with her door firmly closed to exclude the rest of the world she rested her elbows on her desk and sank her forehead into her cupped hands.

The door opened. Becka did not look up.

After a long moment of silence Meghan asked, "Plan fail?"

Becka shook her head.

"So you got Mr. Sexy into bed?" Meghan sounded surprised.

Mr. Sexy. Not Garrett McBride. For the moment she had to erase all thoughts of her investigation. The company's suspicions about the man had to remain private, not for public consumption. Meghan, especially, must not guess. She knew too much about Becka's personal interest in that gorgeous hunk. Separating those two identities in her mind like that would help.

Mr. Sexy. Concentrating on her obsession proved all too easy. The familiar craving for his touch surged over her, her desire pooling between her legs in a dizzying, intoxicating heat. Last night he had teased and thrust and—

With an effort she focused on Meghan's last question and nodded.

"Oh." Now disappointment, mingled with sympathy, colored her voice. "That bad?"

Becka nodded again.

"'Slam, bam, thank you ma'am?' God, who'd have thought it of him? Or maybe someone who looks like that doesn't have to be a good fuck."

Becka raised her face. "Boy you got that wrong." Mr. Sexy, she reminded herself. Remember when he was only Mr. Sexy to her.

Only. Oh god, that had been bad enough.

Meghan's brows rose. "I think I need some details here. Come on, give."

A quavering sigh escaped Becka. "Remember what I set out to do last night?"

"Get laid royally."

"No!" The word exploded from Becka. "I wanted to get him out of my system. To kill this—this obsession."

"Yeah, that too." Meghan settled in the chair on the other side of the desk. "But you did get laid?"

Becka closed her eyes. "That doesn't feel like an appropriate term for what happened. It was... incredible."

"Yeah? Details girl. Give!"

Becka shook her head. "It was—he was—wonderful. And that's all you're getting."

"So what's the problem?" Meghan demanded.

Everything! But she could reveal only half. Becka kept her face lowered, hoping her friend would be satisfied with the incomplete answer. "I can't get him out of my mind. Your so-called cure only made the disease worse!"

"So fuck him again. And again. Keep at it until you're blasé about it."

She could not, for so many reasons. She focused on the purely personal ones. "It wouldn't be right." Not to mention it would probably be impossible. How could she ever become blasé about a man like Garrett McBride?

Meghan stared at her. "What the hell do you mean, 'wouldn't be right'?"

Becka ran her hand over her slicked-down hair, forcing her fingers not to dig in and pull. "A one-night stand is one thing. No ties. No involvement. Just a fling. But to do it again—" She broke off, shaking her head. "It would be dishonest."

"Hey, if you're worried about him, forget it. No man objects to a free fuck with no strings attached. Or are you worried about you?"

Becka stared at her in silence. "Both," she admitted at last. "It would play hell with my peace of mind. Not to mention he could get fired if anyone found out."

"So you're just going to suffer raging lust in silence and not do anything else about it?"

Becka's hands clenched. "What can I do? I'm leaving in two weeks. I'll never see him again. That's going to hurt enough as it is. I don't want to make it worse."

Meghan stood. "You've got it bad, girl. Know what the solution is? Pick a different guy every night. Screw so many of them you can't remember Mr. Sexy. Let him get lost in the crowd." And she left the office.

Becka stared at the door closing behind her friend. The suggestion had some merit, she supposed. She certainly had to get Garrett McBride out of her mind and off her conscience. Enough different experiences and she might forget just how perfect last night had been. Perfect, at least, until she discovered who he really was. She might also hook up with weirdos or sadists or who knew what. Of course kinky sex might prove enlightening. Degrading would be another matter. Going trolling in a bar could prove dangerous.

And why had the dangers never occurred to her when she had decided to seduce Mr. Sexy? Seeing him roaming the halls in the office did not mean she knew anything about him.

Her heart tightened. She had not known anything about him at first, at least. But she had before taking the final plunge of leading him to that hotel room. They had talked over dinner and she had learned something about the inner man, not just the sexy outer shell. She knew even more, now. Like his name. Like the fact he might have committed major fraud.

Oh hell. She would not—could not—believe that of him. The best thing she could do right now would be to cool her libido and concentrate on proving him innocent.

She made more than a dozen phone calls. Four separate trips to both Accounts Payable and Accounts Receivable. She did not dare to go personally to Research and Development but the assistant who answered her third call promised to deliver summary reports on all existing projects within the hour. Somewhere, in all these documents, she would find the truth.

Of course it would be easier if he only worked on one project at a time. His hours, though, were billed to seven different electronic or robotic devices, each with its own budget and codes. She checked for one with a cap of one million and to her disgust found that almost all fell in that range. The project descriptions themselves overwhelmed her. She managed to decipher their basic functions but beyond that they sounded like gibberish. Numbers she could cope with. Circuitry gave her a headache.

But she did not need to understand it. Just account for the money spent.

And as for the man who could conceive of such devices, let alone make them... She stared at the list of figures she had copied into a database but saw only his stubbled face as she had seen him early that morning, leaning over her, his hands caressing her body, waking her to try on his chaps. A slow smile tugged at her lips. She had never done anything like that before, letting her fantasies come to life. Dressing up—or down. Again she felt the suede brushing her legs as she had settled on his lap, as he had lifted her to guide that demanding cock into her pulsing depths.

A moan formed in her throat, escaping on a thread of sound. Oh to rock with him again like that as sensation focused and intensified and desire spiraled into toe-curling, finger-clenching ecstasy.

Except she clutched paper from a file folder, not his thick, waving hair.

Oh damn that obsession! And damn him for being the epitome of her erotic fantasies!

Absolutely no more contact with the man. She made it a vow. He interfered with her work, with her professionalism.

And so many heartaches already awaited her in Phoenix she did not want to bring another with her.

But she had given him her solemn promise she would call.

* * * * *

Becka shivered in the wind that whipped her coat about her knees and huddled into the meager shelter offered by the face plates surrounding the public phone. She checked the paper though she did not really need to. She had memorized his number. She dialed, deposited coins then held her breath, counting the rings. One, two, thr —

"Hello?" Garrett's deep voice reached across space to caress her ears.

"Good afternoon, Mr. McBride." Damn, she could hear the tremble in her words.

"It's evening." Warmth, satisfaction, a touch of relief? "And call me Garrett."

"Garrett," Becka repeated, savoring his name in her mouth. As she had savored more tangible parts of him only that morning.

"I'm taking you to dinner tonight." Not a question. A command.

Becka bit her lip, common sense pitted in a desperate struggle against desire. It won. Barely. For the moment. "No."

"Tomorrow night then."

"No." It took effort to force the certainty into that word. "We won't be seeing each other again. I only called because I promised."

"Fantasy—"

"No." She broke across his alarmed response. "That's all it was. A fantasy. I...I'm sorry."

She hung up the phone, her jaw clenching to keep back the lump in her throat as her eyes burned with tears. Her fingers trailed along the handset as if she were still in contact with Garrett, then she resolutely turned her back. Behind her the instrument rang. And rang. And rang.

She walked away.

* * * * *

"Why did I let it get out of hand, Sam?" Becka asked the cat who curled in her lap. She stroked the soft fur, winning a rumbling purr for her efforts. "Why can't I just forget him?"

Sam rubbed his face along her hand. Not a sign of affection, she had heard. He merely marked her as his territory. Well, that might be a form of love, wanting to keep her for himself. She tickled him behind his ear and he rolled onto his back and latched his claws and teeth about her wrist.

"He can't find out who I am, that I'm the one investigating him. And even if that didn't lie between us and even if we both ignored that we'd be violating company policy, it wouldn't work. Without the mystery I'd just bore him. Or he'd be angry that I started something that I couldn't finish because I was leaving in two weeks. He'd come to hate me. It's better to leave it as a one-shot fantasy. It'll probably be a fun memory for him by the end of the week. Or a brag in the bars."

Would Garrett be a talker? Would all his friends in the computer and engineering departments know about her kneeling on the bed, about her wearing his chaps? Oh god, those chaps, with the strap resting on her mound and the look in his eyes and the size of that engorged rod begging her to take it deep inside. She ached with longing at the memory, a tingling in her breasts, a sharp awareness centering between her legs. She closed her eyes, feeling once more the roughness of his chin as his mouth licked and kissed down her throat, as his teeth latched onto her nipple and teased and tugged until a moan escaped and her back arched for his thrust.

She leaned back against the easy chair's cushions, her breath coming more rapidly, one hand caressing the curve of her breast through the sweatshirt she had donned when she got home from work. But it was not the same alone. She wanted Garrett. She needed that shaft of his stroking her to begging, screaming delight. She wanted his voice murmuring in her ear, calling her his love. She wanted him filling her mentally, emotionally, physically.

Oh damn, she was obsessing again. She was getting really good at that.

"So how do I cure an obsession?" she asked Sam.

The cat blinked sleepy eyes at her.

"Let him get lost in the crowd?" She had scorned that advice earlier. But earlier she had been at her office, in her professional disguise. Now, she was just...Becka. Very much alone. In the midst of having her world turned upside down around her.

If she were to remain sane, she had to kill this obsession. That end would have to justify whatever means it took.

Chapter Six

It was damned hard walking in heels this high. Fortunately so many people crowded the bar, Becka had to move slowly, with care, anyway. She tugged the skirt that cleared her crotch by only a few scant inches. She had hemmed it up with safety pins before leaving her apartment. Now she regretted the shortness.

Or did she? Other women wore even shorter dresses. And there was nothing trampy about the silk camisole she wore or the chenille shawl she had draped over her elbows. Her hair hung loose as she had worn it for Garrett, tumbling about her shoulders. She certainly drew a lot of stares. And not all from men.

Did the overall result look cheap? That had not been her intention. Or had it? She was not after the sort of man who wanted to take her home to meet his mother. She wanted one who would throw her on the nearest bed and make her writhe until she forgot Garrett McBride. She wanted one to prove to her that Garrett was only a mediocre lover at best.

She wanted one to do the impossible.

She found a table against a wall then looked around. Dim lighting. Loud music. Even louder talk. The smell of liquor and beer. Definitely a bar.

A waiter worked his way toward her, a towel in one hand, a tray with several glasses empty except for ice in the other. "What are you drinking?" he asked.

"Something long and sweet with a kick to it, I'd think," drawled a baritone voice.

Becka turned in that direction and saw a man somewhere in his thirties, fair, with a prominent nose that gave his face a strong, powerful air. He wore an open-necked shirt above, suit trousers below and a smile that promised an evening of pleasure to the lady lucky enough to attract his attention.

"How about a bottle of champagne? On me," he added.

He was not Garrett McBride. But sexiness exuded from him. And he was looking to get laid, as Meghan would express it. Becka forced a smile and wondered if he would be good enough to blur the memories that haunted her. A few drinks might help.

He drew his chair beside her, bringing his tumbler with him. She could smell the tequila on his breath and the spicy aftershave that hung in a cloud about him. He must have sprinkled it over his shirt. Desperate? No, she doubted he had trouble picking up women. He probably just liked it.

"I'm Dave. In the advertising game. How 'bout you?"

"Becka. A boring old accountant."

His gaze ran over her, settling on the considerable cleavage revealed by her camisole. A slow smile lit his eyes. "I'll argue with both the 'boring' and the 'old'."

The waiter returned with the bottle and two stemmed glasses. The cork popped and other patrons looked over, grinning, as the fizzing liquid spilled into their flutes, bubbling over the edges. Becka accepted hers, met Dave's in a silent toast, then she sipped. The guy had class, she had to admit that. Sexy, classy—like Garrett.

Oh to hell with Garrett. She was going to enjoy Dave.

He slid his chair closer until his leg pressed against hers. She flinched away then reminded herself why she was here. She pressed back and Dave's smile grew.

He leaned over. "How did I get so lucky? Champagne and the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

"I don't like false flattery," she said before she could stop herself.

"There's nothing false about it," he assured her, though he sounded a touch annoyed. She must have squelched one of his best lines. "So why are you alone tonight?"

"It's easier to meet people that way."

"Just broke up with someone?" He pressed closer.

She nodded. "And looking for the cure."

"Well, I may not have gone to med school but I might be able to help." His arm slipped around her shoulder, sliding down her back, his hand closing over her rib cage just below her breast. His fingers began a gentle stroking.

She emptied her glass in one long swallow. Her body began to respond to the stimuli, both alcoholic and physical. Now if she could just get her mind involved she would be home free. Or rather well on her way to fucking this man and forgetting Garrett. She held out the flute for a refill, which Dave provided at once.

"Music's a bit loud, isn't it?" he murmured against her ear. "You deserve a better setting. Candlelight. Softer music, maybe something we could dance to. You like to... dance?" He put so much suggestion into the last word it was obvious he meant something else.

"I like to...dance." She had to put some effort into saying that. But why? She certainly liked it with Garrett. But with someone else? Well that was why she was here, after all. To get all hot and sweaty and worked up with someone who might make her forget Garrett.

She swallowed her champagne, accepted more then drained that glass, as well. She stood, thrusting back her chair, almost falling over. Dave rose too and she steadied herself with her hands on his shoulders.

"I'd love to dance," she declared before she could change her mind.

"Your place or mine?"

"Yours," she said and stumbled as she took her first step toward the door.

He caught her and she tottered another step, the height of her heels becoming unwieldy in her semi-sober state. She did not like to get drunk, did not like being out of control. But this was medicinal. She had to cure her obsession.

She wrapped her arm about Dave's waist. He arranged her shawl about her shoulders, allowing it to droop over her breasts. His arm encircled her back once more but this time his hand found the swell and his thumb crept upward until it brushed her nipple.

Damn you Garrett, she thought. Why did you have to make me yearn for this?

Outside Dave signaled for a taxi. While they waited he held her in front of him, drawing her close against his body, warming her while at the same time pressing her buttocks against the hardening bulge in his pants. It thrust forward as if seeking to sheathe itself even through their clothes. Memories of the previous night, of Garrett holding her like this, slammed into her, drawing a soft sigh from her throat.

Apparently Dave mistook it for a current arousal. "Not long now," he muttered in her ear.

She could hear the desire that gripped him. His hands slid up beneath her shawl where, hidden from prying eyes, they caressed her breasts, his fingers pinching her nipples through the silk and lace that covered them. His tongue explored first one ear, then the other, then down the nape of her neck. His warm breath came more quickly, his hands becoming more frenzied. One slid down her ribs, past her stomach, reaching for her mound. Deliberately Becka moved her hips against his erection.

"Ahhh." The long, satisfied sigh escaped him.

A taxi pulled up and with relief Becka stepped forward. Relief? But she wanted this! She had to have another sex experience as soon as possible to erase Garrett from her obsessive thoughts. And the taxi would take her to this man's apartment.

She slid across the seat and Dave followed, positioning himself so close he almost sat on her lap. He gave the address then dragged her into his arms and kissed her. Her body responded and she opened her mouth, accepting the tongue that thrust deep inside.

Why couldn't her mind be as enthralled? Why did she have to analyze, compare, note when Garrett had done something differently? Know that she would have responded more readily, more deeply, more passionately with Garrett?

Dave caressed her knees, pushing them apart. His hand slid up the inside of her thigh, reaching the lacy elastic band that held her stockings, stroking the bare flesh above. Then he had found the opening of her panties and shoved inside, searching, finding what he sought and forcing an entry.

She stiffened, pulling back. This was not what she wanted, not like this, not so abrupt. Yet when Garrett had caressed her in a similar manner she had moaned with pleasure, desperate for him to continue.

Dave found her nub and rubbed hard, eliciting not shockwaves of pleasure but discomfort, both mental and physical. She tried to pull away but he held her tight.

"Don't fight," he whispered. "I want you ready for a whole night of fucking."

What she felt like was a whole night of crying. She tried to relax, to accept this as a gift, as a solution, but she could not. It was Garrett McBride's touch she wanted, not Dave's. Not anyone else's. This was just...wrong.

The taxi jolted as it braked for a stoplight. Dave looked up, his attention off her for a moment and Becka shoved his hand from between her legs and opened the door. "I'll get out here," she called to the driver and slid from the cab.

Dave lunged after her. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Sorry," she called back. "I thought I could but I...I'm sorry."

She ducked behind the taxi, dodged a car that had just started forward and made it to the safety of the sidewalk. She leaned against the side of a building, tears streaming down her cheeks, her head a fog of misery and champagne. When the cold finally penetrated she stepped into the street and flagged cabs until one at last pulled over for her.

* * * * *

"God you look like hell." Meghan stood in the office doorway regarding Becka with a frown.

Becka groaned, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes. "I feel even worse." She wore black today, befitting her mood.

"I take it you decided to drown your obsession in alcohol instead of another man."

"Both," came Becka's succinct answer.

"Really? Details." Meghan closed the door and settled herself at Becka's desk. "Was he any good?"

"I couldn't go through with it. Left him in the cab."

"Beck, you're hopeless!" Meghan shook her head. "You've got to let a guy into your pants to cure a sex obsession."

"I did. I mean considering we were in a cab. I just couldn't go any further."

"You did with Mr. Sexy."

"That was...different," Becka said. "I'm obsessed with him. That made it...all right." That had made it damned fantastic but she did not say that out loud.

"So now what are you going to do? Hide in here and get nothing done because all you can think about is sex?"

"Good chance of it," Becka sighed.

But that would not work. She had more than just those investigations she had to complete. She had analyses to finish, reports to write. She had to clean up her job and her desk to hand on to her successor. She had to clean up her life. She shifted a few papers, not really seeing them.

"Well?" Meghan demanded. "If you screw Mr. Sexy again it might not be as good. Then maybe you can think about something else."

"And what if it's even better? I'm leaving in two weeks. Nothing can change that."

With an exasperated sigh Meghan rose. "Okay, fine. Try to pretend your mind's on your job. Be miserable. Just remember you could be fucking him every night. Now that," she added as she opened the door, "would give you some memories even if it doesn't kill your obsession."

Memories. Did she want memories, dreams of what might have been if she had not had to leave? On impulse she dragged out her cell phone and punched in her sister's number.

The voice mail service picked up at once. "Hi, this is Caitlyn." Even on her recording she sounded stressed and harassed. "Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Uh...don't hold your breath." The last sounded like the apology it was.

At the beep Becka said, "Hi, just me. What's the best thing that's happened to you today? Love you." She hung up.

If Caity had her phone turned off she might be at the hospital visiting Ben. And that meant she had been able to find a babysitter for the kids. Becka hoped so. She turned her attention once more to the piles of paper on her desk and set resolutely to work trying to figure out why anyone suspected Garrett of anything.

Two hours later she still did not have a clue. The damned man did nothing wrong. He did not pad expense reports. He did not lose receipts and "guesstimate" on the high side. He accounted for every hour of every day.

Frustrated, she picked up the list of accounts currently open for active projects but her gaze lingered on her desk. If Garrett himself walked through her door it would only take a second to clear off the other papers. Stuff the stapler and scissors into a drawer. Shove the in- and out-baskets on the floor. She had always wondered what it would be like to lie back on the work surface, skirt around her waist. Garrett would stand over her, unzipping those tight jeans. He would unbutton her blouse, ease her breasts from their confining lace, tease her nipples until she wrapped her legs around his and pulled him inside her to thrust and pound while she gripped his arms, urging him on, harder, faster, while sensation coiled like a taut spring until she screamed with the ecstasy of her release.

A noise intruded, not the sound of her moans or Garrett's ragged breathing but a tinny rendition of Mozart as provided by her cell phone. She picked it up, flushed with the eroticism of her daydream, appalled to see it lacked only a few minutes before five. She glanced at the screen, saw Caitlyn's name displayed and flipped it open. She drew a

steadying breath before saying, "Hey, there you are. What's the best thing that's happened to you today?"

"Am I interrupting anything?" came Caity's tired voice.

"Yup. And thanks for that." And she had better mean that. She must not keep indulging her damned obsession. "I owe you. Now answer the question."

"Look, I'm not in the mood for—"

"Doctor's orders," Becka broke across her protest. "Remember what he said? You have to write down everything good that happens. Every day. So give."

A deep sigh answered that. "Well I found a parking place at the hospital."

"Great. That's something at least. And if you went that means you found a babysitter."

"Yeah." Caity's voice brightened. "And she agreed to come again tomorrow so I can go to the grocery store."

"Wonderful. See? Good things are still happening."

"And my sister is moving here in two weeks to help me through this." Caity's voice trembled with the last words.

"And you'll get through it just fine. And I'll get to spend time with my nieces and nephews and get to be part of your family. See? Everything will work out great for all of us."

"And Ben—" Caitlyn broke off.

"Ben will fight this and we're going to help him. He's got a lot to live for and once I get there you'll be able to spend more time with him, telling him and showing him."

"Yeah." The tears sounded in her voice. "God I can't wait 'til you're here."

"Me neither." Well, it was only a half-lie. She did look forward to being part of Caity's family. But she would miss Meghan. She would miss her job. And as for Garrett McBride— Well, obsessions weren't lasting love. They were as brief as they were intense.

An infant's wail rose all too near the phone. "Woops, got to go. Love you," Caity shouted at the mouthpiece, then the connection broke.

Becka sat for a long moment staring at the instrument, then closed it and set it on her desk. The sooner she got to Phoenix, the better for poor Caity's sanity. And her own as well. Once there, what with helping her sister and dealing with the kids and trying to establish herself as a CPA working only part-time, she would be too busy to think about Garrett.

Except at night. When she went to bed. Alone.

* * * * *

Garrett strode onto the planning floor, fuming. Three days had passed since Charlie Davenport had admitted that Garrett was under investigation. Under investigation for what, damn it? Why would no one tell him? He had followed the Director of Operations when that meeting had ended, trailed him to his office, asked him point blank what was going on. At least Davenport had not pretended he did not understand, had not lied.

He just had not told him enough.

Garrett stormed to his workstation and glared at the array of circuit boards and schematics that lay strewn across the surface. What a mess his life was becoming. What a god awful mess.

"You look," Tony announced from where he lounged at his own workstation, "like you need to get laid."

Garrett snorted. "Damn straight." But he only wanted one woman and she had told him he would never see her again. Three miserable days since he had heard her voice.

"Go to the bar? Two minutes 'til five. Time to clear out of here."

Garrett considered. He could get drunk, find a willing girl, fuck her until he was too tired to care about anything.

Or he could spend the time following up what clues he could to finding some trace of Fantasy.

He shook his head. "Busy tonight. See you in the morning." He slammed the papers that lay scattered across the table into their drawer then strode toward the door.

Janet, the department's den mother, stood in the opening blocking his exit. A frown creased her middle-aged brow, putting him in mind of his fourth grade teacher when he had not done his homework for the third day in a row. When he reached her she did not move aside.

"Something wrong?" With an effort he kept his impatience from sounding in his voice.

She worked her lower lip for a moment then seemed to come to a decision. She jerked her head toward the hallway. "Out here."

He followed her along the corridor to a water cooler. She filled a paper cup, glanced around then looked up at him, her expression serious. "I'm not supposed to tell you anything."

He gave a short nod. "So just talk to yourself out loud. It won't be your fault if I'm within hearing distance."

Her narrow lips twitched into a smile. "You're too devious for your own good. And that may be the problem."

"I know I'm under investigation. I just don't know why."

"All I know is someone from accounting requisitioned the records for all the projects you're working on."

"The projects? What the hell would accounting want with those? What are they looking for?"

"No idea. But whatever it is, it's financial. Have you been padding too many expense reports?"

He shook his head. "Damn it, why can't someone just come out and ask me a couple direct questions? Who the hell requisitioned the stuff, anyway?"

Janet tilted her head. "Wouldn't do you any good to know. You can hardly confront her."

"Oh can't I?"

"No you can't. And if you haven't been fiddling any accounts you'll be fine. So quit worrying and go relax tonight."

He nodded and she hurried off to whatever she did after working hours. He waited until she was out of sight then returned to the planning floor. Janet's desk stood just inside the door and the notepad where she recorded everything that occurred stood open beside her phone. He flipped back a page, then another, scanning for his name.

And there it was, along with the request for all records of his projects.

Along with the name of the person who had made the request.

Rebecca Carlisle.

Who the hell was she and why had she decided to poke her nose into his affairs? And why could she not be straightforward about it, just walk up to him and ask her damned questions? No, she had to be sneaky. Underhanded. Treacherous. He hated people like that.

* * * * *

Becka closed her eyes. Six days. It had been six days since Halloween, since she had staged that elaborate seduction, since she had discovered how fantastic sex could be. She had gone to her belly dancing class the previous night and no one had questioned why she had borrowed the tent fabric. No one knew the erotic delights that setting had brought. No one knew how she burned to repeat that experience.

And it had been four days since she had last glimpsed Garrett McBride. Instead of making it easier, though, she found herself craving just the sight of him. The thought of his taste and scent drove her mad. It created chaos with her computations and analyses.

"You're stressing," Charlie told her as she sat in his office late that afternoon. "You've never turned in inaccurate work before. Now it's okay but you've got to pull yourself together. We've only got a little over a week to get this organized."

Becka nodded, silent, ashamed. She prided herself on her work. And she let it fall apart because she could not keep her mind out of bed.

"Just a few more days," Charlie said, encouraging. "You can do it."

She hesitated then took the plunge. "I haven't been able to find anything wrong with McBride's billing. I don't think there's anything *to* find."

Charlie frowned. "There's got to be something or his name wouldn't have been flagged. Keep looking."

Which meant keeping Garrett right in the forefront of her mind. Just what she did not need.

With a sigh she gathered her folders and left. She had to get her brain functioning again, her thoughts back where they belonged. This was not fair to Charlie. It was not fair to her replacement. It was not fair to Garrett and the other people she investigated. Damn it, this company paid her to work, not to obsess. She had to do something drastic.

And she could think of only one thing.

Chapter Seven

Lunch hour, the public phone again. "Garrett?" Becka kept her voice soft, husky, alluring.

"Fantasy." Just the one word but it held volumes of emotion.

She caught her breath, savoring the pleasure in his tone. A pleasure he so easily gave right back to her. A week had passed yet he remembered the sound of her voice speaking his name. That sent a thrill through her that she knew was as unwise as it was erotic.

"Tonight. Seven p.m. Same hotel. Same room."

"Eight twenty-one," he said before she could supply it.

"Eight twenty-one," she agreed. "Dinner will be waiting."

She hung up the public phone then paused, watching it. This time it did not ring. This time he had what he wanted. And so did she. But this time it really would be the last time.

She had agonized over the decision for hours. She had no right to do this, not with her part in the investigation still ongoing. It was a flagrant conflict of interest.

And if he ever found out she had played any part in it... It made her sick to think about that. At best it would seem to him she had seduced him for that one reason. At worst he would see it as an intentional betrayal.

But if she did not see him again she might as well give up any hope of ever accomplishing anything in the little time she had left. And that was not an option.

Well, tonight she would not be Rebecca Carlisle, investigator. She would be Fantasy. His Fantasy. They could both forget their troubles for a little while.

Since leaving work the previous day she had spent the time planning, making certain the hotel could accommodate her, making certain she could accommodate Garrett McBride. That had entailed a trip to Victoria's Secret, a store she had never before visited. It had proved educational and wholly delightful.

Oh damn, she should not be so excited, so nervous. He had liked her belly dancing outfit. He would love the lingerie that rested now in her briefcase. She returned to the office, got a salad from the caterer's cart then took it to eat at her desk. Her thoughts kept leaping ahead to the evening to come but this time she got the figures entered into the right columns and made sense of the results.

And everything added up.

Except...

Excitement filled her. The figures were all correct. It was the account numbers that didn't match. No wonder she had missed it before. One of the projects did not appear in the general ledger except as subaccounts under other projects. It would never be seen on the financial statements reviewed by the top executives.

She leaned back in her chair, gazing at the arrangement of chrysanthemums on her desk without really seeing them. Why would someone go to all the trouble of faking a project? There were far simpler ways to embezzle, ways not likely to be discovered during a routine audit. Unless...

Unless the project had once existed, then been canceled. Except could it have been canceled only on paper but still exist in reality? Did someone hide it from the company?

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed possible. Someone had Garrett creating a device that the company thought had failed. When Garrett completed it... Her mind whirled. If she were running the fraud, she would let Garrett complete it then destroy all the evidence, sell the device to a pre-arranged buyer and leave Garrett to be accused of stealing the funds.

She had to go back almost a year before she found the project, some form of micro robotic device intended for medical purposes. The summary sentence called it "not feasible". Its expense accounts were deleted. But at the same time new subaccounts, bearing the same numbers, were added to other projects.

Whoever did this had the authority to play with the company's chart of accounts. That hinted at someone higher up the food chain than Garrett McBride.

But Garrett must be aware the project was avoided in meetings. Whoever was behind it must have told him it was top-secret, never to speak of it to anyone.

If only she could go to him, ask him, find out the truth.

Well, Charlie could.

She started for the door, remembered the possibility of encountering Garrett in the flesh—Oh god what magnificent flesh—and reached for her phone instead. A minute later Sue, that ever-efficient assistant, connected her to Charlie.

"How's it going?" he asked. "Any progress?"

With an effort she kept her voice calm. "Who flagged Garrett McBride's project as possible fraud?"

He hesitated. "That's confidential."

"Look into it. I think the project's real."

"No one's seen it."

She forged ahead. "If I'm right, G—Mr. McBride is working on what he thinks is a top-secret project." Quickly she told him what she had found, what she suspected.

A long moment of silence followed when she had finished. "That's a pretty serious accusation," Charlie said at last. "Got proof?"

"It would help if I knew who tipped you off."

"I suppose it would." A long sigh came over the phone. "I'll look into it and get back to you."

She hung up, relieved. She had done what she could.

Of course she might still have to prove it was not Garrett himself who planned to steal the project.

Which meant no one must have so much as a suspicion of how she felt about Garrett or the real guilty party could scream conspiracy. Then nothing she or Garrett could say would convince anyone of their innocence.

* * * * *

This was a bad idea and Becka knew it. Now, of all times, she should show discretion, avoid any contact with Garrett. She should have called tonight off. But with only a week remaining to her and her obsession raging, she had given in to her lust.

Besides, she had promised Garrett she would be here.

A knock sounded on the door and she admitted the waiter to the room. He rolled the service cart to the curtained window then positioned two chairs, one on either side. Becka lifted the covers and the aroma of beef stroganoff wafted out, reminding her she was hungry. She handed the man a tip, let him out of the room then turned to her final preparations.

That mainly involved taking off the light dress she had donned. Beneath it she already wore the black and turquoise lace bra and matching panties and the black lace thigh top stockings. She kept on the black stiletto heels. And she donned her mask, securing it with the sticky tape that held it firmly in place. Next she applied the cologne she had bought, a heavenly scent. Not too much, just enough to tease and tantalize.

And lastly her hair. She ran a brush through it, fluffing it, spreading it across her shoulders. Would he like the effect? Would he like her? Halloween night had been one thing, a moment out of time, a masquerade. This was different. This was a repeat. What if she did not live up to his memories?

God waiting was hard. She paced back to the table, touched the bottle of champagne that rested in the ice bucket, adjusted the napkins. She surveyed the room once more, searching for any improvement she could make in the atmosphere. Was the music too loud? Not loud enough? She adjusted the volume on her CD player then set it back where it had been.

You're obsessing, she told herself.

A knock sounded on the door, firm, confident. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, adjusted her bra, then crossed the carpet with care not to teeter on her heels. A check through the peephole assured her that Garrett stood just inches away. She fumbled with the security bar then opened the door and stepped back.

He remained where he stood, staring at her. "I didn't dare believe you'd really be here." He stepped inside, shoving the door closed behind him, still devouring her with his gaze. A slow smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Still the mask?"

"It wouldn't be a fantasy without it," she assured him. Oh god, he looked so sexy, so masculine. Why had she waited so long to call him?

Because it was wrong, because she was an idiot to have done so, because now that she was with him, standing so close, she never wanted to be away from him again. And she had to leave Chicago in just over a week. And even if she did not have to go, he could never know who she was.

She turned, gesturing toward the laden cart. "Dinner—" she began.

"Can wait," he finished for her. "I can't."

He caught her shoulders, turning her to face him. She trembled with anticipation, with desire, as his lazy gaze caressed her.

"Great outfit," he said at last.

"Got it just for you."

His smile deepened. "Then take it off just for me. Bra first."

She did, with slow deliberate movements. The lace teased her nipples as she eased the fabric away then tossed it to the bed.

"Panties next," he decided.

She loosened them on either side of her hips, then wriggled until they slid free, down to the floor. She stepped out of them, kicking them away as she did so. Her breath came quickly, shallow. Already desire filled her, pooling in a moist ache between her legs.

She had never realized how erotic it could be, to stand in nothing but stockings and heels before a fully clothed man. As if he held complete power over her. As if she were his slave. She wanted him to exercise that power, that strength. She wanted him to order her, dominate her. The mere thought aroused her even more. She closed her eyes then opened them again in order to see his expression.

He still watched her, eyes narrowed, assessing. "You like this?" His voice, while still soft, had taken on a tone of mastery as if he sensed her reaction.

She nodded, unable to command the words to speak.

"Then get down on your knees." He pointed to the floor.

She sank to the carpet before him.

He unfastened his jeans and dragged down his boxers, revealing his long, hard erection. "Give me your hands," he ordered.

She reached for that rock-hard weapon but he caught her wrists in one hand. He held them together above her head against his chest. The fingers of his other hand tangled in her hair until he cupped the back of her head and pulled it forward toward that monstrous target.

She had never done this before. She had thought it a turnoff to take that portion of a man's anatomy into her mouth.

She had been wrong. Now she ached to take him in any way she could.

The throbbing between her legs neared the unbearable. She parted her lips, opening to him, accepting, her uncertainties fading as the velvety smoothness slid between her teeth and she heard his sharp intake of breath. She ran her tongue along the engorged tip and felt the shudder that raced through him, through his hands, into her wrists and the back of her neck. She was on the right track. With an inward smile, with a sense of power that seemed in perfect accord with her submissive position, she continued her

experimentation, tasting, teasing, pulling. She quavered inside, as aroused as he, her moans echoing his until his convulsions left him gasping in exultation.

For a long moment neither of them moved. Then he pulled her to her feet and gathered her into his arms. His kiss, so gentle, so caressing, melted her, leaving her quavering with a desire that outpaced the merely physical. She snatched one last quick kiss before he held her from him.

Slowly he sank onto one knee and removed first one of her stiletto heels, then the other. Then he slid her stockings down, one at a time, his fingers caressing her thighs, behind her knees, down her calves to the insides of her ankles, then her insteps. At last he stood. Cupping her waist between his hands, he lifted her, carried her to the bed, laid her gently on it.

Instead of joining her, he traced spirals along her stomach, down her groin, through the curling hair that covered her mound, then lower, finding the one spot that drew a gasp from her. Then he knelt, tracing the same pattern with his mouth, finding that same sensitive spot. She wriggled her hips, opening her legs to him, and her fingers clutched his hair as his tongue found the entry it sought. While his hands teased her breasts, his mouth and tongue wrought havoc with her senses until she cried out with the fulfillment that sent shock waves through her entire body.

Garrett sank onto the bed at her side, drawing her once more into his arms, holding her tight as his mouth sought the base of her ear. "Fantasy?" he murmured.

"Mmmm?" She snuggled closer, rubbing her cheek on his Oxford cloth shirt.

"What's for dinner? I'm starved."

A gasping laugh escaped her. "It'll be cold," she warned.

She sat up but he had already swung his long legs from the bed and made his way into the bathroom. When he reappeared he carried the black lace robe she had bought along with the lingerie, just in case. He held it up for her to slide her arms into the sleeves then crossed to the table and held out a chair for her as she buttoned the flimsy garment.

"Almost as nice as your welcoming outfit," he said as he took the chair opposite.

She smiled. It felt right to be sitting here with him like this, all but naked while he remained dressed, the warming glow of his touch lingering on her skin.

He poured the champagne, ate for several minutes without speaking, then leaned back in his chair. "You look tired."

"I didn't mean to," she said before she could stop herself. Oh damn, why did she say what she meant rather than come out with sparkling gems of wit?

He flashed that heart-achingly sexy grin but creases etched their way into his brow as if his own troubles returned to haunt him. "Rough week?"

She nodded. "And you?"

His mouth tightened. "Let's not ruin the evening." He took another mouthful of stroganoff. "Funny thing," he said when he had swallowed, "I've been having a hard time concentrating on anything since I saw you last. I just kept staring at my phone, willing it to ring." He looked up, catching and holding her gaze. "Didn't you want to make it ring?"

She tried to lie but could not. "Every moment of every day."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I have...responsibilities."

His gaze narrowed. "Are you married? Living with someone? Children?"

She shook her head. "Just work and relatives." $\,$

"Relatives." His mouth twisted. "God, I know how that one goes."

"They're the reason you're here and not following your own dream, aren't they?" She honestly wanted to know, she realized. Every detail. Every thought. Every dream. Her lust for mental and emotional intimacy with him had grown as great as her lust for his body.

His mouth tightened. "That might be changing. I just wish I could have earned more—" He broke off. "That ranch was one big pile of debts when my father inherited

it. Luckily I found I had a flair for the stock market—Wall Street, not beef. With that and a night job as a programmer, I worked my way through school. That's when I swore my brother and sister wouldn't have to go through anything that grueling."

"I don't see how you did it and stayed sane." A couple of her classmates had gone that route, classes all day, a job all night, no sleep, living on one meal a day, struggling for grades and praying there would be a little money left over to send home to the folks. She had blessed her own college fund, started by frugal parents on the day after her birth. "So you've been helping the others?"

"My brother did an agri-business program. Came up with all sorts of modern ideas. That's when I started building gadgets for the ranch."

"And your sister?"

"Still in vet school. Another year and a half to go."

"And then you'll be free?"

"And then I can follow my dreams." He reached a hand across the table. "There's one I can pursue right now, though."

If only, if only, if only.

Her fingers caressed his palm. "Fantasies don't survive the full light of day."

"What, you're a vampire?" His tone teased but a serious expression haunted his eyes. "You might as well know, I'm not giving up easily. You're the only good thing that's happened to me lately. I was serious about your becoming an obsession." His grip on her tightened. "I tried to make the hotel tell me your name. I went back to the restaurant and that bar, hoping you'd turn up."

Guilt filled her. "I...I'm sorry."

"Now that you're here, I like the obsession. I want to know everything about you. What sort of movies you like, what sort of books you read, your hobbies, your family, where you grew up. Everything."

Right. Like they worked for the same company? That she had been investigating him for fraud? That he still was not in the clear? She shook her head. "It would bore you."

"If it did, that would only be fair. I've been rambling on about my family."

"Right now I want to concentrate on dessert. The chocolate mousse has been calling me for some time."

He regarded the strawberry cheesecake she had ordered for him. "Looks good. Wrong plate though."

"Did they do something wrong?" She peered across. Nothing seemed amiss.

"Well, it would look a lot better in bite-sized pieces, laid out from the base of that beautiful throat of yours, down a long line over your stomach and beyond."

She set down the spoon she had just picked up. "Mousse can wait." She stood.

An odd sound, rather like an electric razor, sounded from very close by. Garrett muttered an oath and drew his cell phone from his pocket. "That's got to get turned off, for starters," he said. He flipped it open then frowned.

"Need to take it?" She tried to keep the disappointment from her voice.

"Left a voice message." He punched in numbers, waited, punched in a few more.

A man's voice came across, loud enough for Becka to hear. "Where the hell are you, Garrett? Answer this damned thing, will you?"

"One of my college roommates," Garrett told her.

"Go ahead. I'll cut the cheesecake."

"I'll keep it short." He pressed more buttons, waited.

"It's about time," came the voice.

"This had better be important, Sean. And short."

"Right. Get home. Now."

"Why?" Garrett caught Becka's hand and kissed it.

"Because I'm sitting on my bags in front of your locked door, you idiot. Why else?" Garrett's brow snapped down. "Your timing is less than perfect."

"What, with a woman? Tell her you'll screw her tomorrow. You've got a friend in need, here. You've got twenty minutes before I start raising a ruckus that'll give your neighbors fits."

"That's not what I meant—" Garrett began, then, "Damn, he hung up. Fantasy..."

"I heard. You'll have to go." And there it was, their last time together, ended just like that. She had expected—craved—the whole night in his arms. A chill gripped her, a numbness that blessedly blocked the pain. Just as well. She did not want his last memory of her to be of her crying like a baby whose favorite toy had just been snatched away. This way she might get out of it with some dignity.

He gathered her into his arms and held her close. "I don't want to leave you."

"Responsibilities," she murmured. A curse for both of them.

That drew a short derisive laugh from him. "They shouldn't have to include a twenty-eight-year-old man who never grew up."

"Happen often?"

"Every time he screws up either a relationship or a job. He descends on me for a few days, bitches and moans until he's got it out of his system, then takes himself off again."

"Ah. Someone you can count on to be consistent."

He held her slightly away from him so he could look into her face. "Can I count on that with you?"

"Garrett —"

"I'm not leaving until I have your solemn promise you'll see me again. We have a little unfinished business from tonight."

"Cheesecake." Oh god, how could she put herself through this again?

How could she not?

"All right. I'll call you as soon as I can make the arrangements."

"Promise?"

She drew his head down to hers, covering his mouth in a kiss that drew a soft "Mmmm" of pleasure from him. She caught his lower lip between her teeth, tugging gently, then kissed him again before stepping back. "I promise. And you've got just a little over fifteen minutes to avert a riot."

He picked up his coat, pulled it on then stopped, all expression fading from his face. "Fantasy, I-"

"Your friend," she reminded him.

He shook his head. "Look, my asking you to call. It wasn't fair. You don't know the truth."

God, look who was talking. "Truth can be overrated."

He shook his head. "You may not want to see me again."

"Garrett —"

He held up one hand. "You know about intellectual properties and contracts?"

"You mean that any idea you come up with while under contract belongs to your employer?"

He nodded. "That makes it hard for a gadgeteer to set up on his own. The first ideas to be developed tend to be claimed by the former employer."

"That's not fair."

He shrugged. "That's the way it is. But I may not have to worry about it. After a few years in prison they can hardly claim my ideas anymore."

"In—" She stared at him, appalled. "It won't come to that. They'll find out they're wrong. I've—" She broke off, horrified by what she had been about to reveal.

He shook his head. "Someone's done too good a job of setting me up. The Director of Operations has set an attack dog after me, having her check every record, everything I've been involved in, and the damned idiot couldn't come up with a single shred of

evidence in my favor. Not that she probably tried very hard. Much easier just to convict me. I think," he added with a slow cold smile, "after she testifies in court I'm going to strangle this Rebecca Carlisle. That'll give me a fond memory while I'm in prison."

The blood drained from her face, leaving her skin cold, clammy. "Garrett—"

He shook his head. "I'll understand if you don't call again." He hesitated then turned on his heel and left.

For several minutes she just stood there, sick.

After several more minutes she removed her mask then sat on the bed blindly flipping channels on the television to give her distress an outlet.

She ate her chocolate mousse. Then she ate his cheesecake.

Then she got dressed, checked out and went home to Sam.

Chapter Eight

"He didn't do it." Becka stood in Charlie's office, hands flat on his desk, leaning forward to stare him in the face.

"You seem pretty sure about that." Charlie tilted his chair back and folded his hands over the slight paunch of his stomach. "Why?"

"He couldn't."

"I understood you didn't know him."

"I didn't. I mean, I'd met him but I didn't know who he was."

"Dammit Becka, if you've been talking to him you've compromised the investigation! Now just promise me you aren't sleeping with him as well."

She looked away, feeling the heat surging in her face, knowing he would see.

"That was meant to be a joke." A heavy sigh escaped him and he ran his hand through his salt and pepper hair. "It's a damned good thing you're leaving in a week. Well, this will make the McBride mess easier in some ways. We've got grounds for terminating his contract."

"No! He doesn't know who I am! You can't fire him. You can't prosecute him, either. He's innocent!"

Charlie's gaze narrowed. "What do you mean, he doesn't know who you are?"

She looked down, unable to meet his searching gaze. "It was Halloween. I wore a mask."

"What—" He broke off. For a moment he looked intrigued, then he shook his head. "On second thought I don't want to know. But you've put me in a damned awkward position."

"If it makes you feel better, he told me he plans to strangle me—only he doesn't know it's me." Oh hell, she was not making sense anymore.

Charlie snorted. "I've heard a bit of asphyxiation heightens orgasm."

She opened her mouth but could think of nothing to say.

He glared at her. "Go away. I've got to figure out some damage control. Go ahead and finish the other investigations I gave you. Unless you're involved with those people too?"

"No." With what little dignity she could muster she stalked from the room.

She had wanted to redeem herself in some small way, to make things better for Garrett. She had only succeeded in making them worse.

* * * * *

Becka picked up the last of the folders, tapped the papers that jutted out the sides back into place and dropped it on top of the hefty pile already in her briefcase. With a sigh she snapped it closed, grasped the handle and picked it up. Her arm ached with the effort. Again. She was never going to get through everything before she left. And the days sped by.

Well, the sooner she got out of Lanzenger Enterprises now, the better.

"Trying for a new record in the Olympic briefcase lifting event?" Meghan asked from the doorway.

"Bound to get the gold before I leave." Becka came around her desk and headed for the door and her work-filled night. If only she had something to look forward to. If only...

If only she could spend one more night with Garrett.

If only he never figured out she was Rebecca Carlisle.

She longed to call him. She ached to see his smile, to feel his touch, to writhe beneath him while that fantastic organ of his plunged and pounded inside her. One last time before she left. Before he discovered who she was.

But tonight was impossible as was the next night and the one after that. Which brought her up to the fourteenth, the night before her last day of work. If she crunched numbers really hard... She had to see him once more. After all, she had promised.

And this time it really would be the last.

She would vanish and he would never have to know who she was, that his Fantasy was the Rebecca Carlisle who had taken part in the investigation that had been making his life a living hell. Instead she would leave him with a wonderful memory.

Very little remained in her apartment. The few items with which she could not bear to part sat crated near the door, waiting for the shippers to pick them up and transport them to Phoenix. That left one large suitcase, her carry-on, her bed and Sam. The bed would take up its new home down the hall the morning she was due to leave.

She stretched out on the quilt her grandmother had made her for Christmas four years before and studied the papers in the folder she currently held. She had to make faster time than this. She circled the eighth excessive charge on the expense account she studied. Some employees, like the last one she had reviewed, felt a few dollars here and there were a perk to make up for the inconvenience of staying at five-star hotels and ordering room service for every meal. The company might not like it but they accepted it and Becka had marked it for the customary warning. But this guy seemed to be clearing over a hundred dollars a day. She would have to recommended him for disciplinary action.

And Garrett, what about him? She had heard nothing about his investigation since her wretched confession to Charlie. Had she let her lust blind her to his fraud? Or had knowing him helped her see the truth, that someone else set him up for a crashing fall?

He must be going crazy, waiting to find out if the company intended to file criminal charges against him. And there was not one single thing she could do to help except stay out of it.

He must feel the stress, the anxiety. With that, at least, she might be able to help. She could spread her legs, draw him inside until he forgot everything but the pounding rhythm they created, bring him to release over and over again until he collapsed into the sleep of exhaustion. It would be good therapy for her too.

The phone rang and Becka dragged her thoughts out of Garrett's bed and set the folder aside. Caity. The third time today. She flipped it open. "So, what's the best thing that's happened to you since lunch?" she asked.

"You're still awake?" Caitlyn's voice sounded colorless, tired. Defeated.

"Only eleven, here. Come on, answer the question."

A silence stretched. Then, "I only burned my dinner a little."

"Blackened. That's still considered haut cuisine, isn't it?"

"Not when it's scrambled eggs."

Ouch. "Well, think positive. Ben will respond to the new antibiotic, they'll let him out of intensive care and he'll be able to get back on his cancer treatment. Now what do you say?"

Another silence. Then, still in that tired voice, Caity murmured, "He's going to make it."

"Louder and with feeling," Becka ordered.

"He's going to make it," Caity repeated.

"Shout it this time."

"And wake the kids? Not on your — I don't think I'd better."

"No," agreed Becka. Poor Caitlyn, she had not even dared to say "not on your life".

"Only a couple more days and I'll be there," she reassured her sister. "And I give it a week before you're fed up with me."

"No." Back to the colorless tone.

"Go put a DVD of cartoons on your bedroom set and go to sleep to it," Becka suggested. "And I'll keep my phone right beside me all night." After a few more encouraging words, Caitlyn promised to take her advice and Becka hung up.

She still had two more folders to finish before she could turn off her own light but all she wanted to think about was Garrett and what they could be doing and how there was so little time left in which to do it.

* * * * *

Three days later Becka slipped out at lunch, her destination the public phone booth she had used twice before. She dialed Garrett's number then listened to it ringing over and over.

Abruptly it switched to his voice mail. "You've reached Garrett McBride. I'm probably in a meeting but if you'll leave your name and number, I'll get back to you as soon as I can." Then it beeped.

Becka nearly hung up, then forged ahead. "It's me. Tonight, same time, same place. There'll be an envelope waiting for you at the reception desk."

She hung up. Would he get the message? She had heard of voice mails that vanished into the system, not delivered for days or even weeks. Should she call him back later? Just to make sure? Just to hear his voice? She returned to her office disheartened.

"You look too depressed for someone who got all their work done on time," Meghan informed her a couple hours later.

Becka glanced up from the filing drawer she straightened. "Now I just have to flee the state before Charlie finds all the mistakes and demands corrections."

"He won't. Find any, I mean." Meghan toyed with her pencil. "It's going to seem strange around here without you."

"But think of the big blowout going-away party tomorrow. That ought to make it worthwhile."

Meghan grinned. "I tried to talk them into getting you a male stripper but no dice. Or maybe I could get Mr. Sexy to volunteer." An image flashed in Becka's mind of Garrett once more in his cowboy gear, gyrating and undulating. "I'd prefer a private showing for that."

"Will you get it?"

Becka hesitated. "We're meeting for dinner."

Meghan's eyes widened. "You've told him who you are? Taken off that silly mask?"

"Rather late for that now, isn't it? Hi, here I am and you'll never see me again?"

"And how's your obsession?" Meghan shot back.

Becka sighed. "It's going to have a couple of really great memories to keep it alive."

Meghan shook her head. "Once you know he's beyond reach, it'll fade. And next time you see a man whose bones you want to jump, maybe you won't be so stupid and shy."

"Maybe." Becka left it at that. She returned her attention to the filing cabinet but Garrett had once more taken possession of her mind like a sitting tenant who refused to vacate. She was being perverse, torturing herself like this. She had to put him out of her thoughts. She had to forget how her blood pulsed through her, how her body melted just at the sight of him. His taste and smell lingered as did the sensation of his bristly chin brushing her face, her breasts, her inner thighs. And what he could do with his tongue sent ripples of desire coursing through her.

Tonight. She could wait a couple more hours.

Oh like hell she could. She wanted him now. This minute. Right here in her office. On the floor, on her desk, entwined together in her wheeled chair, she didn't care. Any of those places. All of them.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her raging libido. She needed these last few hours. It had taken her days to decide on how to set the stage for this final meeting. She still had one last purchase to make.

She arrived at the hotel just before six, armed with an overnight bag and a discreet brown paper sack. She registered, requested a second key, then asked for an envelope. She wrote Garrett's name on this, slipped the spare plastic card inside, sealed it and left it for him to collect when he arrived.

The room welcomed her like an old friend. She had been lucky always to get this same place. But she had reserved days in advance to be sure each time. She would miss it. If ever she visited Chicago again...

No, she would not request this room. She would not even stay at this hotel. She needed no reminders of her passion-filled adventures with Garrett. They lived inside her, in her memory, in her body.

She changed clothes, donning the disposable bits of lace that claimed to be bra and panties. Sexy and expensive considering they would be used only this once. Stockings, a wisp of a garter belt, a very short skirt, a midriff-bearing top and stiletto sandals more strap than substance. And her mask. This time she would wait to order dinner. It would be difficult to eat until afterwards.

At last she opened her shopping bag and took out the silk scarves and their fastenings. The specialty store—one that catered to very particular tastes—had known exactly what she had in mind and their selection had staggered her. She had chosen something simple, soft and long enough. After all, she did not have bedposts for anchors.

She knelt on the soft carpet and tossed one weighted end of each scarf under the bed, then collected them from the other side. Then she lay down on the mattress, slid the cuffs around her ankles and adjusted the length. She did the same for her wrists. In a very few minutes she lay spread-eagled, secured, with barely enough play on her right hand to free herself if anything went wrong. Such as Garrett not getting her message.

She should have called again but she had not wanted to sound too anxious. Too paranoid. Too afraid this rendezvous might not mean as much to him as it did to her.

But then he did not know it was to be their last.

The minutes crept past. Stiffness assailed her back and she tried to shift her position. Damn, she had her bonds too tight. She should have tucked a pillow under her knees but that would have destroyed the picture of the bondage victim she had tried to create. Hard to look vulnerable when you also looked comfortable.

She turned her head until she could see the bedside clock. Ten after seven. She had been lying here for almost thirty minutes. She also grew cold from lack of movement. It would all be worth it, though, once Garrett arrived.

Once he arrived... She closed her eyes and summoned up the memory of his mouth on hers, of his hands caressing the skin around her breasts until she begged him to tease her nipples, then delve lower, deeper, between her spread legs, his fingers parting the folds that covered the entrance to their private erotic paradise.

Oh hell, now she was getting metaphorical. What other purple prose euphemisms could she recall for describing that region? She grinned to herself. Definitely too much reading and not enough doing. And right now she wanted to do, do, do.

Footsteps in the hall but she had heard those before. They always went right past her door. But this time they stopped and she heard the distinctive clicking sound as someone—dear god it had better be Garrett—inserted the plastic key card into the slot. The door opened, closed and a steady tread approached along the short hall between the bathroom on one side and the closet on the other.

Then Garrett stood there, strain lines still etched in his face, staring down at her. For a long moment he remained perfectly still, silent, just gazing. She wriggled, mostly to demonstrate the extent of her captivity, partly to ease her back.

"I thought you were going to be late when I found the key in that envelope," he said.

"Just a little tied up."

His tension receded as he grinned, boyish and wicked and sexy as hell. "So I see." He advanced to the foot of the bed. "Helpless. In my power."

Like her heart. But she kept that thought to herself. "Cut off my clothes." With a nod of her head she indicated the scissors she had placed on the nightstand.

"Too tame." He reached in his jeans pocket and drew out a knife. The blade, when opened, showed a good three inches of gleaming steel. He touched the point to her instep just above the strappy stiletto sandal. And then he added pressure until the point pricked, hurt.

Alarmed, she tugged at the bonds, trying to move her foot from his reach. That seemed to please him. Or did it excite him? It sure as hell excited her.

He drew the point along the inside of her calf, her knee, never breaking the fine mesh of her stocking. Arousal, heightened by the sense of danger, pulsed like a beacon through her. Heat flooded between her legs and her hips thrust upward of their own volition. How could fear be so damned erotic?

Because deep down she trusted him, she realized. But on the surface the fantasy held her firmly in its grip.

He caught the hem of her skirt and jerked the knife toward him, slicing through the folds of material. Then he ripped the thin fabric past her panties, her navel, up to the waistband. He trailed the blade from the mattress up the wisp of lace that covered that most erogenous of all zones, drawing a low moan from her throat.

He frowned, patted his jeans then drew a handkerchief from his back pocket. This he thrust into her mouth. "Can't have you screaming for help, can we?" He tossed the knife into the air, caught it then returned the blade to the area of her nub.

Her adrenalin pumped. He would not really hurt her...would he? No, she would never tremble like this with desire to feel his cock thrusting into her if she thought him sadistic. But that touch of uncertainty lingered, driving her wild with that intoxicating mixture of lust and fear.

The knife traced over her mound, renewing the shivering deep in her belly. Up her stomach, then with a savage thrust it destroyed her skirt's waistband. Garrett dragged back the fabric, letting it lie on the bed as he continued the path of the blade up her

midriff. The top cut with ease, exposing the lace that pretended to be a bra. Then he brought the knife to the base of her throat.

"You're mine," he whispered. "I can do anything I want with you. I can kill you. I can fuck you 'til you scream with pain, then keep right on fucking you because there isn't one single damned thing you can do about it."

No, part of her cried out, while another, louder voice chimed in with Yes, oh please, yes.

He sliced through her bra where it came to a tiny point between her breasts, then he cut the arm straps and pulled the garment off. The point of his knife touched the peak of one nipple. "I can carve my initials into any part of you I choose." He dealt with her panties.

Her breath came fast and shallow. Her hips arched upward once more, that burning place between her legs striving to maintain contact with him. The garter belt next, then he tossed aside her sandals. At last he sliced the stockings from her legs, slowly, deliberately, allowing the back of the blade to press into her thighs, her knees, her calves, her insteps.

If the blade slipped, if he cut her skin, she would probably explode in an orgasm. She had imagined a slight thrill from tonight's scenario. She had never dreamed of anything so intense, so surreal, so ecstatic.

"You're at my mercy," he told her.

And she was, in every imaginable way.

He stepped back and, with a slowness that had to be deliberate provocation, he unbuttoned his shirt, cast it aside, kicked off his shoes and socks then unfastened his belt. He held the strip of leather between his hands, looping it about his fists like a garroting wire. He snapped it tight. "I could beat you," he mused.

He tossed the belt on the bed then skinned out of his jeans and boxers. His erection loomed large and hard. How long would he make her wait to feel it plunging inside her? With the gag she could not beg. She could only devour it with her eyes, will him to

use in on her like a weapon. Hard, demanding thrusts that would make her whimper and cry with unbearable pleasure.

He jerked her top from under her back and draped it over her face, cutting off her vision. She shook her head, trying to see again but he merely secured it in place. "You're my captive. We're doing this my way."

Oh yes, any way he chose. Just so long as he did it. And soon. And again. And again.

She heard the rustle and tear of plastic, then a sharp intake of breath as he put on the condom. Then she felt the mattress give as it took his weight and he clambered on top of her. His teeth clamped over one nipple, hurting with the extremity of her pleasure. Then he thrust hard, battering inside her and she gasped as wave after wave of exultation washed over her, leaving her panting with the intensity of her orgasm.

He pulled out almost at once. She shook her head, wanting him to continue, to take his own release, to know the ecstasy she had just experienced.

He pulled off her makeshift blindfold and caressed her cheek beneath her mask. "We're going to continue in a moment but there's something I've got to do first." He pulled out her gag then reached for her mask.

"No," she protested.

"Yes. The game served its purpose but I'm ready for some reality, now."

"No," she repeated. "Please..."

"We're lovers. There's no room for any secrets between us. We're one, we belong together. Can't you feel it?" He tugged at the strip of cotton-lined velvet. It clung to her skin, pulling, and he eased his fingers underneath so he could lift it free.

It came at last. For a long moment he stared at her face, his expression unreadable. Was he disappointed that she was not more beautiful? Relieved she had not been hiding some disfiguring scar?

"So you're my fantasies. I love you." He kissed her on the mouth, a gentle caress, a promise that hovered between them.

Tears stung her eyes, spilled over, slipped unheeded down her cheeks. She struggled to free her arms.

"Need to move? Sorry, love." He unbuckled the straps on first one wrist, then the other.

She threw her arms about his shoulders, pulling herself up to hold him as close as she could, wanting to be even closer. The same skin. The same bone. The same person. When had obsession turned to such all-encompassing love?

"Let me get your ankles." He eased himself from her embrace.

Moments later she could move her legs again. She shifted so she half sat, her legs curled under her, and reached for him. He settled beside her stroking her hair back from her face. He kissed her eyes, her forehead, her mouth, his touch so tender it brought an ache to her heart. She lay back, drawing him down and over her once more, spreading her legs to welcome him back to the one place she wanted him to remain forever.

And he kissed her. A full body kiss—that was what someone had called it. His mouth covered hers, his hands caressed her breasts and that wonderful weapon delved deep inside. She grasped his buttocks, urging him on, holding him even closer. She felt his breath catch, the quickening of his pace. Then thought fled and she focused solely on their joining, on the sensations he created, on the spiraling ecstasy that left her gasping. A cry escaped him as he exploded within her, her contractions triggering his own release.

He collapsed, a fine sheen of sweat dotting his skin, and buried his face between her breasts. She clung to him, stroking his hair, his shoulders, trailing her fingers along his spine.

Minutes passed. Let them last forever. She burrowed her face into his hair and drifted between sleep and wakefulness, cradling him, loving him. Wondering how she could ever live without him.

Knowing she had to.

Chapter Nine

Becka opened her eyes. Outside the city lights produced a kaleidoscope of neon greens and reds and blues and yellows. It was raining, she realized. Out there. In here she was warm and cozy and dry. And she had never felt happier and more miserable at the same time.

Beside her Garrett stirred, reaching for her. She slid closer, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder, inhaling the musky scent that was uniquely him.

"Mmmm." He nuzzled his face in her hair. "Want to hear something prosaic and unromantic?"

She wanted to hear anything he had to say. She would settle for just hearing him breathe, hearing his heart pound beneath her ear. "What?"

"I'm hungry."

A soft laugh broke from her. "We never ordered dinner. I'm sorry."

"I'm not complaining. But right now my stomach is. Room service?"

"What time is it?" She craned her neck to see the clock. Almost five-thirty. "Do you have to go home before going to work?"

"Came prepared this time." He threw back the covers and swung his legs from the bed.

God the man's body was beautiful. Long and lean and muscled. Pure male. And last night he had been all hers.

She stretched, the memory of his touch lingering on her body, in her mind. If only she could spend every night like this. But there would never be another one.

That sobered her, leaving a cold emptiness inside her. It growled. Okay, she was hungry too. As he disappeared toward the bathroom she reached for the phone. "What do you want?"

"You," he called back.

"I mean for breakfast."

"Eggs, ham, whole wheat toast. Nothing sugary." He leaned around the door. "I've got you for that."

"Coffee?"

"And orange juice." He vanished again.

She called in the order, doubling it, then leaned back listening to the sound of the shower running. Hot, steaming water that would flow through that thick hair, cascade over his shoulders, down his chest and stomach...and below. Oh damn, she was supposed to be weaning herself off him. Giving in like this was just weakness. But memories, she reassured herself, might help ease the long emptiness that stretched ahead.

She slipped from the bed then paused to pull a packet from the bedside table before padding across the carpet. At the door she knocked, waited a moment then let herself inside. He had vanished into the tub, behind the curtain. She set the packet on the farthest edge of the tub then knocked again, this time on the tile enclosure.

The edge of the curtain pulled back and his dripping head appeared, grinning. "Come on in, the water's fine."

"You don't mind company?"

For answer he reached out and picked her up. She barely got her feet out of the way before he swung her over the side of the tub and set her before him.

"Shampoo?" he suggested.

She grabbed the tiny bottle, poured some into her hand, then attacked his hair. Laughing he did the same, massaging the lotion into her scalp then down to the ends that hung well below her shoulders.

"You know, I'm feeling dirty all over," he told her.

She picked up the soap, built a lather, then started at his shoulders. A ritual cleansing, that was what this must be. To wash the last traces of each other from their bodies, from their minds. But nothing would ever cleanse him from her heart.

She moved slowly along his arm, all the way down to his fingers, savoring every moment. She lingered over his chest then reached around to his back. How perfect he felt, each defined muscle, each tendon. She stooped, lathering his hips, then farther, to the erection that awaited her attention.

"I should have brought something with me." He sounded rueful. Regretful.

"That's all right. I did." She groped for it.

He grinned as he ripped it open. "You think of everything. A good person to count on in an emergency." He slid it on then put his arms around her.

He lifted her and she wrapped her legs about his hips and half-sat on his clasped hands, half-supported herself against the enclosure wall. She nibbled at his ear as she clung to his shoulders. "What if we slip?"

"We make up a story for the paramedics." $\,$

"You really think we'd fool them?"

"Right now I don't care."

She gasped as he thrust deep inside her, then all she could do was cling to him as he set up an ever-increasing rhythm that throbbed through her body, through the core of her being. She buried her face against his neck, muffling her moans. Then thought faded as she gave herself over to experiencing, to sensations. To love.

The water beat against her arms where they wrapped around him, against her head where it emerged above his shoulder. And he beat against her, harder, faster, driving them both over the brink that left them convulsing, gasping, entwined.

They remained clasped together for a very long time. Then slowly, reluctantly, he set her on her feet. She caught her balance on the tiled wall behind her.

He touched her cheek. "I've got to know your name."

She caught his hand, holding it there. "Not yet."

"Why not?" Frustration screamed at her in those two words.

She hesitated. "Tomorrow night," she promised. No, not even then. Never. She would make up a name before admitting the truth.

His eyes lit. "Tomorrow night," he repeated, then nodded. "I'll hold you to it. Hell, I'll hold you to me." And he did so.

Minutes passed as they stood close, the water pouring over them. Then another sound intruded. Someone knocked at the main door.

"Damn. Room service," Becka sighed. "I'd forgotten." She scrambled out of the tub and reached for a towel.

"Let me." He took the cotton sheet from her, wrapped it around his hips and went, still dripping, into the hall.

Becka pulled the door closed behind him and went to work drying herself. She was still fluffing her hair when she heard the outer door close.

"All clear," he called.

"Just a sec." She donned panties and bra and went to join him. His discarded shirt lay across the top of the dresser. She put it on.

"Mmmm. I've never understood why a woman looks so sexy wearing a man's clothes—"

"And a man looks ridiculous wearing a woman's?" She smiled. "But there's little sexier than a man in a kilt."

His eyebrows rose. "I'll remember that."

She took a seat and for several minutes they concentrated on their meal. At last he looked up, that endearingly evil grin on his face. "After that bit with my knife last night, I wouldn't blame you if you showed up tomorrow in leather, carrying a whip. It would be only fair."

Tomorrow she would be on a plane and when she called him that night she would be in Phoenix. She would not have to look into his face, into his eyes, when she told him they would never see each other again.

And she could only pray he never found out her real name. Let him keep the memory of his Fantasy.

"Something wrong? You don't like leather?" He kept his words light but a slight frown creased his brow.

"No. Just remembering what I have to get through today. I...I'd better get going." She could not lead him on like this. If she stayed she would have to tell him the truth, which she could not face.

"It's not even seven yet," he objected.

"I forgot some papers at home." She rose, leaving most of her eggs and toast untouched. "I'm sorry."

She hurried to the closet where she had placed her overnight bag, then vanished with it into the bathroom. Hell, this was going terribly. She wanted to stay with him, gaze at him for every moment possible. She dragged off his shirt and pulled on her own, then donned her stockings before climbing into the straight navy skirt. She could put up her hair in the restroom at work. She emerged again in only minutes to find him sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting.

He stood at once. "Fantasy..."

She wrapped one arm about his neck, pulling his head down to hers. Her mouth found his and she released every ounce of her pent-up frustration and desire into that kiss. For a long moment she clung to him, knowing it was the last time, knowing she would remember it forever.

"I'll call you tomorrow night," she whispered, then fled the room before she broke down into tears.

* * * * *

Becka stood near the punch bowl, sipping from her glass. Her coworkers seemed to be having a good time. Lots of laughing, some couples even dancing to the loud music. Charlie had actually hired a caterer for *hors d'oeuvres* and desserts, which the obliging firm had supplied with a lavish hand.

The turnout was impressive too. Everyone she had worked with over the last few years. Even a few she did not actually recognize. News of a party like this got around and who would stick to dull work when a chance offered to goof off and eat free food?

Thank god the R and D people moved in a different sphere most of the time. None of them would come.

Charlie strolled over. "Thought you'd like to know. I've settled the McBride problem."

Her stomach clenched. "You've proved he's innocent." She made it a statement, willing it to be the truth.

Charlie nodded. "His supervisor. Evidence could have gone either way, so I decided to trust your judgment and laid a little trap."

Relief washed over her leaving her dizzy. Her hand trembled and the ice clinked in her glass. "Have you told him?"

"When I leave here. So you had better not say anything to him. There is still," he added pointedly, "that little matter of his fraternizing with a coworker."

"Charlie, you can't! He never knew what he was doing. And besides, I'll be gone in a couple hours. The problem won't exist anymore."

"I'll take that into consideration." He nodded to her and strolled off.

Becka closed her eyes. Surely they would not fire him, not after clearing him of the fraud. She drew a steadying breath and concentrated on that. They had cleared him. He would not face indictment, not face prison. He would be so relieved.

Someone from marketing drifted over, wished her well then drifted off again. Meghan, who had stood at her side supporting her at the beginning, had vanished some time ago. She wished she could vanish too. Go somewhere and hide and be alone. Or better, be with Garrett.

No, she had said goodbye to him that morning. To see him again would tear her apart. It was not as if she could stay if she wanted. Not with Caitlyn counting on her.

She scanned the partiers, searching for someone cheerful, harmless, undemanding. Charlie's assistant, Sue, maybe. She set off to find her only to freeze.

Garrett stood in the doorway perhaps thirty feet and twenty milling people away from her.

Oh god, not now, not in front of all these people. What was he doing here, anyway? R and D had *not* been invited.

She turned away, hiding the face she had taken such pains to keep secret from him all this time. Until last night. Why had she let him remove her mask? At least she had slicked her hair back now in its usual work-time twist rather than letting it hang loose and curling about her face. Hair made a world of difference in a person's appearance. If she kept out of his way he might not catch more than a glimpse of her, might not recognize her. Maybe she could escape the whole party, make it back to the safety of her office. She worked her way in what she hoped was an inconspicuous manner to the farthest corner of the room.

"It's you." Garrett breathed the words from just behind her. "It's really you. Fantasy." He spoke the name with care, as if tasting the syllables.

As he had tasted the rest of her...

She remained frozen for a long moment, then turned to face him. "Yes." Her tone made it an admission of guilt.

"So this is why you wouldn't tell me your name." Warmth lit his eyes and he took her arm, just below the elbow, his fingers caressing her sleeve. "Did you really think I'd care that we work for the same company? That I'd give a damn about getting fired as long as I had you?"

"Garrett..." Her chest felt as if an axe hacked her heart in half. She had to get out of here—get him out of here—before he made any more connections, before he realized she was Rebecca Carlisle. "Let's go somewhere else."

"A hotel?" he suggested. "Or a private office would do. Got one?"

Her office. With her name engraved on a plate on the door. Right.

She looked around, desperate. They might be able to find a measure of privacy in that far corner, beside a huge potted palm. Not enough for what he had in mind. Or what she wanted. To feel his hands caressing her...

She rushed into speech to stop the dangerous direction of her thoughts. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Some woman came by the planning floor and said if I didn't get up here I'd regret it."

Meghan. Only Meghan, with the best of misguided intentions, could have betrayed her so utterly.

"I guess she thought I'd like to know that damned Rebecca Carlisle is leaving. Hope she got fired," he added with a touch of venom.

Becka's chin rose. Time for the defense team to start its case, as meager as it was. "Her brother-in-law has cancer. She's going to Phoenix to help her sister get through this."

Garrett's face went blank. "Huh," he said after a moment. "I wouldn't have thought a professional attack dog would be altruistic."

"She's not a professional attack dog. She's just an accountant. And she didn't go after you out of malice!" With an effort she brought her voice under control. "She was

given a list of names, people she didn't know, as part of an internal audit. All she did was check facts. She would have spoken to you but she was ordered to have no personal contact with anyone on that list."

A corner of his mouth twitched into that beguiling, sexy smile. "I like the way your eyes blaze when you get passionate about something."

Her indignation melted into a puddle. She just stared at him, shaking her head, wishing she could tear his shirt off and run her hands over his shoulders, around his back, down to his hips and beyond.

His grin broadened. "Let's get out of here. I want to talk about you, not Rebecca Carlisle."

"Becka!" One of the guys from Accounts Receivable planted himself at her side. "Just wanted to let you know how much we're all going to miss you." He gave her shoulder a friendly pat and strolled off.

"Becka," Garrett said softly. "I like—" He broke off and his expression went rigid. "Becka. Short for Rebecca. Rebecca Carlisle."

"Garrett-"

His glare cut her off. "Of all the dirty, deceiving, filthy tricks..."

"It wasn't like that!"

"Oh you've been open and honest, have you? Sorry, I must have misinterpreted something."

"Outside," she begged. "Please. Not in front of all these people."

"I don't see the need." He turned away.

She grabbed his arm. "Come with me." To her relief he accompanied her through the crowded room. She forced smiles whenever someone spoke to her, murmured excuses that no one could possibly hear. She darted a glance toward Garrett and her stomach twisted at sight of his face as hard and cold as granite. All her reflections and justifications, which had sounded so reasonable to her, were not going to impress him in the least.

The music followed them down the corridor. Becka opened the door to the room that had been her sanctuary and labor pit these past several years. Garrett propelled her inside then slammed the door behind them. The flimsy wall shook.

"You were never going to tell me the truth, were you? You were just going to disappear. Leave me thinking you'd been run over by a truck or kidnapped and murdered."

"I gave you my word I'd call—"

"Your word doesn't seem to mean a hell of a lot."

She felt as if he had slapped her. "That's not fair."

"No, open and above board, that's you."

"I knew you'd take it this way. That's why I didn't dare tell you until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. When you're safely in Phoenix?"

This time she could not force words into her mouth. She merely nodded.

He drew a ragged breath. "I should have known you were a coward when you refused to take off that damned mask."

"Please." She reached toward him. "Let me explain."

"No need. I've had a few minutes to figure it out. The company told you not to approach me. So you did it on the sly, wearing a disguise." His fists clenched and for a long moment he said nothing. Then, "Do you fuck everyone you investigate?"

"No! You know I—"

"Spare me." He turned on his heel. "I hope you got everything you wanted from me."

"Garrett..." she began again but the door slammed behind him.

Becka collapsed into her desk chair, sick, empty.

Alone.

And she had no one to blame but herself.

Chapter Ten

The night dragged past, sleepless, lonely. Miserable. Becka sat cross-legged in her bed, cradling Sam, staring around the empty room that had been home for the last three years. Tomorrow—no, today, it was long after midnight—she would have a different home, a different city, a different life. And no Garrett, ever again.

How could she have handled everything so badly? She had everything she could possibly want and she had destroyed it. And all because she could not be open and honest about who she really was.

Even to herself.

Damn and damn and damn.

As soon as she found out his name, realized he was on that damned list, she should have told him who she was, that she had been ordered to investigate him. Or better, she should have told Charlie she could not look into that particular fraud allegation. But she had been an idiot, all because she did not want Charlie to know she had slept with a man whose name she did not even know. And then she had gone and told him anyway.

Idiot, idiot, stupid, god damned idiot!

Oh hell, she was only making herself feel worse. Better to look at it from another angle. Even if she had never worn that damned mask, even if she had told Garrett her name up front, he would still be tied to a job here in Chicago and she would still be heading to her sister in Phoenix. Nothing changed that.

Except maybe, just maybe, if she had not made such a wreck of everything, they might have met for the occasional weekend.

And would that have been enough for her? The question hung in her mind, the answer becoming distressingly clear. No, it would not. Garrett was a man who

demanded—and commanded—total commitment. And if it had not been for Caitlyn, for her own stupidity, she would have given it to him.

Sam bit her wrist, a pointed complaint that she clutched him too tightly. She loosened her grip and he resumed his purring. She smoothed his fur. She had to stop dwelling on the mess she had made of the recent past, start thinking about the future.

And that reminded her, she had forgotten to confirm her flight and print out her boarding pass. That meant she would have to take care of everything when she got to the airport in a few hours. Hours spent in hopeless longing, in burning desire that would never again be fulfilled.

At least she was about to be very busy. Keeping Sam quiet on the flight. Getting herself, the cat and her luggage from the airport out to Caitlyn's house. And dealing with her traumatized sister and the kids who only knew their daddy was not there and their mommy was upset. She would not have time to dwell on her own misery.

Until she was alone. Then she could castigate herself all over again for making such a disaster out of everything.

She must have drifted off to sleep at last because the insistent buzzing of the alarm on her cell phone brought her alert. Six-thirty a.m. Time to call for a cab, dress, pack up her overnight bag and put poor Sam in his airline-approved traveling cage. That last one should take a bit of doing.

Contrary to expectations, the cat put up only a token fight before allowing her to close him into the confining space. He set up an instant howl, though, which threatened to last all the way to Phoenix.

She took a last look around the place. Nothing remained except her bed and that would be gone before much longer. She could go.

With her carry-on bag slung over her shoulder, dragging her heavy wheeled case behind her, carrying the disgruntled Sam, she let herself into the hall, closed the door behind her for the last time then slid the key under the door of the family that would pick up the bed when they awoke. Nothing left for her to do but wait for the cab. And get Sam out of here before he disturbed the entire building.

The ride to the airport passed to the accompaniment of Sam's protests. She gave the driver a large tip for having to endure the cat's distress then loaded up and hurried inside, out of the cold. At least the animal stopped yowling once the car had stopped moving.

Two hours to go. She headed for the check-in line and tried to think of anything except Garrett, of his hands caressing her, of his mouth on hers, then moving down her throat with teasing, tasting nibbles, past her collar bone, finding the swell of her breasts. He would reach around to unfasten her bra, then with slow, deliberate movements he would unbutton her blouse, holding her gaze the whole time. Oh hell, no, he couldn't. She was wearing a T-shirt. All right, he would start at the waistband of her jeans and push the cotton up, higher, higher still. She could feel his fingers trailing along her flesh as he pushed aside the hindering lace so his thumbs and forefingers could capture her nipples. The thrill raced through her, hot and scorching between her legs. He would grasp the cotton of her shirt and pull it up even more, enough so his mouth could replace his fingers, his teeth latch onto one nipple, tugging, licking—

"The line's moved." An irritated woman's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Sorry." Becka shoved her carry-on forward with her foot then followed, dragging the heavy case and still carrying Sam. The cat remained silent, glaring at all he surveyed.

Just as well she got interrupted. Garrett would never touch her like that again. He would not even want to. She had seen to that by not telling him the truth.

She blinked rapidly to dispel the moisture that crept into her eyes and her throat ached with the emotion she swallowed. Her own fault for indulging in erotic daydreams. She kicked the carry-on with more force than necessary to move it another two feet. If only she could cancel her flight, go back to her apartment, call Garrett...

She inched forward again. If only he were here, standing behind her, forgiving her, wanting her again. He would slide his arms about her waist, drawing her tight against him so her hips massaged his groin, teased that swelling erection that would press against her with its urgency to bed itself deep inside her. If she moved in just the right way she could draw a groan from him. He would bend his head down and nuzzle her neck just below her ear. Under the cover of her coat his fingers would slide under her T-shirt then walk their way upward—

She had reached the front of the line and one of the check-in clerks waved at her. Thrusting her longings into the background of her mind she picked up the carry-on and headed to the counter.

"Ticket and ID?" the young woman asked as Becka deposited Sam on the flat surface. Becka handed over the latter and supplied her flight number. The woman punched something onto her computer, checked through the heavy bag, then collected the boarding pass that printed. "You know where the first-class lounge is?"

"Why would I need to?" Becka asked as she collected Sam.

The woman's eyebrows rose a fraction. "Most of our first-class passengers prefer to wait in there. It's quieter. More comfortable. I'm sure your cat would prefer it."

"When my cat can afford to buy himself a first-class ticket, he's welcome to it." Becka turned away.

"He – or rather you – have one." Now, the woman sounded puzzled.

Becka stopped. "There must be some mistake. I'm flying economy."

"Then someone upgraded your ticket. It's definitely first-class. Check your boarding pass."

Becka peered at it. First-class. "There's been a mistake then."

The woman smiled. "Lucky you. It happens. Not often but it does happen. Enjoy it."

"But what if the real passenger shows up?"

The woman shook her head. "You've got the boarding pass. Don't worry, you won't get bumped off the plane." She turned to the next person in the long line.

Becka made her way to the gate. First-class. Well, at least something had gone right in this whole miserable fiasco. Maybe she should take that as a hopeful sign that everything would start to get better. Ben would go into full remission, Caitlyn would be so happy she would be able to cope with the kids again and Becka could return to Chicago and try to make everything right with Garrett.

Yeah. Sure.

She had brought a book but the exploits of the angst-ridden private investigator held no appeal for her. She wanted to let Sam out of his cage and hold his purring furriness on her lap. Hell, what she wanted in her lap was Garrett's head so she could clench her fingers in his thick, waving hair while he explored between her legs with tongue and fingers.

She closed her eyes, tilting her head back, arching her hips upward as if he were really there, really touching her. A soft cry of desire welled in her throat and she bit it back. Damn, was her face a mask of erotic ecstasy? She did not dare look around, did not want to know if anyone saw the animal passion of her expression, guessed at her secret erotic thoughts.

She fumbled in her bag for the book and dragged it out. Thank god she had chosen a mystery and not a romance. Reading about someone else's incredible sex would prove too much for her right now. She studied the cover and wished she had taken a sleeping pill. Then at least her mind—or libido—might shut off for a little while. But no, she was going to sit here and obsess over Garrett McBride just as she had done for these last several months, just as she had been so desperate to prevent.

An airport employee picked up a microphone, calling her flight at last. Well, with her first-class ticket, at least she could board right away. That meant she could get Sam under cover before the bustle of people carrying luggage and finding seats in a confined area got too bad. She stood in the short line, held out her pass and proceeded down the covered corridor to where the plane waited to take her so very far from Garrett.

Sam objected to having his cage bumped as she slid it under the seat in front of her. Then there was nothing to do, only sit there and try not to remember the look of betrayal in Garrett's eyes as he realized who and what she was, the pain in her heart as he slammed from the room. Why could she not have told him the truth? She might—just might—have been able to salvage something, some scrap of affection, some hope of future meetings, if she had kept her common sense.

She leaned her head against the rest, trying to ignore the influx of other passengers. She should have brought dark glasses. That might help hide the moisture that drowned her eyes, the redness that would soon outline them.

She turned her face to the window but did not look out. Instead she looked inward, into her empty heart, into those secret places that no man had touched except Garrett. And as for the physical places he had touched...

Memory burned within her, recreating the feel of his fingertips, the strength of his hands, his deep laugh, the sound of his voice. The way he could make every one of her senses come alive as if echoing a solar flare.

Someone took the seat beside her. She ought to look around, smile a greeting, but she could not face it. Maybe later. She could feign sleep for a bit longer, until the attendants began their pre-flight spiel. No one could sleep through that.

"The lines at the airport are getting ridiculously long," remarked her seat-mate. A deep, attractive voice. Very familiar.

Her heart lurched and thudded in her chest. Slowly—afraid to discover her longings had created an auditory illusion—she raised her head and turned to stare at the man. Her mouth formed his name but no sound came out.

"Hope you don't mind the seat upgrade," Garrett said. "They were sold out in economy."

"Garrett." More a hoarse croak than anything else but it would do.

He grinned, that boyish, sexy, devilish expression that turned her into a puddle of lust. "Thought you might like company on the flight."

"But—" She shook her head.

His grin slipped awry. "Charlie came down to the planning floor for a little chat. He's rather fond of you, did you know?"

She nodded, mute.

"We came to an agreement."

"What?" she demanded when he said nothing more.

"If I would forgive you for being a coward and not telling the truth, he would terminate my contract for violating the non-fraternization clause—"

"No!" she gasped. "Damn it, how could he! I told him it wasn't your fault!"

"With no waiting period for my starting my own company," he went on, ignoring her interruption. "He also gave me the name of a venture capitalist. I called the guy this morning and he sounded really interested in funding my new company."

His dream. He was getting to follow his dream. "But...your family. Your apartment. Your life."

"The ranch is safe. Vic's schooling is safe. I called my brother right after I got done with the venture capitalist and he said to go for it. He's not worried." His lips twitched. "Caution just gets to be a habit, I guess. Like not wanting anyone to know who you are when you try something daring and new."

Her cheeks burned and she looked down. "I'm so sorry. I can't tell you how awful I've felt."

He tilted his head to peer at her face. "I'll bet prim little Rebecca Carlisle got the shock of her life when she unleashed Fantasy."

A shaky sigh escaped her. "You have no idea."

He smiled. "As for my apartment, my former roommate is taking over the lease. He's decided he can make a go of it in Chicago. And as for my life... Well, when you're self-employed you can set up headquarters anywhere you want. And I have a rather good reason for wanting that to be in Phoenix."

"You mean that?" But he must. He was here. With her. He would not be if he had not forgiven her. She reached out, her hand trembling, to touch his cheek. The familiar flame shot through her, one that only he could extinguish. But his hose—damn, what an awful metaphor but so apt—was inaccessible in public.

She dragged her gaze from his crotch, up the shirt that covered that wonderfully muscular chest to the hair that showed above the unfastened top button. She touched the tip of her tongue to her lips, wanting to explore the hollow at the base of his throat. Wanting to explore every inch of him. "You're sure?"

"I've organized my life around my family's needs for as long as I can remember. They're fine, now. It's time to create the life I want. And that," he added as he slid his arm around her shoulders and drew her close, "includes you. With your permission, of course."

"I—" she began but a feline yowl broke across her words. "I think we'll both need Sam's permission."

He grinned. "A ready-made family, I see. Do I have to go through a formal adoption process or does he just let me move in with you two?"

"Just move in."

That devilish, sexy look crept back into his eyes. "As soon as the 'fasten seat belt' light goes out, you and I are taking a little trip to the restroom."

"But what about Sam?"

"Or would you rather I put you on my lap right here, in front of everyone?"

"I think," she murmured against the mouth that sought hers, "they'd better get this plane off the ground real fast."

"Well, until they do..." Garrett stood, rummaged in the luggage compartment over her head and emerged with his coat. He draped this over her like a blanket then resumed his seat and gathered her close. "Yes, much better," he murmured as his hand slid beneath the covering.

"Do you really think—" she began but his thumb stroked her breast and everything else faded into insignificance.

About the Author

Elyssa Lynne firmly believes that life ought to be one long fantasy—and the more fantastic, the better. She loves the quirky, the magical, the romantic—and the tyrannical furry beasties who dominate her home. She is also firmly convinced that her computer runs on chocolate chips instead of silicon chips.

Under her own name she has written numerous books and won several awards, but she has only just discovered the delights of writing for Ellora's Cave. She feels she has embarked on a joyful new adventure, not only in her fiction but also in reality.

Elyssa welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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