



Between Floors

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Between Floors

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Between Floors

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Lia Sebastian

Dedication

For Mom and Dad. Thank you for providing a warm, loving home and for demonstrating what true love is. I love you both.

Between Floors

Chapter One

Chloe Wilson ran to the elevator as the doors began to close. "Hold the elevator!" Missing it meant being stuck in the lobby for at least ten minutes. The superintendent should get them fixed. There were six elevators, and all of them moved slower than a bad blind date. Yesterday, the door had shut right in her face. She'd already waited for an elevator twice this week and didn't want to do it again.

Today, luck was with her. The sliding elevator doors stopped abruptly, then jerked open. "Oh, thank you," she said, stepping inside.

"You're welcome."

Oh, God. Maybe she wasn't lucky. She knew that deep, rich voice. It almost made her get off the elevator and wait for the next one. She could take the stairs. Fifteen flights weren't too bad. It'd only take...much too long to climb. Her calves hurt just thinking about it. Plus her stomach was doing flip-flops at the sight of him, something that wouldn't make a trip up the stairs any easier. That left one option—staying in the elevator with the voice.

She'd heard it for the first time about a year ago, when he'd consulted at her office on a minor work project. They'd worked together only two weeks, but his voice had captivated her. She hadn't hesitated to say yes when he asked her to dinner. Within months, she'd fallen in love. First, with the voice, then with the man it belonged to.

Sean.

"Hello, Chloe."

Lia Sebastian

“Hi.” She turned to face him. He looked wonderful—tall, lean, and muscled—in worn jeans and a black T-shirt. His brown hair was longer than the last time she’d seen him. Why did she still want to melt when she looked at him? It made her want to scream in sheer frustration.

His shirt clung to his chest and abs, bringing back memories of buying him T-shirts when they’d been together. Sean collected T-shirts and had more than a dozen of them. The first time she’d bought him one, he’d grinned, put it on, and modeled it for her. Later, she’d slowly taken it off him, and they’d made love on the couch.

Now, after months of missing his smile, missing *him*, Sean was back. What had she done to deserve this? Why did he still look irresistible?

Chloe inhaled sharply. Time to stop thinking about his body. Besides, it was only a body—everyone had one. So what, if Sean had the best one she’d ever seen? There was absolutely nothing wrong with looking. Besides, she doubted any woman could stop herself from looking. Touching was what she had to worry about. As long as she didn’t touch him, she was fine.

She met his gaze. *See? Looking was fine, just fine.* She would think of him as a...a statue. Or some other piece of art she could appreciate on a purely aesthetic level. She’d taken art appreciation classes in college—she’d seen dozens of statues, many of them erotic. After seeing them, she should be able to view Sean with complete indifference.

Yes, just call her Chloe, the indifferent.

But looking at him made her remember the good times—the gentle way he’d treated her when she had the flu. He’d been incredibly sweet, bringing her soup and tucking her in bed. When being buried under a mountain of blankets hadn’t taken away her chills, he’d climbed into bed with her.

She thought about how turned on she’d been the first time she discovered he didn’t wear underwear. And how happy she was the first time she woke up with him sleeping beside her. She still cherished the memory of his arms wrapped tightly around her while he slept, as if holding her close was not only pleasurable, but necessary.

Between Floors

She remembered all those things now, as she looked into Sean's brown eyes—eyes that reminded her of chocolate.

She never could resist chocolate.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine." What was she supposed to say? Long time no see? I've thought about you every day since you left? Seeing you again makes my heart pound?

"Are you still on the fifteenth floor?"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

Sean pushed the button for floor fifteen. No other buttons were lit. Hmm. Who was he going to see? She wanted to know, but she could barely bring herself to look at him. She wasn't sure she could ask him a question without wanting to yell at him.

"It's good to see you." He crossed his arms over his chest, drawing her attention to his biceps. Those same arms had caged her five seconds after she'd walked in the door when returning from a four-day business trip. Five seconds after that, he'd kissed her senseless.

"You look great," he said now.

So do you. "Thanks." Though she wasn't sure it was such a compliment. She had probably looked terrible the last time he'd seen her, the day he'd said goodbye.

Chloe was no novice to relationships, but she didn't usually think long term. When she started seeing Sean, she'd done it with her usual thought of enjoying the time with him while it lasted, and then moving on. After six months with him, she'd known she wanted more, had let herself want more. She'd begun to hope that what they had wouldn't be another in an endless string of short-term relationships. Sean had shattered her hopes with one short sentence...*I can't stay.*

Remembering the agony of that moment made her stomach tighten painfully.

A quick glance told her he was watching her closely. His focus was one of the things she'd loved about him. It was time to stop fooling herself—she wasn't indifferent to him. Far from it. She was better off not even looking at the man. She turned away from him as the elevator doors

Lia Sebastian

closed with a soft, hollow thud, shutting her inside with the one man she had loved...and lost.

Sean couldn't take his eyes off her.

Chloe.

God, he'd missed her, even more than he realized. Just seeing her made his heart feel as if it might pound out of his chest. She was beautiful and amazing.

She also didn't want to talk to him.

He struggled not to show his disappointment. Her response was worse than he'd anticipated. On the way to her apartment building, he had convinced himself that he was prepared for her reaction. He knew she wouldn't leap into his arms and welcome him back into her life. At the very least, she'd expect him to grovel.

She'd surprised him, much like she had the first time he'd seen her. He'd walked into a conference room at her office and been struck speechless by her smile and her laugh. He hadn't been able to do anything but shake her hand. Only after the first charged moment, when he'd touched her hand and felt an instant connection, was he finally able to talk to her and make conversation.

Now he felt speechless again. He had underestimated Chloe. She didn't expect him to grovel. In fact, the cold expression on her face and her clipped responses made it clear she didn't want anything from him. Groveling would be several steps *up* the list of things she wanted him to do.

He had known their reunion wouldn't be easy. He hadn't known seeing her turn her back on him would be like watching the collapse of his dreams.

Sean wouldn't let his dreams die, not without trying to do something about it. After months of being without her, of waking up alone, he was in the same room with her—if an elevator qualified as a room. Either way, she stood less than four feet in front of him. *Chloe.*

They might as well have been hundreds of miles apart. She had barely looked at him since entering the elevator; he'd caught only a glimpse of her light blue eyes. It took all his self control to keep from

Between Floors

touching her, from taking her into his arms and begging her to look at him. He wanted to touch her curly black hair, which still fell several inches past her shoulders. A yellow tank top and slim black pants covered the body he knew was lush in all the right places.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, and turned away quickly when she saw he was looking. Her rigid stance and the way she stared at the elevator doors reminded him of a mannequin. It didn't matter—she still turned him on. His dick had come to life when he heard her call for the elevator. The damn thing wanted to say hello. *Shit*. Another second and it would wave.

Staring at her ass wasn't helping matters. She had a great curved ass—one he knew she thought was too big. He loved it. He wanted to touch it again. He wanted to touch *her* again. He wanted Chloe again.

But first, he had to get her to talk to him.

He took a deep breath. "Do you still work at Stanwood Enterprises?"

The elevator shrieked and slowly began to ascend.

She didn't look at him, simply kept her gaze focused on the elevator doors. "Yes."

"How's it going?"

"Fine."

Since when did she give one-syllable responses? He rubbed two fingers against the side of his forehead. "You get promoted yet?"

"No."

The yes or no questions obviously weren't working. Maybe it was time to switch to essay or multiple choice. He walked forward and put a hand on her arm. "Chloe—"

"Don't," she snapped, taking a step away from him.

"I'm sorry." He held up his hands in surrender. "I just want to talk to you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine. Talk."

The elevator jerked to a stop with a screech. The elevators in this building had always been slow, but this one sounded as if it were in serious need of repair. "OK. Will you look at me?"

Lia Sebastian

"I can listen to you without looking at you," she said, shrugging her shoulders as if to shrug him off.

Shit. This *really* wasn't going well. "All right. I'm sorry."

"You said that already."

"I'm not sorry only about upsetting you now. I'm sorry about the way I left things. For not explaining things better when I left."

Now she looked at him. Finally. But there was no warmth in her gaze. "What's to explain? We never made any promises. Either one of us could have ended things any time. You ended it first. Big deal."

It obviously was a big deal. "I want to talk about that."

She laughed, but the brittle sound made it clear she wasn't amused. "You want to talk. That's usually what women say." She turned away again. "It's too late. The expiration date on that discussion was six months ago when you moved out."

"Chloe—"

"I don't want to talk. Why isn't the door opening? Stupid—" She broke off when the small elevator light went out, surrounding them in complete darkness. "Damn it." Chloe started pounding on the door.

Holding his hands in front of him, Sean stepped forward until he felt her shoulders. "Hey." He squeezed her shoulders, relishing the feel of bare skin under his hands. She was already tense, but she stiffened. He wanted to give her a backrub the way he used to do. She was always tense at first, but he would keep rubbing her muscles until her body relaxed under his hands...and this train of thought wasn't helping his dick stay in his pants. Maybe the darkness was a good thing.

"I want to get out of here."

"I don't think beating the doors will help." He eased her aside to get to the doors.

"Will they open?"

Sean tried to pry them apart, but he couldn't get his fingers between the doors, let alone open them. "Not enough leverage."

"What do we do now? I wonder if there's enough reception in here for my cell phone." He heard her start digging in her purse.

Between Floors

"Let's try this phone first." He ran his hands down the wall of the elevator until he felt the small emergency panel. It opened easily, and he picked up the phone inside. "Hello?"

There was a long pause before a voice asked, "You all right?"

"Yeah," Sean said, "but the doors won't open."

"It's a power outage. All of the elevators are having trouble. We're hoping to get you back up and running within two hours."

"That's a long time." But he didn't mind the wait. In fact, he might be able to make it work in his favor. Two hours might give him enough time to figure out what to say to Chloe, how to make her understand what he wanted.

"We've got people with claustrophobia in two other elevators; we'll get those running first. We'll call back once we start working on your car."

"OK, thanks." He hung up the phone.

"Who was it?" Chloe demanded. "What did they say?"

He explained the situation and heard her sigh.

"We're stuck," Sean repeated, leaning toward her. "Looks like we're going to be here a while. Ready to talk now?"

Lia Sebastian

Chapter Two

Great, Chloe thought. *Just great.* Stuck in an elevator with Sean Harris, the one-time love of her life—before he'd walked out on her. Damn it. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he planned this. Tossing her purse to the back corner of the elevator, she leaned against the wall. "Are we really stuck here for two hours?"

"That's what he said. Maybe they'll get to us sooner."

Two hours in an enclosed space with Sean? Double damn it. She slid down the side of the elevator until she was sitting on the ground.

"Might as well get comfortable."

"Is there room next to you?"

The question filled her with a sense of *déjà vu*. It's what he'd asked when they met—and the first time he came to her house to watch TV together. She didn't want him sitting next to her now, didn't want to get close enough to smell his cologne or to feel the warmth of his body next to hers. "I'll take this side." She slapped the metal wall of the elevator. "You take that one."

His silence made his disappointment obvious even in the darkness of the elevator. After a few seconds, she heard him step away from her. Then she heard him slide from the wall to the floor, much as she had. They sat on opposite sides of the elevator without speaking.

She wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her head on her knees. Not exactly dignified, but she was wearing pants. Besides, it *was* dark. She didn't need to worry about him seeing anything. As if he hadn't

Between Floors

already seen everything anyway. He'd seen, touched, and kissed every part of her body. *Stop*, she told herself. *Don't even go there.*

"So," she began, considering an array of topics they could discuss.

"I thought we weren't talking."

Smart ass. "It's fine with me if you want to sit here for two hours without talking." Maybe it would be less than two hours. If she were lucky. But she hadn't been lucky so far.

"You're right. I'm sorry. Let's talk."

Didn't it figure? She'd learned one thing in the six months they'd lived together—Sean wasn't talkative, especially about his past. She knew his parents were dead and he had no other family. If she remembered right, she'd had to drag the information out of him. Even then, he hadn't said much more about it. And *now* Mr. Taciturn wanted to talk? "We're not. We're just passing the time."

"I can think of better ways to pass the time."

Chloe closed her eyes and tried to forget about the better ways they had passed the time together. As if she could ever forget about the way Sean kissed and touched her. Or how good it felt to have him on top of her or, better yet, sliding inside her. Her sex clenched at the mere thought of it, of him, as she remembered the sensation of his cock filling her.

Damn it. It was starting to feel warm in here. She could feel sudden tension in her throat almost choking her.

"Oh?" She hoped her voice sounded calm. "Do you have a chessboard with you?"

Sean laughed. "No luck there. Sorry."

No luck, period. She'd have been better off climbing the fifteen floors to her apartment. "Since there's no light, it wouldn't help if you did."

"I was hoping you'd tell me more about how work is going."

They *were* going to be here for a while.... "It's fine. Good."

"You still work with Sabrina?"

"Yes." She wished her friend was here now to act as a buffer. But Sabrina would probably tell Chloe to talk to Sean, to stop avoiding him.

Lia Sebastian

"Have you thought about contacting him?" Sabrina had asked a week ago. "You need to talk to him and see him again." When Chloe had protested, Sabrina simply said, "Maybe it would help you get over him. You need to get over him, Chloe."

It wasn't working. Chloe was more attracted to him than ever, even though the lack of light made it impossible to see him. She shifted, tucking her legs beneath her.

"And you came up for promotion three months ago?"

He remembered? She thought he'd walked away without looking back, without even thinking of her. "Yes. They picked someone else, someone with more seniority."

"You would have been good at it."

Her hand was digging into her abdomen, she realized. God, her stomach hurt. Moments like this were why she'd enjoyed being with him, why she'd fallen in love with him. Why she'd grieved when he left. In the first month after he left, she'd walked around as if she were lost—not surprising, since she'd felt lost. When Sean moved out, she'd lost not only a boyfriend, but a friend as well.

She still missed the man who'd once been her lover and friend.

"Thank you," she said.

"I mean it, Chloe."

She heard him move slightly, as if he were trying to get comfortable. "I know you do. I appreciate that."

They fell silent. She knew it was her turn to ask how work was going, how he was doing, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. She was afraid of what his answers would be. She didn't want him to be unhappy, even though he'd hurt her, but she couldn't bear to hear him say how happy he was now. Without her.

"Have you thought about looking for another job?" he asked.

"I've considered it, but a new position is opening up soon. If I don't get it this time around, I'll start weighing my options."

"Well, I hope you get it."

"Thanks." His words were all the sweeter because she knew he meant them.

Between Floors

"It's good to talk to you." He sounded closer now. "God, I've missed you."

"Really." She knew the tone of her voice sounded flat, but she couldn't help it. How had she forgotten, even for a minute, that he had walked out? Why was she having a polite conversation with him when she had no idea why he was here? Why *was* he in her apartment building? "Tell me something, Sean. Who are you here to see?"

"Who...? Chloe, I'm here to see you."

Her? "Sean, you walked out of my apartment six months ago. Why would you want to see me?"

"Because I want you back."

Good thing she was sitting down. She couldn't imagine him saying anything that could have surprised her more.

"Chloe?"

She rubbed her forehead with her hand. "Maybe we'd better talk."

"OK."

His short response suggested he wanted her to go first. That was exactly like him. Sean being willing to talk was rare enough, but wanting to share feelings? Of course he wanted her to go first. "All right. Start by telling me where you went when you left."

"Scottsdale. I took a job in Phoenix."

She hadn't even known he was applying for jobs in Phoenix. It hurt her all over again to know he'd kept secrets from her. They weren't together any more. She told herself it shouldn't matter. But it didn't change the feeling. "Did you do a phone interview or what?" She didn't remember him leaving town at all the month before he moved out of her apartment.

"No, I started looking for a job after I left."

That surprised her. "You left me, left New Mexico, left a job you liked, and you didn't have something else lined up?"

"That's right."

Interesting. And very unlike him. Sean was a planner when it came to his work. "And you've been in Scottsdale ever since?"

Lia Sebastian

"Yeah. I was lucky that I found a good job, but I couldn't stay there."

She nodded before remembering he couldn't see her in the darkness. "Why'd you leave it?"

He paused. "It didn't feel like home to me."

"Oh." Her apartment apparently didn't, either, since he'd left it behind so easily.

"I left Scottsdale because of the one thing it didn't have. You."

He expected her to believe that? "Then why did you leave in the first place?"

Silence. That was familiar. She said nothing, simply waited for him to speak.

He finally said, "I wanted you too much."

"You wanted me too much," she repeated, as if echoing his words would help her understand them. "That doesn't make any sense."

"I'm not used to getting what I want."

This kind of logic made her dizzy. Maybe she needed to lie down instead of sit down. "You're not used to..." She shook her head, unable to make sense of his comment. He'd left because he wasn't used to getting what he wanted? It was far more likely he'd met someone else, and returned when the relationship hadn't lasted. That made a lot more sense than some statement about wanting her too much.

Thinking about him with someone else made her angry. She stood, wishing the elevator was large enough for her to pace. "If there was another woman, why don't you just say it? You don't have to lie about it." She stopped talking when she heard him shift. She knew, even without seeing him, that he was standing too, moving closer.

"There's no other woman," he said in her ear. It was his I'm-losing-patience voice. "There was no other woman then, no other woman now."

"OK." *Did that sound breathless?*

"Damn it, I haven't been with another woman. I haven't even looked at another woman since I met you. I want *you*."

Oh, boy, was all Chloe had time to think before Sean kissed her. That changed to *Oh, God* when she felt his lips nibble on hers. Even as she

Between Floors

told herself not to respond, she opened her mouth and felt his tongue slip inside. She felt the heat of it all the way to her womb. *This* was why she was angry, why she didn't want to see him again. After the way he left, after everything he'd done, she still wanted him. She'd never gotten over him.

If he kept this up, she never would.

She was in his arms again, kissing him again, remembering how good they were together, how well he knew her body. They didn't have forever—all they had was now. She slid one hand up his chest to the back of his neck and pulled him closer.

Kissing her again made Sean's heart race. He lifted one hand to touch her face as he explored her mouth. Her lips softened under his as he continued to kiss her. She tasted like caramel. God, how had he forgotten she loved eating caramel? His head spun with the sweet taste of it combined with the taste that was uniquely hers. He licked his way inside her mouth. Then he took her hand in his.

"Sean—"

He put her hand on his cock. "Does this feel like I want another woman? I swear I haven't been with anyone since I was with you."

Her hand shifted from resting lightly on his cock to gently squeezing it through his jeans. He closed his mouth so he wouldn't groan aloud.

"You want me." She sounded a bit out of breath.

"Yeah, I do. I always have." *I always will.*

Now she was kissing him, and it was the best thing he'd felt in months—Chloe, in his arms again, kissing him as if she never wanted him to let go. He'd missed this. He'd missed her.

She tugged at his T-shirt. "I want you."

Sean closed his eyes against the emotion that almost overwhelmed him at her words. *Don't think about it—just do what comes next.* He pulled his T-shirt over his head.

"We won't be interrupted?"

"Maintenance said they'd call before working on this elevator." He moved toward her, close enough to touch her through the soft fabric of

Lia Sebastian

her top and smell her floral perfume. The subtle scent slid seductively around him, wrapping him in a world where nothing existed but the two of them. *Phone, don't ring now.*

He pulled up her tank top, lifting it over her head and off so he could touch her sweet, smooth skin. He couldn't see her—it was too dark for that—but he could lose himself in the smell, taste, and feel of her.

"Sean, I don't have any condoms—"

Shit. "Neither do I."

"—but I'm on the pill. You said you haven't been with anyone?"

"No, not since you."

Her hands were in his pants, gripping and stroking him firmly. *God.* He'd bust out of his jeans at this rate. "Hey," he said, with a groan, "don't play with that."

"I thought you liked it when I play with you."

Often he did. Usually he did—when they hadn't been apart for six months. But not now. This wasn't like the times when they'd spent long, leisurely hours together in bed. "It's been too long."

"All right. We'll skip the playing for now."

For now. He liked the suggestion of future pleasure. He heard a zipper, and the sound of shifting fabric. Man, he wished he could see her pants slide down her legs, especially when he heard something slither to the floor. Oh, yeah. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend he saw her. But right now, hearing Chloe undress was almost as exciting as watching it. Almost. As good as it was, nothing was better than seeing her bare skin.

Then she was pressed against him. He moaned as he felt the friction of her breasts against his chest. Fuck seeing. He was ready to start touching. He wanted to touch her everywhere—wanted to touch her so bad, he didn't know where to start. He moved one hand down her back and felt her shiver in his arms.

He brought both hands to her waist and slid them lightly over her ass. This time the shiver rippled through her body, and she pressed herself closer to him. She shoved her hands down the back of his jeans. Damn, she was way ahead of him when it came to getting naked.

He could fix that.

Between Floors

He shoved off his jeans, and then turned her away from him, wrapping his arms around her and cupping her breasts. It had been too long since he'd touched her like this. He flicked his thumbs over her nipples until they began to bead in his hand. Chloe moaned and writhed against him, wiggling her ass against his cock.

She turned to face him, pulling him to the floor before running her hands up his chest.

He cupped the back of her head to bring her toward him again. Her mouth was open as it met his, open and warm. He had always loved kissing her. But he liked being inside her even more. His body shook with the need to be inside her.

"It's OK," she whispered, as if she heard his thoughts.

"Chloe, I...we..." *Shit*. Talking about his emotions never came naturally. How could he say what it meant to him to be here, back in her arms? How could he tell her what he was feeling, that he wanted her so much he couldn't wait?

"Shhh." She kissed his cheek lightly. "It's OK."

"I should wait," he muttered. "I want—"

"I know what you want." She had her hand on his cock now, holding it with one hand and using the other to guide him toward her, inside her wet folds. Thank God, she was ready for him.

"Chloe." He entered her slowly. *Chloe*. His body screamed for him to push inside her, to pound into her until he reached his release. It had been way too long since he'd been with her, and his arms shook with the effort of holding back.

In seconds, he was embedded inside her. Without a condom. *God*. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone without a condom, and the sensations in his dick were magnified beyond anything he'd known. She was hot and wet around him. He inhaled, hoping the focus on his breathing would help him get back in control.

Despite his desperation, he remained still a long moment to savor the feeling of her muscles clenched around him. Then he couldn't wait any longer. He started to move.

"Sean." Chloe sighed and pressed her cheek against his.

Lia Sebastian

God, he wished he could see her, wished he could look into her eyes as he slid inside her. Her legs wrapped around his waist as his cock plunged inside her. He heard the moist friction of their bodies moving together, and the sound nearly sent him over the edge.

He was on the verge of orgasm now, and he wanted to sink into her, to stay in her for as long as she would let him, for the next two hours and beyond. He wanted it to last, desperately wanted—then his world shattered as his balls tightened, and he came inside her.

Between Floors

Chapter Three

She was pinned beneath him. Sean's head rested next to hers, and she couldn't tell whether the sweat on her face was hers or his. And honestly, she didn't care. She didn't want to move away. Instead, she cuddled closer.

The floor of the elevator felt cool against her back, but she didn't want to get up. She didn't know how long they'd been in the elevator, but she could stay here for two more hours if he was with her. She didn't harbor any illusions. They were good together. They'd always been good together, even if they hadn't lasted as long-term partners.

Regardless of what he'd said about wanting her back, Chloe didn't expect Sean to stay. He was in her life for the moment, so she would seize the day, or what was left of the night, and enjoy sex for the sake of sex. Men did it all the time, right?

She ignored the inner voice that wanted to resume their relationship. She wouldn't start hoping for or dreaming about the future this time around. This time, she'd settle for closure.

Sean lifted himself off her. "That was good, Chloe."

"Yeah," she said, enjoying the feel of his skin as she ran one hand up his back and another along his shoulder.

"It was quick." She heard a rueful note in his voice. "I'll do better next time."

Better? Dear God. Any better and he'd kill her. "I loved it, Sean."

Lia Sebastian

"I'm glad." He shifted her until they lay side by side. "Will you let me stay with you?"

Her breath caught. She wished she could see his face, not only because it was handsome, but because she wanted to see his expression. It was still too dark to make out his features. "Yes. You can stay tonight."

He kissed her gently and thoroughly. "Thank you."

* * * * *

They didn't stay in the elevator long after that. Within half an hour, the elevator had been fixed, and they were in Chloe's apartment. "Make yourself comfortable," she said, as she emerged from her bedroom and entered the kitchen. She wore the same yellow tank but had changed into a pair of jeans. "Are you hungry? I could fix—mmm."

A moment before, Sean had been in the living room. Now he stood behind her, with one arm wrapped around her waist.

"I'm hungry," he said, pulling her closer until she felt his erection against her butt. "But not for food."

Chloe felt her own reawakening desire as she leaned into him. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the comfortable and familiar pose. It was as if he'd never left.

But he had. A small part of her couldn't forget what happened, couldn't forget the pain he'd caused. She ignored that voice and resolved to tuck the past away for the moment. She couldn't have him forever—she knew that—but she had him now.

"Why did we bother to get dressed?" Sean nuzzled her ear.

She laughed, then shivered when his hand slipped under her top and touched bare skin. "So the maintenance men wouldn't see us naked."

"Good reason. I don't want anyone seeing you naked but me."

That sounded possessive. Was that a good sign? *No hopes*, she reminded herself. *Only closure.* It was her new mantra. But when he cupped her breast, she didn't feel closure—she felt heat and connection. She couldn't keep herself from moaning when he lifted the tank top over her head.

Between Floors

"Thanks for not wearing a bra."

"You're welcome," she said, trying to sound relaxed despite the fact that he was unbuttoning her pants. "You really don't want anything to eat? I could make some—" She gasped when one hand slid under her jeans and into her underwear.

"Some what?"

He sounded way too calm for a man who had his hand in her panties. Two could play at this, though, if she managed to remember what she'd been talking about. "Some...spaghetti." She exhaled raggedly when his hand slipped from just below her stomach to the soft curls above her sex.

"I'm not in the mood for spaghetti." He breathed the words into her ear.

She shivered. "OK, maybe I could—" She squealed softly when he turned her to face him, and lifted her into his arms. "What about dinner?" she asked, when she saw he was heading for her bedroom.

"Later." He bent his head to kiss her. "Right now, I plan to feast on you."

He carried her into the bedroom, put her gently on the bed, and turned on the bedside lamp. Then his gaze centered on her, and Chloe loved being the focus of his attention. She faced him, leaning up on her forearms. There was a certain freedom in being half naked, but she enjoyed the look in his eyes the most. He looked as if he wanted to savor every inch of her. The air felt cool on her breasts, and she shivered.

"Are you cold?" His eyes were fixed on hers, and he walked straight toward her like a man who knew exactly what he wanted.

"A little." But she stayed where she was rather than crawling under the covers.

He lay next to her. "You won't be cold for long."

She stopped feeling cold the instant his hand touched her skin. He slid two fingers along her collarbone, touching her gently as if he feared she would break apart if he applied more pressure.

She leaned into his touch and shivered again, this time from the heat of his hand moving from her collarbone down between her breasts.

Lia Sebastian

She leaned forward, encouraging him to touch her more firmly, to cup her breasts.

He only smiled and pulled his hand away until he stroked her again with that light touch. He moved his hand down from between her breasts to rest on her abdomen.

She lifted one hand to cover his. "Don't tease."

Leaning over, he kissed her, kept kissing her until nothing existed outside his mouth, his hands, and what was happening in her bed. He was pulling her jeans now, easing them slowly down her legs in a way that made her think of an erotic massage. Damn it. Why didn't he just toss the pants?

She wanted him now, but when she tried to bring his hands to her breasts he moved his hands out of reach.

He set aside the pants, and turned back to look at her.

She wore only panties, panties already damp with desire. When he continued to watch her, she lifted her hips in subtle invitation and watched his eyes light with passion.

He returned to the bed and to her, placing his hands alongside her chest.

The touch of his mouth on the side of one breast made her gasp with pleasure. *Yes*. He nibbled softly, so softly, moving his lips from the side to underneath her left breast. His hand toyed with the nipple of her right breast, and she trembled under the dual sensations of his hand and mouth.

Slight trembles grew into shudders by the time he got her naked. She'd fall to pieces soon if he didn't satisfy her; she was sure of it. When he rolled her nipple with his tongue, she cried out, and her sex ached to be touched and taken. She shuddered again when his mouth clamped on her breast. "Sean, please. I want...I want..." She wanted him inside her.

"I know what you want," he whispered, smiling as he echoed her earlier words. But he took his time, kissing his way down her torso to her abdomen. When he spread her legs wide, she knew he meant it when he'd said he wanted to feast on her. Still, she wasn't prepared for the way it felt

Between Floors

when his mouth descended on her and his tongue gently licked her clitoris.

Chloe didn't bother to hold back the scream of pleasure.

"Come...inside me now." The tip of his cock was in her before she finished the sentence. He pushed inside her so slowly she had to stifle another scream. Instead, she lifted her hips to meet him, and his cock sank deeply into her.

She shifted, rising to meet each thrust. She hadn't thought there could be more pleasure than when his mouth was on her clit, but now she knew she was wrong. Feeling her inner muscles surround him was even better, was more....

She felt him groan and shudder inside her, filling her with his cum, an instant before her orgasm hit.

"Chloe." After the tremors passed, he eased out of her and reached up to touch her face.

She took his hand in hers. "Sean."

He looked into her eyes as he brought their joined hands to his lips and kissed the back of her hand.

The expression in his face overwhelmed her, and she moved to press her face against his neck.

Putting one arm around her, he pulled her against him. He said nothing, just continued to hold her close as they drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Her body throbbed. She shifted her hips, lifting them in a vain hope that Sean would be there, that he would ease the ache between her thighs. As she expected, her hips met only air, and she kept her eyes closed so she didn't have to acknowledge her empty bed. She moaned softly.

In an instant, she was lifted and moved on top of Sean's body. She felt his thick erection and realized he was as turned on as she. For a moment, she didn't move, not wanting to do anything that might disrupt the dream. Then she reached down between them and stroked his cock.

Lia Sebastian

Even with her eyes closed, she knew he wanted her. She could feel it in the reaction of his body, by the way his cock shifted in her hand, and in the way he sucked in his breath when she cupped his sac. She knew his body well, knew what would make him crazy. The dream felt so real and incredibly intense. She hated knowing that she would wake up any second and find him gone, as she'd done countless times before.

Dream or not, she wanted him now.

She moved quickly, positioning herself above him and sliding down to take his hard penis inside her. He was thick and warm as she sank onto him. It felt real, as if he were actually part of her, hard and hot. It was better than any dream she remembered. Her dreams usually left her feeling empty, but this time Sean filled her—not only her body, but all of her. She stopped moving, afraid once again that she would wake and find herself alone.

He shifted beneath her, pushing his hips against her in an abrupt movement that startled her fully awake. It wasn't a dream.

He wasn't a dream.

"I need you, Chloe."

Need? He wanted her, she knew, but need was something different, something he'd never admitted before. But when he lifted his hips again, pushing his cock deeper, she stopped questioning his choice of words and simply moved with him. She welcomed his body, welcomed him.

"Ride me."

"Yes." She rose until only the head of his cock was inside her, and lowered herself slowly, using muscles she'd almost forgotten. She squeezed her body around him the way he'd always liked.

He still liked it—his eyes widened with pleasure each time his cock entered her.

When she maintained a slow rhythm, he lifted his hips again.

"Please."

"Yes." She rode him hard, taking him deeper inside her with each stroke. She loved the feel of him, hard inside her. Her climax built, starting

Between Floors

as a slow burst of pleasure that swelled until she exploded around him. Within minutes, he followed, groaning and pulsing inside her.

“Chloe,” he said, pulling her close once again.

She felt his hand stroke her hair as she collapsed on top of him. The last thing she heard before falling asleep was Sean’s voice saying, “I love you.”

Chapter Four

Chloe wanted one thing—coffee. She opened her cupboard, shifting aside her everyday coffee. Today called for more, for the expensive brand she saved for days when she really needed a boost. She pulled out a bag, measured carefully, and poured the grounds into the filter of the coffee machine. When she hit the button that would start the coffee-making process, she noticed something she hadn't allowed herself to see before.

Her hands were shaking.

She clasped them together and turned away from the coffee machine. Walk, she told herself, and her feet moved mechanically until she stood by the table.

She didn't know why she felt this way—kind of...disconnected from herself. She should be happy, right? Sean had stayed the night, giving her an opportunity to work off some of her sexual frustration. He was still in bed, asleep.

If they were still living together, she would take him coffee and allow herself to be coaxed back into bed with him. But they weren't living together. They weren't even dating. In fact, the last time he'd been in her apartment was six months ago, when she'd walked into this kitchen and seen a small pile of suitcases and boxes. The stack was so small, she'd almost tripped over it.

She'd been fresh from work, ready to enjoy a quiet night with Sean. The boxes brought her up short. *Weird*, was what she'd thought at the time, when he had walked into the room, wearing his coat.

Between Floors

"I brought home a movie. What do you think about...?" She'd taken a step forward to greet him in her usual way, with a long, warm kiss. Then she'd seen the look in his eyes—one she'd never seen before and hadn't been able to identify at first. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

He'd stepped away from her. God, it hurt to remember it, though at the time, the action had only confused her.

"I have to go," he'd said.

She'd frowned in confusion. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure yet."

Not sure yet? That was odd, when his things were stacked and ready to go. "How long will you be gone?"

He hadn't answered immediately. He'd only stared at her with the brown eyes she loved. That's when she'd seen the sorrow in them. That's when she'd known.

"You aren't coming back," she'd whispered.

"No."

The pain of hearing that one word had been sharp and vicious, like a knife slicing her to the bone. "Why?" Her mind had raced back over the previous few weeks. Had she done something to piss him off? He'd been quieter than usual, but she figured he was in one of his pensive moods. "What did I do?"

"It's not you, Chloe. I—I...can't stay."

"What do you mean, you can't stay? You've been staying for months now. If you can't anymore, I'd like to know why."

Sean only shook his head and crossed the room to pick up two suitcases.

Though she'd been nearly overwhelmed with panic, she'd told herself to think. If she could only get him to stay a little while, they could talk about whatever was bothering him and work things out. "When are you leaving?" She hadn't been able to smile, but she'd managed to ask, "What about the rest of your stuff?" He wouldn't leave without packing everything else, right? They could discuss things while he packed, until she could convince him to unpack.

"This is it."

Lia Sebastian

She'd watched him walk out the door with the suitcases. Two suitcases. Two suitcases and three boxes contained everything he owned. She'd known he didn't have much, had teased him about how quickly he was able to move in. But the sight of the small boxes left in her kitchen hit her with the force of a baseball bat. The boxes had blurred and cleared as she stared at them. Even when she put her hands over her eyes, the pain was so bad, she'd had to sit down.

The boxes told the truth—he'd never intended to stay. He'd moved in, shared her apartment and her bed, but he'd never planned to share her life. When she realized it, she'd simply gone to her bedroom and waited there until she heard him return for the rest of his belongings and leave the apartment. Since there were only three boxes, it hadn't taken long.

When she'd finally returned to the kitchen, the key to her apartment lay on the kitchen table. It was the only indication he'd been there.

Remembering that moment of discovery, Chloe looked at the table where she'd left the key sitting for days after Sean moved out. It was gone now, of course. She'd thrown it in a drawer when she couldn't stand to see it any more. It was around here somewhere.

Just like Sean.

She wished she could call Mary, her best friend, or Sabrina. She could use advice. The clock told her it was too early to call anyone. Right now, she was on her own.

She should be glad Sean was in her bed, glad he was here so she could get him out of her system and move on. She should be—

I love you.

He'd never said those words when they dated, when they'd lived together. Hearing them last night should have made her happy, right? Maybe they could get back what they lost, but she didn't know what they had back then, let alone why they'd lost it. She didn't know why her heart still felt torn to shreds.

So much for her plan to simply enjoy the sex. She should have known it never would have worked. She still loved him, even though she never understood why he'd left.

Between Floors

All Chloe could think about was one thing—two suitcases and three boxes were all Sean had needed to move out last time. She didn't know if she could let him back in.

* * * * *

Chloe was gone when he awoke. He knew it even before he reached out and felt her side of the bed. It was cold—she'd been gone a while. His chest felt constricted, making it hard to breathe until he heard her moving in the kitchen. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until he exhaled roughly. Then he smelled coffee. She hadn't left.

Idiot. Of course, she hadn't left. It was her apartment, her bed. He hoped it would be their bed.

You can stay tonight. He frowned at the memory of her words. Tonight was over, but if Sean had his way, he'd be here for many more nights to come. He got out of bed, pulled on his jeans, and walked into the kitchen. She sat at the table, wearing a pink robe and looking into her coffee cup.

"Want a refill?" He didn't wait for her to answer, but picked up the mug and poured another cup. He added a spoonful of sugar and brought it back to her.

"Just the way I like it," she said, taking the mug from his hand with an absent smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He waited for her to look at him, but she avoided his eyes. He bent down to kiss her cheek, and she leaned back to evade his touch. *Damn it. What was wrong?* He turned away to pour himself a cup of coffee.

"I guess this is it."

The cold tone in her voice made him turn to face her. "What?"

"When do you leave?"

He felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. "Leave? Did I miss something last night? I'm not leaving."

"Yes, you are."

Lia Sebastian

The finality in her voice sent a chill up his spine, but he spoke calmly. "If you're saying we're done with each other, you're wrong. That's not what I want, and it's not what you want."

Her mug dropped an inch to the table with a snap. "Don't tell me what I want, Sean."

"I don't have to." He leaned forward and placed one hand on top of hers. "You wouldn't have been with me in the first place if you didn't want me. You wouldn't have let me stay last night if you felt nothing."

"It's called chemistry. We have it in spades, but there's no deeper significance—"

"I know you, Chloe. Sex without commitment isn't what you do."

Her eyes closed tightly. "Fine. You win. I can't do this."

He frowned before taking a sip of his coffee. "What's 'this'?"

She met his eyes for the first time since he entered the room. "I thought I could be with you, enjoy the moment. I wish I could. But that's not me." She slid her hand out from under his and picked up her mug again.

What did *that* mean? "What are you trying to say? Spell it out."

"I was going to enjoy our time together, not worry about the future. That's the way most of my relationships have been. But I can't do it with you. I want more. I wanted more six months ago when you left, and I want more now. This—whatever it is—needs to end before I'm hurt again."

No. *No*. "Why end things? I want more, and you want more." He stood and paced for several seconds before stopping in front of her. "If we need to slow things down, fine. But I'm not walking away."

"Uh huh."

"What does that mean?"

"You left before, Sean. How do I know you won't do it again?"

The walls of the room suddenly felt like they were closing around him. "I explained why I left," he muttered, and began pacing again.

She pushed away from the table and stood, pulling her robe even more securely around her. "Sorry, I'm not buying that you wanted me too much."

Between Floors

He whipped around to face her.

"And don't tell me again that you love me. If you loved me and really wanted me in your life, you wouldn't have left like that. You left me bleeding in this kitchen."

His mouth opened and closed before he spoke softly. "That's not true. You weren't bleeding. I would have noticed—"

"My *heart* was bleeding because of the way you left. You walked out without telling me what went wrong, what I could do to make it work between us."

"It wasn't *you*. I—" Oh, God. If he'd made her feel back then like he felt now, he must have completely broken her heart. He fought a sharp, threatening stab of emotion.

"All you said was you couldn't stay. I loved you, Sean. I *loved* you, and you couldn't spare ten minutes to tell me why you were leaving."

She'd *loved* him? "I—you never said—"

"Why should I have to say it? You know me. A minute ago, you said I don't do sex without commitment. If you know me well enough to know that, tell me how you think I felt about you?"

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"If you're really sorry—"

"I am."

"—then tell me the truth. Why did you leave?"

"I..." The look on her face told him one thing—he needed to explain what happened or lose her forever. He had to say it, to get the words out somehow. "I'm telling the truth. I'm not used to getting what I want." He took a deep breath. "Please, listen to me. I'll try to explain."

"I'm listening."

"I told you about my parents."

Chloe looked down at the floor. "You said they're dead."

"They died when I was ten."

"God, I didn't know how old you were when it happened. I'm sorry...."

He waved that aside. It wasn't the issue now. "I lived in foster homes for a while."

Lia Sebastian

"I didn't know."

"I don't talk about it much. I thought I'd put it behind me."

"It must have been tough," Chloe ventured.

"Yeah. I lived in a few homes and ended up with one couple, the Palmers. I loved it there. They had a big yard, some kids my age in the neighborhood."

"It sounds nice."

"Nice. That doesn't begin to describe it. I had been bouncing around between different houses for years, but the Palmer's house was the first place I started to think of as home. I don't know how to say it, but it was more than the yard and the neighborhood."

"They were good to you."

His throat felt thick. "Yeah. I felt like...part of the family."

"How long did you stay with them?"

"About five months. One day the social worker came by and pulled me aside. I thought I was in trouble or that I was going to move on to the next place."

Chloe reached out a hand toward him. "What happened?"

"She asked if I liked it there, if I wanted to stay there. If I wanted to be adopted." He swallowed. "I wanted it. I had never considered the possibility before—hell, I was thirteen, trying to muddle through each day. But when she asked me what I wanted, I knew. I wanted to be adopted. I wanted to be home."

She could see what was coming, he knew, and tears began to fill her eyes. "It didn't happen." The words were choked with emotion.

"Don't cry, Chloe." Wanting a connection, he took her hand. He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand as he continued. "No, it didn't. She had jumped the gun by talking to me before talking to them. The Palmers told her I could stay another six months. But they wanted a kid of their own. They didn't want me."

"My God." Her eyes fired with anger. "How could they do that?"

Her indignation almost made him smile. "They weren't bad people. They just..."

"What?" She squeezed his hand, a silent gesture of comfort.

Between Floors

He shrugged. "They wanted something different."

"That was their loss, Sean."

"I told myself it didn't matter, that I didn't really want it. Time passed and I stopped thinking about it. Most of the time. Then I met you."

She held her breath, afraid that any sound would keep him from continuing. This was what she'd always wanted. He was talking about himself, about the past, who he was. She didn't move, except to rest her hand on his arm and wait for him to speak.

"The first time I saw you, I couldn't stop looking at you, still can't stop looking at you. I wanted you from the first day." His eyes met hers, and she could see the emotion in them, the need for her to understand.

She nodded. "I wanted you the same way."

"When we started dating, I went into it much as you said, planning to enjoy it while it lasted. We're single adults, obviously compatible. I moved in here. And six months ago, I realized something."

Heaven help her. Was she ready for this? "What?"

"You're home to me, Chloe."

Sean's simple statement nearly knocked her off her feet. *You're home to me.*

Oh, God. She thought about what he'd told her, about the family—the home—he'd thought he had, and lost. Years later, he'd left Scottsdale. *It didn't feel like home to me,* he'd said on the elevator.

Only *she* did.

She looked into Sean's eyes and saw a plea in them. Finally, *finally*, she understood. He'd lost one home when his parents died, and had a second one knocked out of reach. She was no longer surprised that he had left. "*I can't do this,*" he'd told her. Now she knew why. What he'd really meant was that he couldn't stay and risk losing her, too.

He breathed heavily. "I left because...because—"

"Because you didn't want to risk losing another home," she finished.

He shook his head in self-frustration. "I left because I'm stupid. Because I didn't know how to talk to you. Hell, I still don't know how to

Lia Sebastian

talk to you. But I'll try. I swear, I'll try. I'm tired of being away from you, being without you."

He was still afraid he would lose her, she realized. Afraid that he would lose out on the one place that felt like home.

"I know I hurt you."

Tears filled her eyes. "You did."

"I'm sorry. When I left, I didn't let myself think about how much it must have hurt you. I can't stand knowing how much I did."

"I know." She blinked away the tears before they could fall.

"I won't do it again, won't leave you again. I promise. From now on, you're not getting rid of me. I want you. I want to be with you. I don't care where—here or somewhere else if you want. Someplace with elevators that work."

She laughed, but it sounded a little like a sob. "Elevators sound good."

"I want to go to bed with you at night and wake with you in the morning. I want you to buy me more T-shirts. I just want you."

She nodded, too choked up to speak.

"Chloe." He stepped toward her, brought up a hand to brush her hair from her face and cup her cheek. "I'm asking you to give me a chance. Give us a chance."

She looked into his eyes and was warmed by what she saw. "Yes," she said, and didn't have time to say another word before he took her in his arms, lifting her off her feet and spinning in a circle.

"Thank you." He hugged her closer, resting his forehead against hers. "I love you."

"I know." She smiled at him as he set her back on her feet. "I love you. Welcome home."

The End

Between Floors

Author Bio

After years of working as a writer, editor, and proofreader, Lia Sebastian picked up her laptop and began writing fiction. Since she loves writing about relationships—and happy endings—romance was a natural choice. Lia enjoys the discovery process of each new story. Visit her Web site at: <http://www.liasebastian.com>.

Lia Sebastian

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Chapter One

Sabrina Moore stared at the man sitting on the other side of the conference table and reached one inescapable conclusion—she wanted to jump him.

She never guessed she would feel this way when she was asked to work with Peter Merrill fourteen days, three hours, and seven minutes ago. Not that she was counting. Sure, she enjoyed looking at him. Who wouldn't? He was tall, dark, and not-quite-handsome, with thick black hair and dark green eyes. After a week, watching him taking off his suit jacket had become the highlight of her day.

He wore no jacket today, and the rolled-up sleeves of his white shirt revealed muscular forearms that made her want to whimper in frustration. She fantasized about running her hands up and down those arms, feeling his muscles—

“I made you copies of the charts.” Peter handed her a small pile of papers.

Work. Right. She stifled a sigh. Obviously concentration was a problem. Unless it meant concentrating on Peter, as she'd done at this morning's meeting. Who knew quarter-end statistics could be so interesting? She sure hadn't. But when Peter had discussed market trends,

Between Floors

she hadn't been able to take her eyes off of him. Watching him from a distance was one thing. In close quarters, Peter's charisma washed over her like an endless waterfall.

"You did a great job with them," he said with a smile.

There was the problem. Peter wasn't only good looking. He noticed and praised people's strengths and listened when someone shared an opinion. The truth was, he made her feel valued, at least as a coworker. When they started working together, she had admired his appearance. Now she liked everything about him, except the fact that he didn't seem to notice her on a personal level. Not the way she noticed him. Maybe he had a girlfriend. Or two. Or—*God!*—was he gay? She hoped not.

She didn't want to think about how things would change next Monday when the project was finished and they stopped spending hours in the conference room. Maybe she should say something to test the waters, see if he was interested. Or she could just jump him. He was a guy, right? Surely he wouldn't mind. No matter what *Cosmo* said about the merits of letting a man chase you, today's woman went after what she wanted. Thinking about how he might react made her smile.

Then she swallowed and wondered when the temperature had gone up in the room.

Time to get back to work. Only half an hour left before the end of the day. Sabrina knew she should be grateful for the chance to prove her worth, to show her supervisor what she could do. Her immediate boss had indicated her hard work was sure to get the attention of the Big Boss, the man who ran Stanwood Enterprises. "Your work will send a positive message," she had said.

Sabrina had her own message for the Big Boss. *I appreciate the assignment to work with Peter Merrill. Thanks, Dad. If the torture continues, don't expect anything for Father's Day.*

* * * * *

Peter saw Sabrina's faint smile and felt his cock stir. *Shit*. It was too early for this. They still had half an hour left today to work together on the

Lia Sebastian

proposal. As if his dick could tell time. No, it saw something it liked— Sabrina Moore being its current object of affection— and it had to show its appreciation. Peter only wished it weren't so openly appreciative.

He shifted in a vain hope the move would hide his erection. How the hell was he getting this turned on when he sat halfway across the room from her?

On most days, Peter liked working at Stanwood Enterprises, which was refreshingly free of the unpredictable politics that had plagued his previous place of employment. That had been one fucked up company. Going to work was a crapshoot, with praise or insults handed out indiscriminately. Actual work performance had nothing to do with it.

That company's biggest problem was nepotism. In fact, many employees had jokingly—or not so jokingly—called it Nepotism Grand Central. Family members of the president, qualified or not, had filled most management positions. If one family member disliked you, they'd all work against you.

Accepting a job three years ago at Stanwood Enterprises was one of the best things he'd ever done. There was no nepotism here, and Peter rarely looked back. Except on days like today, when he was in a room with Sabrina Moore and his dick was hard enough to use as a paperweight. On such days, he needed to remember how much worse things could be.

Peter wasn't particularly religious, but he prayed to any deity who might be listening to make the day pass quickly.

Please make the clock move faster. Don't let her do that little thing where she presses her lips together when she concentrates, that thing that makes me want to nibble on her lower lip before sucking it into my mouth. Don't let her stand and stretch in the way that pulls her shirt tight across her breasts. And while I'm on the subject, don't let me think about her breasts and how well they would fit in my palms...

Fuck. Forget the small stuff. He needed to focus on the big request. Please, please don't let me come in my pants.

This prayer obviously wasn't working. He hadn't come in his pants yet, but it was touch and go. If only Sabrina would touch so he could go.

Between Floors

He needed to refocus. Looking away from Sabrina would be a good start. Peter had worked on this project with her for almost two weeks. They'd accomplished a lot, and it was good work, but it was at a cost. His sanity.

If she didn't stop wearing that perfume, he was likely to go insane. Being carted away in a straight jacket was a possibility. So was spontaneous combustion. Could he pretend an allergy to the scent? No, not after telling her she smelled good back on day two. *Note to self. Think twice about complimenting a woman, no matter what Mom says.*

Thank God this was the last week of the priority project. If he was lucky, he might live through it. Peter turned to look at Sabrina. What was she smiling about, anyway?

She returned his look, as if waiting for him to speak.

"How do the charts look?" He picked up his stack of papers and tapped them against the tabletop to straighten them. "We should have this wrapped up tomorrow."

Her smile vanished. "They're fine," she said, curling her papers in her hand. "I enjoy working with you, Peter. I've learned a lot."

The woman was beautiful, amazingly gorgeous. She wore bright pink, with a lighter pink tank top underneath her jacket. Her honey-blond hair was twisted up in some clip thing. He liked it better down around her face. Liked it when she twirled a lock of it through her fingers while reading or thinking. Sabrina was always in motion whether she was twirling her hair, tapping her pen, or doodling in her notebook. Today she'd drawn daisies.

She continued to look at him with those big blue eyes. Yes, she was beautiful. Her work had proved she was smart. Her words proved that she was sweet, too.

Damn it.

"Yeah," he managed. "Me too."

He watched her blink slowly, twice, before she abruptly stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to use the bathroom."

Lia Sebastian

* * * * *

Sabrina wanted to kick herself. *I need to use the bathroom. Oh, that was clever.* It was partly true, though. She was in the bathroom, but instead of using the facilities, she sat in the women's lounge area holding a tissue to her face and tried not to cry.

How stupid. Of course Peter didn't really want to work with her. Why would he? He was on the fast track to management. A few of their coworkers said he was sure to be promoted by the end of the year. Why would he want to work with an average, mid-level employee when he could have his pick of partners?

She could have a job at the top if she wanted it. All she had to do was ask her father for a higher position, and he'd give it to her. But she didn't want to rise in the company because of her father. It was one reason why she told no one who her parents were and used her mother's maiden name. If she advanced, she wanted to do it on her own merit, not because of family connections.

Hearing Peter's forced, "me too," made her stomach clench. She wanted to believe his lack of interest was because he didn't want to date the boss' daughter. But he didn't know who her father was and he still didn't want her, not even as a coworker. Truth was, his actions lately were odd, like he didn't even want to be in the same room with her.

Just her luck. She found a man she was interested in, and he couldn't even stand to be around her. Okay, that sounded pathetic, but everyone was allowed a little self-pity now and then. She sniffled into the tissue and hoped Peter would leave before she came out.

* * * * *

Okay, she's gone to the bathroom. Peter folded his arms and leaned against the conference table to wait. Growing up with three sisters had taught him that a trip to the bathroom could mean one of a dozen things. Sabrina could be there for obvious reasons, but her downcast gaze made him suspect otherwise. She seemed upset, and he wanted to know why.

Between Floors

She'd been fine five minutes ago. Since her briefcase and purse were still here, she was sure to return. Maybe he could get his body back under control while she was gone.

When ten minutes went by without Sabrina's reappearance, Peter started to worry. Damn it, where was she? If she didn't show in another ten minutes, he'd ask a female employee to investigate. He looked at his watch and groaned. He doubted anyone was still around. Stanwood Enterprises was a good company, but there was always a mass exodus at 5:00 P.M.

Peter was pacing when Sabrina finally returned. She entered the room, tissue in hand, but stopped walking abruptly when she saw him. "Oh," she said, wrapping her arms around her waist. "You're still here."

"You've been crying." He forced himself not to reach out to her. What was wrong?

"Oh," she said again, looking away from him and wiping her face, as if to brush away tears. "No, I'm fine—"

"Sabrina, I can see you've been crying." Shit, he probably wasn't supposed to notice. His handling-crying-women skills were obviously rusty. No surprise since his sisters lived in other states now. He had a moment of panic before he took a deep breath. "Can I help with something?"

"No. I just want to go home."

"Okay. Let me walk you out to your car." He stepped toward her and gently took her arm.

"Don't you have to go somewhere?" She went suddenly still, almost frozen—this woman who usually smiled and was always in motion.

"No, I don't need to be anywhere else. I need to help you if I can. Or I can listen. Whatever you want."

"Right." Sabrina jerked her arm away from him. "Forget you saw anything. I know you don't want to be around me. Why act concerned? I'll be fine."

* * * * *

Lia Sebastian

He should have been happy to leave, happy to get away from her. In fact, Sabrina was surprised he was still here. She hadn't expected him to look angry.

He looked straight into her eyes. "Who said I don't want to be around you?"

"No one said it. No one said anything. But I'm not stupid." She took a step away from him before she continued. "I can tell you don't like being around me. You don't have to pretend anymore."

Peter frowned, then turned away and walked to the window.

She paused, not knowing what to say next. Why didn't he respond? "It's okay, you know. I don't expect everyone to like me. I was just hoping—"

"Hoping what?" he said sharply, turning to face her.

In for a penny. She might as well go for it. "I was hoping you'd like me and like working with me. I've...sort of admired you since we started this project, and I like working with you."

He couldn't have looked more stunned if she hit him with a two by four. If she didn't feel hurt, the expression on his face would have amused her.

"God," he said, taking a step toward her.

She walked to the table to get her briefcase. "Don't worry about it."

"You're wrong."

Sabrina glanced at him again. He no longer looked stunned, but she couldn't interpret his expression.

"You don't have to—"

Peter interrupted. "Sabrina. I enjoy working with you. You know your field, you work hard, and you're good at what you do."

Huh? "Then tell me why you sit across the room from me when we work?" she challenged. "Why do you race out of here at the end of the day? Why do you look at me the way you do?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by the way I look at you, but I can guess. I'll answer your last question first. I look at you the way I do because I want to fuck you so much I'm ready to explode. I want to fuck

Between Floors

you until we're both too tired to move."