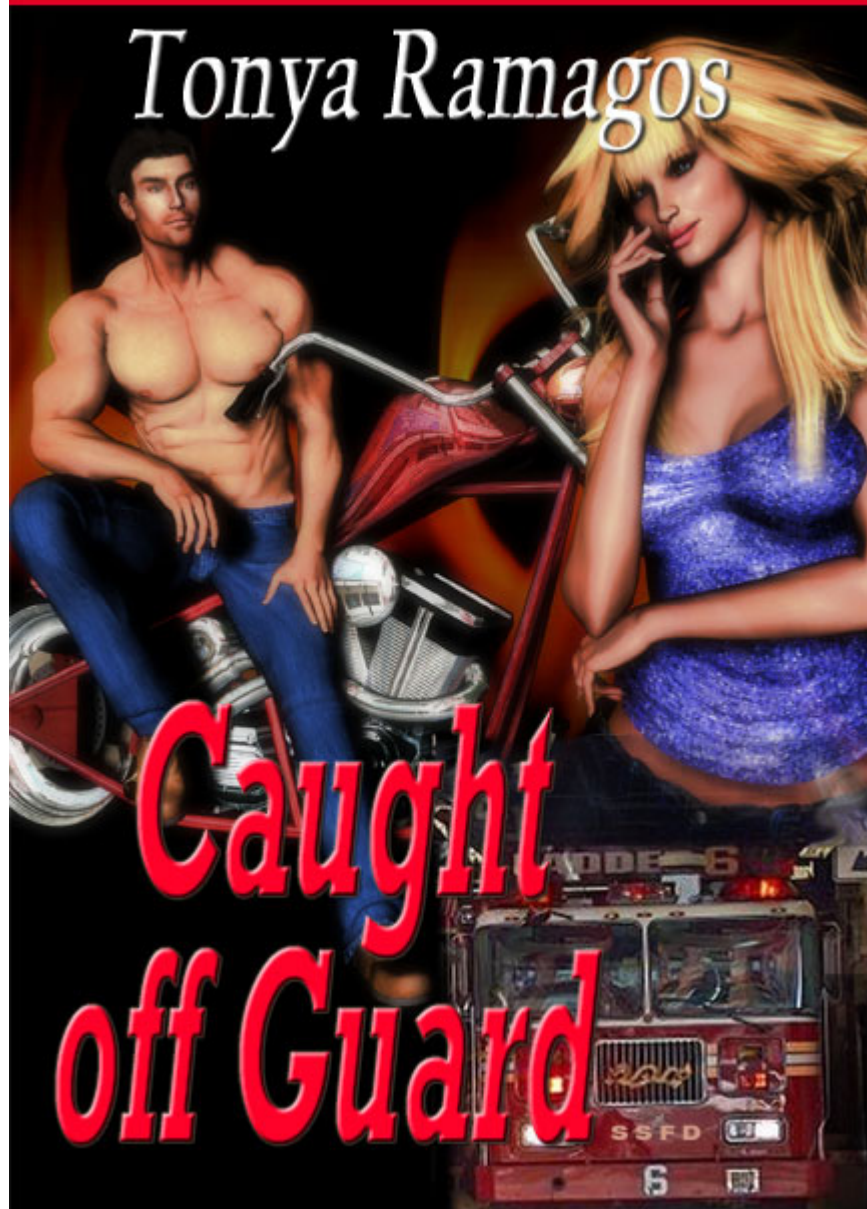


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Tonya Ramagos

Caught
off Guard



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SCORCHING: Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

SEXTREME: Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

Tonya Ramagos

Caught off Guard

Fire Department Captain Dean Wolcott has struggled to tame the wild boy ways of his childhood. Now an adult, he's a responsible and respected member of the Silver Springs Fire Department. But with all he has achieved, there is one thing he still longs for...Veronica Abbott. The sweet, innocent, rich girl was always been out of his league, but that never stopped her from monopolizing his dreams. Now she's back, and the woman she has become leaves Dean with his jaw touching the floor!

After a life of domineering parents and becoming a widow in her mid-twenties, Veronica is finally in control of her future. And a future of excitement, surprise and spice is exactly what she wants. Her new business—a shop of sexual favors and lingerie—is sure to give her some of that, but it's the prospect of Dean Wolcott that really lights the fire inside her.

CAUGHT OFF GUARD

TONYA RAMAGOS



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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Caught off Guard

By Tonya Ramagos

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PROLOGUE

Captain Dean Wolcott was dreaming. He knew he had to be when he stepped out his front door to find the beauty in the driveway. And no, the beauty wasn't his motorcycle, though the fire-engine-red Harley FLSTFI Fat Boy, with its twin cam engine, was the current love of his life. It was the long legged, long-haired, completely *naked* blond leaning against it that had him stopping in his tracks

He took a moment to study her. Her sunshine hair fell over one shoulder barely covering a breast, her hair a contrast against her completely naked, tanned skin. Her breasts weren't large by any means, but they were full, perfectly rounded, and oh so enticing. His palms burned to cup those breasts, his thumbs aching to graze over their taut, dark brown peaks.

He fisted his hands. His gaze slid down her flat stomach, over the patch of blond curls that was barely visible between her legs—oh, yeah, she was a natural blond—and continued down. Her legs were toned, perfectly shaped, and seemed to go on for miles. He swallowed. His mouth watering at the thought of tasting them, skimming his tongue from her ankle up the long length of one leg until he licked himself home to that wonderfully enticing pussy. She would have no problem wrapping those legs around his waist as he slid...

No. Stop it. You can't do this again. He was not going to get lost in those thoughts again. Not this time. This wasn't the first time this woman, this *vision*, had visited him in his dreams, and each time he allowed the scenario to play without a single word spoken.

Not this time, he thought with a determination that surprised even him. This time,

there would be conversation. This time, he would tell her to leave him alone, to stop tormenting his dreams.

Because I can't have her, he thought miserably. No matter how badly he wanted her, no matter how many years he had dreamed of her, he could never have her.

She raised a hand, crooked a finger at him. *No. Don't go near her. If you do, you're doomed.* He tried to dig in his heels but realized all too quickly it wouldn't work when he stood on solid concrete. *Tell her to go. Tell her to leave you alone.* He tried to speak, but no sound came out.

Instead, just like every other repeat of this dream, he found himself being pulled toward her. Then the scene changed, as if someone had clicked the channel button on a remote control and he was back inside his house with her in his bed. He was naked now, too, and on top of her.

Dear God, please don't let me wake up, he thought as his gazed down at her, felt the soft warmth of her skin against his. Her hands were on his shoulders, her long fingernails digging into his back. He could feel those legs wrapped tightly around his waist as he slowly began to ease the tip of his cock toward the sopping wet opening of her pussy.

All thoughts of telling her to leave, of getting her out of his dreams had been swept away. Replaced by the overwhelming need to have her, to be inside her, even if only in his fantasies.

A loud crack of thunder had him stopping just before his dick slid home. *What the hell?* It hadn't been raining when they were in his driveway. Then an ear-piercing shrill cut through the sexually charged atmosphere, and Dean's eyes popped open.

He sighed with the quiet desperation of a man whose fantasies had just been shattered to bits.

It was going to be a long night.

Dean sat up, struggling to push his blond vision out of his mind as he swung his legs over the edge of his cot and waited for the no-nonsense voice of the dispatcher. Around him, several of the men mumbled and cursed as they jumped into their turnout gear and prepared to roll. They complained, but Dean knew in truth they loved it every time the tones went off. There was nothing like a good raging fire to get the blood and adrenaline pumping through the veins. Nothing that was, except an incredibly sexy blond, he amended.

For a man, that adrenaline often settled in his groin, and it was a good thing, too, because his dream had left him with a very visible hard-on. Still, if anyone noticed, they would simply think it was from the thrill and anticipation of the call and not from the fact that he had been only seconds from a serious wet dream.

Across town, nestled in the central communications office located at the Sheriff's Department, Julia Bradley was tonight's dispatcher on duty. Dean had met her only once and had been blown away by how far off his impression of her had been. She was a young, petite slip of a thing but one would never guess by the authoritative, deep timbre of her radio voice.

“Engine 1, Ladder 12, Rescue 4, we have a report of a structure fire at 3211 Cumberland Road. Unknown occupancy. Time out, 2430.”

That announcement kicked the guys into higher gear, eliciting whoops from a couple of men and even a Hoo-yah from the ex-Navy SEAL. Dean quickly slipped into his boots, snatched his handheld radio off the table between the cots. He followed the rest of his crew down the steps to the bays, listening to the voice of Zack Houston, B shift’s radio operator, over the speaker, confirming the location of the fire for the men responding.

“I’m taking the IC truck,” Dean called to the crew, bolting around them and through the open bay doors to the Incident Command SUV parked out front. Rain poured in sheets from clouds so dark they nearly blended in with the black night sky. He was instantly soaked. He snatched his handheld off his belt and slid into the driver’s seat. Keying up the radio, he said, “900 in route with Incident Command 2,” as he started the SUV and peeled out of the parking lot. The engineers—more commonly known as drivers—of the rescue engine and ladder companies followed his announcement as they also called in route.

Visibility sucked even with the windshield wipers on full blast and the momentary brightness from streaks of lightning that shot through the sky. Dean clenched the wheel as he strained to see the road in front of him. Cumberland Road was less than three miles from the station, but weather like this would slow their response time.

“And make putting out this fire a real bitch,” he grumbled to himself.

Though fires were generally put out with water, and rain was in fact water, fighting a fire in the pouring rain only made the job a thousand times more difficult. It slowed their response time, made everything as slick as frozen ice and as messy as a mudslide. No doubt, it was the weather, the lightning most likely, that had caused this fire to begin.

But to his pleasant surprise, the rain had diminished to a mere drizzle by the time he pulled up at 3211 Cumberland Road. Strange how quickly the weather could change in the distance of a few blocks.

A small crowd of people, some huddled under umbrellas for protection, had gathered in the yards across from and next to the house numbered 3211. *The Abbott house*, Dean realized. “Wouldn’t you know it,” he muttered as he pulled the SUV to a stop in the street and hopped out, radio in hand.

From his vantage point at the left front corner of the house, he couldn’t see anything wrong. It was a woman in the yard next door frantically waving and pointing that drew his attention to the right side of the house. Sure enough, they had a fire on their hands.

Dean keyed up his radio. “IC 2 on scene, smoke visible but no flame,” he reported to his crew.

“Engine 1, 10-4 that. We’re right behind you, Cap. Where do you want us?”

Dean turned, shook his head, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. The bright red and clear rotating lights of the engine were already visible, the siren screaming louder

as the truck sped toward him. He should have known. Not even a little rain would slow down Ryan Magee, the Engine Company's engineer and former Navy SEAL.

"Roll to the house, Engine 1," Dean said into his radio. "Ladder 12, take hydrant duty, then proceed."

"Ladder 12, 10-4."

The four-men crew of Engine 1 hopped out before the truck even came to a full stop. Dean made a mental note to reprimand the men for that one later. They all knew better. Safety was always an issue on any scene, but right now, they had a job to do.

"Anyone inside?" Lieutenant Trip Barrett's usual lazy, Texas drawl was clipped and accent free in the face of action. He grabbed a pike pole—a long metal pole with an arrowhead and hook on one end—and other tools from the truck before sprinting across the yard with Jason Graham to the front door of the house. The firefighters waited just outside the door for Bailey Lamont—B shift's latest probie and female firefighter—who had stayed behind to help Ryan pull and connect the engine's hose before joining them.

Dean felt a quick twinge of what might have been fear, or apprehension, as Lamont hightailed it across the yard to meet up with the guys before entering the house. She was fresh meat from the Fire Academy, on the job for only a week. In that week, she had responded to several calls, all of them minor, none being a real test of her capabilities. Tonight's call, on the other hand, held the potential to put her newly learned knowledge through the ringer.

She had to be put to the test at some point, and knowing that Barrett was leading her crew gave Dean the ability to push his concerns aside. Lieutenant Trip Barrett was one of the best. Lamont would certainly be safe in his hands.

"It should be vacant but proceed with caution until we know for sure." The house on Cumberland Road had become a second for the Abbott's when they took up primary residence in Florida a few years back. Since they always failed to alert the Fire Department of their comings and goings, Dean had no way of knowing where they spent their time tonight.

"Ladder 12, charge the line," Ryan Magee said into his radio before turning to Dean. "You know who owns this place, Cap?"

Oh, yeah. He knew. The parents of the woman he had longed for in and out of his dreams for as long as he could remember. The parents of the woman he could never have.

"The Abbott's," he confirmed and wondered fleetingly where dear, sweet Veronica Abbott was these days. Was she still the delicate, innocent soul he had fallen head over heels for so long ago? Or had the death of her husband changed all of that?

The three men of Ladder Company had taken their place on the right side of the house where Dean had seen the smoke. He could see his men now, one on the ground serving as spotter, another at the top of the ladder, and the third on the rooftop.

"Looks like lightning is our culprit this time, Cap." David Karston, obviously the man on the roof, reported over the radio. "I've got a 3 x 3 section here where it struck. I'm going to cut through."

“We’re empty here. Nobody’s home,” Barrett reported from inside the house. “We’re searching for the attic entrance now.”

“How’s your visibility in there?” Dean asked through his own radio.

“Smokey but not too thick,” Barrett answered.

“Ventilation hole is cut,” Karston informed. “And we have flames, gentlemen. They’re smoldering in the insulation. Looks small enough. We can handle this thing with the booster line.”

“Dean.”

He turned at the sound of his name and came nearly face to face with Lacy Fergus. She stood in the middle of the street, close enough to be heard over the noises of the trucks and pumps but a far enough distance to be safe and not get in the way.

He hadn’t spoken to Veronica Abbott’s best friend in years. Did he really have to start again tonight?

Like Veronica, Lacy came from one of the well-to-do families of Silver Springs, but unlike her best friend, she didn’t send Dean’s hormones shooting through the roof. Not that she was ugly. No, she was defiantly a very pretty woman in a business exec, completely serious, high society sort of way. She was tall—taller even in the heels she wore at 0115 in the morning. Did she ever take them off? She had a great pair of legs, too. Dean had always been a legs man, and he had to admit that hers were first rate. She was dressed in a no frills business suit, her ebony hair piled in a bun high at the back of her head.

Dean turned his attention back to Ryan who had already pulled the booster line from the truck, charged it, and passed it on to Kyle Shannon, the firefighter on the ground. The guys had this one under control. He took several steps closer to Lacy.

“Is it bad?” She didn’t look at him. Instead, her gaze was glued to the house where Karston had begun putting out the fire through the hole he made in the roof.

“Depends on how you look at it. Most people see fire as a bad thing no matter how big it is.”

She looked at him, then tilted her head and frowned.

He had to stifle a laugh. He liked getting that kind of look from women like her. It was a look that clearly said, “My time is too valuable to spend it toying around with you so give me the straight answer I’m looking for so I can go about my business.”

“I can’t tell you much at this point. It looks like lightning struck the roof. So far, the fire seems to be contained in one spot in the attic. My guys are putting that out now.”

“But it should be repairable?”

“As far as I can tell at the moment, yes.” Dean hated predicting things like this. Fire was completely unpredictable. True, his men seemed to have it under control right now. He was sure it wouldn’t be long before they would have the fire out completely, and they would be headed back to the station. Still, there was always the chance that something else could happen. They had no way of knowing what, if anything, that attic

held. If there were anything inside it that was highly flammable and the fire reached it before his men could put it out, they would be playing in a whole different ball game. “Are you still in contact with the Abbott’s? Can you notify them about the fire?”

Lacy nodded, her attention once again on the house. “I’ll call Veronica. I was going to call her in the morning anyway. She’s planning to move back into the house for a while. There shouldn’t be any reason why she can’t once the repairs are done, right?”

Dean’s mind latched onto her words. *Veronica. Moving. House. Holy God.* Veronica Abbott was coming back to Silver Springs. To live! Surprise rendered him speechless. She had been gone by the time he returned from the Fire Academy. She had left to attend college, met someone while she was away, got married soon after, and moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Dean didn’t ask, didn’t look for her when he returned. All he’d needed to do was listen. The local grapevine was always full of gossip when it came to the rich. Without uttering a word, he learned the man she married was a cop. A cop! That had been a hard one to swallow. Her parents actually allowed her to marry a cop.

He always pictured her getting married to some suit in a high-powered, executive job, who did nothing more than sit behind a desk and push a pencil all day. Then he learned that the guy she married was in fact the son of Robert McDonald II, owner of McDonald Technologies and filthy rich. Instead of following in his old man’s footsteps, Robert McDonald III apparently decided to follow his own dreams and became a cop. It had been a bad career move considering Dean heard the man had been gunned down in the line of duty two years ago. Yes, Veronica Abbott McDonald was a widow.

And she was moving back to Silver Springs.

“Captain? There shouldn’t be any reason why Veronica can’t move into the house once the repairs are done, right?” Lacy repeated her question, her irritation with him sounding more and more with each word.

“Right,” Dean forced himself to answer her. Then he fought to ignore the hope that began to build inside him at the news of Veronica’s impending return. Who was he kidding? So what if she came back to Silver Springs? That didn’t mean she would give him the time of day anymore than she had when they were growing up. No doubt she was still the same person she had been as a girl. So what if she had married a cop? He had been a rich cop. The key word there was “rich.” Despite McDonald’s career choice, he had still been from her world—her rich world.

Though Dean was no longer the wild and careless soul he had been growing up, he was still as far from the world of the rich as a man could get. Dreaming of starting something with a woman like Veronica Abbott would only lead to disappointment and pain.

Except, hadn’t he spent years imagining exactly that? There was no mystery to the blond vision leaning against the motorcycle in his fantasies. He had known all along it was Veronica. Now the woman from his dreams would be stepping back into reality.

And Dean was in trouble.

CHAPTER ONE

Veronica had second thoughts, and she didn't like it. She was so certain of her decision, had even forced herself to take a few months to ponder over it, making sure there would be no regrets before she carried through with her plans. Now she could feel the twinges of doubt attempting to take hold.

"There's no going back," she reminded herself, hoping by saying the words aloud, it would etch them in stone. In truth, she could go back. The house hadn't yet been sold. She signed the contract for the building where her store would be opening on Saturday and filled it with merchandise, but she knew how to get out of contracts, and the merchandise could be returned.

Yes, she could go back to her life in Baton Rouge and probably make it appear as though she had never left. She could go back to her dull, uneventful life and move about like a zombie as before. Dammit, she didn't want to. She was tired of living that way, tired of moving through life as if it were simply a string of one monotonous day after another. Besides, Baton Rouge didn't feel like home. Though she had lived her adult life there until now, she never felt she truly belonged. Silver Springs was her home. It always had been. That was what she wanted, what she needed, to feel at home again. She also wanted to add some spice to her life.

Silver Springs had changed a lot over the years. It was no longer the small, sleepy town it had once been. The legalization of dockside gambling brought in several casino boats to the neighboring city, and with them came the people. Compared to Baton Rouge, the city was still small, but the population had quadrupled in size from the years of Veronica's childhood.

Still, despite the changes, it felt like home. The changes were a good thing, too, because Veronica had made her own changes over the years, and she didn't intend to stop now. She doubted that the woman she had become, the woman she intended to be, would have fit in with the sleepy town she remembered as a girl. But the Silver Springs of today definitely held promise.

So did her store. No doubt it would add the spice to her life that she looked for. Veronica gazed around feeling all her second thoughts, all her doubts, begin to melt away. For the first time in her life, her parents weren't there to tell her what to do, her husband—God rest his soul—wasn't there to make decisions for her. She was doing what *she* wanted to do, taking her life into her own hands, and it would work. She would make it work.

Romantic Illusion. The idea had come to her in the second year of her marriage and continued to roll around and build in her mind until she decided to make her dream a reality. In the day and age where sex had become an open topic, similar stores had begun popping up all around. They were stores that catered to the sexual exploits of people, stores more commonly referred to as porn shops. But Romantic Illusion would be nothing of the sort.

Oh, Veronica knew it would be seen as such at first. She had prepared herself for her store to be lumped into that classification. At least in the beginning, until her customers became familiar with the merchandise she carried. A porn shop, Romantic Illusions would not be.

Her store would cater to couples, to love, and not simply the fun between the sheets. As the name of her store said, she'd cater to romance. She had added "illusion" to the name, because it was indeed only an illusion if the romance wasn't in the heart.

She couldn't put romance in one's heart. She didn't kid herself into believing that she could. She could help one set the right atmosphere, the right semblance, to draw out the romance, which lived inside. The rest was up to the couple.

As a believed to be straight-laced girl from the rich side of the tracks and a widow to boot, Veronica knew she was the last person anyone would expect to open such a store. It seemed too bold and brazen for someone like her, and it no doubt would have been ten years, or even five years, ago. Heck, two years ago it would have been a stretch. Not anymore. In taking hold of her life, so many changes developed as well. Interests that had been buried, desires gone unrecognized, needs gone unfulfilled pushed their way to the front of her mind and she latched onto them as a directional arrow to her future.

She finished hanging the sign over the display of luxurious powders, glitters, and sprays, steadied herself on the three-foot ladder, and admired her handy work. The sign—a picture of a couple standing naked beside a claw foot bathtub, their hands beginning an obvious exploration of the other's body—would definitely draw attention.

Satisfied, she stepped down from the ladder just as she heard a knock on the glass of the front door. The store wouldn't open for another three days. A sign outside said as much. Still, she'd had several people knock inquiring about her merchandise during the weeks she had been inside the store preparing for the opening. They had all been tourists and she had to politely send each of them on their way, but it was nice to see the store already generated attention.

As she stepped into view of the door, she saw it wasn't a tourist knocking this time but Lacy Fergus. Veronica smiled, always happy to see her old friend, and unlocked the door.

"I figured I would find you here." Lacy stepped inside, her high heels clicking on

the tiled floor, breaking the silence of the building.

Veronica hadn't noticed the silence. She had spent the morning working while lost in her thoughts, and it hadn't bothered her. Yet, she found she welcomed the interruption of the quiet atmosphere now.

"There's still so much to do before Saturday." More than she realized, she silently admitted, but she would get it done.

"Where is Judy?" Lacy asked of the young college girl Veronica had hired. "Isn't she supposed to be helping you?"

"She is, but she has a full day of classes at the Junior College on Wednesdays. She won't be here until late this afternoon." And by that time, Veronica would probably be too pooped to do anything but hand over the responsibilities to Judy. "I was thinking, I should have saved room for a bed and moved in here instead of the house."

"You better not. Not after I worked my tail off this week finding you an apartment. Those are getting scarce around here these days." Lacy walked to the counter, set her briefcase by the register, and turned back to Veronica with a triumphant grin. "But I found one, and I think it's exactly what you're looking for."

Though she didn't want to say as much, Veronica had her doubts. This wasn't the first time since Lacy took over Veronica's apartment hunting that her friend had been certain she found the perfect place. Veronica told Lacy exactly what she was looking for time and again. The problem was that Lacy's idea of perfect was huge, expensive, and glamorous while what Veronica wanted was simple, practical, and cozy.

"It's a condo." At the look that Veronica knew must be on her face, Lacy held up a finger. Her nails were perfectly manicured and painted a conservative shade of brown. "I know you said you didn't want anything big, and it's not. It has two bedrooms, a bath and a half. The half bath is downstairs of course—a decent size combination living and dining area and a patio that's shaded by a couple of beautiful oak trees."

Veronica busied herself by rearranging a rack of women's lingerie. She didn't want to appear too interested, although it seemed her words had finally gotten through. "Where's it located?"

"It overlooks the back nine of the Green Leaf Golf Course."

Any hope that had been building in Veronica's heart at Lacy's description of the condo was instantly washed away. The Green Leaf area was a new addition to the town. Off the beaten path, it offered peace and solitude with a bit of the country feel. It was also where the new crème de la crème of society was finding their resting ground.

"I don't know, Lace..." She let her words trail off as she turned to face her friend, trying hard not to let her skepticism show.

"Drive out there and take a look around when you get a chance." Lacy unbuttoned the jacket of her gray business suit to reveal more of the white silk blouse she wore underneath.

Veronica couldn't help but be amazed at how comfortable her friend looked in the suit. She had worn similar suits many times in her life. She owned a closet full of them.

And on more than one occasion lately, she had toyed with the idea of starting one heck of a bonfire with all of them.

Over the years, she came to hate the stuffy, binding, conservative clothing she and so many of her acquaintances wore. Veronica had curves and what good were curves when she couldn't show them. These days, she preferred the sexy to the conservative, the comfortable to the classy. Give her a choice between a suit like Lacy's and crop top and shorts, and she would take the shorts any day. Besides, the crop top would show off the bellybutton ring she had gotten just before moving back to Silver Springs.

"You haven't been out there since you've been back, have you?" Lacy continued. "These condos are new, and many are still under construction. There's a section of the complex that will be reserved for golf packages and corporations but the rest are available for lease. The area is great! It's quiet and cozy, just like you said you wanted, and even though it overlooks the golf course, it isn't pricey or elaborate."

Veronica had to laugh. It was easy to see how Lacy had become one of the top realtors in Silver Springs. She did know the right things to say to sell a person on a place. Or was it to sell a place on a person? Which ever it was, Lady was doing it right, because she found her interest growing and her skepticism fading.

Lacy leaned her back against the counter, her hands resting on the Formica on either side of her hips, her ankles crossed. "Will you at least check it out? I'll go out there with you if you want. I can get the key, and we can walk through it together."

"Okay," Veronica agreed. She didn't miss the way her friend's shoulders slightly lifted and fell in a sigh of relief. Lacy had always been one who strived to please. She also recognized the moment she gained the upper hand and knew when to accept small victories and change the subject.

"Have you heard from your parents lately?"

Her parents. Yeah, Veronica had heard from her parents. She wouldn't be surprised if half the town of Silver Springs had overheard her last conversation with her father. "Dad isn't too happy with me right now."

"Because of this store?" Lacy guessed correctly.

"This store and the house in Baton Rouge, my decision to sell and move back here. Heck, Lacy, sometimes I think he's unhappy with me for even being born!"

"You knew when you decided to open this place that he would be less than thrilled."

"Because a woman like me has no business owning a place like this," Veronica said, mimicking her father's tone and the exact words he had spoken so many times in the past few months. "I'm tarnishing the family name. How dare an Abbott be involved in such trash? Do you know that he actually threatened to revoke my trust fund if I attempt to use a single penny of it on this business?"

Veronica had been shocked to hear such words from her father. Not that she really cared about the money. She didn't need it, and if she played her cards right, she never would. Though she had been born rich, married rich, and even widowed rich, money

didn't mean as much to her as she supposed it should have. She learned early on that the old cliché about money not buying happiness was oh so true. Happiness was found in living, in doing things you enjoyed, in spending time with those you love. Having money, especially loads of it, often wrought more *unhappiness* than it brought. Her husband's life had been a prime example of that. Heck, *her* life had been too...until now.

"Can he do that?"

"Oh, yeah, he can do it. Dad isn't a stupid man. He also isn't one to relinquish control. The money is mine, but he's the executor of the account. He can monitor every dime I take from it, know exactly where it's spent, and what it's spent on, and believe me he does."

"Is that going to cause a problem?" Lacy asked, the concern in her expression also sounding in her voice. "Not being able to use any of the money for the business."

"Not at all." Veronica walked behind the counter and rested her elbows on the top. "I hadn't planned to use it anyway." She had no need to. Robert's death left her in a better than good financial standing without dipping into her own money. Between the money they'd had in their joint bank accounts, his life insurance policy, and the money she received from the Baton Rouge Police Department because Robert had in fact been killed on the job, she could easily live with no worries. "It's just Dad's way of continuing his attempt at controlling my life. He's never let go, Lace. I may have moved out years ago, got married and lived hundreds of miles away from him, but his strings on me have remained strongly tied."

"But I'm untying those strings now," she said with utter conviction. "I got rid of the first one by moving back here. Dad didn't like that one little bit. He wanted me to stay in Baton Rouge. I think he expected me to lock myself in the world that Robert and I had built together, only I would continue living it without Robert."

And wouldn't that have been fun. Yeah, right. The life she and Robert built together, the friends they made, it had all revolved around the Police Department. The women she knew—not one of which she could truly call a friend—were all wives of cops just as she had been. Oh, they stuck by her immediately after Robert's death, but it hadn't taken long before they began to drift away. Veronica no longer fit in. She became a cop's widow instead of a cop's wife. She served as a constant reminder to the women of what could happen to their own husbands. It was a reminder that none of them wanted.

"But since you moved anyway—"

"He now expects me to fall into the world that he and Mom left behind here. He wants me to stay in the house, live off my inheritance, and attend bridge meetings twice a week until I find another man who has more money in his bank account than I do, who will marry me and give him the grandchild he so desperately wants. He wants me to become my mother. That's what he's always expected from me...to live exactly as she does, the lady of the house and servant to her man."

"So that's why you're looking for a apartment instead of staying in the house. I thought maybe your parents were planning to move back to town, too. Or that your decision had something to do with the fire."

“No. Thankfully my parents seem to be completely satisfied in Florida.” Veronica prayed they would stay that way. As long as they were happy in Florida, she only had to contend with them over the phone and during visits every few months. Having them two states away would make it easier for her to build the new life she was looking to construct. “The crew they hired to do the repairs on the house did a superb job. There’s no trace there was ever a fire of any kind.”

“You know, a lot of the credit for that goes to the Fire Department. It was their quick response and skill that kept that fire from being far worse than what it was. You should have been there that night. Watching them in action, it was pretty amazing,” Lacy said, wonder and admiration rang in her words. “I never thought I would say this, but it was a good day for the Silver Springs Fire Department when Dean got hired and an even better day when he became one of their captains.”

Butterflies Veronica thought had gone dormant long ago took flight in her stomach. “Dean Wolcott?” she asked, unable to hide her surprise. How could she have forgotten about him?

“You didn’t know he was a firefighter?”

Shaking her head, Veronica lowered herself onto the stool behind the register. “I had no idea.” So the rugged and carefree boy—young man really, who had been twenty-two the last time she remembered seeing him—had grown up to become a part of the Silver Springs Fire Department. Wonders never ceased.

The times she visited Silver Springs since leaving for college had been brief and filled with her parents and their friends. Putting Dean Wolcott in that crowd would be the equivalent of tossing a rat in a cage of kingsnakes. She had often wondered what happened to him but there had been no one to ask without raising suspicions. Finally, she simply pushed him from her mind. He was a man who didn’t travel in the world in which she lived, and though the gossip vine had been pretty heavy with tails of his latest adventures in school, the vine seemed to break once they reached their adult years.

Had the wild and crazy boy she remembered turned into a responsible adult? Veronica actually found herself hoping he hadn’t. His bad-boy persona had been one of his main attractions. And his eyes...oh, she remembered his eyes all too well. The promises of adventure, excitement, of teaching her things that would make a nun blush that she had seen in his eyes.

Everyone had childhood secrets and her crush on Dean Wolcott was hers. No way would she have ever admitted it to anyone. Not even Lacy. In truth, she hadn’t even admitted it to herself except when she was alone, locked in her room late at night and dreaming of a life so different than the one she lived. Now she was building that different life. Wasn’t she? And a man like Dean Wolcott would certainly fit to spice things up.

Veronica wasn’t looking for a relationship as much as simply someone to spend time with and have loads of sizzling, sweaty sex. Her husband had been dead for two years and she sunk into two years of celibacy. Well, almost. She had one hot encounter with a guy in Baton Rouge several months ago. The only one-night stand she’d ever had in her life. While the idea was exciting, the sex hadn’t been. He had never been interested in exploring, in taking the time to thoroughly enjoy the experience. Instead, the sex had

reminded her much of the sex she had with Robert...sweet, gentle, and quick. Boring!

Sex with Dean Wolcott, on the other hand, would be nowhere near boring. She was certain of it. Always had been. That had been part of the reason she had been so afraid of him as a young girl. She knew he could show her things she would never experience anywhere else, things that she burned to experience now.

"It's pretty amazing how much people change when they grow up," Lacy said with a laugh that mirrored her amazement. "He definitely didn't turn out anything like I expected him to. Shoot, the whole town expected him to spend his adult life behind bars. And you, God, look at how much you have changed! The sweet, little innocent girl turns hot, sassy, and sexy. News at eleven."

Veronica didn't crack a smile at her friend's poor attempt at humor. "I want to see him." She realized she actually voiced the thought and quickly added, "To thank him...them, the firefighters, for putting out the fire so quickly. Maybe I'll take them a thank you basket or something."

Lacy looked around, a wide mischievous grin spreading across her lips. "From the store? And exactly which items would you include in a basket for a crew of beefy, bad ass firefighters?"

Veronica laughed, seeing her friend's point. She would look like a complete idiot, or worse, showing up at a fire station with a basket of romantic goodies for a group of men she didn't know—men who had the reputation of being some of the toughest, bravest, and manliest on Earth.

Lacy walked around the store looking like a woman on the prowl. "You could toss in one of these." Her grin widened as she held up a jar of shimmering gold body dust. "Oh, and one of these." She moved to a display of sex games for couples a few steps away and selected a box. "*Jump Me Checkers*, now that sounds like a lot of fun. And what's this?" She put the game back, moved to another display, this one of instructional books. She held up a book titled *Romance for Dummies* and Veronica thought her friend's face was going to split from the size of the smile that one brought out. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It's actually a very informative book." Veronica walked to her friend, took the book, and replaced it on the shelf. "It breaks down lots of ideas to their simplest form."

"Well, you should definitely include that in the basket."

"Yeah, and the next time my house catches on fire, the firefighters will stand back and watch it burn. With me in it!"

"No, they would just bring the checkers game along and wait for you to come out and play by the romantic glow of a four-alarm fire."

Veronica laughed, shook her head. "I'll figure out something. Somehow I doubt those guys ever get the recognition and thanks they deserve."

* * * *

"She jumped my ass! Can you believe that? I get the woman out of the car—a car that is in danger of turning into a blazing inferno, mind you—and she bitches at me for

breaking the dammed door off to do it.”

Dean wrapped a towel securely around his waist and walked to the row of sinks against the wall, turning his back on the Lieutenant before he caught him smiling. Lieutenant Tripp Barrett had every right to be angry by this latest call. Heck, Dean would have been furious himself if he had been the one to respond to the traffic accident that occurred on the highway that morning. Instead, he had been on an entirely different call on the opposite side of town. The fire he responded to had been inside the laundry mat of an apartment complex. Though he dealt with a few people when putting out the fire, no one gave him any shit. Apparently, the Lieutenant hadn't fared as well.

From what Dean had been able to piece together so far during Barrett's latest tirade, a pickup truck illegally transporting drums of flammable material had broad-sided an elderly woman in her Cadillac. As a result, one of the drums toppled over, spilling onto the highway and turning an already bad situation to worse and dangerous. Neither of the drivers was seriously injured, but the damage the Cadillac sustained, left the elderly woman trapped inside, and the firefighters had been forced to use the Jaws of Life to extract her from the vehicle.

Dean didn't speak as Barrett paced the locker room in his boxer shorts and continued to recount the heated words exchanged between him and the elderly woman. The Lieutenant was blowing off steam, and it was actually pretty comical to watch, even more comical to listen to because when Tripp Barrett got angry, his Texas drawl got thicker, his grammar less proper and full of cuss words.

“The car was fucking thrashed anyways. What dammed difference did it make if we had to remove the damn door?” Dean caught Tripp's reflection in the mirror over the sink, saw the man throw his hands in the air in exasperation. His hands were clean after his recent shower. The nicks he had gotten while struggling with the metal of the Cadillac were clearly visible, not yet blending in with older scratches that still remained from who knew what. The Lieutenant always got dinged up somehow. “The ole bat is lucky we didn't have to remove the steering wheel from her chest. You should have seen how close the fucking driver's seat was pulled to the steering wheel. If the Cadillac hadn't been as old as she was, she would' a been in the hospital right now from injuries sustained from the airbag.”

Dean didn't have a doubt that the Lieutenant was correct on that one. Airbags saved lives, but only when they were allowed the space to properly deploy. He couldn't count how many victims he saw transported to the hospital, because they had been sitting too close when an airbag went off. In this instance, it was the ladies lucky day that she drove a car manufactured before the inclusion of airbags had become the law.

“Instead by now she is at home and only a bit shaken by the morning's accident,” Dean reminded and picked up the can of shaving cream on the shelf by the sink. He always tried to enforce the positive when a course of events led to one or more of his men becoming angry. “You did your job. You didn't actually save her life, but you would have if those chemicals had caught fire.”

“Yeah, I know.” Tripp sighed and walked to his locker, pulled out a clean uniform shirt. “It's not like I expected a thank you or anything. I didn't expect the woman to drop

down and bow at my feet like I was some kind of world hero or something. But the bitch really pissed me off when she started yelling at me in front of everyone for doing my dammed job.” He laughed as he pulled the shirt over his head, but there was only a trace of humor in the sound. “You should have seen the look on Lamont’s face when the woman started yelling. For a minute there, I thought she was going to deck her.”

“Speaking of Bailey Lamont.” Dean squirted the shaving cream in his palm and used his free hand to spread the foam on the stubble that covered his face. It had been nearly two days since he shaved, and he was beginning to look like a grizzly bear. Not that shaving would make a whole lot of difference. His years were beginning to catch up with him. The hard and crazy way he lived, combined with the roughness of his years on the job, were becoming evident in the deep lines etched in his face. “What did I miss this morning? Was that Terri or Bailey I heard let out that ear-piercing squeal?”

The squeal in question had come immediately following the tones that called out the Engine Company and Rescue for the accident on the highway. Dean had just gotten settled behind his desk to tackle the morning’s paperwork—paperwork that still waited for him because of the second call, which came fifteen minutes later and pulled him away—when he heard the unmistakable female shriek and the riot of male laughter that erupted as a result.

Tripp stepped up to the sink next to Dean, his lips spread in a wide grin. “It was Bailey,” he said as he began his shaving ritual. “Magee and Shannon put water balloons in her turnout boots.”

Dean shook his head but couldn’t hold back a grin of his own. Poor girl. They had probably filled the balloons to near bursting with the coldest water they could find, knowing that if they got toned out for a call, she would be in too big of a hurry to notice until she slammed her feet into the boots, smashing the balloons and soaking her feet with freezing water. With no time to dry out her boots and change her socks, she’d had to endure the discomfort for nearly two hours.

“Was she pissed?”

“A little.” Tripp shrugged. “I think she was more pissed that the guys had finally gotten a rise out of her than she was about the prank itself. The guys have been pretty relentless in their antics since she joined the department, but this morning’s was the first one that really got a response out of her.”

“What’s your take on her? Do you think she’s going to make it?” Dean knew he was worrying more about Bailey than he had other probies in the past, but she was a woman and he genuinely liked her. In the two months since she had been hired on, she had given him the impression of being strong and eager to learn.

Tripp didn’t hesitate. “She’ll make it. She still needs a lot of work, still has a lot to learn, but she’ll make it.”

“She doesn’t complain.”

It was a statement more than a question, but Tripp answered it anyway. “No, she doesn’t.”

“That concerns me,” Dean admitted, tapping his razor on the side of the sink.

“She’s just trying to fit in, Cap., to be accepted. She’s probably afraid if she whines and cries, the rest of us will see her as a weak female instead of one of us. Though, *weak* is definitely not a word I would use to describe her,” Tripp said laughing. “I walked into the weight room the other day, and she was bench pressing a hundred and seventy-five pounds. That’s nearly half what I can do! Can you believe that?”

Dean could. Bailey Lamont might appear to be a woman of average weight and strength, but he had seen her do things that proved her strength to be far above average. “It concerns me because I don’t want her trying so hard to fit in that she doesn’t complain when something is too difficult or it’s something she can’t handle. She could get hurt. Or get someone else hurt.”

Tripp paused, his razor stopping in mid-stroke up his left cheek, and looked at Dean through the mirror. “I see your point.” He nodded slowly then returned to shaving. “You want me to have a talk with her?”

As the captain of the B shift, it was really Dean’s responsibility to confront Lamont, but as second in command, Tripp might be the better person to do so in this situation. The Lieutenant had spent more time with the firefighter since she’d been hired. Dean had noticed that Tripp seemed to have taken her under his wing so to speak. Lamont would probably take a talk from him better than Dean.

“Broach the subject lightly,” Dean instructed, rinsing his razor before placing it back on the shelf. He cupped his hands under the running water, splashed it on his face. “I don’t want her thinking she’s done anything wrong, because she hasn’t really. But let her know it is okay to complain. She doesn’t have to take all the shit the guys give her without saying a word. Let her know it is okay to fight back.”

“Will do, Captain.”

“What about the other guys? Are any of them giving her any trouble?” Dean had been so buried in paperwork lately that much of the goings on when the men weren’t on a call had escaped him.

“No more than normal for a probie. Magee has been giving her hell, but it’s more playful ragging than anything, because he asked her out and she turned him down.” Tripp grinned, obviously amused.

Ryan Magee. The ex-Navy SEAL had become B shift’s playboy. Despite his rough physical appearance, despite the permanent, hard warrior trained look in his eyes, despite his arrogance and the slight limp when he walked that seemed to be improving with each passing session of physical therapy, he was a real ladies man and he knew it.

Dean wasn’t surprised the firefighter had made a play for Lamont. What was surprising was that she turned him down. Women didn’t turn down Ryan Magee. If anything, *he* turned *them* down.

There was no rule against fraternizing in the Silver Springs Fire Department. There had never been a need for one. Until Bailey had been hired, Terri Vega was the only female on the department. She was also part of the B shift and an EMT assigned to the rescue unit. Terri had dated several of the guys on the department, but no problems seemed to result from the short escapades.

“Did she set him straight?” Dean asked.

“Surprisingly, yes. And she did it skillfully yet politely.” Tripp’s obvious pride for the way Bailey had handled the situation was written on his face. “If we can get her to handle everything else the way she handled Magee, we’ll have one hell of a firefighter on our hands. I wouldn’t worry about her too much, Captain. She’s proving to be a woman who can handle herself.”

No, Dean wouldn’t worry about her, because in the course of this short conversation, he had learned without a doubt that the Lieutenant did the worrying for him. Tripp hadn’t said as much, but Dean could tell the man watched out for his crewmember.

“Oh, baby! I’ve died and gone to Heaven.” Magee’s deep baritone voice carried easily through the station house.

“Sounds like we have a visitor,” Tripp said and moved back to his locker for his jeans.

“No doubt of the female variety,” Dean agreed, knowing only a woman would have Magee thinking of the pearly gates.

“Man, I haven’t seen legs like that in way too long,” Shannon chimed in with a loud appreciative whistle. “They must be three miles long. Cap., L.T., you guys are missing it.”

“And you guys are pigs,” Lamont’s distinctively female voice followed.

“Oink, oink,” Magee said.

“Don’t worry, Lamont, you have great legs, too, babe,” Shannon said.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t have long blond hair like that,” Magee said. “There’s something about a woman with long silky blond hair. The way it falls over her breasts when she’s naked and on top of you. The way—”

“Spare us the details, Magee. We get the picture,” Lamont said in disgust.

Mile long legs, long blond hair... Dean froze, his hand suspended above the towel he had been reaching for on the rack. No. No way. It couldn’t be. Could it?

Of course not, he decided and snatched the towel from the rack. Veronica Abbott wasn’t the only blond in town with legs to die for. And he didn’t even know for sure that the description still fit. She was back in town. He knew that much from tuning into the grapevine, but he had yet to see her. No, the description definitely fit the woman from his dreams but not necessarily Veronica Abbott.

“Guess I should go calm those two down before whoever that woman is gets inside and they jump her,” Tripp said, shaking his head. He quickly shoved his feet in his boots and walked out of the locker room.

“Wait. I think I know her,” Dean heard Shannon say and closed his eyes as the feeling of doom washed over him. Shannon would know Veronica. He had been born and raised in Silver Springs too and was about the same age as she.

Dean buried his face in the towel even as he heard the front door to the station

house open. He was doomed. No doubt about it, if he walked out there now, he would be toast. But if he avoided her, if he stayed hidden in the locker room, maybe he could hold onto his sanity. Then again...

He didn't even have to see her for the feelings of lust and desire from so long ago to return to his veins. He heard the clack of heels hitting tiled floor as she walked inside. Not wanting to even hear the sound of her voice, he moved to the sink, twisted the cold water on full blast effectively drowning out any words that may have carried from the other room. Of all the women he had ever met, ever been with, she was the one he always wanted but never had, never could have.

And dammed if he didn't still want her.

CHAPTER TWO

You can do this, Veronica told herself as she sat in her car in the parking lot of the fire station. *You have a good excuse to be here. No one will know your motives are really to see Dean.*

She had almost settled on a fruit basket purchased at the Fresh Market a few blocks down from Romantic Illusions. It would have been the obvious, less brazen choice. It would have been the un-spicy choice, she had realized and just like that she nixed the idea. Thinking daring, shameless and spicy but still keeping it light, she put together her basket from the merchandise in the shop. She included small boxes of assorted love chocolates, incenses, an incense burner, masculine scented after-shower oils, and a couple of boxes of condoms. She had thrown in the last on a whim. They were men after all, and in this day and age, safe sex was a must.

She hesitated just inside the door of the station house, unsure exactly where she was supposed to go, or who she would find when she got there. She had never been to a fire station before and had no idea what to expect. Were Fire Departments really like those portrayed on TV? Should she have knocked before walking inside? Was there a different door reserved for visitors that she hadn't seen?

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the difference in light, but as her focus cleared, she realized she had stepped into what appeared to be some sort of small lobby. She stood before a wall half made of glass, and behind that glass were a man and a woman looking back at her. Another man stepped around the corner and into the lobby. He was dressed in well-worn jeans and navy T-shirt. He took one look at her and a small, seductive smile curved his lips even as his gaze slid down her body. It was easy to return that smile. She liked the way men looked at her these days. Oh, she had always gotten her share of looks. What man didn't like a long-legged, attractive blond after all? But the looks she got these days—now that she dressed for comfort and sex appeal rather than convention and wealth—were more desirous, hot, and made her feel like a true woman.

"Good afternoon," he said and nodded ever so slightly in greeting. He was a tall man, impossibly built, his hair dark and slightly long on top. Several strands hung

together in a curl over his right brow. His eyes were the color of milk chocolate and full of amused intrigue. "I'm Ryan Magee." He extended his hand. "What can I do for you?"

The glint in his eyes and the crooked way his lips tilted opened a realm of possible answers to his question. No doubt there was a lot this man could do for her if given the chance.

"Veronica Abbott," she said and put her hand in his. There was no electric jolt, no heat spreading throughout her body at the physical contact. Strange. The man was hot! Yet, she felt nothing. Maybe there wasn't anything he could do for her after all. "You put out a fire at my house—well, actually the house belongs to my parents—a couple of months ago."

"The house on Cumberland Road," he guessed correctly.

"Yes, well, I wanted—"

"You're Veronica Abbott, right?" The voice sounded as though it had come from inside a drum, and she realized it was the man behind the glass that had spoken. "Come in here."

She glanced at Magee, knowing the expression on her face would look as though she were asking his permission. He motioned with a flourish of his arm for her to proceed. Without the outside glare on the glass between them to contend with, she immediately recognized the other man as Kyle Shannon.

"I thought I recognized you when you pulled up. Nice car," he said with a boyish grin, and Veronica saw that he hadn't changed much over the years. He was still the same, ordinary guy he had always been. His hair remained an ordinary shade of brown, cut in an ordinary style. His eyes were blue but not a spectacular bright shade or even a deep mesmerizing color, just blue. He wasn't muscle bound, nor was he a beanpole. He wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, nor upchuck ugly. He was simply...ordinary.

"Thanks. It was my birthday present to myself." She'd needed something to replace the mini-van. That one hadn't been her idea. Robert had insisted they buy something large enough to transport the children. It hadn't seemed to matter to him that they didn't have children and hadn't even been trying to get pregnant.

"You're opening the store on Main Street, right?" the woman standing behind Shannon asked. "I'm Bailey Lamont, by the way."

Veronica was surprised to see that Bailey wore the same uniform of a navy blue T-shirt and jeans as the guys. A firefighter, too, no doubt, and Veronica felt a surge of pride that a female was a member of the Silver Springs Fire Department. But this particular female looked nothing like what she would have thought a female firefighter would look like. Veronica would have expected an Amazon type woman, excessively tall and overly built with harsh features and choppy hair.

That description was so far from Bailey Lamont it was almost comical. An Amazon, the woman definitely was not. She was shorter than Veronica by two or three inches. And her build was certainly not over done but more feminine, curvaceous, muscular, and slim. She could easily fit into a size seven. Though she wore no make-up, her features were soft and shown with a natural beauty, her chestnut hair long and pulled

into a ponytail.

"We open on Saturday." Veronica nodded in confirmation. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize there were any women on the department."

"She's a probie," Magee said dismissively.

"A probie?" Veronica asked, her gaze dancing between the two firefighters.

It was Bailey who answered, "Probationary firefighter. I'm the new kid on the block."

"I see. Well, I brought this." Veronica held up the basket. "As a small token of thanks for putting out the fire at my parents' house. It's just a few things from the stock in my store, but I geared it more toward men, because I didn't realize...If you would like to swing in the store after we open sometime, I'll make a special basket for you."

"That isn't necessary, but thank you," Bailey said with a genuine smile that made her even prettier.

"Lamont isn't very feminine anyway," Magee said, taking the basket from Veronica's hands. "She'll probably get more use out of this stuff than we will."

"Knock it off, Magee," a male voice ordered from behind Veronica.

She spun around, saw that another man had entered the room. It wasn't Dean. Was he even here? She wished she had thought to call first. Bringing the thank you basket had been the perfect excuse for her visit, but if the man she wanted to see wasn't even there...

"Tripp Barrett. And ignore him," he said with a slight nod at Magee. "He's chapped because Lamont won't go to bed with him."

His bluntness surprised Veronica, and she shot a glance at Magee who simply shrugged, then at Lamont who grinned from ear to ear. Yeah, it was easy to see why Magee was angry at being turned down by that woman. Not that Veronica could see exactly why Bailey had turned the man down. He may not have sent sparks though her own body with a touch—probably only because he wasn't Dean Wolcott, she figured—but he was damned sure one hot bed of perfection.

"We appreciate the gift," Barrett continued kindly. "It isn't often you get thanked in this line of work."

And that, too, surprised Veronica. These men—and woman—risked their lives to save others and their possessions, and yet they didn't get the thanks and recognition they deserved. What kind of world were they living in?

"Dean was there that night, too," Shannon said. "Dean Wolcott. You remember him, don't you? He's our captain."

Finally, an open door to the information she wanted. Veronica lunged through it. "Is he here?"

"Yeah, he's in the back. I'll take you to him." Shannon was out of his seat and through the door before Veronica could blink. She followed him down the hall.

“Shannon, wait,” Barrett said and hurried after them.

“Hey, Captain,” Shannon said loudly as he stepped through a door halfway down the hall. “You have a—”

“The Captain isn’t—” Barrett said and halted behind them in the doorway.

Veronica was stuck between the two men just inside what appeared to be a locker room. She heard Shannon say, “visitor,” at the same time Barrett said, “dressed,” and her gaze locked with a pair of eyes over Shannon’s shoulder. They were eyes as green as the leaves on a tree in the middle of the summer, eyes she instantly recognized, eyes that had been designed to make a female buckle at the knees. She managed to hold herself upright. When Shannon shifted in front of her and she caught a glimpse of a white towel and nothing else but deep tanned skin, she nearly melted to the floor.

“Whoa, Captain,” Shannon said and reached behind him, blindly grabbing Veronica by the waist and attempting to shield her with his body. It was pointless, of course, because she was taller than him by a full inch, and even if she hadn’t been, she had no intentions of missing this sight. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“It’s my fault, Dean,” she said and freed herself from Shannon’s hold. She stepped around him, moved further into the room. Her pulse pounded loudly in her ears, and her knees felt like jelly, but there was no way she was going to bolt now. “I asked to see you.” She stopped, raked her eyes down his nearly naked body from head to toe, and felt completely inspired, wickedly aroused, and ready to fuck. “Though, I must admit I didn’t expect to get to see so much of you.”

* * * *

“You asked to see me?” Despite the fact that the woman of his dreams stood there looking at him, dressed only in a towel, with a heat in her eyes that would burst any thermometer; despite the fact that in about three seconds he would have a very visible pop-tent going on with the towel because of that look; that was the part his shocked mind latched on to. He even forgot that Barrett and Shannon were still in the doorway watching with wide eyes and amused expressions. She had asked to see him. *Holy shit!*

“I wanted to thank you for putting out the fire at my parents’ house,” she said, and he felt his dick sigh in disappointment. She wanted to thank him. Not invite him to that house for a dinner that would lead to hot, slippery sex in the bedroom. Which would then lead to another night of hot, slippery sex and another and another. Which would then lead to him asking for her hand in marriage and a lifetime of nights of that hot, slippery sex.

He looked at her—at her long blond hair, sweet rounded breasts that stretched the material of her maroon crop top, the gold loop bellybutton ring that showed above the very low cut waistline of her very short shorts—and wanted to cry. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Barrett tap Shannon on the shoulder, cock his head, and the two tiptoed out of the doorway leaving him alone...with her! He was alone with Veronica Abbott in the locker room of the station house wearing only a towel and she...He looked down her body again. Hell, she wasn’t wearing much more than he!

The realization of that shocked him into confusion. The Veronica Abbott he remembered would never be dressed the way this woman was. She would never be

standing in front of a man who wore nothing but a towel and looking at him as though she willed that towel to drop, either.

“I should get dressed,” he said quickly and turned to walk to his locker.

“Don’t do that on my account,” she said, and he stopped, turned. Though he had only taken a few steps, she had followed. She stood close, too close. When she spoke, her voice reverberated with arousal. “I like you this way. Although, if you want my opinion, I think you’re still wearing too much.”

Dean was flabbergasted. Sweet Jesus, the woman was coming on to him! His wildest, most crazed fantasy was coming true—no, even his fantasies couldn’t have created a moment like this—and he was too stunned to know what to do. He stared down at her, knowing all his bewilderment and shock were etched in his expression, and waited. For what, he didn’t have a clue.

She laughed. The sound was both musical and sultry. No doubt, the woman could make a fortune on one of those 900 sex lines. “Dean Wolcott, you’re looking at me as though you aren’t sure if you want to rip off my clothes or run for the door.”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted when he finally managed to find his voice.

“Lacy told me you aren’t the wild adventurous boy you once were, but I didn’t believe it.” She stepped even closer until their bodies touched. He could feel the heat radiating from her, smell the subtle hint of her sweet perfume.

“I’m not that boy anymore, Veronica.”

She clucked her tongue, lifted a hand, and trailed a fingernail down the center of his bare chest igniting a blazing fire in its wake. “And isn’t that a shame. You know, I always had the biggest crush on you.” Her finger stopped when it reached the barrier of the towel, paused, and he felt his eyes widen before the finger began slowly moving up again. “But you never would talk to me. Why was that, Dean?”

“I valued my life,” he said, his voice husky to his ears. God, she drove him mad! He fisted his hands at his sides to keep from touching her, because once he got his hands on her, he knew he wouldn’t be able to pry them off...ever! “I may have been a bit wild, but I didn’t have a death wish. Your parents would have had my head on a chopping block for even trying to get near you.”

“But my parents aren’t here now. They have no control over me anymore.” She flattened her hand on his chest, slid it down again. But this time she didn’t allow the towel to stop her descent. She continued, and when her fingers wrapped around his cock, he felt his breath lodge in his throat.

“Oh, my God,” he whispered as her hand began to stroke him.

She smiled up at him. “Not quite, but I guess you can call me a goddess if you wish, though Veronica will be sufficient enough.”

“Veronica, what—” She squeezed his dick, not too hard but just enough pressure to have his eyes rolling back in his head...and he completely forgot everything. He forgot that he was in the locker room of the station where one of the guys could walk in at any given time, that he was completely naked with his dick in a woman’s hand, that the

woman was Veronica Abbott—a woman that he had no business being within twenty feet of much less close enough to have his dick in her hand—and lost himself in the moment.

He reached for her, but when he attempted to lean down for a kiss, she evaded him, kissing his chest instead. She licked her way through his chest hair to his nipple, fondled it with her tongue, sucked and all the while pumped his dick with her hand.

"I dreamed of doing this to you," she said against his chest. "This among other things of course. You were my teenage fantasy fuck. I bet you never would have guessed that."

"Not in my wildest dreams," he murmured.

"Was I ever in your wildest dreams, Dean?"

"Every single one."

"Then you won't mind if I make one of those dreams come true," she said, and for a moment, he was confused again. Then he felt her begin to slide down, felt her soft lips as they planted kisses down his abs and stomach and—

Holy God! She wasn't going to—but oh yes, she was. She had sunk to her knees in front of him and was licking his cock. Her tongue trailed lightly from the base of his dick, so agonizingly slowly to its head that it made him whimper. Her tongue lapped at the pre-cum it found there, and she made an "Mmmm" sound.

"You taste so good Dean," she said between licks.

"Veronica." He nearly hissed her name. "We shouldn't—"

"Do you want me to stop?" Her tongue circled the head of his dick, delved in the tiny opening at its tip, then slowly pulled away.

"God no!" He gasped and heard her soft laugh.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes, but—"

Her hand wrapped around the base of his cock and she gave it a gentle squeeze. Then in one quick, knee locking, brain jarring, control-shattering stroke, she sucked him into her mouth all the way to his balls.

"Shit!" He gasped on a quiet whoosh of surprised air. He felt her smile around his dick even as she began to fuck him with her mouth. He had a big dick, and he half expected her to choke, but she didn't. She opened the back of her throat, pulling him further inside the wet warmth of her mouth.

And he moved one step closer to Heaven. He wanted to touch her, wanted to feel her, wanted to drive her as mad as she was driving him. But he couldn't move. It felt too damned good. Where had this woman learned to suck a dick like this?

He felt the pressure building and tried to ward it off. Did she expect him to cum in her mouth? He didn't know and couldn't find enough of his scruples to ask. "Veronica," he managed, hoping she could hear the warning in his tone.

If she heard the warning she ignored it. She lightly grazed her teeth up the length

of him, and then sucked him harder all the way down, reaching at the same time to cup his balls.

"Sweet Jesus." He breathed. Whether she wanted him to cum in her mouth or not, there was no way he could stop it.

She obviously sensed it, too, because she picked up pace, sucking him faster, fondling his balls in the palm of her hand until he shot his seed into her mouth. She continued to fondle and suck until he was completely drained, and then he felt her stand. Slowly, he opened his eyes, forced himself to focus. She was watching him, her eyes intent, her mouth closed. Then she visibly gulped, and he realized she had been holding his cum in her mouth until he could watch her swallow it. The sight very nearly had his dick growing hard again.

"Wow! You truly are a goddess," he whispered.

"Hey, Captain," Magee's voice sounded outside the door of the locker room. "The mayor is on the phone. He wants to talk to you."

"Shit!" Dean shoved a hand through his hair and said a few more choice words under his breath. "Of all the lousy, timing..." He looked at Veronica expecting to see her angry or at the very least disappointed, but she smiled.

"Sounds like you have business to take care of," she said and rose to her tiptoes to plant a light kiss on his cheek. "My store opens on Saturday. Try to swing by if you can." Then she turned and walked out of the room, leaving him to stare after her completely stunned, speechless, spent, and wanting more.

* * * *

"Are you getting nervous yet?"

"Not a bit," Veronica answered on impulse, but to her surprise, she found it true. She would be opening the doors of the store for its first day of business in less than an hour, and she wasn't the least bit nervous. That's what worried her. "Why am I not nervous?" she asked, turning to Lacy. "I should be. I should be climbing the walls right about now. Or running around the store like a crazy woman. But I'm not. I'm calm. I'm cool. I'm ready."

"You're confident," Judy said. She placed her hands on the checkout counter behind her and pulled herself up to sit on top. She was twenty-three, her dark brown hair cut in a pixie style that suited her oval shaped face and large greenish-blue eyes. She wore jeans—Veronica hadn't seen the girl wear anything else—and a sunflower yellow blouse that hinted at her slim waistline.

I'm glad I hired her, Veronica thought, not for the first time. She hadn't intended on hiring an employee. The store would be open six days a week from 10 am until 9 pm, and though they were long hours for one person, she had fully intended to handle them herself. She planned to wait until she was sure the store would do well, that the hours she set worked, that the revenue she took in could handle paying out a salary, before she even thought about bringing in someone else to work.

Then Judy had come knocking, and if the girl was anything she was certainly

persuasive. She was double majoring in Fashion Marketing Technology and Fashion Design at the local community college with dreams of one day having her own line of erotic women's fashion. In the two weeks since Veronica hired her, she had proven herself to be a hard worker, dependable, and chocked full of ideas. She was also very outgoing, and Veronica knew she would be good with the customers.

"I just hope I'm not being overly confident," Veronica said on a sigh. "Everything is in place? We haven't overlooked anything?"

"Everything is perfect." Judy nodded. "All we need are the customers."

The customers. What if no one came? The question should have had her stomach in knots, but it didn't. Something was way wrong with her. She didn't have any of the reactions she should be having at this very moment. She had worked so hard—they had worked so hard—in the past weeks getting the store in tip-top shape for this day. Having a perfect store meant nothing without customers.

"Here, have another cup of coffee," Lacy said, handing Veronica a cup of the expensive French roast she brought with her this morning. "You want to climb the walls, you need more caffeine."

Veronica laughed. "I didn't say I *wanted* to climb the walls." She took a sip anyway. It was strong and hot, and the description had her thinking of Dean Wolcott, which made her mouth water for something way different than coffee. She hadn't seen him since her visit to the station on Wednesday, since she sucked him until he came in her mouth.

She knew she had taken him completely by surprise. Heck, she had taken herself by surprise. She wasn't sure what she intended to say to him that day, but she certainly hadn't intended to suck his dick. She wanted to flirt with him a bit, let him know she was interested. Well, she definitely did that, she thought and stifled a laugh.

She had never done something so spontaneous, so brazen in her life. She wasn't even sure what came over her. She had been standing there looking at him, flirting with him as she intended to do and then she touched him, the rest, as it went, was history.

Not that she regretted her actions. She would do it all over again in a heartbeat. His hard, muscular body had felt so wonderful beneath her hands, and the taste of him, thick and hot and sweet, stayed with her long after she left the station. Would he come by the store today as she asked him to? God, she hoped so.

"I want to climb the walls," Lacy muttered softly, gazing down into her cup of coffee. "But I want a man to make me do it. Not this garbage." She frowned, lifting her cup.

"I take it what's his name...Kevin, doesn't fit the bill," Judy said, swinging her legs, the heels of her shoes hitting the counter wall with a soft thump.

Lacy scoffed. "The only reason I have to climb a wall with that man is to get out. Which I did last night," she added with a pleased grin.

"You broke it off with him? Wow!" Veronica hadn't met Kevin Beresford, but from everything Lacy had told her about the man, she already pegged him as someone

she had no desire to know. *How did Lacy end up with such dweebs?* she wondered, but she knew the answer without asking. Her friend still saw money first. Not that all men with deep pockets were dweebs. Plenty of wealthy men out there could please a woman two ways from Sunday. Lacy simply got stuck in a dweeb rut, had been all her life.

But Veronica couldn't fault her friend for the men she had been with in her life. Hadn't she been married to the dweeb king for over four years? Yes, Robert had been wealthy. Yes, he had been a cop—not a normal profession for a wealthy dweeb. Yet, he hadn't known the first thing about pleasing her. Although to be fair, he had tried. It had been her fault that he hadn't been able to succeed, because she didn't know exactly what would please her for the first two years of her marriage.

"He was in my house when I got home yesterday afternoon. In my house!" Lacy added with a near shriek. "The man takes it upon himself to uncover my spare key, enter my house of his own free will, and make himself at home."

Was it the power of a rich man that made him think he could control everything and everyone? Veronica wondered, thinking of the way her father had always controlled her mother, had controlled *her*.

"Did you tell him to get the hell out or you were calling the police?" Judy asked.

Lacy laughed. "Don't think for one second that it didn't cross my mind," she said. "But it would have been pointless considering I'm the stupid idiot that keeps a key under the plant outside the front door. And I'm an even bigger idiot for letting Kevin know that."

"Yeah, I guess the police wouldn't have been much help in that case," Judy conceded.

"What did you tell him?" Veronica wanted to know, unable to picture her friend angrily confronting a man. Lacy was head strong and confident when it came to business matters, but where men were concerned, Veronica knew her friend usually walked away like a scolded cat with her tail tucked between her legs.

"Nothing at first," Lacy admitted on a sigh. "I walked in, and he was in the kitchen. He had brought Chinese takeout and was emptying the contents of the boxes into bowls. Heaven forbid the man eat from a box." She rolled her eyes. "And the whole time he's doing this, he's complaining about getting the juices on his hands. That's how finicky the guy is. Can't stand to get a drop of anything on him anywhere. And suddenly that became absolutely infuriating to me."

"You got angry because the man didn't want to get General Tao's Chicken sauce on his hands," Judy said, an amused smirk quirking her lips.

"It was Kung Po Chicken," Lacy corrected. "And that wasn't it exactly. He didn't want me to get close to him for fear that he might get some on me. Not that I really wanted to get close to him. I was already pissed. But it got me thinking. I had this sudden urge to have hot, slippery sex against the kitchen counter, to smear food or any of that stuff," she gestured with her hand toward the display of edible lotions and oils, "all over a man's body and take my time licking it off. Not Kevin's body, mind you," she added quickly. "He would have been appalled to know the idea had crossed my mind."

“So you wanted to have slippery, Chinese food sex,” Veronica said, attempting to make sense of her friend’s rambling.

“I want to have adventurous sex. I want a man who isn’t afraid to get down and dirty. I want a man that doesn’t just *assume* he knows what’s best and expect me to obey. Anyway.” Lacy sighed. “All through dinner, I was imagining how things would be with Kevin, remembering how they have been since we’ve been together and fantasizing about how they could be with someone else. By the last bite of Kung Po, I had made up my mind. I told Kevin it was over.”

“How did he take it?” Judy asked.

“He wasn’t happy about it. But, to his credit, he didn’t argue. He just...left. But I don’t think I really hurt him. He wasn’t in love with me, and I certainly don’t love him. Ending it last night, realizing what I want, it felt great! Exhilarating!”

“Well you go, girl,” Veronica said on a laugh even though she was thinking her friend better change her preference in the type of men she dated if she expected to get even one of those wants she had mentioned.

“Am I the only one who sees the irony in this situation?” Judy asked and jumped down from the counter. “Here we are, three attractive woman, about to open the doors to a sex shop—pardon the term,” she shot Veronica a quick apologetic glance before amending, “A store geared to put romance in a couple’s lives, and neither one of us has a significant other.”

“So we find one.” Lacy shrugged, obviously empowered by her new revelations.

“I already have,” Veronica said, and when the surprised gazes landed on her, she realized she had spoken aloud. “He just doesn’t know it yet. But I think he might have a good idea.”

“Do tell, sweetheart.” Judy glanced at her wristwatch. “We have five minutes till opening.”

Veronica laughed. She didn’t intended to tell anyone about the plans she formed in her head for her favorite Captain of the Silver Springs Fire Department. She certainly wouldn’t tell them what she had already done to him. But, okay, what would it hurt to give them a name? “Dean Wolcott,” she said. When Lacy’s jaw nearly dropped to the floor, Veronica burst into hysterical laughter. “And now we’ll spend the next four minutes and fifty-five seconds waiting for Lacy to scrape her chin off my newly tiled floor.”

CHAPTER THREE

Dean would have been doing more than scraping his chin off the floor if he had known of the conversation about him currently taking place at Romantic Illusion. Instead, his complete attention was focused on the game. The Silver Sprigs Fire Cubs were playing against the Pascagoula Mustangs. He, of course, rooted for the Fire Cubs but most of all for little Timmy Walker. The boy had stepped up to the plate and prepared to bat. They were down by two, and with two outs in the bottom of the seventh inning, the boy couldn't afford to strike out. Timmy nodded at the pitcher indicating he was ready. The first ball sailed through the air and he swung and missed.

"Strike one," the umpire bellowed, and Timmy's face fell to the ground.

Don't get frustrated, Dean coached silently in the stands. Shrug it off and try again. As the next ball was pitched, he could see it would fly outside of the strike zone before it even reached the batter. *Don't swing. Don't swing.*

Timmy didn't.

"Ball one," came the umpire's voice.

Timmy lowered his bat, shifted his position, lifted the bat again and nodded. The next pitch was perfect, gliding through the air and straight to Timmy's bat. He swung, hit, dropped the bat, and broke into a run for first base. The ball flew through the air, and the Fire Cub who had been waiting idly on third base made it home. Timmy reached first, glanced around, saw that the other team still scrambled for the ball, and made a try for second. He was mere inches from the base when the other team recovered the ball, passed it to their man guarding second, and tagged Timmy.

"You're out," the umpire yelled. The game was over.

Dean sighed as he stood and made his way through the crowd of parents to the field. *Time to be big brother.* He wasn't actually Timmy's big brother, but he played that roll in their little game. Timmy Walker was in fact an only child with a loving mother who worked three jobs just to support them. His father had abandoned them when Timmy

was a baby and had never paid a lick of child support. Dean knew that the Department of Human Services attempted to track the man down, but they had been for several years, and he doubted they would have any luck.

The man was obviously a dead-beat dad. Dean knew all about those. His own father had been the dead-beat king. But unlike Dean's childhood, Timmy had a mother who wasn't a dead-beat, a mother who loved him and had stuck around. He also had Dean.

Dean met the boy one rainy afternoon nearly a year ago. He was in the IC truck returning to the station from a fire when he spotted the boy walking home in the rain. Timmy had been soaked to the bone and alone. The sight pulled at Dean's heartstrings and he immediately stopped, offered the kid a ride. Despite the boy's reluctance—he had been well taught not to talk to or accept rides from strangers—Dean managed to convince Timmy that he was a firefighter and only wanted to be sure he got home safely.

Though Timmy's mother tried to be there to pick him up from school everyday, she often got stuck at work, and he was forced to walk home. He lived only three blocks from the school and a very responsible seven-year-old. Even working three jobs, his mother had somehow managed to schedule them so she was home with her son most nights. That afternoon in particular, she arrived home a mere five minutes after Dean pulled into the driveway with the boy.

The boy's situation hit a soft spot with Dean, and since that day, he had become the primary male figure in Timmy's life. The last thing he wanted was for the kid to grow up the way he had, alone and staying in constant trouble to simply remain entertained. He took the kid under his wing, spent as much time with the boy as he could squeeze, and attempted to show him the rights and wrongs of the world—things he himself had learned far too late in life. Well, not too late really but almost.

As Dean expected, Timmy was walking off the field, his head to the ground by the time Dean reached him. "Good game, sport," he said and slid an arm around the kid's bony shoulders. He was a tall kid even at the young age of seven, the top of his head nearly reaching Dean's waist.

"We lost," Timmy mumbled, not looking up.

"Yeah, I know, buddy. But it was still a close one."

"We wouldn't have lost if I hadn't made a play for second."

"Maybe not." Dean nodded slightly though the kid still hadn't once looked at him. "Then again, the next batter could have struck out, and you would have lost anyway. Baseball is a tough game. You never know how it's going to pan out until it's over."

"It was still a stupid move," Timmy grumbled and jerked off his Fire Cubs baseball cap.

"So you'll remember that the next time you find yourself in that same situation," Dean said and gently propelled the boy toward the parking lot. "How about we go get some ice cream and forget about today's game."

"Yeah, okay." Timmy brightened but only marginally. "Mom said I have to be

home by one. She took the afternoon off, so she can take me clothes shopping.” He cringed at that and Dean laughed.

“Then you definitely need some ice cream first. A triple scoop of chocolate, so you’ll have the energy to put up with a woman and shopping.”

Timmy finally looked up at him and grinned. “Yeah, no kidding. I hate shopping!”

“Most men do, son.”

* * * *

“Distasteful.”

It was the first word to reach Veronica’s ears when she stepped out of the office around 4:00 that afternoon. She stopped, scanned the store. Since the doors opened at 10:00, there had been a steady stream of customers in and out, most of them purchasing some little something and all of them—at least the ones she had the chance to speak with—were happy that she had opened the store and promised to return with friends or lovers. She had expected to eventually run into someone who would be offended by the stock she carried, and apparently her first someone was in the store now.

From her vantage point just outside the office, she could easily see most of the store. There was a couple—mid to late twenties, she guessed at quick glance—who appeared to be discussing their preferences in tastes by the shelves of flavored body paints and lubricants. Another couple seemed to have separated in their browsing of the merchandise but was no doubt together because they kept whispering for the other’s attention and holding up an item when they found something of interest. A woman who looked to be about the same age as Veronica inspected the small section of lingerie. She had two pieces draped over one arm and wore an expression that clearly read she didn’t need any assistance in making her selections. Veronica would leave her alone.

Judy was talking with a woman by the display of bath sprays, soaps, and lotions. From the little conversation Veronica was able to hear, the woman was looking for a non-perfume spray that her husband would enjoy. Judy suggested a pheromone spray, and Veronica smiled, silently praising her employee for being familiar with the stock.

Then she saw the three ladies slowly walking down the far aisle of the store. One was wide-eyed and wore an expression that seemed to say, *Wow! I didn’t know they made stuff like this*; the second woman appeared to be a bit more intrigued by the stock, her mind opening to possibilities. It was the third woman who was so obviously not impressed. If anything, she wore an expression of pure repulse.

“Silver Springs is not a town for such filth,” the third lady said in a loud whisper. “Poor Clair. I wouldn’t be surprised if she never shows her face in this town again. How could Veronica do such a thing to her mother? I tell you, I would disown any child of mine that even *attempted* to open a place like this.”

You don’t even have any children, you old bat, Veronica thought as recognition of the woman took hold. Stella Franklin. She was the town’s biggest gossip and busybody, a crabby woman in her early sixties if Veronica’s memory served correctly, short and plump with a head of gray hair piled high in the resemblance of a beehive. Veronica

remembered that the woman had always been more tolerated than liked by her acquaintances, and if the expressions on the other two women's faces were any indication, it still remained true.

Upon further inspection, Veronica saw that she knew Stella's companions as well. Emma Stilks and Norma-Jean Dupree. As she walked toward the women, she heard Emma, the one with the wide-shocked stare, say, "I don't know, Stella. Some of this stuff looks pretty interesting."

Norma-Jean said, "Why didn't they make stuff like this when I was a young woman?"

"And speaking of young women," Stella continued also in a loud whisper. "The nerve of Veronica to hire sweet little Judy to work in a place like this. The poor dear will be warped for life!"

"Judy is twenty-three now, Stella," Norma-Jean reminded and turned her head before rolling her eyes so the other woman wouldn't notice. But Veronica saw, and she had to stifle a laugh. Obviously, Stella didn't know Judy at all.

"Twenty-three is a very impressionable age," Stella said as if she were the authority on such matters. "Why, when Veronica was twenty-three, she was still a virgin. I know. Her mother told me so. At least she was until she got married that year."

Veronica gasped, horrified. How could her mother have shared such an intimate secret with that woman?

"She should remember that. Judy doesn't even have a boyfriend much less a husband. She has no business around such...such..."

"Neat stuff," Emma supplied, still mesmerized, and Stella gasped, sounding utterly appalled.

Veronica did laugh then but managed to keep it short and quiet. When she had her composure under control once more, she pasted her best greeting smile on her face and stepped into view of the women. "Ladies, what a pleasure to see you again. It's been so long."

"Oh my, but, yes, it has," Norma-Jean said and reached for Veronica. The woman pulled her into a tight hug before stepping back. "And look at you. You've gotten so big. Why, I remember when you were just a little tot scurrying behind your mother. My, how the years fly."

"Yes, they do," Veronica agreed. She turned her attention to the other two women. "Mrs. Emma, Mrs. Stella, it's always good to see you." And wasn't that a big fat lie? Well, not to Emma. She was a nice enough woman, though Veronica didn't know her well. On the other hand, the only time it would be nice to see Stella would be if she were put in a muzzle and a straight jacket.

"We were just leaving," Stella said and grabbed Emma's arm.

"Oh, well, I'm glad you stopped by, and I hope you will come back sometime," Veronica said politely though she prayed she would never see Stella in her store again.

"You have a very interesting store here, Veronica," Emma said ignoring Stella's tug on her arm as her gaze scanned one of the shelves. "Are these really safe to eat?" she asked and held up a pack of edible underwear.

"Absolutely." Veronica nodded and bit back a grin. *Emma Stilks, are we getting feisty in our old age?* she wanted to ask but refrained. "They're very tasty, too. Really turns a man on." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively and Emma laughed.

"Well, I never!" Stella scoffed. "Come on, girls," she said and stomped away. Emma and Norma-Jean bid quick goodbyes and scrambled after her.

"Honey, the day you turn on a man will be the day that the rest of the female population of the world goes lesbo," Veronica muttered and whirled around when she heard a soft snicker behind her.

"Is that any way to talk to a customer?" Dean asked. His eyes lit with amusement and goose pimples danced across Veronica's flesh.

Though she had spent much of the day beaming and nearly giddy with satisfaction over the success of the store's opening, there had been a slight twinge of disappointment deep in her gut, because Dean hadn't showed. With any other man, she might have been concerned that he simply had no desire to see her again, that he had gotten what he wanted from her. She had made him come, after all. Yet, she had known that wasn't the case with Dean. He admitted to dreaming of her, but surely she hadn't made his every dream come true with one single act. Men loved blowjobs, but come on, he had to want more.

She finally resigned herself to the fact that he probably worked. She hadn't thought to ask if he had to work when she issued the invitation and she walked out of the locker room without giving him a chance to speak. After hypothesizing and calculating, she reached the conclusion that it was quite possible that he did have to work. Some fire departments operated on a twenty-four-on, forty-eight-off schedule. If he had been at work on Wednesday, wouldn't that mean that he would have been off on Thursday and Friday and back to work on Saturday? She looked at him standing in front of her now seeming larger than life and way too dammed handsome and said a silent thank you that her mental calculations had been wrong.

"Well, hello there. I was wondering if you would show."

He cocked a brow at her, a thin smile spreading across his lips. "Hoping to see me again?"

Dying to see him again was more like it. *Dying* to finish what she had started in the locker room. She looked at him, at his large hands that she longed to feel on her bare flesh, at his broad shoulders and rippling chest that she knew were hard and warm to the touch, at his brown hair with hints of blond highlights, which was disheveled and looked as though he had just crawled out of bed. Oh, yes, she had definitely been hoping to see him again.

"A little." She shrugged. "Hoping work wasn't keeping you away."

"It's my day off. We work a four-days-on, four-days-off schedule. I was filling in Wednesday. My shift begins again in the morning."

“Then I better enjoy you while I have you, huh?”

He laughed, shook his head. “You certainly grew up to be one amazing woman, Veronica Abbott.”

She allowed her eyes to do a slow sweep over his body again, making it more than obvious that she was checking him out. He wore kaki shorts with a red T-shirt. A white bear dressed in firefighter turnouts printed on the front. The sleeves had been ripped off at the seams, putting his wide, glorious biceps on full display. And at the top of his left arm she saw a tattoo. She hadn’t notice that on Wednesday. But she hadn’t been all too concerned with his biceps then either, had she?

Finally, she met his gaze. “And you grew up to be one hot bed of perfection, Dean Wolcott.” She lifted a hand to his arm, lightly ran the back of her fingers over the comic book hero tattoo, and reveled in the heat that seeped through her from feeling him again. How much better would that skin feel all sweaty and slick after a round between the sheets? She couldn’t wait to find out. “Wolverine?”

He gazed down at her, an unreadable expression on his chiseled face. “I’m a big fan.”

“I’ve thought about getting a tattoo,” she confessed, continuing to gently stroke his shoulder. Now that she touched him, she couldn’t seem to stop. It felt too good, *he* felt too good. Though Robert had had a nice body, it had been nothing in comparison to Dean’s. The man was built for pure sin. Good thing she wasn’t a religious woman, because she fully intended to commit every sin in the book with him. “But I’m not sure what I would want or where I would want it for that matter.”

He scratched the side of his nose, coughed, obviously biting back a grin. “You want a tattoo?”

“I think they’re sexy. Don’t you? I have my bellybutton ring.” She flicked a nail over the silver hoop with the dangling red heart in her bellybutton. “But I want something more. A tattoo would be perfect.”

“And permanent,” he said and reached down, traced a finger around her bellybutton. Her stomach trembled under his touch. A raging heat streamed through her settling between her legs. “This isn’t permanent. It can be removed when you want to. Maybe you should try a fake tattoo first. Get an idea of whether you truly want one or not.”

“That may not be a bad idea,” she said and inspiration struck. She stepped around him, moved to an aisle near the back of the store. He followed as she had hoped he would. “I bet I could find something in here that would work,” she said and picked up a tin box of temporary tattoo messages.

Dean took the box, read the top. “Make your body a billboard for your lover. Choose from over eight hundred, carefully selected letters, words and symbols relating to love, romance, and steamy affairs. You do have some interesting stuff in this place,” he said on a laugh.

“You’re only hitting the tip of the iceberg with that. We’ll get to the rest later.” She watched his gaze grow dark with desire from her promise. “So, what do you think?”

Where should I try one?"

* * * *

Where should she try one? She was no doubt baiting him. She made the first move. Oh, boy, had she made the first move. His dick still got hard every time he thought about the move she made, the way it felt to have her lips wrapped around him, and when he watched her swallow his cum... *Sweet Jesus!*

Now, it's your turn. Every sensible cell in his brain screamed for him not to bite. It didn't matter how badly he wanted her—and he *did* want her. He wanted her against a wall, on the floor, on a bed, in the shower, in the backseat of a car... He wanted her any way he could get her. But the simple fact still remained. He couldn't have her. Not in the way he *truly* wanted her. Not if he intended to keep his sanity intact. He had run across women like her before. Women who had lived sheltered, boring lives and then suddenly let their hair down, so to speak, and went wild. It always spelled trouble.

There had been a time when he would have leaped at the opportunity to get wild with Veronica Abbott. He had always known that all it would take was one night with her to get her out of his system. *You gave up one-night stands a long time ago, Wolcott*, he reminded himself. For nearly the past decade, the only sexual encounters he'd had were with women he had actually been involved with, women he was in a relationship with. Though for various reasons, not one of those relationships had lasted over a year.

Still, Dean looked for more than a quick roll in the hay. He wanted love, commitment, marriage, a family. And something about the new Veronica Abbott told him he would find nothing of the sort with her.

"Most women get one on their ankle," he said, thinking that was the safest of her body parts to mention. She lifted her left leg, rested the toe of her shoe on one of the shelves, and he knew in an instant he had been wrong. Even her ankle wasn't safe, because it was connected to that long shapely leg—a leg that he dreamed of having wrapped around his waist as he fucked her to oblivion on more occasions than he could count.

She shifted her foot, turning her ankle a bit as if she were modeling a pair of shoes for a commercial. Dean stared, utterly entranced by the smooth tanned skin. "Wouldn't that hurt? There's nothing there but bone."

"It wouldn't be on your ankle exactly."

"Good because I hate pain." She shuddered. "Unless it's pleasurable pain, of course."

Shit, shit, shit. Pleasurable pain? The images those words brought to mind had sweat beading on Dean's forehead. Deciding it best to ignore that little come-on, he said, "It would be above it a bit."

"Like how far?"

"Right about here." Before he realized what he did, he reached down, lightly touched her leg a few inches above her ankle. The softness of her skin seeped into his fingertips, traveled through his body straight to his cock. And just like that, he was toast.

Dammit, he had taken the bait hook, line, and sinker. One look at the hint of triumph in her eyes told him that he had done exactly what she wanted him to.

"Maybe," she said, her voice growing softer, huskier. "Or higher." She grabbed his wrist, dragged his hand up.

But Dean didn't stop midway up the side of her leg as she probably expected. Instead, the non-sensible cells of the brain in his cock took over. As if on autopilot, his hand continued up and over, not stopping until he touched her inner thigh. Even through the material of her shorts, he could feel her heat, and he thought he would go mad with the hunger that clinched his insides. "If you go higher," he said, his tone breathless, "this is where it should go."

Her fingers were still wrapped around his wrist, and she loosened her grip, slid her hand up his arm. "I think I like that," she whispered. "It would be hidden, erotic, my little secret." She shifted ever so slightly, and the movement had his hand moving even higher on her thigh. "A special treat."

"Jesus, Veronica. What are you doing to me?"

"A treat for you, of course," she continued as if she hadn't heard his question.

"I think you already have that. Right here." He cupped her through her shorts and heard her quick intake of breath. His gaze locked with hers and the triumph he had seen there turned to a hot pleading desire.

"Yes, Dean. That is yours." Her fingers gripped at his shoulder. "All you have to do is say you want it."

"Oh, I want it." He began to caress her, silently cursing the material that prevented him from feeling that sweet pussy. "I shouldn't want it, but I do. I shouldn't be touching you, but I am."

Her lids slowly lowered, her lips parting, her breath becoming ragged as he continued to cup her, caress her, stroke her. "God, Dean, please."

Her soft cries made his head spin. He wanted to rip off her shorts, feel her pussy without the barrier of the clothing. She was hot, so hot it nearly scorched his palm. And she was wet. He could feel it beginning to soak through the thin material of her shorts. His fingers ached to plunge inside her, to fuck her until she came in the palm of his hand. He owed her after all. He owed her for the orgasm she had given him.

But he couldn't kid himself into believing he did this out of obligation. No, he touched her because he wanted to, *needed* to. He couldn't resist her and that frightened the hell out of him. She could rip him to shreds. Probably would if he weren't careful. He managed to find her clit with his thumb, caressed it harder. Yeah, he was being real careful, wasn't he?

* * * *

"Veronica?"

Her eyes flew open at the sound of Judy's voice calling through the store. She jerked her hand off of Dean's shoulder, her leg still resting on the lower shelf dropped to

the floor, and she took a stumbling step backward.

He caught her arm, steadied her. "Careful." There was a bit of amusement in his tone, though his expression was completely serious, his eyes were dark, his lips set in a thin grim line. He almost looked angry. But who was he angry at? Her? Judy? Himself? "Are you okay?"

No! She was absolutely *not* okay. She had been mere seconds away from sheer bliss, from a complete and total meltdown, from orgasm heaven, and it had been violently ripped away from her. Her pussy burned, soaking wet and begging for the satisfaction that would now be denied.

"Veronica, you have a—" Judy rounded the corner of the aisle and stopped, her cheeks instantly turning a deep shade of crimson. "Phone call," she said more softly and quickly added, "I'm so sorry. The phone—I didn't know—It's your father."

"My father." Veronica exhaled an exasperated sigh. "Even hundreds of miles away, his timing doesn't fail. Tell him I'll be right there. I'm..." She glanced at Dean, looked back at Judy. "Tell him I'm with a customer."

Judy's gaze danced between Veronica and Dean, a small knowing smile beginning on her lips. "I can tell him you're busy and will call him back later."

It was tempting, but what would be the point? The moment with Dean was over. The sexual tension that had surrounded them evaporated almost the instant Judy called Veronica's name. "No. Just tell him I'll be there in a second."

She waited until Judy disappeared before turning her attention back to Dean. He stared down at her, and her stomach did a quick little dance. It hadn't been anger she had seen in his expression. It had been frustration, longing, need. He was as aggravated as she that they had been interrupted. Again! But God, what would have happened if her father hadn't called at that moment? They stood in the middle of an aisle in her store for crying out loud! The locker room at the station had been one thing. At least it had been a bit more secluded. But he had been fingering her—well, fingering her the best he could through her clothes—in the middle of a very public place. The thought was both erotically thrilling and chilling. How much farther would they have gone if they hadn't been interrupted? She shuddered while cursing her father at the same time for not allowing her to find out.

"I should go," he said, and his tone was as soft and seductive as the hand he brought to her cheek. He slid the back of his fingers down the side of her face, and she tilted her head, leaning into the touch.

"When can I see you again?" she asked in a whisper. "When can we finish what we started?"

A look of uncertainty, of indecision came to his blue-green eyes. He didn't say anything for several long agonizing seconds. "I'm not sure we should finish," he finally said. "I'm not sure that we should have started at all. Wednesday you—What you did—I shouldn't have let you, but it was fabulous, amazing, absolutely wonderful. But this is dangerous, Veronica."

"That's almost funny coming from a man who used to live on the edge of

danger,” she said but couldn’t find it in her to laugh. He was being so serious, so *deep*, and she didn’t want him that way. She wanted the carefree soul, the man who lived by the seat of his pants, the man who would fuck her at the drop of a hat and not think twice about it just because he was attracted to her.

“I told you I’m not that man anymore, baby,” he said gently. “I’ve changed, and what I want now is something I don’t think you’re ready to give me.”

She wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that, and at the moment, she didn’t care. They would finish what they started. She looked at him, at the warm swirl of desire that was still in his eyes and knew that even though he attempted to be reasonable, sensible, all she had to do was make the move and he would give in. He wanted her that badly, as badly as she wanted him. “I’ll be closing the store at 9. Come by the house around 10. I’ll take the phone off the hook,” she said, her words, half question and half request. Then she quickly added, “So that we can talk without interruption.”

“Talk,” he repeated. One corner of his lips quirked in a smile, and she knew that *he* knew she had no intentions of simply talking. Still, he nodded, just the slightest almost imperceptible movement of his head and said, “I’ll see you at 10.”

* * * *

It was a bad idea. It was a very bad idea. Dean knew it in his bones, in his gut, in his heart. Yet, here he was pulling into Veronica’s driveway. He couldn’t get within ten feet of her without exploding. That much had been proven twice! Well, okay, so that wasn’t exactly true. He could get within ten or even five feet from her and still maintain his control. It was when she touched him, or he touched her, that all reasonable thought got lost.

So he would keep his distance. That was the plan. Oh, it wasn’t what she had planned. She wanted to fuck. She hadn’t said as much when she’d told him to be here at 10:00, but she didn’t need to. Dean didn’t have to be a psychic to read the intention in her eyes. Maybe they would get to that.

Maybe, he thought as he switched off the bike’s motor and let down the kickstand. *Be honest with yourself, Wolcott*. They would no doubt get to that. But first they would talk. They had to talk. They had to get everything out in the open before anything between them—What *was* happening between them—went any further.

Dean climbed off his bike, looked at the house. A rush of different emotions swept over him. How many times as a young boy had he longed to be invited to this house? Not just because of his monstrous crush on Veronica though yes that had been the primary reason. He had also been envious. He had yearned to be a part of more, to have a family that cared even if that said family was, in his opinion, as snooty and stuck-up as Veronica’s parents. They cared for her. They loved her. They may have been controlling, strict, and even a bit harsh, but they had been there. They hadn’t deserted Veronica by leaving or sinking into a bottle as his own parents had done.

As he walked up the long winding path to the front door, he realized he was nervous. It was both ironic and disconcerting. He had faced a lot in his thirty-two years of life, most of which could have taken his very life from him, but none of it had ever made him feel nervous—poised, excited, or even a bit crazy maybe, but never nervous.

Leave it to a damned woman to turn even his emotions upside-down, he thought with a dry chuckle and rang the doorbell. In what felt like no more than a half a second—she must have been watching for him—the door eased open. Instead of seeing Veronica as he had expected, he saw only open space, a dimly lit entryway.

Heart hammering in his chest, he stepped inside. His boots made a soft sound as they met with the hardwood floor. It was an entryway like that which would be seen in a movie about the rich. Classy and exquisite with framed artwork strategically placed on the walls and a small table that appeared on first glance to be from the turn of the century. It was the candles on the floor that lined both walls that had his eyes widening in surprise.

He sensed more than saw the door close behind him. Then he felt the soft delicate hands come to rest on the back of his shoulders. *So much for keeping his distance*, he thought as he slowly turned.

And took an involuntary step backward even as his heart stilled in his chest.

CHAPTER FOUR

If a strong wind ripped through the entryway at that moment and blew out every candle, the vision before Dean would still be forever etched in his mind. She had pulled her hair up into some sort of stylish design he couldn't name and didn't care to guess, with thin tendrils spiraling on either side of her face and tangling with a pair of silver earrings decorated in dangling red hearts. The red coincided with a barely-there, fire-engine-red teddy that made his mouth run dry. Spaghetti straps led to a red floral pattered, but completely see through, lace bodice, tied in a sweet bow between her breasts. The lace hung open in a flyaway shape revealing every slender line of her body and stopping just above her thighs and a pair of red g-strings. She wore red heels that seemed to make those already breathtaking legs end somewhere at her ears.

"Is there a problem, Captain?" she asked, her mouth curving in a satisfyingly wicked grin.

Dean felt his IQ sink into the single digits even as his dick sprang to attention inside his trousers. "My God," was all he could manage on a husky, ragged whisper.

"I thought we already discussed the God thing," she said and stepped closer to him.

He couldn't help himself. He reached out, traced a finger along the string of satin low on her hip. Heat shot through his fingertip white and hot. "You look—" Amazing, astounding, heart-stopping gorgeous! But single syllable words were all his tongue could grasp so he settled on, "Wow."

She laughed, a soft breathy sound that stroked him like a piece of silk. "I'm glad you approve." She reached for him, one hand sliding down his arm to his hand. She laced her fingers in his and slowly led him into the next room.

It too was lit only by candlelight. Long red and white candles in crystal holders sat on every available flat surface in the large living room. On the floor in front of the fireplace, she had made a circle of large fluffy pillows around a makeshift table arrangement.

“A floor picnic?” Dean said as she pulled him to one of the pillows.

“More like a snack bar,” she said. “It isn’t cold enough for a fire, but I thought the fireplace made for a good backdrop so to speak. Have a seat, lover.”

Lover. The endearment stirred something in Dean’s brain. Talk. Yeah, he remembered something about that. But what did he want to talk about?

She pulled him down to the pillows and sat beside him. She picked up two glasses of chilled wine, held one out for him. “Should we toast?”

Dean looked down into the glass he had taken and looked back at her. The candlelight danced over her bare skin giving it a warm seductive glow. Man, but she was gorgeous!

“You seem to be a man of few words tonight. I’ll make the toast. How about to us? To finally indulging in those dreams we’ve both had for so many years.” She lightly clanked her glass to his and sipped the wine.

Indulging in dreams. The words repeated in Dean’s head as he took a much larger drink of the wine than he meant to. It was a smooth, white wine, a bit sweet but tantalizing to the taste buds. Just like her, he mused and stole another large sip. The alcohol seemed to break through the cloud of lust in his mind long enough for him to remember. “Talk,” he said and didn’t miss the almost imperceptible way her shoulders raised and fell in a silent sigh. “We do need to talk, Veronica.”

“I have been talking, handsome. It’s you who seems to have lost his tongue to the cat.”

“And you knew I would,” he said, purposely raking his gaze over her. And, oh damn but he shouldn’t have done that. He had to keep his attention on her eyes, had to keep himself from looking at all of that lace, all of that exposed skin.

She sat her wine glass on the floor, snuggled closer to him. Lifting a hand, she danced her fingers on the side of his neck, and worked her way down just beneath the collar of his shirt. “Sometimes talking really is overrated.”

He breathed in deeply. A heartbeat passed as he reveled in the sweetly feminine smell of her. He felt the top button of his shirt give and gently caught her wrist. “And sometimes talking is a real necessity.”

“You should know that really turns me on,” she said, her gaze dropping to her wrist clasped in his hand. “I’ve never had a man take control of me that way, but I think I would enjoy it.”

Dean dropped his hand, closed his eyes. She certainly wasn’t going to make this easy for him. She obviously had no intentions of talking and did everything in her power to be sure he couldn’t even form a single coherent thought, much less speak it.

As soon as he let go of her wrist, her hand continued to the next button. She undid them until his shirt was open to the waistline of his trousers and then buried her hand inside, tangling her fingers in his chest hair. “You’re welcome to talk if you like,” she said and used both hands to push his shirt open and off his shoulders. She reached over, picked up a small bottle that sat beside a bowl of fresh strawberries. She squirted a small

amount above his left nipple, and then his right, and he sucked in a breath. Whatever was in that bottle came out cold but almost instantly warmed on his skin and tingled slightly.

“What is that?” he asked as she replaced the bottle on the floor.

“Strawberry flavored massage oil,” she answered and began to slowly rub it into his skin. Then she leaned in and licked. The sensations of the oil, of the scent, of her tongue had his head falling back on his shoulders. “I’m listening,” she said against his skin and then her mouth moved over his nipple and she sucked, nibbled.

A lightning bolt of desire, fiercer than any he had ever experienced, shot straight to his dick. Jesus, the woman was amazing! She feasted on him, kissing, licking, sucking her way over his chest, his abs, his stomach, and he couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but feel. And want. Oh, how he wanted. He had wanted all of his life, wanted a mother and father who cared, wanted to be the best firefighter he could be, wanted to be a strong and decent man. And he had wanted her. Still, never before had that final want been so great as it was right now.

Dean had given up on his parents many years ago, resigned himself to the fact that he would never see that particular want, that dream fulfilled. Instead, he focused his energy on what he could make true. He became the best firefighter he could be, worked himself up the ladder from the very bottom to Captain in only a few years. He tamed his wild and crazy ways and liked to think he had become that strong and decent man he wanted to be.

Now he had the chance to make that final dream come true. He could have Veronica Abbott. But what if he had been wrong all these years? What if having her once really wouldn’t get her out of his system?

He felt the button of his trousers give, thought back to the last time she had gotten close to his dick. Who the hell was he kidding? Once would never be enough.

He saw himself stopping her, pushing her away, standing and putting his clothes to rights. He didn’t do any of that. Instead of pushing her away, he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her hard and forcefully against him. Anger seared through him, at her for not listening, for driving him past the barriers of his control, at himself for not holding on to that control, for not being able to resist her. The anger brought out the darker side of him, the part of him that he had buried long ago. But even as he cursed it, that crazed blackness and red-hot anger, he embraced it, felt empowered by it.

Her eyes widened in an instant of shock, and he saw the uncertainty flash through her expression. Her lips parted as if to speak, and he crushed his mouth over hers. So many times he had dreamt of kissing her. In his dreams, he kissed her slowly, softly, tenderly, only taking what she wanted to give when she was ready to give it. Yet, there was nothing soft and slow about this kiss. It held no resemblance to those from his dreams. He plunged his tongue into her mouth not waiting for an invitation and ravaged her. He felt her slight pause of stunned hesitation before she began to respond. Her arms snaked around his neck even as he angled his head and took the kiss even deeper.

* * * *

Veronica felt his hand fist in the back of her hair, holding her head in place. She

tried to pull away and found she couldn't move. Not that she wanted to. The small show of dominance made her wetter than she had ever been in her life. The rough, demanding, controlling way he kissed her had her whole body on fire. No one had ever kissed her this way, with so much passion and strength. His tongue possessed her mouth, made it his, and he tasted so wonderful, so male with the slight hint of the wine lingering to add a bit of sweetness.

I pushed him to this, she realized. *I pushed him past his breaking point*. But hadn't that been her plan? Wasn't that why she rushed home after closing the store to set the perfect atmosphere with the candles, the lotions and oils, the fruits, the red teddy she was wearing? She knew he came tonight wanting to talk and they would. But first she wanted to make sure they finished what they started in the locker room days ago and in her store earlier that afternoon. She was tired of interruptions, tired of waiting. She wanted him inside her. Then he could talk the remainder of the night away if he chose.

His callused hand moved down her bare back as he broke the kiss. Then he looked at her, and the want, the need mixed with the fear and anger she could see in his eyes just before he began savagely kissing her neck, took her breath away. She rolled her head to the side, exposing more of her skin for his hungry kisses. The day's worth of stubble on his face felt like sandpaper to her tender flesh, and she knew she would still wear his mark come morning, but she didn't care.

He pushed her back, and she went willingly. Somehow he managed to keep her on the pillows she had laid on the floor. He went down with her, over her, still kissing, still ravaging her neck. He didn't stop until she moved her arms, tried to feel more of him.

In one brisk move, he caught both her wrists and pinned them to the floor on either side of her head. He gazed down at her, and for the briefest of moments she saw the old Dean again, the one whose eyes shined with excitement, promises, and adventure. But in a flash, it was gone, yet it wasn't replaced with the calm and sensible Dean he had become. The look in his eyes now was one she had never before seen, couldn't quite identify, and when he spoke, his voice was as rough as his kisses had been. "You wanted this. I'm going to give it to you. But you're going to get it my way. Now, don't move."

A ripple of alarm shot from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes at his words, but it only added to the excitement, to the heat blazing inside her. She had never felt more aroused, more *alive* than she did at that moment. He was in control, and yet he wasn't. He was in control of her, but he had lost all control of himself.

He released his hold on her wrists, skimmed his hands down her sides, and shifted himself back as he slid her panties off, tossed them aside. Her pussy was wet, so very wet and throbbing for his touch, for his dick. But he didn't give her either. He returned to her, straddled her waist as he untied the bow between her breasts, and pushed the lace of the teddy aside. His hands were like large suction cups on her breasts, molding to them, working them in a pressured massage that had her gasping in pleasure. When he caught her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and rolled them, pinched them, she writhed beneath him at the same time arching her back and pushing her breasts higher, begging for more. Yes, this was what she had wanted. Well, almost. He wasn't inside her yet, but she had no doubt that he would be soon.

Her eyes tried to close, to bury her mind in the darkness of the erotic pain and blissful pleasure he showed her. Instead, she forced them to stay open, to watch him, to savor him. He looked so exotically sexy straddling her the way he was, his shirt still unbuttoned to the waistband of his pants and hanging off his shoulders. The black trousers he wore strained against his massive erection, and she longed to reach out, to cup his dick the way he cupped her breasts.

His word echoed in her mind. *You wanted this. I'm going to give it to you. But you're going to get it my way. Now, don't move.* So she didn't and was rewarded for her obedience when he pushed himself up, stood, and stripped off his clothes. His body was as glorious as she remembered from the locker room, but even more so tonight with the sheen of sweat layering his skin.

Forgetting herself, she reached for him as he lowered himself above her again, but he caught her hands, pinned them back to the floor with his. His legs pushed between hers, spreading her and then in one quick, breath-lodging stroke, he was inside her. She was tight and his dick was long, wide. It stretched her, filled her so completely that her mind short-circuited. Was that pleasure or pain shooting through her? She could no longer separate the two.

He stopped, buried balls deep inside her and stared down into her eyes. "Is this what you wanted, Veronica?"

"Yes," she whispered on a ragged breath. "God, yes!"

"Or is this what you want?" He withdrew almost completely, pounded into her again hard and fast.

"Ohmigod!" she nearly screamed it. Her back arched on his inward thrust, and when he pulled back ever so slightly, her hips rose to meet his. His fingers laced with hers and squeezed tightly, pushing her hands into the floor as he pounded her. They slid into a rhythm that was hard and fast, rough and wild. He rocked her, reached places inside her she hadn't known existed and with each push, each invasion, had her crying out from the sheer pleasure of it all. She felt herself climbing, the heat inside her intensifying to a blazing fire in search of water. Her stomach tightened, her inner muscles latching onto his dick, her legs wrapping around his waist and pulling him even deeper.

"Cum for me, Veronica." He panted. "And I want to hear you. Let me know how good it feels."

She did. Seconds later her entire body convulsed with the most fierce, most explosive orgasm of her life. She heard herself scream, gasp, cry out his name, and then somewhere in the darkness of her pleasure, she heard him grunt loudly with his release. His seed shot up inside her even as her inner muscles continued to contract around his dick. Then his fingers loosened on hers and he fell on top of her.

Breathless and still trembling from the force of her orgasm, Veronica slowly pulled her hands from beneath his, and finally, she touched him. Her arms snaked around him, hugged him tightly. She could feel his heart pumping in a frenzied pace in time with her own, hear his short ragged breaths in her ear.

She didn't know how long they stayed that way—his dick still buried inside her,

his body molded to hers, her holding him tightly—but finally he lifted his head, looked at her, and she could see in an instant that a part of the sensible Dean had returned.

He closed his eyes, gulped. When he opened them again, she saw the concern, the worry mixed with the anger in his eyes. “Did I hurt you? Please tell me I didn’t hurt you.”

But he had hurt her, hadn’t he? Hadn’t she felt the pain on her breasts, her nipples, deep within her when he thrust into her without warning or sensitivity? Yet, she enjoyed it all. She loved it! “You didn’t do anything to me that I didn’t like,” she said and trailed a hand lightly down his chest.

She watched as he took in her answer, registered the fact that she hadn’t exactly said no, nor had she said yes. A few heartbeats passed, and then he nodded, accepted her response. He shifted, pulled out of her, and she saw the instant realization took hold. His eyes widened, she could almost see his heart pounding out of his chest.

“I’m on the pill,” she said before he had a chance to speak. “And I’m clean. I’ve only had two lovers in my life. The first was my husband, and the second used protection.”

He chuckled, but the sound was completely dry, devoid of all humor. “I’ve been with a lot more than two women, Veronica. But you can trust that I’m clean, too. I’ve been tested regularly.”

She nodded and was only marginally surprised to realize she hadn’t been worried at all.

“I need to...uh...clean up,” he said and looked a bit embarrassed. “The bathroom...”

“Across the hall to the left.”

He picked up his clothes and walked out of the room. Veronica sat up, pulled the sides of her teddy back together, and retied the bow, then hugged her legs to her chest. She should clean up, too, she knew, but she wasn’t quite ready to erase the evidence of their lovemaking. Not that all evidence would go away so quickly or so easily. No, she would be feeling the remnants of tonight for a long time.

What happened now? Where did they go from here? Where did she want them to go? She sighed, realizing she didn’t have a clue. She hadn’t thought outside of the box on that one, hadn’t considered anything past getting him inside her. She didn’t want a relationship, didn’t want a commitment. She knew that much. However, she did want more of that mind-blowing sex he had given her tonight.

She didn’t hear him when he returned, didn’t know he was there until he spoke, and what he said made what felt like a band tighten around her stomach.

“I have to go.” He walked to her, knelt beside her. He was completely dressed and looked much as he had when he arrived, save for the matted strands of his hair from the sweat and water he most likely splashed on his face while in the bathroom.

He was leaving. The imaginary band in her stomach squeezed tighter. They just had sex, and now he was leaving. She expected him to stay, expected a repeat of the event at some point in the night, expected to awake in his arms tomorrow morning. He

obviously had a different ending planned for the night.

“Don’t you want to talk?” she asked, her thoughts swimming through disappointment and confusion.

“I can’t talk now.” He brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek, kissed her lips softly. “I’ll call you later.” Before she could chase down her thoughts enough to say anything more, he walked out of the room. She heard the front door open, only to close again a half a second later. Then in the distance, she heard the motor of his motorcycle as it came to life and he sped out of the drive.

* * * *

He had left. He had to. He needed time to align his thoughts, his feelings. He needed time to put the night in a different perspective. Not that the time did him much good, Dean mused as he slid into the chair behind his desk. He spent the remainder of last night and all of this morning replaying his time with Veronica over and over only to come to the conclusion that he longed to do it, to do *her*, all over again.

Dammit!

Once hadn’t been enough. He knew it wouldn’t be, was stupid to think it could be. No way could he live the rest of his life without feeling that silky smooth skin again, without tasting those luscious lips, without sinking his cock deep inside her tight, wet pussy. He lost himself last night, lost everything he came to be. And had gotten the one thing he had always wanted.

Double dammit!

“You look like a man who had a rough Saturday night, Captain,” Barrett drawled from the open doorway. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, a shoulder leaning against the doorframe, studying Dean with a bemused expression.

In Dean’s years with the Fire Service, if he had become close to any one firefighter in particular, it was Tripp Barrett. With only a year’s head start on Barrett, they had worked their way up the ranks together, and though Dean now outranked the Lieutenant, there was a mutual respect between them that had been hard earned. There was also the ability to see right through the other’s façade.

Dean simply shot Barrett a look before returning to the paperwork he attempted to concentrate on. Attempting, because if he were given a pop quiz at that moment, he wouldn’t be able to even recite the first word on the page. No matter what he did, no matter what he looked at, all he could see was Veronica. Hot, sexy, dripping with wetness, moaning and squirming beneath him, screaming his name as her body convulsed around him...

“I didn’t think you went out partying anymore.”

“I don’t and I didn’t.” Though he wished he could blame last night’s recklessness on alcohol. At least then he would have some sort of lame excuse for his actions. He had been so rough with her, so demanding. Hell, he fucking raped her! But she enjoyed it, hadn’t she? What was that saying? *You can’t rape the willing*. She had no doubt been willing, asking for it all, *begging* for it. She pushed him until he snapped. Had she cursed

him when he walked out? Was she cursing him this morning? Was she having regrets?

“Then you aren’t suffering from the monster of all hangovers?” Barrett stepped into the office, took a seat in the chair opposite Dean at the desk.

“Not from alcohol,” Dean muttered.

“Uh oh.” The Lieutenant’s grin was evident in the sound of his voice. “When a man looks as bad as you do after a night of no alcohol, there’s only one explanation. Someone had a bout with a member of the opposite sex. Could her name be Veronica Abbott?”

“Do I butt into your sexual life, Barrett?” Dean snapped before he could stop himself. In truth, they had exchanged words about their sexual affairs in the past. Not explicitly. They never engaged in what would be considered “locker room talk,” but they had been known to boast a bit.

Barrett’s eyebrows leaped up in apparent surprise, and he leaned forward in the chair. “You had sex with her last night?”

“Shit!” Dean cursed, tossed his pen on the desk, and shoved a hand through his hair.

“And now you’re beating yourself up about it,” Barrett guessed correctly. “But why? Forgive me for saying so, but the woman is hot, Cap. And from the way she was coming on to you in the locker room Wednesday, I would say she’s hot for you.”

If the man only knew exactly what transpired in that locker room on Wednesday...Dean couldn’t walk into that room without watching a replay of Veronica on her knees sucking his dick as if she had been starving for the last millennium. And the way she waited until she knew he was watching before she swallowed his cum... He still got hard just thinking about it.

“She’s hot for the sex,” he muttered. “That’s all.”

Barrett sobered, eyed Dean with a knowing stare. “But you want more.”

Dean hesitated, feeling odd at having such a deep conversation with another man even if they were friends.

“We always want what we can’t have.” Barrett sighed and stood. “It’s when we get it and the want doesn’t go away that we know we’re in trouble.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Dean muttered and picked up his pen. Barrett left the office, leaving Dean wondering what, or whom, the Lieutenant wanted that he couldn’t have.

CHAPTER FIVE

Veronica had to get out of her parents' house and fast! She had officially run out of time to find a place of her own. When the phone rang an hour ago, she leapt for it, certain that it was Dean. He was calling to apologize for walking out on her last night, calling to tell her how much he enjoyed the sex they had shared and how badly he wanted to do it again. Unfortunately, it hadn't been Dean on the other end of the line. It had been her mother. Her parents were returning to Silver Springs on Tuesday. Tuesday! Only two days away.

She had to get out of the house! No way could she live under the same roof with her parents again. Her father was too set in his ways, too controlling, too certain that he knew what was best for Veronica. The store was already a source of contention between them. Her choice to live the single life instead of immediately looking for a rich beau to marry and take care of her was another. Under her father's roof, her newly gained freedom would be instantly ripped from her. She couldn't let that happen. Not when she worked so hard to achieve exactly that.

How long did it take to rent an apartment? Veronica wondered as she whipped her Corvette into the parking space reserved for future residents in front of the office at Green Leaf Condominiums. She didn't take the time to look around, could care less at this point if the complex was what she was looking for or not. She suddenly became a very desperate woman and would take just about anything, live just about anywhere, to keep from having to stay under her parents' roof.

She got out of the car when she saw Lacy walking out of the office. Professional realtor to the end, Lacy had obviously arrived early for their two o'clock appointment. She was dressed in a no frills business suit, her expression, as plain as the beige material.

Veronica's heart slumped to her feet. *This can't be happening*, she thought as she watched Lacy walk somberly toward her. But it was happening. Her friend didn't have to say anything for Veronica to know there weren't any condos available for her to rent. Now what was she going to do?

"I should have called before we drove all the way out here," Lacy said when she reached Veronica. "They rented the last available condo yesterday morning."

Veronica nodded, her mind already pondering her other options.

"They will have more ready in a month. If you want one of those, you should get the paperwork started now."

"I can't wait a month." Veronica sighed. "I need something now."

"You really have to get out of that house that bad, huh? Well, you could stay with me until your condo is ready."

Veronica had thought of that but nixed the idea just as quickly as it came to her. Lacy lived across the street and three houses down from Veronica's parents. It would be better than being under the same roof but not by much. She needed to be further away, somewhere so that her father couldn't watch her comings and goings.

She looked around, realizing now that the condominium complex was exactly what she hoped for. It was quiet and secluded yet not so far out that she would feel as though she lived in the boondocks. She'd have a bit of a drive to and from the store, but it wouldn't be a bad drive. Actually, it'd be well worth it.

From her vantage point in front of the office, Veronica could see that each building consisted of four individual condos. The buildings were strategically spaced to allow for privacy and seclusion, and each condo had its own narrow, private driveway outside its front door. Huge shade trees, manicured bushes, and a variety of plants and flowers dressed the landscape around and between the buildings. She couldn't see the backyards but could tell that a few of them overlooked the golf course.

Maybe she could pitch a tent on the back nine for a month, she mused, moving a few steps from the car to see more of the buildings that lined the two-lane street, divided by beautiful magnolia trees. Much of the buildings to her right appeared to be still under construction, but the ones to her left were occupied. And that's when she saw it. The fire-engine-red motorcycle parked out front of one of the finished condos near the back of the complex.

"Isn't that Dean Wolcott's motorcycle?" she asked, shooting a glance back at Lacy over her shoulder.

"Probably. I think he's the only one in town with a bike like that. I forgot he lives out here."

Veronica turned, cocked her head. The tone of Lacy's voice had her asking, "Did you really forget or were you just trying to set me up?"

"I really forgot," Lacy nearly screeched in her own defense. "Besides, I told you about this place before you even mentioned Dean."

That was true, Veronica silently conceded. She remembered Lacy first speaking of the condos when she came into the store the Wednesday before it opened, the same Wednesday Veronica had visited the fire station.

Veronica felt her lips curve into a smile as an idea began to take hold. It was a

silly idea, a stupid idea, a completely spontaneous and brazen idea. She loved it!

Obviously catching on immediately, Lacy stepped up to her, shook her head in disbelief. “Veronica, you aren’t thinking—”

“I am thinking.” Veronica nodded, excitement flip-flopping in her belly even as her mind latched onto the ways she could accomplish her new goal. “And I’m going to do it.”

* * * *

His dream had come to life. Well, almost. He pulled into his driveway instead of walking out his front door, and she wore clothes instead of being completely naked, but his dream blond leaned against his motorcycle all the same. Dean put his truck in park, paused to steady himself before turning off the engine. Finding her at his place was the last thing he expected. Though, he wasn’t sure why it should come as such a surprise. Catching him off guard and unprepared seemed to be her forte.

“Hey there, cutie,” she greeted him as he climbed out of the truck. She wore a pair of the tightest jeans he saw on a woman, with a halter-top that left her bellybutton ring exposed and a smile that made any man weak in the knees. The woman was drop-dead beautiful, and she knew it.

“What are you doing here?” At the crestfallen look that flashed through her eyes, Dean realized what he said and how it must have sounded. And for the briefest instant, he saw the innocent, bashful Veronica she had once been. Just as quickly, that young girl was masked and the sexpot Veronica was back.

“I wanted to see you, lover,” she said and met him halfway in the driveway.

Lover. Was that truly how she thought of him? Did two foreplay encounters and one night of incredible sex make them lovers in her eyes? Well, duh, he guessed it would make them lovers in anyone’s eyes. She wanted to see him. He should have been happy about that. Only he knew why she wanted to see him. She was no doubt looking for a replay.

Lover. He couldn’t handle simply being her lover. Delete the “r” from that word and he would have what he wanted. Too bad there wasn’t a delete button in spoken conversation.

She reached for him, but he sidestepped her, moved past her, and walked to the front door. He fumbled with his keys, dropped them on the concrete, picked them up, and fumbled some more before finally managing to find his house key and unlock the door. She had shaken him up. Who was he kidding? She always shook him up, and he was convinced that was her intentions. However, shook up or not, this encounter with Veronica would be different. He’d make sure of it. They had been together three times in less than a week and each time had been sexual. This time wouldn’t begin that way. Dammit, it wouldn’t!

When he shot a glance over his shoulder, he saw that she hadn’t followed but still stood in the driveway watching him, her expression, a combination of uncertainty, anger, and pain. Obviously, he had thrown an unexpected curve to whatever plan she had in the works. *Good.* That was a good thing.

“Are you coming inside?” he asked, keeping his tone neutral as he swung open the door.

She shoved her hands in her pockets—how the hell did she even fit them in there as tight as those jeans were—and seemed to contemplate his question for a minute. When she finally answered, her voice portrayed the confusion on her face. “You don’t sound like you really want me to.”

Dean sighed, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. He was acting like a total ass. He knew it, and yet he couldn’t help himself. If he were nice to her, if he showed her how much he truly wanted her there, how much he truly wanted *her*, she would take his need and run with it...straight down his pants. Too bad she wouldn’t take it and lock it inside her heart.

“Come inside, Veronica.” He molded himself to the doorframe, leaving her ample room to enter the condo without touching him. But of course she didn’t let him get away with that. She walked through the doorway slowly, hesitantly, her arm brushing his front as she passed. And just that slightest bit of contact had his body growing warm and his dick jumping to alert.

* * * *

Veronica’s tennis shoes made a squeaking sound as she stepped onto the brown tiled floor of the entryway. It was more a short hallway, she realized, with a short set of beige carpeted stairs immediately to her right—presumably leading to the second level—and a closed door on both the right and left of the hallway. The brown tile met more beige carpeting as the hallway led her to a wide combination dining and living room area. The left side of the room housed an entertainment center complete with a thirty-two-inch television, combination VCR/DVD, and a nice stereo system. A movie poster of—what else—the X-Men hung on the wall along with a small trinket shelf that held a dozen different Wolverine action figures.

Before the entertainment center sat a black leather recliner—a throw blanket with a weaved-in picture of a firehouse tossed over the back—and a matching sofa had been placed off to the side as a way of separating the area from the dining portion. A coffee table and a single end table between the sofa and recliner completed the living room furnishings. The dining area to her right was even sparser on furnishings with only a small oval table and four chairs in the center. The table appeared to be used more as a desk than for eating if all the papers and books covering the surface were any indication. She saw a darkened doorway off the dining area and guessed it led to a small kitchen.

The complete downstairs of the condo was small and there was nothing glamorous or exquisite about it. Yet, she felt a cozy, at home, sensation wash over her as she gazed around the room. This was what her condo would look like, she realized, and, though it was nothing like any place she had ever lived before, she loved it.

“Do you want something to drink?” Dean asked, breaking into her thoughts as he pushed passed her and made his way to the darkened doorway off the dining room. A light came on, and then he spoke again. “I don’t have much in here. Soda, water, beer...” He peeked his head around the doorway, his expression questioning.

“Whatever you’re having.” Veronica shrugged.

He walked back into the room carrying two bottles of beer. He handed one to her before turning back and taking a seat at the far end of the dining room table.

Okay, Veronica thought. *What the hell is going on here?* She had thought only those who ran in her parents' social circle knew how to be rudely hospitable, but apparently she was wrong. He had invited her inside—if one wanted to call his almost curt order an invitation—offered her a drink but was hardly looking at her and keeping as much distance between them as possible.

She looked at the table, at the stacks of magazines, papers and books that lined the sides and covered the center. The only clear spot for her to sit was at the opposite end of the table from his. Yet more distance between them, she mused as she pulled out the chair and sat.

Dean leaned back in his chair, his beer bottle cradled between his hands on the table in front of him, and stared at a spot on the wall over her head. He didn't speak, didn't move, and his expression revealed absolutely nothing of what he thought.

Veronica fought the urge to squirm in the chair, taking a long pull from the beer instead. It was ice cold and hit her stomach like a glacier sliding into the mouth of a volcano. Despite the coziness of the condo, she felt uncomfortable, and she didn't like it. She could feel herself sinking into the confused, timid girl she had once been, and it pissed her off. She wasn't that girl anymore. She was confident...of herself, of what she wanted. She was a woman in control of her life. She didn't cower to people anymore, didn't let anyone tell her what to do or how to act. And she didn't avoid confrontations. Not anymore.

"You're angry with me." She said it as more of a statement than a question, blunt and straight to the point. "Want to tell me why?"

Several heartbeats passed before he answered. "I'm not mad at you, Veronica," his tone was despondent, only the slightest trace of the rudeness with which he had greeted her remained. "I'm just not in the mood to have sex right now."

A man who wasn't in the mood to have sex! Now, wasn't that one for the record books? Though his comment held a comical amazement, she was stunned. No way was this a laughing matter. He obviously thought...

"Funny, I wasn't aware you had such a big ego," she said, adding a bite to her tone, and sat her beer bottle on the table a bit harder than she intended.

"Isn't that why you're here?" He finally looked at her, and now she found herself wishing he hadn't. His eyes were so hard, his lips set in a thin grim line. Where was the softness, the desire she always saw when he looked at her?

"I'm here because I wanted to see you," she said through clinched teeth. "Because I happened to be in the area, saw the motorcycle, realized it was yours, and decided to wait for you."

"You were in the area." Skepticism rang in his voice.

"Yes, I was in the area. I've been looking for my own place to live. Lacy told me about the condos out here. Unfortunately for me, we waited too long."

“You want to live out here?” That got a raise of an eyebrow.

“I would love to live out here. Especially since I’ve seen the inside of your condo.” She made a show of looking around and then crossed her arms at her middle as she said, “It has such a cozy feel, a homey feel. That’s what I was looking for.”

“Several of the condos are still under construction. Can’t you get on a waiting list or something for one of those?”

“I could. There’s one set of them that will be ready in a month.” And from the way her parents had talked on the phone that morning, it would be a month spent not only under her parent’s roof, but under her father’s foot as well. It wasn’t uncommon for her parents to spend weeks or even months at a time in their home in Silver Springs even though their primary residence was in South Florida. Now that Veronica was back in town, she was certain their visit on Tuesday would only be the start of one very long stay.

She sighed, picked up the beer bottle and guzzled down a large portion of what remained. “My parents are coming on Tuesday. I wanted to be out of their house before then.”

Dean nodded slowly as understanding began to set in. “You don’t want to live with them.”

“Would you? Imagine having to live with your parents again after being on your own for so long. Imagine having to answer to them about your every move, abiding by their rules, having a curfew for crying out loud!”

Dean’s gaze dropped to the table. His fingers toyed with the neck of the beer bottle, spinning it, tilting it from side to side. “I never had to answer to anyone, never had rules or curfews,” he said quietly. “Besides, my father is dead, and God only knows what happened to my mother. I don’t think I have anything to worry about there.”

Veronica realized what she had just said, who she had just said it to. Dean never had parents that cared. He had been a young boy when his mother took to the road and Veronica knew his father never was what anyone called a candidate for the Father of the Year Award.

The need to reach for him, to hold him tightened like a vise on her heart. She had never considered his childhood, how he felt about being on his own all his life. The thought that he might want a family, parents that loved him, someone to put order in his life, had never occurred to her.

“Dean, I’m sorry. I—”

“Don’t push your parents away, Veronica.” He cut her off, pinned her with a serious and steady glare. “Be grateful that you have them. Even if they do try to control you, set rules for you. They love you. That’s what matters most.”

“And I love them. I’m not trying to push them away, Dean. But don’t I deserve to have my own life, be my own person? Dad controls me. He always has. And he will do anything and everything he can to keep that control. He hates the idea of my store, and he hasn’t even stepped foot through the door yet.”

His lips twitched as she could see him fighting to hold back a grin. “You actually

expected a man as old fashioned and high society as your father to like it? I've been in your store, Veronica, and I—" He shook his head and laughed.

Veronica laughed, too. "Okay, point taken. No, I didn't expect him to really like it, but he could accept it. My store is me." She pointed a finger at her chest. "I made the place into what I wanted, the way I wanted it. Maybe the stock is questionable for a man like my father, but we aren't living in the fifties any longer. You would think being a man that he would realize women are more sensual, more sexual than they were back then."

"You dammed sure are," Dean muttered, and his gaze raked over the top of her body in a way that had her nipples growing hard beneath her tank top.

"I wasn't alive in the fifties," she reminded him. "Anyway, the point is, I would like for my parents and I to come to some sort of an understanding. I want them to accept my independence. They will never do that as long as I'm living under their roof. Whether they are there or not," she added.

"Then where are you going to live for the next month?"

Veronica heaved a sigh, propped her elbows on the tabletop, a frown etching itself between her brows. Trying to appear casual, despondently even, she said, "Good question. I wish I had an answer." She looked at him, shot him a coy half smile and as though the thought just occurred to her, she said, "I don't suppose you're looking for a roommate for a month."

* * * *

He should have seen it coming, should have known what was going through that pretty head of hers as soon as the conversation started. But he hadn't. And once again, she caught him off guard and completely unprepared. He stood, walked to the fridge for another beer, stayed in the kitchen as he allowed her words and their implications to sink in. She wanted to move in with him, to *live* with him. He would be stupid, absolutely insane to agree. But he would have her under his roof, the woman of his dreams within arms reach 24/7 for a month. As bad of an idea as it was, it was dammed sure tempting.

"Can I have another one of those?"

Dean hadn't realized she joined him in the kitchen. He started, pulled another beer from the fridge, and twisted off the cap before handing it to her. She didn't return to the table as he expected. Instead, she stayed where she was only inches away from him.

So much for keeping distance between them, he thought grimly. "What do you want from me, Veronica?" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. He was glad. The question had to be asked. He needed an answer.

She paused, the beer bottle frozen in mid-air halfway to those luscious lips that he was dying to taste again, and stared at him. It was about dammed time he caught her off guard. She recovered quickly though, and the answer she gave him wasn't what he wanted to hear. "A place to stay for a month," she said and drank the beer.

"That's all? Just a place to stay?"

"And some more of what you gave me last night," she said, her voice taking on that soft, seductive tone that drove him nuts.

“And sex,” he clarified more bluntly on a deep sigh. Once again, not what he wanted to hear. Yet, wasn’t it the answer he had expected?

“Was last night enough for you? Or was it too much, cutie?” She took a step closer to him, lifted her hand, but it fell back to her side when he took a quick step back. She glared at him, and he didn’t miss the slight trace of hurt that flashed through her eyes. “If you don’t want me anymore, all you have to do is say so. It was just an idea.” She shrugged. “And even if you go for the idea, that doesn’t mean that we have to have sex. People live together all the time and don’t have sex. It’s called roommates.”

Yeah, right. He could live with Veronica and not have sex with her. Fat chance on that one! “Last night was no where near enough,” he admitted and watched that slow, easy smile return to her face. “But it was also too much.”

“You’re not making any sense, lover boy.”

“Is that what you’re looking for, Veronica? A lover? Or do you simply want a man to have sex with until the next one comes along? Or hell, do you even want an exclusive sexual relationship with someone?”

“I’m not running around fucking every man in town, Dean.” She spat and spun on her heel, walked back into the dining room.

Her bluntness surprised him, as did her anger at his implication. What had she expected him to think? They had exchanged more words in the last ten minutes than they did in the last week!

“But you’re all too eager to fuck me,” he said, equally blunt as he following her. “I want to know why.”

She stopped behind the sofa, her back to him. “I told you why. That day at the station in the locker room, I told you I always had a secret crush on you.”

“So that’s it. You’re just entertaining a teenage fantasy to go to bed with me.”

“Is that so wrong?” she asked, whirling to face him, and the gleam of tears in her eyes tore at his heart. “Is my wanting to be with you so wrong?”

“No, absolutely not. But what I’ve been trying to figure out is whether you simply want to be with me or if you really want to *be* with me.”

She placed her hands on the back of the sofa behind her, the beer bottle dangling in her right hand, and looked at the floor. “I don’t know what I want, Dean,” she admitted quietly, shaking her head. “That day... When I came to the station that day, I knew. When I saw you again, I knew. I knew that I wanted you, that I wanted to have you.”

“And now?” he asked and braved a step closer to her.

“Now.” She sighed, and the hopeless sound to it, the confusion he could see in the slump of his shoulders, tore at him. “I know that I still want you. I know that I love being around you, I love touching you and you touching me. Last night, it was...” She trailed off, threw her head back, closed her eyes, and he knew she was seeing them on the floor in her parents’ house, remembering the way they had made love. It was the same thing that he saw each time he closed his eyes. “God! It was amazing.”

“Do you want to know what I want, Veronica?” He set his beer on the end table and moved to her, placed his hands on her shoulders, and waited for her to look at him. “I want you. I always have. But not just sex with you. I want it all. I want exclusivity, a real relationship, a commitment, marriage, kids, the works.”

Her eyes widened with each point he made until she looked like a frightened deer in the path of a set of headlights. “I—I don’t know if I can give you all of that,” she whispered.

“You can if you want to, if you want me enough.” Her eyes narrowed, and he stopped, shook his head. “No. I didn’t mean—That’s not—I meant, if you care about me enough to want those things with me like I want them with you.”

“Can we take it one step at a time? Start with the exclusivity. I can give you that,” she said in a tone of complete certainty. “I want to give you that. I feel something with you, Dean, something I’ve never felt before but have longed to feel for years, maybe even my whole life. There’s a spark with you that takes my breath away, and I like it. I *really* like it. It makes me feel alive, makes me feel like a real woman. But what if...”

“What if that spark doesn’t last?” he asked when her words trailed off. He had to admit that she had a point. He felt the spark, too, always had with her. But what if it did go away too quickly? It hadn’t died in him after all these years, but he had never been this close to her before, had never touched her, kissed her, made love to her. What if they had sex again tonight and he woke up in the morning to find the spark had died out? It could happen, he knew. Maybe it simply hadn’t gone away after one night because his desire for her had been pent up for too many years. Maybe once hadn’t been enough, but more than once would be.

He cupped her cheek in his hand, and her head leaned into his palm, her eyes growing heavy lidded, her lips parting on a contented sigh. “There’s only one way to find out,” he whispered and kissed her.

CHAPTER SIX

Somewhere deep in her mind, she heard a whoosh sound as the spark inside her ignited to a raging inferno. His lips brushed hers like the softest of feathers, sending tingles all the way to her toes. It was a sound heard when a match was held to gasoline-covered charcoal as it went up in flames. She waited for the explosion, for him to devour her mouth, devour *her*, the way he had last night. But he kept the kiss light, licking her bottom lip, her top lip, skimming his tongue over her parted lips but not entering.

His arm slid around her waist, his palm opening on the small of her back, and he pulled her against him. Her nipples tightened as they pressed against the hard planes of his chest. His hips rocked into her, and she felt the evidence of his inferno, huge, and blazing hot against her middle. But it was her mouth that held his current concentration, so she focused her thoughts there as well.

The hand on her cheek slid to the nape of her neck, and finally his tongue snaked into her mouth, brushed her tongue, tangled over it before making an all too quick retreat. His forehead came to rest on hers, and she gazed into his eyes, saw the smile playing with the hot desire in their blue depths. “Definitely a spark,” he whispered.

“Oh yeah, it’s still there.” Her arms found their way around his neck, her fingers locking together. But she moved them now, trailed them over his shoulders, between their bodies and down his chest. Needing to feel the warmth of his skin, wanting to bury her fingers in the dark curls that covered his upper body, she gripped his uniform shirt in her fists and pulled it free from his jeans, slid it over his head and tossed it over her shoulder. She heard it connect with something in the living room behind her with a clatter. “Oops.”

“It was only an empty glass,” he said softly and kissed the tip of her nose. “Shouldn’t have been left there anyway.”

She flattened her hands on his now bare chest, explored the hard, smooth ridges, loving the way his skin felt. He let her play, let her caress until she began inching toward the button of his jeans. Before she could undo the button, his hands slipped beneath her halter-top, found the front clasp of her bra. He removed her halter top and bra in record

time and bent to take one breast in his mouth.

Though he removed them fast enough, his mouth on her breast moved with an excruciating slowness that had all the electricity in her body gathering in that one spot beneath his lips. He licked, suckled so sweetly, so tenderly. She felt him pull at her waist, slowly began to turn her before walking her backwards toward the hallway even as he swapped his attention to her other breast, taking it with the same slowness as he had the other.

Even as she reveled in the pleasure he brought her, her attention returned to his pants. By the time she felt her heels hit against the carpeted bottom step of the staircase, she had his jeans unfastened and slid her hand inside. She found his dick rock hard and ready for her, and curved her fingers around its shaft. He straightened, gazed at her with heavy lidded eyes, their blue depths now almost black from desire. She squeezed gently and saw his eyes roll, heard his low, almost animalistic growl of pleasure.

Then he made quick work of her jeans, unfastening and tugging until he had them, along with her panties, down around her ankles. With one hand still on the small of her back, he slowly lowered her to sit on the stairs, pulled back to remove her shoes and clothes.

She was naked now and sprawled on the narrow staircase. He sat on his knees on a step below her, his hands easing up her legs, moving between them, spreading them until her pussy was open and on display.

“You are so beautiful.” His whispered words sounded awestruck, and she felt a surge of pride rush through her. He wasn’t the first man to tell her she was beautiful. She had heard it most of her life. So much so that the words came to have no effect on her. Except when they came from his lips, when they were spoken with such heartfelt emotion, when they were spoken in such a moment of intimacy. It wasn’t simply a compliment or flattery when he said it. He really and truly *meant* it.

His fingers found her pussy lips through the mound of blond curls and held them open. Then he leaned into her, licked her with the tip of his tongue, and she gasped, squirmed, trembled.

“So beautiful,” she heard him whisper again, and he plunged his tongue inside her. She nearly came off the stairs from the shock of it, the sheer electrifying fervor of it. He licked, fucked, and tormented her with his tongue until she was mindless. She wanted to rear up on her elbows, wanted to watch him as he feasted on her, but her bones felt like jelly, her muscles useless. Somehow, one arm did move, her hand coming to rest on his head, pushing his face into her. She felt his tongue slide out of her sopping hole to lick over her clit, and she exploded with little warning. She began to jerk, groan, her pussy pulsating from the orgasm and his tongue returned to her hole, slurping up her cum as it gushed from her like a river.

Breathless and spent, she lay there with her eyes closed, forgetting that she was sprawled on a staircase until she found the energy to attempt a stretch and nearly slid off the step.

Dean caught her, his hands on her waist and a smile lighting his eyes. She looked at him, at the gleam in his eyes, at the sheen of her juices around his lips and felt

something open inside her. Her heart stilled.

As if sensing something had changed, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Something had changed and the transformation wasn't yet complete. She knew it, felt it in her bones, in her mind, in her heart. She didn't want to analyze it now. Instead, she stared at him, unable to speak for several, still ragged breaths. Then she reached inside herself, found the part of her that thought only of sexual pleasure and latched onto it. "You have one hell of a tongue there, cutie," she said and grazed the pad of her thumb over his lips. She felt the juices her thumb picked up from his mouth, and inspired by it, licked the salty-sweet cream.

He growled and tugged her up until they stood on the stairs. "Woman, you're going to kill me doing stuff like that. Do you think we can make it to the bedroom now?"

"Maybe," she said and turned to walk up the remaining three steps. When she reached the top, she discovered that the staircase made a V shape, a flat short hallway separating the two flights of stairs. She turned the corner, moved onto the first of the next set of stairs and stopped. He was right behind her, and her sudden halt had him crashing into her. Unable to keep her hands off him a moment longer, she reached back, found his jeans still unfastened, and easily slipped her hand inside them again finding his cock.

"Veronica..." He said her name on a low exasperated gasp of desperation.

"I want that, you know?" she said and gave his dick a little squeeze.

"Just a little further, baby. Then you can have it."

She looked up the stairs, saw the two open doorways on her left, the one on her right, and knew one of them had to be his bedroom. Even the closest of the doorways was too far, her need for him too great to wait that long. With her free hand, she reached behind her and began to tug at his jeans, willing them to fall. But they were too tight to be removed without more help.

His hands were still on her waist, and she felt him gently push at her, urging her to continue up the stairs. "Veronica, move, baby, or I'm going to end up taking you right here."

"Now you're catching on, handsome," she said and stroked his dick with a bit more pressure. His hands released her. She felt the material give around her hand as, at last, his pants and briefs were pulled down. Then his hands were on her back, sliding down, caressing, and she slowly began to lean forward. She caught herself with one hand on an upper step, her other hand still stroking his cock.

His hands moved down her sides, over her hips, and she heard him whisper, "Oh wow," before he said, "We have to make it upstairs, baby. The condoms are in my bedroom."

“We didn’t use one last night,” she reminded him, rocking her hips back until she felt the tip of his cock brush against her ass.

“No, but once is taking a chance, twice is playing with fire.”

“I thought that was your specialty.”

* * * *

Dean heard himself chuckle, heard how breathless the sound was, heard it die a quick death when Veronica wriggled her hips again and the effect had his dick nearly lodging between her butt cheeks. He couldn’t stand it, couldn’t resist the temptation. They were mere feet from his bedroom, from where he intended to take her, but she was apparently not willing to wait. The way she was moving against him left him completely unable to wait.

Her hand still wrapped around his dick, he allowed her to guide him to her sweet opening. He didn’t immediately plunge into her as he had last night. He was in more control of himself today—okay, so maybe not a lot, since he couldn’t wait until they made it to his bedroom, but he still had more restraint than he possessed last night. He positioned his feet shoulder width apart and slid just the head of his dick inside her. Her hand fell away. When she attempted to push back on him, drive him all the way in, he caught her on either side of her waist and held her still.

He eased inside her, inch by slow agonizing inch, savoring the way her inner muscles parted for him before clenching around him, on fire from her warmth and reveling in the magnitude of the emotions that swam through him. When at last he filled her completely—even more completely than last night given their position—he paused and slowly began to ease out again.

She moaned, and when she said a quiet, “Dean, please,” he knew what she asked for, but he simply smiled. She wanted it fast and hard like he took her last night, but he was determined that this time he would keep it slow and easy. He wanted to savor the moment, wanted it to last as long as possible. He wasn’t trying to make her beg, though he did have to admit it was incredibly erotic, a mind-blowing turn on to hear her soft whimpers, her quiet pleas. Today, he made sure without a doubt that she knew who was inside her, that she could feel all of his wants, his desires, his emotions. He wanted her to feel how much he loved her.

He did love her. If the truth were known, he had probably loved her most of his life. It didn’t matter that he got close to her when they were younger, didn’t matter that she had only been back in his life less than a week. She was the only woman for him, the woman of his dreams, of his every fantasy. The woman of his heart, and he wanted her to know it.

Maybe it would have been simpler to tell her. Yet he knew saying the words aloud would only frighten her. She wasn’t looking for love. She had all but said as much downstairs. She didn’t know what she was looking for. Except for sex. Oh, yeah, she knew she wanted that. So he would use what she wanted to get what he wanted. It was a simple enough plan. And she made it easier for him by asking to move in for the next month. Only what she didn’t know, hadn’t yet figured out, was once she moved in, she would never be moving out.

He slid inside her to the hilt, keeping his movements in that measured pace he had set despite the building urge inside him which wanted to pound, to claim, to possess. He wouldn't let her move out, and he—he slid his hands from her waist and over her baby-soft ass cheeks—he was never moving out of her.

“Dean, please,” she panted breathlessly. “You’re driving me *cra-zy*.”

He leaned over her, reached around and found her clit with the tip of his finger. She gasped, writhed, ground her hips into him. He had to calculate PSI in his head—a technique firefighters used to determine how much hose pressure was needed to put out a fire—to keep himself from losing it inside her. He traced lazy circles around her clit with his fingertip, all the while keeping his invasion of her wetness slow and deliberate. Within seconds, he felt her entire body tense. She rose on her tiptoes, her arms collapsing until her forehead rested on the step above her. Her cries became louder, her breath more ragged.

Then she exploded. It was the only word he could think of to describe it. He felt her insides explode around him, felt her muscles contract in hard and fierce determined clutches around his dick, felt her warm sticky wetness wash over him.

Still he held himself back. He waited until the contractions subsided, until her breath seemed to have returned to a slower, steadier pace, and eased himself free. It was quite possibly one of the hardest things he had ever done, pulling out of her before he achieved his release. But his determination to prolong the moment, to have her in his bed prevailed.

When he thought she could stand, he gently urged her up, his palms roaming the silky skin of her back, her ass. She shot him a look over one shoulder, her eyes both questioning and clouded with satisfaction. “Did you—”

He shook his head, knowing what she asked and smiled when her eyes widened in surprise. “Second door to your left,” he said and indicated the stairs with a lift of his chin.

She stared at him for a long heartbeat and then, to his dammedest surprise, bolted up the remaining stairs and disappeared through the door of his bedroom. He heard the bedsprings creak as she obviously threw herself on top of it.

Dean shook his head and laughed as he followed the path she took. Caught off guard and completely un-expecting...It quickly became obvious that's what a relationship with Veronica Abbott would be like. No matter how he tried, somehow she always managed to surprise him, to catch him off guard.

He stopped when he reached the open doorway, his gaze traveling over her. She had thrown herself onto his bed and lay there now, her thighs completely spread, her hands roaming over her breasts, her eyes imploring him to join her. God, but he did love this woman!

* * * *

Veronica wanted to stretch, but couldn't find the energy, so she settled for a yawn instead and burrowed herself deeper in the crook of Dean's arm. Three orgasms. Three! In the short span of—well, she didn't exactly know how long it had been, but she figured an hour would be a safe bet, because it couldn't have been much longer than that. He had

given her three mind-blowing, sanity stealing, life draining orgasms. God, she hadn't known that was possible!

"I was wrong, you know," she said and skimmed a lazy hand over his chest. It was the only movement aside from breathing that she could manage.

"About what?"

"You're specialty. You may be good at playing with fire, but making love is definitely your forte."

He laughed, a soft airy sound and kissed the top of her head. "Where did you learn that stuff?"

Confusion rendered her the motivation she needed to be able to lift herself onto one elbow. She looked down at him and asked, "What stuff?"

"You drive me wild, sweetheart. You always have. But some of the things you do..." He shook his head.

"Like what? Give me an example."

He cocked a brow at her. "Honey, if I do that, your little buddy down there will spring to life again."

"*Little* buddy? Cutie, there isn't a part of you that is little."

"Okay, bad choice of words, but you got the meaning well enough."

"I'll take my chances. Give me an example."

He looked to the ceiling as if a multiple-choice quiz had been etched into it, and he selected his answer. "In the locker, room when you..."

"Sucked you off," she provided when he hesitated too long.

That had him laughing again. "And when did you become so blunt?"

"Nope, you haven't completely answered my first question yet."

"How did you get so good at that? You don't strike me as the type of woman to go around giving men blowjobs to get practice. And the way you waited until I was watching before you swallowed. It was...God, it was amazing! You can't imagine what that did to me." He looked at her, and when he saw the knowing smile on her face, he closed his eyes, shook his head. "Okay, so maybe you can imagine."

"That was the whole point." She hadn't known what possessed her to do that, to do any of the stuff she did that day, but she figured at the very least it would give him something to remember.

"So, where did you learn stuff like that?" He prodded.

She shrugged, not really having an answer for him. It wasn't like she had taken classes on how to drive a man wild. They hadn't offered 'Dirty Ways to Make a Man's Eyes Wide and Dick Hard' classes in college. Somehow she had just known. "I guess it just comes naturally," she said, knowing it sounded lame, but it was all she could think of to say.

“No. No way. If it was a natural thing, then every woman would do it, and trust me, baby, not every woman can do what you do.” He pulled her down, kissed her lightly on the lips.

“I think every woman could. I think it comes from being in touch with yourself. I spent a lot of time soul searching, getting familiar with my sexual side, I guess you could say.”

“Did Robert help you with that?”

Veronica closed her eyes, took a deep breath. She should have realized Dean would have questions about Robert, about her marriage. Still, hearing her late husband’s name put a definite damper on her mood. “Do we have to bring Robert in the room with us?” she asked, pushing strands of his hair away from his forehead. His hair was soft, her fingers sliding through it as easily as they would strands of pure silk.

“He’s already here,” Dean said, his hand lightly caressing her arm from shoulder to wrist.

She knew that he was right. The fact that she had been married, that Robert had died, would inevitably lay between them at least until she put Dean’s questions to rest.

“But we don’t have to talk about him now if you don’t want to,” he said, complete understanding filling his eyes. “We can wait.”

Yes, they could wait. However, what would be the point? Veronica sighed, pushed herself up and rolled off the bed. She spotted a robe draped over the back of the chair—obviously an extra belonging to the dining room table—just inside the doorway and walked to it now, slipped it on. It swallowed her, the shoulder seams reaching halfway down her upper arms, but she knew she would never be able to discuss Robert while she was naked in front of another man.

She tied the belt of the robe around her waist and walked back to the bed, perched on the edge beside Dean. He had sat up and leaned against the oak headboard. He had attempted to pull the sheet over him but it barely covered his groin.

“Robert was a simple man in a lot of ways,” she began slowly. Needing to look at something other than Dean, her gaze locked on the open closet across from the bed. Several navy blue shirts were bunched together on the far left. Obviously his uniform shirts, she decided. Beside them, hung several pairs of jeans and slacks. It was quite possibly the neatest man’s closet she ever saw. “He was also a very confused man.”

“He was a cop.”

It was a statement more than a question, but Veronica nodded anyway. “It was only to get a rise out of his parents. He wasn’t a very good cop,” she said on a slight laugh, completely devoid of humor. “I often wondered how he made it through the academy much less two years on the force. He was a pussycat, reared to sit behind a desk and push a pencil all day, not carry a gun and fight the war against crime. He should have been in the family business.”

“Why wasn’t he?” Dean asked quietly. He kept his tone conversational. It made it easier for her to answer his questions. They were simply two people talking about

someone else. At least, that's how she figured he wanted her to feel. He didn't touch her and she guessed it was because he sensed that she wouldn't want to be touched right now. "Or why didn't he do something else? If all he wanted to do was piss off the family, he could have chosen dozens of other far less dangerous careers that would have done that."

"A young boy's fascination with the rotating red and blue lights, a man's need to be seen as a tough guy...I honestly don't know." She shrugged. Though she had asked Robert that very question many times in their marriage, he never actually gave her a true answer. "I'm not sure he even knew. It worked...somewhat. The job did toughen him up. But he had a head for business. Not one for piecing together clues or chasing after the bad guys. Or dodging bullets," she added, her voice growing quiet as the memories of the day he had been killed assailed her.

Robert had been working the late night shift. She had been pouring her first cup of morning coffee when the doorbell rang. Expecting one of her neighbors, she was surprised to spot the squad car parked outside. She shook her head, shook away the memory. Robert had had one hour left to his shift that morning. He hadn't made it. The time clock on his life had run out first.

Her focus returned to the closet, her eyes narrowing as she spotted a...Was that a suit jacket? It was, she realized as she studied it more closely. Dean Wolcott owned a suit. She wasn't sure why that surprised her so, but it did. Maybe it was because she couldn't quite picture the rugged, motorcycle riding, fire fighting man she had only seen in a uniform, T-shirt and jeans, or nothing at all, wearing a suit. Even the slacks he wore to her house last night had been the casual style, not the type generally worn with suit jackets.

"Is that why you married him?" Dean's voice pulled her back to the conversation. "To get a rise out of your parents."

"Yes," she admitted. "And no," she said a bit more softly. "I loved him. I can't honestly say that he was the man for me, my soul mate, you know? Because I can't say that if I met him today instead of all those years ago, I would even give him more than a second glance. But the girl I was then loved the guy he was."

"It was timing really," she said, her gaze shifting out of the closet to a poster that hung on the small spot of wall between the closet and door of the room. It was a poster of a fire truck. Go figure. "My parents were all for our marriage," she continued. "But at the time our engagement was announced, no one knew Robert's plans of going to the police academy. He kept it a secret. My parents thought I would be marrying the suit-and-tie, rich man they wanted for me. Imagine their surprise when I married the rich man who quickly exchanged that suit and tie for a blue uniform and a gun."

"But you knew. He told you what he planned to do, didn't he?"

"Oh yeah. I knew. And that was the fun part. That was my little spurt of rebelliousness as a young woman. I think I knew deep down that I didn't want to live my life like my mother has, days of fancy women's club meetings and bridge games, the trophy wife to my husband. But I was still too afraid to defy my parents, too. With Robert, I got both. I got a bit of the rebellion but still had the riches, the social standing."

"And now?"

Veronica's gaze moved to the wall behind the door. Another poster, this one of a half nude blond clad in only a fire helmet and fire-engine-red g-string. *Hmm*, she thought, *not a bad idea*, and tucked it in her mind for future use. "Now I could care less what my parents want or think." She paused, took a deep breath and shook her head. "No, that isn't true. I do care. But I want what I want. And I want them to understand that and see me for who I am instead of who they expect me to be."

"Do you think they will?"

She thought about that, about the conversations—more like shouting matches—she'd had with her father about the store, thought about her mother. "Mom might," she said after a moment. "When Dad isn't listening, she can be very supportive. If she would simply stand up to Dad, my life might be a whole lot easier. It's the store that's really the current source of the contention between Dad and me. Mom seems to be intrigued by the idea."

"Maybe she's hoping you can show her how to spice up her sex life with your father," Dean said, and she didn't have to look at him to know he smiled, trying to lighten the darkened mood that had settled over the room.

Veronica laughed. "I think I would prefer not to imagine my parents' sex life. Thank you very much."

"Just a thought," he said. She felt the mattress curve in as he leaned closer to her, saw his hand as it reached around her to cup the side of her face. He turned her head so that she had no choice but to meet his gaze. "Does my being a firefighter scare you? Is that what you're afraid of? Being with me? That I will be killed in the line of duty, too?"

The thought had never crossed her mind, and yet hearing him say it now, hearing him admit that he could be killed while doing his job as Robert had been, sent chills down her spine. As the chills subsided, she realized the sudden fear that washed over her with his words had fled as well.

"You love your job," she said slowly and saw the truth of her words in his eyes. How could she tell him that it didn't frighten her without leading him to think that she didn't care if he lived or died? She hadn't lived her years with Robert fearing that every time he walked out the door, it may be the last time she would see him alive. Maybe that was simply a strong part of herself that she hadn't really realized she possessed, an accepting part of her heart. Of course, she wouldn't want Dean to die. She hadn't wanted Robert to die. Still, both men had chosen their careers for whatever reason, and she acknowledged that, accepted the danger and possibilities that came with their choices.

"No," she finally said. "Because I would know that if you died on the job, you would have died doing what you love."

He nodded slowly. His thumb brushed her cheek under her eye as if wiping away a tear though she wasn't crying. "Do you miss him?" he asked, his voice soft, his words carefully spoken.

He had steered the conversation back to Robert. She hesitated as her mind switched tracks. "Sometimes," she admitted. "I don't know if our marriage would have lasted. While we did our best to hold it together, we were slowly growing apart. We were

too young. It's really that simple. We were far too young to get married when we did. Neither of us really knew what we wanted, who we were. We weren't mature enough to know. We had only just begun to figure it out when he was killed."

"And what is it that you want, Veronica?"

What do you want from me, Veronica? The two questions were nearly one in the same though the first held a broader scope than the one he had asked her earlier downstairs. She gave him the only answer she could. "Time. I want time to be certain."

He nodded, acceptance and understanding clear in his eyes. "Fair enough."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“You’re moving in with him?” The shock on Lacy’s face was almost comical. Her eyes had grown as wide as a compact disc, her skin had taken on an almost deathly shade of pale, and her mouth hung open so wide it could have fit around a watermelon. Okay, maybe not a watermelon but definitely a cantaloupe or a large grapefruit.

“Yep,” Veronica answered simply, hefting a large suitcase into the trunk of her car.

“Are you crazy!”

“Probably.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Lacy leaned against the rear fender, crossed her arms below her breast, and pinned Veronica with a potent glare.

“Probably not.”

“What are your parents going to say?”

Of all the questions Lacy lashed out at her, the last was the only one to make her pause. “I have no idea what Mom will say. Dad, on the other hand, will have puppies.” She slammed the truck, propped her elbows on the warm metal, and rested her chin on her fists. “Maybe they will be cute ones. I wonder what the pet deposit is at the condos. Do they even allow pets?”

“Ve-ron-ica!” Lacy growled through clinched teeth.

“Okay, okay.” Veronica laughed, straightened and held up a hand in a ‘calm down’ gesture. “I know it’s a little sudden—”

“A little!” Lacy all but screeched the words.

“Very sudden,” Veronica amended, because it definitely was. Moving in with Dean Wolcott was a quick, impulsive decision that she had given very little thought. She wasn’t allowing herself to think, and she certainly wasn’t allowing herself to feel. She

had grown afraid of what she might discover if she did.

"I know you don't want to stay here with your parents, and I completely understand why. But is moving in with Dean—or any man for crying out loud—really the answer? Your parents aren't moving back to town. They are only returning for a visit."

"A visit that has no time limit," Veronica reminded and stepped around the back end of the car, then began walking up the pathway to the front door of the house.

"But you can have your own condo in a month," Lacy continued to object as she followed closely at Veronica's heels. "One month isn't that long in the grand scheme of things."

"Under my parents' roof, one month will be like a lifetime sentence to death!"

"And you think one month under Dean's roof isn't going to be a lifetime sentence to something?"

Veronica stopped in the entryway, turned back to face her friend. "It's what he wants. He told me so last night."

Lacy opened her mouth, closed it. Her mind visibly switched tracks. The shock that had been so evident in her expression was now gone, replaced by a look Veronica couldn't name. "Is that what you want?"

She was really beginning to hate that question. First Dean, then herself, now Lacy, suddenly what she wanted seemed to be the most important thing in the world to everyone but herself. Wasn't that odd? Wasn't *she* supposed to be worried about what *she* wanted more than anyone or anything else? Yet, to do that, she first had to let herself feel.

Oh, she had been feeling all right. She felt the independence she had developed in her life, felt the control she now possessed over herself. And she had been feeling Dean. Ah, yes. She had definitely been feeling Dean. But she hadn't focused on what she felt about Dean, how she felt about him.

He obviously had been. He had focused on her. He wanted her. But not just in bed, not just for sex. He wanted her for a partner, for a mate, for a wife! Getting married again wasn't something she thought of even in the quickest of passing since losing Robert. God, there was no way she could think about that now. She couldn't marry a man she only knew a week. Okay, scratch that. She had known Dean far longer than a week. More like most of her life. Not in the ways that she knew him now. In the short time they had been together, she now knew not only his body—every delicious, glorious contour of his body—but she was getting to know his mind and his heart as well.

And he was getting into hers, she realized. That change, she felt but quickly ignored yesterday. A chill snaked over her bringing goose pimples to the surface of her flesh. Dammit. That was why she hadn't allowed herself to really think. She didn't want to know that he was getting to her, didn't want to deal with the way he got to her. She only wanted the lust, the sex, and the spark. She didn't want love or anything remotely close to it. Yet, that was what she got and exactly what he asked for in return.

"No," she finally said, but the simple word didn't feel right, didn't even sound

right to her own ears. "Maybe," she amended. "I want him. I've wanted him since we were kids. Right now, I at least know that much. He's amazing, Lacy," she said when she saw the undisguised amusement and surprise in her friend's eyes. "He makes me feel...I can't describe the way he makes me feel. I'm so hot for the man I feel like a walking inferno!"

"You and Dean Wolcott." Lacy shook her head, but she grinned from ear to ear. "Who would have ever thought?"

* * * *

"How was school today, sport?" Dean asked Timmy as he helped the boy into the truck.

"Cool!" Timmy said with undisguised excitement. "We went on a field trip to J. L. Scott. It was *awesome*! There was all kinds of fish and sharks, and I even got to pet a tiger shark!"

Dean stopped in the motion of closing the passenger door. The kid had petted a tiger shark? No. That couldn't be right. He quickly searched his mind for a shark with a similar name, one that didn't attempt to take a chuck out of someone who tried to touch it. "Do you mean a leopard shark?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it."

Feeling a silly relief wash over him, Dean chuckled, helped the kid fasten his seatbelt, and shut the door. "Do you have any homework tonight?" he asked as he climbed in behind the wheel.

"A little. Mom will help me when she gets home."

"Actually, you'll be staying the night with me."

Timmy's head whipped around, his eyes growing wide, and he looked even more excited then he had about his field trip if that were possible. "Really? I get to spend the night with you?"

"Yep." Dean nodded and pulled out of the school parking lot.

"But what about Mom? Why am I staying with you? Is something wrong with my mom?"

Though Dean's eyes were glued to the road in front of him, he immediately picked up on the fear and worry in the boy's voice. He reached over, ruffled the boy's hair with his palm. "You're mom is fine. She's working late again, and then when she gets off, she has a date."

"A date! Like, with a man."

I hope it's with a man, Dean thought, but he laughed and said, "Yeah, a date with a man."

"No way. Mom doesn't date men. She doesn't date no one."

"Anyone," Dean automatically corrected. "And that's what she told me when she called to ask if you could stay with me." Though Timmy's mother had insisted she

wouldn't be out all night, she didn't know how late she would be and didn't want to get Timmy out late on a school night. She had been ready to refuse the date, but Dean insisted she go, offered to not only baby-sit Timmy for a few hours, but to keep him for the night. He would take the kid home in time to prepare for school in the morning.

"It's a good thing, huh? Mom going on a date," Timmy qualified. "She's never done that, but if she's doing it now, that means I may get a daddy. Right?"

Whoa! Slow down there, kid. Was that why his mother never accepted dates? Because Timmy instantly became attached to men, longing to have a father figure in his life? Dean had simply thought she didn't have time or was afraid to leave Timmy with a sitter. He really didn't get into Tina's private life. He was there for Timmy, to be a friend and a male figure in the boy's life. As long as Dean knew the boy was taken care of—and it was easy to see that despite his mom's working hours, Timmy was well taken care of—that was all that mattered.

"It doesn't exactly work that way," he told the boy slowly, carefully, not yet ready to have a conversation about the workings of men and women with a seven-year-old. "Your mom will go out with this guy tonight. If things go well...If she likes him, she may go on another date with him and another and another. If they like each other well enough, then maybe months or even a year or so down the road, they may talk about getting married."

"It'll take that long?" Disappointment rang in Timmy's voice.

"It could." Dean nodded. "People don't just meet and get married. They have to get to know one another first, see if they like each other, fall in love...That sort of stuff."

"You know my mom. And you like her. Don't you?"

Alarm bells louder than any Dean ever heard sounded in his head. "I do," he said slowly, afraid to hear where the kid was going with this though he already knew.

"You've known her for a long, long time. Why haven't you fallen in love with her?"

Yep. That's exactly where Dean feared the boy was going. Now, how to make him understand? Dean sighed, hesitated for a moment too long.

"She's not your type, huh?"

Dean looked at the kid and suddenly saw wisdom in his eyes that Dean hadn't known he possessed at such a young age. He smiled. "You're mom is a very nice woman. I like to think of her as a friend."

"But you're not hot for her?"

Dean made a sound that was a half cough and half laugh and actually struggled to keep his eyes on the road as he made the turn onto the Green Leaf Condominiums property. "Hot for her?" he repeated more to himself than to Timmy. He knew exactly what the kid meant. What surprised him was that Timmy obviously knew what Timmy meant.

"Yeah. Richie Metcaff says when a boy likes a girl, he's got the hots for her."

Richie's big brother, Josh, is hot for this girl named Samantha."

"Well, if Richie says that's what it's called, then I guess he must be right."

"So are you?"

Still amazed by the course the conversation had taken, Dean was momentarily confused by the boy's question. "Am I what?"

Timmy heaved a sigh, and when he spoke, it was in a tone that clearly said, 'duh.' "Hot for my mom?"

"No. I'm not hot for her," Dean answered honestly.

"I wish you were. You would be pretty cool to have for a dad."

Dean's heart swelled so big he thought it would pop out of his chest. No one had ever said anything like that to him before. Knowing his roots, how his own father had treated him, he had often been afraid to want children, scared to his toes that he would turn out like his father. Obviously Timmy didn't think so. Timmy thought he would make a good dad. He felt a wide smile curve his lips as he whipped the truck into the driveway in front of his condo and bet he looked as goofy as he felt inside at that moment but didn't care.

He turned off the engine, angled his body in the seat to look at Timmy. "Who do you have the hots for?"

"Eww." The boy wrinkled his nose as if completely disgusted by the thought. "No one. That's gross!"

"Not into girls yet, huh, sport?" Dean chuckled. "Don't worry. That will change in a few years."

"No way. Not me," Timmy shook his head vehemently.

"Ah, you say that now but, mark my words, in a few years, you're going to see a girl and step on your tongue trying to get to her."

"Who do you have the hots for?" Timmy asked, turning Dean's own words around on him.

Taking the cue, Dean did the same...or attempted to at least. "Eww. No one. That's gross!" he said in his best Timmy impersonation, both voice and expression.

"Yeah right." Timmy rolled his eyes.

"What makes you think I'm hot for anyone?"

"You're old. Old guys like women."

Old? Ouch. That stung. But it was also true. Timmy would know that for certain all too soon when Veronica came over. He hadn't talked to her since they parted ways that morning—him reporting to the station for his shift and she off to, first, her parents' house to change and then to open the store—though it wasn't from lack of trying. He had phoned the store twice after Timmy's mother called the station, but each time it was Judy who answered.

Veronica had been with a customer the first time he called. He let a couple of hours pass before trying again only to have Judy tell him that Veronica just left for the day. Apparently, she felt comfortable enough with her employee to let Judy close the store. Dean then tried her parents' house but got the answering machine. Resigned, he left a message but kept it short and sweet. They would have company—*young* company—tonight, he had told the machine. Be on your best behavior. In other words, don't show up at the house wearing a trench coat covering a barely there teddy and g-string. It sounded like something Veronica would do. Not that he would mind under different circumstances...

"Her name is Veronica," Dean told Timmy now. He got out of the truck, walked around to help the boy out then they walked to the door. "She should be home shortly."

"She lives with you?"

He hadn't realized exactly what he said until Timmy called him on it. But it was true. Veronica was moving in with him. This would be her home now...for the next month anyway. It would be up to him to make sure that month lasted far longer than thirty-one days.

* * * *

Veronica's first night officially living under Dean's roof was absolutely nothing like she expected it to be. She figured they would be alone, of course. She imagined the two of them putting something together for dinner in the kitchen, then settling at the dining room table to eat before kicking back on the sofa with a glass of wine and a romantic movie, which would be followed by hours of tangling in the sheets until they drifted off to sleep.

Well, they were putting something together for dinner in the kitchen, she mused as she sliced a cucumber for the garden salad she prepared. Only they had an extra set of hands—a set of very small, very young hands. They would eat at the dining room table, but it would be a table set for three instead of two. The movie—her ears tuned in momentarily to the soft sounds coming from the television in the living room—would obviously be one of the animated variety. As for the tangling, obviously that would not make it into the night's agenda.

That was okay, she told herself as she moved to the sink to wash her hands. She quickly dried them on a dishtowel, snagged the salad bowl from the countertop and carried it to the dining room table, placed it in the center. She was headed back to the kitchen for the dish of mixed vegetables she prepared when a voice drifted to her from outside the opened sliding glass door. Dean and Timmy stood on the back patio grilling chicken breasts. It wasn't the voice that made her stop to listen but the words.

"I like her," Timmy said in a tone that told her he wasn't the least bit concerned with being overheard. "She's cool, and she's got an awesome car!"

Dean chuckled and spoke a bit more softly but not too low for her to hear. "Yeah, she does."

"Are you going to marry her?"

There was a long pause in which the rapid pounding of her heart was the only

sound to fill the silence. Then Dean answered. "I hope to...one day."

"In about a year or so?"

"If I have my way, it won't be that long."

"Cause you already know you like her and she likes you, huh?" Timmy said.
"Next you have to fall in love before you can get married. Are you in love with her?"

Veronica's heart tripped, nearly stopped, and then began to pound so loudly it nearly drowned out the conversation. She shouldn't be listening anyway. Dean and Timmy were having a private talk. No matter that the talk was about her. But she couldn't pull herself away, couldn't make herself walk to the kitchen where she wouldn't be able to hear them, couldn't make herself do anything but listen.

"Yes. I am in love with her," Dean said.

"Then you're going to marry her. That's what comes next, right?"

"Not quite. First, I have to find out if she is in love with me."

"I could ask her."

"No!" Dean's gasp was followed by a soft laugh. "She'll tell me when she's ready. I have to give her time."

"How much time?"

"I don't know, son."

"I hope it isn't a *long* time."

"Yeah, me too." Dean sighed and then he said, "Looks like the chicken is ready to come off the grill."

"What's the brown stuff?"

Veronica didn't stick around for the answer, figuring Timmy referred to the darkened marks as grill's grates made on food. She forced herself to return to the kitchen, her mind reeling, her insides swarming with so many different emotions, she couldn't separate one from another. Dean was in love with her. She didn't know why that surprised her. He told her he wanted her.

I want exclusivity, a real relationship, a commitment, marriage, kids, the works.

But he hadn't told her that he loved her. He had told Timmy. Because he gave her the time she asked for, she knew. He gave her time to be certain of her feelings for him.

She did have feelings for him. That much she could admit. How deeply those feelings ran, however, she couldn't yet say. It was all happening so fast. Yet, that was her own fault, wasn't it? She had been the one who advanced on him the first time they were together and she had continued to pursue him until she found herself here, living in his house, standing in his kitchen making the side dishes for a dinner they would share with a young child.

She had been looking for fun, excitement, spice, and sex. Well, she definitely found that, hadn't she? But in her quest, she found so much more?

“Chicken’s done,” Timmy’s voice rang out.

Veronica turned, the dish of mixed vegetables in her hands, to find the boy standing in the kitchen doorway. But it was Dean standing beside him that she focused on. Their gazes locked, met and she could see when he realized that she had overheard the conversation, that she had heard him say he loved her.

“It’s true,” he said, almost in a whisper.

Veronica slowly nodded. “I know.” How could she not? His love for her was written all over his face. It sounded in his voice. She felt it every time they touched.

He walked to her, his eyes never leaving hers, and kissed her. It was only a peck, the slightest brush of his lips over hers. In that small amount of contact, she felt it all: his tenderness, his desire, his longing, his love.

“Eww. That’s gross.” Timmy made a gagging sound, and Dean laughed, took the bowl Veronica held and turned back to the boy.

Veronica stayed in the kitchen for a long moment watching man and boy as they took their places at the dining room table. They began to talk about baseball and Timmy’s hopes that he could hit a homerun at next Saturday’s game.

This was how it could be, she thought. How it will be if she gave Dean what he wanted. As she watched the two males, something opened inside her. It told her she just might want the same things that her heart already had all the certainty it needed. It was simply waiting for her mind to catch up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“It isn’t as...*trashy* as I expected.”

Veronica wasn’t sure if she should be insulted or elated by her father’s words. What had he expected to find at her store? Pornographic pin-ups lining the walls, televisions playing B-rated flicks, peepshow booths? Probably. Yeah, judging from the expression of surprise and wonder on her father’s face that was exactly what he had expected to find.

“I like it,” her mother said as she looked around. “It’s classy.”

“It’s a sex shop,” her father said. “My daughter is running a sex shop. I don’t think I want to consider what that implies.”

Veronica laughed, albeit shakily. Her nerves had hit speeds over a hundred when her parents walked through the door. It was 2:00 on Tuesday afternoon, and though the store hadn’t been excessively busy that day, she had been relieved that they picked a time when there wasn’t a customer in sight. She expected the yelling to start immediately, the demands for her to close the doors, hang a ‘Going Out of Business’ sign. To her surprise, there hadn’t been any screaming, nor any demands. They exchanged hugs and kisses, the obligatory how are you’s and now her parents were checking out the store with...interest?

“How’s your profit margin?” her father asked.

Leave it to you to think of money first, Veronica thought, but she said, “I’ve been open less than a week, Dad. You know how it is with a new business. Opening day went better than I expected, and we’ve had a steady stream of customers nearly every hour. That’s the best I can tell you at this point. It’s still too early in the game to make any real predictions.”

“It’s never too early to make predictions in business,” her father argued. “You need goals, restrictions. I can help.”

If a circus clown had rushed between them at that moment riding an elephant,

Veronica wouldn't have been any less surprised. Her father offered to help her. *Offered* to help. He wasn't attempting to take control, wasn't trying to tell her what to do, or how it should be done. She wanted to say, Excuse me but who are you, and what have you done with my father? Instead, she said, "That would be...nice."

"Your mother and I didn't notice any of your stuff at the house. We...um...thought you were staying there."

Here it came, Veronica thought. The shouting, the demanding, the insistence, it was all just a breath away. "I was, but I moved out yesterday."

Her father slowly nodded. "Because we were coming home."

It was a statement not a question, and Veronica felt a vise squeeze at her heart. "Yes," she said simply. What else could she say? It was the truth. She couldn't lie. If her parents hadn't come back to town, she would have stayed in the house longer. She would have remained there at least until her condo was ready at the Green Leaf.

Or would she have? She wondered now as Dean leaped to the forefront of her mind. He was never really far away. Would she have moved in with him anyway? A part of her thought she probably would have. Maybe she wouldn't have moved in as quickly. No. She would have waited a while before jumping in head first as she had. Yet, there wasn't anything about her new living arrangement that felt like a jump.

"Where are you staying?"

Veronica squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and said in a rush, "With Dean Wolcott." When she dared to open her eyes again, it was to find her father staring at her. He didn't look angry. There wasn't any smoke spewing from his ears, his face hadn't gone red as a tomato. He simply looked at her, studied her.

It felt like eons passed before he finally said, "Are you...involved with him?"

Okay, this was just...weird! Her father was talking to her. Talking! Not yelling, not challenging, not showing the slightest signs of disapproval. What the hell was going on?

"I am."

"Are you in love with him?"

Now wasn't that the question of the hour? "I—" Veronica hesitated, unsure exactly how to answer. She hadn't exactly figured that out yet. Okay, not true. More like she hadn't exactly admitted that to herself yet. But it was time. It was time to stop fighting it, to accept the fact that it had happened. She had fallen in love with Dean. She didn't know exactly when it happened, couldn't believe it happened so quickly. But it had. She was now certain of that, the impact made stronger by the realization that it felt so right. "I am," she finally said.

"He's a good man." Her father nodded. "Really turned his life around. I have a lot of respect for him because of that."

"Veronica, come here for a minute, sweetheart. Burt, you stay where you are."

Veronica started, realizing only then that her mother had wandered off at some

point while she talked with her father. Dazed, confused and more euphoric than she had ever been after a conversation with her father, she slowly turned and found her mother sifting through a rack of lingerie.

“Do you have this in my size?” her mother whispered when Veronica reached her. She glanced at Burt as if to be sure he wasn’t watching, and then held out a baby blue negligee. It was one of the least revealing items Veronica had in the shop, an ankle length piece made of satin and lace with a thigh high slit and low cut bodice. It was classy, sexy, and so not her mother, yet absolutely perfect for her at the same time.

“I—uh—yes.” Veronica pushed the pieces around on the rack until she found the negligee in her mother’s size, but instead of giving it to her mother, she clinched it in her hands, stared at her mother, and allowed all the bafflement she felt to show on her face. “Dad isn’t yelling at me.”

A wide, knowing grin spread across her mother’s lips. “I know.”

“Even when I told him I was living with Dean Wolcott. He didn’t hit the roof.”

“So that’s why we couldn’t find any of your stuff at the house.”

“And you aren’t saying anything, either.” Veronica glanced down at the negligee she still held and looked back at her mother. “You’re actually going to wear this for Dad?”

“Honey, I might be an old woman, but I’m not a dog. At least your father doesn’t think so. I think he will like this. Don’t you?”

Maybe she’s hoping you can show her how to spice up her sex life with your father. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Dean had been right! Veronica’s shock grew so heavy it dropped like a bomb before she could stop it. Before she knew what she said, she asked the one question that had been ping-ponging in her mind almost since the moment they entered the store. “Who *are* you people, and what have you done with my parents?”

Her mother laughed. “We had a long talk about you before leaving Florida...and about us, too. I stood up to him.” She visibly straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and took on the look of a woman who was proud of herself. It was a look Veronica rarely saw her mother wear. “Let’s just say that apparently you *can* teach an old dog new tricks.”

“Or scare them into him,” Veronica said, knowing that if her mother had stood up to her father after all these years that was exactly what happened. She had scared the shit out of him.

Her mother shrugged. “Whatever works.”

* * * *

Three Weeks Later

“I think we may have a problem with Lamont.” Tripp Barrett lined the middle of the three-man rod of the foosball table with the ball, spun the rod, hitting the ball hard with the middle man, and sending it sailing into the goal with a loud *thwack*.

Dean scratched his head, looked at the Lieutenant who simply shot him a grin, and reached for another ball. Dean was losing...as always. Now, the Lieutenant had managed to distract him with his talk of Bailey Lamont. As if he needed more of a distraction. "What kind of problem?" he asked as Barrett started the new ball in motion on the table.

"That call yesterday, the one at the hotel with the woman stuck in the elevator," Barrett clarified because their shift had had several calls the day before. Silver Springs had been rocked with a thunderstorm from dawn until dusk. Streets became flooded, dangerous lightning started a couple of small fires, and power had been knocked out in half in the city for several hours. "The elevator was stuck between floors. I had to send Lamont in to give the woman a boost out."

Another *thwack* sounded through the game room of the station house, and Dean realized Barrett made yet another perfect shot. Dean shook his head, sighed, and propped his hands on the foosball table. The game was over. He lost. Again.

"Thing is," Barrett continued, mirroring Dean's pose on the opposite side of the table. "I'm not sure exactly what the problem is. She nearly hyperventilated while she was in that elevator, but I don't know if it was because she's got a fear of the dark or a case of claustrophobia."

Dean gnawed the inside of his cheek as he weighed the Lieutenant's words. Neither was good for a firefighter though if he were given a choice of the two to have as a problem with one of his men—or women as in this case—he hoped it was fear of the dark. They rarely faced situations in total darkness. Even at night or inside a building, if they were fighting a fire, they at least had the glow of the flames for light. But claustrophobia, now that could be a big problem. Firefighters were often tossed into situations where the job they had to do was in an enclosed space, sometimes a very small, enclosed space.

"Have you talked with her?" Dean asked.

"No. Not yet. I thought about setting up a drill at the maze, blacking out the face mask of her SCBA and making her crawl through it."

"Sounds like a good plan. If she does have a problem, the only way to get her over it is to make her tackle the fear."

Barrett nodded in agreement. "Then you're okay with the idea."

"Yeah. Go for it. Take her to the maze yourself. I'll go, too, if you want, but we shouldn't have the others around. Too many people watching might make it worse on her at first. Take it slow and work her through it."

A soft knock came from the doorway, and Dean saw Veronica leaning against the frame, her long legs bare and sticking out from under a skirt that was impossibly short and oh so tight, her blouse—a bright material in a riot of colors—was equally tight over her breasts and stopped just above her bellybutton ring. He felt his blood pressure instantly soar to record numbers. Man but he had to buy the woman some less revealing clothing if for no other reason than to keep himself from having a heart attack.

"Am I interrupting, gentlemen?" she asked as she sauntered into the game room.

“Looks like that’s my cue to leave.” Barrett grinned and stepped away from the table. “Veronica, nice to see you again.” His gaze swept over her before he turned and walked out of the room, closing—and locking—the door behind him.

“I didn’t mean to run him off.”

Dean moved to her, pulled her into his arms. “You come here looking like this and the guys have two choices. They can run and hide or they can tackle you. Since they have too much respect for me and know that I would beat them to a bloody pulp for laying one finger on this body of yours, they choose to run and hide. So, to what do I owe this pleasure of your visit?”

“I got a call from the Green Leaf office today. My condo will be ready by Monday.”

Dean’s heart plummeted to his boots. He stared at her, looked for any indication, any warning of what she was going to say next but found nothing. “Are you telling me you’ll be moving out on Monday?” he finally asked. God, he didn’t want her to move out. He thought they had progressed far enough in their relationship that he no longer had to worry about her leaving. So what if she would be moving into a condo in the same complex as his. He wanted her to stay under his roof. He *needed* her to stay.

“I’m telling you that I can,” she said slowly, her voice taking on a teasing tone. Her hands moved from his neck and began a slow slide down his arms. “If you want me to.” One hand slipped between them, trailed down his chest. Then she cupped him through his jeans and his brain dropped to his groin.

“W-what do you w-want?” Her other hand had joined the fun and made fast work of the button and zipper of his jeans. It was when her hand slipped inside and wrapped around his cock, that he started stammering.

“To be with you,” she said against his throat as she rose to her tiptoes, leaned in and began to kiss, nibble, lick, and explore.

“Veronica, baby, are you forgetting that we’re at the station?”

“Tripp locked the door when he left.” She squeezed his cock and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Oh, God.” He breathed, his hands beginning to explore. They had snaked under the back of her blouse, moved upward, and he realized she wasn’t wearing a bra. That was all he needed, easier access to those luscious breasts. “Someone could still hear us.”

“So we won’t make a sound. It will heighten the excitement.”

Dean didn’t think it was possible to become any more excited with this woman, but that wasn’t the point that needed arguing at the moment. “Someone could still walk in. That door has a key. If we get—” She pulled his jeans and briefs off his hips and cupped his balls, all the while continuing her mind-numbing adventure with his dick. “I could get fired.”

“Then I could have you whenever I want you,” she said with an undiscouraged sensuality that had him breaking into a sweat.

“I’ll give you as much as you want, *anything* you want, when we get home tonight.”

“We’re babysitting tonight, remember? You have to pick up Timmy from school, and he’ll be with us until after the game tomorrow.”

Shit! He had forgotten about that.

She rose to her tiptoes again, whispered in his ear. “I’m not wearing any panties under this skirt.”

Dean heard a low, barbaric-like growl escape from his throat, and then he lifted her into his arms even as he backed her against the nearest wall. In seconds, he was inside her, knowing she did it again. She knew he couldn’t resist her, and as always she got her way.

Not that he was complaining now. How the hell could he when being inside her felt so damned good? Her arms were back around his neck now, and she pushed her elbows into his shoulders, lifting herself off his dick until he nearly slid out of her. She looked at him, and the warm swirl of emotion he saw in her eyes had his breath catching in his throat.

“I’m not moving out,” she told him in a determined whisper.

Thank you, sweet Jesus, was all he could think.

“I’m staying...forever.” She dared to move an arm, tenderly touched his cheek with the back of her fingers. “I love you, Dean Wolcott.” Then she relaxed her other arm, and her body slid down fast, effectively ramming him inside her to the hilt.

The shock of her words combined with the sudden, brain-jarring, instant pleasure of being so deep inside her rendered Dean speechless. But he could still think, still feel. Veronica Abbott loved him. The woman he had loved most of his life finally loved him back, and oh, the wonder of it all.

“Say it again,” he whispered.

“I love you,” she said, and he didn’t need to see her face to know she was smiling. He felt the emotions the words held against the side of his neck. They seeped into his skin, traveled through his blood straight to his heart where he knew they would remain forever just as she would—forever in his heart, forever in his arms, and forever his.

CAUGHT OFF GUARD

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIO

I began writing when I was in Junior High School. (We won't discuss how long ago that was :-)) When my parents saw how serious I was about becoming a writer, they enrolled me in a mail course through the Institute for Children's Literature. It was there that I learned much of the ins and outs of the publishing world.

In 1999, my first young adult book (though no longer available) was accepted for publication. And I was off! Six books later, I gave mysteries for adults a go. Writing under the pen name of Calley Moore, I had four books published. Meanwhile, my YA novels were still kicking butt. In 2002, I won the Best Author's award at the Book Review Cafe that same year.

As I continued to grow, so did my writing interest. In 2004, I expanded to adult romances, and in 2005, I turned erotic. <grin> I have several books that will be released in the upcoming months.

All writing aside, I am a native of South Mississippi, though I currently reside in Tampa, FL. I am a mother of two wonderful boys, and when I'm not writing, I'm reading. I also enjoy heavy metal music, various types of movies (anything with Matthew McConaughey is a sure winner with me) and dancing.

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