



Haunted Dreams

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Haunted Dreams

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Haunted Dreams

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Dedication

To Julie and Sarah—the best cheerleaders a girl could have!

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Chapter One

Santa Augustina, California.
1886

"We'll be together again someday. I'll find you, I promise." She rested her hand against his cheek, the prickle of stubble rubbing against her palm. A shiver went up her spine as the fierce wind rattled the windows of her bedroom. Tree branches swayed and scratched against the glass.

He closed his eyes for a moment, nuzzled his face in her hand.
"How? We're going to die, Katherine. He will be here soon and when he finds us..."

Katherine leaned in close, pressed her mouth against his, not wanting to hear what he had to say. They were trapped, she knew it, knew what was about to happen, what was destined to happen, but she couldn't think about it. Not when her father was ultimately responsible.

"We shall be together again. In heaven, or possibly in another time. Somehow, somewhere, our souls will meet and we'll know, without having to say a word. With just a glance, or a touch, or a scent. We'll know, and we'll be together, this time until we grow old and make lots of children and grandchildren." Her hands cupped his cheeks, she stared deep into his amber eyes. "I believe that, Hadden. Do you? You must believe or it will not happen."

Hadden nodded, kissed her again. Flinched when he heard the front door slam open downstairs. "I believe for you, Katherine."

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"You need to believe for us." She kept her eyes locked with his, knowing he couldn't resist their pale blue color. Especially when she spoke of something so important.

A horse neighing sounded in the distance, loud enough to be heard through the closed window, and Katherine leapt into his arms, pressing close against his body.

"I believe for us. I promise." His lips rained gentle kisses across her forehead, his muscular arms trembling as he held her.

Heavy footfalls came up the stairs, and they looked at each other. Hadden's brow crinkled with worry. "He's here. Your father wasn't lying."

"We should've tried to get away, run away together."

Hadden shook his head. "Why? They would've found us, tried to stop us. They'll always try to stop us."

Katherine stood, began to pace. "I won't marry him, Hadden. I cannot marry Edgar. I would rather die than be married to him, unable to be with you." She shook her fists. "It's not fair! Why does my father care so much who I marry? Wouldn't he rather see me happy?"

Hadden stood and grabbed Katherine by the shoulders. "He thinks this will make you happy. He's only doing what he believes is best for you."

The doorknob rattled. "Open up, Katherine! Let me in!"

Her eyes met Hadden's, tears blurring her vision. "It's Edgar. Where's my father? Why wouldn't he come up with him?"

"Maybe he is with Edgar." Hadden glanced toward the windows. "Should we try to escape?"

"I don't know." Katherine could actually see the door rattle against the hinges as Edgar threw himself at it, could practically make out Edgar's shoulder as it thrust against the door again and again. She was sure, with enough force, the wood would soon splinter open.

"We need to talk to your father, Katherine. Have him call off Edgar. Your father is a rational man; I believe he would listen to us. Edgar, I'm not so sure of." She could hear the tremor in his voice, his eyes reflecting his fear. He was trying to be strong but deep down, Katherine knew Hadden was afraid.

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His fear only fueled her, made her stronger. They were facing certain death at the hands of a man she despised with all of her being. The man her father chose for her to marry. A man who undoubtedly planned her and Hadden's destruction the moment he caught them together.

Katherine realized she wasn't afraid anymore, even as she heard the door start to break apart. She could only accept their fate, knowing they would meet again someday. And the next time she and Hadden met, it would be forever.

* * * * *

Santa Augustina, California.
Present day.

The touch was feather light, almost tentative, but she needed more, craved more, to get her where she wanted to be. With a little more pressure and a flick of the wrist, back and forth, the rhythm grew more insistent, and she threw her head back against the pillows, closing her eyes as she felt warmth spread from her belly to course through her entire body.

She could imagine his handsome face, the rich brown hair, the dark amber eyes staring at her, watching her as she writhed on the bed. Could almost feel his fingers touching her, sliding inside of her, rubbing against her most sensitive place to help bring her release.

She turned her head to the side and bit down hard on her bottom lip, the tension mounting inside of her but not quite there—yet. The touch became faster, fingers fumbling in their eagerness to bring her to that magical point. And then it happened. The wave washed over her, crashing again and again, causing her to gasp and moan in delight, in ecstasy, in passion.

Her body slumped in relief against the mattress, her bones feeling as if they'd turned to liquid. She threw a wrist over her closed eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and expelled it slowly. And felt something nudge against her big toe.

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Kara opened her eyes and looked down to see Madge, her dark gray cat, blinking up at her with those gold, all-seeing eyes.

Kara sniffed and glared back at her. "What?" Kara murmured, as Madge rubbed her cheek against Kara's toe, her whiskers tickling. "You've never seen a woman masturbate before?" Nothing like another session with her dream lover floating through her thoughts. Why he always managed to appear when she touched herself, she wasn't quite sure. He also frequented her dreams—a man she'd never even seen before, let alone knew. It felt like she knew him, though. Knew every intimate part of him, knew his thoughts and his hopes. He was so tall, dark, and thrillingly handsome she could feel a shiver creep up her spine. Turned on over an imaginary man—she was becoming downright pitiful, if she did say so herself.

The phone started to ring, its shrill musical tune she'd found so charming when she selected it a few months ago now grated on her nerves every time she heard it. Glancing at the caller ID screen, she picked it up without hesitation. "Yo."

"Kara? Are you all right?"

She rolled her eyes and yanked her panties back up with one hand. "I'm fine, Tina. What's going on?"

"You sound out of breath. Did you just run or something?" Kara's older sister always acted like a mother, always concerned, always checking to see if she ate her vegetables, making sure she went to bed early. It was kind of ridiculous.

"Actually, I just finished up a nice little round of self-love, so I'm breathless because I had *the* most spectacular orgasm. Thanks for asking," she said, knowing full well her sister would never believe her, even if she did speak the truth. Ever since her dream lover appeared, she'd been experiencing the most intense orgasms of her life. All while in her sleep. Made her wonder about her previous choice in men.

"Oh, my gosh. You just say that stuff to shock me. So, what are you really doing? Getting ready, I hope."

Kara pulled the comforter over her and snuggled into the pillow. "Getting ready for what? I figured you'd be thrilled to know I'm in bed

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already, instead of working." She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. "Only eight o'clock on a Saturday night. Rather unbelievable for me, don't you think?"

Dead silence was Kara's answer, and she realized she could detect the sound of voices murmuring and glasses clinking in the background.

"Tina? Are you with me?"

"You forgot, didn't you?" Tina's voice was tight. Unforgiving-tight.

"Forgot what?"

"Kara!" She could hear Tina inhale deeply, and then that fake pleasant voice of hers started talking. "I'm at the Halloween costume ball right now, waiting for you. We're all waiting for you, and we're about to be served dinner. You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"Oh, my God." Kara slapped her hand against her forehead. "I totally forgot!"

"I know you totally forgot. You'd better get your butt down here, pronto, before the auction and raffle starts. The least you could do is witness that. I've only been organizing this event for the past six months of my life."

"But it's so late. There's no way I can make it there in time," Kara whined. She'd really meant to go to the charity ball/auction her sister chaired, really she did. She knew how much it meant to Tina, and it sounded kind of fun. Halloween was her favorite holiday, even above Christmas. Though, this ball wasn't *on* Halloween, but the Saturday before the actual holiday. But she'd spent the entire day shopping with a girlfriend she hadn't seen in years, and then once she got home, she'd had a glass of wine, relaxed a little too much.... Time simply got away from her.

"You're coming to the party whether you like it or not. I know you have a costume to wear, and I know you can get ready in ten minutes flat. Your apartment is only fifteen minutes from the convention center. Just make it by nine—that's when all the fun starts."

Kara heard the sharp click and pulled the phone away from her ear, staring at it as the dial tone buzzed insistently. She threw the phone onto the nightstand and sighed long and loud. So loud even Madge glanced up

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from her sleepy pose to stare at her. "Guess I'm going to a Halloween party. Wait till Tina gets a load of my costume," she told Madge as she stood up and went to the closet.

* * * * *

"Oh, my God. I think I'm in love."

"What, isn't this like the fifth time you've declared your love tonight? I know the place is swarming with beautiful women in outrageous costumes, but that doesn't mean you have to fall in love with every single one of them."

Hayden shook his head, his gaze never leaving the vision that had appeared in the doorway only moments ago. If he'd been in the hospital and a nurse came to his aid dressed like her, he'd have a heart attack and die for sure. But at least he'd die happy. "She's gorgeous."

"They're all gorgeous. I can't make up my mind which one to make a play for first," Tad said.

Hayden's eyes never left the dark-haired woman as she walked across the floor, grabbed a glass of champagne off of a waiter's tray, and laughed at something someone said. Even across the room he could hear her laughter, the sound of it sending an electric current straight to his heart. Something that normally wasn't involved in situations like this. "I've made up my mind. I want the nurse."

"Which nurse? There are about a bazillion nurses here tonight."

Hayden inclined his head toward her. *His* nurse. "That one. She's mine."

Tad chuckled, the sound disappearing when he looked at Hayden, obviously noticing his serious expression. "What's wrong with you, dude? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

More like a vision of beauty the likes of which he'd never seen before. And he couldn't believe that sentence just popped into his mind. He shook his head, as if to shake the thought. Yeah, she was hot. Sexy as hell in that nurse's costume. He could just imagine running his hands up her legs, over the sheer white thigh high stockings that covered them.

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"Nothing's wrong with me," Hayden finally said, wanting to reassure his friend. And himself. "She's just really beautiful."

Tad shrugged. "Yeah, if you like brunettes, which you normally don't."

"I can always make an exception to the rule."

"True. So yeah, she's all right. If you like them short and busty with a nice curvy ass," Tad said with a smile.

Hayden was suddenly tempted to punch his friend square in the face, preferably his mouth so he would shut up. He didn't even know why, but he did *not* appreciate Tad talking about her in such a shitty way. It was rude, disrespectful, and he should tell his friend to shut the hell up. Let him know he needed to clean up his mouth and thoughts or else he could...

He shook his head. What the hell was *wrong* with him? One of their favorite pastimes was to watch hot women and make crude comments about them. Hook up with hot women and share the gory details afterwards. Even pursue the same woman to see which one scored first. They were dogs and they knew it. Hell, half the time they reveled in it.

So why all of the flowery, gag me feelings now? Freaky.

"Bet you twenty bucks I can get in her skirt first," Tad said. The normal cue for Hayden to shake his hand and agree all bets were on.

"Fuck you. She's mine," Hayden said instead, his gaze still never leaving her. She had a beautiful smile. Full lips, straight white teeth. He wondered what it would feel like to have that smile directed right at him. Probably like a dagger straight to his heart.

There went that heart business again. What the *hell* was going on?

Tad took a step back, held his hands in front of him. "Simmer down, my friend. I won't try and take what you've obviously claimed as yours."

"Thanks." Hayden continued to watch her, willing her to walk toward him, come close to him so he could see if she really was as beautiful as he thought. He wanted to see her up close, stare into her eyes, wondered if he would see any type of emotion swirling in their depths—for him. Wasn't sure what he would do if he did.

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As if she could read his mind, she started toward them, her hips sashaying in the red and white nurse's uniform. The short skirt revealed a long expanse of shapely legs, feet encased in red stiletto heels. Her dark auburn hair wrapped around the little satin nurse's hat that sat upon the top of her head. A tantalizing view of cleavage exposed invitingly above the low cut neckline of her uniform. Hayden's mouth watered at the sight of her.

"Hello."

One simple word. The most universal word ever said, really, yet Hayden realized at that moment he'd never heard anything sweeter. He reveled in the sound of her voice, wondering why it called to him. As if he'd heard it before. Heard it say his name on a gasp as he pushed himself deep into her body.

Her eyes met his, blinking. Her candy apple red lips parting, confusion suddenly clouding her expression. "Have we met before?"

He shook his head, realized he hadn't said anything, and stood a little straighter. "I think I would remember if I'd met you."

Her pale blue eyes clouded even more. "You seem so familiar to me..."

Hayden stuck his hand out, wanting to do more than shake her hand but figured he had to start somewhere, do anything to touch her.

"Hayden Roberts."

She placed her delicate hand in his, her fingers curling around his fingers, the electric current from her touch sending a jolt throughout his entire body. "Kara."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Just Kara?"

She nodded, a sexy smile on her face. "For now."

Hmm. Mysterious. Made him want to get to know her even more. "Are you here with someone?"

Her eyes widened. He wondered if he'd been too bold for asking.

"Maybe."

Hayden chuckled. "Trying to keep me guessing?"

"Possibly."

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A woman in a witch's costume stepped onto the stage, and Kara turned to watch her. She then glanced back at him. "I have to go."

"Why?" Could he sound any more desperate? Why not throw himself at her feet and be done with it? He was half tempted to do so.

She nodded toward the stairs. "That's my sister up there. She'll want my support when she announces the winners of the big raffle. She's nervous about speaking in front of the crowd."

"I'll come with you," he started, but she shook her head.

"I'll find you, I promise."

The second the words left her lips he knew, without a doubt, he'd met her before. He just couldn't figure out when or where. But he wanted to take the time to figure it out—with her. "You'd better go show your sister your support then. I'm sure she'll need it."

Kara smiled again, licked her shiny red-glossed lips, then leaned in and brushed the briefest kiss to his cheek. "It was nice meeting you, Hayden."

He inhaled her sweet sexy scent when she kissed his cheek, and his cock instantly hardened. It pressed against the fly of his jeans and he winced, wishing those luscious lips were somewhere else on his body. "Nice meeting you too, Kara."

* * * * *

"It has started. They've met."

"Who are you speaking of?"

Katherine rolled her eyes, wishing as always that they were mortal again so she could slap him for being so dense. And then touch him tenderly for being so handsome. "You know exactly who I'm speaking of. Us."

"How can we meet again if we are together right now?" Hadden asked.

She watched him, saw those devil may care dimples and smile, and longed to touch his face. It was a fate worse than hell to be stuck in this middle ground, waiting for their souls to meet once again. So many chances on earth missed. And they were soon to lose their place to be together in the afterlife. No, if their rekindled souls could not come together, they would be banished to the in-between

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world where they would have to watch their reincarnated souls try to meet again and again for all eternity. With this chance—their last chance—they must succeed.

And once they succeeded, she and Hadden could move on to the afterlife, where they could be together, be able to touch each other, love each other, forever. None of this drifting shadows torture any longer. What sweet relief it will bring her, and surely Hadden, when they could actually be together again. Completely.

“You know what I talk of, Hadden. Our souls, our reincarnated selves, have finally met again. Briefly, but they feel it. I can tell.” She smiled, the joy welling up inside of her. “It is going to happen this time, I know it.”

Hadden scowled. “Don’t get your hopes up, Katherine Hildegard. You know what happens every time you do.”

Now she really longed to hit him. She despised it when he called her by her full name. “Hadden Christopher Robertson, you know I cannot stand it when you call me by my full name. And do not tell me how I should or should not feel. I must encourage and sway this coming together as much as possible. This is our last chance, and I have a feeling this is going to be it!”

“I hope so, for your sake.” Skepticism laced his voice.

“You must hope so for our sake. How many times must I tell you that you have to believe? And not just for me, but for us?”

“I believe for us, Katherine.” His handsome face was serious, solemn. She longed to kiss him, wrap her arms around him and hold him close. For him to strip her of her clothing and make sweet love to her like he used to when they had been so alive, but never really free to express their feelings for each other. It had always been in secret, sneaking around, not letting anyone close to them know they were in love. It had been wonderful, it had been magical, and it had brought about the tragic end to their lives.

Just one more chance, Katherine thought with a wistful smile. Please let us meet so we can be together again, both for Hadden and me, and for our future souls. Our legacy. Our love needs to live on.

She could only hope these two would be free. Free to love and free to give.

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Chapter Two

If she could imagine anyone to be her dream lover, it would be *him*. The man she'd just met. Hayden Roberts. At first she didn't realize it, couldn't place him. Kara had been sure she'd met him before, but when he said no, she'd only become confused.

And then he'd touched her, his big warm hand encircling hers, his long fingers grasping her hand, holding it gently. The heat from his touch, the pure shock as his flesh connected with hers, startled her. Caused her to realize her made up fantasy man stood before her, amber-colored eyes boring into hers, and he was very, very real. It shook her to the core of her being, her heart pounding in her chest so hard she'd been afraid it would leap out of her body.

More than anything, it scared the hell out of her. And also made her want this man more than anything she'd ever wanted before.

She had no idea why she'd been so elusive with him. Didn't quite understand why she promised him she would find him again. The words had slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them. And heaven knew what possessed her to kiss him on the cheek, but she did so without even a second thought. As if someone else had invaded her body and caused her to do it. The mere brushing of her lips on his face had pushed her nearly to her breaking point. He tasted so good, felt so good, smelled so good—too good to be true.

Tina was up on stage, her voice still shaking with nerves while she announced one name after another as her little assistant, dressed up as

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Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz, kept drawing raffle tickets from a large box. It had been going on for at least ten minutes, enough time for Kara to become lost in her thoughts of her dream lover coming to life, wondering if she should go seek him out again. Knowing she was going to do so, even if she wanted to or not. The draw toward him couldn't be helped.

"All right everyone, it's time for the final drawing. The chance to win an all expenses paid six-day, five-night vacation for two at a gorgeous resort in Mexico. With this drawing, though, there's a twist. One I can't announce until I call the names of the six people we're going to draw right now." Tina watched expectantly as Dorothy swirled her hand in the box of red raffle tickets.

Would this ever end? Kara wondered as a waiter walked by with yet more full glasses of champagne. She plucked one off the tray as he passed, and sipped from her glass of bubbly.

"Oh, my gosh, this is so exciting, it's my sister! Kara Piersen, please come up on the stage." Tina jumped up and down, her pointy witch's hat almost falling off of her head.

Cool. A vacation to Mexico sounded pretty good right now, what with all of the hours at the hospital she'd been putting in. Even though she had no one to take with her. She walked up the stairs and onto the stage, waving at everyone as they clapped for her. Probably appreciating her skimpy costume, she mused as she stood next to her sister, who enveloped her into a big witch's hug, the tattered ends of Tina's sleeves fluttering all around her.

"This wasn't rigged, everyone, I swear. Okay, let's draw another name!"

Four more excited and costumed people came onto the stage to form a line next to Kara, all of them looking at each other expectantly, no doubt wondering what the twist was. Tina appeared ready to burst with excitement, the smile on her face so wide Kara was afraid it would split in two.

And then Tina called the last name.

"Mr. Hayden Roberts, you're our final winner for the chance to win an all expenses paid vacation to Mexico! Come on up here, Hayden."

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Kara watched as her dream man sauntered through the crowd, his sure strides confident as he walked up the stairs and onto the stage. He acted as if he didn't have a care in the world. He hadn't even come to the party in a costume. Made him seem like a bit of a rebel, which Kara could only appreciate. His warm gaze met hers and held as he walked across the stage to stand at the end of the line.

"Why aren't you in costume tonight, Mr. Roberts?" Tina asked, teasing him.

He shrugged, a dazzling smile crossing his face. Aimed directly at Kara. It made her knees wobble. "My friend who dragged me to the party forgot to mention it required a costume."

"Well, lucky for you they let you in the front door."

Oh, my gosh, her sister was actually flirting with him. Jealousy flared hot and hard in Kara's gut. As if she had some sort of claim on him. At least in her fantasies she did.

"All right, everyone. Anxious to hear what you'll have to do in order to win the trip to Mexico?" Tina asked.

The six people lined up all nodded their heads eagerly.

"The powers that be decided we couldn't just *give* away this awesome trip, which happens to be the most fabulous prize we've ever offered. No, they decided that the six of you would have to *earn* your way for the chance to win this vacation.

"Now, you're allowed to back out at any time before the event we've planned actually begins, so let me inform you of that right now. But if you're a thrill seeker, then this is the perfect opportunity for you. Are all of you familiar with the Polanski House?"

Dread filled Kara's stomach like a clenching fist, quickly replacing the jealousy. Everyone knew the Polanski House. It was one of the most popular landmarks in all of Santa Augustina.

"For those of you who don't know, let me share a brief history behind the legend. Katherine Polanski was the only daughter of Polish immigrants who came here for a new chance at life back in the late 1800s. Her father was a very wealthy, successful businessman here in town, establishing many businesses and buildings that are still around today.

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His daughter Katherine was a beautiful, spirited, willful woman and a force to be reckoned with. He arranged a marriage for her in order to tame her, a man from Germany who had come to town only months before, but Katherine was against it from the start.

"No one knew, but she had already fallen in love, had promised her heart to another. Hadden Robertson, a handsome young man who worked for her father. They met secretly and were ready to announce their love to the world, but when Katherine requested that her father call off the engagement to the other man, he refused. And then that man happened to find Katherine in bed with Hadden." Tina shook her head. "He promised the two of them he would seek revenge for humiliating him, that they would rue the day they crossed him. And he did. He murdered them both in her parents' home, in her bedroom, on October 31st."

Collective gasps filled the room, lots of murmurs of *oh no*, and shaking heads, as if they'd never heard the story before. Which most of them had to have heard if they lived in Santa Augustina for some time—it was *the* town legend. Kara had heard it countless times since she'd lived her entire life in the small town. Yet, every time she heard it, she still got chills.

"Katherine's parents left the house, left California, to go back home to Poland, so overcome with grief they couldn't stand to be in the very house where their only child was murdered. A few families moved into the home after that, tried to establish a good life for themselves, but all of them reported strange happenings, things moving when no one was around, weird noises in the night.

"They say the house is haunted by the restless spirits of Katherine and Hadden, two lost souls seeking, but never able to find, each other. So, in honor of Halloween, and in remembrance of the 120th anniversary of the death of Katherine Polanski and Hadden Robertson, we've set it up for the six of you to spend the night at the Polanski House. All night. If you dare."

The entire audience started going crazy with lots of loud clapping and cheering. Kara gulped, never having been comfortable with the

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thought of ghosts and creatures going bump in the night. She glanced over at Hayden, caught him watching her with a slight smile on his face, and realized everything was going to be okay.

And she also knew, without a doubt, she was somehow going to end up naked with this man before the month of October was finished.

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Chapter Three

"Touch me," she whispered.

He did as she asked, his fingers caressing her full breasts, moving down to skim over the skin of her soft belly. She sucked in a breath at his touch, her entire body trembling as he glanced up to meet her gaze.

"I never want to stop touching you." His fingers dipped lower, to the tumble of russet curls that hid the heated center of her body. He trailed them up and down her slit, spreading her wider with each passing. "Don't ever forget that you are mine. No one else's."

She shook her head, whimpering as his fingers went deeper. She would never tire of him touching her there, making her body flush with desire, making her yearn for release. No one had ever made her feel so good before. So alive. "Who else's would I be?"

"The man your father brought to be your groom." His fingers continued to tease her damp flesh, his gaze still locked with hers, anger flaring in their depths. "No one will ever touch you like this, Katherine. Only me."

"Only you." She closed her eyes against the intensity of his gaze, lost in the sensation of his fingers moving over her, one long finger slipping inside of her. She moaned at his entry, marveling yet again at how wonderful he made her feel. Decadent. Sinful. Cherished.

Loved.

The pace increased, a second finger joining the first as he continued to move in and out of her, mimicking what was sure to happen between their bodies in moments. "Say you love me, Katherine."

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She clenched around his fingers, the familiar wave of ecstasy about to plunge her over the edge, and she murmured on a shuddering breath, "I love you, Hadden."

She would love him forever.

* * * * *

"Do you have everything packed?"

Kara glanced up at her sister who was perched on the edge of her bed. "I'm only allowed whatever I can shove into this tiny bag you gave all of us. Of course I'm packed. I can hardly bring anything."

Tina clapped her hands together, her eyes shining with excitement. "This is so cool. I wish I could stay the night at the Polanski House. There's nothing better than being scared."

"You're a complete freak, you know that? There's nothing worse than being scared shitless and all alone," Kara said, throwing a tube of lip balm into the tiny bag.

"You're not alone. You'll have five other people with you. Including that really good looking guy who couldn't stop staring at you all night."

Kara rolled her eyes, feigning indifference. She couldn't get Hayden off her mind. He'd been all she could think about for the last three days. "He did not stare at me all night. And anyway, he probably has a girlfriend."

Tina shook her head. "He doesn't. I asked."

"You asked?" There it was again, the classic symptoms of jealousy eating at her insides. If Tina so much as made a move on him, she swore she'd pull all her sister's hair out by the roots.

"Of course. I wanted to know if the guy who was so interested in my little sister was taken." Tina raised her eyebrows at her, her lips pursed. "And he's not."

Kara already knew that, even though he hadn't told her so. She'd sensed it. Just like she'd sensed everything else about Hayden. "He's not interested in me, and I'm not going to cozy up to him just because I'm

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scared to be in that house.” *Liar*. Well, she could take that back. She wasn’t going to cozy up to him because she was scared. No, she was going to cozy up to him because she wanted to know what it would feel like to have that big body of his wrapped around hers. Naked.

Kara wondered if it would be presumptuous of her to toss in a couple of condom packets just in case. Better to be safe than sorry.

“Whatever. Keep telling yourself that.”

“Now what I want you to tell me is what’s going to happen if all six of us make it through the night at the Polanski House? Did your committee ever think of that?” Kara asked.

“Of course we did. And we already figured the majority of you are not going to make it. I shouldn’t even be telling you this, but be prepared. We have a few things planned that’ll probably scare the bejesus out of you.”

Kara rolled her eyes. “Great. That’s real comforting.”

“Listen, if you have Tall, Dark and Handsome take care of you, you’ll be set. Don’t worry.”

“Yes, that makes me feel so much better.”

Tina waved a hand at Kara as if to dismiss her. “Whatever. Anyway, whoever’s left, those names will be put into a hat and we’ll draw one winner. Those remaining will get some pretty kick ass consolation prizes. This is a huge deal for the town, you know. Local television stations will be there, and I heard even one from San Francisco is interested. A radio station has a booth set up in front of the house, and they’ll be broadcasting live all night. It’s going to be pretty crazy.”

“I still can’t believe I’m doing this.” Kara shook her head. She couldn’t. Ghosts freaked her out. The Polanski House freaked her out more than normal, for some reason she couldn’t quite figure out. And to spend the night in a haunted mansion without any power, nothing but the clothes on her back and the few items in her bag? She must be crazy. Then again, it could also be fun—and certainly a challenge.

Especially spending the night in a haunted mansion with Hayden by her side.

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* * * * *

Kara felt him before she actually saw him. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled, her entire body tightening in anticipation. She heard him come up behind her, his warm musky scent wrapping around her like a blanket as he touched her shoulder.

"You made it."

She turned around, drawing in a breath as she drank him in. How could she have forgotten how handsome he was? The rich brown hair, those dark eyes looking straight into her, the firm set of his jaw. Clad in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, he looked rugged, masculine. Gorgeous. Late October brought pleasant days and extra cool nights to Santa Augustina, so everyone dressed accordingly. Kara wore her favorite black velour sweat suit with a snug tank top underneath and, worried she might not be warm enough, also brought a thin blanket. She didn't want to risk being cold on top of being creeped out in a decrepit and damp haunted house. Alone and in the dark.

Well, she had a feeling she wasn't going to be alone. Not with the way Hayden watched her so carefully.

Realizing she hadn't spoken yet, she smiled and threw her ponytail over her shoulder. "Nice to see you again." *What an understatement.*

He smiled as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. "Always nice to see you, Ms. Piersen."

All six candidates for the Mexican vacation were gathered in the sitting parlor of the Polanski House. Battery-operated lanterns were scattered throughout the room to throw enough haphazard light so everyone could see. By the brick fireplace a man and a woman, both dressed in black, stood murmuring to each other as they cast glances at the six people waiting patiently.

Three women and three men were staying the night. One of the men appeared around the same age as Hayden, though with more bulk. The other one was older and creepy looking. Every time he glanced Kara's way, too often for her taste, a shiver slithered up her spine—not the good kind of shiver, either. The two other women competing reminded Kara of

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sweet grandmothers, and both of them looked scared out of their wits. They'd be lucky to make it past midnight.

Which would narrow the pool down to four.

Kara had always had a competitive spirit, something she'd forgotten since she'd been out of school. Though she'd been thoroughly freaked out at the thought of spending Halloween night in the mansion, the minute she walked into the house, a sense of calm came over her. As if she knew everything was going to be all right. Made her realize she might have a good chance at winning the trip.

Also made her wonder if Hayden Roberts had a competitive nature, too.

"Ready to get spooked and run out of here with your tail between your legs before the morning dawns?" Kara teased.

He looked shocked by her question, then began to laugh. A very nice laugh, she thought as the sound of it zapped straight to her toes. "I have no intention of leaving this house before morning dawns, Kara. Sorry to disappoint you."

She pouted. "Well, someone has to give because I don't plan on *you* winning the trip to Mexico."

"Are you saying you want to win?"

Kara raised a brow. "Of course I want to win. The more I think about it, the more I wouldn't mind getting away from my job and the dreary winter weather to relax on a sandy beach in Mexico."

"There's nothing I would like more, either. Besides maybe taking a beautiful woman with me on the trip." His lips twisted into a wicked smile. "Maybe I could take *you*."

"And let you win? Nuh-uh." She shook her head. "I want to earn this trip fair and square."

"Not even if I promise I'll take you with me?"

"Definitely not if you promise you'll take me with you. I don't need your pity vacation. I'm ready to win on my own." She smiled, the competitive streak inside of her growing wider by the minute.

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Something definitely flared in his eyes at her statement. Interest. Desire. As if he'd like nothing more than to take her on in more ways than one. Kara knew she was definitely up for the challenge.

She stood there wanting to verbally spar about competitiveness and Mexican vacations, and all Hayden could think about was how to get her alone so he could pull her into his arms.

He'd had the strangest dream last night. Filtered visions of the two of them naked on a bed with an old black iron frame headboard. Chunky white candles burned on various tabletops, casting a golden glow on her bare skin as he touched her. Memorized her texture. Sampled her taste. She'd been so responsive, falling apart in his arms before he plunged himself deep inside her, causing him to experience the most amazing orgasm of his life.

He'd awakened, his hand jerking his dick until he came with a groan. Disappointed that it hadn't been real. Amazed at how intense the experience had been. He'd just jerked off in his sleep, and he'd never felt more satisfied.

Not quite true, he realized as he watched her come to attention when the two stooges in black began to talk. He'd be a lot more satisfied if he could get this woman into bed. Naked. Willing. Begging him to take her. His cock grew hard at the thought and he plunged his hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt, yanking down so his shirt covered the front of his jeans. Didn't want to scare the others in the room with his raging hard-on, he thought with a wry grin.

"...So, in ten minutes we will be exiting the house, locking all of you inside, and leaving each of you with one lantern. We will be monitoring you for the entire night, in conjunction with our local radio station, The Mix." The woman smiled at all of them, her teeth eerily white in the semi-darkness. "If any of you, for any reason, want or need to exit the Polanski house tonight, please do not hesitate to hit any of the numerous buzzers placed throughout the house for this event. We will direct you to the nearest exit and allow you to leave the house, though you will be disqualified from the contest. Any questions?"

A large man raised a beefy hand. "Any snacks provided?"

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The entire room erupted in polite laughter, and the woman shook her head, a patient smile on her face. "I'm sorry, but no. You could've brought your own snacks, though, in the bag we allowed in with you. Just no littering, please. We have waste baskets throughout the house to dispose of your trash."

Hayden rolled his eyes. The woman spoke so proper, he wondered how big the stick up her ass was. She even moved stiffly. He glanced about the room, catching the eye of a thin-faced older man who glared at him, his dark eyes burning with anger. Hayden cocked an eyebrow at him, wondering what the hell his problem was, but the man only looked away, his expression still full of rage. Fucking weird.

Why couldn't they just get on with it and let these two drones leave? It was nearly eleven o'clock, the official start time of the contest, and when midnight struck it would be Halloween. He was ready to get the night going.

And he had to admit, he was ready to sneak off into a dark corner and see exactly what Kara had on underneath the outfit she wore. The fabric looked soft and clung to her body in all the right places, showing off her curves. Very nice curves, he thought as he cast an appreciative glance up and down her body while she wasn't looking. Hard to believe he could find a pair of sweat pants and a matching hoodie sexy, but he had a feeling a potato sack would look sexy on this woman.

He realized then, he was probably in deep trouble.

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Chapter Four

"She's in my room."

Hadden smiled. "No. Really?"

Katherine nodded, a pleased smile on her face. "I wonder if she felt my spirit? I tried to wrap myself around her, guide her as she went up the stairs, but it was as if she didn't even notice me."

"Because you two are one in the same, my love. Of course she wouldn't notice you—she is you."

"Not really. We may share a similar soul, but we are not exactly alike." Her smile grew, appeared quite wicked, even. "He is following her. He is about to go into the room after her. It is going to happen tonight, I sense it. No, I know it."

Hadden shook his head and frowned. "Only because you shall force them, just as you have done in the past. You must be careful with that, Katherine. Look where it has gotten you."

She scowled at him, then turned to watch the two potential lovers begin to talk in her room. "I am not forcing anything this time. Just trying to...gently influence, if you will."

"Watch yourself, my love. You cannot ruin it tonight. If it doesn't work out, we're trapped here forever."

Katherine sighed and hung her head. "There is no need to tell me. I am reminded of it every day we spend here, as each passing year, decade, century goes by."

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Hadden laughed. "Only one century has gone by since we've been here. You act as if we've been her for a millennium."

"I know, but it feels like thousands of centuries have passed since we last touched. It feels like all of eternity." Her smile grew soft, her pale eyes sparkling. "I cannot wait for this to be over, to be in your arms again."

"If all goes as well, as you believe it will, then we won't have much longer to wait. Do not worry. We shall be together soon."

* * * * *

Kara turned to find Hayden standing in the doorway, filling it. For such a large man, he moved with natural grace as he walked into the bedroom, a determined look gleaming in his eyes. Anticipation filled her, her heart started to beat double time, and she clasped her hands in front of her to keep from reaching out and grabbing him. Once she touched him, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to stop.

"Is this the room you're going to stay in tonight?" His deep voice washed over her, sending tremors up her spine.

She nodded, glancing around the dark room. It sat in the front half of the house, with two large windows that overlooked the road and the ocean in the distance. Light from the almost full moon shone through both uncovered windows, casting Hayden's face in shadows, bringing out the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw line. His eyes were at half-mast, and his lips were curled into a smirk, making him look like some sort of devil.

A sinfully sexy devil.

He glanced about the room as he walked farther inside, his feet silent as they moved across the floor. Downstairs she could make out the sounds of the others talking, a few of them climbing up the stairs and causing a horrible racket with all of their stomping. She'd chosen the room because she'd heard it was Katherine Polanski's bedroom, and knew the others would be too scared to stay in it.

For whatever reason she still couldn't fathom, she wasn't scared of staying in Katherine's room, the very room where she and her lover had

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been murdered. It was as if Kara had been drawn there, as if she really didn't have a choice in the matter. And she knew without a doubt that Hayden would come into the room, too. Would stay with her, keep her company through the long night.

Make love to her if she so wished.

She *did* wish. Why deny it when the vibe between them was so strong? Not that she was normally so cocky, but she knew all she would have to do was ask, and he would touch her. Kiss her. A shiver shot through her at the thought, and she found herself staring with fascination at his mouth. Imagining his mouth touching hers, his tongue tracing her lips before plunging inside of hers.

"What are you thinking about?"

Kara's eyes lifted, meeting his. No way would she admit her thoughts aloud. She shrugged and, with a smile, said, "Do you realize this is Katherine Polanski's bedroom?"

Hayden walked around the perimeter of the room, seeming to search every nook and cranny. He finally stopped between the windows and turned to face her. "Did you choose this room on purpose?"

"Of course." Her smile grew. "Are you scared?"

"Not at all." He nodded toward the bed. "I've been having some crazy dreams lately, and I swear that bed was in all of them."

She turned to look at it, admiring the intricate scrollwork of the black iron headboard, surprised it was still even in the house. Even more amazed that the bed was in such good condition, and it still had a threadbare bedspread covering it. "And why were you dreaming about a bed, or should I even ask?"

He moved to stand next to her, the both of them staring at the bed. "If you're wanting to know if it was a...dirty dream, then yeah, I can admit to that. But it was almost as if it wasn't happening to me. Like I was watching two other people have sex. In this bed."

Sounded suspiciously like the dreams she'd been having the last few days. Before she'd met Hayden, her imaginary lover had been the one who came to her in her dream, bringing her pleasure over and over again, night after night. These last few nights, though, she hadn't been

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participating. No, she'd been watching, and the man looked like Hayden, though it wasn't him.

And the woman looked just like her—though it wasn't her.

"What are you, a voyeur?" she teased, not wanting to think about their similar dreams anymore.

He shook his head, his gaze meeting hers. "No. Normally I'm more of a participant."

Well. If that wasn't obvious... A shiver skipped across her skin, and she took a step closer to him. "So, you don't like to watch?"

"I prefer to be involved." He didn't move a muscle, his expression didn't even shift as she took another step, and then another. Until she stood directly in front of him, so close his body heat radiating toward her, drawing her in.

"Do you think anyone will come in here?" She glanced in the direction of the closed door, then looked deep into his eyes. "Disturb us?"

"No." He glanced at the door as well, his amber eyes burning bright in the dim light of the room. "I think they're all too wrapped up in their own drama to even care where we are."

His head dipped, and Kara parted her lips in anticipation of what was to come. Her eyelids drifted shut as she waited for him to kiss her. His hands suddenly grasped her waist, and he pulled her against him. His breath feathered across her face, over her lips, and she sighed with longing. Waiting for his mouth to touch hers.

They leapt apart as a loud alarm sounded. The entire house seemed to shake with the intensity of the incessant wailing, and a voice boomed from a megaphone, coming from outside.

"Our first contestant is out of the house, everyone! Let's go interview her."

Kara and Hayden looked at each other and then rushed to the window, watching as one of the sweet grandmothers made her way to the DJ with the megaphone. Hayden threw open the window so they could listen.

"So, why did you hit the buzzer, Gladys?"

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The woman shook her head, pressing a hand to her ample chest. "I couldn't take it anymore." Her breath came in short gasps.

The DJ checked his watch. "You've only been in there for approximately twenty minutes. I'm taking that you fall under pressure relatively easy."

She glared at him. "Let's see you stay in that creepy house for any length of time."

The DJ laughed. "I don't think so."

Kara glanced over her shoulder at Hayden, smirking at him. "One down and four to go."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Expecting me to go down along with everyone else?"

She nodded. "Absolutely. You'll run screaming out of here just like Grandma Gladys. I guarantee it."

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Chapter Five

He'd been this close to kissing her, his hands on her slim waist as he yanked her closer and then...that damn alarm had gone off. The silly little woman running out of that house like the ghosts of hell were gaining fast on her heels.

Hayden shook his head and pushed away from the window, frustration filling his entire body. He wanted nothing more than to carry Kara over to the beckoning bed, strip her of her clothing before covering her body with his own. To feel the softness of her skin welcome him, her lips on his as he touched her everywhere. To make her his.

Forever...

His head whipped around. He glared at Kara as she stood with her back to him, still looking outside the window. Why did she say that? Could she read his mind?

"Did you say something?"

She turned around to face him, shaking her head slowly. "No, not at all. Did you hear something?"

"I thought so. I heard a woman talking." He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "I must have imagined it."

Kara grinned. "Maybe it was the ghost of Katherine Polanski."

His skin prickled with gooseflesh at the mention of Katherine's name. If he didn't know any better, he *could* believe it had been the voice of Katherine Polanski. People had reported the hauntings for years. And

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considering his relation to the entire situation, well, he wouldn't be surprised in the least that Katherine would want to speak to him.

"Did I happen to mention I'm a direct descendant of Hadden Robertson?"

Her eyes widened. "You're kidding."

"No. I'm even named after him, kind of." He smiled. "Hadden Robertson, Hayden Roberts? I'm surprised no one noticed."

"Why the drop of 'son' in the last name?"

He shrugged. "I really don't know. Maybe some past relative didn't want the association with Hadden—the ultimate banished murdered son of Santa Augustina? I have no clue."

She tapped her index finger against her mouth. "Interesting. My initials are the same as hers. KP."

"Really?" He hadn't noticed. Strange. "Are you related to the Polanski's somehow?"

"I don't think so. Not that I know of, anyway."

"Maybe we were brought together to reunite the lost souls of Hadden and Katherine. Maybe that's why they still haunt the very house they were killed in. They need living conductors to bring them together, so to speak."

Her brows furrowed. "Where do you come up with this stuff? That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. *Living conductors?*"

Suddenly feeling stupid, Hayden shrugged, yet he felt compelled to keep talking to her about it. "I don't know. I've always had a fascination with Katherine Polanski and her story. We'd visit the museum when I was a kid, and I always found myself staring at the pictures of her on display." He paused, realizing something. "You resemble her, you know."

She leaned against the windowsill, crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I do not."

"Yes, you do. Same color hair. Same eye shape. I was drawn to you the second I first saw you. Maybe that's why, because of your resemblance to Katherine."

"You're talking crazy. Really." Kara pushed away from the windowsill and moved over to the far wall, as far away from Hayden as

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possible. Something he definitely did not fail to notice. "You're talking as if we could be star-crossed lovers finally reunited. From another time or something. I don't believe in stuff like that."

"You don't? I never really thought I did either, but I can always be persuaded." He walked toward her, noticed she was backing herself into the farthest corner of the room. "I want you, Kara, and I know you want me too. It's as if we're almost—destined to be together."

"I never figured you for such a romantic," she said sarcastically.

"Well, you hardly even know me..." He stopped in front of her, her back pressed into the corner. "...so you have no idea if I'm a romantic or not."

Normally the answer to that would be a resounding no. Hayden had certainly never thought of himself as a romantic—ever. He didn't even know where the words he just spoke were coming from. It was as if someone was speaking for him, through him.

Shit, this was freaky.

He noticed her chest move frantically in time with her hurried breathing. Her tongue sneaked out to dab at her lips. Her cheeks and chest were flushed, her pale blue eyes sparkling. She looked completely and totally...aroused? Freaked out? Hell, he didn't know.

"I feel...dizzy," she whispered, pressing her hand to her chest.

Hayden placed his hands on her shoulders, felt her slump against the wall. He lifted her up, shaking her slightly. "Kara. Kara, are you all right?"

Her eyelids fluttered, her head drooping to the side. She looked ready to slide into a puddle at his feet. "My head...is spinning."

He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her up against his body. She leaned into him, her legs like limp noodles, and he felt the breath gush out of her in one long sigh.

"Kara?" He shook her gently. Nothing.

* * * * *

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Hadden seemed angry. Furious, was more like it. Katherine turned away from him, not wanting to look him in the eye.

"What did you do, Katherine? She fainted, just as they were about to come together. I even went inside of him, caused him to say all of those words to her. Something I've never done before, ever." Hadden paused. "So what exactly did you do to her?"

Katherine flinched at his roar. "My presence inside of her must have been too much for her to take. I weakened her spirit, caused her to pass out, which I didn't mean to do. I'm sorry."

"Look at me!" His voice was subdued, but still a low roar. She turned to face him, held her body rigid when she saw the anger in his eyes. "You must take this slow. You cannot overpower her in your eagerness for them to be together. We almost had her, damn it, and then she collapsed in his arms."

"She'll come around, I promise. And I won't interfere, I swear. My emotions are too strong, too easily read right now. I can't slip inside of her spirit anymore. I must do all of my influencing outside of her body."

"You will do no more influencing for the rest of the night! I won't have you ruin our chances with your haste. Let me handle him and you can watch."

"I can't stand by and watch while they try to come together," Katherine cried, helpless. "What if it doesn't work? What if you ruin it somehow? We can't take our chances."

"Leave her be, Katherine. At least for a short while. Let her gather her wits and let him nurture her. Let me nurture her. I believe I can persuade her—and him—that they are meant to be together."

She crossed her arms in front of her and turned to stare out the window, angry. "Fine. You don't want my help, so I won't offer it. I'll just go ahead and let you ruin our final chance, and it shall hang over your head for the rest of eternity."

He sighed, walked over so he stood directly behind her. "Calm down, my love. It will happen. I promise."

She ached to have feel his reassuring touch on her shoulders. Wanted to lean back into him as he wrapped his arms around her. "I'm not going to stand by and not do anything, Hadden. It isn't my nature."

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"I know. But at least let the poor girl rest for a moment. She needs to gather her strength, needs to recover her racing heart." Hadden smiled at Katherine when she turned around to face him. "I have a feeling our Hayden has more talent than we are giving him credit for."

* * * * *

Kara felt as if she'd slept for hours. Days. Her eyelids were heavy as she tried to lift them, her head groggy as she glanced about the darkened room. She looked down, saw the blanket she'd brought tucked around her, noticed the two lanterns were turned off. The glow of the almost full moon shone through the windows, casting an eerie frostiness throughout the room, and the entire house was surprisingly silent.

She felt something shift and move beneath her head and realized she was lying on Hayden's hard thigh. Her head was in his lap. She wanted to snuggle closer and see if she could make something else on his body grow hard.

"Kara? Are you awake?"

"Yes," she croaked, hating the sound of her voice. She cleared her throat. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Do you remember fainting?"

She nodded, the hard muscles of his thigh pressing into her face. "Yes. I don't know what happened to me. How long have I been out?"

He shifted again, and she lifted her head to look at him. He looked deliciously scruffy with a faint beard shadowing his face, his hair mussed, his eyes sleepy. She had the sudden urge to wrap her arms around his neck and never let go.

"A couple of hours."

Kara sat up straighter, disbelief flooding her. "A couple of hours? Are you kidding me?"

"No." Hayden shook his head. "You worried me at first. I couldn't get you to wake up, but your breathing evened out, and I could tell you were sleeping. Peacefully. So I let you sleep. I thought you might've needed it."

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She ran a hand over her head, smoothing back the hair that had escaped from her ponytail. "It feels like I've been out forever."

"Two more people walked out."

"No way." She smiled, clapped her hands together. "Who?"

"The guy who wanted snacks and the other grandma. Within 15 minutes of each other, too. They wouldn't even really talk about what happened. Said they heard two people—a man and a woman—in a heated argument, but when they went to look, no one was there." Hayden paused, his eyes searching her face. "Weird, huh?"

"Weird about the argument, but wonderful about them leaving." She laughed, letting out a little whoop of joy. "We're down to three, baby! Me, you and—who else?"

"Some other guy, I have no idea who he is. Older, kind of freaky looking. Glared at me earlier when I found him creeping outside our door. Then hurried off without saying a word."

"Oh. That guy." Kara shivered, and not from the cold. "I noticed him when we first came into the house. He kept staring at me, but I've never seen him before in my life. He was scary looking."

"He reminded me of someone, but I don't know who. And I have no idea why he was hanging around here." Hayden reached out, touched her cheek. "Are you feeling okay? You scared me."

Her cheeks heated beneath his tender touch. "I'm fine, really. I don't know what came over me. One minute I was feeling completely normal, and the next it was as if something—or someone—had taken over my body. Overwhelmed me to the point where I couldn't breathe and my brain turned to mush. I could literally feel it inside of me."

He watched her, his eyes dark, searching. "I felt the same way earlier, too, though not as extreme. When I was talking about our friendly ghosts here in the house. Those words coming out of my mouth were not my words."

She found herself trapped within his gaze. "I told myself not to be scared by all of this, but I'm starting to get a little freaked out."

He cupped her cheek, and she leaned into it, nuzzling her face against his palm. His skin was warm, slightly rough, the tips of his fingers

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calloused. It felt good. She realized she had no idea what he did for a living, where he lived, how old he was...nothing. She also realized it really didn't matter.

She still wanted him. Bad.

"Are you cold?"

He must have noticed her faint trembling. "A little." If it brought her closer to him, then perfect.

Hayden moved to grasp her shoulders, and he hauled her onto his lap, holding her close to his chest. She braced her hands against his broad shoulders, marveling at the restrained strength she felt in them. She wanted to rip his sweatshirt off, to see the masculine beauty hidden beneath the fabric.

His eyes were warm and golden, like the finest whiskey. Full of desire. For her. Her lips parted, but she couldn't speak, all words lost at the expression in his eyes. She wanted to tear her clothes off and attack him.

"I'll keep you warm," he murmured, his fingers smoothing her shoulders.

And then he kissed her.

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Chapter Six

Her lips were soft, pliant, opening slowly as he continued to kiss her patiently, not wanting to spook her. Whatever was happening between them couldn't be explained, but he wouldn't worry about that now. Didn't want to worry about it.

Hayden just wanted to make love to her for the rest of the night.

For the rest of your life.

He lifted his head, glanced around the room. He knew for a fact Kara hadn't said that. Her lips had been too busy kissing his. It had definitely been a female voice that spoke. A mere whisper, but he'd heard it. He looked down at Kara, who watched him with a dazed expression in her eyes, her lips parted, still wet from his kisses. His dick surged in his jeans, and he wondered why he cared so much about the strange voices whispering in the room, when he had a willing woman sitting in his lap.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Her brow furrowed with confusion. He sighed as he pressed his forehead to hers. "I thought I heard a woman whisper."

Kara shook her head. "I didn't hear anything." She placed her hands on his face, causing him to stare deep into her eyes. "Forget about the mysterious voices you think you hear. Let's resume where we left off."

He didn't hesitate. Pressing an open-mouth kiss to hers, his tongue teased along the seam of her lips. She opened for him on a groan, her tongue moving to dance with his, her hands sliding up to cup the back of his head. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and he reached between

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them, sliding the zipper of her hoodie jacket down until it came undone. His hands sought out her waist, grasping her closer to him, and she gasped against his mouth.

"You have too much clothing on," she whispered, as he moved down to kiss her throat, his tongue licking at the heavy throb of her pulse. She jerked at the hem of his sweatshirt.

Hayden pulled away from her and tore it off, revealing the T-shirt he wore underneath. Kara watched him, shook her head when she saw it. "Take that off, too."

He did so without hesitation, throwing the offending shirt onto the floor, and watched as her pale blue eyes glowed silver in the moonlight. She reached out, brushing his chest with tentative fingertips, and he closed his eyes against the sensations her touch conjured within him. His cock strained heavy against the fly of his jeans. He grabbed her, pulled her to him.

"I want you naked," he demanded against her smooth throat, nibbling at her fragrant skin. "Now."

She pushed away from him and stood next to the bed, shrugging out of her jacket and throwing it onto the floor before reaching behind her head and pulling the hair band out. Her auburn hair fell around her shoulders. Grasping the hem of her tank top, she pulled it off slowly, revealing creamy white skin, inch by tantalizing inch. Hayden could only stare at her, mesmerized. She finally pulled the shirt up and over her head, revealing full, high breasts that beckoned him with tight rosy pink nipples. His mouth watered and heaven help him, his dick grew even harder.

Her gaze never left his as she undid the tie at her waist, loosening the pants so they fell in a heap at her feet. She wore a miniscule pair of black lace panties, see through enough so he could make out the dark curling hair that lay beneath. He couldn't wait to touch her, taste her. Drive his cock inside of her.

"Do you want me to take off my panties?" Her voice was a soft whisper, wafting over him much like the sweet voice he'd heard earlier.

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"No," he said, his voice sounding strangled even to him. "Come here."

Kara did as he asked, resting on all fours to crawl across the bed toward him. He grabbed her, pulling her lithe body on top of his, and she rubbed against him, purring like a cat.

"You still have too much clothing on," she murmured, sliding provocatively down his body. She braced her hands on either side of his hips, propping herself up on her arms as she smiled wickedly up at him. "Would you like it if I took these off?"

"Yes," he said through clenched teeth, his fingers coming up to toy with the silky strands of her hair. The image of her long hair floating over his naked body as she sucked his cock deep within her mouth filled him, and his penis jerked in response. He desperately wanted to make the image come to life.

Her nimble fingers undid the metal button then slid down the zipper of his jeans. He lifted his hips, and she pulled them off and down his legs, throwing them onto the growing pile of clothing on the floor. His cock tented his boxer briefs, dying to come out and play. She reached out, trailing her fingers over his erection.

"Do you want me to take off your underwear?" She mimicked her earlier question to him.

"Hell, no," he growled, pushing them off himself. She helped pull them down his legs.

"My, my," Kara whispered, smiling up into his eyes. "Happy to see me?"

Hayden growled again, couldn't come up with anything to say. Waited in tense anticipation for what she planned to do next. The sexy smile still on her face, she bent over, dabbed at his cock with the tip of her tongue, licking up the side of him slowly. He threw his head back against the bed with a groan.

"I've imagined doing this. Dreamed about it actually," she whispered, her hair tickling his thighs. "I didn't know you would smell so good, taste so good."

Karen Erickson

The woman was going to make him come just with her words. He reached out and tangled his fingers in her hair, grasping at her head as she bent again and took him into her mouth. She slid down as far as her mouth would allow, his cock bumping the back of her throat as she sucked him up and down.

His hips moved as he slowly fucked her mouth, a tightening low in his belly starting to form as her lips swirled and sucked, her tongue licking, lapping at him. Her mouth was on fire, doing things, making him feel things he'd never experienced before. Her hand gripped the base of him and he knew he would come at any moment. He pushed her hair away from her face and cupped her cheek, causing her to pause mid-suck.

"I want to be inside you when I come," he murmured, watched as her eyes flared silver at his words.

She released him and moved up his body, languid as she dragged her breasts along his chest. The feel of her hard nipples brushing against his skin made him close his eyes and clench his jaw, trying to keep some sort of semblance of control before he totally lost it. He hadn't felt this way since he was a teenager trying to bang every girl he could find. Anxious. Impatient. Turned out.

Kara shifted so her face was above his and smiled as she lowered her head and brushed her lips against his. Her tongue darted out and licked a trail from corner to corner of his mouth, darting inside to dance with his, marveling at his delicious taste. His familiar taste. A sense of this happening before washed over her. The feel, the sound, the smell of him all familiar, yet different. New and exciting, yet the same.

Must be all of the dreams, Kara thought as they continued to kiss, lazy and slow, tongues sliding against each other. She pressed her pelvis against him, felt the hot, hard length of his cock brush against her wet center, and knew she wasn't going to last much longer. Impatience filled her and she grabbed his face, deepened the kiss, causing him to groan into her mouth.

"I want you," she whispered against his lips, her tongue darting out to lick his cheek, savoring the salty taste of him.

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"Slow down, baby." Big hands slid down to cup her buttocks. "We have all night."

"No." She shook her head, urgency flowing through her veins as she ground her lower body against his. "I want you inside me *now*."

With one swift movement, Hayden flipped her, pinning her to the mattress. Her entire body warmed beneath his heated, golden brown gaze.

"I want to take my time with you." He bent and kissed her nipple, lips enveloping the taut peak to suck it deep into his mouth. "Do this right."

"What I want is for you to do me now." Her pussy throbbed for him, she wanted him so badly. She shifted her legs beneath his, as he continued to suck on first one nipple, then the other, his hands squeezing her breasts.

"Patience." He sounded amused, but she didn't want amusement. She wanted him inside of her, fast and hard and pounding. Making her belong to him.

Kara spread her legs wide, his penis slipping to rest against her lower belly, and she moaned as the hot tip probed at her. "Take your time later. I can't wait."

Hayden didn't waste any time after hearing her words. He yanked her panties off then surged inside of her, filling her to the hilt and she stilled, overcome with pure emotion. A connection sizzled between them like an electric current. She closed her eyes, reveled in it.

He's mine. Forever mine.

He cupped her cheek in his hand, and she opened her tear-filled eyes, not understanding where they came from, but unable to prevent them. His eyes held the same shocked expression she was sure hers did. He held himself above her, still not moving, his cock throbbing inside of her body.

"You're mine," he whispered. "You've always been mine."

"Hmm." Kara arched beneath him, stretching herself so he slipped even deeper inside of her. Deeper than any man had ever gone before. "Yes. Forever."

Karen Erickson

Hayden began to move, and she wrapped her arms around him, sliding her hands up and down his sweat-slicked back. Her legs slid around his waist, allowing him to penetrate her even deeper, and she gasped at the delicious sensations of his cock filling her so fully. So completely.

His movements quickened, his skin heating even more beneath her fingers. She stared up into his face, saw the beautiful intensity there, the glow in his eyes. Her breath left her, everything disappeared except for Hayden buried deep within her, his gaze never leaving hers as he plunged into her one more time then stilled, yelling her name as he came inside her.

Out of nowhere her orgasm hit her, causing her to shudder around him, clutching him with her arms and legs as her inner walls milked his cock. She murmured his name on a gasp, her hands moving to push the sweaty strands of hair off his forehead. He gazed down upon her with eyes full of an unknown emotion, his entire face tender as he dipped his head and kissed her.

She closed her eyes and cupped the back of his head, her mouth opening beneath his as he continued his gentle assault with lips and tongue. "That was..."

"Amazing?" He tilted his head and pressed a wet kiss to her neck.

"More than amazing." She shifted his head with her hands, causing him to look at her. "Out of this world. Intense. Like something I've never experienced before."

"For me, too," he whispered, kissing her again. "And I haven't even done everything I'd like to do to you. Yet."

She shifted her hips beneath him, felt his penis stir to life, and she smiled. "Then what are you waiting for?"

A loud slam echoed through the quiet house, startling them both. Hayden jumped off of her. Kara yanked the blanket to cover her chest, and they both sat up to see the bedroom door hanging open, dangling from its hinges.

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The older man stood in the doorway, his body tense with anger, his entire expression full of rage. He flexed his hands into fists, a snarl on his lips as he strode into the room.

“You son of a bitch. She belongs to *me!*”

Karen Erickson

Chapter Seven

Kara had never seen the man before tonight, though his eyes, his angry expression, was vaguely familiar. She had no idea what he wanted, or why he would think she belonged to him. She did know that her body flooded with fear at the sight of him, in the ferocity in his eyes, the anger in his stance. He terrified her.

She glanced over at Hayden, noticed the alertness in his position, in his eyes. The strange man had him reacting as strongly as her.

"Who the hell are you?" Hayden asked.

The man stood at the footboard of the bed, a sneer on his face as he watched them with disgust. "I should be asking you that, you son of a bitch. In bed, naked, with my intended? I told you before you would both pay. Prepare for my retaliation!"

Kara rolled off of the bed just as the angry man lunged toward them. Hayden leaped up, grabbed the man by his shoulders, and threw him onto the floor. The man was thin but wiry, putting up a decent fight as they struggled with each other across the floor.

"No," Kara wailed as she ran to the doorway, clutching the blanket around her. She found what she was looking for and began pressing the emergency buzzer repeatedly.

The room flooded with light that shone from outside, and she could hear running footsteps race up the stairwell. *They must have heard my screams*, she thought as she glanced at the forgotten open window. The

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window that faced directly down onto the radio station booth set up outside.

Three men, including the DJ, pushed inside and pulled the two men off of each other.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Kara recognized him as the man in black who gave them instructions earlier.

Hayden's chest moved in time with his heavy breathing, seeming oblivious to the fact he was stark naked. "That crazy mother fucker threatened to kill us!"

"Because this creature is sleeping with my fiancé," the crazy man howled, thrashing his arms, trying to break away from the two men holding him back.

All of the men turned to look at Kara. She clutched the blanket around her, trying to cover herself. "I've never seen him before in my life."

"Somebody needs to call the police." The two men began dragging the crazed lunatic out of the room. He still carried on, screaming obscenities at Kara as they left.

The coordinator released Hayden, who immediately grabbed his jeans and slipped them on. "He really threatened to attack you? And you've never seen him before?"

Hayden shook his head, glanced over at Kara. "We have no idea who he is. I caught him lurking around in the hall earlier, but I brushed it off. I certainly didn't think he was a threat."

"He said you're his fiancée."

Kara sighed. "I've never been engaged. Ever. I have no idea who that man is."

"Well, we're going to have to file a police report. I assume the both of you would like to press charges?" When they nodded, the coordinator continued. "And I guess we'll call the contest as over. Considering the intimate circumstances of this situation, I'm assuming one of you will give the prize to the other?"

Karen Erickson

Their gazes met, full of relief and longing. And banked desire. "Give it to Kara," Hayden said, his eyes never leaving hers. "She's won fair and square."

* * * * *

As if a fog had been lifted, they came together, bodies pressed close, flesh burning into each other. Katherine gasped at the sensation of Hadden's body so close to hers, the feel of his strong arms encircling her, her face pressed against his broad chest. She slipped her arms around his waist, closed her eyes, and wept.

"My love, why are you crying?" Hadden pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, his hands gentle as they slid up and down her back.

"They are tears of happiness, Hadden." She pulled back from him, gazing up into his adoring face. "We did it, my darling. We're finally together. Forever."

"It almost didn't happen." He kissed the tip of her nose. "That man who threatened them. I believe it was Edgar's spirit, reincarnated. Don't you?"

Katherine nodded. "I was so scared, so afraid he would hurt them as Edgar hurt us. That man wasn't Edgar, but I believe Edgar's spirit somehow overcame him. He would've killed them for sure."

"My descendant came through, though, to save them." Hadden's arms tightened around her. "He made me proud."

"Of course, he was wonderful. But let us not talk about that now. We have many, many years to catch up on." Katherine stood on tiptoe and kissed him, dipping her tongue inside his delicious mouth, a mouth she hadn't sampled in far too long. She found herself becoming lost in the kiss, lost in him and a wave of joy threatened to overwhelm her.

She would never be deprived of her love again.

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Epilogue

Four months later...

The warm tropical breeze washed over her bare skin and Kara smiled, smoothing the tanning lotion onto her arms. She set the bottle down on the table next to her and slipped her sunglasses on, savoring the seeming embrace of the hot sun.

"Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

Kara pushed her sunglasses up onto her head and shaded her eyes, smiling at Hayden as he stood above her. "Maybe. Do you like my new bikini? I bought it at a little shop yesterday while you napped."

"Don't you think it needs a little more fabric?" He sat down on the end of the lounge chair and trailed his fingers over her smooth legs.

She shrugged, feeling naughty. And turned on. Two constant emotions that filled her now that Hayden was permanently a part of her life. "We're on a private balcony. No one can see me...except for you."

"As long as you don't wear it in public, I have no problem." His hands slid higher, to the tiny strings at her hips that kept the bikini bottom in place. He tugged on one, and they both watched it unravel. "Easy access, at least."

She closed her eyes, spreading her legs a little, as his fingers slipped beneath the scrap of fabric to dip into her pussy. A murmur of approval escaped from her lips as he pushed deep inside of her with one, then two fingers.

Karen Erickson

"You look beautiful with the sun on your face and your skin golden." She opened her eyes to watch him watch her, and felt the familiar tingle within her belly as he started to bring her to yet another easy orgasm. "Why haven't we made love outside before?"

"Because we've only been together for a couple of months, and it's the dead of winter back home," she reminded him, closing her eyes as the ripples of pleasure took over her.

"Oh, that's right." She could hear the smile in his voice, and she smirked in return. "We need to remedy that when spring comes."

"Well, hold on to that thought because *I'm* about to come," she said with a whimper then shuddered, throwing her head back as the climax overtook her.

When the tremors eased from her body, she opened her eyes to find him staring at her, his fingers nimbly untying the rest of her bikini bottom. She lifted her hips, and he slipped it off of her, throwing it over his shoulder. She giggled.

"Have I mentioned lately how much I love you?" His fingers stroked her belly.

Kara reached up to untie her bikini top at the neck, letting it fall forward so her breasts were revealed to his gaze. She didn't think she would ever tire of seeing the flicker of arousal that heated her husband's eyes every time he saw her naked body. "Not in the last ten minutes."

Hayden leaned in close, pressed his mouth to hers in a gentle kiss that stole her breath, and her heart. "I love you, Mrs. Roberts."

"And I love you, too, Mr. Roberts."

"Forever."

The End

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Author Bio

Karen Erickson loves to write steamy romances and has been telling stories for as long as she can remember. When she's not creating her characters, she and her husband are chasing their three kids.

Karen lives in central California. You can visit her at:

www.karenwritesromance.com

Karen Erickson

Also Available from Cobblestone Press, LLC

Release Me by Karen Erickson

Chapter One

"Did I tell you I'm taking control of my orgasms?" Sommer stuffed the last of her blueberry muffin into her mouth. "I'm so tired of counting on someone else, I decided to take action and make them happen myself."

"Honey, you're preaching to the choir. It's about time you take control of your own body," Noura said.

Sommer pressed the phone between her ear and shoulder. Her friend and coworker was right. She'd been telling Sommer that for years, but she'd been so repressed she thought she had no other choice but to count on a man to give her mind blowing orgasms. The problem? Most men she'd been with hadn't given her *any* mind blowing orgasms. No multiple orgasms, no *feeling like she was going to die* orgasms, nothing. Oh, sometimes a pleasant washing over sort of feeling would happen. But nothing that rocked her world.

"I bought a vibrator online," she confessed in a hushed whisper, not wanting anyone to hear her. Not that anyone was in her office, but talking about it made her uncomfortable. "Ordered it online. It came yesterday."

"So did *you* come yesterday?" Noura asked.

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Sommer giggled. Yes, she had. A few times. She'd been so sensitive down there by the end of her vibrator breaking in session that it had taken her forever just to pee. But she didn't need to share the dirty details. "I did."

"Well, vibrators are great, but you need to find yourself a real man. Some big, strapping guy who'll take you on your desk at work. Someone you don't care about, a delicious man you just want to have sex with. Get a few of those potential orgasms out of your system, only with a warm body versus a battery operated machine."

"Oh, yeah. But just who the heck can I find around here to ravish me on my desk?" Sommer shivered as she remembered a handsome man she'd seen in the elevator a few days ago. Tall and broad shouldered, with dark hair and a nice ass. She'd been unable to look at him straight on, but from what she could tell by her glimpse of his profile he had high cheekbones, perfectly sculpted lips, and beautiful eyes. *Dreamy*.

Noura snorted, so loudly Sommer had to hold the phone away from her ear. "There's no one at work who would even qualify as *Ravish on the Desk* material. Please. Although there are probably some interesting prospects in the building. We should go on a hunt some day soon."

"Great. So what do we say when we spot a hunky one? 'Hey, could you come back to my office and have wild monkey sex with me? I'm trying to regain control of my orgasms.'" Sommer giggled again. "I don't think so."

"We're not going to be blatant, Sommer. Come on! But it doesn't hurt to see who's closest to us. You never know. We could find some hot man for you to do in no time."

Sommer thought of Mr. Hot Man in the Elevator and twirled the phone cord around her index finger. He was probably a client of one of the businesses in the building. A one shot deal. She'd most likely never see him again. "I think I'm better off with my vibrator for now."

"A vibrator doesn't have hands, a mouth, or a tongue," Noura said. "A vibrator can only satisfy you for so long."

Karen Erickson

"Yeah, yeah, tell me about it," Sommer muttered as she started composing an email to a client. Nothing happened. She moved the mouse across the screen. Nothing. Typed furiously on the keyboard. Nada. Crap.

"It's true, you can get vibrated for only so long, and then it's going to become an addiction and no guy will ever be able to satisfy you—"

"Shit!" Sommer banged her fists on her now useless keyboard.

"Look, Noura, I gotta go. My computer just died on me again." She disconnected and hit the button that quick-dialed the receptionist. She had a huge project due in two days and she was barely halfway finished. She did not need her computer to fritz out on her now. "Hey, Joanie. You got the number for that IT place on the fourth floor? My computer just died."

"I'll call them for you," Joanie said. "Do you need them to come right away?"

"Definitely. It's an emergency. Thanks." Sommer hung up, then punched the keys on her keyboard to no avail. It was frozen solid, had been freezing on her for the past couple of weeks, but she'd always brushed it off, restarted the computer, and gone on her merry way. That probably wasn't the best way to handle a computer problem, but she never had the time to worry about it, always told herself she'd deal with it later. Big mistake.

Her phone rang and she snatched it up. "A tech is coming down to your office right now. Watch for him."

"Thanks, Joanie. I appreciate it."

While she waited, she decided to go through her stack of mail, something she'd been neglecting as of late. As a junior account executive for a small advertising firm, Sommer had been swamped with various projects the senior executive had dumped on her. She didn't mind. She loved her work and was dedicated. With no boyfriend take up her time, she spent lots of late nights at the office. She figured all this hard work would eventually pay off, so why not put in as much time as she could before life got in the way?

Boring, boring, boring, she thought as she shuffled through the envelopes. If anyone had anything important to say, they sent it via email, and since she couldn't open her email program, she was stuck. Maybe she

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could grab one of the laptops the advertising team shared and work from that, although her important information was stored on her actual computer. Hopefully, if the global freezing hadn't wiped it out.

She was so stupid for not backing up her files. Very important files, she reminded herself. Suddenly the Garbage song started playing her head. "Stupid Girl—"

A soft knock sounded on her office door and Sommer glanced up. She sucked in a breath, practically choking on the air she inhaled. As if her imagination had conjured him up, there stood the very man she'd been lusting after—the man from the elevator. In the flesh.

Unable to speak, she cleared her throat, coughed, and waved him in.

"You're having trouble with your computer?" he asked.

Aha. He was from the IT company. A computer geek. He blinked at her from behind his glasses and she sucked in too much air yet again. He had the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen. Long, black lashes surrounded irises that wavered between green and blue. The thin wire rimmed glasses he wore only accentuated their intensity, their masculine beauty. Suddenly hypnotized, she gazed into them.

"Your computer, Miss Daniels?" he asked politely, looking at her as if she'd lost her marbles.

She nodded and sat up straighter in her chair. Trying to be serious and businesslike, when she wanted nothing more but to throw herself at his feet and beg him to touch her. "Yes, it keeps freezing up and shutting itself down. I don't know what's wrong with it."

"Let me take a look at it," he said, walking over to her so he stood next to her chair. "Is it under your desk?"

Sommer looked up at him. The sudden image of him beneath her desk, touching her bare legs, filled her thoughts and she blinked—and tried to banish the naughty thoughts. He smiled at her and just like that, she felt her panties grow wet.

"Your tower. Is it under your desk?" He sounded as if he were talking to an imbecile.

Karen Erickson

"Oh, yes. Of course it is." She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry. I'm a little slow on the uptake this afternoon. I have a huge deadline at the end of the week and computer problems are the last thing I need right now."

"Well, let me get under there, Miss Daniels, and I'll take a look at it."

Still sitting with her delectable legs crossed and her short skirt hitched up to reveal a lengthy expanse of thigh, Sommer pushed away from the desk.

Ted Maxwell licked his lips in anticipation. He normally wasn't a leg man; he preferred a nice ass to grab hold of and squeeze. But legs like hers demanded attention and imagination. Yes, indeed, he could see himself grabbing her slender ankles, running his hands up her shapely calves to the inside of her thighs, then pushing them open so he could tongue her pussy with long, slow licks . . .

Shit. He needed to focus, to fix this sexy woman's computer and get the hell out of her office. Why did frickin' Stan have to call in sick today? Ted cursed his employee for about the 70th time since this morning. He hadn't made a repair call like this for months. Hell, he didn't have to. He spent all his time in the office. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been out in the field.

He tried to power up her computer, but it wouldn't even turn on. Not good. He shook his head and muttered an oath.

"Do you think you'll be able to fix it this afternoon?" Sommer asked in her sweet voice.

Ted grunted. "Do you have another computer you can work on while I try to repair this one?"

She sighed, the sound washing over him and making his dick stand at attention. He could imagine her sighing just like that right before he kissed her. Touched her. Entered her from behind, on top, whatever. "I have a laptop, but the information I need for my project is saved on this computer."

"You don't back it up?" He came out from underneath her desk but still sat on the floor, facing her—and abruptly realized his face was level with her crossed legs. *Her crotch*. He willed her to uncross and cross her

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legs, a la the movie "Basic Instinct", so he could catch a glimpse of panties, or no panties. Either one would please him just fine.

Miss Daniels bit down on her lip, drawing his gaze to the sweet fullness of it. Her lips were plump, ripe. Kissable. She shook her head. "Not as often as I should, it seems."

"Everyone learns that lesson when something like this happens." He reached back under the desk, unplugged all the cords and dragged out the tower. "I'll take this back to my office and see what I can do with it."

"Oh, that would be wonderful." She smiled at him, and he felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. Damn, she was beautiful. Big brown eyes, full lips, smooth skin. Her brown hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail that he longed to undo, to watch all that hair fall around her sweet face. "I'll be working late tonight, so please don't hesitate to call if you fix it before the evening is over."

"No problem." Oh, he longed to call her all right. Just not in the way she was expecting. He had other computers to worry about and other emergency repairs to make, and considering he was down a man for the day, he was running way behind. But that wasn't going to stop him from working on Miss Sommer Daniels' computer the minute he got back to the office.

Other clients, be damned.