

TONYA
RAMAGOS



SPORTS

BEATS

Sports Beats
by *Tonya Ramagos*

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HEAVY METAL SEDUCTION THREE:

SPORTS BEATS

By

Tonya Ramagos

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To the band and board members of the DMB. Thank you for your support and help in getting my facts straight.

CHAPTER ONE

Anticipation, adrenaline and hope had Melody Forbes holding her breath. Her heart pounded against her rib cage, her pulse hammering in her ears like a fierce heavy metal drum beat. *Come on, come on, you can do it guys. You can do it.* Though her lips moved with each word, her chant was silent, pleading. They *had* to do it. They just had to. They needed the win and with the time on the clock quickly counting down if they didn't start to turn the game around now all hope would be lost.

On the ice, the action seemed to be happening in slow motion. The Philadelphia Flames had the puck, the players guarding it with expert skill as they moved down the rink and prepared for the shot. Then it happened. In one swift, powerful stroke, the Philadelphia Flames center player sent the puck sailing across the ice and straight into the net for the score.

Melody exhaled a whoosh of air. She leaped from her seat, colliding elbows with the man at her side as the crowd around her erupted into a deafening roar of party horns, hoops, hollers and applause. Inside the hockey rink, the players of the Philadelphia Flames were exchanging high-fives and congratulatory pats on the back. But no one in the capacity packed Wachovia Center was more elated than she. That was her brother down there strutting his stuff across the ice, her brother who had just made the shot that tied the team with the Carolina Hurricanes. Way to go, Brock!

Her pulse slowly returned to normal, even as her heart swelled with pride. She couldn't explain the feelings that came over her when she watched her brother on the ice. It had been too long, far too long, since she had reveled in the experience of a live hockey game. The exhilaration, the rush of adrenaline, was almost enough to make her forget that where she should have been, at this very moment, was at home.

Was her father okay? Surely she would sense it if he wasn't. Wouldn't she?

It wasn't as though she had left him alone. He was under the supervision of a trusted family friend and next-door neighbor. Still, it had been months since she had left her father with anyone except Brock, and the knowledge of that made her uneasy. If not for the relentless coaxing by her brother, her father and their neighbor-friend, Stanley, she never would have left tonight. But as the crowd settled around her and the game continued on the ice, she silently admitted that she *had* needed the break, and what better way to set aside one's troubles than to watch a kick-ass hockey game?

One more shot. If Brock or one of his teammates could only make one more shot, the Flames would win the game, effectively ending the losing streak that had overcome them shortly after the season began. With the end of the third period drawing near there was still time, but it would be a close one.

Putting every ounce of confidence she possessed in the players of her favorite hockey team, Melody slowly lowered

herself into her seat. It was moments like that which had just passed when she longed for her camera. In her mind's eye, she could see just how the picture would look: Brock would have an intense expression on his face as he sent the puck flying past the Carolina Hurricanes' goalie and straight into the net. She would see that picture, she was sure. It would appear in a magazine or newspaper somewhere in the coming week, probably even flashed across television screens on tomorrow's news broadcasts. But it would be a picture taken by someone else's camera, some member of the press that she could see standing around in the press box a mere few feet away. A member of the press that was here tonight only because it came to them as an assignment, here tonight for the story and not for the love of the game or even perhaps their job.

"Now that's hockey," a male voice broke into Melody's reverie. "It's about damn time Forbes woke up and started playing the game."

Melody instantly bristled. Several retorts came to mind as she turned to look at the man. But he hadn't been speaking to her. Instead, his head was turned toward a woman on his other side. Because the man was sitting on the edge of his seat while his companion sat comfortably back in hers, Melody could see the woman quite well. She was breathtaking, super model material, a glistening beauty with long straight scarlet red hair and gleaming ivory skin. She was dressed in an olive green blouse that was loose but not so loose to hide her delicate curves. The blouse was accented by what appeared to be a matching broom skirt, probably

fitted at the hips and flaring out as it continued down to her ankles. Melody could just see a navy blue sash printed with stars and moons tied around the woman's trim waist. Corresponding silver stars and moons dangled from her earlobes, tangling with her hair.

The woman was looking at the man, amusement lighting her expression. Her eyes were a dazzling shade of green with an outline of blue and Melody felt a sense of what she could only describe as power drift through the air. It made her shiver. This was definitely a woman of confidence, full of energy and light, in possession of the power to have any man she wanted wrapped around her finger.

Melody shifted her attention to the man just as he turned his gaze back to the rink affording her with a clear, side profile. Unable to resist, she took him in with a slow appraising glare. He was slim, lanky, with just the right amount of muscles to show that he cared about his body but not so much that he nearly lived at the gym. His hair was a dark brown, the back short, the sides and front long and hanging haphazardly in his eyes. A thin dark beard lined his crescent-shaped jaw and chin, inching upward around his mouth to meet a thin mustache above his upper lip. He wore a Philadelphia Flames jersey and a pair of black pants. He wasn't drop-dead gorgeous by any stretch of the term but he was good looking nevertheless. She had always thought so. There was simply something about the man that made her senses jump to attention and take notice every time she looked at him.

They had never been officially introduced but she knew the man was Reese Torrin. She knew he was a friend of Brock's and the drummer for the popular heavy metal band, Façade. Though she often preferred dance or techno music as opposed to heavy metal, Brock was a fan. She had heard Façade's music at his house and had seen photos of Reese Torrin on the CD cover and in metal magazines her brother had scattered about.

Deciding it best to bite back the retorts still bouncing around in her brain, Melody looked back at the rink. On the ice, the puck had landed in Brock's control once again. He swayed across the ice with the grace of an Olympic figure skater, keeping the puck hugged by the end of the stick as he made his way closer to the goal. The crowd around her began to chant, "Go, go, go, go," as he positioned himself for the shot. Suddenly, the puck sailed like a bullet shot from a high-powered rifle across the ice toward the net ... and was quickly blocked by the Carolina Hurricanes goalie. The chant of the crowd immediately changed to a disappointed collective "Awe."

"Shit! Forbes should have had that shot," Melody heard Reese say. His arm flew out in an aggravated gesture toward the rink then fell back to rest on his thigh. "What the hell is he doing out there?"

"Playing the fucking game," Melody spat before she could stop herself. So much for biting back retorts. Too much of her life spent around strong-willed men had made her just as fast on the punch and foul-mouthed as the next guy. She tried to control it—her temper, her often knee-jerk reactions that had

her speaking without first thinking and usually included a curse word or two—but more times than not she failed miserably. "What? You think you could do better?" She purposely raked her gaze over him as if in disgust or challenge. "Get out there and prove it."

The thought would have been comical if she hadn't been so angry. The man was a musician, a *drummer* for crying out loud. He wasn't an athlete. And to play better than Brock ... ha! Brock was one of the best players on the team. Hell, he was one of the best players in the NHL! But even the best could be expected to screw up a time or two. He *was* only human after all.

For Pete's sake, look at all her brother had gone through in the last few months. Their father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Though in retrospect it was believed he had been suffering from the disease for quite some time; the diagnosis had come only a few short months ago. Both Melody and Brock had seen the signs—the occasional loss of memory, the repetitive asking of the same question, the subtle changes in his personality—but both had dismissed them as simply signs of getting older. He was in his early seventies after all.

Their father's diagnosis had caused devastating repercussions in both of their lives. Though he was physically able to continue life as normal adult male, mentally he required the supervision of a young child. Melody and Brock had tossed around their options of making sure their father was cared for and in the end it had been Melody who had given up her apartment in New York and moved back home. It had been a sacrifice, but one that was easier for her to

make than Brock. Being a freelance photographer gave her the flexibility to work from anywhere she chose, whereas Brock's place on the hockey team required constant practice and travel.

Still, though Brock's professional career hadn't changed, everything else about him had. He spent every available moment that he could squeeze returning home to give Melody a bit of relief. He was carrying the weight of worry and concern on his shoulders, but on the ice he couldn't allow it to show. There was no room for one's personal problems to interfere on the ice. The principle rule in hockey was that of continuous action and play. So what if a player is having personal difficulties? So what if a player has suffered a minor injury or needs a moment to rest? So what if a player has broken his hockey stick! The game still went on. With twelve tough and beefy men, six on each team, skating around on the ice all with the undying need to win, a player couldn't afford to lose his focus even for the shortest of seconds.

So there he was, Brock on the ice doing what he did best, or at least trying to.

Melody glared at the man beside her, a man who was supposed to be her brother's friend, and felt like slapping him for his lack of compassion. Heaven knew the asshole deserved it.

* * * *

Reese returned the woman's wide-eyed glare, stunned that she had spoken to him at all much less in the way in which she had spoken. They had bumped elbows several times

during the course of the hockey game but he hadn't paid the least bit of attention to her. His mind had been focused on the game ... until now.

She was angry. No. She was pissed. At *him*. Oops. Sports fans were notorious for becoming so involved in a game that their every emotion heightened to dramatic proportions. His did. Whether live or on television, he became so entranced with the action that he probably sounded like a want-to-be coach rather than a spectator. And anger was the top emotion that showed through the most often in nearly every fan. He had watched fights break out in the stands because of an argument that had erupted between fans. Although...

His gaze traveled over her and he felt his insides stir. Rolling around in the stands with this woman could prove to be more fun than the game. She was incredible! Her hair was a blondish brown, probably shoulder length, he decided though he couldn't tell for certain, as she had it pulled into a high tight pony tail on the back of her head. Her skin was a sun-kissed tan and he couldn't help but wonder if that tan spanned her every inch. Her eyes were big and round and a deep shade of green that could make a man melt—or squirm if those eyes held the level of anger they did at this moment, as she glared at him. She wore no make-up, save for the light pink gloss that moistened shapely lips currently set in a grim thin line. Lips that he found himself longing to feel against his, to feel as they planted wet kisses down his neck and torso, to see as they wrapped around his...

Like most of the people around them, she was dressed in a Philadelphia Flames hockey jersey and blue jeans. Because

she was currently sitting down he couldn't tell how well those jeans formed to her lower body, and it was probably a good thing because he had felt his blood pressure rise the moment he looked at her. She reminded him of a tomboy version of Kate Beckinsale and damn if she wasn't fine!

Unfortunately, right now, this so-fine woman was glaring at him with a set jaw and icy daggers shooting from her eyes.

"He should have known he wouldn't make that shot," Reese countered with a gesture of his arm toward the ice rink.

"It was an open shot," the Kate look-alike argued back. "There was no reason to think he couldn't make it. The Carolina goalie was simply fast on his feet this time."

"Oh, what do you know?" Reese grumbled and returned his attention to the game.

"Apparently more than you," he heard her mutter.

In his peripheral vision, he saw her shift in her seat as if trying to move further away from him. It was a sold-out game. The Wachovia Center was packed to capacity and there was nowhere for her to go unless she left entirely. She was no longer paying attention to him but now that he had noticed her, *really* noticed her, it was hard for him to concentrate on anything else. Damn, she was hot! Forget that she had looked at and spoken to him in a way that held the equivalency of the frozen ice the hockey players were skating on. She may be an ice bitch on the inside but the outside was sexy as hell.

"Way to go Reese," Diana said on the other side of him low enough only he could hear her. "What a way to meet a beautiful woman."

Reese shot her a glance and scowled. She was right, of course. As was the Kate look-alike, he silently admitted. The Carolina goalie *had* simply been quick on his feet. It had actually been an amazing save on Carolina's part.

So why had he nearly bit the head off the most attractive woman he had met in years? Who the hell knew? It had been a knee-jerk reaction to her obvious fury against him. She was a woman, after all, and there weren't many that really knew what the hell they were talking about when it came to hockey. Still, this woman apparently did, and if he had had any brains at all he would have agreed with her, struck up a conversation, asked her out for a drink, took her back to his place and started a game all their own that would have put this hockey game to shame.

Maybe he could turn this thing around. If he apologized, pulled out his charm card—he knew he had it in his pocket somewhere—maybe, just maybe, he could get this woman right where he wanted her. He started to turn, opened his mouth to speak, but she leaped out of her seat. So did everyone else around them. He stood, also, to see what was happening on the ice. Eric Amonte, the Philadelphia Flames left defenseman, had control of the puck and was skating backwards toward the goal. With less than thirty seconds left on the clock, he whirled, simultaneously shooting the puck and sending it sailing straight into the net securing a three-to-two win for the Flames over the Hurricanes. And when he looked back at the woman again, he saw only the back of her as she headed down the aisle away from him.

* * * *

She should have gone home, Melody thought as she closed and locked the bathroom door. After the game, she should have insisted Brock take her back to the house before following the rest of the team to the victory party. Instead, it had been her brother who had done the insisting. Their father was well taken care of. Stanley was with him and was prepared to stay the night. There was no reason she had to return to the house immediately. Still, the guilt threatened to eat at her insides like a family of termites feasting on a tree. Her father was sick and here she was about to attend a party. Clarence Forbes would have never left his sick daughter to party with a bunch of celebrating hockey players, even if hockey *was* his all time favorite sport, even if the hockey players in question *were* part of his all time favorite team. He had proven exactly that years ago when Melody had been thrown from a motorcycle and sustained serious internal injuries. She had been in the hospital for weeks and her father had refused to leave her side. Now it was his turn to need her, but instead of being there for him she was at a fucking party!

With a heavy, saddened sigh, Melody took her time changing from the comfortable hockey jersey and blue jeans she had worn to the game into a two-piece bathing suit for the victory pool party. She had only attended a half dozen victory parties in Brock's three years with the team but it had taken only two before she had learned appropriate attire was an absolute must.

Oh, she could walk into the pool area wearing jeans and a shirt, and in less than ten minutes she would be soaked to the bone in ruined clothes. Then she would have no choice but to change. So after her second dunking by the team members and the second set of ruined clothing she had learned her lesson and now beat the guys to the punch. They would still dunk her, she knew. After all, they had to get their kicks, and giving a team member's sibling hell was such fun.

She shook her head and sighed. At least this way the dunk wouldn't cost her a fortune.

As with nearly every victory party that happened when the team was home in Philadelphia, tonight's was being held on Eric Amonte's million-dollar estate. It was the largest one owned by a team member and the only one with an indoor pool. With December temperatures outside in the bone-chilling numbers, a pool party would have been nonexistent had it not been for Eric's lavish home.

Though Melody wasn't often impressed with wealth, she had to admit Eric's place was awesome, to say the least. It was three stories decked out with the best money could buy. The top two floors were used as the main living area while the entire bottom floor was set aside for play. There was a small kitchen and bathroom for convenience but all the other rooms were complete with every toy a grown man could love. Arcade games, pool and foosball tables occupied one room, another larger room housed a small practice skating rink, and down a long hall that led to the back of the house was an indoor swimming pool, sauna and Jacuzzi.

Yes, Eric Amonte was a rich boy—a very rich boy that loved to flaunt his wealth. It wasn't hockey that had given him his money though his position with the Philadelphia Flames did top the mountain in his already hefty bank account. Surprisingly enough, the tall, robust, sandy haired jock was also a businessman and, if his possessions were any indication, he was no doubt a dammed good one.

That wasn't the only thing Eric Amonte was good at, Melody mused and attempted to push all guilt over her father to the bottom of her thought files. Memories of hot, sweaty, dominant sex assailed her as she stepped out of the lavish first floor bathroom. They had been lovers for a short time two years back. Their split had been mutual, each choosing to revoke their lover status and return their relationship to that of platonic friends.

Eric Amonte was a wild man, in bed and out, and while Melody liked more excitement between the sheets than most, Eric had offered her more than she could handle. Thank God no one knew they had once been lovers. Not even Brock. They had been very discrete and neither of them were the type to brag.

Naturally, Eric was the first man she encountered when she began walking down the long hall that led to the indoor pool area at the back of the three-story mansion.

"Be still my heart," he said dramatically, his hand flying to the center of his broad bare chest. His eyes, authoritative and dark, made a slow slide from the roots of her hair down to her toes and back up again, awakening a fire inside her that made her want to squirm. "Woman, you're trying to kill me."

"Oh stuff it, Eric." Melody rolled her eyes and kept walking. It angered her the way her body still reacted to his gazes. It angered her even more to know that *he* knew the effect he could still have on her. His looks weren't a rock-my-world turn-on, but dammit they could still make her wet and he knew it.

He caught her by the arm and spun her around. Her body collided hard and flat against his. "I would love to stuff it, baby," he said in a heated seductive whisper. "Right inside that sweet, tight ass of yours." His hand traveled down to squeeze her left butt cheek and she felt the evidence to back up his words pressing against her stomach.

The thought of his dick, so thick and hard, invading her most secret hole made her pussy throb with need. It was something he had always wanted to do to her when they were lovers and the one thing she had denied him. She had never had sex that way. Though the fantasy excited her, the thought of making it a reality scared her half to death.

It had been far too long since she'd had sex. That was why her body was reacting so viscerally to Eric, because Heaven knew she didn't want to go down that road again. She needed to get laid, but Eric Amonte was certainly not the man for the job. Reese Torrin, on the other hand...

Where in the hell had *that* come from? Getting laid by Reese Torrin! Had she lost her mind? The man was Brock's friend. That in itself made him a no-no in her book. She had only deviated from her personal rule—to never get involved with her brother's friends—once in her life with Eric Amonte and look at how that had turned out. The man was also an

asshole, who obviously saw women as the inferior species who were stupid when it came to such manly things as sports. *Oh, what do you know?* That comment had held such a chauvinistic ring that even though it hadn't been followed by *you're just a woman*, the words had been clearly implied. And to top it all off, the man was a bigger player than Eric Amonte. She knew that for a fact. Brock had told her stories, and even if he hadn't, the mere fact that Reese Torrin was the drummer for a heavy metal band was enough to cement the man's player status in stone.

Not that she was looking for a long-term relationship, or anything of the sort. She simply wanted someone to spend time with, to share nights of good, steaming sex with no strings, no emotional bonds, no promises of forever, because she couldn't offer forever. Forever demanded things she couldn't promise a man.

"Don't be so vulgar," she spat and punched Eric hard on arm. Her knuckles screamed in pain when they contacted with the hard wall of muscle, but she didn't allow herself so much as a wince. Instead, she tried to step back, to free herself from his embrace, but his grip on her waist only tightened.

"You're not getting away from me that easily, sweet cheeks," he drawled, a wicked, boyish grin spreading across his lips. "You're not wet yet."

Oh yes I am, she wanted to say but despite the double entendre of his words she knew what he meant. "I haven't even made it to the pool area yet," she said instead, her teeth clenched as she continued to struggle in his arms.

"Then let me help you with that." He scooped her up into his arms before she could utter a word in protest and began walking down the hall.

"Put me down you big Ape!" she ordered even though she knew she was wasting her breath. He would put her down all right—right in the deep end of the pool. Oh well, at least she would have her dunk for the night over with early.

* * * *

By the time Reese had driven across town to drop Diana at her hotel then reversed direction and made his way to the ritziest part of the city where Eric Amonte's mansion was located, the Philadelphia Flames victory party was already in full swing. One thing about it, the bastard had one hell of an amazing house, he mused as Eric's place came into view. He had wanted Diana to see it, knew she would appreciate its turn-of-the-century architecture. She got off on stuff like that. But try as he might, she had repeatedly declined his invitation to join him. "What if the hot Kate Beckinsale look-alike shows up at the party?" She had asked him.

Yeah, like his luck could be so good. On second thought, that wouldn't be good luck at all. A woman like her spelled danger with a capital D. No way could a man keep things on a purely sexual level with her—one night between the sheets and walk away the next morning. Yeah, right! More like *crawl* away the next morning with his tail tucked between his legs and his heart in a zillion pieces because he would have instantly fallen in love.

Whoa! Back up there buddy. Fallen in love? What the hell was he thinking? Love didn't exist. But lust? A lust like what would be acquired from spending a night with a woman like that could leave a man in pieces.

What if the hot Kate Beckinsale look-alike shows up at the party? Reese had simply rolled his eyes and told Diana she had lost her mind. Still, she had insisted he go to the party alone. Victory parties with a bunch of jocks wasn't really her thing, and besides, a man never knew when the love of his life would suddenly appear before his eyes, she had told him. And if said man was with another woman when said love of his life walked in ... well, wouldn't that create one hell of a problem?

The love of his life ... Ha! Reese snorted as he found a place to parallel park across the street from the house. There was no love of his life. He didn't believe in love. L-O-V-E was simply another meaningless four-letter word. People tossed it around like a sheet of paper in the wind, as if it held no more substance than the word poop or even shit or damn. People swore their eternal love to another one day, only to decide they had been wrong, and find a different recipient the next. He could easily think of much better four-letter words. One in particular that was his favorite, understood in its context in every corner of the world and had more uses than could be counted on one hand and, best of all, it didn't matter how often the recipient changed.

For instance, just a few short months ago Reese had thought Diana would be a good recipient. There was no denying it, the woman was drop-dead gorgeous. But instead

of falling into bed with Diana Thompson he had fallen into a friendship. His friendship with her was one he hadn't thought possible to have with a woman. No way was he going to fuck that up by fucking her.

And as for the Kate look-alike he had seen at the game tonight ... Okay, honesty time. He would gladly fall to pieces for a chance to fuck her. She was the stuff fantasy fucks were made of.

Too bad she would only be in his fantasies.

Reese slid out of the car and walked across the street wondering absently if Diana had some sort of spell in one of her many books that would bring his Kate look-alike to his bed. Yeah, right, even if his favorite witch could pull off something like that, he probably wouldn't know what to do with the prize when it was received. A woman like his Kate look-alike would require ... no, she would rightfully deserve more than a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am type of fuck. She would...

He was reaching for the doorknob when the front door of the house swung open and a woman stormed out, cutting off his train of thought and nearly knocking him on his ass.

"Sorry," she muttered without so much as a pause in her flight.

Stunned, Reese stared after the woman. She couldn't have been more than five-foot-one, he determined, with frizzy bleach blond curls that looked as though she had stuck her finger in a light socket. Or maybe it was her temper fuse that had done that to her hair, because if the furry he had spotted

in her expression and sensed in her tone was any indication, her fuse had blown.

"Baby, wait!" A man called out in a drunken slur as he stumbled out the door after her. It was a chilly twenty-eight degrees outside and the dip shit was dressed in nothing more than a pair of dripping wet swim trunks and a pout.

Reese took a step to the side, crossed his arms over his chest and watched the scene unfold.

"Eat shit, Cody," Light Socket spat back over her shoulder.

Cody Stillman. Reese shook his head, laughing to himself. It was Cody's first season with the team. Reese had been watching him play. He was good, a man who had seemingly been born to play defense for the Flames. And it was no wonder, Reese mused. It looked as though Cody was accustomed to playing defense on and off the ice.

"Come on honey," the hockey player whined, shuffling a crooked path after the woman. "We were only messing around."

"Feeling up another woman's tits in front of me is more messing around than I can handle," Light Socket fumed.

"I'm sorry baby. It won't happen again. You shouldn't take things so seriously. You know you're the one I love."

Reese couldn't help but roll his eyes. He had known it was coming and would not leave disappointed. A figure appeared in his peripheral vision and he turned slightly to find another woman, this one with jet-black hair and clad in a blood red bikini. Her skin was so pale she could have passed for a vampire, but it was the impressive set of knockers spilling over the bikini top that beckoned his attention.

So Cody had copped a feel with this woman. Hell, Reese couldn't blame the man. Tits like that practically demanded to be touched. They were probably fake, he decided. They were too perky, too firm and stable not to be. But fake or not, they were dammed sure enticing.

"She's pissed again," the vampire with the luscious breasts muttered in a low voice only Reese could hear.

In the yard, Light Socket whirled around to face Cody. Angry tears streamed down her puffy cheeks. "You should have thought about all of that before you started feeling her up." Her hand flew out, index finger extended, pointing at the woman standing at Reese's side.

Ms. Vampire stepped away then and sauntered down the walkway to Cody. "Come back to the party darling," Reese heard her say. "You're going to catch pneumonia standing out here in you swim trunks. She'll be over it by morning. Then the two of you can make up and everything will be hunky dory again."

"I don't give a rat's ass if she gets over it or not," Cody shouted, his pout now replaced with a snarl. "I didn't do anything wrong." Hooking his arm around Vampire's waist, he began walking back to the house, steadily defending himself with each faltering step. He addressed Reese with a quick nod as they passed and disappeared from sight.

Reese glanced back at the street where Light Socket had hopped in a car and was now speeding away. With another shake of his head and a laugh, he turned. That little episode had been a prime example of the meaningless L-O-V-E.

"Better Cody than me," he muttered and entered the house.

Though he immediately began searching for Brock in the small crowd scattered about, it was Brock who found him. "Reese, my man. Glad you could make it," the hockey player greeted. He slapped Reese on the back and shoved a beer bottle in his hand. "What took you so long? I was beginning to think you weren't going to show."

Reese took a long pull from the beer before answering. "I had to take Diana back to her hotel."

"That is one hot woman." Brock whistled in appreciation. "You're a better man than me, keeping your relationship with her on the friendly level. Drink fast. You have a lot of catching up to do."

Reese guzzled down the rest of the beer without taking a breath and then grabbed another from a nearby ice cooler. "You played a good game tonight," he said as they began to make their way to the back of the house. Though he had been there before, he was no less amazed by the lavish home than he had been on his first visit last hockey season.

"My shots were off, too slow," Brock disagreed. "But I've got one hell of a team. Tonight's win was theirs. I'll make it up to them at next week's game."

"Hey Forbes, Amonte's captured your sister and is headed for the deep end," Dave Peca called out with a wide grin brightening his Canadian features.

"Poor Mel," Brock chuckled and pushed his way through the crowded pool area. "You guys are always giving her hell."

You still haven't met Melody, have you?" he asked Reese as he stepped up beside him.

Reese shook his head and scanned the room. Dozens of half-plastered men and woman cluttered the enormous swimming pool and the concrete that surrounded it. The scene reminded him of a few of the after-show parties he and the other guys in Façade had thrown through the years, minus the pool of course.

"The purple bikini in Amonte's arms," Brock said and pointed to the far end of the pool. "Look quick because he's about to toss her in."

Reese followed Brock's finger until he spotted Eric Amonte and the woman in the purple bikini squirming wildly in his arms. Though her face was turned away from him, something about the woman registered. Blondish brown hair tied into a high ponytail, sun kissed skin, shapely body...

He caught a glimpse of her face just as Amonte dropped her into the water and his heart stilled. No way. No fucking way!

He saw the purple glint through the water as she sank to the bottom and then slowly swam her way back up. She broke the surface facing him. It was kind of stupid really, the way everything suddenly seemed to happen in slow motion. Matrix style, he mused as he watched wide-eyed. Her hands came up to brush the hair from her face as her head broke the water. Sprinkles seemed to hang suspended in the air around her. Her breasts floated just below the surface, the water invading the deep tantalizing valley between them. He could have sworn he heard Diana's mischievous laughter

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ringing in his ears as he stared, mouth gaping, at the vision. It was her! His Kate Beckinsale look-alike ice bitch was none other than Melody Forbes.

"Well, I'll be a sonofabitch."

CHAPTER TWO

Melody swiped at her eyes as she treaded water in the deep end of the pool. Hoots and hollers surrounded her but she barely heard them. Her gaze had collided with another several feet away and suddenly she felt as though all the oxygen had been sucked from the room. He was here. The impossibly irate, impossibly good-looking Reese Torrin had showed up at the victory party and he was staring at her, his mouth a gape, his eyes incredulous. She would have laughed had she been able to breathe.

That's right buddy, she thought in surreptitious delight. The woman that knows nothing about hockey is actually the sister of one of the best players in the NHL.

Regaining her bearings, she quickly masked her own surprise at seeing him and shot him her best icy glare before swimming to the side of the pool. No way did she want him to even guess that the hardening of her nipples was in response to seeing him again. No way did she want him to know how intensely her stomach was flip-flopping, how bad her every nerve ending was tingling with excitement. After the way he had treated her at the game tonight, he didn't deserve the way her body was reacting to him. What he did deserve was a boot up his ass.

The man had been a complete dick! She had wanted to tell him just because he had one didn't mean he had to be one, but had thought better of it. Good-looking or not, brother's friend or not, the man was apparently not worth the waste of

breath. Yet, hadn't he been the first man to pop into her mind when she had thought of getting laid less than twenty minutes ago?

"Hey Mel, darling, you look like a drowned river rat," she heard a male voice call out as she swam for the steel ladder at the pool's end.

"What happened, sweet cheeks?" Came another male voice in a drunken slur. "Did big bad Amonte throw you in the pool again?"

Assholes. They were all immature assholes! Whether it was all in good fun or not, she was surrounded by assholes tonight. If assholes could fly, this place would be an airport, she mused as she reached the ladder. Her fingers wrapped around the cool steel poles and under the water her feet found the first step.

"Need an extra hand?" Brock called down to her.

Melody looked up and didn't miss the smirk that toyed with the edges of her brother's lips as she took his extended hand and quickly climbed the remaining steps to the concrete. She bit back a retort wondering all the while why she was fuming on the inside. She was used to the playful jabs from the guys on the hockey team, used to being the object of their dunking escapades. So why was she getting so angry tonight?

"I wanted to introduce you to a friend of mine," Brock said. "Mel, this is Reese Torrin. He plays drums for the band Façade. Reese, my sister Melody, but everybody calls her Mel."

"We met at tonight's game," Reese told Brock.

And in that instant, she knew. *He* was the reason she felt like ripping someone's balls off and using them for a hockey puck. Though the tone in which he had spoken had been neutral, neither cruel nor kind, the sound of his voice enveloped her like a gentle caress and made her more uneasy than she had ever felt. That was the problem. This man made her uneasy. She couldn't put a finger on why. He just did.

Melody never felt uneasy around men. Never! Though she was decidedly female on the outside, many had questioned her inner sex. She had been raised by, with and around men. Instead of playing with Barbie dolls as a young girl, she had played with tanks and army trucks. Instead of wearing the pretty lacy dresses and shiny shoes, she had been dressed in jeans, T-shirts and ball caps. Instead of cheering on the sidelines at sporting events, she had been part of the event. She had played baseball, basketball and even a bit of football with the guys, though she had never actually been a part of the school team.

All her life it had been the tough and masculine surrounding her rather than the frilly and feminine. She was most often looked at as one of the guys, and she liked it that way. But this man, Reese Torrin, was certainly not looking at her that way now. No, from the moment she had caught his attention at the game by her words in defense of her brother, he had looked at her as if she were a miniature poodle scampering about in a field of elephants—so out of place and easily trampled over. But it was what she saw behind that superior male gaze that gave her pause. Attraction, desire,

hunger, and oh boy, the promise of hot slippery action between the sheets.

"Good. Since the two of you are already acquainted, you won't mind if I leave you for a moment," Brock said and, before either Reese or Melody could protest, he walked away.

Melody reached up and back to her ponytail, gripping the silky strands in one fist and squeezed, ringing out what she could of the chlorinated water. "Did you come to give my brother the third degree about his shitty playing at tonight's game?" she asked with a slight bite to her tone.

He ignored her, answering instead with a question of his own. "Why didn't you tell me you're Brock's sister?"

"You didn't ask," she shrugged and stepped around him and away from the pool. The rest of the party guests had resumed their individual fun. Her show for the night was over. Now that the players had gotten their dunking kicks, they would leave her alone.

She weaved her way through the crowd, snatching a dry towel off an empty lounge chair as she passed on her way to a bar set up against the far wall. She draped the towel over the back of her shoulders as she walked. She would dry the rest of her body after she got a drink. It wasn't until she reached the bar that she realized he had followed. Pouring herself a stiff shot of bourbon, she leaned one hip against the bar and turned back to him.

"Mind if I have some of that?" he asked, his voice low and seductive.

Though his tone said differently, though his dark eyes raked over her barely-covered body in a quick steamy

appraisal, she knew he was referring to the bourbon. She stole a sip from her glass. The burn of the liquor as it slithered down her throat only added to the wall of flames his look had ignited inside her.

"Help yourself. It isn't my alcohol," she said with a surprising coldness that was completely contradictory to the roaring temperature inside her.

"I suppose I owe you an apology for my comments at the game tonight," he said as he poured himself a shot. He downed it in a single gulp and then poured another to sip.

"Yeah, you do. Though I doubt I'll get one."

The corners of his lips tilted up in an impish grin. Had she thought this man wasn't drop-dead gorgeous by any stretch of the term? Boy howdy, had she been wrong! And it didn't take much stretching to realize it. It was the eyes that changed her mind. The innate male confidence that shown through them with the underlining promise that he could rock her world two ways from Sunday, that had her entire body tingling with need.

Melody liked a man with confidence, a take-charge sort that could appreciate her own strength yet open the envelope of her femininity in the bedroom. Because that was the type of woman she was. She could stand tall and straight, toe-to-toe with nearly any man in just about any situation and never once back down. But in the bedroom, everything changed. In the bedroom she wanted to relinquish all control. Well, almost all control. She *did* draw the line in a few places.

If only the man's confidence didn't make him such an asshole. She didn't have to be in a bedroom to draw the line

at assholes and from second one it had been clearly obvious Reese Torrin was exactly that ... an asshole.

Melody held her glass a breath away from her lips, her elbow resting on her opposite arm that was now folded below her breasts. She glared at him for a long moment before she finally spoke. "Tell me Reese, do you have to work hard to be such an asshole or does it come naturally?"

He chuckled at that, obviously amused by her observation. He opened his mouth to respond but stopped when something over her shoulder caught his attention.

Melody turned just as Gavin Whitcar came to an almost screeching halt a mere few inches from her. Usually the shyest, most quiet member of the hockey team, she was surprised that the goalie had sought her out. Then she took in the deeply worried expression that covered his boyish face and her blood seemed to still in her veins. Something was wrong. Something was *way* wrong.

"Your father," Gavin said without preamble. "He's been in a car accident. They've transported him to Philadelphia General Hospital. I think it's pretty bad, Mel."

Stunned, Melody stared uncomprehendingly at Gavin. Her throat constricted, fear gripped her chest. "I ... I don't..." She didn't understand. A car accident! No, that couldn't be right. How could her father have been involved in a car accident when he was safe at home with their neighbor, Stanley?

"I'm sorry Mel. I didn't get any more details. All I know..."

"Where is Brock?" Reese interrupted. He had moved to Melody's side, his hand gently resting on the small of her back.

"He's already on his way to the hospital," Gavin answered. "He left here a few minutes ago with one of the other guys. Apparently someone called his cell with the news. He said he was closer to the hospital than here. His car is outside. He said you have a key," he said, turning his attention to Melody.

"I do," she nodded, gulped. Her voice sounded weird even to her own ears. She tried to step away but felt a hand grip her arm. She spun, unable to hide the tears that had pooled in her eyes but rapidly blinking in an attempt to veil them anyway. "Let me go, Reese," she said through clenched teeth. "I have to change. I have to get to the hospital."

"You're upset, babe," he said, his tone surprisingly gentle. "You shouldn't be driving. Get dressed. I'll take you there."

Though her first impulse was to argue, she knew Reese was right. Besides, there was no time for such nonsense. Her father was hurt and she had no idea how bad. For all she knew, he could be dying! Anything could happen in a car wreck. The list of possible injuries was practically endless.

Reluctantly, she nodded and jerked her arm from Reese's grasp. Asshole or not, the man was a friend of Brock's, she reminded herself. Call her a pessimist, but if the worst happened tonight, her brother might want Reese there.

She thought of the way it had felt to have his hand on her back, to feel his skin in contact with hers. She thought of the fire, the need that Reese Torrin had ignited inside her. If the worst happened tonight, *she* may want him there.

* * * *

Reese hated hospitals, hated the overpowering smell of antiseptics, the soul clenching feel of sickness and death. It had been years since he had been to a hospital. The last time being a simple visit to Derek Kadin, his good friend and the vocalist for the band, when he had been admitted for surgery on a herniated valve in his throat. It had been even longer since Reese had been a patient himself. He thanked his lucky stars for that.

Yet tonight he had voluntarily left a kicking party to come to the hospital. Had he lost his mind? The quick shot of bourbon he had downed at the party had obviously been an instant death sentence to several much-needed brain cells.

The double doors of the hospital entrance eased open and there it was, the loathsome smell of germ killing chemicals and the feeling of certain doom. He sighed, stopping just inside the lobby as Melody rushed to the information desk. Only a heartbeat passed before she pushed herself away from the desk and briskly walked toward the elevator.

Reese hesitated for a split second before breaking into a slow jog to join her. Had she consciously realized she had been about to leave him standing around in the lobby? He doubted it. Her mind was on her father. He knew, at this point, nothing else mattered to her.

She had been completely silent during the twenty-minute drive to the hospital. He hadn't been able to see her well in the darkness though the glow from the dashboard lights and passing street lamps had granted some vision. She had sat in the passenger seat ramrod straight, her eyes focused on the road in front of them. Occasionally, he had detected a soft

sniffle and knew it was taking every ounce of her strength to keep her level of composure. Had she been alone, he suspected her battle of will would have been lost.

That was why he had insisted on driving her. The last thing she or any of them needed tonight was for her to end up in the hospital right next to her father because she had been too upset to drive and had lost control.

The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside. It wasn't until the doors closed, and Reese shifted beside her, that she seemed to remember he was with her. She looked at him, her big round eyes glassy with unshed tears, and forced a weak smile.

"I left you, didn't I?" she said, her voice sounding as feeble as her smile. "Sorry. You can leave now if you want to. You got me here safely. There's no reason you have to stay."

She was giving him an out, a chance to leave this God-awful place free of guilt. But he *would* feel guilty if he left, especially if he found out tomorrow that her father had died. He knew, through his friendship with Brock, that the only family she had was her brother and her father. Her mother had died due to complications after giving birth to her.

Reese had never been the type of person one turned to for comfort. Putting him in the middle of someone else's saddened problems was the quickest way to put him on edge. And if Melody lost her fight and started to cry ... oh hell, he didn't have a clue what he would do then. Still, he couldn't leave. It was almost as if someone had tossed him into a dark dungeon with a thick barred door and threw away the key.

"I would rather stay if it's all the same to you," he told her, his tone sounding more dry and unfeeling than he had intended. Dammit! Now was *not* the time to be an asshole.

She shrugged and looked up at the ascending row of lighted numbers over the elevator door. "Suit yourself. He's in intensive care. I'll be lucky if I even get to see him tonight. That is if..."

If she wasn't too late. She didn't say it but Reese knew it was what she was thinking.

As if someone else was controlling the limbs of his body via a remote, his arm stretched around her and encircled her waist. She had changed from the dick-torturing purple bikini before leaving the party. She now wore the same jersey and jeans he had seen her in at the game. He hadn't failed to notice this time how perfectly those jeans hugged her firm, curvy ass, either. Her hair was still in a ponytail, the blondish brown strands now matted and in complete disarray after drying from her dunk in the pool. Still, she was probably the most gorgeous creature he had ever laid eyes on.

"We can make the nurses let you into his room," he told her. "At least long enough for you to assure yourself he's still alive."

She said nothing to that, though he heard an almost inaudible snuffle as her shoulders rose and fell on a ragged breath.

The elevator stopped, the doors opened and there was Brock. The tall, hockey player had been leaning, arms folded over his expansive chest, against the wall across the hall, but

moved toward Melody the instant she stepped from the elevator.

Reese hung back just outside the elevator and watched as the brother and sister embraced. He expected Melody to completely fall apart then and was half thankful that she was in Brock's arms and not his own. But as she pulled back from Brock, he saw that not a single tear had escaped those deeply saddened but still oh-so-beautiful eyes. The woman had to be made of steel!

"Thanks for driving her, Reese," Brock assumed correctly. He stepped toward Reese, easing Melody along with him, and the men shook hands.

"How's your father?" Reese asked. He was surprised the question hadn't yet come from Melody's sensuous lips but figured it was because she was afraid to speak for fear she might break.

"Not too good," Brock answered with a heavy sigh. He glanced at Melody and pulled her closer to his side. "He's alive," he told her, "and his condition is stable. But he's in a coma and he has a broken leg. Until..." He paused, took a deep breath, and then began again. "Until he regains conscienceness we won't know how bad his head injury really is."

Melody turned her face into her brother's chest. Here it comes, Reese thought, watching her. But again, she only seemed to take a moment to compose herself before she lifted her head to speak to Brock.

"Can we see him?" she asked, and Reese couldn't believe how even the words came out.

The woman was amazing, to say the least. It wasn't that he wanted her to dissolve into a heap of river-rushing tears—no, truthfully, he *did* want her to. She *needed* to. She had to be crumbling inside and yet only a minuscule amount of that devastation was showing on the outside. She was holding it in, keeping her emotions in a tightly-corked bottle and it wasn't good for her.

Men could hold their emotions captive, sometimes so securely they were never set free, and it didn't hurt them. Women, on the other hand, were delicate creatures. It was their nature to allow emotions to flow. Not doing so could be harmful to their very being.

"Five minutes," Brock answered her. "It's all they will give us right now. If he..." Again, he hesitated and took a deep breath. He was holding his emotions in check as well. But he was a man. He was supposed to. "If he makes it through the night we can spend a bit more time with him tomorrow."

"I want to see him now," Melody said softly.

Brock nodded and turned his attention to Reese. "Can you stay for a few minutes? We won't be long."

"I don't have a choice. We came in your car," Reese said with a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

Brock smiled back, albeit weakly, and led Melody down the hall.

* * * *

As badly as Melody wanted to be with her father, she was secretly grateful the nurses only allotted her five minutes for tonight's visit. Seeing him like that, completely still and oh-so

pale with all the wires and tubes stretching between him and the various machines, was just too difficult.

The hospital room was a private one with a bed, stiff looking chair, bedside table and television for furnishings. The air was cold and reeked of the typical hospital smells. The walls were painted a solid utilitarian white with only a single floral painting hanging under the suspended television.

Standing at his bedside, she tenderly lifted his limp hand in hers. It was cool to the touch and sent an icy chill from her fingertips all the way to her toes. If not for the rhythmic beat of the machine monitoring his heart she would have sworn he was already dead.

Tears pooled in her eyes but she blinked them away. "Tough girls don't cry," her father had always told her. Though when he had said those words to her it had more often than not been in conjunction with a skinned knee or elbow. Melody had taken those words to heart. She didn't cry, at least not when she wasn't alone. In her mind, crying was a sign of weakness and she was *not* weak. She wasn't! She was *not* going to cry, especially not in front of a man. Her father couldn't see her now, but Brock and Reese could. She knew Reese was waiting somewhere outside that door. No way would she let him see her cry.

Brock stepped up beside her. His upper arm brushed her shoulder, but other than that small contact, he didn't touch her, didn't try to comfort her. Offering her comfort in the form of physical touch, when she was teetering on the edge of tears, would break the dam and he knew that. She had to

give herself kudos for holding it together when she had been in his arms in the hall. But if he were to touch her now...

"Mel?" Brock whispered softly, questioningly.

"How in the hell did this happen? Wasn't Stanley watching him?"

"He fell asleep, Mel. They both did. Dad has never wandered out of the house in the middle of the night before. Stanley had no reason to think he would start tonight."

"But why? Why did he get in the car in the first place? Where did he think he was going at that time of night?"

Brock shook his head. "I don't know, Sis," he answered and his tone was full of despair. "Stanley doesn't have a clue, either. We won't know anything until Dad comes out of this coma."

And what if he doesn't? Melody didn't say it, but it was the question at the forefront of her mind. She knew comas were completely unpredictable. A comatose person could wake within hours and then again they could stay that way for weeks, months, even years!

"We should go," her brother whispered softly.

Melody nodded. She gave her father's hand a gentle squeeze and then slowly lowered to the bed. With one final look and a soft choked goodbye, she spun on her heel and followed Brock out of the hospital room.

She immediately spotted Reese leaning against the wall a few feet down the hall. His arms were crossed over his midriff pulling the Flames hockey jersey he wore tightly against his muscular frame. His right leg was bent, his booted foot resting flat on the wall behind him. It was a pose one would

see in a magazine advertisement for some male product and, despite the sorrow that gripped her insides,, Melody felt her pulse pick up its pace. He looked toward her, his face expressionless, and pushed himself away from the wall.

"Thanks for hanging around, man," Brock said to him as the three moved to a nearby waiting room.

The room was small and empty. Rubber-cushioned chairs lined three of the walls with a long uninviting sofa on the fourth. A small television extended from high on the wall in one corner, the station set to CNN, the volume muted.

"I asked you to stay because I hoped you would take Mel home for me," Brock told Reese as the three of them stopped in the center of the room.

"I'm not going home," Melody said quickly, her tone adamant. No way was she leaving this hospital without her father. What if something else happened to him in the night? What if he ... died?

Brock turned to her, his soft eyes full of understanding. "I know you want to stay, Sis, but there is no point in us both being here," he said. "The nurses aren't going to let us back in to see him again before morning."

"I don't care." She shook her head, her ponytail swinging wildly on the back of her head. "I'm not leaving."

"One of us is going to want to be with Dad until he's released," Brock said patiently. "I have some things I have to do with the team tomorrow. Go home, catch a couple of hours of sleep and you can take the next shift in the morning."

She didn't like the idea, but she knew arguing with her brother was like arguing with a brick wall. He would carry her to the car if he had to, or tell Reese to do it.

"You'll call me if Dad's condition changes?" she asked Brock.

"You know I will Mel."

Melody sighed in defeat and nodded. She was too exhausted and upset to argue. Any weapons she might have possessed to battle a brick wall seemed to have deserted her in her time of need. It looked as though she would be going home after all. But the minute the sun began to rise, she would be back. There was no way she would get a lick of sleep tonight, anyway.

Wordlessly, she walked with Reese, retracing their steps back to the main lobby. Her thoughts remained on her father and the sinking feeling she had inside. The five minutes she had spent with her father could have been the last minutes she saw him alive. She knew her thoughts were probably a bit melodramatic, but the doctors had said there was no way to know if he would ever come out of the coma. On top of the Alzheimer's that was rotting his brain, the injury he had suffered to his head may have caused more irreversible damage. It could even be fatal! And yet here she was, leaving him behind in the hospital, going back to the home she shared with him. Only he wouldn't be there as he had been since the day she had been born. She would be in the house alone, surrounded by his everlasting presence, his memory. And what if he never returned?

It was that thought, combined with the sudden but gentle and comforting feel of Reese's hand on the small of her back as he led her through the main lobby, that finally caused her to break. She sank into a nearby chair, buried her face in her hands and wept.

* * * *

When it finally happened Reese felt a rush of red hot anger, which was almost instantly replaced by sympathy. She had needed to cry. He had known she needed to cry. Yet she'd had to wait until they were alone. Great. Just great!

If only she had done it upstairs in her brother's company. Surely Brock would have known how to offer her the comfort she so obviously needed. Instead, she had until they were downstairs on their way out the door, waited until she could obviously hold her emotions in tack no longer, waited until he was the only one available to console her. Perfect! Now what the hell was he supposed to do?

She sobbed quietly, almost like a man would. The only indications she was truly crying were the ragged rise and fall of her shoulders and her hands covering her face.

Reese found it odd how badly his arms began to ache with the need to encircle her, to pull her to him so she could cry on his shoulder. Would she push him away? A part of him thought she might. Still, he couldn't fight the overwhelming urge to try. Slowly, he keeled down in front of her, one hand hesitantly easing to her shoulder as he brushed a few unruly hairs from her forehead with the other. "Mel," he said so softly, so compassionately that he surprised even himself.

She jerked up straight, her eyes wide and full of ... Horror? Yeah, that would be right, he decided. Apparently, as her grief had overcome her to such a point that it had forced its way through her barriers, she had forgotten where she was, that she wasn't alone, that he—a man she scarcely knew, a man she thought was an inane asshole—was there with her.

She mopped her eyes with the palms of her hands and abruptly stood, nearly knocking Reese on his ass. He caught himself with one hand on the floor at his side and stood, too.

"Mel..." he began as she turned and started walking toward the door.

"Don't, Reese," she said sharply with an audible sniffle. "Just pretend that didn't happen. Okay?"

She seemed embarrassed, completely mortified, that she had fallen apart in front of him. She wouldn't even look at him. The best thing he could do was to drive her home and get away from her as quickly as possible. But how could he? he wondered as he scurried to catch up with her. She had walked briskly out of the large double doors and was heading across the parking lot. They had driven Brock's car. Reese's car was still back at the party. He would need a ride back to Eric Amonte's place and Melody was in no condition to drive.

He could call Garrett, he thought as they reached the car, but nixed the idea as quickly as it had come to him. It was the middle of the night and, although he knew the band's guitarist wouldn't mind, he couldn't pull the man out of a bed. He had a wife that could go into labor any day now.

He would simply have to call Derek, he decided, as he slid in behind the wheel. The vocalist was most likely in bed with

his woman as well, but Alicia wasn't pregnant. Reese wouldn't feel as guilty for dragging them out of bed in the dead of night.

He started the engine and turned to Melody. She sat stiff as a board in the passenger seat, her eyes, now dry but still puffy from her quick crying jag, focused straight ahead in the darkness.

Reese cleared his throat, surprised at how dry his mouth had become. "You'll have to give me directions," he said, his voice cutting through the silence in the car like a dull-bladed knife. "You've been staying at your father's, right? I don't know where the house is."

At the mention of her father, he saw the glimmer of tears rise to her eyes again but he didn't fear she would cry this time. She had done it once, but he knew there was no way would she allow herself to fall apart in front of him again.

"Head west," she said. She spoke so softly that Reese had to strain his ears to hear her. "I'll tell you where to turn when we get to the street."

He put the car in reverse but instead of backing out of the parking space, he kept his foot on the brake and turned to her again. "That is where you want to go, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "I don't really have a choice. I have nowhere else to go."

Reese stared at her for a long moment as realization dawned. Her father's house was full of memories, full of his presence. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that returning her to that house, leaving her alone there, would make the night harder for her.

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"We could go to my place," he suggested and would have kicked himself in the ass if he hadn't been sitting on it. What the hell was he doing? He had wanted to get away from her not spend the rest of the night with her at *his* house!

Melody looked at him then and he could see all the indecision mixed with the pain in her eyes. He half expected her to bite his head off, tell him he was fucking nuts. Instead, her gaze locked with his and she nodded.

CHAPTER THREE

Melody was operating in a haze of sadness and worry. That was the excuse she gave herself as she stepped through the door of Reese's home. How else could she rationalize her decision to allow him to bring her to his place?

When he had made the suggestion she hadn't allowed herself to think. She had known she didn't want to be alone, had felt the agony in her veins at the mere idea of returning to her father's home tonight. And before the ramifications of her decision had a chance to sink in she had nodded her head in agreement.

Living room lights came on, provided by a set of matching brass lamps perched on solid wood end tables on either side of a plush sofa the color of burnt sienna. Through the fog that clouded her mind, she stood and took in the rest of her surroundings. A matching coffee table, sitting on an area rug of browns and dark blues, stretched before the sofa. The carpet beneath was beige, and the remaining furnishings consisted of two overstuffed recliners, a bookcase and a big screen television, all falling into the color scheme of brown or black. She thought the room was decidedly male and definitely suited to Reese Torrin.

A few plaques hung on one wall displaying awards for Reese's band, *Façade*, going platinum on the charts. But it was the items scattered on the bookcase that caught her attention: hockey pucks, hats, trading cards, engraved mugs and other memorabilia—most of which sported the

Philadelphia Flames logo—cluttered the shelves. In the back corner of one shelf sat a framed newspaper clipping, a photo of Brock and her father snapped after the Flames had won the Stanley Cup—the National Hockey League's equivalency to the National Football League's Super Bowl—two years before.

Her hands shaking, she reached out and carefully pulled the frame from the shelf. She remembered the photo. She had taken it and her name was printed in small type underneath, in the photographer's by-line. She had sold the photo to the Philadelphia Times for a generous compensation.

It had been Brock's first year on the team, only the second time in more than a decade that the Flames had won the Stanley Cup, and the thrill and sheer joy was evident on both Brock's and their father's faces.

"Brock gave me that last season," Reese said, his voice cutting through her reverie.

"I took this," she said, tapping a nail on the glass that guarded the photo. "They were so happy that day. We all were. Dad looked so..." Her voice hitched, "...healthy."

Though she fought with all her might to hold it in, a single tear betrayed her by trickling down her cheek. Quickly, she swiped it away with the back of one hand. Then, as Reese reached out behind her, gently grasped her shoulders and slowly began to turn her to face him, more betraying tears followed. Her usually impenetrable resilient core had simply become too fragile and the usual, irremovable cork in her bottle of emotions shattered to bits. Unable to fight the battle any longer, she surrendered to the sorrow and fell into Reese's awaiting arms.

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by Tonya Ramagos

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The ache to hold her that had begun in the hospital lobby and escalated to a searing pain in the long minutes that followed, seemed to sing like a choir of angels in Reese's mind as his arms folded around her. Her forehead rested on his shoulder and though he couldn't hear her sobs he felt them, felt her body shake with them, felt his shoulder grown wet from them.

He had no idea what to say, what else to do, so he simply held her. He buried his nose in her hair and reveled in the faint fruity smell that had managed to break through the chlorinated scent left by the pool water. He lost himself in the feel of her slim, trim body against his. And when she shifted ever so slightly, moving even closer to him, their lower bodies brushing, he felt the effects of that contact in his groin.

He was a pig. He was truly the asshole she had accused him of being. The woman was in pain, practically drowning in sorrow and here he was getting a hard-on the size of the Pocono Mountains. She was in his arms in search of comfort—a comfort that he was certain did not come in the form of sex. Yet here he was growing harder by the second and wanting nothing more than to jerk off her jeans, push her against the nearest wall and slam his cock deep inside of her. Yep, no doubt about it, he was a real pig.

Long excruciating minutes, that felt like decades, passed before he felt Melody's quivers subside. She sniffled, a soft almost inaudible sound, then slowly lifted her head. Though her eyes were now even more red and puffy than before and

still glistening with tears, they drew him in like a fish on a hook. He felt a tightness in his chest even as his groin pulsed with need.

His gaze dropped to her lips. They were slightly plump and pale pink, the color of a carnation in the sparkling sunlight. When she drew her bottom lip between her teeth, he knew he had to taste them, had to taste her.

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Melody could have stopped him. She could have turned her head. She could have pulled herself out of his arms, stepped away. She saw his gaze drop to her mouth, saw the heat and intention in his eyes, and it paralyzed her. His hand rose to her face, cupped her cheek, his thumb lightly brushing away the tears that remained. Her eyes drifted shut and then she felt his lips on hers.

It began as a soft caress of skin brushing skin, his mustache lightly tickling her upper lip. Then she felt the warm moisture of his tongue as he licked, urging her to allow him access.

She sighed, a hopeless, helpless, needy sound even to her own ears, and her lips parted giving him the invitation he had been looking for. As his tongue slid into the darkness of her mouth, high-velocity tingles exploded throughout her body.

Their tongues tangled, danced, retreated and came back for more. The hairs on his upper lip and chin bristled against her smooth skin as the kiss grew hotter and boiled with passion and longing. All thoughts of the night she'd had, of the events that had led her to standing in this man's arms in the living room of his home, of her father, vanished, only to

be replaced with the wonderment of what this man could do to her.

Her inner thighs burned with the desire to feel the coarse hairs of his face against their sensitized flesh. Wetness pooled and slowly seeped through the folds of her pussy, soaking her panties. She moved into him, even as his arm tightened around her waist, and pressed her body to his. Her hand fisted in the back of his hair as his mouth left hers to trail warm, wet kisses down her face and throat.

Her head lolled back and her right leg eased around his until his thick, muscled thigh was between her legs. She gyrated against him, the rough denim of her jeans pressing her soaked panties between her folds. His thigh moved with her, offering a gentle pressure that nearly drove her mad. She moaned and a quiet *"Oh God"* escaped her lips before he captured them with his again.

She felt him pushing her and she stepped backward until her back slammed against a wall. As he continued to ravage her mouth, his hands moved to the bottom of her hockey jersey. A blast of cool air hit her midriff as he slowly lifted the shirt, exposing skin that was screaming for his touch. He broke the kiss, continuing his upward pull and her arms rose obediently above her head, but instead of removing the jersey he stopped. The neckline was caught just under her nose, drawing a smile from her lips. She was blinded by the fabric covering her eyes, her arms bound by the sleeves on either side of her head.

With her sight cut off, her sense of feel became predominate. His breath heated her tingling lips and she

waited for another kiss that didn't come. Instead, she felt the soft graze of his fingertip over her cheek, her lips, her chin, down her neck, and across the outline of her red lace bra. His touch was so surprisingly soft, like the tip of a feather, tantalizing her skin, electrifying her senses. Though she couldn't see, she closed her eyes anyway and concentrated on that touch. Anticipation made her shiver when his finger delved into the valley between her breasts to the clasp of her bra. Her nipples tightened, hardening almost to the point of pain, longing for his touch, for his mouth, for his tongue and, oh yes, here it came.

He unfastened the clasp and her breasts spilled free. The man was, no doubt, experienced in undressing a woman. Not many could manage to undo a bra's tiny clasp one handed without the slightest fumble before succeeding. But he had done it, and now she sensed him bending slightly, even as he continued to hold her hands, and the jersey, suspended above her head with one of his large, callused hands.

"Beautiful," she heard him whisper as he cupped one breast in his palm and lifted it as though testing its weight. Then he took her in his mouth and ... Oh wow! He sucked, gently at first then increased the pressure as he licked at the pebbled surface surrounding her nipple. When his teeth joined the action for a bite that teetered on the erotic edge of pleasure and pain, she gasped and felt her clit throb in stupendous agony.

Slowly—so dammed slowly she wanted to scream at him to move faster—he released her breast to trail a finger down her abs and stomach to the button of her jeans. She wanted to

help him, to speed things up, but when she tried to move one of her arms, a tight squeeze to her wrists stopped her. He was in control and that squeeze was his way of telling her so. With one of his hands and the aid of her shirt he had successfully blinded and bound her. Her body was his to do with what he chose and the realization had her pleading.

"Please Reese," she cried on a ragged breath.

"Please what, Melody?" he asked, and stole another bite of her nipple.

She sucked in a breath. Blazing fire coursed through her. "I want..."

"You want what, Melody?" Another bite, this time to her other nipple. "Tell me what you want, baby."

"I want you inside me," she cried on a gush of air. She couldn't stand it. Her nipples were so hard they hurt, the lingering sensations of his bites throbbing in time with her needy pussy.

She felt him straighten then he nestled his lips against her ear. "What do you want inside you?" he whispered and she could tell by the sound of his voice that he was struggling to preserve his own control.

"Your tongue ... your fingers ... your cock..." She said each word on a ragged breath.

She felt the waistband of her jeans loosen as he finally undid the button and she whimpered with relief. He lowered the zipper, his hand moving inside her pants, inside her panties, at the same time.

He licked her earlobe, his breath hot in her ear. "Is this what you want Melody?" he whispered, his fingers stopping at the opening of her pussy lips.

"Almost."

With excruciating slowness, his finger slid down, eased between her folds and found her clit.

"Yes," she breathed, spreading her legs as far as her jeans would allow and pushing her lower body against his hand. His finger began a sweet, pressured, circular movement and she knew in a few short seconds she would explode. "Oh Reese. Yes!"

"Don't come, Melody." Though his voice was still low, still dripping with his own desire, it held an authoritative ring. "You can't come yet. Not until I'm inside you."

Oh God, could she stop herself from coming? Was it possible when she was so close, when he was doing such amazing things to her clit? She felt his mouth close over her nipple again and knew there was no way she could deny her body the release it was screaming for. What would he do if she allowed herself to let go after he told her not to, if she disobeyed him? The wonderment, the possibilities nearly had her screaming to come.

"Do you want to come, Melody?" he asked. He caught her clit between two fingers and squeezed.

"Yes! Please!"

"Not until I tell you to," he said in that same authoritative tone. With one last caress of his finger on her clit, he slid his hand out of her jeans.

Melody nearly cried out in protest until she felt his hand tugging at one side of her pants. At last he released her jersey so he could use both his hands to remove her jeans. The jersey fell from her face and she saw him for the first time since he'd started laying claim to her body. His eyes were dark with need, but in control. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead, but he ignored it.

Their gazes locked as his hands clasped the waistband of her jeans...

And the phone rang.

Reese froze and Melody saw the mixture of anger and despair as it washed over his handsome features. Of all the lousy timing...

She wanted to tell him not to stop, to ignore the ringing phone. They were so close. A few more minutes and they would be ... fucking like rabbits in the living room floor. That is, if he even decided to lay her down before invading her body.

The sexual fog around her brain began to clear. She saw the play of emotions in his eyes as he stared back at her and knew he was fighting a similar battle inside.

The phone shrilled again, the ring acting like a bucket of water being overturned to douse the burning flames inside her. Other thoughts began to take hold, clean thoughts that had nothing to do with sex, and her blood stilled in her veins. What the hell was she doing? She had been about to give herself to a man she had known only a few hours, a man who clearly wanted nothing more from her than sex, a man she didn't even like!

One night stands were one thing—she'd had a couple of those in her day—but a one night stand with this asshole? She had to be out of her mind! Yeah, that was it. If she looked into a mirror right now she was certain she would see a huge neon sign on her forehead that read: Out of my mind, back in an hour. And Reese? As she stared at him she could almost see the neon sign gleaming on his forehead that read: Wanted: meaningless overnight relationship.

The truth and realization was like a slap in the face. Asshole! He *was* an asshole. She had thought it the moment he had opened his mouth at the game, and he had continued to reinforce her opinion of him later at the party. Oh, he had been nice enough to drive her to the hospital, nice enough to hang around while she checked on her father, nice enough to hold her when she had cried. And she had fallen for it all hook, line and sinker. Dammit! Whoever had put a stop payment on her reality check needed to be shot. The fact that she had actually allowed herself to cry in front of this man, not once but *twice*, was enough in itself to make her stomach roll. Yeah, he had been nice all right, and it was oh-so-obvious now why he'd had such a sudden change of heart. It hadn't been compassion. Oh no. He had seen the opportunity to get a piece of ass, and, to her utter mortification, she had been more than willing to give it to him.

"You should probably answer that," she said in a carefully neutral tone, when the phone rang a third time.

He hesitated, his hands still gripping the waistband of her jeans. Seconds passed and he finally let go. "Don't move," he told her, his tone laced with anger for the unwanted

interruption. With a string of curses, the likes of which she had never heard in exactly that order, and she had heard some doozies, he stepped away from her and moved to the phone across the room.

Melody did move. The moment his back was turned she hastily began straightening her clothes. Saved by the bell, or rather the ring, she thought as she refastened her jeans. She refused to remember those long excruciating breaths, when she had craved, more than oxygen, that he undo that button and pull her jeans off of her.

"Yeah, she's here." Reese's words, spoken to the caller, had her ears jumping to attention. "We'll be right there," he said next, then hung up the phone and turned to her. "That was Brock. You're father has regained consciousness."

* * * *

The Ice Bitch was back. Melody hadn't said a word to him since the phone call from Brock. When Reese had told her the news that her father had come out of the coma, she had closed her eyes, laid her head against the wall and whispered several words of thankful prayer, then dashed for the front door. He'd had to scramble to keep up with her.

In the car, she still said nothing. The heater had warmed the chilly air of the car's interior in a matter of minutes but it did nothing to melt the ice that radiated from Melody Forbes. Dammed if he could figure out the woman. In the hours they had been in one another's company he had watched her go from Ice Bitch, to cool and seductive, to distraught and saddened, to crumbling in a river of tears, to boiling hot,

willing and submissive then right back to Ice Bitch mode. Dammed moody women!

"You're pissed at me," he said, and the instant the words came out he knew he should have kept his mouth shut.

"Yep." The single word was her only response. She didn't look at him, didn't nod her head. Hell, was she even breathing? She sat in the passenger seat stiff as a board, her gaze transfixed straight ahead, her arms folded under her breasts—breasts he had touched, caressed, tasted. Oh man!

He should have left it at that. What did it matter if she was pissed at him or not? Hell, she had been pissed at him from the moment she had seen him at the game. But, of course, he couldn't leave well enough alone. "I suppose you think you have a right to be," he said, slowing the car to a stop at a traffic light that quickly changed from yellow to red.

She looked at him. The glare of the street light on the corner cut through the darkness in the car to highlight her set jaw and eyes that were shooting daggers. "You're an asshole," she said vehemently.

Reese laughed. It was the last thing he should have done at that moment but he couldn't help it. Damn, the woman was adorably cute and unbelievably sexy when she was angry. "I thought we had established that hours ago."

"Yeah, we established your first name is asshole. I just didn't realize your middle name was rapist."

Now that pushed his temper button. The light turned green and he punched the accelerator harder than he intended. "You're trying to blame me for what happened back at my house?" he snapped incredulously. "Maybe I'm looking at the

wrong picture but the one I keep seeing is of a woman ready and willing for everything that happened and more. That woman was you, babe."

"You took advantage of me," she accused, her head snapping back to glare out the windshield.

"You could have stopped me at any time?"

"You had me pinned to the wall. I couldn't move."

"Bullshit! You could have if you had tried."

"I did try and you told me not to."

"Ah yes," Reese taunted, remembering the way he had gently squeezed her wrists and her response to his action. "And I guess your saying, Please Reese, I want you inside me, your tongue, your fingers, your cock..." He said, repeating her words in an almost perfect imitation of the way she had sounded, breathless and pleading, when she had said them. "That was your way of telling me to stop? Get real, babe. You wanted it."

"I wasn't thinking clearly," she argued quickly. "You knew that and used it to your advantage."

"Those sounded like some pretty damn clear thoughts to me."

"I was upset, worried to death about my father. I was crying for Pete's sake! No one thinks clearly in that state."

"Not true. Lots of people think more clearly. How the hell was I supposed to know how your thoughts work under pressure?" He whipped the car into the parking lot of the hospital and pulled into the first available space.

Sports Beats
by Tonya Ramagos

Melody opened her door even before the car came to a complete stop. "Stay away from me, Reese. You're an asshole and I don't want anything else to do with you."

"You're loss sweetheart," he said as she got out of the car. He put the gearshift in reverse and yelled, "Tell Brock I'll bring his car back in about an hour."

Without another word, Melody slammed the door and he peeled out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was late that afternoon, or perhaps the next afternoon—she had been awake for so long now she didn't know what day it was anymore—when Melody stumbled through the door of the house she shared with her father. It was an old house, two stories but small with a cozy feel. The layout was simple: a square kitchen, a family room, half bath and a dining room that was barely large enough to hold a table and chairs but had long ago been converted into an office for her father downstairs. Upstairs there were three bedrooms and two baths. It wasn't a castle by any means, and wear and tear had taken its toll over the years, but it was the only true home she had ever known.

She was certain if she hadn't been a walking zombie the memories that filled the house would have had more of an effect on her. As it was, her bones were nearly limp from exhaustion and her brain had turned to mush at some point before the last sunrise. No, that wasn't right. Her brain had begun its meltdown to mushville the moment she had spotted Reese Torrin at the victory party. Hell, maybe it had even started when she laid eyes on him at the game.

What did it matter exactly when the meltdown started? The point was, the events of the most recent past had left her with a little more than too-runny mashed potatoes sloshing between her ears. Still, as she kicked off her shoes by the front door and drug herself to the stairs three thoughts began to solidify. She needed sleep, she needed a shower and her

father was going to be as okay as a man in his seventies could be with a broken leg and Alzheimer's disease eating away at his mind.

She pushed the first of the three thoughts aside and climbed the stairs to the second floor. She was in desperate need of sleep but it would have to wait. On the other hand, the shower couldn't wait a moment longer. She smelled of sweat and chlorine, and as she began to undress in the upstairs bathroom she realized, to her horror, that she smelled of sex, too. Though she hadn't actually had sex with Reese, he had done things to her that had left her panties soaked and smelling of her own feminine juices.

Memories of those moments with Reese attempted to join her solidified thoughts but she quickly squashed them, forcing herself to think of her father and the preparations that needed to be made before his release from the hospital. With his leg now broken and his car totaled, she supposed she wouldn't have to worry about him wandering off in the car again. Still, while that worry wasn't paramount, how she would care for him once he was home from the hospital was. Mobility had become an increasing problem for her father as he aged, even before his recent accident. Now, with the addition of a broken leg and his newly formed track record for wandering off in the middle of the night, he was going to need around-the-clock care and supervision.

She leaned against the shower wall and closed her eyes, listening to the rhythmic sound of the water beating against her naked body. She had spent nearly every waking moment with her father since he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's,

and would continue to do so, but she feared the time had come for her to admit she could no longer take care of him alone. Even the help Brock had been, and would be able, to give wouldn't be enough now. It was time to begin exploring other options. But what options were there? Hiring someone to help was the only one that came to mind. It would have to be a live-in nurse, she decided as she stepped under the showerhead. The hot water pounding on her head then streaming down her skin, felt like a slice of heaven.

Yes, they would need to hire a live-in nurse. It would have to be someone certified in caring for a person in her father's condition. She had no idea what someone like that would cost, but she was certain between her income and Brock's, and her father's savings, they could afford it. It was even possible that such services would be covered by her father's medical insurance. She reached for the bottle of shampoo on the shower rack and made a mental note to check his insurance policy when she returned downstairs.

With her next course of action decided, she quickly shampooed her hair then continued to revel in the soothing steam of the shower. Her muscles began to relax, as her mind completely cleared of the mush that had previously hindered her thoughts. And that was so not a good thing, because without that mush to weight them down she found she was no longer able to fight the thoughts and memories of Reese Torrin.

"Dammit! I don't want to think about you!" she growled as if he were actually able to hear her.

She leaned against the shower wall again, this time clutching her hair in her hands on either side of her head and pulling until it hurt. It didn't help to rid herself of the unwanted memories, of course. If anything, it brought them more clearly into focus. She stood with her back against the wall, her hands above her head—the same position in which Reese had taken control. With one large, callused, confident hand he had possessed her body and mind.

And she had let him! Sweet Jesus. What had she been thinking? Duh! She hadn't been thinking. If she had been thinking she would have never been alone with the man at his house mere hours after meeting him..

But, oh boy, was she thinking now! And, she was remembering the way his fingers had lightly grazed her skin, the warmth of his mouth as he first captured hers before moving to suck her breasts, the painfully gentle bites to her nipples, the roughness of his wide finger as it slid between her folds...

The way her body had reacted to his touch had been exquisite. Much like the way it was reacting now to the mere memory of him, though not nearly as powerfully. Her nipples were erect as though they too remembering the bites and longed for more. When she slipped one finger through her curly pubic mound and found her clit, the touch felt nothing like his finger had, but for the moment her own was all she had.

She spread her legs wider as she traced a circle around her clit, easily picturing Reese standing before her, his finger replacing her own. When he had touched her there,

massaging and pinching her throbbing bud, it had nearly sent her over the edge.

Don't come, Melody.

She could hear his whisper in her ear just as she had when he'd had her pinned to the wall. She moved her other hand between her legs and delved first one finger and then two side-by-side into her wet opening. Both hands instantly fell into a succinct rhythm, one massaging her clit while the other slid in and out in a rapid pace, pulling her closer and closer to the orgasmic edge.

You can't come yet. Not until I'm inside you.

But he wasn't there. He couldn't be inside her when he wasn't even there in the shower with her. It was her fingers inside her, her fingers fucking her instead of his cock. What would it feel like to have his dick inside her? The phone had rung before she'd had the chance to find out.

Do you want to come, Melody?

"Yes." She said the word aloud as though he were truly whispering to her now, as though he could actually hear her.

Not until I tell you to.

"But you aren't here," she whimpered breathlessly.

Now Melody. Come for me now, baby.

She heard him grant her permission and she fell over the edge.

Her legs grew weak and she had to place a hand on the adjacent wall to steady herself. Slowly, her eyes opened and she almost expected to find him standing there, a triumphant smile tilting his lips. The words in her head, his voice telling

her to come, had sounded so real. But of course he wasn't there. She was in the shower alone.

"Just as you should be," she muttered angrily as she quickly washed herself. She couldn't believe what she had just allowed herself to do.

No. Not the masturbation part. She did that whenever the mood struck her. It was a healthy, safe, private act that always made her feel better. But pretending to be with asshole of the century, Reese Torrin, while masturbating.

Fuck a duck! Maybe her brains were still in mashed potatoville after all.

Disgusted with herself, she stepped from the shower, wrapped herself in a towel and walked to her room across the hall. What really pissed her off was how badly she wanted a replay of last night, but this time without the interrupting phone call.

Last night, she had accused him of taking advantage of her vulnerable state. Though he had done exactly that, honesty forced her to admit, at least to herself, that she had wanted and asked for everything she had gotten. Forget that the man was an asshole of colossal proportions, the little taste she had gotten last night left her with no doubt that sex with Reese Torrin would be off the scale.

Mind reeling, Melody slipped into a clean pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, brushed the tangles from her towel-dried hair and made her way down the stairs to her father's office. Off-the-scale sex or not she would be stupid to allow herself even one night with Reese. Sure, he was the perfect candidate for no-strings, no-promises sex but there were so many things

about him that made the idea so very wrong. No, the best thing she could do was to stay far, far away from him.

With a resigned sigh, she sat down behind her father's desk and pulled out the file drawer on her bottom right. Her father was meticulously organized when it came to paperwork and she easily located the file that held all his medical and insurance information. Placing the file on the desk, she flipped it open and gaped in disbelief at the brochures that stared back at her.

* * * *

"That must have been some party last night," Diana said, the sound of her voice pulling Reese out of his day dream. "And from the looks of you today I would say that you had way too much to drink and no Pedialyte before you passed out."

Reese wished that were true. If he had been smart that's exactly how the night would have ended. He would have drunk himself silly until the wee hours of the morning and then chugged a jug of Pedialyte before passing out somewhere in Eric Amonte's monstrosity of a house.

He wasn't an alcoholic by any means but he did love to drink and, when he did, he did it with passion. He consumed most of his alcohol when the band was on tour. After-show parties could often be a nightly occurrence and he made sure to enjoy every one. Of course, he rarely enjoyed the morning after. Hangovers were a bitch!

It had been while touring with Pantera, one of the greatest metal bands, that he had learned the way to beat, or at least

ease the bitch-of-the-morning hangovers. Pedialyte wasn't just for infants anymore. It was a quick way to replace the electrolytes alcohol took away.

"Nope, try again," he said and picked up his glass of Crown and soda. Okay, so he wasn't on tour right now, but after the night he'd had last night he felt he deserved a little spice in his soda today. They were in the restaurant of Diana's hotel for a late afternoon brunch, or whatever it was called, and a relaxing drink had simply been too appealing to ignore.

The look Diana shot him across the table would have been comical if he had been able to find even an ounce of his sense of humor today. Damn but the woman was beautiful! She was a modern-day goddess, drop-dead gorgeous from head to toe with eyes that could pull a man in and make him squirm in his skin. They were like nothing he had ever seen. Green was too simple of a word to describe their color. It was more like the color of leaves on a tree just before autumn—green, yes, but with light tints of brown, yellow and red all outlined in a dazzling shade of deep-ocean blue. Yet, he sat at the table looking at this incredible beauty and all he could see was Melody Forbes. Shit, he really needed to have his head examined.

"You didn't get drunk?" Diana asked in a slow, soft tone of disbelief. "Then tell me, dear brother, what did you do all night? Obviously, sleep didn't make an appearance."

"Do I look that bad?" he asked with a dry chuckle.

"You've definitely looked better."

"Did you do any spell casting, or whatever it is you call it, after I dropped you off last night?"

Though the question obviously caught her off guard, a sly smile tilted the corner of her lips. "I performed a small ritual of thanks, nothing complex or unusual. I generally do it, or one like it, a couple of times a week."

"You didn't alter it last night, maybe include a name or a couple of images?" He was being silly, or at least he *hoped* he was being silly. He wasn't totally convinced that he believed in the powers of Wiccan magic but last night had seemed far too surreal. He'd spotted Melody at the game and then met her again at the party. Okay, so there wasn't anything bizarre about that. After all she was Brock's sister and he and Brock were friends, so they surely would have met eventually. But what about the things that had happened with her when he had taken her back to his house?

"Are you asking if I put some kind of spell on you last night?" Diana laughed musically, but then her laughter stopped and she stared at him, her expression a mixture of surprise, amusement and understanding. "She was there, wasn't she? You're Kate look-alike from the game. She was at the party."

"She's Brock's sister."

"You didn't know that?"

"We had never met. I knew he had a sister, but I didn't know it was her until I got to the party."

"I almost wish I could take credit for that one." Diana giggled softly and then sighed dramatically. "But I had absolutely nothing to do with it. It sounds to me like there were other powers than mine at work last night."

"Yeah, well, whoever's power it was ran out too soon," Reese muttered and downed the remainder of his Crown and soda.

"Then you didn't spend the night with her?" Diana deduced, picking up her wine glass.

"Not in the way you're thinking. The dark side intervened just when it started getting good." Because he knew Diana wouldn't be satisfied until he told her everything about last night, he started with his arrival at the party and ended with the argument in the car. He left out the in-depth details of the time spent at his house, of course, but Diana was a smart woman and could read between the lines. "You know it's possible she was right?" she said when he finished. She stared at him questioningly over the rim of her wine glass.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, do you have to take her side?" he scowled.

"We women do have to stick together." She smiled but then she added, "I'm not exactly taking her side but from what you're telling me about the shape she was in..."

"I know." Melody had been right. He *had* taken advantage of her. She had been vulnerable, upset about her father, and he had used that to his advantage. It hadn't really been intentional. But intentional or not he'd had no business getting that close to Melody Forbes in the first place. She was Brock's sister for crying out loud! He had no business fucking around, or rather trying to fuck, a friend's sister.

"How is her father?"

Reese shrugged. "She wouldn't let me stick around to find out. I thought I would take a ride to the hospital later. See if I can catch up with Brock."

"Want some company?"

Yes! Please, oh please, oh please, don't make me go alone. Not that he was worried about seeing Melody again. After the way she had gotten out of the car last night, he doubted she would even speak to him if they came face to face. But if she did speak to him, if he did get close to her again ... He sighed and picked up the check. Knowing she was Brock's sister wasn't helping him a dammed bit!

* * * *

Melody returned to the hospital in a rage. He knew. Brock knew! Why was she so certain of that? Because thinking back now she could recall all of the subtle hints her brother had dropped over the last few months: "Alzheimer's disease isn't one that will go away with treatment;" and, "Although we don't want to admit it, Dad will never get better;" and, "He's going to need constant care for the rest of his life." There had also been countless others that she simply hadn't caught at the time, or had subconsciously ignored because their implication was too painful for her to consider.

But apparently it wasn't too painful for Brock. Damn him!

She forced herself to walk at a brisk but even pace to the elevator that would take her to the Intensive Care Unit. Though her father had come out of the coma fairly quickly and had so far suffered no set backs, the doctors had thought it best to keep him in the ICU for another night. Family was

still only allotted a few short minutes every couple of hours for visitation, but she wasn't here to see her father right now. She was here to see Brock and she knew she would find him in the waiting room down the hall from their father's room. Who she hadn't expected to see was Reese Torrin and the incredible redhead who had been at the game with him.

Her step faltered only slightly at the sight of them sitting side by side on the far end of the room, but then she saw Brock in a chair adjacent to Reese and she instantly forgot they were there. "When were you planning to tell me?" she seethed. She stopped a few feet from her brother, crossed her arms and glared at him, letting all her anger show in her expression. She held the brochures she had found in one hand, but he apparently didn't see them.

Brock's hazel eyes widened; they were the same as their father's and usually dancing with life when they weren't puffy and red from worry and lack of sleep. He was really a handsome man with dark hair streaked with blond. He wore it cut short but not short enough to eliminate the slight curls above his ears and the nape of his neck. He had slightly craggy features for a man who had recently reached thirty, features that would only roughen with age, but she had no doubt that he would look just as good at seventy as he did right now. He took after their father, who at seventy, looked just as handsome as he did in pictures she had seen of him taken forty years ago. If only his mind had followed the same pattern.

Brock glanced at Reese, at the redhead, then back at Melody. He knew she was mad. She could see the realization

in his eyes. He usually kept his distance when she was angry, especially when her anger was directed at him. But she had made sure he had nowhere to flee. She was giving him no choice but to face her head on right here and right now.

"Uhh, tell you what, Mel?" he finally asked and he truly sounded as if he didn't have a clue.

Melody pulled in her temper. She had to remember that she was in hospital, a quiet place with quiet workers who would not hesitate to throw her out for causing a disturbance. She kept her voice low, but all her anger, all her hurt still spewed with every word. "I hate secrets," she said to Brock, keeping her fiery gaze locked on him. "You know I hate secrets. More, I hate secrets that involve me or someone I love. I also hate being deceived." She glanced at Reese then but immediately returned her attention to Brock. On top of everything else, Reese Torrin had deceived her, also, but she would get to that later. Or, maybe she wouldn't. She had already decided she was going to stay as far away from the man as possible. But how dare he do the things to her that he had done last night, when he was so obviously involved with someone else?

"Sis, I haven't kept anything from you," Brock said. To his credit, he was calm and cool. He rarely got angry and it took a whole lot more to push his stiff buttons than a steaming sibling storming into a room with murder in her eyes. "You know everything..."

"Then explain these, hot shot." She tossed the brochures in his lap.

He picked them up, read the covers then looked back at her. He looked genuinely surprised. Had he been an actor in a movie that short three seconds would have been an Oscar-winning performance. "Where did you get these?"

"I found them in Dad's desk," she said through clenched teeth. She refused to be fooled by his feigned surprise, no matter how genuine it appeared. "I went looking for his health insurance policy and found those instead."

"We should go," she heard the redhead say quietly and out of the corner of her eye she saw Reese nod.

"Call me if you need anything man," Reese said to Brock and then he and the redhead left the room.

Minutes passed in a heavy silence before Brock spoke. "Sit down Mel. Please."

"I don't want to sit," she said stubbornly. It was getting harder to keep a firm grip on her anger, especially when she allowed herself to see the confusion, worry and sadness in her brother's eyes.

"You may not believe this Melody but I don't know anything about these." He sighed and rose from his seat, tossing the brochures in the seat next to him. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his brown Chinos and began to pace.

"You haven't been checking into old folk's homes for people with Alzheimer's?" Skepticism rang in her voice. If Brock hadn't brought those brochures home then...

"I believe they are called nursing homes," he corrected. "And no, I haven't been checking them out."

"Then how..."

"But if you found those in Dad's desk I would say it's safe to assume that he has."

"But how would Dad get those and why would he be looking into nursing homes?"

"His doctor," Brock said with another sigh. "At his last appointment he asked me to give them a few minutes alone. Apparently, that's why," he said, pointing to the brochures he had tossed in the chair.

"But why would he do that?" Melody threw her arms in the air in frustration. "He has to know that we will take care of him. Between the two of us we will be there for him night and day if we have to. We would never send him away like that."

Brock fell silent, paced for several more seconds then stopped in front of her. "Maybe it is something we should consider," he said slowly, quietly.

She felt her temper boil. "What! How could you even...?"

"Think about it, Sis," he said, still in that same quiet, gentle voice. "Dad's illness is only going to get worse and you and I have our own lives, our own responsibilities."

"And taking care of our father is one of those responsibilities," she argued, her voice rising. She instantly caught herself, lowering her voice to a near whisper, but she still spoke with all the vehemence she felt. "I can't believe you! I will not send my father to live with a bunch of strangers in some old folks home and I'll be damned if I'll let you send him there, either."

CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't often that Reese turned in for bed before the wee hours of the morning. He wasn't a big fan of sunlight, and if he had his way he would stay awake all night and sleep most of the next day away. But the combination of a serious lack of sleep in the last forty-eight hours, and the knowledge that he had a date with the band very early tomorrow morning, had him in bed by ten. Ten! It was certainly one for the record books. And at five minutes after eleven the phone rang. Didn't it figure?

He slapped at the bedside table. There were several smacks and a crash before his hand found the cordless receiver. Sprawled on his stomach with his head turned to the side, he felt for the on button, pushed it and brought it to his ear with a groggy, "Yeah?"

"Reese? Hey man, it's Brock. Were you actually sleeping?"

Reese chuckled at the surprise that sounded in his friend's voice, and rolled over effectively managing to completely tangle his lower body in the bed covers. "Yeah, but don't tell anyone."

Brock laughed. "Yeah, we wouldn't want anyone getting the idea that you're really human." Then his laughter died and he said, "I called to see if my sister was with you but now that I know you're in bed I'm not sure if I'm hoping she is or hoping she isn't."

Reese actually reached out with his free hand and felt the mattress next to him. It was empty, of course. Like he

wouldn't have instantly known if Melody Forbes was in his bed. Like he would have been asleep with Melody Forbes in his bed! I wish, was the first response that came to mind but he had awakened enough in the last few seconds to know that would be the way wrong thing to say to her brother. So he settled for the simple, honest and safe instead. "I haven't seen her since Diana and I left the hospital."

Brock signed heavily. "Now I don't know if I should be relieved or worried."

"Watch it man. I'm starting to feel insulted." He was only half kidding. How would Brock react if he and Melody hooked up? How would he react if he found out what Reese had done with his sister last night?

"I'm sorry buddy. But I *am* worried about her. She stormed out of the hospital not long after you and Diana left and I haven't seen or heard from her since. Worse, I walked outside a bit ago for some fresh air and her car is still in the parking lot."

Reese sat up, flicked on the bedside lamp and bit his tongue to keep from crying out. Fuck! That was bright. "She isn't inside the hospital anywhere? In the cafeteria maybe?"

"The cafeteria closed a couple of hours ago," Brock said, weariness taking over his voice. "And I had the front desk page her. If she's here, she's ignoring the page."

"Did you try the house?" Reese asked and ran a hand over his face. He was nearly completely awake now, and his eyes had adjusted to the bright light. "Maybe she ... Oh hell, I don't know how she would've gotten there without her car, though."

"It doesn't matter anyway. I tried calling the house. No answer. When I saw her car in the parking lot, but couldn't find her here, I immediately thought she must have left with you and Diana. She was pretty pissed at me this afternoon."

"Yeah, I gathered that when she stormed into the waiting room," Reese chuckled dryly. And dammed if she hadn't looked sexy as hell! He had almost been relieved when Diana had suggested they leave, because simply watching her go off on Brock the way she had, seeing the heated anger in her eyes, had been one hell of a turn on. So much so that he'd had to be extremely careful how he stood to keep from making his erection a spectacle. Thankfully no one had been paying attention. "Do you want me to go looking for her?"

"I wouldn't know where to tell you to start. Besides, there is no need getting you out to do something I can do myself."

"I'll go," Reese said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "I'll start at the hospital and work my way down the strip. She couldn't have gone far without her car and there isn't much that will still be open in that part of town at this time of night. You stay there in case she comes back. Call me on my cell if you see her first."

Reese found her forty-five minutes later in a barroom two blocks from the hospital. It was the last place he had expected to find Melody Forbes, and yet the first on his list of places she could have been at that time of night. A quick search of the smoke-hazed room revealed she wasn't the only woman in the bar, but she was by far the most eye-catching and, oh damn, apparently he wasn't the only one who thought so.

Melody sat on a stool at the bar, her back to the door, a drink in her hand. A skinny, dorky, Peewee Herman type sat on her left. That geek didn't bother Reese. It was the tall, burly, biker type with a dozen tattoos and a balding head on her left that gave him pause. Boy, did she know how to pick 'em?

Reese had been in enough bar fights in his life to know that charging up to Melody and demanding she get the hell out of there right now with him, as long as Mr. Harley was at her side, would award him with nothing less than a broken jaw ... or nose ... or lip. And the pain he would suffer would be for nothing because Melody Forbes was not the type of woman who would take kindly to such an order, especially not from a man she didn't like. That fact on top of everything else was going to make even approaching her with Mr. Harley around a difficult task, not to mention what it would take to coerce her out of this place. It would take a lot of finesse and loads of charm, two words that generally didn't appear in Reese's working vocabulary.

But it had to be done. He had to get her out of here. Or at the very least convince her to tell Mr. Harley to take a hike.

She laughed at something Mr. Harley said. Wow! The brute was actually capable of comical conversation? But her laugh was a loud, drunken one that continued a bit longer than one from someone amused by a simple comment. That type of laugh combined with the way she suddenly swayed on the stool told him if she wasn't ready to leave yet she should be. What was that she was drinking and exactly how much of it had she consumed?

Finesse and charm, finesse and charm, Reese repeated the words to himself as he made his way toward her. Maybe he should have a couple of courage drinks at the other end of the bar before he approached her. In the state she was in, he doubted she would notice him before he was ready to be spotted. But no, one of them would have to drive away from here, and one look at Melody made it abundantly clear she wasn't the one.

Mr. Harley glanced at him as he approached but paid him no mind, returning instantly to Melody. Reese couldn't blame him. From what he had seen, she was the only woman in the bar worthy of attention and damn was she incredible! Even with her back to him, her beauty nearly took his breath away. The smooth, silky looking skin of her neck peeked from beneath her pony tail—skin that not only looked like silk but that he knew from experience felt like silk, too, and tasted better than the sweetest of candies. The rectangular shape of her back curved in perfectly at her narrow waist in a tantalizing heart-shape that represented the start of the tight, firm ass planted on the stool. Fuck! Now was not the time to get a hard-on.

He cleared his throat when he reached her, but she didn't turn around. It was Mr. Harley instead that looked at him, sized him up with his eyes, and scowled.

"Hello," Reese said with a short nod. "Mind if I cut in for a moment?" Didn't politeness fall somewhere between finesse and charm? Apparently not in Mr. Harley's working vocabulary.

"Yeah, I do mind," Mr. Harley answered sharply and then returned to ignoring Reese.

It was times like this that he wished he were built more like Garrett Henry, his good friend and the guitarist for Façade. Garrett was about two inches taller and several inches wider with a body that would make him the perfect movie double for Stephen Segal. At the very least, it would have been nice to have Garrett at his side right about now. But the guitarist was at home with his all-too-pregnant wife. There was no chance of him suddenly materializing here tonight.

Reese tried again, this time bypassing Mr. Harley. "Mel, can I talk to you for a second?"

That got her attention, though by the expression on her face as she turned on the stool and recognized him, he wasn't sure if it was a good or a bad thing.

"What are you doing here?" she slurred, rolling her eyes. "Brock sent you, didn't he?"

"He called to see if you were with me," Reese explained, with a patience that shocked him down to his boots. "He's worried about you. I told him it I would try to find you."

She spun further on her stool to face him. Her drink sloshed over the rim and she giggled. "Oops." Oh yeah, she was well on her way to plasterville. "Why would I be with you? You know, I don't mind getting kinky in the bedroom but threesomes really aren't my thing."

Whoa! TMI! Well, not necessarily for him since he wanted nothing more than to know what she liked in the bedroom, but that information was a bit too much to announce to the

barroom. And a threesome? What the hell was she talking about?

Then a light bulb flicked on. Diana. The last time Melody had seen him he had been with Diana. The first time Melody had seen him he had been with Diana. Hell, she probably thought ... "I haven't told you about Diana yet, have I?" he asked, not missing the way Mr. Harley straightened and glared at him.

"Uh, no, you seem to have conveniently forgotten to mention her," Melody said with a drunken chuckle that held absolutely no humor.

She had conveniently forgotten to mention Diana before now too, but Reese decided now was probably not the best time to point that out. "I would like to tell you about her now," he said instead. "Why don't I buy you another drink and we'll sit and talk a while?"

"I've got a better idea," Mr. Harley snarled. "Why don't you get lost?"

And here it came. Mr. Harley was ready to pulverize and Reese was looking to be pulverized. But despite her inebriation, Melody appeared to be in control. "It's okay Bruno," she said and placed a gentle hand on the biker's massive upper arm. Bruno. The brute's name was actually Bruno. How fitting. "This is a friend of my brother's. I would like to talk to him now."

Mr. Harley—Bruno—hesitated, looking unhappily from Reese to Melody but finally nodded. "If this guy gives you any trouble I'll be right over there." He indicated the corner of the

room where several more biker types were standing around a pool table.

"So my brother was worried about me," Melody said after Bruno had, thank God, left the two of them alone. "Well, that's too bad because I'm thoroughly pissed at him. Are you going to buy me that drink now? Straight Jack on the rocks," she said to the bartender without waiting for Reese's answer.

The bartender, a man of average height, weight and looks probably in his mid to late twenties, looked to Reese questioningly. No doubt he was thinking Melody'd had enough but was hesitant to cut off such a striking beauty with so many of her new biker friends only a few steps away.

Reese nodded and ordered a Jack for himself, but doused greatly with soda. He would have much preferred the straight up that Melody was having, but again someone did have to drive them out of here tonight. One weak drink to sip as he attempted to coax Melody out of this place was all he would allow himself.

"Yeah, I could tell you were pretty pissed at him this afternoon at the hospital," he said after the bartender served their drinks.

"I was pissed at you, too, but you didn't stick around long enough for me to get to that. You left with that redhead," she said, her bottom lip protruding in a pout. A pout! Wow, she really was drunk. "I don't think I like her, but I can see why you do. She's gorrgeousss."

"You will like her, too, once you get to know her," Reese said. He sipped his drink then set the glass on the bar and

looked Melody in the eyes. "Her name is Diana and she's a friend. A very good friend but nothing more."

"Ha!" She slapped the bar with her palm, effectively catching the attention of her biker friends.

Oh great, Reese thought, but apparently they realized there was no danger because they watched for only a moment and then returned to their pool game.

"You expect me to believe that you're just *friends* with a woman like that? How stupid do you think I am?" she shrieked. "I swear, first Brock and now you. He wants to send my father to an old folks home. Can you believe that?" Suddenly, her eyes filled with tears.

Oh fuck! Don't let her start crying in the middle of this bar. Not with her biker friend looking on who would instantly think I made her cry and then take the opportunity to pound me like he had wanted to do from the start.

Reese didn't want her to cry again in front of him period. He remembered all too well what had happened the last time she had cried in front of him, and how he had put his arms around her, and how he had kissed her, and how he had...

And how she had accused him of taking advantage of her. Oh no—no way in hell was he going to do that again.

With the warp-speed mind of the truly inebriated, she changed the course of the conversation again. The tears instantly dried, and the look in her eyes turned hot and seductive with a single blink. It was pretty amazing to watch.

"I've been thinking about you all day, you know," she said and the purely erotic way she spoke made his dick hard to

say nothing of the way his balls tightened from the look she was giving him.

She leaned toward him, lost her balance and he had to reach out and catch her by the waist to keep her from falling off the barstool. She giggled then leaned even closer to whisper in his ear. "I even masturbated thinking about you in the shower this afternoon."

Oh God! Oh Jesus, Mary and George ... or Joseph ... or whatever his name was. Had she really just said that? No way. No fucking way!

But she wasn't through blowing his mind yet. She stuck her tongue in his ear and his blood pressure soared. Then she whispered, "Take me home Reese ... to your home. I want you to fuck me."

And, oh yeah, he was toast.

* * * *

They had barely made it through the door of Reese's house when she jumped him. Breathtakingly sexy, delectable, tantalizing Melody Forbes in all her drunken glory jumped him! And she *was* drunk—stumbling, slurring, don't have a care in the world, horny as all get out drunk.

Okay, so she was no longer stumbling because the instant he'd closed the door she had leaped into his arms. Literally! She had thrown her arms around his neck, locked her ankles behind his waist and was now kissing him with such intensity it had his toes curling in his boots. Damn, the woman was amazing!

Amazingly drunk, he reminded himself as her tongue snaked so deeply into his mouth that she nearly licked his tonsils. She was beyond drunk. She had checked into a room in plasterville for the night and when she woke in the morning, she would regret every second of this night, *if* she remembered anything at all.

Her fingers laced in his hair at the nape of his neck and she tilted her head, changing the angle of the kiss, deepening it even more. She tasted strongly of Jack Daniels, her preferred drink for the evening, but under that was the sweet taste of passion that had haunted him since he had first kissed her last night.

And look at how that had turned out, he silently mused. Not thirty minutes after that first kiss she had accused him of taking advantage of her and he *had* taken advantage of her and of the situation that had put her in his arms, just as he was doing now.

Shit! He couldn't do this again. Okay, so she wasn't upset and crying as she had been last night. No, tonight was worse because she had consumed too much alcohol. Did she even know what she was doing?

"Melody," he tried to say, but it sounded more like a fucked up moan with her tongue still lodged in his mouth. Her hand slid from the nape of his neck, moved between them, and continued down his front, stopping at the waistband of his jeans. With her legs wrapped around him as they were she couldn't go any further. Finally, after several more excruciating minutes, she traded her exploration of his mouth for his ear and neck. Now he could speak, tell her they had to

stop, but, oh man, it felt so good when she slipped her tongue in his ear like that and then nibbled his lobe.

His arms tightened under her ass, pulling her close to him where she could, no doubt, feel the magnitude of his erection. Had it not been for the layers of clothing between them he would be deep inside her hot, wet heat, feeling her inner muscles contract around his dick as he pounded...

Double shit! He was *not* going to do this again. "Mel," he said, and when she didn't respond, he tried again, louder this time. "Melody!"

She looked at him then, eye to eye, and her gaze was so full of desire, heat and promise that he wanted to cry. She wanted him—or at least at the moment she thought she wanted him—and he was trying to tell her to stop, to deny them both the ecstasy they could share. When the hell had he become such a gentleman?

"We can't do this," he heard himself say, but it sounded like someone else saying the words because they were words that he, Reese Torrin, would have never said to a woman like this. Yet, he had said them and he even went so far as to reach behind him and force her to unlock her ankles before he slowly returned her to a standing position. He knew at once this was the worst thing he could have done because she immediately allowed her hand to continue its downward travel.

"Sure we can," she said, speaking slowly putting heavy stress on her consonants as drunk people often did. She cupped his dick through his jeans and he sucked in a breath,

fighting to keep his eyes from rolling back in his head. "You know you want me."

Oh yes, he wanted her. At that moment he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman in his life. But how could he take her knowing what the end result would be? This was not a woman looking for a fuck, who would then step off the tour bus or walk out of the motel or dressing room never to be seen again. No, Melody would no doubt fall asleep—or more accurately pass out cold—in his bed, only to awaken in a few hours with the biggest regret of her life. Reese didn't want to be her biggest regret, he realized with a sudden certainty that nearly knocked him on his ass. He wanted her to enjoy sex with him. He wanted her to like it so much that she would still like it in the morning and want it again and again. He wanted things that he had never before wanted with a woman, things that he had never before wanted in his *life*. And it was way too scary and pointless to think about exactly what those things were because they were things that absolutely were *not* going to happen.

He sighed. "You're drunk Melody," he pointed out unnecessarily. Or maybe it was necessary since she was so drunk that she had forgotten she was drunk. It could happen. Hell, he had even done it a time or two.

"Yep." She grinned mischievously, nodded and squeezed his dick. "So what's your point?"

"You don't know what you're doing," he said on a barely controlled breath. Man, the feel of having her hand on him, even through his clothes, was driving him insane.

"Sure I do," she disagreed and as though she intended to prove it, she smoothed her hand over the length of his bulge, cupped his balls through his jeans and gently squeezed.

Holly cow! He couldn't take much more of this. He already had more control in the works than he had known he possessed. But if she kept doing stuff like that ... "When you wake up in the morning..."

"I will have the mother of all hangovers," she finished for him, obviously picking up on the direction he was headed.

Maybe she wasn't as drunk as he thought.

She continued, "I will be so worried about how murderous my head feels that I won't be able to think about anything else."

"But when you are able to think..." he tried again but again she bulldozed over him.

"I'll worry about that when it happens," she shrugged and reached for the button of his jeans.

He caught her wrists, and pulled them up, safely away from his body.

She frowned. Anger flashed in her eyes and she stepped back, jerking her hands from his grasp.

"Baby, I..."

"I want you to fuck me," she said over him.

Damn, if he could finish a single sentence here maybe he could make her understand.

"And I know you want me," she continued before he had a chance to speak. "We are two consenting adults..." As she went on, she pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it to the floor. "...who are hot for each other." Her bra joined her

shirt on the floor. She stepped toward him again, grabbed his hands and placed them over her bare breasts. "And this is one consenting adult who refuses to take no for an answer."

A string of curses and apologies echoed in his head even as his hands involuntarily began to massage the toys they had been given. It was wrong. He knew it was wrong and, come morning, Melody might not be the only one waking with regrets. But he was only a man, not some super hero. Then again, he doubted if even the best super hero could walk away when such temptation was placed right in his hands.

Reese closed his eyes, felt the silky smooth skin of her bare breasts in his hands. He skimmed his thumbs over her hardened nipples and heard her quick intake of breath. "Melody, you don't really want to do this," he said through gritted teeth.

"How do you know what I want?" she asked and he felt her hands reach for the button of his jeans.

"You'll be angry with me in the morning," he said as he felt the button give way.

"What do you care if I'm angry with you or not?" she asked and lowered the zipper.

She reached inside his boxer briefs and, oh God, his dick was in her hand. Any reply he might have had was instantly lost.

"Oh wow," she breathed as her hand slid down his length in a gentle pressured stroke.

His eyes flew open and then he was kissing her. He didn't try to be gentle. He exploded. He grabbed her by her ponytail, slammed his mouth on hers and ravaged her lips

and tongue. His hands slid down her stomach to her pants and, between the two of them, had her shoes, slacks and panties off in record-breaking time.

Sanity broke in for only an instant and he fished a condom from his wallet before his pants and briefs fell around his ankles. He barely had enough time to sheath himself with the condom before she climbed into his arms.

He held her up, his hands gripping her perfect ass, and backed her against the wall. Then he lowered her a bit more quickly than he had intended and slammed into her. It was like walking through the gates of heaven. She was hot, wet, and ready for him. Finally being inside her felt more spectacular than he could have imagined.

"Yes," she breathed and locked her legs tightly around his waist.

He did try to be gentle then, tried to slow down. Christ, he didn't want to hurt her. But even as he pulled out with full intentions of slowly sinking into her heat again, she dug her heels into his buttocks and pulled him to her, slamming his dick impossibly deep inside her again. He may have been the one in the position for control, but she was determined to dominate the speed.

"Melody," he growled as the pressure in his balls began to build. "Jesus Mel, we have to slow down. You're so tight. I can't..."

"I don't want to slow down," she panted. "I want to come." Shit, so did he but if something didn't change quick he was going to come before she did. Desperately holding back his release, he braced her more firmly against the wall and

supported the bulk of her weight on his left arm as he reached between them, finding her clit. And just like that, she exploded around him. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as her body shook and convulsed from the force of her orgasm and he, too, let go, pushing himself deep inside her as his seed shot out, filling the condom.

Though her eyes were closed, his were open. They had been the whole time. He had watched her, enjoyed the expression that shown on her face as he made her come. But now, as the silence settled around them, broken only by the faint sounds of their heavy breathing, he found he was afraid of what he would see when she looked at him. He didn't have a clue what he hoped to see but he could guess what he would find: self-recrimination, anger, regret, surely nothing good. Then her eyes fluttered open and her stare was so blank he wondered if anyone was home in that beautiful head of hers.

"I think we should probably lay down," she said in a barely-audible whisper.

And Reese understood. He had actually managed to forget that she was drunk. Or, at least, she had been. All of that Jack Daniels she had consumed, followed by the shaking her body had just received, couldn't have had a positive effect on her stomach.

Slowly, he pulled out of her but he didn't put her down. He doubted she would be able to stand by herself. "Do you think you're going to be sick?" he asked softly.

She seemed to think about that before answering. "No." She started to shake her head but apparently thought better

of it. "But the room is spinning and I think you're drunk because I'm seeing two of you."

Reese chuckle and carried her to his bedroom. His pants were still around his ankles and he had to take baby steps to keep from falling. He eased her down on his bed and finished undressing then tossed the used condom in the wastebasket in the corner. "I'll be right back," he told her and went into the kitchen. He half expected her to be passed out by the time he returned but she wasn't. She lay flat on her back, still completely naked, staring at the ceiling just the way he had left her.

"Here, drink this," he told her. He sat on the bed beside her and waited as she slowly turned on her side and propped herself on one elbow.

"What is this?" she asked, taking the glass.

"Pedialyte. It will help ease the morning hangover you're probably going to have."

"Cool," she said and drank.

Reese smiled, forcing himself to keep his eyes on her face and not on her beautifully rounded breasts, or the soft, curly mound between her legs. Damn, he was already getting hard again! After a few minutes, and a single touch from her, he would be ready to ... make yet another mistake tonight. Was he determined to make tomorrow a living hell? Dawn was already going to be hard enough to face as it was. He had given up the hope of sleep a long time ago, knowing that it wouldn't be restful. He had to be up and out of the house hours before he was usually even awake, and at some point in the day he would probably have to face Brock. Or, at least

he would have to talk with the man on the phone. Brock knew Reese had found Melody. Reese had called the moment he'd spotted her at the bar and had told Brock he would see that she made it home safely. Of course at that time he hadn't meant *his* home.

Yep, Brock was probably going to beat the hell out of Reese, and all that fun was in addition to what it was going to be like facing Melody once she sobered up and her sanity returned. Fuck! He had really made one hell of a mess out of things.

"Reese," Melody's voice pulled him from his thoughts and she handed the now empty glass back to him. "Lets do it again."

It took a few seconds for the implication of her words to sink in. It? Holly mother of God, she meant let's have sex again! He stared at her, knowing that amazement and disbelief he felt was written all over his face.

She shrugged. "It makes the room stop spinning. Or, at least it makes me forget that it's spinning."

Well, that answered that. He had almost dared to hope that she had enjoyed having sex with him so much that she couldn't wait to do it again. But no, she only wanted to make the room stop spinning. So, what the hell? Maybe it was some sort of warped payback or something. He had taken advantage of her drunken state—not that she had really given him much choice, but he supposed he could have stopped her if he had really tried—and she was going to use him now to make her forget how truly drunk she was.

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So, okay, he would let her use him, but this time he was taking control. He would do her slow, make her squirm, make her beg, and the next time she said lets do it again—if there was a next time—it would be because she wanted *him* not because she wanted a way to forget.

CHAPTER SIX

Melody couldn't think, but that was probably a good thing. She heard herself saying things she would never say in million years, at least not to a man like Reese Torrin. She caught herself doing things that were completely out of character. Like the way she had jumped him in the living room and the way that now, as her gaze landed on his semi-hard erection, she reached for it even as she leaned into his lap and took him in her mouth.

"Oh shit," she heard him breathe and smiled around his dick.

She forced her throat to relax enabling herself to take in more of him. He was fully aroused now, and swallowing his complete length proved to be a bit of a challenge, so she maneuvered herself to her hands and knees making it easier to go down on him. She lifted her head, her teeth lightly grazing his shaft, then circled his swollen head with her tongue and slurped at the beads of pre-cum she found on its tip.

She felt his hand on her ass, his palm lightly caressing one cheek. Again, she lowered her head, licking, sucking until she felt him ease down the back of her throat. He groaned, gripped her butt cheek, then he slid one finger down the crack of her ass and she froze. Alarm bells sounded loudly in her head. Her heart hammered in her chest as fear gripped her insides. But instead of stopping at her most secret hole, his finger continued down.

She relaxed, even as he drove what felt like at least two fingers into her pussy. She pushed back on his fingers taking him deeper inside her as she continued to feast on his cock. But just as she settled into an even tempo, he fisted his free hand in the back of her hair and pulled until his dick slid out of her mouth. She tried to lower her head again, tried to get him back, but his grip was firm.

His fingers pounded into her, picking up pace, spreading, wiggling as he drove them as deeply as possible. Heat surged through her veins and she felt the pressure building at her center. But then he stopped, slid out of her. She heard herself whimper. Whimper! She never whimpered. But her pussy was empty now and screaming for more penetration.

He released his grip on her hair but when she tried to look at him he stopped her with a firm palm on the back of her head. "Don't move," he said in that soft authoritative voice she remembered from that first night.

Like an eager-to-please puppy, she obeyed. It was a fitting simile, she decided, since she was on her hands and knees with her ass stuck in the air. The fingers that had been inside her retraced their path up her ass and continuing to glide over her spine leaving a trail of wetness—her wetness, her juices—in their wake. He reached beneath her with his other hand to cup one of her breasts.

"Is the room still spinning," he asked and began rolling her hardened nipple between his thumb and index finger.

"No," she managed to whisper. He was driving her nuts, slowly caressing her back, gently playing with her nipple. She wanted him to squeeze like he had before, get behind her and

ram his cock inside her hard and fast until they both fell over the edge. "Reese..." She tried to tell him what she wanted, but he interrupted her.

"Don't speak, Melody," he said in a tone laced with warning. "I know what you want but I'm in control this time. This time we're going to do things my way."

My way. The words echoed in her mind. A slight twinge of fear returned as she wondered exactly what *his way* was, but she wasn't frightened enough to tell him she no longer wanted this, because she did. She wanted him again. She wanted to find out what *his way* was. She wanted to give him control.

He slid from beneath her head and stood. Her eyes tried to follow him, but she only saw the backs of his legs as he disappeared from her sight.

"Roll over on your back," he said, his voice coming from somewhere behind her.

She rolled over and found him standing at the foot of the bed watching her. His eyes were dark with desire, his muscular chest expanding with each even breath he took. His dick darted out like a steel rod in front of him. God, she wanted that dick. Her pussy throbbed with the anticipation of feeling him inside her again.

"Hands above your head," he said, and she obeyed. "Open your legs."

She hesitated only a moment before allowing her knees to spread apart. His gaze raked over her, slowly drinking her in. She had lay like this for Eric Amonte a couple of times, but with him she had felt so uneasy, so self-conscious. To her

surprise, she didn't feel that way with Reese. Instead, she felt sexy, excited, ready and willing for whatever he chose to do to her next.

Several seconds passed, seconds that he spent simply staring at her. He studied her breasts, her flat stomach, her pussy open and on display for him. When she squirmed slightly, his gaze darted to hers, one eyebrow lifting as if to ask, "Are you defying me?"

She stilled, her heart racing.

Quickly, he sheathed himself with another condom. She wanted to tell him it wasn't necessary, that condom or no condom he couldn't possibly get her pregnant, but then he was easing onto the bed between her legs and all she cared about, at that moment, was having him inside her again. But to her dismay, he kept his lower body away from hers. As he breathed she could just barely feel the tip of his erection lightly brush against her clit. Christ! The man was going to drive her mad.

He hovered over her, his hands on either side of her head supporting his weight, and gazed into her eyes. She looked back, expecting to see dominance, victory, arrogance but what she saw instead made her breath catch in her throat. His eyes were soft, tender, passionate. He was gazing down at her the way a man would as he made love to the woman of his dreams.

Oh, there was no way he was in love with her. She was drunk, but she wasn't so drunk that all her synapses had quit firing. And she wasn't the woman of his dreams. There was no way could she kid herself into believing that. She was

merely a woman whom he found attractive, who had offered him sex. But was it possible that she had somehow managed to break through his assholeish walls to a benevolent, gentle soul she hadn't known existed? Or, was it simply the remnants of the Jack Daniels in her system causing her to see things that weren't really there?

Slowly, he lowered his face to hers and she closed her eyes as their lips met. But instead of the hot, animal-like, possessive kisses she had come to expect, he kissed her in a way that could only be described as tender. His lips brushed hers softly, gently, and instead of plunging his tongue into her mouth, he licked, teased, coaxed her lips to part for him. It was the kind of kiss meant to tantalize, the kind that not only aroused but awakened emotions that ran far deeper than sexual lust and need.

Too soon, he ended the kiss, lifting his head to gaze down at her again. "Have I told you yet how unbelievably beautiful you are?" he asked, his voice a heated whisper.

She remembered his orders not to talk, not to move, though she had a feeling those orders no longer applied. But even though she was now free to speak, the kiss he had just given her had shocked her silent. She shook her head, her eyes never leaving his.

He smiled. Smiled! And the way his lips curved, erased all of the hard lines from his face, miraculously transforming him into, quite possibly, the most gorgeous man she had ever seen.

With his gaze still locked on hers, he eased into her with excruciating slowness, filling her inch by inch until he was

buried deep inside of her. His eyes closed as he reached home and he stayed that way for several long seconds.

"And you feel so incredible," he said, opening his eyes as he eased back, nearly sliding out of her. "You're so tight." Still slowly, he eased back in again. "So wet." Slowly out again. "So hot."

God. He was killing her! She liked sex hard and fast. Surely he had realized that. Yet he was moving so slow, at such an agonizing pace, that had he been in a race with a snail, the snail would have won.

She tried to move her arms but she had barely gotten them off of the mattress before he caught them. He laced his fingers with hers and pinned her hands to the bed. Next, she tried to lift her hips, to draw him fast and deep inside her but he pulled back further.

"Reese..." she cried out in frustration. To hell with not being allowed to speak, to move. She couldn't take much more of this. Every fiber of her body was hot and tingling with need. Her pussy was throbbing with an intensity the likes of which she had never before felt. She was climbing up the orgasmic mountain but it was a measured, torturous climb, as if she were a heart patient attempting to climb Mt. Everest.

He laughed softly. The bastard knew what he was doing to her and he was loving it. Damn him! "I'm in control this time. Remember?"

"But..."

"My way," he said, and once again eased himself home.

Beads of sweat popped out on Melody's forehead and between her breasts. Her head lolled from side to side as he

continued his slower-than-snail pace in and out of her. He watched her all the while, his eyes never leaving hers, and when she attempted to move in any way, tried to speed up the pace, he would stop completely.

She realized what he was doing, then. He was trying to make her beg for it. He wanted to drive her so wild that she lost her mind, her own control, her dignity even. So, okay, it was definitely working. Her mind had been drowning in alcohol anyway, her control—or what little she'd had—had gone for a joyride on a very long roller coaster, and as for her dignity—well, that was way overrated, anyway. "Reese, please!" she growled. "I can't stand this."

"Please what, Melody?" It was driving him crazy, too. She could hear it in his voice, see it in his eyes, feel it in the sweat that dripped off of him and rolled over her body. But damn, what was the man made of to have such control?

"Fuck me." She nearly screamed the words.

He grinned, a mischievous grin that, at that moment, she would have loved to slap from his handsome face. "I thought I was."

"Harder. Faster. Deeper. Oh God Reese, make me come."

"You forgot the magic word."

"Plea..."

Before the word was even out of her mouth he was slamming her. She lifted her hips, meeting him stroke by glorious stroke, as he pounded impossibly deep inside her. And then she was coming. *Thank you sweet Jesus!* Her body shook from the force of her orgasm, her muscles tensed, her toes curled and she cried out from the sheer pleasure of it.

Through her screams, she heard him grunt loudly and knew he had finally released his grip on his own control.

* * * *

The alarm clock blared at 8:30 the next morning, startling Reese from what had been quite possibly the deepest, best sleep he'd had in weeks. He slapped the off button, quickly silencing the deafening noise before it woke Melody.

Melody. She was still in his bed, still curled in his arm and, oh boy, still gloriously naked. He had an hour and a half before he absolutely had to meet with the guys from the band at the studio for the bass auditions that were scheduled for 10:00 a.m.. He didn't live far from the studio. Traffic would be light. He could make the drive in as little as fifteen minutes. He could shower and dress in ten, gather his equipment in another five. That would leave a full hour free.

He really shouldn't push it that close. He would need some time to converse with the guys and get set up before they began the auditions. Okay, so give that another fifteen. That still left forty-five minutes that he could spend with his hands on the amazing Melody Forbes—forty-five minutes that he could spend with his dick inside the incredible Melody Forbes.

But would she even let him? It had been hours since her last guzzle of Jack Daniels, hours that had been spent first in heated exertion and then sleep. She would be sober now, and most likely full of regrets. Despite the fact that, even at this early-for-him-hour, his body was completely alive with a hard-as-steel morning erection; despite the fact that he wanted more than anything to bury that morning erection in

her sweet pussy; despite the fact that he longed to feel her and kiss her, make her beg and scream, he didn't make a move to wake her.

When she awoke reality would set in quickly. Though he was only guessing, he expected her to not only have regrets about last night, but to be angry and accusatory as well. That was, if she even remembered the things they had done last night. But even if she didn't fully remember, she would be waking up in his house, in his bed and she was certainly no idiot. Once she looked down at her naked body in his bed, she would know that something had happened between them.

Reese angled his head for one more glance at her. She lay on her side, her head resting in the curve of his arm, one hand splayed on his chest. Her hair spilled over the pillow, a few strands dipping over to cover one of her cheeks. She looked so peaceful, so outrageously beautiful, like Snow White before her prince kissed her awake. But while Melody could certainly pass for Snow White, he was nowhere close to being her prince.

He sighed and then gently, carefully eased his arm from beneath her and rolled out of the bed. She rolled over on her stomach, reached out as if reaching for him, and curled her arm around the pillow.

His thoughts fought an inner war with his desires as he stood at the bedside and watched her for a long moment. No, it was best not to wake her. He would leave her a note and cab fare in case she chose not to stay until he returned. He knew she wouldn't stay, but a man could dream couldn't he?

He would make sure to put his phone number on the note. Maybe she would call.

Yeah right, and maybe those pigs he had always heard about were finally going to grow wings and fly.

* * * *

Melody was afraid to move, afraid to open her eyes, afraid of what, or whom, she might see. She could tell by the feel of the bed that it wasn't her own. She could tell by the masculine scent around her that she wasn't at home. She could tell by the feel of her used and naked body that she had been with someone last night. But where was she and, oh God, who had she been with?

She lay, still unmoving, on her stomach, her eyes tightly shut and tried to force herself to remember. Okay, so she had stormed out of the hospital after her confrontation with Brock. She would start there. God, she had been so angry with him. She still was. How dare he even suggest that they should ... Stop, fast forward a bit. Thinking about that now was only going to make her angry again and she didn't need that. What she needed was to remember what she had done *after* leaving the hospital.

She had gone for a walk. Yeah, she remembered that now. She had been too upset to drive so she had attempted to walk off some of her anger. She remembered walking down a sidewalk, going into a few shops, realizing that she had traveled quite a distance and was still pissed as hell. Finally, she had given up, and started walking back to the hospital to

get her car. It had been dark by then. But she didn't remember making it back to her car. So where had she gone?

A bar she found on the way. Uh-oh. She clearly remembered that now. She had gone into a bar, sat on a stool and ordered a Jack and coke. Then she had ordered a shot of Jack and that's where the night's events really started to blur. She scarcely remembered talking with a bald man—a big, biker type that she wouldn't have wanted to run into in a dark alley. But despite his rough exterior he had been very nice. His name? Oh, what had his name been? Bruno. Yeah, that was it. His name was Bruno. Holly shit! Had she gone home with Bruno? Her blood stilled in her veins. *No. Please God, no.*

Despite the fear that was now wrenching her gut, her eyes popped open. The pillow under her head blocked her right eye view but with her left eye she saw what appeared to be an empty bedroom. Unless someone was behind her, she was alone. She heard no movement, no breathing. She didn't feel the mattress sagging under someone's weight beside her and if she had gone home with Bruno she would certainly have felt his frame on the soft mattress. She was alone. *Thank you, sweet baby Jesus!*

She focused again on the view in front of her. Brown carpeted floor, a pair of men's jeans—she couldn't tell for sure but those didn't look large enough to be Bruno's. Her one-eyed gaze traveled to the wall, where she saw a closet with its sliding door left open. She could see clothes hanging there—definitely men's clothes, but she couldn't tell much more about them.

Outside, and to the right of the closet, she spotted a large poster hanging on the wall. It was some sort of advertisement poster or something and, though she couldn't read the words, she could see that it was a picture of a drum set, the professional type with a large spread of drums, toms and cymbals.

That's when it hit her. She nearly cried out from the flood of memories that washed over her. Reese Torrin. Reese had come into the bar, sent by Brock to find her, and she had asked him to take her home, asked him to fuck her. Oh man!

I even masturbated thinking about you in the shower this afternoon.

She bolted upright in the bed, her eyes wide, her face heating with embarrassment and sheer mortification. Had she really said that to him?

I even masturbated thinking about you in the shower this afternoon ... Take me home Reese ... to your home ... I want you to fuck me.

Oh yes. Dammit yes! She had said all of that and more to him last night. And, of course, he had done it. On three separate occasions, that she could remember anyway. God, how could she have done such a thing? She had practically jumped him when they had walked into his house. She had taken off her clothes, and all the while he had been trying to convince her she didn't want to do it. Then there was the way she had begged him later, right here in this very bed.

You did it, her conscience sighed, and there's nothing you can do to change it now. It's time to deal. She would just have to forget about it and move on, she decided.

She turned in the bed, swung her legs over the edge and spotted a piece of paper folded around a twenty-dollar bill. With fingers shaking from nervousness, she picked it up and read the short note scribbled in messy handwriting: *Mel, Have auditions with the band today. Had to leave. Here's money for a cab. Thanks for an amazing night. Call me. Reese.* A phone number was written below the signature.

Auditions with the band? What did that mean? He was the drummer for Façade, wasn't he? Had he left that band and was auditioning for another?

Oh, what did she care? He wasn't here, that was the important thing. She didn't think she could face him after last night—maybe not ever again.

Call me, his note read. No way would she do that. Just to prove a point, and as a way of telling him so, she tossed the note and the twenty bucks back on the nightstand.

* * * *

Fuck me. Harder. Faster. Deeper. Oh God Reese, make me come.

When Reese had walked out of his house that morning he had left Melody and the memories of last night behind. At least he had thought he had. But no, she had followed him. The memories of her silky soft skin, her sweet taste, her heated tantalizing touch, her softly spoken words had followed him. Dammit!

He had never met a woman he couldn't walk away from, and he had been with his fair share of women. It wasn't that he was a womanizer. He didn't use women for sex then toss

them away when the sun came up. Not really, anyway. He simply went into each sexual situation with the mutual understanding that it was sex—no strings, no future, no emotions. He never dwelt on the hours he had spent with a woman. Once it was over, it was over. Just like last night. The hours he had spent with Melody last night were over. So why in hell was he dwelling on them now?

Maybe it was because she had managed to get to him. How the hell had that happened? She had gotten under his skin, into his system, and he realized with a sudden sense of horrifying clarity that it hadn't began last night. She had started getting to him the moment he had laid eyes on her. She had possessed him to do things for and with her that he hadn't done with any woman. He had comforted—or at least attempted to comfort—her when she had been sad and worried about her father, and he'd held her while she cried on his shoulder. He had even attempted to *not* have sex with her when she had practically thrown herself at him last night. Yeah, a lot of good that had done him. But hey, he had tried. Still, it wasn't just her looks that had gotten to him, it was her spunk, her tenacity, her openness, her lack of fear that had securely placed her in areas no woman had ever gone.

"Ready for the next one?" Reese heard Derek ask and he forced his thoughts back to the auditions he was supposed to be giving his full attention.

Reese twirled his drumstick in his right hand. "Whenever you are," he replied, his voice carrying through the silence of the studio to where Derek and Garrett sat.

It was a good thing he could play the three required songs without so much as a single thought because he had been only half paying attention all morning. He was doing nothing more than setting the tempo for the bassist right now anyway, and none of the prospective candidates had been amazing enough thus far to demand his full concentration. Judging from the weariness he saw on the faces of Derek and Garrett, it was obvious he hadn't missed anything.

The way Reese figured it, when the right person to replace Trey Langston, Façade's former bass player who had left the band a few months back to become a family man, walked in the door he would know it. That was the way it had happened with Derek. They had held open auditions—much like the ones they were holding today—four years ago when they had been in search of a vocalist. The band had been new, then. They hadn't even had a name. Friends from way back, Garrett and Trey had decided to form a band, and recruited Reese, who had played with Garrett once in another band that had gone nowhere. Then they had begun the tedious task of finding a vocalist. Almost the instant Derek Kadin had opened his mouth the three of them had known their search was over. Derek's voice was absolutely amazing, and that was putting it mildly. The man could spit out lyrics off the top of his head that could give you goose bumps, and sing those lyrics with such intensity you couldn't help but become engrossed.

Reese knew that it had been the combination of his, Garrett's, and Trey's musical talents along with Derek's phenomenal voice that had gotten the band the recognition

and fame they had achieved. Still, he had his doubts that they would be where they were today if they hadn't found Derek.

As for Trey, he had been hard to lose, not only because he was such a good bassist but also because the four of them had been as tight as brothers for so long. Still, he wasn't irreplaceable. At least, they all *hoped* he wasn't.

Reese stood behind his drum set and shook hands with the next hopeful—that's how he had come to see those auditioning—who had entered the building. He watched the man as he plugged his bass into the amp the band had provided. His hair was long and dark, reaching halfway down his back and dreaded, as was the current style. He was thirty-something, Reese guessed. Clean shaven and muscular, he was dressed in all black and had a tattoo of a dragon on his right bicep. He was tall. Not quite as tall as Garrett but taller than Reese and definitely taller than Derek. Reese often thought of Derek as the shrimp of the band because the man was barely five-foot-seven without his boots.

Because Reese had slipped off into his own little world when the man had walked in, he hadn't caught the his name. Oh well, he probably would have forgotten it five minutes after the man walked out the door.

Reese waited for the man to signal that he was ready, then began the opening beats of the first song. *Holy shit! This guy is good!*

Reese sat up straighter on his stool and saw, as he glanced at Derek and Garrett, that they had done the same. It looked as though he should have paid attention to this man's name

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after all, because it appeared they had just found their new bassist.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Melody entered Philadelphia General with her head held high. It was easy to do when she knew she wouldn't have to face Brock and answer all the questions she knew he would have about last night. His car had been in the parking lot earlier when she had arrived in the taxi after leaving Reese's to pick up her own car. She had driven to the house, showered and changed before returning. It had taken her all of an hour to do that but when she had pulled back into the parking lot this time Brock's car had been nowhere to be found.

Relief surged through her as she made her way to the ICU, only to discover they had moved her father to a private room on the second floor. That was a good sign. At least his body was recovering. But his mind would never recover. There was no stopping the deterioration that would eventually leave him with no memory. She sighed as she stepped off the elevator on the second floor. She almost wished she could say that about herself. Remembering nothing, at this point in her life, would be a blessing. Then again, if she could simply erase the last three days, she would be hunky dory. That way she could erase all of the incidents that had happened with Reese, and maybe she could even erase her father's accident.

On the other hand, simply turning back the clock, say, seventy-two hours—no, better make it ninety-six to be on the safe side—would accomplish the same thing. She could go back to the day of the hockey game. But instead of attending

the game, she would stay home with her father as she had intended to do in the first place. God, why hadn't she stayed home?

And just like that, she knew. That was the sinking, sick feeling she had been ignoring for so many days. It was guilt. If she had stayed home with her father instead of going to the game, instead of leaving him with Stanley, he would have never had the accident and she wouldn't have gotten herself mixed up with the number one asshole, Reese Torrin.

It was the guilt that had caused her to crumble in Reese's arms, the guilt that had led her to the bar last night, the guilt that had pushed her to Reese's bed. It hadn't just been her worry and concern over her father's condition. She had been worried and concerned about things before and it had never made her act as stupidly as she had during the last couple of days. She had been angry before, too, lots of times, so she knew her stupidity couldn't be blamed on her confrontation with Brock. But all of those emotions piled on top of guilt could drive anyone stupid.

So, okay, her father's accident was her fault just like everything else that had happened recently. There was no one to blame for her idiotic actions but herself. Now they had to stop. Starting now, it was time to deal. It was time to find other ways of handling her guilt besides falling into Reese Torrin's arms. He was an asshole. Maybe she could blame him. After all, he was the one who had driven the car to his house—twice! He was the one who had taken advantage of her venerable state—twice! He was the one...

"Melody?"

Hearing her name, jerked her from the pity party she had going on in her head. She stopped in the middle of the hall and turned to find Stanley walking toward her.

If she had been looking for someone else to blame for her father's accident, this would be the top man. She had left her father in this man's care the night of the game. But it wasn't Stanley's fault her father had wandered out. It was hers. It was her responsibility to care for her father.

And what had she been doing since his accident? She certainly hadn't been taking care of him, watching over him. She hadn't spent any real time with him since he had been admitted to the hospital. She hadn't even been *at* the hospital! She had been with Reese. Damn, she was really batting a thousand here.

Stanley was a short, stocky man close to her father's age with salt and pepper hair that curled around his pointy ears, bushy sideburns that framed his chiseled face and a smile that could warm any heart. He was dressed in a plaid long-sleeve shirt and a pair of jeans that had definitely seen better days. It was the way she was used to seeing him, the way he had looked for as long as she could remember. He was her father's oldest and dearest friend. No way could she blame this sweet man for anything.

He greeted her with that smile now as he stopped in front of her, Styrofoam cup of steaming black coffee in his wrinkled hand. "You're father is doing much better today," he told her in a pleasant, comforting tone. "I just stepped out for a cup of coffee. He was awake when I left."

"How long ago did Brock leave?" she asked as they began walking together to her father's new room.

"'Bout twenty minutes, I guess. Said he had practice with the team." Stanley stopped again, this time just outside the door to her father's room. "He also said you were pretty ticked at him right now."

"That's putting it mildly," Melody muttered.

"Clarence is pretty coherent today," Stanley said, speaking of her father. "He doesn't remember the accident and keeps forgetting why he's in the hospital, but there are other things, important things, that he seems to be remembering quite well." He paused and blew into the cup of coffee before taking a small sip. "You should talk with him, child. You might be surprised by what he has to say."

* * * *

"Well, I guess that's my answer." Reese frowned down at the note and twenty dollar bill he had left that morning for Melody, as he rejoined Diana in his living room.

Diana took a seat on the sofa. "Do you mind if I say something?" she asked, brushing her mane of red hair behind her shoulders.

Reese simply looked at her.

"I know that you were being a gentleman when you left her cab fare this morning and, by the way, that single act racked up tons of goody points in my book, but Melody may not have seen it that way. Leaving a woman cash on the nightstand after what happened between the two of you last night..."

It took a moment for Reese's mind to catch up with Diana's words. He lingered too long on the word gentleman. "I don't think anyone has ever called me that before," he said absently and sat down beside her.

"What? A gentleman?" She laughed. "It's in you, though I'll admit it's rare that you actually show it. Although..." She tapped the tip of one long, red-polished fingernail on her bottom lip and gazed at him with an amused twinkle in her amazing eyes. "From what you've told me about the time you have spent with this woman, I would say you're beginning to show it more and more."

"She thinks I'm an asshole," he muttered dryly. How many times during that first night had Melody called him that? Of course, she wasn't the only woman to have ever called him an asshole, but dammit when it came from her sweet, alluring lips it got to him.

Diana grinned and reached over to pat his knee. "Reese darling, you are an asshole."

"Thanks for your loving support."

She laughed again. Though he enjoyed hearing her musical laugh, he found he didn't care for it much when he was the cause. "I do love you," she said. When it came from Diana, he knew she meant it. Love wasn't just another meaningless four-letter word to her. It was pure, true, even when only spoken as a friendship kind of love. If he had come to believe anything since meeting Diana, one thing was for certain: whoever stole this woman's heart was going to be one lucky man.

"You also will always have my support, dear brother," she continued, "but along with that you will get my honesty. It's a package deal. You *are* an asshole. You too often speak and act before you think, and usually those words and actions come as knee-jerk reactions from your asshole side."

"You're referring to the way I reacted to her at the game the other night." He leaned back on the sofa and desperately wished he could go back to that night, maybe take the advice Diana was giving him now and apply it then.

But, hello, what was going on here? He had never regretted the way he had talked to or acted with a woman before. He prided himself on living without regrets. Except, he did regret that night. Well, not all of it. He didn't regret those too-short minutes when he'd had Melody pinned against the wall, nor did he regret any part of last night when he had driven her up the orgasmic mountain over and over again. And those were the actions he *should* be regretting!

"The game is one of many instances I could name," Diana said with a nod. "But I'll tell you something else, and this one is going to freak you out. You're falling in love with this woman."

She said it so simply, so matter-of-factly that it took a long moment for the words to sink into his frazzled brain but when they did he stared at her and she burst out laughing at the utterly horrified expression he knew was on his face. In love! Him! With Melody Forbes! No way. No fucking way! "Did you ingest some crazy concoction of herbs before coming over here," he asked, when he finally found his voice.

She ignored him. "There is more I could say on this subject but I think I've given you enough to stew over for a while. So, tell me about the new bassist. What's his name? What's he like? Give me all the deets."

Reese leapt at the opportunity to change the subject. "He's good. Dammed good. Almost from the moment he started playing the three of us knew he was the one. He has his own style of playing that's different from Trey's but it incorporates well with our old material. I'm excited. We all are. It's going to be cool to see what he can bring to the new CD."

"Has he ever been in a band before, or is he completely new blood?"

"A little of both, I guess you could say. He's been in bands but none that ever really got their big break. Jumping into a band as big as Façade is definitely going to be an experience for him."

"And does this amazing new bassist have a name?"

"James," Reese nodded. "James Fisher."

If he hadn't known Diana so well he might have missed the look of despairing surprise that flashed through her eyes. It came and went that quickly. Except he *did* know her and he *had* seen it. But she stood up and spoke before he had the chance to even form a question.

"I need to get back to the hotel and pack," she said. "Are you still driving me to the airport tomorrow, or should I take a cab from the rental place?"

Reese stood, too, and followed her to the door. "I'll be there," he assured her. "I don't suppose I can convince you to stay in town a while longer?"

"No, I have to get back to Florida."

He opened the door for her and she flashed him a grin. There he went being a gentleman again. Well, holly shit, maybe he did have it in him. But the grin she gave him prevented him from feeling the elation he might have experienced because her grin didn't hold even an ounce of its usual gleam. What the hell had happened? She suddenly looked so sad. He had never seen her this way before. Was it because she would be leaving tomorrow? He knew she loved her little home in St. Petersburg, but he also knew her job as the manager of a New Age shop called All Things Magical, no longer held the joy for her that it once had.

Diana had gone to college straight out of high school and double majored in retail and business management. At some point she had gotten the job at All Things Magical, and five years later she had worked her way up the ladder to store manager. But finally achieving her goal hadn't given her all she had dreamed it would because, even with the title of manager, she still had to deal with the owner, Chamberlain, who refused to let her spread her wings. Obviously, he had no idea what a jewel of an employee he had in Diana. With her knowledge and ideas she could put the store on top, but Chamberlain always had to have the final say and often disagreed with things Diana wanted to do to better the store.

"Have you given anymore thought to Alicia's offer?" Reese asked.

She sighed and paused in the open doorway. "I've hardly been able to think about anything else," she told him. "My

best friend is offering me my dream—a dream that would take me many more years to reach on my own."

"But?" he prodded.

"But I'm just not sure I can let her do it. I mean, we're talking a lot of money, Reese, to open my own store. There's so much that goes into that—the location, the inventory, employees—I'm not sure Alicia really realizes the magnitude of her offer."

"You know better than anyone that she has the money," he reminded her.

Alicia Addison, Derek's girlfriend, was loaded. She was a product of a very wealthy St. Petersburg family that had given her a trust fund that had matured when she had reached twenty-one, with yet another to be received when she reached thirty-five. But it was a trust fund she never touched because she firmly believed in earning her own income, which she did by writing vampire romance novels.

"I know she has the money. I just don't know if I can take it."

"But she isn't offering it as a gift or a loan. For her it will be an investment. She provides the startup cost in return for a certain percentage of the profits."

"But what if the store doesn't make a profit? What if it fails?"

"That doesn't sound like Diana talking. Besides, with your brains and looks, you'll make it the best store in town—wherever you decide to base it," he added, knowing thoughts had been tossed around about opening the store in Philadelphia rather than St. Petersburg.

"It looks like we have both given the other something to stew over tonight. See you tomorrow." She planted a tender kiss on his cheek and walked to her rental car.

* * * *

To say Melody would be surprised by what her father had to say had been putting it mildly. She was completely floored. So much so that, when she entered the house she and her father shared later that evening, she hardly noticed the ringing telephone. She walked in the front door and headed straight for her father's office in a daze of confusion and disbelief.

Brock had had nothing to do with the brochures she had found filed away in her father's desk, after all. He hadn't even known about them. She was still angry with him, though, for suggesting that they consider putting their father in an old folks home. She still couldn't understand how he could even think of sending their father away!

But what did it matter? she wondered as she plopped down in the chair behind her father's desk. After the conversation she'd had with her father this evening, she now knew how he felt about the whole idea. He wanted to move into a nursing home. He actually wanted her and Brock to send him away. He had even gone so far as to chose the place, contact them, and set up an appointment. It was an appointment he had been unable to keep because of his accident, but tonight he had asked her to reschedule that appointment and check the place out, herself.

But why? Why did he want to live the rest of his life in such a place?

Melody picked up the small pile of brochures that lay on the desktop. Brock had apparently returned them at some point after their confrontation. She leafed through the stack until she found the one her father had spoken of, and began to read.

The Mountainside Village boasted of many awards for excellent care and service. It specialized in the care of people with Alzheimer's and related illnesses, and offered individualized programs of recreational therapy, ongoing supervision and cooperative interaction among their staff, the patient—or resident as the Village seemed to prefer to call them—and the family. Activities, health services and accreditations were listed, along with several snapshots of the facilities and grounds.

It was beautiful, she had to admit; opulent but cozy with landscaped grounds full of trees and shrubs. The living quarters were stylish and elegant, much nicer even than the house in which her father had lived for the last forty-some-odd years.

She tried to imagine her father moving about in those pictures—lounging on the sofa, standing before the window, strolling the grounds—and tears rose to her eyes. Though he would have the constant care he would soon require and probably more luxuries than he enjoyed now, he would be alone. He wouldn't have his friends, his familiar surroundings. He wouldn't have Brock. He wouldn't have *her*.

"Need a shoulder and an ear?"

Melody jumped, completely unaware until now that she was no longer alone. Brock was leaning against the doorframe, his arms folded across his expansive chest, watching her. How long had he been standing there?

"I don't need *your* shoulder," she said angrily, swiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "And I don't want your ear."

"Come on, Mel," he said with a sigh, as he pushed himself from the doorframe and walked into the room. "You can't still be mad at me."

"Why can't I?"

"You should know by now that I had nothing to do with those," he said, indicating the brochures with a lift of his chin. "I had never seen them before until you threw them in my lap."

"You agree with it," she countered, her voice rising. Oh yes, she could still be angry with him, very angry. "You want it. You want..."

"I want what's best for Dad," Brock talked over her. "Just like you want what's best for him."

"How is sending him to live somewhere else, away from everything and everyone he knows, best for him?"

"Melody, you aren't even trying to think about this sensibly, are you?" He shook his head sadly. "Maybe I was wrong. I thought you wanted what's best for Dad but apparently you can't see passed your own wants and fears to what *Dad* wants and what *Dad* needs."

"How dare you?" she seethed, leaping from the chair. "I have done nothing for the last year but think about what Dad

needs. I gave up my home in New York, my fucking *career* to be with Dad and take care of him while you've been off gallivanting around the United States playing hockey."

"You didn't have to give up everything. That was your choice, Melody," he reminded her with a forced tone of patience.

"Yeah and who else was going to do it? You?" She laughed, but there was no hint of humor in the sound. "You wouldn't have given up your precious team to be here with Dad." She walked to the window, stared out into the darkness as more tears began to leak from her eyes.

"Dad wouldn't want me to. He wouldn't want you to continue giving up your career, either. But I would give up the team if I had to and I will have to if Dad stays here."

Melody whirled around, her face burning with anger. "And you say *I* can't see past my own wants," she shrieked, jamming a finger into her chest. "You want to send Dad away so you won't have to quit the hockey team. Some son you are." She was happy to see that Brock visibly winced at that. "You haven't even been here for much of the last year. You wouldn't be here now if Dad hadn't had the accident."

"I've been here as much as I could be," he said, his voice sad and low.

She was being mean and unfair and she knew it, but dammit she didn't care. She was hurt, she was angry and Brock was in her line of fire.

"But none of this is even touching on the real point," her brother continued. "Dad wants to go live at that nursing home, Mel. He made the decision completely on his own. No

one, except maybe his doctor, even knew about any of this until you found those brochures. It's what he wants, what he feels is best and that's what's most important."

"Because he doesn't want to be a burden on us." Her heart wrenched at the thought of what her father must be thinking, how he must be feeling, knowing that his once completely independent life was ending, that someday he wouldn't even remember how his life had once been.

"That's probably part of it," Brock admitted. "But think about it, Mel. Dad is worried enough over his condition without having other problems cloud his already foggy mind. If he feels like he's being a burden to us—to you—he's going to worry more. At this place," he leaned forward, picked up the brochure for the Mountainside Village, "he will know that he isn't being a burden on anyone. He will know that no one is giving up anything in their own life to make his happier. That in itself will be good for him, and that's in addition to the care and service this place can offer him."

Brock was right. Somewhere deep inside she knew he was right. But dammit, she didn't want him to be right. She wanted everything in her life to be as it was a year ago. She wanted her apartment in New York back. She wanted her career back. She wanted her *life* back. But she wanted it all and her father, too, and that was what he was trying to give her. If he moved into the nursing home she could have her life back, still have him as often as she was able to visit and he would still get the care and comfort he needed.

Heartbroken and beaten, she sank to the floor right where she stood and cried.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Reese couldn't sleep. He would have liked to be able to blame it on the fact that he was accustomed to staying awake until the sun came up, but he knew that wasn't really the reason for his sleeplessness tonight. Tonight he should be exhausted. Hell, he *was* exhausted. He had only managed to squeeze in a few hours of sleep in the last couple of days.

Yet, as he stretched out in his bed and closed his eyes, visions of Melody filled the darkness: Melody and her dazzling smile; Melody and her baby soft skin; Melody and her perfectly shaped breasts and taut brown nipples; Melody and the look of sheer pleasure that washed over her beautiful face as he pushed his cock deep inside her.

Again he heard Diana's voice as she told him, in no uncertain terms, that he was falling in love. Him! Reese Torrin. No fucking way! No way was he falling in love with Melody Forbes. The thought was completely absurd. Wasn't it?

Okay, so what if he couldn't sleep right now because he was missing her. That didn't mean he was in love with her. He would miss Diana when she returned to Florida tomorrow and he knew for a fact that he wasn't in love with her. So what if his arms were practically aching right now from the need to hold Melody? So what if his mouth watered at the mere memory of how sweet and absolutely delectable she tasted? So what if he was hard as a rock right now because he had been thinking of touching her, kissing her, slamming his dick

inside her? All of that simply meant he wanted to fuck her again. That was all. It certainly didn't mean he was in love with her for crying out loud!

Except he couldn't remember a time when he had longed to be with a woman so badly. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been able to get a woman out of his head. He couldn't remember a time when he had felt so heavily a woman's presence long after she had left his house, his bed.

He could see her curled up beside him, feel her body heat, hear the soft even rhythm of her breathing. He felt it so strongly that he actually reached for her, to draw her closer, but of course his hand only connected with an empty mattress because she wasn't there. He was alone, a fact that he had never given a second thought until now.

Where was she tonight? He couldn't help but wonder. Was she at the hospital with her father? Was she at home? Was she somewhere in between at some rundown bar pounding down shots of Jack Daniels with some rough biker guy named Bruno? God, he hoped not. What would have happened to her last night if he hadn't found her? Would she have gone home with that Bruno fuck? *She sure left with me easily enough.* And when he had brought her back here ... "What the fuck!" he growled aloud in frustration.

He sat up in bed and flicked on the bedside lamp. This was bullshit! What did he care where she was tonight? She had made it perfectly clear when she had left his note and phone number on the nightstand this morning that she had no intentions of seeing or even talking to him again. He had known last night, before he had even touched her, that it

would be a one-night stand. He preferred sex that way. Equal pleasure, mutual fun with no strings attached and absolutely no promises. It was the way all his encounters with women were and he liked it that way. That is until he had gotten his hands on Melody Forbes.

Shit!

Frustration turned to anger and he climbed out of bed. If he couldn't sleep he could at least do something more productive with his time than wallow in his memories of Melody. He would go into the garage he had converted into a soundproof music room and beat on his drums for a while, maybe come up with a new rhythm to use on the band's next CD. It would be nice to have Garrett here to play along. Or even their new bassist, James. Reese wondered what hard-hitting riffs the new guy would create. He couldn't wait to find out.

He slipped back into the boxer-briefs he had dropped to the floor before crawling into bed and turned toward the door just as the phone rang.

* * * *

The curt "Hello" on the other end of the phone line had Melody seriously considering hanging up without saying a word, but she couldn't. She did hesitate for several long seconds though, and when she was finally able to speak she stammered, Uhh ... R—Reese, it's me. Melody."

Silence. He was still there. She knew he was. She could just make out the sound of his breathing over the seemingly thunderous pounding of her own heart. But he didn't speak.

She shouldn't have called. She knew it was a stupid thing to do. He hadn't really wanted her to call. She had suspected he'd simply left his number on that note this morning because it was the nice thing to do. Except, Reese Torrin hadn't struck her as the type to do something because it was the *nice* thing to do. She had dubbed him an asshole from the start, and one thing assholes never, ever worried about was being nice.

Yet, stupid idea or not, she had called and now here she was sitting on the edge of her bed holding a silent telephone to her ear. Perfect. Just perfect. What a way to end a hellacious day?

She took a deep breath, forced her heart to slow to a normal rapid rhythm and tried again. "Did I wake you?"

More silence. *Hell-o*, wasn't he going to say anything at all? Had she simply dreamed she had heard him pick up?

"No."

Finally! Another word. Well hallelujah, he was there after all. Now if only she could figure out what to say to keep him talking. If she had been smart, she would have rehearsed what she was going to say to him before she dialed his number. She would have stood in front of a mirror and acted out what she would say, predicted what his responses would be. Countless characters on television programs had done it, and as soon as the character was faced with the person they had been preparing to speak to, the character always went brain dead. Okay, so maybe that wouldn't have helped after all.

No, if she had been smart, she would have fought the overwhelming urge to call him in the first place. But she

hadn't fought it. She had called and so far he hadn't spoken more than two words to her. Literally! That was so not going to cut it. She had to pull more than one-word responses from him and she knew just how to do it. She didn't really want to bring it up, but she had done a bit of soul searching since talking with Bryce in her father's office and had come to the realization that she owed this man, Reese Torrin, an apology. Wow! That had been a hard one to come to terms with. *She* owed the asshole of the century an apology. But it was true. *So here goes.* "I just wanted you to know that I think you are an asshole now more than ever," she told him adding just enough matter-of-factness and venom to her voice to make her sound angry. "I really don't appreciate the way you..."

"Dammit, I knew you would do this," Reese said, irritation and annoyance spewing from his voice.

Jackpot! That was more than a one worded response and he still wasn't done.

"Apparently you don't have a clear recollection of last night. You were all over me woman and I..."

"You tried to tell me no and I wouldn't listen," she bulldozed over him.

"Yeah."

He sounded so surprised she almost laughed. "I remember last night with a clarity that would obviously surprise you," she said as images of the many things they had done together flashed through her mind like an old-fashioned slideshow—click, another one came into view. "I also remember waking this morning to an empty house. *Your* house," she added unnecessarily.

"I left you a note. Along with money for a cab, but you didn't take either one."

"I know." She didn't take them because at that moment in time she had had no intentions of ever calling him. And as for the money, well, if she had taken that it would have felt as if she had gotten paid for services rendered. "Why didn't you wake me? That's the part I didn't appreciate."

That was such bullshit and he probably knew it. She had actually been more than relieved that he hadn't woke her, that he had slipped out of the house leaving her to awaken alone. It had definitely been for the best because if he had woken her they would have surely butted heads. She would have accused him of taking advantage of her just as he thought she was about to do moments ago. She would have blamed him for everything that had happened last night instead of admitting that it had been she who had instigated it all.

That was most likely why he had decided not to wake her up. Because he knew she would blame him and he hadn't wanted to fight with her. But Reese Torrin, asshole of the century, not wanting to fight? It sounded absolutely ludicrous.

He sighed and instead of answering her question he asked one of his own. "What's going on here Melody? Why the sudden change?"

You can't see past your own wants and fears ... They were the words Brock had said to her a few hours earlier in their father's office, words that had eventually made her crumble into a world of tears. She had realized, then, what she did truly want—her career, her life, her father—but more, she

had realized she also wanted Reese. That final realization had been the worst of all. She wanted this man who could be the biggest asshole she had ever met one minute and the sweetest, most tender man she had ever met the next. Now how the hell was she going to explain that one?

"What's going on?" she repeated, deciding to answer his first question in her own flippant way and ignore his second. "What's going on is that you're listening while I'm apologizing. It's as simple as that. Just don't let the fact that you were right go to your head."

He actually laughed. "Oh, you can bet I'm going to let it go straight to my head sweetheart. And don't think I won't remind you of this moment every chance I get."

"I bet you will," she said dryly, but she was smiling as she settled back on the bed. Now that was a pure Reese Torrin response. It was amazing how normal that suddenly felt, how she had actually hoped to hear some asinine remark come from his mouth.

"So you want to come over and do it again? Is that really why you called?"

Oh yeah, they were getting back to normal. "Yeah, right. Like I want to sleep with you again."

In truth, she did. She *really* did. Once she had allowed herself to accept the fact that she wanted this man she found herself longing to go to him, to jump him the way she had last night. He wouldn't turn her down; no way would he do that. But despite the fact that she longed to go to him tonight and that she suddenly couldn't stand the thought of spending the night alone in her own bed, she couldn't go to him

because another turmoil had begun to rage inside her. She had wanted sex with no strings and that was what she had with this man. He was using her for sex and so far she had been all too willing to let him. Hell, she had been using him, too. Only, was it her imagination, or was she really starting to see a thin thread tied between the two of them?

"I could always come to you," he offered and her heart skipped a beat.

She could invite him over. After all, she was alone in the house. Brock had left hours ago. She could invite Reese over, get laid again and forget all her troubles for a few hours. Christ! Who was really using who here?

"That's not a good idea." She shook her head, even though he couldn't see her. "I really just called to talk. I—I needed someone to talk to."

After her tears had finally dried, and Brock had left, and all her newfound revelations had begun to settle, she had found herself going crazy in the thick silence of the house. She had tried to break the deadly quiet with music, blaring her favorite high-energy dance CD at full volume, but it hadn't helped. She had tried talking to herself but that hadn't helped, either. How could she talk to herself when she didn't even know what to say to herself?

That was when she'd picked up the phone. She had sat on the edge of her bed, receiver in hand, for countless minutes racking her brain for someone to call, but she really didn't have any friends. Sure, she knew people in New York, but most of them were either her old co-workers or mere acquaintances. The same went for the few people she knew in

Philadelphia. She had always been more of a loner, content to be in her own little world. When she did mix with people it was of the male gender and usually having something to do with sports, or sex.

Then Reese's number had popped into her mind from out of the blue. It took her completely off guard the way the seven digits came to her so easily with no trace of doubt as to whose number it was. She had merely glanced at the number on the note that morning, and hadn't even attempted to memorize it. But she had always been fairly good with numbers and had, what some would consider, a photographic memory. Apparently, one look at his number had been enough for her mind to commit it to permanent memory.

* * * *

"You want to talk?" Reese couldn't hide the surprise in his voice. She had called him to talk. When was the last time a woman had done that?

The thought was almost laughable. He wasn't the type of man a woman called to just talk. Sure, he had two ears just like the next guy, and he had a mouth complete with a tongue, throat and vocal cords, too, but he was generally the last person one would think to call for general conversation and a sympathetic ear.

Someone up there was playing tricks on him, he decided as he sat down on his bed. That was all there was to it. Here he had been, not ten minutes ago, laying in this very bed fantasizing about this woman, missing her with every fiber of his being, wanting to be with her again, wanting to fuck her

again and then she calls and she wants to talk. Talk! Lord, when had his world gotten turned so upside down?

"Do you mind?" she asked and she sounded so weary, so needy even that he responded in the only way he could.

"What do you want to talk about?" He lay back on the bed, tucked his free hand behind his head and stared up at the ceiling.

"I don't know. Anything but my father, or my brother, or last night."

He chuckled. "That's not leaving much for us to talk about, you know?"

"Sure it is," she disagreed. "How about we start by you telling me about yourself?"

"How about we don't?"

"Come on, Reese. I don't know anything about you. I mean, I know you're the drummer for Façade, I know you like hockey and your amazing in bed but..."

"Amazing, huh?" He latched onto that one, hoping to steer the conversation in a different direction. She wanted to know about him. She actually expected him to sit here on the phone and talk about himself. That, in itself, was proof enough that this woman didn't know him at all.

"Yes, amazing," she laughed. "And I can see your ego growing through the phone line. But I want to know more about you."

"Like what?" he found himself asking. He was going to do this. He was actually going to do this. He was going to lay here on this bed and tell this woman whatever she wanted to

know about him. *Watch out world. Lightning is about to strike.*

"Oh, I don't know. What's your favorite color? What was the last movie you saw and did you like it? What made you become a drummer? Have you ever been married or come close to getting married? What do you like to do when you aren't playing drums with the band? What..."

"Whoa! Slow down there, speedy." He laughed. "Jeez, you're worse than some of our fans on the board."

"What board?"

"The post board the band has on the Internet. There's a link to it on our web page. The Webmaster set it up for our fans to chat with one another and ask the band members questions and so forth. Me and the other guys sign on from time to time and make a few posts. Its just another way for us to interact with our fans."

Not that she would really find out a lot about him by reading his posts. Of the four of them, he had always been the one to post the least. He wasn't much on computers to begin with and revealing personal information about himself to complete strangers simply freaked him out. When he did sign onto the board, he mostly only answered general questions about the band or questions pertaining to drumming or the equipment he used on stage and in the studio.

"Ah, sounds like something I'll want to check out," Melody said. "But I don't feel like fooling with a computer right now. And why should I go through all of the trouble of looking for

the answers to my questions when I have you right here on the phone?"

"My favorite color is black," he answered with a sigh of defeat. The last movie I saw was *Van Helsing* and yes, I enjoyed it. Kate Beckinsale was in that movie. You remind me a lot of her ... in a tomboyish sort of way."

"Really? Thanks," she said, her surprise evident in her tone. Then she added, "I think," and Reese had to laugh.

"You can take it as a compliment," he assured her. "She's beautiful and so are you."

"You really amaze me, Reese."

"Yeah, you already said that."

"No, I said you were amazing in bed. But this ... this is a different kind of amazement. You are such an asshole and yet you can be so sweet sometimes you make my teeth hurt."

I know that you were being a gentleman...

Diana's words spoken earlier that evening echoed in his mind. Hers and Melody's were two different comments and yet they held basically the same meaning. Damn but that was scary. Either he was losing it or the women in his life were going berserk.

"Don't let the candy coated compliments fool you sweetheart. I'm still an asshole. See, you called tonight wanting someone to talk to and I've been laying here the whole time thinking that if you would just come over here or let me come over there we could be doing something far more productive and more entertaining than talking."

"Yeah, you're still an asshole," she agreed and he could almost see her rolling those incredible eyes to the ceiling. "So, go on. You haven't answered all of my questions yet."

Reese sighed. "Where was I?"

"What made you become a drummer?"

There were two different ways he could answer that one. He could give her the simple answer, the one he gave almost everyone when they asked. Or he could tell her the unedited version complete with the pain and anguish, the loneliness until he finally found solace in music. Both were the truth, only the latter one would be letting her in far deeper than he had ever let any woman in, with the exception of Diana.

He chose the edited version. "I walked into a music store when I was fifteen, sat down behind a drum set and I was hooked for life."

"That's it? No driving your parents up the wall by banging on pots and pans with sticks you found in the yard at the age of three? No hounding them for years for a drum set? No temper tantrums until they finally bought you one?"

"My father ran off when I was three." Shit! Why had he said that? The simplest, safest answer to all her newly added questions would have been no. Instead, he had to go deeper and now he found he wanted to tell her more. He wanted to tell her everything, the unedited version of his life. "He told my mom he didn't love her anymore, that he never had, and he left. I shouldn't remember that, but I do. Don't ask me how. I mean ... I was only three. How much do you remember about being three years old?"

"Very little if anything. Did he ever come back?"

"No. Never called, never returned. Nothing was ever the same again."

"But you still had your mom."

Leave it to Melody to attempt to find the silver lining. She had lost her mom at an even younger age than Reese had lost his father. Hell, she hadn't even *known* her mom. Reese couldn't count the times in his life that he had wished he hadn't known his father. "My mom fell apart. The little strength she kept she used to hold down two jobs to support us. But emotionally..."

"She deserted you," Melody guessed quietly.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. She was always there in body but..." *Do you love me, Mom?* He had asked her that once. He didn't remember exactly how old he had been at the time but he remembered her answer as clearly as if she were saying it to him now. It was an answer he would never forget. *There's no such thing as love. L-O-V-E is just another four-letter word.*

"As I got older I started looking for things to occupy my time," he told Melody now, pushing the painful words from his mind. "I started hanging around a music store down from my house. That's when I discovered music."

"And the drums."

"Yeah, and the drums. I sat down behind that first drum set and it seeped into me, it possessed me. I knew right then and there what I wanted. It took what seemed like forever for me to come up with the money for my first set. But I did it. Working odd jobs and saving every dime until one day I had that drum set and I've never looked back."

* * * *

Melody had tears in her eyes. It wasn't just his story that put them there, it was the belief, the knowledge, that what he had just told her was something that he didn't usually tell people. She doubted if anyone, aside from possibly the guys in his band, knew about the things he had just confided to her.

They sat in silence for a long time, the sounds of their breathing the only sounds moving through the telephone line. She didn't know what to say. He had just revealed a part of himself that gave her more insight into the man that he had become—tough, hard, more or less a loner—than she had ever thought he would. She couldn't decide if she felt better knowing the sad story of his childhood, or if she would have been better off not knowing, because now she could feel her heart opening to him and it was more than simple compassion she felt coming out. Just knowing that small part of him brought her to a new level of understanding and the ability to see him in a totally different light than she had when they had first began this conversation.

It was Reese who finally broke that silence. "Moving on, I believe your next question was have I ever been married. The answer to that one is no. Never came close."

That didn't surprise her. Not that it would have, even before he had told her of his parents' failed marriage. He wasn't the type to settle down. It was part of the reason why she had decided what they had going on between them was

perfect. He wouldn't settle down with one woman and she couldn't settle down with a man, not for eternity at least.

"Do you hope to some day?" she found herself asking. "You know, fall in love, get married, start a family."

"Have kids?" He chuckled. "No way. And I don't believe in love so that's out, too."

Because of the way your father deserted you and your mother? Are you afraid you would run off the way your father did? she wanted to ask. The questions were on the tip of her tongue. But she couldn't. Maybe they were perfect for one another after all. If he didn't want to get married, didn't want to have kids ... "What do you like to do when you aren't playing drums with the band?" she asked instead. It had been the last question she had rambled off earlier but it was a far safer one than the new questions that were forming in her mind.

"Have sex."

She had to laugh. He was bringing them back to the way they had been before their conversation had turned so serious. Good. And how had she known that would be his answer? Men, they were so predictable. "And?" she prodded.

"Have more sex," he said and she could hear the smile in his voice.

"You're incorrigible." She sighed, but she refused to be defeated. "You like hockey. I know that about you. Do you play, too, or just like to watch?"

"Watch. I couldn't play if my life depended on it."

"Are there any other sports you like?"

"Sex."

She growled and he had the nerve to laugh. "Sex isn't a sport," she said through clenched teeth.

"Sure it is," he insisted. "Sex is the best sport there is. There's rules, different positions, sometimes different players ... hell, there can even be uniforms if you get into that sort of thing. Sex has everything any other sport has to offer and it's been around since the beginning of time."

"Okay, so sex is a sport," she conceded.

"So what about you? What other sports do you like besides hockey?"

Melody rolled onto her side, propping her head on her hand. She had known he would turn the conversation around to her eventually. In truth, she had actually expected him to do it long before now.

"I like them all," she answered. "Football, baseball, soccer, basketball ... well, I'm not real crazy about basketball," she amended. "I like to play it on occasion, but I don't really care to watch it."

"So the tomboy look isn't just an act?"

"I've been a tomboy all my life." She twisted the phone cord around her finger as she talked. "My mother died giving birth to me and my father didn't have the slightest clue how to raise a girl so he raised me the same way he raised Brock. I was out there playing sports and tagging along with the boys before I even learned to walk."

"Your father never remarried? Never gave you a female figure in your life?"

"No, he says he never wanted to remarry. He loved my mother that much. So it was always just the three of us—my

father, Brock and me. Daddy's little Mel." Tears rose to her eyes unexpectedly as she thought of growing up with her father and Brock. True, she had been raised by only one parent, too, but unlike Reese's mother, her father had loved her.

She blinked rapidly, pushing back the tears, thankful that Reese couldn't see her through the phone line, but when she spoke again her voice betrayed her by cracking slightly. "He may not have raised me the way most girls are raised but I couldn't have asked for a better father."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you with my question."

"It's okay. Turnabout is fair play." She sniffled. He was actually apologizing. Wonders never ceased. "Brock and I had it out again tonight."

"About the nursing home deal?"

"Yeah. Come to find out the whole thing was really Dad's idea. He's found a place here in Philadelphia that specializes in care for patients with Alzheimer's and he wants to go live there."

Reese was silent. Melody waited for him to speak but when it became apparent he wasn't going to, she said, "You think it's a good idea, too."

"What I think is that I should keep my mouth shut on this one."

"You aren't actually worried that I will get mad at you, are you?" she asked, her tone conveying her disbelief.

"No way. I like it when you're angry," he said. "As a matter of fact you're dammed sexy when you're angry. But I don't want to upset you again when I'm not with you. See, if you

start crying again right now I can't pull you into my arms and take advantage of your vulnerable state. Now, if you would let me come over..."

Melody laughed. It was the safest reaction. How could she like this guy? He was not only a complete asshole, but he was an asshole that thought about nothing but playing drums and having sex. Yet he had let her in tonight, allowed her to see a different side of him and dammed if he hadn't managed to make her like him more. Asshole or not, there was a kindness inside this man, a tenderness that peeked through when his defenses were down. If only he didn't fight so desperately to hide it.

"Forget it Reese," she finally said. "You're not coming over."

"Well damn, can't blame a man for trying."

CHAPTER NINE

Visiting the Mountainside Village nursing home was quite possibly the most difficult thing Melody had done in her life. The fact that the place was truly beautiful in its elegance and charm did nothing to alleviate the wave of sadness that had overcome her when she had stepped out of the car. And the fact that she wasn't alone—Brock and Reese had come with her—hadn't helped either. If anything, the harsh unfriendly looks that Brock kept shooting Reese and the lack of conversation between the two made her feel worse.

She had thought it would help, having Reese with her. She couldn't believe he had actually offered to come. And he had offered. She hadn't asked. Though she had confessed her nervousness and dread at having to make the visit when she and Reese had talked on the phone. That conversation had taken place two days ago. She had fully expected him to make some excuse, to find some way to back out between then and now. Yet he hadn't. He had arrived at her house this morning forty-five minutes before the scheduled appointment time and, to her utter surprise, he seemed to have left his asshole alter ego at home. Or maybe he loaned it to Brock for the day, she mused, glancing at her brother as she, Brock and Reese made their way back to the visitors' parking lot. It was unusual for Brock to be so quiet, but she had seen the expression on his face when she had arrived with Reese. It had been one of shock, surprise, even anger. Brock had greeted Reese with a stiff nod but had said nothing. Come to

think of it, the two of them hadn't spoken at all, and they had spent nearly two hours at the Mountainside Village.

For two men that were supposed to be friends, Melody found their behavior to be very strange. That was, until Brock pulled her aside once they were in the parking lot.

"What are you doing with him Mel?" he asked. His voice was low so only she could hear, but it was full of ice and indignation.

"I didn't know if you would be able to make it today," she answered with a shrug. "Reese knew I didn't want to come here alone so he offered to come with me."

"I didn't realize the two of you were spending so much time together."

"We aren't, really. I needed someone to talk to the other night after you left the house so..."

"So you called Reese. Reese isn't the type of guy you simply call to talk to, Mel. He's a player. I thought you would have realized that after five minutes of talking to him."

"He's *your* friend," she reminded him. "You're the one who practically threw us together the night of Dad's accident, and you sent him looking for me the night you and I had it out in the hospital."

"I thought I could trust him. Or at least trust that you wouldn't be fool enough to fall into bed with him." Brock stopped, narrowed his eyes at her. "Have you slept with him?"

"That's none of your business!" she gasped.

He shook his head, looked away. "So you have. Damn him! I thought even he would draw the line at fucking a friend's sister."

"It takes two to tango, brother. And since you're obviously intent on knowing, I'm the one who seduced him."

"Yeah, with loads of help from Mr. Jack Daniels," Brock said in disgust. "That was the night it happened, right? The night when he was supposed to find you and take you home ... to Dad's home, not *his*."

"I asked him to take me back to his place. If you're going to be angry with anyone, you should be angry with me. Despite what has happened between Reese and me, that man has been one hell of a friend to you since Dad's accident. You have no right treating him as the villain here."

Brock sighed and when he looked at her, his eyes were full of worry and concern. "I just don't want you to get hurt, Mel. Reese is ... well, he's not the one-woman type. The word love is nowhere in his vocabulary. If you fall for him..."

"I know what I'm doing Brock," she said, laying a comforting hand on her brother's shoulder. But did she really? Did she really know what she was doing when it came to Reese?

No! She hadn't known what she was doing where Reese was concerned almost since the moment they had met. She knew that Brock was right. Reese *was* a player. She knew she couldn't allow herself to fall for him unless she wanted *both* of them to come out completely trashed. Yet, hadn't she realized just the other night how deeply she wanted him, how badly

she longed to be with him again? Hadn't her heart opened to him the other night on the phone?

No doubt about it, she didn't have a clue what the hell she was doing. But what would it hurt to let Brock believe that she did? At least, that is, until it came time to pick up the pieces of her heart.

* * * *

"He's pissed at me," Reese said, backing the car out of the parking spot. Though he meant it as a question, it came out sounding more like a statement and Melody didn't answer. He drove for several miles in silence before he tried again. "Is he pissed because I came with you today?"

"He's pissed because I'm with you, period," Melody answered with an indiscernible glance in his direction. Then she sighed. "Pissed is probably the wrong word to use."

"Funny but I thought it was quite appropriate. If the man had had a hockey stick in his hand today something tells me it would be indented in my skull right about now."

"He thinks you're going to hurt me."

Reese fell silent. What could he say to that? Brock knew him, knew that he had never been in love, knew he didn't even believe in love. Yet, here he was spending time—a lot of time—with Brock's sister. He glanced at Melody, expecting her to be sitting ramrod straight, tense and staring out the windshield. But she wasn't. She was kicked back in the passenger seat, completely relaxed and looking at him. Her expression revealed absolutely nothing of what she was

thinking, but then she smiled and it didn't appear forced or fake at all.

"But you aren't going to hurt me." She said it so matter-of-factly, so certainly that he almost believed it himself. "I told him he was being stupid and, quite frankly, I think he owes you an apology for his behavior today."

Would he hurt her? Yes. Probably. If she fell for him, as in fell in *love* with him, yeah, in the end she would come out hurt. And it *would* end. Wouldn't it? Whatever had developed between them would surely come to an end eventually because Reese had never been the staying type. He had never been the happily-ever-after type. He had never been the loving type.

You're falling in love with this woman.

Diana thought he was. She had told him as much the night before she left town. But what did Diana know? These feelings of emptiness when Melody wasn't around, the tightness he felt in his chest when he thought of being with her, this inability to get her out of his head, it wasn't love. Was it? He was in lust. It was pure and simple animalistic attraction. No way was it anything more than that. Right?

"Mel..."

"Don't let Brock get to you," she bulldozed over him. "If I was stupid enough to allow myself to fall for you he might have reason for concern. But I'm not stupid. I know that the night I spent in your bed was just that—a night spent in your bed. We're both adults. We had casual sex with no strings attached. You came with me today because..." She paused,

laughed on a quick whoosh of air. "Why did you come with me today?"

"Because you asked me to." She eyed him suspiciously and he knew the response she was expecting. So he said it. "You see, I figured if I came with you today and played that ... um ... charm card I could convince you to come back to my place later for another round of that casual, no-strings sex."

She laughed and her lips widened in a dazzling smile that nearly made his heart stop.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. I'll give you points for the charm card, though. You're pretty good at selecting the right time to put it to use. I bet you're one hell of a poker player."

"Want to go back to my place and find out?" He glanced at her again, grinning mischievously. If she could see any of his indecision, his uncertainty, any of the turmoil that he felt inside in his eyes, she didn't let on that she could.

"Not on your life buddy. Your charm card didn't work that well today."

"Then how about going over to Garrett's with me?" he asked before thinking. What the hell was he doing? Asking her over to Garrett's house? If he showed up at the guitarist's house with a woman he would surely be opening a can of worms. But he had already asked and it was too late to back out now. Not that he actually expected her to come, anyway. She wouldn't say yes. She would want to get back home, to get away from him as soon as possible.

"Sure. Why not?" she shrugged and he nearly choked on his own saliva.

"It's a baby shower," he said quickly, hoping the knowledge that it wouldn't simply be them and another couple would discourage her from wanting to come. Except, she was a woman. Didn't women get off on baby showers and shit like that? "I don't know how many people will be there. It's not going to be your traditional baby shower. Suzanne has already had one of those at her parent's house in Florida last month. I know it will be the guys from the band and Alicia, Derek's girlfriend, and probably Garrett's parents."

"Do we have time to stop by a store? Do a little shopping? I can't show up at a baby shower without a gift for the guest of honor."

Shopping. Not only was he taking this woman to a baby shower where the people closest to him would all be in attendance, but he was going to take her shopping, too. Suddenly this was beginning to resemble far more than a casual thing between them. This was the kind of stuff two people in a *relationship* did together, the kind of stuff he never ever did with a woman, except for maybe Diana, but they were just friends.

You're falling in love with this woman.

Holly Mary, mother of God, maybe he was. The thought scared him shitless.

* * * *

"When is the baby due?" Melody watched as Suzanne Cassidy Henry lowered herself into a chair at the head of the oblong dining room table.

Suzanne was a petite little blond with all the features of a small town schoolteacher. She was quite a contrast to her husband, Garrett Henry, who was unbelievably tall and looked as though he had just stepped off the set of a Steven Segal movie. Suzanne was straight laced, a bit on the shy side and very pregnant. The poor thing looked as though she were about to burst, and Melody's heart went out to her suspecting how incredibly uncomfortable she must be. She was also far from the snobbish, unfriendly woman Melody had expected to meet. Reese had told her about Suzanne Henry and Alicia Addison on their way over. He had told her that both of them were from immensely wealthy families in Florida and she had pictured high society bitches with whom she would have absolutely nothing in common. It had taken only a few minutes before she decided she had been completely wrong.

Suzanne rubbed her huge stomach and sighed. "My doctor says it could be another week. I say it was due yesterday."

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"No." She shook her head. "Garrett didn't want to know. He wants it to be a surprise. I was afraid if the doctor told me, I would let it slip."

"It's a girl," Alicia predicted as she joined them. She put down a glass of wine in front of Melody, a mineral water for Suzanne and took a seat across the table from Melody with her own glass of wine. "It has to be a girl. Suzanne and I need all the help we can get handling these men around here."

Melody smiled. She had taken an instant liking to Alicia Addison. Casually dressed in a pair of skin-tight jeans and an

equally tight baby-doll-style black shirt, she was the type of woman who could fit in just about anywhere. Her hair was a deep tawny brown and hit just below her shoulder blades. Her eyes were the color of the water in the deepest of oceans. She was about the same height as Melody with fair skin and a friendly, easy-going smile. She, too, was the complete opposite of what Melody had expected her to be. Nothing about the woman made her think of big money.

"Especially since Diana keeps deserting us," Suzanne agreed.

Alicia picked up her glass of wine and took a sip. "I'm still working on that one. She wants to be here with us. She's even said as much. There's nothing holding her in St. Petersburg anymore. Not since her parents moved to the island and I moved here. If she could make the move on her own she would be here tomorrow but..."

"She can't do it alone and she's too proud to accept the help you've offered her," Suzanne finished. "I think the store is a great idea. It's exactly what she's always wanted."

"Except that the money will be coming from my bank account instead of hers," Alicia reminded her. "At least to start." She turned her attention to Melody. "Diana's dream has always been to own a New Age shop. She's working at one now in Florida but she isn't happy. I'm trying to get her to go into business with me, let me front the money to get it started then I would take a percentage of the profits."

"It sounds like a fair deal to me," Melody agreed. "But I can also understand Diana's point, as well." Though she hadn't actually spoken to the woman either time their paths

had crossed, she had instantly envisioned Diana as a strong, powerful woman. Giving in to a form of defeat—that was probably how she saw taking money from a friend to get what she wanted—and admitting that she couldn't do something on her own, didn't seem like something the woman would do easily.

"I think she will eventually accept my offer," Alicia said, staring into her wine glass. "But something else is going on that she isn't telling me about. She seemed ... I saw her the morning before she left and she was acting strange, as if she was battling something inside. I asked her about it, but she told me not to worry."

"Maybe she was simply sad because she was leaving," Suzanne suggested.

Or in love with Reese and doesn't want to say it. Melody kept the thought to herself. She still found it hard to believe that Reese Torrin, asshole of the century—even if he had made her see a completely different side of him in the last few days—could simply be *friends* with a woman as strikingly beautiful as Diana.

"Maybe," Alicia said thoughtfully. "Whatever it is that's bothering her I think she needed to get back to her surroundings to connect or commune or whatever it is she calls it." She looked to Melody again. "You didn't actually get the chance to talk to Diana when she was here, did you? Did Reese tell you she is a witch?"

Melody tilted her head at Alicia and tried to picture the woman she had seen on two separate occasions as being

anything but kind. "No. We never talked but she looked so ... nice."

Alicia laughed. "By witch I don't mean that she's cruel or a bitch. I mean a real witch as in cauldrons, spells, rituals ... She's Wiccan."

Again, Melody pictured the woman—her long scarlet hair, her amazingly colored eyes, her choice of clothing—and then she remembered the feeling of power that had made her shiver at the game. Diana was a witch. "Now *that* I can believe."

"She told us about you," Suzanne said, her eyes twinkling. "That Reese had found someone. But we didn't believe her."

"I think it was the part that he's actually fallen in *love* with someone that we found so hard to believe," Alicia added with a chuckle. "Mr. Never-Gonna-Settle-Down, who doesn't believe in love and prefers to have everyone think he's an asshole, is in love. Who would have thought?"

Melody gaped at her in utter disbelief. Both women laughed at the expression she knew must have been on her face. Fallen in love! Were they talking about the same Reese? She looked over her shoulder as if expecting him to be standing behind her. But, of course, he wasn't there. No one was there. Garrett's parents had left nearly an hour ago and the guys—Reese, Derek, Garrett and James—had disappeared into the music room to play around with their instruments. She was alone at the table with Alicia and Suzanne, two women who had apparently escaped from some nearby mental institution.

"Since you have about the same look on your face that we did when Diana told us, I take it he hasn't even hinted the truth to you," Alicia said with an ear-to-ear grin. "Shit, he probably hasn't even admitted it to himself."

"But ... We aren't ... Reese isn't..." Dammit. She was so rattled she couldn't even form a complete sentence. Could Reese really be falling in love with her? No. No way. That was simply wishful thinking. Wasn't it? No. It wasn't even wishful thinking because she didn't *want* Reese to be in love with her. Did she?

"Uh oh, it looks like Reese isn't the only one lying to himself." Suzanne raised one perfect brow in question as she gazed at Melody.

Wow! Melody had dreamed so often in her life about having female friends, other women to talk to about woman things. But suddenly she wasn't so sure she wanted that after all. This was the kind of stuff women talked about—men, relationships, *love*—and maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing if she were simply a participant in the conversation rather than the subject.

"We aren't in love." There. She had said it. Finally. "Reese and I are..." What exactly were they? Friends? Not exactly if she compared what they had with what he appeared to share with Diana. Casual lovers? Well, yes, but that didn't seem to be saying enough. "We hardly know one another," she finally said.

"There's no rule etched in stone that says it takes a certain amount of time for two people to fall in love," Alicia said. "It just happens."

"It happened with me and Garrett," Suzanne chimed in. She giggled. "Garrett is so different from any man I ever found myself attracted to, but I fell in love with him almost on the spot, and here I am married to him and about to have his child."

"I would venture a guess that you probably already know Reese far better than either one of us," Alicia added and when Suzanne giggled again she smiled and said, "And I'm not talking just sexually either."

"I know him well enough to know that he's an asshole," Melody said. It was the only thing she could come up with at the moment to dispute the women's claims that she and Reese were falling in love. Only, as scary as it seemed, she had to admit to herself that they were half right. She was growing attached to Reese. Maybe not falling in love with him—that would be stupid, she knew—but she did want him, and bad.

"A minor flaw that can be overlooked," Suzanne said, swiping a hand in the air as if to wave Melody's comment away. "He isn't always an asshole."

No, he wasn't. Melody could agree with that. His other side, his non-asshole side, was the part of him that made her want him so. He could be so gentle, tender, caring, but it lasted only a moment before the real Reese Torrin shown through. He was a player. Brock had said it and she had already known it. She had to keep reminding herself of that. Trashed was exactly how she was going to come out of this—whatever *this* was—when it came to an end, and it would come to an end soon.

Sports Beats
by Tonya Ramagos

"It's the way he looks at you," Alicia said.

"And the way you look at him," Suzanne chimed in. "Trust us. The two of you are falling fast and you're falling hard. It's pointless to try to deny it and it's even more pointless to try to run and hide from it because it's not going to go away."

CHAPTER TEN

"My house or yours?"

Reese glanced at Melody and the mischievous twinkle that sparkled in his eyes made her laugh. The man just didn't give up. He wanted to have sex with her again and she had a feeling he wouldn't rest until she gave in. Except, she had seen something more in his eyes in that quick glance. Something more than simple sexual desire. Something that was akin to ... hope? But it wasn't just the hope of getting laid. Sure, he wanted her to say yes, to tell him to take her back to his place so they could have sex, but that look had said so much more. It was as if he actually *needed* her to say yes.

I think it was the part that he's actually fallen in love with someone that we found so hard to believe.

Dear God, could Alicia and Suzanne have been right? Was that what she was seeing in his eyes? Was he really falling in love with her?

This wasn't supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to fall in love with her and she was certainly not supposed to fall in love with him. They were supposed to have no-strings, no-promises sex. There were supposed to be no complications, no emotional entanglements, no broken hearts—just sex. He was supposed to be the perfect candidate for that sort of affiliation. He was a player with no intentions of settling down, a man who was such an asshole the last thing she would want to do was fall in love with him.

Except, Suzanne had been right. Melody was falling in love with this man. She was falling fast and falling hard just as Suzanne had said. And if she had read the look in his eyes correctly just now, *he* was falling in love with her. But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing after all. Maybe, in truth, they were meant for one another. He had no intentions of getting married, no dreams of a family. He had told her as much the other night on the phone. And, even though deep down she did harbor the dreams of having a husband and a family, she had accepted long ago that they were things she would never have. Men eventually wanted children. When they found someone to marry, having a child was the natural next step. Only, giving a man a child was something she would never be able to do. The accident she'd had so many years ago had made sure of that.

Reese had said he didn't want a family. But what if he someday changed his mind? He was only in his early thirties, a man still young enough to one day want to father a child. It wasn't as though time was running out. Except, he had sounded so convinced, so certain when he had said it. Melody knew there were men in the world that lived their entire lives never wanting a child of their own. Was it too much to hope that Reese was one of those men?

He was waiting for her answer. He shot her a quick inquiring glance again before returning his attention to the road, and she knew she had to say something. "Still haven't given up on that poker game for today, have you?"

He smiled. "That depends on how good of a poker player you are. If you suck at it, then yeah, I still want to play."

"Afraid I'll take too much of your money?" She was baiting him. She knew money would have nothing to do with the type of poker game he would want to play.

"More like afraid that the wrong one of us would lose all of their clothes." He wiggled his eyebrows and she laughed again.

"It could be a pretty tight game. You seem to have forgotten that I was raised by men, and those men taught me everything I know. This isn't a sweet naïve woman you're dealing with here."

"Don't I know that," he said on a bark of laughter. He slowed the car to a stop at a traffic light and turned to face her. Her took her hand in his and gazed at her, all playfulness gone from his expression. "I don't want to play poker Melody," he said softly, his voice husky and loaded with desire. "What I want is to make..." He stopped abruptly and there was no way she could miss the look of shock that flashed through his eyes. It was quick, just a flicker, but it had been there. "I want to have sex with you."

The light changed and he dropped her hand and punched the gas. *I want to make love to you.* That was what he had almost said and it had obviously shocked him as much as it had her. Maybe more, if his actions were any indication. A man like Reese Torrin wouldn't use the term "making love" in reference to getting laid. He would say exactly what he had: "have sex." Had he ever told a woman he wanted to make love to her? Had he ever even been in love? The thought that she could be the first and only woman to ever capture this man's heart was almost preposterous. But, then again, he

was the first man to have ever broken through the walls she had built around her own heart.

"Your place," she finally said and she prayed she wasn't making the biggest mistake of her life. He had gotten to her, crashed through her defenses, and apparently she had gotten to him as well. That thin string she had wondered if she had been imagining between them was thicker, more visible now, leaving no doubt that it was there. But was it strong enough not to snap? Was he really the man she had thought she would never find? Was he a man who would be satisfied with what she could offer him and never long for what she couldn't? Dear God, she hoped so. She really hoped so.

* * * *

He probably wouldn't know what to do with the prize once it was received. Reese remembered thinking exactly that the first night he and Melody met—well, in between their meetings to put it more accurately. The thought had come when he had been walking across Eric Amonte's estate just before Cody Stillman's frizzy haired girlfriend stormed out the door, back when Reese thought Melody was only a fantasy. And then that fantasy had materialized in the form of a barely-there purple bikini and his life had been changed forever. Come to find out, he *had* known what to do with her. Everything had seemed to come to him naturally since that night. But, as he led her into his house, he suddenly became absolutely clueless. All the things that had come so naturally with her since that night seemed to have deserted him.

Was it because, for the first time since they had met, she was walking into his home with a completely level head on her shoulders; that tonight she was neither saddened by her father nor angry and drunk over a confrontation with her brother?

Or was it because for the first time in his life he knew that the sex he was about to have wouldn't simply be sex; that for the first time in his life he didn't have the comfort of knowing that he was about to get laid and when it was over they would go their separate ways?.

Damn. This was freaking him out. He watched her as she removed her coat, hung it on the hook next to the door and turned to face him.

"Do you have any coffee?" She started walking toward the kitchen not waiting for an answer. "I've got this sudden craving for some coffee."

Who would have ever thought the he would fall in ...
Would fall in...

"It's in the cabinet above the coffee maker." He followed her into the kitchen and leaned a shoulder against the refrigerator as she went through the motions of making a pot of coffee. She looked so at home in his kitchen, almost as if she belonged there. His heart literally flipped inside his chest as he realized it even *felt* as if she belonged there.

Love. There. He had thought it, admitted it. He, Reese Torrin, the man who absolutely positively had never believed in love had fallen star-dazed head over shaking feet in love with Melody Forbes.

Holly shit.

She glanced at him, smiled awkwardly and began pouring the water in the top of the coffee maker. "Does tonight feel as strange to you as it does to me? There must be something in the air."

"It's the first time you've come to my house with your complete head attached. It's the first time that I know you're here because you want to be with me instead of not wanting to be alone or being so drunk and horny that who you're with doesn't matter."

She flipped the on switch on the side of the coffee maker then grasped the counter in front of her and hung her head.

Was he wrong? Was there something in her head after all that had compelled her to agree to come home with him? Was there something more than the simple need to be with him? He pushed himself off the refrigerator and in three steps he was behind her. She had worn her hair down tonight and it fell over her shoulders, hiding her face. He leaned into her, and pulled one side of her hair back to afford him at least the side profile of her face. Her eyes were closed and he could feel the pulse in her neck beating rapidly under his fingertips.

"Is there something you haven't told me, Melody?" He kept his voice soft, compassionate even though the mere scent of her was driving him wild. He didn't want to talk. He wanted to kiss the soft side of her neck where his fingers lay, wanted to spin her around, rip off her clothes and bury himself deep inside her.

"I shouldn't be here," she said in a barely audible whisper.

"I'll take you home if you don't want to stay." And on the way back he would drive his car off the side of a cliff because

killing himself was the only way he was going to keep himself from wanting her. But he didn't tell her that.

She sighed and let out a breathless chuckle. "God, you're doing it again."

"Doing what, baby?" He couldn't resist any longer. He had to kiss her. He brushed his lips across the soft sweet skin of her neck and her head rolled to the side, offering him more skin. "What am I doing, baby?" he asked again, his tongue snaking out for a taste.

"Being ... sweet. Being a gentleman. I can handle you when you're being an asshole but this nicer side of you ... It throws me off balance."

"Am I supposed to make you stay?" His hands moved around her waist and he felt her quick intake of breath as he moved up to cup her breasts. "Am I supposed to tell you that now that I've got you here you can't leave until you have sex with me? Is that what you want to hear?"

"Yes. No. I ... I don't know."

Reese removed his hands from her breasts and turned around. Her head remained bowed and he hooked a finger under her chin and lifted, forcing her to look at him. Her eyes were dark with confusion yet, at the same time, they seemed to sparkle with need. "Do you want to be here with me, Melody?"

She hesitated for only a moment before nodding. Yes, she wanted to be with him. That was all he needed to know, at least for now. She wanted him but she didn't know what to do about it. Well he did. He stepped back from her just enough to give her room to move and said, "Take off you shirt."

She gazed at him and he could see the confusion fade, heat replacing her indecision. She grabbed her shirt by the hem and slowly, seductively, allowed her fingertips to glide up her sides, pulling it over her head and dropping it to the floor at her feet. She wore a blue lace bra with a front clasp, very low cut and extremely sexy.

Reese shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from touching her. Damn but the woman did have some sexy underwear. One wouldn't guess by the over-sized shirts and blue jeans she always wore that underneath were the slim straps of material that would push a man's blood pressure to dangerous levels.

She stood there, her hands limp at her sides, gazing at him as if awaiting his next order. She liked this, he realized—being told what to do, being dominated. She was a strong woman, a woman who lived most of her days in complete control. She was a woman whom he had learned could hold her own in a room full of men and be treated as one of the guys. But when it came to sex, she liked to relinquish her control. She liked to *be* controlled.

"Take off your bra," he said to her next, and as he watched her fingers wrap around the clasp between her breasts, hot anticipation shot straight to his groin. The clasp gave way and her breasts spilled out even as she slid the straps off her shoulders and down her arms. The bra landed on the floor on top of her discarded shirt.

Reese took another step back. Now he was no longer within reaching distance. His hands fisted in his pockets so tightly his knuckles hurt, but he wasn't going to touch her.

Not yet. Instead, he stared at the rounded beauties with their dark-circled nipples that stood stiffly awaiting his attention. His mouth watered, wanting to taste them, to nibble them, to bite them, so he clenched his teeth together in defiance.

He saw goose bumps rise to the surface of her skin. He had turned the heat way down before leaving that morning and the air in the house had grown chilly. "Are you cold?"

"A—a little," she admitted.

"It won't last long. Take off the rest of your clothes."

She obeyed without hesitation, taking her time as she removed first her shoes and socks then her pants and finally the little slip of blue lace material that served as her panties. She removed each article of clothing slowly, her movements seductive, teasing. When all of her clothes were pushed to the side in a pile on the floor she stood before him, her head held high, her eyes full of heat and excitement.

Reese thought he could stand there like this forever with her naked in front of him, presenting herself for his appraisal. He wished he could capture this moment, hold it forever in time.

"May I speak?" she asked, her voice a bit shaky. Was she nervous or just cold? He wasn't sure. When he simply nodded in response, she asked, "What are you thinking right now?"

"How incredibly, amazingly beautiful and sexy you are," he answered, skimming his gaze up and down her naked flesh.

"How I wish I had one of your cameras."

"I—I have one," she stammered slightly. "A small one. In my purse."

Reese felt a slow grin spread across his lips. She had a camera. Of course she did. She was a photographer. He doubted she ever went anywhere without at least a small camera. And she was offering it to him, offering to let him photograph her naked. Damn. How could he help but love this woman?

"Get it." He watched her walk away, loved the way the muscles tightened in her perfect ass with each step.

She disappeared for only a moment before returning with a small silver camera. "It's digital," she said. Her hand shook slightly as she handed it to him.

He took the camera, looked at it for a moment figuring out the buttons and then brought it to his face. "Step back," he told her as he turned the camera sideways to capture the full length of her in the viewfinder. When he could see her from head to toe he said, "That's good." The camera made a barely audible click as he snapped the picture. "Touch yourself."

She lifted a hand, paused. "Where?" There was no way he could miss the small mischievous smile that tilted her lips. Oh yeah, she was enjoying this.

"You're tits. Cup them, run your thumbs over the nipples, play with them."

She did as he asked and, oh holly Jesus, the sight of her touching herself made his dick harder than he had ever thought possible. The camera made that almost silent click as he snapped picture after picture. Then he watched through the camera as one of her hands slowly trailed down her stomach and disappeared between her legs. No doubt about it. Reese had died and gone to Heaven.

His newfound love for photography began to fade as he became entranced instead by the movements of his super-sexy, super-tantalizing, super-WOW model. After several minutes he completely forgot about taking pictures of her, lowered the camera and simply stood there to watch. Her left hand was still cupping her left breast, fondling, caressing while her right hand delved between her legs. She used her index and ring finger to part her lips and massaged her clit with her middle finger. Her skin had grown flush, her eyes heavy lidded with pleasure and still she looked directly at him, watching him.

Reese could have come right then and there, without so much as a touch to his own body from her, his dick still safely enclosed in his clothing. The incredible show she was giving him had driven him that close. He had to think about drum patterns and tempo beats to calm his libido.

"Is this what you wanted?" Her voice carried to him like a feather on a cloud, soft and smooth.

His own voice, however, came out husky, breathless, and just short of sounding like a growl. "Yes." He wanted to close the distance between them, replace her hands with his own, but he knew if he did that at this moment, their lovemaking—he couldn't deny anymore that he would be making *love* to her—would be over too soon.

"Stop."

Her hands stilled and her gaze turned questioning.

"Come here."

Her hands fell to her sides as she walked to him, stopping only a breath away.

He took her right hand, the only contact he would allow himself at the moment, and brought her finger to his mouth. It tasted warm and sweet from her feminine juices. He leaned into her, allowing only their upper bodies to touch as he captured her mouth. Her lips parted instantly, her tongue darting into his mouth, tangling with his. God. Even kissing the woman drove him to the edge of nuclear explosion.

He clasped her trim waist and lifted her onto the countertop. Her hands were in his hair, her tongue devouring him and he had to catch her legs to keep her from wrapping them around him as he sat her down. She was so fucking hot!

Inspiration struck and he broke the kiss, pulled away from her. "I think you need to cool off a bit."

She tilted her head, a mixture of confusion and trepidation tainting her gaze, as he stepped away from her.

"Close your eyes," he said and reached blindly behind him for the handle of the freezer door. He continued to watch her as he reached in, grabbed a piece of ice from the ice bin and returned to her, leaving the freezer to close of its own accord. When he brushed the ice cube over her already taut nipple, her eyes popped open in surprise and she gasped.

It was then that he finally allowed himself a taste, just a quick one. He leaned down, grazed his tongue over her nipple then brushed it again with the cube of ice. He alternated, a lick, a brush of the ice, on first one nipple and then the other, until she was panting, with her back arched and her breasts pushed out for him.

"Reese. *Please!*"

He smiled, pushing her knees further apart as he trailed the ice cube down her abdomen, watching her shiver from the chill and anticipation. When he touched her between the legs with the ice he thought she would vault off of the countertop. She was so unbelievably hot, the ice so cold, he wouldn't have been surprised to see lightening surge from her body.

Satisfied that he had her teetering close enough to the edge, he tossed the ice in the sink and kneeled, burying his face in her pussy. He licked, drove his tongue in the warm sopping wet opening of her vagina and her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him to her, driving him deeper. The mere taste of her pre-cum had his body whirling in delectable delight.

He reached up and grabbed her wrists, pulled her hands from his hair and held them as he withdrew to lick and suck her clit. She groaned loudly, her breath so rapid he was almost afraid she would hyperventilate, and then she was screaming his name in warning. He didn't stop, though, and when she exploded, cum rushing out of her like a giant waterfall, he lapped it up, not wanting to waste a single drop.

When at last he lifted his head, and stood up between her legs, she was totally spent, breathless and looking at him with pure amazement in her eyes. Damn but he did love this woman. She was sexy. She was hot and undeniably beautiful. She was amazing, compassionate, strong yet delicate, in complete control yet able to relinquish that control at just the right moment. She was everything he had ever fantasized about, everything that he hadn't known he wanted, and

whether she knew it or not, she was his. And not just for tonight. She was his forever.

* * * *

The orgasm left Melody in a daze and completely out of sorts. She had heard herself screaming, panting and pleading, had felt the wondrous things he had done to her with the ice cube and his tongue, and yet it had been as though she was watching the entire exchange. It felt too phenomenal to believe that she was actually feeling it. It was the closest thing to an out-of-body experience she had ever experienced. In the aftermath, her muscles continued to convulse with a furiousness she had never before felt. Her pulse refused to return to normal. And as for her heart, well, that would never again be the same.

"Are you okay?" She heard Reese ask quietly and when she shook her head he chuckled. "Want to do it again?"

Her eyes widened and his face came into full focus as the fog in her mind slowly began to clear. He was grinning at her boyishly, in complete triumph, but it was the look in his eyes that gave her pause. His gaze was so warm, so tender, so ... loving. And she knew in that moment that it was truly too late to run, too late to hide.

"Definitely." She finally answered albeit breathlessly. "But you'll have to give me a minute or two. My mind is saying yes but my body hasn't yet recovered."

"Are you sure about that?" he asked, his hand moving between her legs to cup her pussy. His thumb slipped between her folds, the callused tip grazing over her swollen

clit and she sucked in a breath even as her body miraculously began responding to his touch.

Holly Mary mother of God, how did the man do it? She should be exhausted, ready to pass out from the exertion of the orgasm he had just given her and yet suddenly all she wanted was to feel it again.

He kept touching her, tenderly massaging her, caressing her, all the while gazing at her with that look in his eyes that made her heart swell. She reached for him and, dammit, he was still fully clothed. That was so not going to work.

"I think it's time for you to follow an order or two," she said, grabbing his wrist to stop his fondling of her clit. She couldn't think when he was touching her like that and no way was she going to come again until he was buried deep inside her.

He lifted one eyebrow at her in amusement. "Oh really?"
"Take off *your* clothes."

He did as she requested but with more speed and less seductive movement than she had used when she had removed hers. Still, the sight of him undressing for her was an erotic experience in itself. She allowed herself to stare at his dick, hard and huge, darting out in front of him and she licked her lips.

"Don't do that," he said in a heated warning.

Her gaze leaped to his face, then to his eyes and she could actually see his control slipping.

"You keep looking at me like that and I'm going to come."

"Really?" She pointedly looked at his dick again, unable to believe that she could make him go over the edge by simply looking at him.

He stepped to her, lifted her face with one finger. "Really," he whispered and kissed her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, locked her legs around his waist and pulled him against her as he ravaged her mouth as effectively and passionately as he had feasted on her pussy just moments before. His hands slid beneath her ass and then she was completely in his arms.

"I want you in my bed," he said against her lips as he began carrying her through the house to the bedroom. "I want to be inside you. I *have* to be inside you."

The way he said it, so urgently, made her blood sizzle. She had never dreamed that she could *need* a man as badly as she needed this one. And dammit, his bedroom was too far away. They were only halfway down the hallway when she reached the point where she couldn't wait any longer. She wiggled in his arms, attempting to position herself to pull him inside her.

"Whoa, baby." His hands tightened on her ass, stilling her. "I don't have a condom yet. Hang on just a couple more seconds."

We don't need a condom. She nearly said it but stopped just in the nick of time. Instead, she kissed his neck, then licked and nibbled, drawing out a moan from him that made him walk faster. She wanted to tell him that she longed to feel his dick inside her without the barrier of a rubber. But if she told him that now she would have to explain. She knew

he wouldn't simply take her word for it. He would want to know why. He was way too cautious not to question. And even though she found solace in the fact that he had said and acted as though he didn't want a child, she would have to tell him everything and engage in a serious conversation, which was the last thing she wanted to do at the moment.

With a speed that reminded her of a contestant in a store-wide shopping spree, he ran the last few steps into the bedroom and quickly stood her on the floor beside the bed. She was laughing now, watching him as he jerked open the nightstand drawer, snatched out a condom, and had it on before she could even blink. Then she was in his arms again, and he was leaning back on the bed, pulling her with him.

She straddled him and finally he was inside her. She saw the relief wash over his face, the same relief that coursed through her body as she began to move. His dick stretched her, filled her and the feeling was indescribable. He cupped her breasts, used them as handlebars, steadying her as she sat up straight on his dick and began to bounce.

"Melody, slow down, baby," he said through gritted teeth. "This isn't going to last long at this rate."

But she didn't slow down. She didn't want to slow down. Instead, she moved faster, bounced harder, driving him deeper and deeper inside her until they were both screaming from the force of their orgasms.

Spent and breathless for the second time in less than an hour, Melody fell limply onto his chest. His arms wrapped around her and he hugged her close, nuzzling his face against the side of her neck.

"God, that was incredible," she said at the same time that he said, "I love you Melody."

She froze, her heart stopping in mid-beat. He had said it so quietly and she had been speaking at the same time yet there was no doubt in her mind that she had heard him correctly. Slowly, she pushed herself up, resting on her elbows, and gazed down at him.

He stared back at her with such devotion and seriousness that even if she hadn't been certain of what he had said, she would have found all the confirmation she needed right there in his eyes.

He laughed but it wasn't a humorous sound. It was full of nervousness, uncertainty. "I've never said that to a woman before ... to anyone before," he admitted. "I never thought I would ever feel it much less say it. But you've showed me that love does exist Melody and I *do* love you."

She had never thought he would say it, either. Though she had seen signs of it in his eyes, felt it in his touch, she had never expected him to admit it. She felt herself smile as a contentment she had never before experienced settled in her veins. She nodded, lay down again and nested her mouth against his ear as tears of happiness rose to her eyes. "I love you, too," she whispered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Suzanne had had the baby. The call had come before dawn, just as Reese and Melody had slipped into a sexual-bliss-induced sleep. Garrett, of course, was completely ecstatic—the happy father of a new baby girl.

They were all there—Garrett, Derek, Alicia and James—packed inside Suzanne's hospital room when Reese arrived, and every one of them, including Reese, was sporting outrageously goofy grins. It reminded him of the new Enzyte commercials. The ones where all the people had wide-mouthed, big-toothed smiles and looked impossibly retarded.

But Reese suspected he looked more retarded than his friends because he had been given double gifts tonight. One of his best friends now had the baby he had so desperately longed for and he, well, he had Melody's love.

Melody's love. The thought should have terrified him, left him shaking in his boots. Instead, he felt as though he was walking on water, king of the world.

Reese weaved his way through the room to Suzanne's beside and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "How's the new mommy?"

Suzanne sighed but it was one of contented and sheer happiness despite how exhausted it sounded. "Feeling like she somehow got pinned under your drumsticks as you played *Disaster Strikes*," she admitted, referring to one of Façade's heaviest, most powerful songs. She glanced around the room then looked back at him. "I didn't expect you to come alone."

"Funny, I expected you to *be* alone. How did you get the doctors to let all of them stay in here?"

"The nurse on duty is a fan," Derek explained. He was leaning against the wall and his girlfriend, Alicia, walked over to him, settling herself in his arms. Though the two of them had been a couple for many months now, Reese saw for the first time just how in love they were. He glanced at Garrett who sat on the opposite side of Suzanne's bed and knew that he, too, was desperately in love. How could he have missed the joy that had shown in their faces for so many months? Because he hadn't believed what they felt was possible. He hadn't believed in love.

"More like the nurse on duty has a serious thing for the band's lead singer," Alicia corrected teasingly.

That wasn't surprising. Women always fell over their own feet trying to get to Derek. The five-foot-seven, muscle-bound, shaved head, heavy metal star was one of the biggest heartthrobs in the music industry. He had broken many hearts when the ladies' man had settled down with Alicia Addison.

Suzanne lightly touched his arm. "Where is Melody?"

"She stopped downstairs to check on her father."

"He's still in the hospital?" Garrett asked.

Reese nodded. "Melody thinks he'll be released tomorrow." He glanced at a utilitarian clock on the far wall. It was after 7:00 a.m. "Make that later today," he corrected.

The door to the room eased open and a long-legged blond in a nurse's uniform entered. She looked like someone out of central casting for a porn flick with the top three buttons

unfastened to reveal an impressive set of breasts. She also had a trim set of hips that swayed seductively when she walked and tanned legs that seemed to go on for miles. No doubt about it, the woman could have been next month's Playboy Bunny and, oh yeah, she definitely had the hots for Derek.

Even though Alicia was present, and even though Derek had his arms wrapped possessively around her, the nurse didn't hesitate to make her attraction clear by her movements and looks in the vocalist's direction. But, while a lot of women would have come unglued by the nurse's flirtatious actions toward Derek, Alicia simply smiled wider, obviously secure in her relationship. She was used to women coming on to Derek, but she knew who held his heart.

Reese wondered fleetingly how Melody would react in the same situation. He had never gotten as much female attention as Derek, but he did get his fair share. Would Melody get jealous if another woman flirted with him that way? Or, would she smile and take it in stride the way Alicia always did?

"The little one is awake and wanting her Mommy," the nurse purred, only half her attention focused on her patient. "I thought I would bring her in here if you're up for it."

"Yes, please," Suzanne beamed.

"I'll bring her in here for a while but then you guys," the nurse's eyes stopped on each of the men in the room, "will have to leave so Mommy can get some rest." She locked gazes with Derek, licked her lips, then turned and left the room.

"Damn man, that woman is trying to be putty in your hands," James laughed.

Derek smiled and pulled Alicia even closer. "Yeah, but my hands are already full with all the putty I need."

* * * *

Melody stopped outside the door to Suzanne's hospital room and listened to the barely audible laughter coming from inside. It sounded like the whole band was in there and they probably were. She had learned very quickly that the guys were tight, like brothers. Jim, or was it James? she couldn't remember exactly, may have been the new guy, but he had been instantly adopted as not only the band's new bassist but their newest brother as well.

She heard Reese's voice and, although she couldn't make out what he was saying, her heart picked up its pace. He had told her that he loved her more than once throughout the night and she knew without a doubt that he did. A feeling of contentment and happiness, that she had never expected to feel in her life, nearly took her breath away.

But then she knocked softly and opened the door to the room and her heart lodged in her throat. He was holding Suzanne and Garrett's baby girl and the look in his eyes as he gazed down at that tiny bundle of life said that he wished she were his.

Have kids? No way. His words echoed in her head. He had sounded so certain, so convinced. But he had sounded the same when he had told her that he didn't believe in love, yet

he had told her only a half hour before when they had parted at the elevator that he loved her.

No. He may have thought that he didn't want children. He may *still* think that he doesn't want children. But the true desire was right there in his eyes. How could she have ever allowed herself to hope for anything different?

"That's going to be one spoiled little princess."

It was Jim, no, James—his name was definitely James. He was tall, nearly as tall as Garrett, who stood well over six feet. His face was long and thin, his features chiseled with thin lips currently turned up in a knowing smile and smoky gray eyes that seemed to swirl with intensity.

"She certainly has that one wrapped around her tiny finger already," Melody agreed around the lump that had begun to form in her throat. Reese was still holding the baby against his chest, one hand supporting her delicate head while he tenderly stroked her tiny rosy cheek with the other. He looked so comfortable, so content, much more at ease than she would have thought he would be while holding a tiny infant. But worse, he looked so at home, as if he were a natural father getting practice for the day when he would hold a child of his own.

Suzanne caught sight of Melody and greeted her with a bright but exhausted grin. "I was just asking about you. Come here." She gestured for Melody to come closer.

Heart thudding, the lump in her throat growing more painful by the second, Melody tentatively approached the bed. Reese looked up just as she reached his side and smiled. "How's your dad?" he asked, reaching out with the hand that

had been stroking the baby's cheek to lightly graze it down Melody's arm.

"He's..." The word cracked and Melody swallowed, tried again. "He's doing good. The doctors said he can go home after lunch."

"Wish I could go home after lunch," Suzanne sighed and settled her head deeper into the pillow.

Garrett laughed and leaned over to plant a kiss on her forehead. "You really look like you're ready to go home, sweetheart."

"By noon I will be," she argued. "I hate hospitals."

"Who doesn't?" Reese chuckled. "Do you want to hold her?"

Melody started. She hadn't realized she had been staring at the baby, but Reese had noticed and now he wanted her to take the infant. Oh God. No, she didn't want to hold her. She didn't want to feel that baby-soft skin against her own, that tiny body curled in her arms. She didn't want to experience the emotions, the joys that came with holding a new life. She had felt it once before when Stanley's oldest daughter had her first baby and the emotions, the need, the longing had nearly killed her.

"No." Melody shook her head and then, afraid her reaction would give her away, she added, "She looks too comfortable. I don't want to disturb her. Besides, I can't stay long. I need to get to the house and prepare for Dad's release."

Reese looked at her, obviously confused. He nodded, looked back at the baby, gently kissed her cheek and then carefully passed her to Suzanne. "I'm sure the Playboy nurse

will be ready for you to get some sleep soon so I'm going to go. I'll check on you and the little princess here later this afternoon."

"Okay," Suzanne said but her full attention was focused on her baby. "Thanks for coming. You too, Melody."

Melody had to fight to keep from bolting to the door. The lump in her throat had grown enormous and her eyes burned. She had to get control of herself before she burst into tears. But Reese was right there behind her. She couldn't stop, couldn't take a much needed moment to collect the myriad of emotions that were so close to spilling.

"Baby, is something wrong?"

She felt him reach out, attempt to slip his arm around her waist, and she walked faster, her gaze fixed on the elevators down the hall. Oh why did the hall have to be so long? It felt like she was the heroine in a horror movie with the killer stalking her down a long hallway that narrowed and kept getting longer and longer no matter how fast or how far she walked. Only it wasn't a killer stalking her. It was Reese. He didn't want to hurt her but what he didn't know, what he couldn't know, was that he already had.

No. She had hurt herself. She had allowed herself to fall in love with him, to believe things that she had known nearly all of her life were not safe, or smart, to believe. She had allowed herself to dream and to actually think that her dream was coming true. She had allowed herself to hope, to feel, that she could actually have a future with this man, a future that included a long serious relationship, possibly even marriage, all without the slighted need or desire for children.

"Melody. Stop!" He caught her by the arm just as she finally reached the elevators that were, of course, closed. Continuing the scene from the horror movie, the endless hall finally does end only to leave her trapped in front of closed steel doors with no escape. If the script went on, she should be frantically pushing the elevator buttons now, screaming and praying for one of them to open while her stalker got closer and closer. Instead, she had only managed to push the button once—at least that was all that was required to summon the elevator to her floor—before her stalker had spun her around to face him.

"Melody, what the hell is wrong, baby?"

"Don't call me baby," she snapped and the tears she had been so desperately fighting to hold in spilled down her cheeks. Did he have to use that particular endearment right now?

Startled and beyond confusion, he dropped his hand from her arm. He shook his head, opened his mouth to speak, closed it, ran a hand through his hair. "Why are you running from me?"

She turned away from him, silently pleading for the elevator doors to open. "I have to get out of here," she managed to choke.

"Okay, we'll go."

"No. I don't want you to go. Brock is here. I'll get him to give me a ride home."

"What the..."

She felt his hands on her shoulder again just as the elevator doors slid open. Several people spilled out, all

wearing ear-to-ear grins. Probably a family eagerly coming to check out a new baby brought into their clan. The instant they were all out of the elevator, Melody all but dived in, punching the button that would take her back to the floor where her father was. Reese had no time to move or say anything else before the doors began to close. The last glimpse she saw was of him standing there utterly baffled, his eyes wide with confusion, concern, and hurt.

* * * *

What the hell had just happened? For more than a week Reese had been asking himself that very question over and over again. And as he had each and every time he asked that question, he wanted to put his fist through a wall. He shouldn't have let her run away from him that way. She had been upset, *crying* even. Yet, he had let her run away. Dammit! *Why* had she run away? He had replayed that morning at the hospital more times than he could count and still the answer eluded him.

"You had to start believing in love didn't you, you stupid shit," he chastised himself as he went into the kitchen for a bottle of beer. Why the hell hadn't he simply fucked her and walked away just as he had done with every other woman in the past?

He twisted the cap off the beer bottle and leaned against the counter trying like mad to answer that question. What was it about her that made her stand out, that caused her to get to him the way no other woman in his life had?

Everything! She was strong, level headed, a woman who would stand up to him without a second thought and not back down. She didn't pretend to be someone she wasn't, didn't try to fit in. She didn't have to. And as for the sex ... God, sex with Melody had been off the scale.

He glanced around the kitchen, remembering the way she had looked when she stood in front of him completely naked, touching herself, fondling herself, as he snapped pictures of her with her digital camera. It was those pictures, now downloaded to his computer, that had driven him closer to insanity in the last week than he had ever been in his life! The way she had perched on the countertop, her legs spread wide for him and the ice cube—he would never look at an ice cube the same way again.

That had definitely been one incredible night. Little had he known that mere hours later she would run from him, tears streaming down her cheeks and completely unwilling to talk.

He heard a knock at the front door and froze, the beer bottle halfway to his lips. Was it Melody? Had she simply needed time to sort things out and was now coming back to him? It was that hope that made him rush to the door. But when he snatched it open it was Brock he found, and the man didn't look happy. He stood tall and straight, hands in tight fists at his sides and Reese wondered for a fleeting instant if he was about to get punched.

"If you're here to blame me for what happened with you sister you can save your breath and leave," Reese said and walked away, leaving the door standing wide open.

"Guilty conscience, Torrin?" Brock asked and stepped through the doorway. He kicked at the door, closing it with a loud thud. "How do you know I didn't just come by to share a beer and catch up?"

Reese laughed but it was completely humorless. "You haven't wanted to say two words to me since I started seeing your sister and no, I do not have a guilty conscience. I didn't do a damned thing wrong. As for the beer, help yourself. There's more in the fridge."

Brock disappeared into the kitchen, returning seconds later, beer bottle in hand. "So if you didn't do anything wrong what the hell happened? And don't tell me nothing because I know that's a damned lie. I've never seen my sister like she's been this last week."

"Why don't you try asking her?" Reese plopped down on the sofa and reached for the television remote. The action movie he had been watching—or at least attempting to watch—had been replaced by some mushy chick flick. He clicked through the channels and finally settled on ESPN.

"I *have* tried." Brock sat down in the recliner and sighed. "She won't talk to me."

"Sounds like we're both in the same boat. I've tried calling her several times. She won't answer the phone." He had even tried going to her house. Her car had been in the driveway but after five minutes of knocking without so much as a "Go away" in response, he had given up and left.

"You didn't break things off with her?" Brock was eyeing him suspiciously. He knew it was because of his reputation. He knew that as one of his friends Brock had seen him fuck a

woman and walk away. It was what he was expected to do. But that wasn't the way it was with Melody.

"Look man, if I had only wanted a fuck out of Melody things would have been over between us a long time ago. You know as well as I do that I slept with your sister the night I found her at that bar. Hell, I would have had sex with her the first night we met if you hadn't called to say your father was out of the coma! She was ready and dammed sure willing. But she..." He broke off, shook his head, took a long pull from his beer.

"She what?"

"Forget it." Disgusted with himself, with Melody, with the entire situation, Reese tossed down the remote control and stood from the sofa.

"She what?" Brock asked again, obviously unwilling to simply forget it.

Just like my heart is unwilling to forget Melody? He had tried. Since that morning at the hospital when she had ran away from him, he had tried to forget her, tried to convince himself that he had been going through some sort of mid-life crisis or something. Thinking he was in love. Ha! How absurd. Except he hadn't simply been *thinking* he was in love. He *was* in love. No matter what he tried to tell himself, or what he attempted to force himself to believe, it couldn't cover up the truth. He had fallen in love with Melody, and she had ripped his heart out and left it in shreds.

He was pacing, one hand shoved in the pocket of his jeans, the other clinching the beer bottle so hard it hurt. Everything hurt. Life had been so much easier when he hadn't believed

love existed, when he had thought his Kate Beckinsale look-alike to be only a fantasy.

"She what?" Brock asked for the third time when Reese still didn't answer. The man wasn't going to let it go.

Reese wished he had taken lessons from Melody on how to ignore a knock at the door. He didn't want to deal with Brock right now. He didn't want to deal with anyone. He simply wanted to curl up with his bottle of beer and lick his wounds. But his friend wasn't going to let that happen.

"Holly shit! You weren't actually about to tell me she got to you?" Brock laughed the question but when Reese turned to face him his laughter died a quick death. "Oh my God. She did get to you. You're in love with her."

Reese tipped his beer bottle at Brock before downing the remainder of its contents and heading into the kitchen for another. Brock followed close at his heels.

"Did you tell her?"

"Yeah, I told her and she said it back. We had an amazing night of incredible sex that began right here in this kitchen..."

Brock shivered. "Spare me the details man. This is my *sister* we're talking about."

Reese would have laughed if he hadn't been so frustrated. "Then ended it in the bedroom with mutual I love yous and very little sleep. It was the night Suzanne had her baby."

"Damn. The next morning you took her with you to see that baby."

Brock had said it as more of a statement than a question but Reese answered it anyway. "Yeah, she stopped off to see your father and then met me in Suzanne's room. Minutes

later, Melody was running away from me and I haven't seen or talked to her since."

"What happened in Suzanne's room?"

"Nothing. Melody came in, said hello and not long after we said goodbye. We were in there together for all of five minutes, tops."

"Was the baby in there, too?"

Reese glared at Brock, utterly confused. He didn't know what difference it made but he answered anyway. "Yeah, I was holding her when Mel came in."

"That's why she ran from you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reese turned off the headlights before pulling into Melody's driveway. He didn't want to alert her to his presence just yet. He needed a moment to collect himself, his thoughts, his nerves. He was actually shaking! He hadn't been this damn nervous when the band had played on stage before fifteen thousand screaming fans—the largest crowd they had ever seen—last year in Mexico.

But sitting behind a drum set was a whole lot different than confronting the woman he loved. Hidden behind his drums, he was in a world all his own. Whether he was practicing at home or performing on stage before thousands of fans, the instant his stick hit the drum for the first beat he was transported, taken away from reality to a place where only he and music existed, where the only emotions he felt were sheer fun, blissful happiness and serenity.

Not so when it came to Melody. With Melody he felt a myriad of emotions he hadn't know he was capable of feeling, at least not when a woman was involved. Anger, depression, emptiness, loneliness, sadness, compassion, and, most of all, love—they were all emotions that she had brought out in him. It had been the anger and loneliness that had been the driving force each time he had tried to call her since that morning at the hospital and since the last time he had showed up at this house and attempted to see her. He had been angry as hell at her for running away, and more lonely than he had ever thought possible.

Tonight, it was the deep sadness, the emptiness, the compassion and the love that was paramount. He finally knew why she had run from him. But, her assumption was wrong, and he had to make her see that.

And that's where the nervousness came in. How was he going to convince her that, when he had told her he didn't want children of his own, he had been telling the truth? How was he going to make her see that he would never change his mind? How was he going to make her see that all he truly wanted, all he would ever need was her? It certainly wasn't going to be easy, especially for a man like him who had absolutely no clue how to handle such emotions, much less approach a situation where those emotion were so heavily involved. But he had to try.

With a heavy sigh, followed by several deep breaths, he stepped out of the car and walked to the front door. There was a light on in the living room, but he couldn't see anyone moving around inside. He raised his hand to knock but paused, his knuckles a mere inch from the hardwood door, when a sound drifted to his ears. It was a sound he had heard before, a sound that was nearly unmistakable—the sound of a basketball bouncing or being dribbled over concrete.

Reese stepped back, angled his head and listened harder, trying to determine where the sound was coming from. It was definitely close. Next door? Behind the house maybe? Melody had said she sometimes played basketball. Did she have a small court set up in the back yard? He hoped so. If he could catch her outside there would be no way she could avoid him. Not that she could avoid him this time if she was inside the

house. Brock had given him a key on the assumption that she would ignore his knocks again.

The dribbling sound continued as he stepped off the porch and walked slowly through the front yard. It became louder as he rounded the side of the house and moved closer to the back yard. A bright floodlight suspended from the roof line illuminated a sizable slab of concrete and a basketball net behind the house.

And there she was.

His steps faltered until he stopped completely and just stood there watching her. She was wearing navy blue sweatpants, a matching sweatshirt and a pair of ragged but comfortable looking tennis shoes. Her hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. Her back was to him and he had to fight the urge to run up behind her and yank her into his arms. She would probably jerk away, maybe even punch the shit out of him.

Despite the fact that he wanted, *needed*, to hold her right now more than he needed oxygen, he knew they would have to talk first. Until they talked, until he made her see the truth, he suspected she wouldn't let him within arms reach of her.

Intently focused on her game, Melody dribbled the basketball, rotating it from hand to hand as she made her way toward the net. With a skill and grace that would have made Michael Jordan stop and take notice, she jumped and sent the ball sailing cleanly into the net.

"Nice shot. You should play for the pros."

* * * *

Melody froze, the basketball falling through the net and bouncing loudly away from her. She let it go, more intent on the voice that had spoken and how fast she could get away from the owner of that voice. She didn't want to see him right now, didn't want to talk to him. *For Pete's sake, can't the man take a hint!*

But apparently he wasn't going to. Apparently he wasn't going to leave her alone until she faced him, until she made him face the indisputable truth. Their relationship was over. It had to be, even though he said he loved her, and she did love him. This last week without him had been one of the most difficult of her life, but they couldn't be together anymore—it was just that simple.

It hurt to know that what they had shared was over. God, how it hurt! But it was best to end it now. The hurt now was far less than what it would be a few months or even a couple of years down the road when he decided he needed the one thing nearly everyone in the world wanted at some point in their lives, the one thing she would never be able to give him.

Melody turned slowly, hesitantly and there he was. Her heart tripped at the sight of him, and a longing so forceful it nearly knocked her off her feet swept through her very being. He stood at the edge of the yard, backlit by the floodlight. He was dressed simply, in a pair of jeans and a solid black T-shirt, the sleeves hugging his muscular shoulders and forearms. God, how she wanted to feel those strong arms around her. She allowed her gaze to run over him and she wanted more than life itself to free him of those clothes and press her body against his nakedness.

She put the lid back on her desires, denying herself what she wanted, what she needed, and turned away. She walked to the grass at the edge of the concrete, picked up the basketball, and began to dribble. "Go home Reese."

"No. Not until we talk."

She watched in her peripheral vision as he walked toward her. Then he stopped at the edge of the concrete as if he needed to stay at a safe distance away from her. Smart man.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She faltered at the question and the basketball slipped from beneath her palm, but she recovered swiftly, catching it before it bounced too far away. Tell him? Did he somehow know?

She ignored him and continued to dribble the ball down the court until she was in position for a shot. She leaped, extended her arm and pushed the ball toward the basket. The ball hit the backboard, bounced off the rim and sailed away from the basket, landing on the concrete with a loud thud and bouncing toward Reese.

He caught the ball and held it. She turned to him and crossed her arms, but still she didn't speak.

"I'm not leaving here until we talk," he shrugged, tossed the ball from one hand to the other as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"I don't want to talk," she said through gritted teeth. Why should they? Talking wouldn't do any good. It would give her the capability to bear his children. That had been stripped from her long ago. "Give me the ball back."

"Come get it." His eyes shone with the challenge.

She took a step toward him and stopped. She could see that he had no intention of letting her have the ball. She also knew that if she got within arms reach of him he wouldn't let her go. "Nice try but I'm not falling for that one."

He stepped onto the concrete and began to dribble as he slowly came toward her. She stepped back, held up her hand for him to stop, but still he kept coming. "I'm making it easy for you, Melody. I watched you just now. You can play. This," he dribbled the ball faster, a little more forcefully, "is the best I can do when it comes to basketball."

She bolted toward him, hoping to catch him off guard, but he was fast. He dodged her, never once losing the rhythm of his dribble. She stopped, planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. He smiled back at her with a knowing, mischievous ear-to-ear grin.

Melody felt her temper boil. She tried again, moving this time in the opposite direction, hoping to cut him off, but again he dodged her. Each time she went for the ball he seemed to sense her intention and avoided her like a pro. "I thought you didn't play basketball."

"I don't. But I do know how to dribble pretty well."

"I'll say," she said on a bark of humorous laughter. "Just give me the damned ball, Reese."

"Not until you agree to talk to me." He was dribbling circles around her now, teasing her, taunting her, all the while keeping that wide grin on his handsome face.

In one last-ditch effort she lunged for the ball. He moved to prevent her interception, but in doing so put his body directly in her path. She collided with him hard and he lost his

balance. His arm went around her, taking her down with him as he fell. He made an *oof* sound as he landed half on the concrete, half on the grass, and she was right there on top of him. The basketball, once again, bounced out of reach, stopping when it met the grass on the opposite side of the concrete.

Immediately, Melody tried to get up but both of his arms were around her now, crushing her to him, preventing her from moving. "Let go of me," she growled, still wiggling, even though she knew it was pointless.

"Not a chance, sweetheart."

Her leg slipped between his and in an instant she knew how to get him to release his hold on her. Swiftly, she raised her knee but before she could make contact with his balls he had flipped her over on the ground and pinned her solidly beneath him.

He gazed down at her, shock evident in his expression. "You were going to knee me in the nuts." He sounded so disbelievingly, so flabbergasted that she nearly laughed. "Is that what it would take Melody? Injure me so that I can't produce children and then I can have you back?"

Surprise froze her body as well as her blood. He did know. "How..."

"Brock came by my house earlier. Between the two of us, we figured out what's going on with you. Only, it still doesn't make sense to me. Why would you run from me, avoid me, give up what we have together because of that?"

"I can't have children, Reese," she whispered and felt the tears burning her eyes. God, this was why she hadn't wanted

to have this conversation with him. If he would have just left her alone, accepted the fact that they couldn't be ... "I'll never be able to have children."

"Yeah, because of the accident when you were younger." His voice was low now too, calm and full of so much compassion that she was sure the tears she was so desperately fighting were going to flow. "Brock told me all about it. But what does that have to do with us? I told you I don't want children."

"Maybe not now," she sniffled. "But you will. I saw the way you looked at Suzanne's baby. Babies have a way of awakening things inside a person, bringing out wants they didn't know they had. You may not want children now but one day you will and I can't ... I'll never be able to..."

The dam on her tears broke. There was no stopping them. She was utterly amazed that she had any left. She had given in to tears more since the morning she'd run out of the hospital than she had in her entire life! Yet, here were more of them flowing from her eyes like a waterfall.

"Oh Mel," he whispered. He released his hold on her wrists, slid his arms beneath her head and neck, then pulled her against his shoulder as she cried. It was several long moments before he spoke again. "Listen to me," he whispered in her ear. Slowly, gently, he lowered her head back to the ground. "Look at me," he said, and she reluctantly opened her eyes. "I love you."

At his heartfelt confession, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut again. God. Where was the asshole side of this man when she needed him?

He caressed her soaked cheek with one tender thumb as he continued, "I've never said that to a woman before, never felt it before. Hell, I didn't even believe in it until you came along. And if you think that I'm going to let go of the only woman in my life I have ever loved just because she can't give me a child, then you have one hell of a shock coming, sweetheart."

"But..."

"Shh." He placed a finger over her lips. "No buts. I like children, yes. Garrett and Suzanne's baby is beautiful. But that doesn't mean that I want one of my own."

"You'll change your mind," she said around his finger. "One day you'll decide..."

He was shaking his head. "If by some strange tilt of the world that I do decide I want a child someday, if we decide that we want a child someday, there is always adoption."

We. He had said we. Despite it all, he still wanted her. He still loved her. And he was talking now like they truly did have a future together, like there would always be a we. As she looked into his eyes, she could see that he was speaking not with just his head but with his heart.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you, Melody?" he asked as he brushed her lips with his fingertip. "I love you. I need you. I want you. More than anything I want you. I want to spend my life with you. Everything else can be figured out along the way, as long as I have you."

His eyes were glistening. Was that tears making them shine that way? Oh God. He seemed so certain, sounded so sure. How could she continue to deny him, to deny herself?

Unable to speak, her throat completely closed off with emotion, she nodded.

His eyes closed and she felt him heave a sigh of relief. When he opened his eyes again she saw his heart in them. "Thank you," he said in a barely audible whisper. And then he kissed her.

Bright wild lights exploded, electricity surged and Melody knew there was no going back. This man was in love with her and she was in love with this man. There was no denying it, no running from it. Suzanne and Alicia had been more right than they could have known when they had told her that. Whatever happened from here on, they would figure out along the way. That's what Reese had told her. And she believed him. How could she not?

His hands skimmed up her sides, sliding under her sweatshirt until he found her breasts. His fingers were cold and she gasped into his mouth as he slipped them beneath her bra to her bare flesh. She could feel him hard and strong against her, the heat from his arousal burning through the layers of their clothing. It had only been a little over a week since she had felt him inside her but that had been far too long.

His lips left hers to trail wet kisses along her cheek, her neck, to nibble her ear lobe. She moaned and spread her legs until he slipped between them. It felt so right, like he belonged there. He began to gyrate against her, pushing his body hard against hers. Had it not been for their clothing he would have been inside her.

The clothing had to go.

With fingers trembling from need, she slipped her hands between their writhing bodies and unfastened his jeans. His zipper slid down easily and she stuck her hand inside his briefs, then around his stiff cock. He grunted, moaned and began tugging at her sweatpants. She lifted her hips as he pulled, wiggling until she kicked her way out of the sweats, her underwear and her shoes.

Her bottom completely bare, she should have been shivering from the cold, but she didn't even notice the chill. The heat he had built inside of her was too great, and apparently he shared the same fire because, when she pushed his pants and briefs down to free his cock, he remained hard, rigid and ready for her.

For the first time, he didn't reach for a condom. There was no need and he knew that now. For the first time, there was nothing between them as he slid himself into her wet heat. The feeling was all too incredible and they both sighed in mutual pleasure and delight.

He stopped, buried inside her to the hilt and gazed down at her. "Marry me, Melody," he whispered, his voice catching with emotion. "I don't want to take the chance of ever losing you again. Say yes. Say you'll marry me."

Melody didn't give herself time to think or to worry about the future. She stroked the side of his face and nodded. "Yes, Reese. I'll marry you."

He smiled—with his lips, with his eyes—and then he began to move inside her and right there in her backyard under the stars, in the light of the floodlight, in the cool Philadelphia air,

Sports Beats
by Tonya Ramagos

he made love to her with his mouth, with his cock, with his heart.

The End

About the Author

Tonya Ramagos is a best-selling author of young adult romances. After several years of writing solely for teens, she decided to let her imagination soar to include erotica, romances and mysteries for adults. When she's not writing, she's reading. Though she was born and raised in South Mississippi, she is now a resident of Tampa, Florida where she lives with her husband Jarett and handsome boys Gavin and Korlin.

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