



Finding Home

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Her family, her friends and her conscience all say it's wrong to fall for the hustler she rescued from the streets. How come it feels so right?

When Megan first meets Mouth, a homeless teenage hustler, on the streets of L.A., he's the perfect subject for the street life expose she hopes will help her break into journalism. She doesn't expect to be drawn into his life and become his friend—or to take him in after he's been beaten and robbed by thugs.

As they learn to live together, a powerful attraction flourishes between Megan and the young man. Although he's street smart, tough and mature, he's also a youth in transition. When they finally give in to the sexual heat between them, Megan fears she's taking advantage of her position as his mentor.

Their relationship challenges every aspect of her life. Megan must make difficult choices between the conflicting demands of her friends and family, her career and love.

Warning: Explicit sex, reference to underage sex, graphic language, violence

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Bonnie Dee & Lauren Baker

Dedication

Heartfelt thanks to Annie for her invaluable editing of our raw copy, and to Erin for her professional advice; and also to Siobhan, Mel, Amanda, Becky, Brandy, Barb, Kathryn, Jo, Nancy, Sonia, Kassie, Jeri, Michelle, Shannon and all the flisters who provided encouragement and support for our writing from the start.

Chapter One

The street steamed and Megan's high heels left indentations in the tacky asphalt as she crossed to the sidewalk. Glancing down at her outfit, she decided her camouflage would serve. She wore a tight black skirt, a hot pink halter with crazy green swirls, three-inch heels and more make-up and jewelry than she ever wore. It was a look she might adopt when going out clubbing, but kicked up an extra notch. She could pass for someone who belonged on the boulevard. Sort of.

The trick was to watch what was going on without appearing like she was looking, so she leaned against a shadowed wall, her bare back scraping rough brick, and crossed one leg over the other. She took her time lighting a cigarette and was careful not to really inhale. She'd invested way too much money on patches to start that habit again. Breathing in the humid, rancid air trapped between tall buildings, she let the cigarette dangle between her fingers and watched the show.

A couple of trannies in mile-high boots, sequined clothes and shimmering body glitter stood at the curb shouting at each other and gesturing dramatically. Their fight escalated to name-calling and expletives before the queens strolled off down the sidewalk, still arguing.

Megan's attention was drawn to a vintage red Corvette which pulled to the curb. A young man with dreadlocks and skintight leather pants swaggered up to the passenger side and leaned down. His upper arms rested on the frame and his ass jutted out behind him. He talked to the

driver for only a couple of seconds then opened the door and climbed inside. Megan wondered what signals had passed between the john and the hustler. How had eye contact been made from inside the dark confines of the car? It happened so quickly, she'd missed the silent communication.

Her cigarette burned down, and Megan pretended to take another puff. She was one of the very few women on the street. Hookers traditionally worked Sunset Boulevard. Santa Monica was for the boys. The sexual vibe here was thick and sultry as the summer air. Boys and men stood in pairs or groups or walked past on the sidewalk. Watching their conversations and pickups, Megan felt completely out of place and awkward.

She'd always wanted to be a reporter but was currently a copy editor at a weekly L.A. paper. Correcting other peoples' writing was not what she had in mind when she entered the journalism program in college. Megan decided the best way to get ahead fast was to write a freelance exposé that forced her boss to take notice of her talent. The homeless street kids who traded ass for cash were the focus of her story, but now she wondered how she'd thought it would be simple to approach one of them and strike up a conversation, let alone ask for an interview.

She looked around for anyone who appeared like he might give her a moment of time.

Farther down the sidewalk under the neon lit awning of a strip joint, a guy leaned against the wall, smoking a cigarette. He was sandy blond, wore a white muscle shirt, low-riding jeans and engineer boots. He gazed out at the street like he had all the time in the world to make a sale, like he'd be doing the customer a favor if he graced him with his presence. Relaxed and easy, he lounged and surveyed the street.

Megan crushed her cigarette under her heel and walked his way. She could bum a smoke or a light off him to get conversation started.

As she drew closer and saw his face, she noticed that while his posture might be relaxed, his eyes weren't. Light reflected off the whites as they moved restlessly back and forth scanning the people and passing cars. He was vigilant and ready to respond to potential clients.

Megan's pulse sped and her throat felt dry. She was completely out of her element here. There was no way she could actually walk over to him. Instead, she stopped and studied the posters plastering the window beside her. They announced that HOT ALL NUDE boys were just inside the door. For a low cover fee, you could see Live! Hot! Action! Dancers Reggie Lee and Dustin were appearing along with a bevy of pretty boys.

Megan turned from the window and caught the lounging guy glancing at her. She looked out at the street as if waiting for someone and wished to hell she'd never left her safe, comfortable shadow.

A few minutes later, a beige sedan glided up to the curb, the passenger door opened and a skinny black kid hopped out. He turned to address the driver, but the door slammed and the car pulled away from the curb. The boy had to jump back to avoid being run over. He chased after the car, hitting his hand on the rear panel before it accelerated out of reach. "Motherfucker! That's right, you better run! I ever see you again I'm gonna..."

The kid yelled after the driver for a few more seconds then turned to another teen on the sidewalk, a lanky boy with greasy, shoulder-length hair and a T-shirt that read "Bite Me!"

"Fucker stiffed me. If that no-neck, fat-assed, tiny-prick bitch ever comes round here again, I'm gonna personally make sure everybody on the walk knows! He ain't never gonna get another piece of ass down here."

A slight, pale boy ran up to the angry black kid from the sedan. He was shirtless and his scrawny chest reflected white like the moon, his cutoff jeans slipping down his narrow hips as he ran. He said something to his pissed-off friend, pointed down the street, and the pair of them took off. Megan wondered what he'd said and where they were going.

She ran her hands through her short hair, lifting it off her sweaty neck to let the air cool her skin. She considered going to the convenience store up the block and buying a soda. Then she considered simply going home. This whole adventure was a stupid idea.

A couple of men stopped several yards in front of Megan. They exchanged a small bag and some money. The dealer, a bald guy with an elaborate tattoo painting the canvas of his scalp, frowned at the wad of cash the customer had given him and said something.

The emaciated junkie, who looked like he might jitter apart, began talking quickly and gesturing wildly.

The dealer grabbed a fistful of his shirtfront, wrenching the bag back from him.

The junkie twisted free and ran—straight toward Megan.

She jumped to the side as the dealer tackled the junkie, sending him to the pavement, then viciously kicked his ribs.

Blood ran from the man's nose and he rolled into a fetal ball trying to protect himself.

Megan backed away from the violence and bumped into a body. She whirled around and confronted the lounging boy. "Sorry," she said, stepping away from him.

He nodded.

Meanwhile, the attacker, having delivered one last order to pay up, stalked away from his victim. The other man moaned and writhed on the ground.

Megan wondered if she should call 911 or try to help the man. When she took a step in his direction, the boy behind her said, "Don't."

In another second, the injured man got up from the ground, swearing and holding his hands to his gushing nose. He limped off down the sidewalk.

Megan looked at the young man beside her.

He gazed back with heavy-lidded blue eyes. His hair was tousled and overlong, his cheeks and chin scruffy with unshaven stubble. Megan was so close she could smell him, a mixture of cigarette smoke and sweat, which should have been off-putting but was surprisingly arousing.

"You shouldn't be here. It's not safe." He spoke around the cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

Megan laughed at the obvious irony. "You think?" The adrenaline coursing through her subsided a little. She extended her hand. "My name's Megan."

He stared back at her, not offering his name or his hand.

Megan took his cue and settled back against the wall beside him, arms folded. She continued watching the street. From the corner of her eye she saw the boy take the cigarette from his mouth, drop it to the ground and grind it underfoot.

"How often does that happen?" she asked after a moment. "Not the fight. I mean, that kid who didn't get paid."

He was silent so long she didn't think he was going to answer.

"Ricky," he finally said. "He knows better. You always take the money first."

He hadn't really answered the question, but at least he was talking. Megan looked up the street, thinking about what else she wanted to ask. Farther up the block, another boy was getting into a car. Megan turned back to her companion. "Hey, how do you know when...?"

He was no longer beside her. He stood at the curb, forearm resting on the door of a BMW as he talked to the driver. In a moment, he opened the door and got inside. Break time was over.

She watched the boy's profile through the car window as it closed. His face was white against the dark interior, his expression blank as he stared ahead through the windshield. The car drove off and he was gone.

Megan stared at the red taillights turning a corner. She pushed off the wall and walked toward the lot a block away where her car was parked. There was a bitter taste in her mouth, probably the cigarette, but also a faint nausea after the scenes she'd just witnessed. All she wanted to do was get home to the security and comfort of her own world.

Back in her apartment, Megan kicked off her too-high heels and went to the fridge for a beer. She popped the top, threw herself down on the couch, flipped open her laptop and began to write. The faces of the street boys haunted her. She stared at the glowing computer screen. It was easy to write about what she'd seen, but how could she depict what it felt like down there on the boulevard?



The next day at work was so normal, it made the previous evening seem like a surreal dream. From morning coffee until she knocked off at 6:30, Megan slogged through her office routine. She chatted with co-workers and edited copy. The urge to completely rewrite Abbie Carolton's boring article about the chili cook-off was hard to resist. Megan knew she was a better writer than Abbie. It burned her to have to correct instead of completely revise Abbie's articles.

In the afternoon, the managing editor, Gerald Rossi, called her to his office.

Megan entered and sat, afraid she was going to be bitched out again for her perpetual lateness.

Rossi pushed a red-marked article across his desk toward her. “Abbie Carrolton complained about the hatchet job you did on her piece about the parking garage.”

She gazed at the paper on his desk. The article was about an accident due to structural damage that had brought shoddy construction work to light. The desire to change phrases and punch up Abbie’s description had been irresistible.

“Proofreading, not surgery,” Rossi reminded her.

“Yes, sir.”

He folded his arms, leaned back in his chair and regarded her. “I realize you’re anxious to make a big splash. Every journalist dreams of being a Woodward or Bernstein, but you’re more likely to spend the next twenty years covering city council meetings and dog shows. Before your career gets even that interesting, you have to put time in on the bottom rung.”

Megan nodded. Her cheeks burned. It was embarrassing that her aspirations were so evident. She tried not to care that Rossi made her feel young, naïve and foolish.

Rossi added in a voice probably meant to sound kind and paternal, “Don’t worry. You’ve got potential and a lot of drive. I’m sure you’ll make your mark.”

“Yes, sir.”

The rest of the day, she dreamed of proving Rossi wrong with the amazing article she would write. A few interviews, photos and a unique angle for her story would make her career. There was no reason to waste time as a copy editor. She was too talented for that.

No more nerves. Tonight she would get an interview and start her story.



Back on the street that evening, Megan looked for the lounging boy under the awning, but he wasn't there. She leaned against her patch of wall and psyched herself up to approach one of the other hustlers, but before she roused the courage, the kid who'd gotten booted out of the sedan the night before came to her. He swaggered over, chock full of attitude.

"I seen you here last night." He moved in close, invading her personal space.

Megan held her ground despite her urge to back away.

"What you lookin' for, girl? Maybe I got it." He grinned, revealing a missing front tooth that made him look like a second grader—a slightly dangerous and sexually potent second grader.

"I'm writing an article. Got a quote for me?" She was proud of herself for keeping her tone light and relaxed despite her pounding heart.

"What you writin' about?" His black eyes narrowed.

"You." Megan folded her arms over her breasts and continued to meet his gaze. "Working kids like you. What your life is like, how you got into hooking, stuff like that."

"Shit." He backed off, shaking his head. "Why the fuck I want to talk to you about that? Why you want to write about it?"

"People are interested. They want to know how someone gets into a situation like yours, and they want to know how they can help."

"Help? They can help by coming on down here and giving me a hundred bucks for a fuck. That's how they can help. I need cash, hear what I'm saying? Not some do-good bitches trying to get me off the

street.” He glared and retreated a few paces. “You some kinda social worker or something?”

Megan followed him. “No. I told you, a reporter. Talk with me for ten minutes. Answer a few questions. I promise I won’t put anything in the article you don’t want.”

“Naw, I don’t think so. I gotta protect my rep, you know. Wouldn’t look good talking to some reporter.” He grinned. “But I do know somebody who’s a real talker. He’ll tell you anything you wanna know.” The kid pointed.

Megan turned.

The lounging boy was suddenly back in his spot, slouching against the wall.

“That’s Mouth. We call him that ‘cause he never stops running his. Go ask him. If he talks to you then you can come back and see me. Maybe I’ll change my mind.” The kid laughed and strutted away.

“Hey,” Megan called after him, “What’s your name?”

He turned and delivered another of those big, gap-toothed grins. “They call me Li’l Ricky. Only I ain’t little where it counts, know what I’m sayin’?” He grabbed his crotch and winked at Megan, then turned and sauntered off.

Megan looked at the boy under the awning, bathed in the glow of pink neon. He shifted his back against the wall, finding a more comfortable position, and drew a long drag on his cigarette, letting the smoke out in a thin, steady stream through his nose.

It had been two years and one month since Megan’s last cigarette and the nicotine craving still ached like a sore tooth sometimes. Watching his sensual enjoyment of the cigarette awakened more than one kind of desire in her. She drew a deep breath and walked up to him. “Hi. Remember me from, uh, last night?”

He slid a sideways glance at her.

"That boy Ricky said you could help me with something. It's a writing project I'm working on."

He looked away from her without answering. Either he was considering speaking or waiting for her to give up and walk away.

"I'm a reporter. I just want an interview. That's all. Really."

"What are you reporting?" He stared at the street, dropping the hand with the cigarette to his side.

"I'm writing about street kids, how they get in that situation and what they do to survive." When the boy turned and looked through her with his cool blue eyes, Megan's idea for her article suddenly sounded completely stupid. How could she understand his life from asking a few questions? But she was here and she had his attention. Bracing herself, she plunged on. "I have a few questions about your background, a little about your daily life and what your hopes are for your future."

He snorted in derision.

"If you prefer the interview to be confidential, we could go to that diner." She gestured down the street. "I'll buy you dinner. You answer my questions. Quick and painless." She smiled.

"How much?"

"Excuse me?"

"Fifty bucks for twenty minutes. My time is valuable."

"Um." Megan calculated the cash she had available and what bills she needed to pay. "I can give you, uh, twenty." He seemed to be considering so she added, "Plus the meal. It's all I can afford." The ethics of paying for an interview were questionable, but she decided this was a one-time transaction.

His gaze slowly wandered over her from head to foot.

Megan wanted to wrap her arms around her body to cover it.

Finally he nodded. "Okay."

"Great." It sounded way too enthusiastic. She repeated in a less spunky tone, "Great."

This young man was so self-possessed he made her feel like a child. He strolled toward the restaurant with long, easy strides. Megan had to walk quickly to keep up.

She sat across from him in the booth, torn vinyl scratching the back of her legs. Inside the diner, she could see the boy more clearly than in patches of neon and shadow. His eyes seemed a brighter shade of blue in the fluorescent light. He scanned the menu and placed his order. The strappy, once-white T-shirt he wore showed off his well-defined arm muscles when he passed the menu back to the waitress. The material of the shirt molded to his chest, outlining the bump of each nipple pressing against it.

Megan quickly lifted her gaze back to his face.

He stared at her, eyes flat and calm as a lake on a hot summer day.

She could read nothing in them and wondered what he could possibly be thinking of her.

"You have questions?" he prompted.

"Oh, uh, right." Megan pulled out her notebook and a small recorder from her purse. "You don't mind if I tape this? It's easier than writing everything down."

He considered a moment then nodded.

She pressed the button and spoke. "Interview with...Mouth. White male, age...?"

"Seventeen."

"Can you tell me a little about your family and your parents?"

“There was just my mom.” He didn’t offer anything else. Megan began to understand why Ricky had laughed when he suggested Mouth for an interview. He wasn’t a talker.

“How did you come to be on your own?”

“My mom was an addict. After we got evicted, there didn’t seem to be much point in sticking around anymore. I could take care of myself better than she could.”

“You didn’t have any relatives to stay with?”

“No. I stayed at a friend’s place for a while, but I couldn’t live there forever. Then I hooked up with some other kids who live in this abandoned building.”

“What about a foster home? Did you consider that?”

He stared at her for a second like she was stupid. “No. I’d rather be on my own.”

“How did you reach the point of,” she searched for a polite way to phrase the question, “considering prostitution as a source of income?”

“Some of the kids I knew were whoring, but I wouldn’t at first. I was sure I could find a job. But the days went on and I had no money. This kid, Donnie, convinced me sucking cock was a pretty simple way to make fifty bucks. So one night I did it.”

Megan swallowed. “How did you feel about it?”

“I didn’t feel anything. He was right. It wasn’t such a big deal and I had enough money to eat for a few days.” His voice was perfectly steady and emotionless.

Megan felt the cold reality of his answer hit her in the chest. Jesus, what kind of a life was that for a kid? She stared at her notepad, scribbling a few words, afraid he might see the pity in her eyes. “So how old were you when you did that? When you first sold sex?”

“Sixteen.”

He hadn't been on the game all that long then. Megan remembered what she'd been like at sixteen when the whole focus of her life was school, she had an unrequited crush on the captain of the football team and her knowledge of sex was still mostly theoretical except for a little fumbling with Ray Marsden at a house party one summer evening. And even then, nothing much had happened.

"May I ask about your early sexual experiences?" She referred to her list of questions. "How old were you when you first had sex?"

"Fourteen." Again, his answer was succinct, and Megan had to ask him to elaborate.

"Kristina Taylor. Eighth grade formal. In back of the gym. Less than five minutes."

"How did you feel about it?"

"Embarrassed. But she was cool about it and it was better the next time and even better after we'd had more practice." There was a hint of humor in his tone despite his blank face.

"When did you realize you were gay?"

"I'm not."

Megan paused, taken by surprise. "But your clients are male."

"What I do is work. Doesn't mean I like it. You know anybody who works at McDonald's and loves the job?" He smiled slightly for the first time.

"True." She returned his smile.

The waitress returned with Mouth's meal and a soda for Megan, who turned off the recorder.

The boy tore into the burger, his jaws bulging as he chewed an oversize mouthful. He didn't look at her as he methodically ate his way through the food, chased by great gulps of soda.

Megan wondered when he'd last eaten.

If it bothered him to be watched, he gave no sign of it, but then anyone who engaged in intimate acts with strangers on a daily basis must have long ago lost all self-consciousness.

“Why do they call you Mouth?” she asked when he’d finished his burger and she’d put on the recorder again. “Ricky said it’s because you’re such a talker, but it’s nothing to do with that, is it?”

He looked at her significantly, eyebrows raised and a smirk on his lips.

“Listen, even if I know why, I need some quotes from you.” Megan felt her cheeks flush and her tone was sharp.

He shrugged. “I’m good at blowjobs.”

She fought the desire to shoot back “How good?” and said instead, “So it became your nickname.”

“Yeah, well it’s better than Ass, don’t you think?”

Megan had trouble taking his teasing lightly. “So you also engage in penetrative sex?” She sounded like a prissy schoolteacher, but couldn’t find a better way to phrase the question.

“No. I only do blowjobs and handjobs. Mostly guys want blowjobs. Because I *am* good.”

“And that’s all you do?” She felt like a pervert poking through other people’s dirty laundry, which in a way was exactly what she was doing. Rossi had better publish the damn article when she was finished.

“Now and then, some guys pay me to jerk off over them. Or they want to suck me off.”

“They do? And you...?” Her cheeks burned hotter as her questions brought more explicit answers. She couldn’t help feeling this interview would be easier if he wasn’t so attractive.

“Yeah, they do. I can close my eyes and use my imagination to get off. It beats sucking cock.” He critically examined a burnt fry, setting it to the side of his plate.

Megan looked down at her written questions again. She’d hoped the conversation would flow more easily, but it seemed to be getting more stilted as the garish details of his life were laid bare in front of her. “Are all your clients men or do you also get women?”

He didn’t answer immediately. When she glanced up, he was watching her speculatively. “Guys. But I had a client who wanted me to go down on his wife once. So, yeah, I guess I do do women.” His voice grew huskier.

A shiver passed through her and her crotch tightened in response to his suggestive tone. Shame followed immediately on the heels of her arousal.

She took a long sip of her soda. This was ridiculous. The kid was a prostitute, she was paying for his time and maybe he thought she wanted more than an interview. Or maybe he was simply messing with her because he could. Either way, she had to be professional and remain in control.

Megan looked outside at the cars driving slowly past and wondered how many of their drivers came here to look for boys like Mouth. She wondered who they were, these men who paid him to suck them off. Not to mention the client who was apparently happy to incorporate him into his marital relations. Megan wondered whether any of the men she knew, co-workers or even friends, used prostitutes. Statistically, she figured it was likely.

Mouth took a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his hip pocket, shook one out and placed it between his lips, then offered her the pack.

She shook her head. She felt like having one more than ever. “I have a few more questions I’d like to go through and then it can be all for today if you want.”

“You’re paying. You call the shots.” He took a long, deep drag and exhaled in her direction.

Megan resisted the temptation to inhale the smoke. “Do you always practice safe sex?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t swallow come.” He was doing it again, trying to make her uncomfortable then watching her for a shocked reaction.

She focused on her questions. “Even when clients offer more money for unsafe sex?”

“Yes.”

“Do they often?” It seemed absurdly dangerous to take that chance.

“Yeah. But I won’t. I’m not stupid. I don’t want to catch anything.”

“Do you get tested regularly?”

He nodded.

“Do you take any drugs?” Megan thought he seemed together in a way most of the other kids she’d seen weren’t. He wasn’t jittery or shaking with crystal meth cravings and didn’t have that dead-eyed, desperate look.

Mouth took another drag on the cigarette before tapping ashes into the saucer in front of him. “Sometimes. But I’m not a junkie, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t use needles or do fucking crack.”

“You said you live in an abandoned building. If you don’t use money for rent or drugs, how do you spend it?”

“I want to get an apartment and need enough rent money to keep me inside this winter. I don’t plan to spend my life sucking cock and living on the street.” He looked away across the restaurant. The hard set of his mouth told her he was embarrassed to have admitted his goals.

“Do you keep in touch with your mom?” she asked to fulfill her own curiosity.

He was silent, removing the cigarette from his lips and grinding it out in the saucer. “She’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.” Megan murmured the obligatory response.

He absently spun the saucer around in a circle. “She wasn’t always like that... Wasted. When I was little, she hadn’t even really started drinking much yet.” He paused as if trying to decide how much to share about his early life. Finally he simply said, “Things were okay then.”

He seemed to be on the edge of actually revealing personal feelings. Megan waited quietly for him to continue.

He gave a little shrug, his eyes refocused, and he looked at Megan as if conscious of her presence again. He reached across the table, grabbed her hand and turned it to read the watch on her wrist.

She felt a second of shock at the sudden contact of his warm fingers.

“Time’s up.” Abruptly, he slid out of the booth. Before she could say a word to thank him for the interview or ask to meet him again for more questions, he headed for the door.

Megan stared after him as she turned off the recorder.

Chapter Two

“...close my eyes and use my imagination to get off. It beats sucking cock.”

As she got ready for work the next morning, Megan listened to the previous evening's interview. It was strange listening to Mouth's voice in her own space, like bringing a piece of him home with her. She leaned in close to the mirror and carefully lined her left eye in black then pulled back to examine her face. Her makeup was conservative, not at all the extravagant application she wore on evenings out. The liner accentuated her dark brown eyes, making them seem even wider than they were.

“I had a client who wanted me to go down on his wife once. So, yeah, I guess I do do women.”

God, even without his physical presence, that voice gave her a shiver of lust, which was absolutely unacceptable. Megan changed her nose ring from a double hoop to a simple stud, irritated with herself for not just saying “screw Rossi” and wearing what she wanted. She blotted her lipstick then pursed her lips, assessing her make-up job. Against her pale oval face, her dark eyes and bright lips were a startling contrast. She frowned and pinched her nose, willing it to be a little smaller, then stood up straight and lifted her breasts, willing them to be a little bigger.

She artfully tousled her dark curls, thanking the fashion gods that messy hair was in because she would never be able to achieve smooth, straight, shampoo-commercial hair.

“I don’t plan to spend my life sucking cock and living on the street.”

Megan gave her image a last assessing once-over as she listened to the boy’s young-old voice share his meager hopes for a better life. She turned away from her reflection with a shake of her head, flicked off the recorder and carried it with her as she left the bathroom.

In her bedroom, Megan rummaged through dirty clothes on the floor to locate her favorite bra and finally found it crumpled at the foot of her bed along with the shirt she’d worn several days ago. Her drawers were empty of clean clothes. She swore she would stay home tonight and do laundry as she put on the bra and stuffed the blouse in the overflowing hamper.

The phone rang. Megan glanced at the clock. There was no time to answer. She’d be late to work. As she searched the apartment for the shoes she’d kicked off yesterday, she listened to the message.

“Megan? I know you’re still there. Pick up, pick up, pick up...”

Megan grabbed the phone. “What? I’m running late.”

“Where were you last night?” James demanded. “Sasha and I were expecting you. Even Terry was there.”

Damn, she’d completely forgotten about meeting her friends last night. “Terry as in ‘Terry who had a crush on you all through college and no-one was surprised when he came out senior year’ Terry? I thought he was in Dallas.” She spied her shoes in the front hall.

“He’s moved back. And if fucking Terry can make it to our monthly Thursday nights, you can, too. What were you doing?” James was one of her best friends and sometimes good for a casual booty call, but his over-protectiveness could be annoying.

“I’m sorry, I forgot last night. I’ll make it up to you guys, but right now I really, really have to get out of the house or Rossi’s going to fire me. I’ll IM you from work, okay?”

“That was your get out of jail free card, Meg. Next time, you’re in deep shit with me and Sasha.”

When Megan got to the office a good twenty minutes late, thankfully Rossi was in a meeting. She sat down at her desk and began reading through fresh copy, sighing when she spotted another turgid offering from Abbie.

It didn’t take long for her concentration to waver. Maybe it was time to send James an e-mail explaining what was up. She sent him a message briefly telling the basics of her article and how she’d been doing research. Within ten minutes, her cell rang. She picked it up and slipped out into the corridor.

“What the hell are you thinking, Meg?” Sometimes James forgot his place in her life and slipped into protective boyfriend mode.

“James, I’m being careful and—”

“You’ve been spending your nights in a sleazy, dangerous part of town. How exactly are you being careful? You keep your cell phone off and you haven’t even told your friends so we can check on you if you disappear? You’re going to get yourself killed by some addict for a twenty dollar fix.” The anger in his voice was barely under control.

Megan felt like a reprimanded child. “They’re not all addicts.”

“At least promise me next time you go there, you’ll check in with me or Sasha. Please?”

“I’ll think about it.” Part of her was touched at her friend’s solicitude and the other half fumed. She’d been living in L.A. for five years now and knew how to handle herself. She was no longer the small town girl he’d met as a freshman at U.C.L.A. “I really have to work, James. I’ll call you later.”

She cut off the call. He should know by now she hated to be told what to do. Handing out demands would only make her less likely to

comply with them. Besides, she wasn't being needlessly stubborn. She was furthering her career—something both James and Sasha should respect.



When Megan went to the boulevard the next night, she cruised by Mouth's usual spot, but he wasn't around. She was embarrassed by the pang of disappointment she felt at not finding him. Her fascination extended beyond journalistic interest, edging into the embarrassing territory of a schoolgirl crush.

Ricky and his pale sidekick were on the street and came up to her the moment they saw her. "Mouth said you was cool." Ricky gestured toward his friend. "Me and him want to get interviewed."

"That would be great." She gave silent thanks for Mouth's intervention. Now her credibility was established, it looked like she might make some headway in her project.

"Mouth said you give him twenty bucks."

"Oh." That was something she wasn't expecting. Although she probably should have, considering these kids' lives. "That was a one time only deal. I can't afford to pay for every interview and it's..." She wondered how to explain ethics to a kid like Ricky. "It's kind of against the newspaper's rules. But I could buy each of you a meal."

"Aw, man! You tryin' to rip us off."

"No, seriously. I'm sorry, but it's the best I can offer." When he continued to scowl, she added the only other perk she could think of. "Plus, of course, you'll get to see your words in print, which is kind of cool."

The boy pouted a moment longer then shrugged. "Okay. Whatever. Where you wanna go?"

Megan led the way to the small diner again. It was beginning to feel like her on-site office. She slid into the same booth as before and the boys sat across from her. They both ordered burgers, fries and Cokes and she wondered if they ever had fresh vegetables in their diets.

“Mind if I record?” She pulled out her machine.

Ricky eyed it suspiciously. “Why? You sure you ain’t a cop?”

She smiled. “I just want to get everything you say. Your words are gold, Ricky.” She began shooting off questions, starting with his name.

“Ricardo Hector Jackson,” he stated for the record. “Mama’s a spic, daddy’s a nigger and I’m spicy hot soul food. I got a little somethin’ for everybody.”

The other boy grimaced like he’d heard the line way too many times.

It didn’t take much prompting to get Ricky to talk. He told her he was thirteen. His daddy stabbed somebody in a bar fight and got sent up for twenty years and his mama worked two jobs, housekeeping at a motel and waitressing. She tried to keep Ricky in line, but he had a wild streak. He went out on the streets to have some adventure and someday he’d go home to his mom with lots of riches.

“I’m gonna buy her a big house with servants and dogs and probably a horse, too. Already got a big bunch saved up. And then Elf and me’ll open a comic book shop.” He nodded at his friend. “Elf knows everything there is to know about comics and everybody likes comics, so it’ll be a success. We’ll sell coffee, too. That’s where the money is. There’s always a line waitin’ at Starbucks. Elf and me’ll have an apartment over the store, but sometimes on weekends we’ll go see my mama at her house in the country and ride the horse and have a home-cooked meal.”

Megan let him ramble. She watched Elf’s reaction to the sprawling tale and could tell he was enraptured by the story of their future. Eventually she tried to lead Ricky back on track.

“So you and Elf hang together a lot. Where do you stay?”

Ricky shook his head. “Nuh-uh. Don’t ever give away a squat or next thing you know, cops come and you gotta look for someplace new.”

Megan nodded. “Your mom lives near here, though. Do you ever think of going home again?”

“Naw. My mom lives in Arizona now. Went there with her new husband and she got all his kids to take care of, so there ain’t room for me to live there. But she says she’ll send for me soon.”

“So you’re still in contact with her?”

“Well, we ain’t talked lately but... You know in Arizona they got roadrunners, just like the cartoon? I’d like to see one of them.”

Megan chased Ricky through a maze of words, trying to pin him down about details and only getting contradicting facts and embellished stories. It was hard to tell which parts were real and which weren’t. He told at least three versions of what had happened to his mother and Megan wondered what had really prompted Ricky to leave home.

It was a frustrating interview, and after much more than twenty minutes, Megan finally had to cut Ricky off in the middle of a fabrication about two famous actors who’d hired him to participate in a threesome.

“Well, you’ve given me a lot to work with here, Ricky. Thank you. But I need to move on to Elf’s story now, if that’s all right.”

Elf sat up straight. His eyes shifted as though looking for an escape route. Megan hadn’t heard the boy speak more than three words all evening. He sat quietly in his corner of the booth, interjecting an occasional “That’s right” or “Yep” when called on by Ricky. Where Ricky was twitchy, playing with the salt and pepper, scratching the track marks on his arm, twisting around to look at other people in the diner, Elf was still, trying to remain unnoticed.

“Do you mind telling me your real name?”

He shook his head.

“Elf don’t give his name. He don’t like to. He’s only been out on his own for ‘bout half a year. He’s fourteen. I seen him wandering around down here and could tell he didn’t know what the fuck he was up to, so I showed him the ropes. Showed him how to dumpster dive and lift stuff and trick, everything you need to know. Like, I bet you didn’t know you gotta hit the same dumpsters every day. You get your route going so you know what’s fresh in there, then you won’t accidentally get sick eating some old stuff.”

“That’s smart,” Megan said. “But, Ricky, I’d really like to ask Elf these questions.”

“Oh, sure.” Ricky subsided into silence except for his fingers drumming the table.

“What made you leave home?” she asked Elf.

“It was bad there.”

All right. This kid made Mouth look talkative.

“Can you tell me something specifically that happened?”

He sat looking at his hands.

“Maybe what happened the day you left?”

“There was a fight.” He pronounced it “faa-ght” with a Southern drawl. “My step-dad was beatin’ on me and I had enough of it, so I left.” She waited to see if he would add more and was rewarded with a further confidence. “He done other things to me besides hit me, though, and that’s the part I couldn’t take no more.”

“He abused you sexually?”

He shrugged.

Megan thought it ironic he’d escaped abuse by his stepfather only to have sex with countless strangers.

“Where are you originally from?”

"I was born in Tennessee, but we lived in Texas the longest. We been all over. My dad was in the army before he got killed."

"When was that?"

"Two years ago. A car accident."

"Your mom re-married."

He nodded. "And we moved to Sacramento."

"When did he start abusing you?"

"I don't like to talk about all that." He looked down at the tabletop, his jaw clenched and thin shoulders hunched.

"Okay." She was afraid to push further. "How did you end up in L.A.?"

"A friend of mine moved down here and I thought maybe I could find him and stay with his family, but that didn't work out."

"How long were you on your own before you hooked up with Ricky?"

"Bout a week."

Ricky couldn't suppress himself any longer. "Then I took him in hand. On the street, it's safer to have a buddy. He watches your back, you watch his."

Elf nodded. He looked relieved to have Ricky resume the burden of conversation.

Megan talked with the boys a long time. Neither of them seemed in any hurry to get back out hustling.

When she finally left the restaurant, Megan caught sight of Mouth and a short Asian boy loitering at the curb beside a newspaper kiosk. Mouth noticed her and beckoned her over with a jerk of his head. As she approached, Megan smelled the sweet odor of weed from the joint the two were sharing.

Mouth's companion wasn't really a boy. His features were delicate and his olive skin smooth and flawless, making him appear young, but

the corners of his eyes and forehead were etched with fine lines. He could be anywhere from thirty to fifty. "So you're the intrepid girl reporter?" The man smiled. "Learning anything interesting on the street?"

"It's an eye-opener."

"That it is." The man took a hit off the joint then passed it to Mouth. He offered it to Megan with a smirk.

She didn't know where he got the idea she was some Sunday school prude. Megan took it, sucked in a lungful of smoke and held it before letting it go. Almost immediately, her head felt light and detached. Pretty powerful stuff.

"Thanks for spreading the word about me needing interviews. It's been really helpful."

"No problem." Mouth took back the joint. His fingers brushed hers and a jolt of desire rocketed along her nerve endings from her fingers straight to her crotch.

She turned her attention to his companion. "So, you know I'm a reporter. Who are you?"

Even, white teeth flashed against his tan skin. "You can call me...Mr. X."

"What's *your* name?" Mouth asked her. "You like asking questions, let's see if you're as good at answering."

"Megan."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"When was your first sexual experience?"

"Eighteen. Seventeen if you count handjobs." She stared back at him, refusing to blush this time.

"Are you from L.A. originally?" He sucked in smoke and his red-rimmed eyes watered a little as he held and finally released it.

“No. A small town a few hours north.”

“What made you leave home? Domestic violence, sexual abuse?” he mocked.

“I went to college, then got a job here.”

“Where do you work?”

She hesitated, uncertain how much of her personal life to reveal. “A newspaper.”

“Which one?”

“The *Weekly Reporter*.”

He extended the joint toward her.

Megan started to wave it away, but he kept his hand out until she took it.

At the moment their fingers touched exchanging the roach, he asked, “What’s your favorite sexual position?”

Megan fumbled, burnt her fingers and dropped it to the ground.

Mr. X gave a full-throated belly laugh. “This is good. You two are much more entertaining than getting a blow job.”

Suddenly, the proverbial light bulb went off in Megan’s head. He was a john. A real live troll she could interview for her article. She’d wanted to offer the perspective of client as well as hustler and here was her chance handed to her on a platter. “So you’re here for sex?” she said bluntly and realized she might be too stoned to carry off an intelligent interview.

“Used to sell it, now I have to buy it. Isn’t that a trip?”

Megan’s eyes flitted to Mouth, adding up the rest of the equation. Mr. X was here for Mouth.

But the man caught her mental arithmetic and corrected it. “No. Not this one, sweetie. He’s a little too butch for me. We’re just hanging out ‘til the right boy comes along.”

“How...? Why...?” Megan couldn’t remember any of her questions. Her eyes floated in their sockets and she blinked.

“You want my story? I was one of these kids, homeless, an addict, a whore, but I got clean, started a business, got rich and grew old. Ironically, I find myself back here twenty years later still looking for a little weeknight action.”

Mouth gave Megan a look that said as clearly as words, “That’s the way it’s done here. Nothing ever changes. Nothing you write will ever change it.”

His stoic acceptance of the life was painful. Megan’s heart ached and her eyes prickled with tears. Maybe it was the pot.

“Hey, what’s up?” A familiar voice came from near her elbow. A hand patted Megan’s ass.

She turned and almost knocked into Ricky. “Oh. Hi.” She brushed her hair out of her eyes, trying to regain some measure of composure.

“Damn, are you wasted, girl!” Ricky peered into her eyes. “What you smokin’? Got any more?”

Mouth shook his head.

“Well, fuck. This party’s over then.” Ricky sidled up to Mr. X. “How ‘bout you and me go make our own good time.”

“Why not.” Mr. X smiled. He extended a hand toward Megan. “A pleasure meeting you, young lady. Good luck with your article.”

Ricky and his date started to walk away, but Mouth caught Ricky by the arm as he went past. Without saying anything, he held out his hand.

“What? What the fuck?” Ricky blustered.

Mouth tightened his grip and glared at him.

Ricky reached for his rear pocket and slapped Megan’s wallet into Mouth’s outstretched hand. He threw her a sheepish grin before strolling

off with Mr. X, who laughed as though the whole incident had brightened his day.

“How did...?” Megan couldn’t form a complete sentence.

“He grabbed your ass,” Mouth said. Opening the wallet, he examined her license, credit cards, photos and cash, then pulled out a twenty before handing it back to her.

“Hey!”

“Finder’s fee. For your wallet and for getting you an interview with a troll.” He smiled.

Megan burst out laughing. Her head felt like it was flying off her shoulders.

“Seriously.” He moved so close she could feel the warmth radiating off his body. “You shouldn’t keep coming down here, and if you do, then be more careful.”

“I will.” She felt a ridiculous glow of pleasure that he bothered to caution her.

A car slowed as it passed them and stopped a little way beyond.

Mouth brushed past Megan to go speak to the driver. She watched him take the familiar stance, forearms on the door of the, ass juttied out behind, filling his jeans perfectly.

A jolt of lust raced through her. She rubbed her face, trying to get herself straight.

Mouth looked up suddenly with a grin. “Hey,” he called. “This guy wants us both. What do you think?”

A blush surged to Megan’s cheeks. “Uh, not tonight. I have a headache,” she quipped.

Mouth laughed, and Megan thought it was worth the embarrassment to hear the full, rich sound of his laughter.

He climbed into the car, shut the door, then gave her a little wave out the open window as the car pulled away.



Word of Megan's interviews spread among the street kids, both boys and girls, and soon she had all the material she could use and more. She learned the going price for sex varied widely depending on who you were and what part of the city you worked. On this stretch of Santa Monica you could expect forty dollars for a hand job, fifty for a blowjob and a hundred for sex—more if you were willing to let the customer ride bareback.

She met Penny, who Megan thought was a girl until she began interviewing him. The boy had gotten thrown out of his parents' house at age sixteen when he dressed in his sister's prom gown to go clubbing and his dad didn't take it too well.

Donna was a little dumpling of a girl with bad teeth and a friendly smile. She was fifteen and had been hooking off and on since she was thirteen. In addition to venereal diseases and one abortion, she'd been arrested for prostitution. After living in a group home for a while, she ran away because they were too strict and she couldn't get a fix when she needed one.

Megan heard repeated stories of abuse, abandonment and neglect that made her question peoples' right to parent without passing some sort of psychological test.

One night, Megan brought her camera along to shoot photos to accompany her article. She approached Mouth and snapped a shot of him standing in his classic lounge against the wall.

"What are you doing?" He glared. "Don't."

"I need photos to go with my story."

“Are you stupid? No one is going to let you take their picture.”

Megan hadn't thought about that. She'd gotten so used to hearing 'the business' talked about openly, she'd almost forgotten it was illegal.

“I won't show your face,” she promised, showing him his picture in the display on the back of the camera. “I'll darken your figure until it's just a silhouette.”

“I don't care. Delete it,” he commanded.

Megan's finger hovered over the button. “Look, I really need photos and this is such a striking one. I promise I'll make sure no one can identify you.” She paused then added, “I'll buy you a pack of cigarettes.”

He sighed. “Fine. Use it. I know you'll keep bugging me until you get your way.”

“Thanks.” Megan put her camera away and assumed the lounging position next to Mouth, gazing at the passing cars and trying to think of something new to ask. She'd seen him a lot during her last few visits and they'd developed a tentative friendship.

“What do you do during the day?” she asked after a while. “How do you spend your time when you're not here?”

“Hanging out.” He lit his cigarette and took a drag. “The park, the mall, the arcade, the skateboard park, but you have to watch out for the cops. They'll pick you up for loitering or truancy. I go to the library most afternoons.”

“Library?” He continued to surprise her.

“It's free and it's air-conditioned. They pretty much leave the street people alone unless they lay down on the benches and nap.” He paused and Megan sensed he was deliberating whether to tell her something more. “They've got computers there you can use for free. I found the G.E.D. web site and they tell you what to study to pass the test. So, I've been working on that.”

Megan was impressed. "That's great!"

He shrugged and looked off in the distance. "I don't talk about it down here. So keep it to yourself."

"I will," she promised. "What do you plan to do once you get your degree?"

"Get a job. I can't keep on doing this forever."

"Good luck. I think it's wonderful that you're working to finish high school."

She fished in her pocket and pulled out a five, which she held out toward him. She hadn't carried her wallet since the night Ricky took it. "For the cigarettes I owe you. I don't know what brand you smoke."

Mouth stared at her hand for a moment before quickly taking the bill and jamming it into his hip pocket. His expression was hard and closed again.

Megan was embarrassed realizing she'd offended him by giving him cash. It was difficult now they were becoming friends. She didn't know where commerce stopped and camaraderie began.



On her next visit to the street, Megan finally got the invitation she'd been waiting for. She knew Ricky, Elf, a couple of other boys and Donna, who hooked over on Sunset, all shared the same squat. They lived in a loose-knit family group, members of which came and went with the vagaries of their lives. Megan had told Ricky she'd like to see their place and take photos, but he refused. He'd explained that finding a safe, undisturbed place where you weren't infringing on someone else's territory was difficult and he wasn't willing to trust Megan with the location. Mouth had refused to show her his place, too.

When Megan hit the sidewalk that evening, Donna came up and linked arms with her. "Hey, how ya doing?"

The young girl was very touchy-feely. She seemed to want nothing more than someone to care about her...and her next dose of crack. Megan had given her a cheap ring from her finger on one of her visits and now Donna worshipped her.

"Hi Donna, how's tricks?" Megan said, the double meaning making the girl giggle.

"Slow. There's not shit going on lately. Ricky says it's cool if you come to our place tonight and get pictures like you talked about. But he says I should ask for twenty bucks for the, uh, photo opportunity."

"Really?" Megan wondered what had brought on the sudden change. She decided not to quibble over the issue of money since she was really eager to check out the kids' living conditions first hand. She gave Donna a ten. "This is all I've got."

Donna looked disappointed, but shrugged. "All right. Let's go."

Now the opportunity had arrived, Megan wasn't at all sure she wanted to venture from the brightly lit boulevard to some derelict building. "How far is it?"

"Not too far. We can walk. Come on." Donna tugged at her arm.

Megan reluctantly followed, wishing she'd brought her cell phone so she could call for help if this was some kind of bizarre set up. But these kids knew she didn't have money and she had to trust Donna wouldn't hurt her.

"Where's Crystal?" she asked as they walked down the street. Crystal was Donna's friend, who also worked Sunset. She was a third generation hooker, following both her mother and grandmother into the life without thought or question. Somehow that had shocked Megan almost more than anything she'd heard.

“She went off with Mouth earlier this evening and I haven’t seen her since, so I suppose they’re somewhere fucking.”

Megan felt a jolt of shock at the words and quickly suppressed any expression on her face. “Oh.”

But Donna was sharper than Megan gave her credit for. She looked up with a sly smile. “Why? You got a thing for him?”

“No. Of course not!”

“It’s okay if you do. Everyone does, both the girls and boys. He is seriously hot. I bet he’d go for you, too. You’re really cute. I wish my hair was curly like that.”

Megan didn’t answer.

Donna changed the topic, prattling on about regular fifteen-year-old girl stuff, hair, makeup, fashion, crushes and who she had a grudge against and why. According to her, their little family group was a hotbed of drama with someone always pissed off at someone else about possessions, drugs, living space or sex partners.

“Through here.”

Megan followed the girl through a torn section of chain link fence in the back of a vacant lot and down a dark alley behind an abandoned hotel. Plywood had been torn from one of the boarded up windows. Donna boosted herself over the windowsill and when Megan hesitated, she said, “Come on. In here.”

Megan took a deep breath and climbed after her. Donna picked up a flashlight by the window and led the way through empty offices to the lobby and up the staircase to the second floor. The farther she went into the dark, suffocating building, the more Megan’s nerves told her this was a huge mistake. Anything could happen to her in this place and no one would ever know. No one had any idea where she was and she’d left her phone at home. What the hell had she been thinking?

"This is my room," Donna said proudly, opening the door to one of the guest rooms. She preceded Megan inside, flicked on a battery-powered lamp, then lit candles scattered around the room. As it was illuminated, Megan saw that though it might be a homeless squat, it was also a girly girl's room. Posters of hunky guys hung on the walls, a ripped, flowered comforter was pulled over a mattress on the floor in one corner of the room, dozens of stuffed animals lay on the bed. There were plastic milk crates stacked against one wall stuffed with clothes, and many shoes lay in a haphazard pile near them.

Donna evidently loved candles. By the time she'd lit several of them, the strong scents of vanilla, cinnamon and sandalwood were eradicating the stink of mildew and boarded-up hotel.

"You like this band?" she asked and, before Megan could answer, she turned on a boom box and cranked up the volume.

"You must go through a lot of batteries."

"Yeah. It sucks not having electric, but not near as much as not having water. We have to go to convenience store restrooms or the ones at the bus station to wash up. But you can't go anywhere too often or people start to notice. You got to change your routine, you know?" Donna flopped on her bed and struck a sultry, pinup girl pose. "Go ahead. Take my picture."

Megan pulled out her camera. "I thought you guys didn't want any of your faces photographed?"

"Aw, Ricky's paranoid."

After taking several shots of Donna and her room, Megan asked if she could see some of the others' rooms. When Donna hesitated and began making excuses, she finally realized what was up. "Ricky didn't agree to let you bring me here, did he?"

“Well, what he don’t know won’t hurt him,” Donna said. “Besides he’s not the boss of me. He goes around like he owns the place and Elf and Penny are his little flunkies. The rest of us are sick of putting up with that crap. If I want to bring somebody here, I have a right. It’s a free, fucking country.”

Megan was ready to get out of there. “Okay. I think I’ve got everything I need,” she said. “If you want to walk me back to the boulevard I’ll buy you a Coke.”

“You don’t have to go yet,” Donna said. “We could hang out for a while. I could do your nails and I think Crystal’s still got some weed hidden in her room.” She jumped up and retrieved a pink plastic makeup kit from one of the milk carton shelves and started rummaging through it.

The girl’s winsome desire to have a friend was touching, but Megan was a little afraid of how pissed off Ricky might be if he found her here. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I really have to go now.”

Donna pouted but put down the kit, turned off the music and the lamp. She extinguished her candles. As the feeble lights went out and they were left in the gloomy, preternatural stillness of the empty hotel, Megan wondered how anyone could bear to be here alone. It felt so haunted and eerie.

She followed Donna’s bobbing flashlight back downstairs to the window. Her heart didn’t slow until they stood back outside in the weed-choked lot. She vowed she’d never stray from the boulevard again.

Back at the usual diner, Megan bought the promised soda and listened to more of Donna’s ceaseless prattle. It appeared the girl was going to stick with her all evening as they walked along the sidewalk together.

“Do you think I should get my nipples pierced? Some guys think it’s really hot, but then I heard about this one girl who pissed off a john and he ripped her hoop right out. Yeow! I don’t want anything like that to happen.”

“Probably it’s best if you don’t,” Megan said. “Maybe you should think of saving some of your money.”

Donna laughed. “Yeah, right. I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Megan made an effort to smile, but Donna’s persistence was really beginning to grate. “I’m going home now so I’ll talk to you later, all right?”

“Oh. Okay,” Donna said. “Yeah, I suppose I better get my ass somewhere I can make some cash and quit hanging around here.” She threw her arms around Megan and hugged her. “Thanks for coming over. You gotta come some time and stay longer.”

“Maybe.” Megan’s eyes burned as she hugged the plump girl then watched her walk away. When Donna had crossed the street and disappeared around a corner, Megan turned to head toward her car.

There, strolling toward her down the sidewalk was Mouth. He looked like a model for a men’s cologne ad, wearing a beat up jacket as a concession to the slight chill in the air but with no shirt underneath. As in...no shirt.

For a second, Megan froze, riveted by the sight of hard chest, dusky nipples, flat stomach and a trail of fine hair leading down from his navel to the top of his jeans. She swallowed. “Hey.”

“Hi.” He offered her the bottle he was carrying.

Megan sipped the lukewarm beer, conscious that her mouth was touching his saliva on the lip of the bottle. She wondered if he was coming back from his hook up with Crystal and whether they’d really fucked or if it was one of Donna’s invented dramas. She handed the bottle back to him.

He took it and downed the rest, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand afterward. "What are you up to tonight? More photos?"

"Yeah. Donna..." Megan hesitated, unsure of whether she wanted to tell him about her evening.

Her hesitation tipped him off. "What?"

"She invited me home with her and I got some pictures there."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "Ricky know about it?"

"Not exactly. She said he did, but after we got there she admitted he didn't. I just took a couple of shots of her room and left."

"And this seemed like a good idea to you? Going to an abandoned building with a crack whore?"

"Come on. Donna's just a kid, a lonely little girl who wanted a friend to visit tonight."

"No. Donna's a desperate junky who'd kill you for enough cash for her next fix."

"She knew I didn't have any money on me except the ten I gave her."

He shook his head and blew out a breath as if unable to bear her stupidity. "You've gotta quit trusting these kids. It doesn't matter how innocent they look. If they think you've got money or can get money, they'll do whatever it takes to get it."

"You're being overdramatic."

"Do you even read your own paper? Muggings, stabbings, rape and murder; this is fucking L.A., not Mayberry or wherever the hell it is you came from."

Megan bit her lip in annoyance. He sounded just like James had the other day. "All right. I don't need a lecture from you."

"Good, cause I'm not giving you one." He tossed the empty bottle into a nearby trashcan. "So, you must be about done with your article." His voice was calm again

“Yeah, pretty much.” She realized she was really going to miss Mouth, miss talking to him, not just gawking at his body. He was right. She had enough interviews and facts to finish the story. She knew the names of all the local and state agencies, outreach programs, church groups, drop-in centers and shelters set up to aid these children. Help was there if only the kids would come. But she knew from talking to them how wary of authority figures they were, and often with good reason. She’d heard stories of abuse in foster care or group homes. And many, like Donna or Ricky, would rather be on their own so their drug use could continue unimpeded.

It wasn’t as clear-cut as “need help, get help”. Ricky had told her flat out he loved living free and couldn’t stand to obey some adult’s orders. She imagined him chafing under a regimen of school and home life with balanced meals and bedtimes. Meanwhile, kids like Elf and Donna, who seemed starved for love, might find a niche in the foster care system, but only if they were placed in the right home where they could learn to trust again.

Mouth was almost eighteen and would be spit right back out of the system as soon as he reached that magic age. He clearly wanted to be in charge of his own destiny, but Megan wondered if he could make it with no support system.

She thought of her own family and how protected and safe she’d always been, both financially and emotionally. What would it be like to be an orphan with literally no one to give a damn if you lived or died? For the first time, the depth of that loneliness hit Megan forcibly, leaving her feeling bleak and depressed.

“You’re quiet tonight? No more questions?” Mouth led her toward a bench and dropped down on it.

She sat beside him. "I guess not. It was kind of a strange night. Plus there's some stuff going on at work." It wasn't true, but she could hardly tell him she'd been thinking about him.

"Tell me about it." He stretched his arms along the back of the bench.

Megan wondered if he was making some kind of move on her or simply getting comfortable.

When he spread his arms, his jacket opened farther and more of his buff, naked torso was revealed to her surreptitious glance.

"It's nothing really. Office politics," she lied, then quickly changed the subject. "Why don't you live with the others? Ricky told me it's safer to have a buddy. Why do you stay alone?"

"I like it that way. I don't want to be responsible for anyone and I don't want anyone knowing where my stuff is."

Megan nodded. A cool breeze cut through her thin shirt and she shivered.

"Cold?"

"A little."

"Here." He started to take off his jacket.

Megan held out a hand to stop him. "No. Then you'll be cold."

"Naw. I'm good." He already had it off and handed it to her.

Megan had no choice but to wrap it around her shoulders. She felt like a girl on a date and it was really weird. She could smell Mouth all over the jacket, cigarettes and sweat and a heady, indefinable male musk. "Thanks," she said weakly.

As they talked, Megan couldn't help checking out his muscled shoulders and arms resting on the back of the bench. His chest and stomach were chiseled perfection. She even got a glimpse of his naked back when he turned to look at something up the street. She knew

gaping at his body was skeezy, but couldn't tear her eyes away whenever she thought he wasn't looking.

They sat and chatted for another half-hour. Eventually, Mouth stood up. "I should really make an effort to get in a couple of tricks before the evening is over," he said, yawning.

Megan slipped the jacket off her shoulders. "Thanks for this," she said, handing it over to him.

"Give it back to me next time."

"But..."

"Honestly, I don't need it. You do. And shirtless is always good for business."

That Megan could believe. She tried not to stare at him as he strolled off toward the boulevard. Secretly she was glad of an excuse to come see him again.

Besides, she told herself, she needed more photos.

Chapter Three

By the next week, as the weatherman had promised, the temperature soared again. It was almost October, but felt like August. Megan parked in her usual spot, the parking lot a block away, and walked to the boulevard. The day's heat had settled over the city in a stifling embrace, and sweat trickled between her shoulder blades. The street stank of hot asphalt, piss and sweat, and her stomach churned at the thought of any one of the kids down on his knees in a stinking alleyway, servicing the passing trade.

None of her regular crew was around and Mouth was nowhere to be seen. His absence made her realize how much she'd come to depend on him when she came here, on his presence, even if he was in mid-transaction or hustling on his corner or smoking silently under the same awning where she'd first seen him. There was no reason for Megan to be here tonight. She'd returned his jacket a few days ago and, after snapping more photos of the boys, had said her goodbyes and gone home convinced it was her last visit.

Still, here she was again. James was right, she was getting too deeply involved. It was time to pull back.

Then Mouth turned up and Megan's resolution drained away at the sight of him loping casually along the street, bare-chested, his shirt slung over his shoulder and the same faded jeans riding low on his hips broadcasting sexual availability.

“Want a drink? I’m getting a Coke,” she called when he was close enough.

He looked at her as if he’d only just noticed her, which Megan knew wasn’t true because Mouth always knew exactly who was in his immediate surroundings. They all did on the street. It was a basic survival skill.

“Yeah.” He pulled a cigarette from a crumpled pack in his jacket pocket and lit it.

“So what’s up today,” she asked when she came back from the store and handed him the soda can.

He took it with a nod of thanks.

She pressed hers to her cheek, relishing the chill against her damp skin, the beads of moisture mingling with her sweat to cool her briefly. She wondered what impact the hot weather had on the sex trade.

“Nothing much.” Mouth tied the sleeves of his shirt around his waist in a loose knot.

Megan tried to keep her eyes from drifting to his naked torso. “Where is everybody tonight? They’re usually around at this time.”

He squinted at her through the smoke rising from his cigarette. “It’s not like we keep regular office hours.”

Megan rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to reply, when a car slowed down in front of them and Mouth stepped out from under the awning.

She watched him walk toward the car, her eyes zeroing in on his ass until she caught herself. As he leaned in the window, she got a glimpse of the driver, a balding man who looked like every other guy in a suit she might pass in the street. She glanced away. Mouth wouldn’t appreciate it if she scared off the john by staring at him. It amazed her how Mouth managed to look completely uninvolved in the transaction as he

negotiated his price. He probably looked the same when he concluded his end of the deal. She pictured him going down on the man in the car and the thought made her shiver with disgust.

She hated seeing the kids bargaining their wares with the men, longed to march up to the clients and berate them for paying children to suck them off or let them fuck them. Okay, Mouth could pass as an adult, but some of the kids definitely targeted the pedophile market.

Observe, don't get involved, she reminded herself. You're here to report, not judge. But she wanted to slap the bastard's face.

Mouth crushed his cigarette under his heel and climbed in the car, flashing her the briefest of looks and a quick nod. She knew what it meant. He'd be back in fifteen minutes or so with one more satisfied customer to his credit.

At least the guy was a fast one, because Mouth was back within ten minutes, strolling up the street, still swigging from the by-now tepid can of soda.

"That was quick," Megan said as he approached.

He smirked. "Yeah, well, sometimes they can't help it."

"Was he a regular?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"No reason, just trying to get an idea of what it's like."

Mouth snorted. "You want to get an idea? I'll send the next guy your way."

Megan bit her lip. His acerbic comment made her feel like a complete fool, in way out of her depth, pretending she knew what was going on when all she was doing was skimming around the edges.

"Mouth! Mouuuuuuth!" An anguished scream rose above street noise. Elf ran toward them up the sidewalk. He looked panicked, tears streaming down his face.

Adrenaline shot into Megan's system and her heart pounded.

Mouth pushed past her and ran toward the boy. "What happened?"

Out of breath and shaking, Elf drew big gulps of air and tried to talk at the same time, but nothing came out.

"Calm down." Mouth squeezed Elf's shoulder, his tone gentle and reassuring.

"It's Ricky," Elf gasped. "He's... I don't know, man, he's OD-ing or something. I don't know what—"

"Where?"

"Back up in the alley." Elf pointed behind him.

Mouth sprinted off, leaving Elf and Megan behind. They raced after him, but he was a good fifty yards ahead. For a smoker, he could really run.

Megan recognized the alley as one that Ricky had shown her on one of her first visits. It was secluded enough to serve as a useful place for a quick fuck or a fix, as the profusion of used condoms and needles scattered on the ground indicated. The alley stank in the baking heat.

Ricky was slumped on a flattened cardboard box against a brick wall, his head lolling to one side. He was gray and his lips had a bluish tinge that made him look dead. A needle protruded from his arm, just under the crook of his elbow, and a leather strap hung loosely around his biceps. He looked like a poster child for an anti-drugs campaign. Except that this was real, and for all Megan knew he was already dead. Her breath caught in her throat.

Mouth knelt down, feeling for a pulse and pulling Ricky's eyes open. He removed the needle from his arm efficiently and set it down out of the way on the ground. He turned to Megan.

"You got your cell? Call 911. Get an ambulance here. Now. Tell them it's a heroin overdose."

She obeyed, giving directions and describing Ricky's condition as best she could. Mouth supplied details, until finally she handed the phone to him and went out to the road to flag down the paramedics when they arrived. Her pulse pounded and sweat ran down her body, making her clothes cling to her clammy skin. Adrenaline flooded her system like a strong jolt of caffeine and she bounced on the balls of her feet. She alternated between searching up and down the street for an approaching ambulance and looking back toward the opening of the alley in which Ricky struggled for life.

It was a long wait. Apparently, in the list of emergencies taking place all over the city, theirs didn't rate high enough for a prompt response. Megan suspected the fact it was an OD on the street didn't help.

Mouth appeared at the alley entrance, carrying Ricky out to the sidewalk, arms straining and sweat running down his chest. He laid the unconscious boy carefully on the pavement and Elf lent his shirt to put underneath Ricky's head.

"Fuck, man. Oh fuck. Is he gonna be all right?" Elf kept saying, as he hovered and shifted from foot to foot.

Finally Mouth turned and thumped him in the knee to get his attention. "Hey. Cool it. Why don't you help me out here?" He had Elf sit on the sidewalk next to Ricky. "I want you to keep talking to him. Tell him he's going to be okay, that everything's going to be okay. Just 'cause he's unconscious doesn't mean he can't hear you. You have to be calm."

Megan watched Elf collect himself. He grabbed Ricky's hand and held it, patting it and repeating his new mantra. "You're gonna be okay. They'll be here soon. You'll be okay, man."

For the first time, Megan became aware of the attention their crisis was drawing on the street. People watched the show with interest in small groups or pairs, talking in hushed tones to one another. She

wanted to scream at them or shoo them away like a flock of annoying pigeons. No one offered a blanket. No one offered advice. No one asked if he could help.

Pulling on the shirt he'd been wearing round his waist, Mouth came to the edge of the street where Megan stood waiting for the ambulance. They both looked up the length of the boulevard for flashing lights.

"Call again," he said grimly after a few seconds, his voice lowered so Elf wouldn't hear him. "He's barely breathing. Tell them it's a fucking emergency!"

Megan didn't argue. She pulled out her cell again and pressed redial.

"Hello. I called about fifteen minutes ago reporting an emergency. I want to make sure the ambulance is on its way. Can you check for me? It's an overdose." She gave the location, repeating all the information she'd already given during her first call, and the operator assured her an ambulance had been dispatched and should arrive any moment.

When she hung up and told Mouth, he snapped. "Fuck that! This is taking too fucking long. Get your car." For the first time she saw real fear in his eyes. He might be starting to panic a little.

"But if they're almost here, it'd be better to wait for the paramedics so he can be treated right away. I think we should—"

Before she could finish her argument, the whine of a siren far down the street interrupted. A few seconds later, the emergency vehicle pulled to the curb.

The paramedics strapped Ricky to a gurney and loaded him onto the ambulance in a matter of minutes. One of the EMTs, a graying man in his forties, turned to them. "We're taking him to the ER at County. You guys following?" The EMT had a skeptical look in his eyes as he took them in. Clearly, she was doing a good job of blending in on the street.

"My car's just down the road. We'll meet you there."



When they reached the ER, the nurse at the triage station was unhelpful. She stared with disdain at Elf's dirty, tear-streaked face and stained T-shirt and Mouth's street hustler demeanor, all low-slung jeans, open shirt and attitude.

Megan wished she wore her discreet nose stud instead of the ornate Thai ring she liked to sport on the street. "Excuse me," she said with all the authority she could muster.

The nurse turned to her with barely-disguised contempt. "Yes?"

"We're here for a friend of ours who came in by ambulance in the past five minutes. Drug overdose."

The nurse rolled her eyes and made a show of checking her register. She looked back at them. "If you're not immediate family, you can't go in with him. You'll have to wait in the waiting room."

"He doesn't have an immediate family," Megan said. "Can you please give us a break and let at least one of us go and be with him?"

The nurse frowned in annoyance. "Look. The boy's not conscious anyway. It's better if you just stay out of the way of the emergency personnel so they can treat him. Someone will let you know as soon as he's been stabilized. For now, you need to go to the waiting room. If you want to be useful, you can fill out his admittance information. Address, insurance, that sort of thing."

Megan stared at her. It was so obvious Ricky didn't have any of those things that she wondered if the nurse mocked them. "You've got to be kidding me. This kid is fighting for his life in there and you want us to fill out paperwork!" Her voice rose in indignation.

Mouth took her arm and pushed her gently away from the desk. "Excuse me." His tone was low and polite. "We're not trying to make trouble here...Ms. Thatcher," he read her nametag. "I understand you're just following policy, but our friend doesn't have any immediate family. We're the closest he's got."

He pulled tiny little Elf beside him. "This boy needs to see his friend is being taken care of. Can you please just let him look in the room for a second, then we'll come right back? We promise not to get in the way."

Ms. Thatcher looked from Mouth's beseeching eyes to Elf's waifish face and her expression of cool efficiency slipped a little. There was an indefinable softening of her eyes and in the grim line of her mouth.

"Please," Mouth said again, submissive and respectful.

"Not all of you," she said. "It's too many. But I guess it wouldn't hurt if two of you had a quick look." She raised an admonishing finger. "But come right back. If you get in the way of the emergency staff, they'll have my head for letting you through."

Mouth turned to look at Megan.

"I'll wait for you guys right here," she said, waving him on through the security gate. She couldn't quite believe he'd been able to tame the bitch. The way he'd managed to talk his way past her, by looking submissive and respectful of her authority, amazed Megan, and spoke volumes about how he'd had to learn to adapt to circumstances to survive. While Megan lost her temper, Mouth had immediately known which tone to adopt to bypass the woman's hostility.

Once again, he'd proved more mature than she. Megan found that unsettling, not least because it increased her incipient attraction. He might only be seventeen, but Mouth had shouldered adult responsibilities much earlier than Megan ever had and it showed. He was also probably far more used to being treated like trash.

She sat down in one of the hard-backed plastic chairs welded to the floor of the waiting room, trying to steer clear of the sickest-looking people, and prepared for a wait. She expected Mouth to stick around the ER until he knew Ricky's situation was resolved, no matter what the nurse had said. Megan wished she had something to read to pass the time, but all she could find in her bag was her notebook. She pulled it out with a pen and made a few brief notes, jotting down the basics of what had happened in case she wanted to write it up.

As the minutes ticked past, Megan became absorbed in her notes, lifting her head now and then to take in her surroundings. She thought it might be worth trying to capture the atmosphere in the waiting room, the smell of stale sweat and grime, overlaid with hospital disinfectant, the stark neon lighting which made everyone appear gray and drawn, the resigned expression on the faces of most of the people huddled on chairs, clutching an injured limb or cradling a crying child.

One couple in particular caught her attention, a beautiful, very pale woman with dark hair, who was holding an elderly woman by the arm. The old lady was impeccably dressed, but looking closely, Megan noticed her well-tailored jacket was threadbare. She breathed with some difficulty. Both sat up straight, and the younger woman had the older one's hand in hers and stroked it with her thumb, absent-minded, while glancing nervously toward the triage desk. A mother and daughter, Megan guessed, and obviously not used to this. She wondered why they were here—what sorry tale of divorce or bereavement might lie behind the straitened circumstances and the faded gentility of the pair.

Her musings were cut short by the return of the boys. Mouth's gaze dropped to Megan's notebook and she put it away with a fleeting feeling of shame. It seemed wrong to work on her article while Ricky

was...whatever he was. Mouth and Elf looked okay, not distraught, as she'd feared. Ricky must have survived the ordeal.

She got to her feet. "So?"

"He's going to be all right, but they're calling Social Services on his ass, on account of him being a minor with no address, so we bailed. I don't want them sniffing around *my* ass."

Elf nodded, as if to emphasize the point. He still looked upset.

"Hey, Elf, I'm sure Ricky will be okay," Megan said.

The boy nodded again, but said nothing.

"He'll be back," Mouth said. "You know what it's like, they'll keep him for a few days, then he'll go to a group home or something, but he'll get out again."

Elf shrugged. His eyes were bright with tears. Knowing how close he was to Ricky, she could imagine what losing his closest ally on the street meant to him. Suddenly, there was no one to have his back, no one to sleep with at night or share stories with about his day.

"So what was wrong?"

"Looks like Ricky had some good quality smack," Mouth said. "Purer than usual. Apparently, there's a batch around and they've seen lots of ODs of kids who can't handle the concentration. Scary shit."

In the car on the way back to the boulevard, both Mouth and Elf were quiet.

Megan turned on the radio, surfing channels until she found a music station that played guitar bands with a minimum of chat.

She dropped Elf off at a junction before they reached the street. He wanted to go check on Ricky's stuff before word spread Ricky was in hospital and being sucked into the system, which would make his possessions fair game.

She sat in the car, watching Mouth and Elf on the sidewalk. Mouth leaned down with his hand on the skinny boy's shoulder, giving him some kind of pep talk. She was struck again by how easily he assumed the mantle of responsibility.

"Want to get something to drink?" she asked when he got back in the car. "I'd kill for something cold and for some air-conditioning."

"Sure."

A blast of tepid air hit them as they opened the door of the diner. It wasn't the air-conditioned comfort Megan had hoped for, but it was a hell of a lot better than the stifling air out on the street.

"So, you looked like you knew what you were doing out there," she said as they sat in the booth with their trays. She'd just gone for an iced tea, there was too much adrenalin in her system to consider eating, but Mouth had an order of french fries. Evidently, it took more than a friend's OD to curb a teenager's appetite.

Mouth snorted. "Growing up with my mom? Yeah. I got some practice."

"She did heroin, too?"

"Heroin, crack, speed, meth, you fucking name it. Yeah, Mom liked to party."

He sounded so matter-of-fact when he spoke Megan found it difficult to link the events he described with him. She couldn't imagine what his offhand comment about drugs had meant in real life, what it was like to grow up in a household where day-to-day living was dominated by what substances were available or needed.

She shook her head. "Shit. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's the way she chose it. And I got out of there as soon as I could."

"I didn't mean to pry. I'm just, you know, trying to do this thing right."

"Yeah," he scoffed. "And I bet Ricky's little drama is giving you plenty of material to sex up your article." The bitterness in his voice was so unexpected, it felt like a slap.

"What?"

"Oh, come on." He reached for a french fry and popped it into his mouth. "It's all good copy, isn't it? Stuff to make sure your boss runs the piece and you get all the credit."

"That's so unfair! You know I'm not doing this as a sensational piece. I'm trying to give our readers a real insight into your lives. I'm—"

"You telling me you won't use this?" He skewered her with his dark blue eyes. He was calling her on it, and Megan couldn't deny Ricky's O.D. made for a touching, immediate angle to her story, especially since she'd been an eyewitness to the event.

"I... It's not like that."

"Yeah? How is it? Tell me you're not doing this 'cause you want to get your big break and have your career take off."

"I do, but that's not why I'm writing about you guys. This is about telling it like it is, showing the reality of life on the streets."

"Do me a favor. Save the spiel for your readers. You're using us for your career. At least be honest about it. You know, like my clients are honest about what they want."

"How dare you compare me to one of your johns!" Megan's temper flared.

He gave her a sardonic half-smile, then bit into another fry. "Yeah, like you've never thought about it like that. Besides, you're really naïve if you think your story's gonna make a difference in the way people treat us—like that bitch at the hospital."

“Fuck you, Mouth. If that’s how you feel, why did you ever agree to talk to me?”

“Hey, you paid me for my time. That’s how it works.”

His laid-back ease was infuriating. Megan knew he was putting up a front, because he did it all the time. She knew he was worried about Ricky and angry and scared, but she was so upset at his insinuation, she couldn’t control her fury.

Her eyes stung, but she could not, would not, cry in front of him. She got up and grabbed her bag. “If that’s how you see all your dealings with the world, no wonder you’ve ended up on the street sucking dick,” she spat, her voice hoarse. The moment the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to take them back.

There was a flicker of shock and hurt in Mouth’s eyes as if she’d slapped him across the face. He quickly covered it with an expression of detached amusement, but Megan knew what she’d seen.

The tide of Megan’s anger stopped her from apologizing and swept her out the door without looking back. She knew if she did, he’d still be picking at his fries, as if he hadn’t heard her at all.

Chapter Four

Megan walked the street looking for Mouth, although she no longer expected to see him. He'd been missing almost a week. Six days since she'd last talked to him and pissed him off so much he'd probably relocated to a new area of the city or maybe even hopped a bus for somewhere else completely. She no longer tried to pretend she came to the boulevard for any other reason. She'd finished the article a few days ago and submitted it to Rossi, all the while hearing Mouth's voice in her head telling her she was using the kids' lives to further her career. It took most of the pleasure out of her sense of accomplishment at finishing the piece and, although she knew it was a riveting article, part of her almost hoped her boss wouldn't print it.

She'd told herself tonight was the absolute last night she would come down to the boulevard and look for Mouth, but she'd promised herself that several times already. Then she looked up and there he was, standing in his usual spot, back against the wall, arms crossed loosely over his chest, one leg cocked while the other bore his weight. His face was profiled half in shadow and half in the light and Megan thought of the photo she'd snapped and how that striking image alone would sell her story. She felt a rush of relief coupled with a strong swell of desire at the sight of him. Overlaying those emotions was anger that he'd caused her so much worry—even though it wasn't any of her business where he went or how long he stayed away.

Megan approached him just as he turned his head. In the harsh light, the left side of his face was swollen and bruised. One eye was a mere slit and his mouth on that side was twisted downward by the swelling. She gasped and her stomach dropped as she surveyed the damage to his face. The need to touch him, to assure herself he was really there and safe flooded through her. She walked more quickly toward him.

He caught sight of her, registered her presence with a blink of his good eye, then pushed off the wall and began to walk away. He carried himself stiffly and favored his right leg, but still moved fast.

Megan hurried to catch up. "What happened?" She trotted along at his side.

"Go away," he answered. "I'm trying to work."

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said the other night. It was rude and wrong, but please don't shut me out. Whatever happened to you, I want to help."

Stopping abruptly, he turned to her.

She stumbled as she came to a halt beside him.

His angry stare made her step back. "You want to help? Then get the fuck off my street and leave me alone."

"Please. Don't." She reached toward his injured face.

He reared back, raising his hand to block hers. He grabbed her wrist and squeezed it hard once before dropping it. "I don't need your help. I need you to get the hell away from me." His voice was icy and level. It would've been easier to take if he yelled.

"Listen." She tried once more. "I didn't mean what I said. I didn't mean to upset you. Please forgive me."

He looked up the street, then back at her. "You didn't upset me. For you to upset me, I'd have to care what you think, and I don't. I'm not

your friend. You don't need to apologize or help me. Just finish your article and stop hanging around here." He added with an ironic grimace indicating his bruises. "It's not safe."

"So I've been told before." Megan paused, then said in an impulsive rush, "No, it's *not* safe and you're in no condition to be out here right now. That's why I want you to come with me."

"What?"

"Come and stay at my apartment for a night or two until we can find someplace safe for you to go." Her inner voice asked her if she'd just made that offer aloud.

"Like where, a group home or shelter? I don't think so."

"Fine, then. No authorities. No foster care or institutions or shelters. No interfering, just a couple of nights of sleeping on a couch in a warm living room instead of in a drafty, abandoned building."

He looked down at the ground, his shoulders slightly hunched and his neck muscles tight. With the distortion of the left side of his face, it was hard to read his expression, but he seemed to be considering it.

"Hot soup thrown in, no extra charge," she said with a smile, trying to lighten the fervent tone of her plea.

He sucked his torn bottom lip into his mouth, then winced as the scab opened and it began bleeding. His tongue darted out to lick at the blood.

"A shower. Clean sheets. Stouffer's lasagna, which isn't half bad," she cajoled.

He shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. "I guess so," he muttered. "One night."

"I'm parked in a lot about a block away. Do you have any stuff you need to pick up?"

"I got a bag over there." He jerked his thumb toward one of the bars.
"I'll go get it."

"I'll bring my car around."

He walked away with a halting step that made her wonder what his catalog of injuries included. The limp convinced her she'd made the right decision, impulsive or not, in inviting him home, and even her logical inner voice agreed and shut up. Part of her wanted to run after him, not let him out of her sight until he was safe inside her car, but she knew she had to trust him. And when she pulled her car around and he was waiting there on the sidewalk with his stained duffle bag over one shoulder, she felt like whooping for joy.



When they got to her building, Megan led Mouth up the stairs to her apartment on the third floor. She never took the elevator since the day Mrs. Ryan got stuck in it for over five hours. He moved slower and slower by the time they reached the last flight, and she cursed herself for being so insensitive as to make him walk up. She glanced over at him as she put her key in the lock.

He leaned against the wall, his eyes half-closed, his mouth a grim line of discomfort.

She wondered how badly he'd been beaten and by whom, but she hadn't asked questions during the ride home, waiting for him to volunteer the information. Maybe a john had whaled on him or he'd been in a brawl with other kids. Mouth made no secret of the violence that often erupted on the street, fueled by the drugs and booze which most of the kids used to numb themselves to their wretched situation.

Dragging her mind away from the depressing images her question generated, she led him through the small foyer and into her living room.

“Sorry, I don’t have a sofa-bed.” She gestured at the couch.

“It’s fine.” He looked around the room, seeming subdued and smaller somehow inside the confines of the indoors. Or maybe he was just exhausted from his climb up the stairs.

“I’ll improvise something with sheets and blankets while you clean up.” She eyed him critically. “I think I can find you a pair of sweats and an extra large T-shirt to change into while I wash your clothes. I mean, unless you have clean stuff in your bag.”

He looked down at his torn jeans, ragged jacket and filthy white T-shirt, which had bloodstains on it as well as grime. “This is fine. I don’t want other clothes.” His voice was firm and his arms hugged his duffel to him, as though unwilling to surrender any more of himself into her overbearing goodwill.

Megan knew how to pick her battles. Mouth was clearly uncomfortable in her territory and unwilling to admit he needed her help. She tried to tamp down her anxious babbling and adopt a more casual tone as she pointed him toward the bathroom, giving him a fresh towel and washcloth from the linen cupboard.

She noticed his hands when he took them, how the skin of the knuckles was abraded from fighting and the fingernails were bitten short. For the glimmer of a second, she thought about how those hands would feel touching her body, his rough skin skimming over the tender surface of her stomach or inner thigh, then she slammed the door shut on the image. But not before the thought had seared itself into her mind, leaving traces of arousal in its wake.



After he’d showered, Mouth joined her in the small kitchen.

Megan was relieved to see he had, after all, decided to make use of the clean clothes she'd set outside the bathroom door. With his hair wet and slicked back, clad in sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt, he appeared younger. He was clean, but still looked like he'd been dragged down the street behind a car.

Standing in the doorway, barefoot on the tiled floor, he was clearly unsure of himself.

Megan smiled at him, feeling she needed to act the role of hostess and put him at ease. How long had it been since he'd been a guest in someone's home? Someone who wasn't a client.

"I promised lasagna, but it'll take another twenty minutes or so to warm up. What do you want to drink in the meantime?"

"Beer would be good."

Megan hesitated for a second, then sent her inner chaperone to hell. The kid might not be twenty-one, but he sucked cock for a living. It wasn't like a beer was going to corrupt him. She opened the fridge and pulled out two bottles of a local microbrew she kept for when James or Sasha's husband, Stevie dropped by because they were both such beer snobs. She popped the caps and handed him a bottle.

He knocked it back in a few long swallows.

Her gaze fixed on his bobbing Adam's apple. Try as she might, she felt her attention drawn to his body again and again. And somehow she doubted he'd fail to notice her glances. This was a kid whose whole existence depended on reading people's non-verbal cues right. He could tell if someone looked at him. It was up to her to keep her eyes under control.

When he lowered the bottle, his eyes met hers, locked and held for a long moment. The air in the kitchen was charged with palpable tension.

Megan broke, looking away first. “Can I ask you something?” she said, hoping to break the awkward silence that had settled as they waited for the food to cook.

“Sure.” He set the empty bottle on the table.

“What’s your real name?”

He was silent for a moment, absent-mindedly tonguing his injured lip, while Megan focused her gaze elsewhere. She was poking at his privacy again, but couldn’t call him Mouth anymore. Mouth was his street name, his hustler name. It was a name designed to evoke blowjobs given in dark alleys or the front seat of cars, his lips stretched around another man’s dick. It reeked of sex, and just didn’t belong in her kitchen.

“It feels wrong to keep calling you Mouth here,” she added when she realized he wasn’t about to answer.

He nodded. “Fair enough. I guess I owe you anyhow. I’m Sean.”

Sean. It sounded so different, like he was this whole new person she’d just been introduced to. It was such a wholesome name. She smiled. “Thanks, Sean.”



They ate at the dinette table in her kitchen, and it was nothing like the first time she’d seen him eat. He was no longer careless and open about his appetite. Here, he took smaller bites and his movements seemed cautious and controlled. He sipped his milk instead of gulping and refrained from making origami with his napkin as he had in the restaurant. He seemed withdrawn and wary.

Megan realized he was probably as nervous as she was. She remembered what he’d said earlier, about owing her.

“Listen.” As he was finishing his second helping, she broke the strained silence that had fallen between them. She hesitated, wanting to make sure she said this correctly. “I want you to know that whatever happened on the street, you’re safe here. And aside from basically not trashing my place, I don’t expect anything from you.”

He looked up from his plate, his eyes scanning hers as if trying to read them.

“You don’t want payment for this?”

Megan’s heart broke at his incredulous tone. She shook her head. “You don’t owe me anything, Sean.”

“Yeah? Because it really wouldn’t bother me, you know.” He gave her a suggestive once-over that made her stomach flip. The blood rose up her neck. Jesus, he’d just offered to fuck her or go down on her or something in exchange for a meal and bed for a night. And his hooded gaze on her body... She raised her hands in denial.

“God, no, Sean! I’m not...this isn’t...I’m not like that...” As she stammered, anger replaced shock. How dare he think that of her after all the time they’d spent together? How dare he compare her to the men who used him?

“You have no right to accuse me of that,” she said. Rising quickly, she walked to the refrigerator and opened the door. She trembled and tears threatened to take over. The cool air from the appliance washed over her hot cheeks, and she stood there a moment staring at a gallon of milk, a Chinese takeout box and a nasty looking slice of cake she’d forgotten to cover.

She tried to compose herself, but ended up grabbing the milk and spinning around to continue railing at him. “Seriously. After all these weeks, after all the talking... I thought—I thought you respected me. I

thought you knew I wouldn't do that kind of shit. Who do you think I am?"

She was almost shouting now, but Sean hadn't moved. His expression was blank.

"I've seen how you look at me." His low voice hit Megan in the pit of her stomach. God, nothing slipped past him.

She walked over to the table and set the milk down, rested her hands on the table, took a deep breath and forced herself to look him in the eye. "That's got nothing to do with it, Sean. Nothing. I would never expect anything from you. Damn it, you're seventeen. You're younger than my little brother. You've told me how shitty your life is. How could you think I'd ever take advantage of you?" She maintained her stance, leaning on her hands and looking down at him, trying to put their roles in proper perspective.

He shrugged, regarding her from under his eyebrows without lifting his head. He'd been gripping his fork like it was a weapon and now he set it carefully down beside his plate. "Yeah, well, that's the way it is when you work the streets. You wouldn't be the first person wanting to rescue me for their own reasons." His eyes were flat, his voice even, as he retreated into the emotionless shell he favored when he felt vulnerable.

It hadn't even occurred to her he might have had similar experiences in the past.

"You've done this before?" she said, dropping back into her seat.

He cocked his head sideways and gave a little shrug of assent. "More than once?"

"Listen, Megan," he said slowly, "I've been on my own for a year and a half? You don't think I've ever wanted to believe someone was just being nice to me?"

"You seem so unwilling to trust anyone. Why would you—?"

“Yeah, well, I learned my lesson,” he cut in abruptly. “And I was lucky. I never got caught up in any real shit. But no, I don’t trust anyone who says they don’t want a piece of me. It’s just not true. It never is.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her from his one good eye. The blackened one gave him a dangerous look, and he lounged back in his chair with sprawled legs, sending a sexual message. He was definitely giving her attitude. He might be better-mannered and more respectful to her on her turf, but he still had a feral intensity she found hard to ignore. His smoldering gaze challenged her to deny her attraction to him.

“Sean...” Megan swallowed hard. Her body hummed like a plucked guitar string at the heat in his eyes, her nipples tightened and her sex pulsed in time with her heartbeats. When every reaction to him blazed across her face, how could she pretend there wasn’t an element of truth in what he said? The difference was, while she might be sexually attracted, she wouldn’t act on it or demand anything of him as others had done.

“I’m a fucking whore,” he continued. “The people I meet either want to fuck me or fuck me over. End of fucking story.”

“So, if that’s really what you thought, then why did you come with me?”

“Because I can handle this. And with you—well, it wouldn’t be a chore, you know?” His half-lidded eyes and predatory smile left Megan feeling like prey.

She bit her lip—part of her reacting unthinkingly to what he said with a fresh wave of arousal, and the rest of her brain utterly appalled at the thought and at Sean’s matter-of-fact approach. He really had no illusions about anything.

She rubbed her hands over her face. “Look, you might find this hard to believe, but I swear it was never my intention to even suggest I want anything from you. I really don’t. Talking to you over the past few weeks—it’s made me aware of the life you lead, it’s certainly opened my eyes in many respects, but it hasn’t made me want to have sex with you.”

“So why did you want me to come with you?” He sounded skeptical, but he’d uncrossed his arms and resumed a less defensive, less sexual posture. One hand returned to his lap, the other toyed with his fork on the table.

“Because I was worried about you. I *am* worried about you. You drop out of sight for a few days and come back looking like hell. What happened to you, anyhow?”

“You’re worried about a fucking hustler so you invite him into your home? You don’t know me for shit. I could beat you up and steal all your stuff. You think you can trust me because we talked a couple of times?”

Megan ignored the little shiver of apprehension crawling up her spine at his words—no, she knew he wouldn’t do that—and plowed on. “Look, I took a gamble. But no, I don’t think you’d beat me up and steal my stuff, and no, I haven’t brought you home to sleep with you. If you don’t believe it, fine. Leave. But if you stay, just deal with it, have some faith in me and stop being such an ass.”

She took a deep breath. Her cheeks were flushed, showing her emotions as always. It would be nice to have Sean’s amazing self-possession. Then Megan remembered why he was so good at hiding everything and didn’t envy him anymore.

“Okay,” he said, sounding almost defeated, as if it cost him to drop the aggression and the attitude. But he seemed to relax, too, just a tiny bit. Perhaps he’d been hoping for this all along, and had only confronted her to allay his own fears.

Her own anger had gone away completely, leaving her feeling a little foolish at having reacted so violently to his offer of sex. He'd really hit a raw nerve, making her ashamed of wanting him and even more ashamed he'd noticed.

"So, what did happen to you?" she asked again.

Sean looked away. "Some kids beat me up. But that's nothing. I was stupid and careless and I paid for it." More than angry and bitter, he sounded desolate.

"What do you mean?"

His bruised jaw clenched. "I was tailed by some kids I got into trouble with. They trashed my place and got my cash then beat the shit out of me just for the hell of it."

Megan blinked. His money? That meant months of sucking off strangers because it was his ticket to a better life, his way out, wasted. Months of hell. She had no idea how much money Sean was talking about, but it had to be quite a lot, because his daily expenses weren't much. "They got your money?" The beating did pale in comparison.

He nodded, his mouth tight.

She wanted to hug him, but knew it was out of the question. Without thinking, she extended her hand across the table toward his, then stopped herself. He was bound to misread that gesture, too. She fumbled and grabbed a paper napkin instead.

"What are you going to do?" She twisted the napkin in her hands.

"Try to earn it again, I guess." But his voice sounded hollow, his confidence drained. She could imagine how depressing it was to think he was back to square one, with a never-ending stream of tricks to turn before he recovered his lost cash.

"Don't think about it tonight, okay? Try to get some rest and heal. Honestly, you can stay here a few days while you think about what you

want to do next.” She kept her gaze fixed on him, searching for any negative reaction to her offer and was relieved to see none. “In the meantime, is it okay if I wash your clothes?”

“They’re pretty dirty. I can do it.”

“Why don’t you finish the lasagna? Let me do this much for you. Unless you’d rather I didn’t go through your stuff. Do you want to deal with the duffel bag later?”

He was about to say something, but simply nodded assent.



When she picked up his jeans from the floor outside the bathroom where he’d carefully folded them together with his stained T-shirt, she realized his personal belongings were still in the pockets. She pulled out his wallet gingerly and exerted all her willpower to stop herself looking inside for additional information. Placing it on the bathroom counter, she went through the other pockets quickly and fished a handful of condoms from his back pockets. Her heart sank. This irrefutable proof of his daily occupation made her want to cry—again.

As Megan put the clothes into the laundry basket, she looked through the doorway at him. He was eating his way through his third plateful, head bent down, shoveling the food into his mouth like a guy who never quite ate enough. He looked young, with his damaged face, unkempt, damp hair and bare feet.

There was no way she’d let him go back to the street, certainly not as long as he was that badly messed up and even when he healed. As she carried the washing down to the building’s communal laundry room, she decided if she didn’t want him slipping back into his hustling existence, she must find a way to convince him to stay with her.



After giving Sean pain medication and seeing him bedded down on the couch, Megan retreated to her own room.

While dressing for sleep in a T-shirt and shorts, she thought about her motivations for helping Sean. Was she conning herself into believing she was being selfless and helpful, when in fact she wanted more? There was no doubt she was powerfully attracted to him. Having him at close quarters in her house had made that clear to her—and evidently to him. But she was an adult, a mature, responsible adult who would not—could not—allow herself to act upon these thoughts.

It took her a long time to fall asleep, her ear unconsciously straining for any sound coming from the living room, her mind and body restless as she tossed and turned under the sheets. When she finally did fall asleep, it was to a jumble of disturbing dreams, none of which she remembered when she woke, but which left her feeling anxious and skittish.

In the early morning, she tiptoed to the bathroom, not wanting to wake Sean. She checked in on him and the sight of him, sprawled on her couch, sheets everywhere, made her mouth go dry. His T-shirt had ridden up, exposing his chest and stomach. His whole torso was a mass of purple and yellow bruises, colors blossoming under the skin in a garish pattern, which had to signify serious pain. He was remarkably fit and well-muscled for a guy who lived on the streets, with a clearly defined six-pack visible even under the bruising. She mentally kicked herself for that observation and forced herself to look away.

Would she be able to get him to agree to go to a doctor? Probably not, since he clearly hadn't wanted her to see the extent of his injuries. She didn't want to push and risk alienating him.

Megan took a quick shower and went to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee. Sean padded softly to the bathroom and when he came out she called, "Morning. There's fresh coffee if you'd like some. What would you like to eat?"

He leaned against the kitchen doorframe, looking groggy, his black eye slightly less swollen than it had been the previous day, but his face still a mess. "What have you got?" he asked, his voice raspy, and it was unclear whether he was doing the James Dean routine accidentally or on purpose, or whether he even knew about it.

"Bacon, eggs, there's pancake mix if you want pancakes or toast, cereal, orange juice... You name it."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Yeah, that sounds like breakfast to me."

"You want all of it?" Megan was about to make a crack about how he'd eat her out of house and home, but caught herself in time. "Sure. How do you like your eggs?" She turned from the refrigerator toward him and caught his gaze riveted below her waist.

Megan was still wearing her bedtime briefs and they suddenly felt way too short. The skin of her bare legs prickled at his attention.

Sean quickly looked up from her ass to her face. A smile quirked his lips. He moved into the room and reached his hand toward Megan's. "I'll cook them. It's the least I can do."

Still processing the fact he'd been checking out her butt, Megan surrendered the pair of eggs to him. There was a warm brush of skin on skin during the transaction and her fingers tingled when she pulled away.

Sean moved to the stove and cracked the eggs into the hot skillet. “Scrambled okay?”

“Sure.” As Megan got out silverware and plates, she thought about Sean’s interested scan of her assets. She’d been so caught up in fighting her sexual feelings for him she’d never considered the attraction might be mutual. Having him stay with her could be even more difficult than she’d imagined. After a breakfast of toast, scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes, coffee and orange juice, Sean looked noticeably happier. Food agreed with him.

“So how do you feel this morning?” she asked, as she collected dishes and pans and piled them in the sink.

“Okay, I guess. Better.” He smiled again. It was a nice smile, a little crooked, highlighting the fact she hadn’t seen him smile often before. He got up and took the sponge from her hands. “I can do the dishes.”

Megan leaned against the counter, watching the back of Sean’s head as he busied himself with the washing-up. He was a neat worker, washing, rinsing and placing each item on the rack with practiced ease, even though it had to have been a while since he’d had the opportunity to do such a domestic task. It was strange to have him moving around her kitchen, touching her things, filling up the small space with his strong presence. Strange, but comforting too, and she knew she absolutely didn’t want him to leave today.

“I wanted to say...” She trailed off, feeling self-conscious. “I mean, you’re still pretty sore and if those guys have it in for you...” She stopped again. “What I’m trying to say is—stay for a few days. Please. I hate the thought of you being out there when you’re still so beat up.”

“I can’t—impose,” Sean muttered, his back still to her. He was done with the clean up and stood resting his hands on the edge of the sink.

“It wouldn’t be an imposition. Please, Sean.”

When he turned to face her, she knew she'd won the battle for now. He regarded her with solemn eyes. The depth of expression in them made his eyes appear ancient in contrast with the boyishly tousled hair falling over his forehead. He gripped the sponge in his hands. "Okay. Thanks." He swallowed. "Thanks for trusting me."

Megan shook her head. "Thanks for trusting *me*."

Chapter Five

After breakfast, Megan could see the day was going to stretch long and awkward in front of them if there was nothing to do. Sean seemed ill at ease and she wasn't quite sure how to treat him. It was one thing to interact with him out on the street in his environment, quite another to have him invading hers. He was so...there. She decided the best way to pass the time would be to take him shopping for new clothes, and when she noticed him poring over the classifieds, she knew how to bring it up.

"You know, if you're serious about looking for a job, we need to get you a better wardrobe."

He looked up with his jaw set and a frown that told her he was going to protest.

"It would be a loan, of course. But you need a few shirts and trousers so you can look presentable at interviews." Considering the multi-colored bruises that marked the left side of his face, she doubted a potential employer would give him two seconds in the condition he was in right now. "After you find a job, you can pay me a little. Whatever you can afford. Would that be okay?"

"I guess." He frowned. "But I *will* pay you back. For everything."

They shopped at a thrift store, since Megan's income was severely budgeted. She could poke around for hours trying things on, but Sean quickly picked out some pants in black and navy, a pair of jeans, a couple of Oxford button-downs and both long and short sleeved tees in

subdued colors. They stopped at a department store to purchase more basics, including shoes, socks and underwear.

It was a cheap shopping trip so Megan was able to talk him into the haircut he needed as well. She didn't think he'd had it cut since she met him. It just kept growing longer and shaggier and, while she found it sexy as hell, it didn't make for the neat appearance an employer wanted in a job applicant. The scruffy stubble had to go, too.

When Sean emerged shorn and shaved, he looked a great deal more reputable. Instead of appearing like a thug who'd been in a bar room brawl, he looked like a damaged, but clean cut young man.

"Now some lunch," Megan said. "I'm starving." They stopped in a deli and bought soup and sandwiches to eat outside at an umbrella-shaded table.

Sean dropped heavily into his seat, clearly exhausted. She felt terrible for making him walk and shop when he should probably be lying in bed resting.

"Thanks for everything," he said abruptly. "I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"No problem. That was like guerilla shopping. In, out, take no prisoners."

"Guess I'm not much of a shopper."

"What do you like to do?" she asked. "Back when things were more normal for you, what hobbies or sports did you like?"

"Used to play baseball. And I liked basketball, too, but just a pick-up game in the neighborhood. I wasn't on the school team or anything. I don't know. Guess I just hung out with my friends and got into trouble." He smiled at her over his bowl of soup. "Hooked up with a lot of girls."

Megan felt the familiar flush creep up her neck at his words. It was embarrassing she couldn't remain composed when he talked about

anything remotely sexual. And she knew he purposely used that tone of voice, trying to make her blush because it was so easy. “Regular guy stuff,” she said.

“Yep. How about you? What are you interested in besides your career?”

She wasn’t sure if that comment was a dig, but he didn’t seem confrontational, so she answered. “Oh, lots of things. I like biking and rock climbing, even though I’m not terribly good at it, dancing at clubs—you should see me when I’ve had a drink or two—or maybe not. What else? Going to museums, movies, theater, sports, a bit of everything. That’s why I’m living in the city instead of back in my hometown. I like a lot of action.”

Sean’s smile widened at the double meaning and Megan’s cheeks blushed even redder. “I mean, there wasn’t a lot of cultural diversity or new things to experience there. I love living in L.A. I like the city, my friends and my job.”

“What’s your family like?” he asked.

Megan told him about her mom and dad, her overbearing sister Charlotte and her younger brother Chris, her ally and partner in crime growing up. She related family anecdotes and realized after a few minutes Sean had successfully deflected the conversation from his own history and onto hers. She was sure it was intentional.



When Megan woke the next morning, Sean was up and dressed already, sitting at the table, eating toast and looking at the want ads he’d circled. A half smoked cigarette dangled from his fingers and a cup of black coffee steamed in front of him. He looked up when she entered. “Morning.”

Megan breathed in the scent of the cigarette. She craved her old morning routine of coffee and a smoke for breakfast and fought the urge to ask for one from his pack. “Good morning. Um, Sean, I’d prefer it if you didn’t smoke in the apartment. I quit a while ago and it’s kind of—difficult to be around it now.”

“Okay,” he said, grinding the cigarette out on the saucer he used as an ashtray.

“I don’t mean to be uptight about it, but it really is a problem for me. You’re welcome to smoke by the open window if you want. I don’t want you to have to go outside every time you need to light up.”

“I should quit anyway,” he said in that tone of voice Megan knew all too well from all the times she’d said the same thing without really meaning it.

“I’m going to give you a key to the apartment so if you go out you can get back in,” she told him. “I have to leave for work in about an hour. Make yourself at home today. Eat anything decent you can find in the kitchen. I tend to get take-out often, so there’s not a lot to choose from in my cupboards. You might be stuck with a can of soup and a peanut butter sandwich.”

He toyed with the crushed cigarette butt. “If it’s too weird for you leaving me here alone with all your stuff, I understand. I can leave when you leave and come back later in the evening.”

Megan couldn’t tell him she was more afraid of him disappearing and not coming back than she was of trusting him with the key to her apartment. “No. It’s not a problem at all. I totally trust you, and if you’re going to stay here, you’ll need your own key.”

A ghost of a smile traced his lips, and she could tell he was pleased by her confidence. “Thanks.”

An hour later, Megan was dressed and on her way to work, yet still managed to arrive late. The morning traffic somehow always took her by surprise. She walked quickly to her desk with a cup of coffee in one hand and her jacket slung over the other arm, trying to look like she'd been there a while.

Of course Rossi skulked just outside his office and beckoned her before she reached her desk. Megan set down the coffee, flung her jacket on her chair and followed him into his office.

She sat facing his desk, feeling like she'd been sent to the vice-principal's office. How many times could one be late to work before being fired?

"Good work on that hooker article," he said without preamble. "Of course, the subject's been exhausted. Who really needs to see another story about the plight of homeless kids in the city?"

Her heart sank.

"Still, some good stuff there." He looked at her from over the tops of his glasses. "If you work on it a little, I can probably print it. I sent the article to your shared file with my suggestions."

Megan let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding and resisted the impulse to throw her arms around Rossi's neck. "Yes. Yeah, I can do that," she assured him. "Whatever you think it needs."

"Meanwhile," Rossi tapped a pen against his desk. "I have something else you can cover—if you have time for it."

"Oh, I have time. I'll make time."

"It's a quickie. The St. Gervase Community Club is building a playground for the barrio kids in a vacant lot on Hespera Street. They're having a work day next Saturday, members of the church and the neighborhood working together to create joy and harmony from despair—

blah, blah, blah. Take some pictures, get a few quotes and let's see what you do with it."

Megan did her best to suppress the wide smile that threatened to crack the professional demeanor she was trying to establish. "Thank you so much for the assignment and for considering my article."

"By the way," he said. "What happened to the kid with the overdose?"

"He was placed in a foster home. I called Child Services, but I couldn't find out exactly where he is."

"And how about that other kid, Mouth? Did he get out like he planned?"

"I think he's working on it," she said.

Megan turned to leave and Rossi's voice stopped her.

"By the way, Ms. Lennox, if you plan to continue as a copy editor here and write articles, too, you might want to work on your time management skills. You were a half hour late this morning."

"Yes, sir," Megan said sheepishly.

She exited his office and returned to her desk without breaking into a victory dance. She could see Cynthia and Bob and some of the others watching her, wondering what Rossi's business with her had been. She wanted to shout her news to the whole office, but managed to maintain her composure until she was sitting at her desk.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!" she hissed under her breath, tap-dancing her feet underneath her desk. Twenty-three years old, almost fresh out of college and she was already being given writing assignments. Since Bob had told her she could expect to languish as a copy editor for years, she wanted to go and rub his face in it. But she'd be cool and let the news about her reporter status trickle down through the newsroom staff at its own pace.



When she called home, the phone rang five times before her own voice answered her with that stupid message she'd recorded when she was half drunk. God, she needed to change that. She wondered if Sean was out of the apartment or simply not picking up.

"Hey," she said when the beep finally came. "It's me. Pick up if you're around. —Okay, guess you're not, then. I'll be home late. If you're hungry, eat. Don't wait for me. Bye."

When Megan finally arrived home, her apartment was dark. She flipped on the light and immediately scanned the room, looking for anything that might be missing. All her possessions were intact and her knee-jerk mistrust of Sean made her feel ashamed.

Then her heart sank at the thought he'd left for good—until she noticed his stuff was still piled in a corner of the living room. He'd washed more clothes and they were folded on top of his duffel bag.

She assumed he was still out job hunting and prepared a quick dinner of grilled cheese and salad. When he didn't turn up, she ate alone, saving his share.

By ten o'clock, Megan's irritation had turned to concern. What if something had happened to Sean? Maybe he'd gone back to his squat and run into the same kids who'd beaten him up earlier. Or worse, he'd decided to make a quick buck and was with a client. Perhaps his injuries were more serious than she'd thought and he'd collapsed somewhere. She didn't even know what to do—it wasn't like she could call the police or report him missing.

She was starting to consider going back to the street and asking any of the kids whether they'd seen him when she heard the key turn in the lock.

“Hey, sorry I’m late.” Sean walked into the living room, sounding a little drunk and not at all contrite. He still looked really rough, although his eye was slightly less swollen, and he smelled of cigarettes and booze. Where did he get the money for it?

“You know, I was kind of expecting you home for dinner,” she said, trying to stay calm.

“Sorry,” he repeated, avoiding her gaze. “You didn’t have to cook for me.”

Megan shrugged. “It wasn’t anything special. Just tell me, next time. Leave a note or something.”

“I guess I’m not used to having anyone checking up on me.” His voice was tight, annoyed.

“What happened?”

Sean sat on the couch, grimacing slightly, obviously still sore.

“I went out looking for day jobs, but didn’t have much of a chance with this face. Even guys needing manual laborers avoided me. I gave up before I blew my chances of ever getting employed in the neighborhood.”

“That bad?”

“They took one look at me and...it wasn’t worth asking. I’ll have to wait until I look more...respectable.”

“It’ll be easier when you’re healed. Give it a couple days.”

Sean nodded. “I guess.” But he still appeared sullen and upset, and Megan went to bed early because staying there was so uncomfortable. She couldn’t think of anything to say to make him feel better. As she slipped into her sheets, she wondered whether this living arrangement was going to work, especially if he was still working the streets. But she couldn’t bring herself to ask if that was why he’d been so late.



Over the next few days things grew worse instead of better, the tension between them escalating until it exploded one afternoon when Megan came home from work. She was early for once, and as she walked up the street, she heard loud music—some rap artist she didn't recognize—blaring from her building, and realized with a shock that it came from her open windows. She rushed up the stairs two by two, horrified at how loud it sounded in the stairwell and wincing at the thought of old Mrs. Ryan—or worse, Mrs. Sanchez, who was bedridden—having to put up with the racket.

She burst through the door into a fog of cigarette smoke. Sean sprawled on the couch with a book—a math textbook, by the look of it—nodding to the beat. A semi-full ashtray lay on the floor by him, and Megan was sorely tempted to empty it over his head.

She marched through the living room to the stereo and turned it down. “You can't play music this loud here. What were you thinking?”

Setting the book aside, Sean looked up at her. “I didn't think anyone would be around at this time. It's only 4:30. Sorry.”

“There are old people living in this building. And I bet they're not so happy to listen to...whoever that is—at top volume.” There was a lot more going on under the surface that was upsetting her, but the loud music was an easy battle to pick.

“Jesus, Megan, what's the big deal? It wasn't *that* loud!” Sean snapped. He picked up the ashtray and rose from the couch. “I already said I'm sorry, what the fuck else do you want from me?”

“What would happen if somebody complained to the cops about the noise?” Megan turned from the stereo, folding her arms. He snorted. “They wouldn't call the cops. It wasn't that loud. What the hell are you really pissed about? Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” she yelled. “But, damn it, I wish you’d quit smoking in here. I asked you not to and this is the third day I’ve come home to an apartment that reeks of cigarettes!”

“Fuck it then. I’ll just go.” He scowled and turned away, heading toward his pile of possessions in the corner. “I’ve been here too long already.”

Megan crossed the room, intercepting his path to his things. “That’s not what I’m asking you to do. I simply want you to show some consideration. I didn’t tell you not to smoke in the apartment, just keep it by the window.”

Sean flicked ash off his cigarette then stubbed it out with a hard grind into the saucer. “No. You’re right. It’s your fucking house. I’m lucky you even let me stay.” But he sounded more pissed than apologetic.

“Stop being a jackass. I’m not asking for much.” Megan reached to take the saucer from his hand. They both let go at the same time and it dropped to the living room floor, scattering ash and butts across the carpet.

“Damn it!” Megan looked at the mess then into Sean’s face.

They both froze and their gazes locked. The anger vibrating in the air between them turned to something else. Megan’s chest rose and fell as if she’d been running and adrenaline flooded her system. She wasn’t used to getting into a shouting match with anyone and told herself it was anger throwing her senses into high gear, but the tingling sensation that spread from her stomach to her crotch made a liar of her.

In the several days Sean had been living with her, the tension escalated every minute they were together. He was in a foul mood, frustrated at not finding work. She understood that. But incidents like the loud music and smoking were driving her nuts—that and the increasing sexual attraction between them. Even though she went to

work every day, she never felt like she had a break from him. Her awareness of him permeated her consciousness.

“Do you want me to leave?” Sean asked again, his voice quieter. His gaze scanned hers as though honestly searching for the answer. His antagonism evaporated like smoke, his angry scowl replaced by a worried frown.

Megan’s resentment disappeared just as quickly. His stormy eyes, so changeable and indecipherable, twisted her heart. She sighed. “No. I don’t want you to leave.” She knelt and began to pick up cigarette butts, placing them on the saucer.

Sean dropped down beside her. “Don’t. It’s my mess. I’ll clean it up.” He reached out and grabbed her wrist then just held it. His fingers were a little rough and chapped and so warm, wrapped around her wrist.

For a moment they stayed that way, Sean not letting go and Megan not pulling away. “I’m sorry about the music and smoking.” His voice was little more than a whisper. “I shouldn’t have yelled.” His callused thumb traced a line along her wrist, up and down, slow and sensual.

Megan shivered at the tickling touch over her sensitive pulse point. “It’s all right. I shouldn’t have been so upset.”

“Guess I’m not used to living with people anymore. And when I was with my mom, it’s not like there were strict house rules, you know?”

Megan kept her gaze trained on his thumb moving lightly over her skin. If she looked into his eyes, she’d have to admit what was happening and end it. “I don’t want to be a bitch, but the old ladies living downstairs might not be as tolerant of loud rap as I would.”

“Old ladies, yeah, got it. Next time I’ll stick to Sinatra or something.” His fingers slid along her palm as he slowly released her hand. “And I’ll keep the smoking by the window, I promise.”

Megan started to speak, but her throat was so dry her voice cracked. “That’s all I ask.” She cleared her throat and stood up quickly, anxious to move away from such close proximity to him. “I’ll get the vaccum.”

He straightened, too. “No. You just got home from work. Go unwind. I’ll take care of this.”

Nodding, she retreated to her bedroom to change from her work clothes. She released a long-pent breath as she closed the door behind her. Would the apartment ever feel like her own again? She didn’t know how much longer she could take the thwarted sexual tension and his overwhelming presence filling her space and her consciousness.



Sean was still sleeping the next morning when Megan left for work. She wasn’t sure if he was genuinely catching up on the sleep he missed when living rough or if he was avoiding her, but she was determined to try to engage him in conversation that evening. She hoped to reestablish the easy rapport they’d shared on the street, which had somehow been lost by moving him into her apartment.

The day the paper went to press was always long, especially when things went wrong and she was stuck dealing with some major last-minute corrections on the lead story. It was past seven before Megan managed to leave work, and by the time she hit home, she was starving. She was pleasantly surprised to smell cooking clear out in the hallway as she keyed the lock. Opening the door, she breathed in an enticing scent of garlic and spices. Her stomach had been rumbling for the past few hours and she felt almost faint as hunger pangs flared up.

In the living room, Sean sat on the couch writing something on a piece of paper pressed against a book on his knee. He looked up. “Hey.”

“Hi. You cooked!”

“Yeah. I figured you’d be hungry. It’s just spaghetti and garlic bread. Boiling noodles is my specialty. Spaghetti, mac ‘n’ cheese, tuna noodle casserole. I can do all the major carb meals.”

Relief washed through her at his light tone and she grinned. “Sounds great. What are you writing?”

“Filling out some applications, but it looks like I have some temporary work already.” He was working at suppressing his smile.

“That’s fantastic! Doing what?”

“I was walking past a construction site and stopped at the office to ask if they needed any guys to do heavy lifting. Looks like my face has healed enough to pass because the boss basically told me I could turn up tomorrow and if they need help, they’ll use me, if not I go home. It might not be steady employment, but the best part is, I’ll get paid in cash, no paperwork, no questions.”

“Sounds perfect for you. Congratulations.”

He grinned, unable to hold it back, and his smile was infectious. Megan smiled, too. For the first time in days, the atmosphere felt genuinely relaxed.

“Everything’s ready if you want to eat,” he said, taking his feet off the coffee table and standing. To Megan’s surprise, the coffee table was clean of clutter. She hadn’t seen the surface of it practically since she’d moved into the apartment.

Looking around the room, she noticed other areas where stacks of books had been re-shelved or scattered magazines were placed in neat piles. For once there were no haphazardly discarded socks, sweaters or shoes lying around the room. She assumed they’d made it back to her closet. And it even looked like her asthmatic vacuum cleaner had been run over the ragged carpet.

“You cleaned!” Megan was almost taken aback. She should have been overjoyed at having a free and much needed house-cleaning, but instead felt slightly annoyed. This was her space. These were *her* things, her books which had been lying right where she’d put them for a specific reason. Besides which, it was kind of embarrassing that a guy who until last week lived in abandoned buildings found her home too messy to bear.

“Yeah. I picked up a little. Would’ve done it sooner, but I wasn’t sure you wanted me messing with your stuff.” He seemed to catch her ambivalent vibe. “Is that okay?”

“Oh, of course. Thank you. I’m just surprised. I don’t generally think of teenagers as being neat.”

He shrugged. “Where I grew up, if I didn’t keep things clean, no one did.”

She followed him into the kitchen and found the table set for two and the smell of garlic even stronger. “Wow, looks like you taught yourself to cook, too.”

Together they brought the food and beverages to the table. Megan would usually have had wine with her meal to unwind after her long day, but she thought she should set a better example for Sean, so she poured them both glasses of milk.

Sean’s spaghetti was delicious and, although he swore he hadn’t done anything but boil pasta and open a jar of sauce, it tasted like he’d raided Megan’s seldom-used spice rack and created a culinary masterpiece. Or maybe she was just ravenous, since she hadn’t eaten anything except half of Cynthia’s sub for lunch.

“What’d you do at work today?” Sean asked.

“Proofreading, gossiping with my co-workers, the usual.” She hesitated before sharing the news of her assignment. “A few days ago,

Rossi told me I could cover a story on Saturday, something about a church group turning a vacant lot into a playground. Guess there was no one else who could go.”

“That’s great. It’s what you’ve been waiting for, right, an assignment? So what made him realize your writing talents are being wasted? Did he read your article?”

“Yes. He’s thinking about using it. He liked it, but said it needed some revision before it could be printed.”

Sean nodded and his eyes were blank, giving away nothing. She couldn’t tell if he still felt she’d used the kids’ life stories to further her career and was pissed about it or not.

“You worked hard on it,” he finally said politely. “You deserve success.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you check the article over before it goes to press, if Rossi decides to use it.” She accepted his diplomacy then changed the subject. “So, are you going to continue working toward your G.E.D.? Can I buy you textbooks?”

A frown creased his forehead then vanished. “I can get the materials I need at the library. No more loans. I already owe you too much.”

“Okay.” Megan would gladly have given him whatever he needed, but recognized his pride was hurt at accepting her help. “What kind of career do you want to pursue when you’re finished with your schoolwork?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What subject are you best at?”

“Math, I guess. It’s always been pretty easy for me.”

She nodded. “Lots of careers need a strong math background. That’s good.”

“What, are you my guidance counselor now?” His tone was sharp. “You gonna have me filling out career questionnaires next?”

“Sorry. I’m not trying to be invasive, but I wondered about your plans for your future.”

He set his fork down. “To stop leeching off you as soon as possible and find a place of my own.” His voice was hard.

Megan felt like she’d been slapped. Her lips tightened.

“Shit!” Sean pushed back from the table and stood up. “That didn’t come out right. I’m sorry. Again.” He picked up their plates and carried them over to the sink. “I just hate sponging off you. I’m used to depending on myself and I feel like a fucking charity case, eating your food, sleeping on your couch, pissing you off ‘cause I’m in your way.”

“Don’t.” Megan stood and crossed the kitchen to him. She touched his forearm, ignoring the heat that shot from her fingers up her arm. “I’m your friend. I want to help you, like I know you’d help me if I needed it.”

Sean’s intense eyes bored into hers. “Still makes me feel weak. I’ll start paying you now that I’ve got work.”

She nodded, too concerned about bruising his ego to refuse the money. “Absolutely. But take your time. Whenever you feel you can afford it.” Squeezing his arm, she added, “And it doesn’t matter if we fight sometimes. Roommates always do. It doesn’t mean I don’t like having you here.”

His face was only a few feet away, his sapphire eyes looking down into hers. Megan’s heart sped up as Sean’s gaze moved from her eyes to her mouth. He inclined his head slowly toward her, bridging the distance between them.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized what was about to happen. Releasing his arm, she stepped back quickly. “All right then. That’s settled. Let’s tidy up the kitchen then kick back.”

As she finished clearing the table, Megan was intimately aware of Sean’s body moving around hers. The room was too small for them not to

bump into each other now and then. It was like they were doing an intricate dance around one another, working in proximity while attempting to keep their distance.

They passed the rest of the evening watching television. Megan curled in her armchair with her laptop open, reworking her article. She was glad to have distraction of the TV as a buffer between them. It was hard to come home from a busy day of work and deal with the emotional turmoil of living with Sean. Part of her wished she'd never invited him to stay then cringed at her own selfishness.

But glancing over at him during a commercial break from C.S.I., her heart twisted in her chest. He'd fallen asleep on the couch, his long eyelashes fanned over his bruised cheekbones. His mouth was slightly slack and his lips looked so kissable...and vulnerable. How could she have thought for a second she'd done the wrong thing when the alternative for him was sleeping on the floor in an unheated building?

Megan closed her laptop and put it down, then turned her attention to solving the week's mystery through forensics. When she woke, it was to a figure looming over her, a hand touching her arm. She let out a startled, "Ah!"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. You fell asleep." Sean's fingers stroked down her arm before he stepped back.

She gasped. "Jesus, you scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," he repeated. "I thought you might want to go to bed." He sat on the edge of the couch, which was made into his bed for the night.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. "Yeah. Thanks for waking me. Well, goodnight." She felt embarrassed, like a drop-in guest who'd overstayed her welcome. Her living room had become his bedroom again.

"Night." His voice was husky and low, sensual as a caress.

Megan felt his gaze burning into her back as she left the room and remembered how his hand had lingered on her arm after he woke her. She was intimately aware of his presence nearby as she walked down the hallway, used the bathroom and got ready for bed.

The jolt of waking so abruptly left her sleepless and she lay for a long time picturing Sean in the next room. Visions of him sleeping led to visions of him doing other things. But furtive fantasies about him couldn't substitute for the real thing. She longed to know what he kissed like, how his skin felt beneath her hands or his hair slipping between her fingers. How hard were the muscles that stretched his T-shirts and how soft were his lips?

Finally Megan gave in and allowed her hand to move down between her thighs. She closed her eyes and stroked herself to an abrupt and unfulfilling climax. It wasn't enough. Not nearly. She gave a low moan and turned on her side, the tension churning inside her not alleviated at all.



The next day, Sean dressed in some of his old street clothes—the baggier ones rather than the low-riding tight jeans—and left for work at seven a.m., clutching a brown-bag lunch of sandwiches and an apple. The construction site boss turned out to be as good as his word and Sean called her from a payphone to let her know he'd be out working all day.

That evening, Megan made a point of leaving work as early as she could so she could welcome him home. She got in before he did and started cooking. She didn't have time to make anything fancy, but figured he would be starving and steak and baked potatoes would hit the spot after a day's worth of heavy lifting.

By the time Sean walked through the door, dinner was well on its way and Megan poked her head through the doorway to say hello. He looked exhausted, but in a good way. He was covered in plaster dust and dirt from head to foot, his clothes stained and his face and arms streaked where the rivulets of sweat had traced patterns in the grime.

The mixture of sweat and dirt made his arm muscles stand out in sharp relief. Sean undeniably looked good in his rough, sweaty, testosterone-laden construction guy incarnation. She could just imagine the looks he got from passing women as he walked through the site carrying heavy loads, muscles straining with effort, and she suddenly wished she could be there gawping at him and his sexy ass while he worked. She mentally slapped herself and tried to refocus.

“So?” she asked, but she could see in his eyes it had gone well.

“It was good. I mean, the work’s hard, and the pay’s not great but...it feels fucking good to be earning money doing something like that for a change. You know, something I don’t have to be ashamed about.” Sean looked down at his feet and back up again, so vulnerable for an instant that Megan wanted to drop her skillet and rush over to hug him.

She pretended she hadn’t seen him drop his guard. It pained her to think how much he must have repressed his true feelings over the past couple of years, pretending he was cool with his life as a prostitute.

But he really did look happy right now.

“Why don’t you take a shower while I put the finishing touches on dinner? You can tell me all about it while we eat. You must be starving.”

“Yeah.” He grinned. As he walked past her on his way to the bathroom, she caught his masculine, musky, sweaty scent, which was almost overpowering and triggered a rush of heat in her. Jesus, it was such a primal, animal response to his male pheromones. She bit the inside of her cheek, hard, and forced herself to concentrate on the steak.

She had to keep this under control or she'd be going crazy in a matter of weeks. That, or something would happen.

Chapter Six

On Saturday, Megan brought Sean with her when she went to cover her assignment on the community playground building project. When they got out of her car, the vacant lot was already teeming with workers and Megan saw one of the newspaper photographers, Charlie, snapping shots. It was interesting how people slipped into traditional gender roles when working on a project like this. Men did the actual building; measuring, cutting, sawing and bolting large boards together into some kind of climbing structure and a swing set. Women supervised kids in cleaning up the lot, discarding the trash and digging several flower beds. The ladies also laid out a brunch buffet on a long table off to one side.

Charlie caught sight of Megan and came toward her, snatching a muffin on his way past the table. “Hey. I’m outta here. I’ve been shooting for twenty minutes. I’m sure I’ve got something usable and I’ve got better things to do on a Saturday morning.”

“Wait. I haven’t even talked to anyone. How do I know you’ve got all the pictures I need?”

“Trust me. This is standard stuff. It really doesn’t matter who’s in charge of the project or who you interview, Rossi will always choose the ‘happy kid’ shots. See ya.” Charlie gave Sean a curious once-over, then hurried off to his car.

Megan located the contact person whose name she’d been given, Mrs. Xavier Solis, while Sean wandered over to the construction crew to see if

he could help. There wasn't really a lot to cover here, Megan quickly decided after about five minutes of questioning Mrs. Solis.

St. Gervase Church and the Corazon Community Club had joined together to raise funds for playground building materials through car washes, a bazaar and contributions from the congregation and the community. This urban renewal project was the kind of grass roots, feel-good story that Rossi loved to spotlight, but there wasn't a lot of drama for a reporter to sink her teeth into with sunlight and daffodils.

Megan got quotes from a couple more people, observed the milling children and busy parents, making mental notes of how she would describe the scene, then looked around for Sean to tell him she was ready to leave. He held a two by four against a post while one of the other men screwed a bolt into place. She watched for a moment. He looked so relaxed and content, grinning and talking to the guy as they worked together, she decided not to disturb him.

She went over to where the ladies were transplanting flowers into the garden plot they'd created. A pair of women transporting a small tree with its roots balled up in burlap came past, laughing as they struggled to carry the awkward bundle. Megan stepped forward. "Can I help?"

Before she knew it, she was shoveling dirt and helping them wrestle the tree into the hole they'd dug. Someone connected about five lengths of garden hose until they reached a working spigot and Megan watered the sapling. Her jeans were spattered with mud by the time she'd finished.

"Having fun yet?" Sean's voice came from behind her and the husky tenor of it raised gooseflesh on her arms.

"Loads. Gardening is my life."

“Do all reporters get as hands-on with their subjects as you?” he asked, coming up beside her and adjusting the small tree so it stood straighter in its bed of dirt.

Both his tone and words sounded suggestive and ripe with double meaning. She was sick of him putting her on edge and making her feel lust-addled and confused. Besides which, the tree wasn’t crooked and she wanted him to quit messing with it. She turned the spray of water on him.

With a gasp of shock at the sudden burst of cold, Sean leaped back. “Fuck!”

“Language! Church group,” she cautioned, dousing him from his chest to his knees.

“Cut it out! That’s fucking cold.”

“You cut it out,” she returned, turning the spray back on the soupy mass of mud around the base of the tree. “Quit talking dirty all the time.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he protested. “Jesus Chr....” He glanced over at a group of the church ladies who watched them. He held his T-shirt away from his body and wrung out water.

“It’s not what you say. It’s the way you say it,” Megan said primly. She let go of the trigger on the nozzle and set the hose on the ground.

“Oh yeah? Maybe it’s just your dirty mind.” He grabbed the hose and Megan realized she’d made a fatal mistake in releasing control of it. He flipped it on and turned the spray on her, hitting her in the shoulder with icy water. She shrieked and ran out of range.

“Grow up,” she said from a safe distance. Sean grinned and turned off the water. Megan squeezed moisture from her sleeve as she came back over to him. “You’re setting a bad example for the children.” And even though she was only teasing, it seemed to be true enough as one of the little kids came running and picked up the hose.

“Benny! Benito, drop it!” The boy’s mother followed him, glaring at Sean and Megan and extricating the garden hose from her son’s hand before he could use it against her.

“Sorry.” Megan apologized for creating a scene and inciting misbehavior in a minor. She walked back toward Sean and, as she passed the tree she’d helped plant, slipped in the puddle of mud and fell square on her ass.

Sean laughed aloud as she cursed. She glared at him, not truly angry. His face was so open and happy, his laugh deep and full, she was thrilled to hear it. He went to help her up. His warm, strong hand seized hers and pulled her to her feet, then he held on longer than necessary. He stared into her eyes, and time froze for a moment.

Heat radiated from his body, bathing her in warmth. A sheen of sweat slicked his face and arms and she longed to lean in and lick the salt from his skin. He smelled so good, like fresh sweat and soap. Megan breathed him in deeply. In her mind she heard his words from the night she’d brought him home, “With you—well, it wouldn’t be a chore.” A picture of entwined limbs and thrusting bodies swirled in her head and she felt suddenly short of breath.

Then Sean dropped her hand and stepped away.

Megan’s skin burned even after he’d let go. She turned to examine the seat of her jeans. “Oh, great!” She glared at Sean again. “Okay, we’ve done the good deed thing and helped out for almost two hours. Can we go home?”

“Your call,” he said, smiling once more at her misfortune.

“Ms. Lennox,” Mrs. Solis called as they walked past. “You and your boyfriend must have something to eat before you leave.” She gestured to the buffet table.

“Oh, he’s not...” Megan began, then realized it wasn’t worth correcting the woman. “Sure. We’d love to. We’re starving.”

They loaded up a pair of plates with homemade enchiladas in several types of sauce, salads, side dishes and desserts. Then they sat in the dirt at the edge of the lot with and watched the workers carry on with construction. The sun shone hot and quickly dried their clothes.

Megan thought about the continual surprises Sean brought to her life. If she’d been here on her own today, she never would have stuck around to help, but it really had turned out to be fun.

“This is nice,” Sean said after a bit, “building a playground. Although it’d be better for the older kids if they made a skateboard park or something.”

“Maybe in the next vacant lot. Why? Do you skateboard?”

“It’s been a while.”

“How do you feel about rollerblading? We could go home and get cleaned up, then I’ll take you to the park where I like to go. I’ve got my blades and we could rent some for you.”

“Sounds like fun. I’d like to see you fall on your ass again.”

“Never happen. I’m a great skater.”

“Well then, I guess I’d just like to see your ass, period.” He gave a lascivious glance at her rear.

“Never happen,” she repeated dryly.

He leaned in close. “I bet you look real cute skating around in cut-offs—all that long leg showing.”

“Keep teasing about it and you’ll never find out.”

He laughed again, a warm chuckle that felt like the sunshine on her skin. Leaping up, he took her by the hand and pulled her to her feet. “Come on. I want to race you. See how good you really are.”

He didn't let go of her hand all the way to the car, and she didn't pull away.



On Sunday morning, Megan was clearing the plates after breakfast—insisting, for once, on doing the clean-up—when the doorbell rang.

“What the hell? What time is it?” she called out to Sean from the kitchen.

“I don't know—11:30, I guess?”

“Who the hell comes round at this time of the day on the weekend?” Megan wondered aloud. Apart from her mother, or one of her siblings maybe, but they tended to warn in advance. Maybe it was just some Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses doing door-to-door evangelism.

She went to open the door, drying her hands on a dishcloth, only to be confronted with the grinning faces of her two best friends. James had one arm hidden behind his back and Sasha was trying not to laugh.

“Surprise!” they crowed in unison, and James thrust the bouquet of flowers he'd been concealing into Megan's face. She smiled weakly. *Shit.* This was so not how she wanted to introduce Sean to her friends. Still, she couldn't see any way of avoiding it now. At least time played on her side—after a week, the likelihood of him murdering her in her bed would have receded, even for her suspicious buddies.

“Thanks... Come in, guys.” She held the door open. “So what's the occasion?”

“You've been out of contact for more than a week. I thought Sasha must have spoken to you, but then I find out she hasn't heard from you in ages, so we figured it was time to come snooping.” James took off his leather jacket and hanging it on one of the hooks. He ran a hand through his spiked blond hair and smiled at Megan. “So, is it a new boyfriend?”

Megan shook her head. “No. It’s mainly work, really...”

“Mind if I get myself a glass of water?” Sasha asked, yawning. “I haven’t quite mastered this hangover and I am so damn thirsty. Oh, and Stevie sends his love but you know him, he has work to do, on a Sunday morning no less. I swear I’m an office widow.” She strode off toward the kitchen without waiting for Megan’s okay, and nearly ran into Sean, who’d been drying dishes at the sink, and who was coming out.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Oh, sorry, I...” Sasha trailed off, obviously embarrassed. “I didn’t realize you had company, Megan, otherwise we wouldn’t have...”

“What, turned up on a Sunday morning? Like you weren’t trying to catch me at something?” Megan snorted.

James and Sasha exchanged a guilty look, which wasn’t lost on either Megan or Sean.

“Anyhow, I guess you struck paydirt. This is Sean. Sean, these are my very rude friends, Sasha and James, who make it a mission to try to run my life. Sean is a friend, who’s crashing here, on the living room couch, for a few days.”

“Really.” Sasha’s eyes widened. “Nice to meet you, Sean.”

Sean seemed nervous to Megan, but she didn’t think it would be obvious to either of the other two.

James narrowed his eyes at Sean then looked at Megan with an unspoken challenge. She could hear him in her head. *No boyfriend, huh?*

The next few minutes were awkward. Sean was evidently ill at ease and busied himself in the kitchen making coffee. James and Sasha clearly burned with the desire to interrogate Megan, but did their best to restrain themselves and be polite. Megan desperately tried to figure out how much of the truth she was going to tell them. She went into the kitchen with a couple of stray cups as a pretext to talk to Sean.

"I'm sorry about them," she whispered. "I really had no idea."

He nodded, silent.

"Listen, they're like, my two best friends." There was no need for him to know James was occasionally more than a friend. "I'm going to have to tell them something about how we met. I can't really lie to them. They know me too well."

He looked at her through his lashes, and again Megan saw a vulnerable youth rather than the self-assured young man she'd grown used to. "It's okay. They're your friends. You tell them. I'll go buy some milk." He flashed her a small smile.

After Sean left the apartment, Megan took a deep breath and braced herself for the onslaught from her friends.

"Well, he's tactful," James remarked.

"Not to mention extremely hot!" Sasha exclaimed. "Megan, who is this guy? Where did you meet him? And, more importantly, are you having a fling?"

"No!" Megan exclaimed. "I told you, Sean's crashing here while he gets something else figured out. I'm not... No. Absolutely not."

"Whoa! Okay. Although I'd want to ask you why not, because, yum," Sasha said, her green eyes twinkling.

"Sash, cut it out," Megan snapped, sitting on the couch next to her.

James looked thoughtful. He was always good at analyzing situations and reading the subtext in a conversation. She could virtually see the cogs whirring in his head. "So where exactly did you guys meet?" He stared at her suspiciously.

Megan blinked and looked away. "We met when I was doing some research for a piece..."

"I fucking knew it," James shouted. "He's one of those kids, isn't he? You picked him up on Santa Monica Boulevard?"

Damn, he was quick! Megan bit her lip and nodded.

Sasha's eyes opened wide. "One of the street kids? The hookers?"

"How did you...?" Megan started.

"How did I guess? You look guilty as hell, you sure weren't happy to see us turn up and you've been acting squirrely for a while." James paced up and down the room, scowling. "You're fucking crazy, Meg. You brought back a whore to your apartment. Have you got any idea what kind of risk you're putting yourself in?"

"James, stop it. He's been here a whole week and the main change it's made in my life is that the place is tidy. He cleans up after himself and me, he's been cooking dinner and he's been doing all the chores," Megan snapped. She felt compelled to defend not just her decision, but Sean's reputation, too. "Besides, if he was going to stab me in my sleep, I think he'd have already done it."

"But...you invited a stranger into your home, Megan," Sasha said. "He could beat you, rape you, steal your stuff. You have no idea."

"I took a gamble, I know. But I—I got to know Sean over the past few months. It's not like I picked him up blindly. He kind of looked out for me when I was researching that piece."

Megan frowned at James as she went on. "That's why I felt fairly safe hanging out there and why I didn't call you up every night. He helped me out. A lot! We kind of became friends. When he was badly beaten up and his shit stolen, I offered him a place to stay."

"So does he bring clients back to your apartment?" James asked blandly.

"Fuck you!" Megan shot back. "He's stopped that. He's trying to get his GED and get himself out of that shit, all right? He's working his ass off and you have no right to talk about him like that."

Anger surged through her. James objected because he was worried about her, but she also knew he had a tendency to be possessive toward her because of their on again, off again sexual relationship. He never really warmed to any new guy she brought into their group.

Megan paused to compose herself. "Listen guys, give him a chance. He's a nice kid and he needs a break, that's all."

"When you say 'kid', Megan, do you mean he's actually a kid?" Sasha said.

Megan closed her eyes and took another breath. Fuck coffee, she needed a real drink to continue this conversation.

"He's nearly eighteen, okay? The system treats the kids like shit and for older kids, it's a real mess. He's... Look, can you just let it be? Accept it? He was in trouble and needed help. If I'd called Social Services, he just would have run away to find another place to work the streets. Now he's looking at getting his diploma and a proper job and...please, guys?"

She stopped, overcome by emotion. They'd better listen to her, because otherwise she was going to have to ask them to leave. There was no point in arguing the issue and she didn't want to risk Sean coming home in the middle of the scene.

"Couldn't you be in trouble for harboring him here?" Sasha twisted a lock of her curly red hair around her fingers.

"It's not like anyone's looking for him. He slipped through the net a while ago, Sash. This is as stable as he's known, God, I don't even know for how long, but he's had a hard life. And he really is a decent guy."

"If he touches a hair on your head, I will kill him," James said suddenly. And although he was smiling, Megan had no doubt he was, in fact, entirely serious. He'd always been protective of her, sometimes to an irritating extent.

She got up and walked over to him. "I promise he's not a bad guy, James." She put her hand on his arm. "Trust me. I've seen him interacting with kids, I've seen how he is with me. He's a good person caught in a shitty life and trying to get out of it as best he can. I'm simply giving him a helping hand until he can manage on his own." The fact she wanted to jump his bones was not their business, nor was the fact he was hetero and clearly attracted to her, too. Some things were best left unsaid.

James looked at her, then at Sasha and sighed. "Okay. I'll be civilized to him. But he better not turn out to be a psychopath."

Megan smiled and turned to Sasha, who rolled her eyes. "Yes, all right. I will say, he's easy on the eyes. He doesn't look like the hopped-up kids on meth I've seen around the city."

"That's because he's not a drug addict. I am not that stupid, thank you very much."

The atmosphere had eased back into something closer to their normal interaction by the time Sean returned carrying a gallon of milk. They all drank coffee and chatted about the unseasonably warm weather and last night's TV. Sean was fairly silent but not completely withdrawn, and Megan was proud of him for mixing with her friends, knowing they knew about him.

Once Sasha and James left and they were putting things away in the kitchen, Sean turned to her. He was back to his usual cocky self, with a slight smile playing on his lips.

"So I bet you got told off for having me here, right?"

"A little."

Sean laughed. "Yeah, sure. I don't think your friend James likes me much. I think he's into you."

“No. It’s not like that with us. James is a friend like Sasha is a friend only with... I mean, yeah, occasionally we hook up, but it doesn’t mean anything.” Megan’s neck burned and wondered why she was telling him this. “It’s like a convenience, really.”

“Friends with benefits.” A smile still curved his mouth, but his eyes were unreadable.

“Anyway, as a friend, he’s simply being protective,” Megan said.

“He’s right, you know. If I was him, I’d kick my ass out of your house, and I’d sure as hell tell you off for doing something as crazy as taking in some punk you don’t know.” Sean actually sounded serious.

Megan frowned.

“From where I’m standing, though, I just want to say thanks for giving me a shot.” He no longer looked cocky, just a little shy.

“You’re welcome.” A happy glow pervaded her. She’d done the right thing. She had no doubt about it.

Chapter Seven

Megan plodded to the bathroom, eyes barely open, feet following the familiar path in the near dark. She closed the door, pulled down her pajama bottoms and started to sit.

“Jesus Christ!” The toilet seat wasn’t where it was supposed to be. The backs of her thighs hit cold ceramic instead of plastic and she fought to keep her balance and avoid dunking her rear. “Fucking Sean!”

Her eyes flew open and she scrambled to her feet, still cursing, turned and put down the seat and sat. “Stupid asshole.” She rubbed the heels of her hands into her bleary eyes then stared at her nightlight, Mickey Mouse smiling and waving at her while she peed.

Living with someone, especially a male someone, after she’d lived alone for almost two years really sucked sometimes. With Sean taking over most of the household chores, she felt guilty complaining. Who wouldn’t want a guy around who was willing to clean your apartment and have a hot meal ready for you at the end of a long work day, even when you told him he could go ahead and order takeout? She kept telling him he didn’t have to do everything, but since she wouldn’t accept rent money from him, this was his way of compensating.

Still, sometimes she wanted to smack him and tell him to quit messing with her stuff. She’d forbade him to touch her desk no matter how badly the piles teetered. Of course her bedroom was still a joyously sloppy sanctuary.

The main drawback to living with another person was more intangible than toilet seats and neat versus sloppy. Megan had her own routine and her own little habits she couldn't indulge anymore—running around in her underwear for one. She missed stupid things like singing loud and off-key along with the stereo, or sitting and clipping her toenails in the middle of the living room floor while watching the shopping channel, or belching or farting without embarrassment.

Sean was the perfect houseguest, but he was still a guest and she could never completely relax at home anymore.

“God, I’m such a selfish bitch,” she muttered, standing and flushing.

Little moments crowded her mind, snapshots of Sean around her apartment—turning from the stove to answer a question, walking bare-chested from the bathroom, looking up from his textbook with a sweet smile of welcome, snapping a dishcloth at her ass and laughing, lying on the couch channel-surfing with her remote. It was nice having another person to live with, someone to talk over her day with and to sense another human presence in the apartment even when he wasn't in the same room. It was comforting.

Sometimes it was just hard to remember that.

As the days went on, they settled into a routine. Sean would be up before Megan on the days they needed him on site, and making breakfast by the time she emerged and hit the bathroom. Other days, he steered clear of the bathroom and kitchen altogether and either slept or studied or read on the couch, anxious not to get in her way as she rushed to work in a perpetual flurry of last-minute panics.

She finished the rewrite on her article about the Hespera Street playground and turned it in to Rossi and the following week had her byline in the paper for the first time. When she held the actual paper in her hands and read her words in print, she had to go to the ladies' room

and cry in a bathroom stall until she pulled herself together enough to come out and accept congratulations from her co-workers. Even Bob managed a smile and a “congratulations” although she could tell from his eyes how sour he really felt about it.

The evening her story ran, she came home to find Sean sacked out on the couch, one arm flung above his head, the other hand resting on his chest. He’d been putting in long hours all that week at the construction site and even with work gloves, his hands were red and sore from handling sheets of plywood, cement blocks and whatever else he was told to transport from one place to another. His eyes opened and he smiled on seeing her.

“Hey,” he said. “Guess I fell asleep. Sorry. I meant to make dinner.”

“No need. Wok Express has been suffering since you moved in here and took over cooking. Before that I must have supplied them with half their business. What do you want to eat? Fried rice, chow mein, sesame chicken, moo shu pork?”

“Anything. Just get a lot of it. I’m starving.” The fact he was no longer hesitant about asking for what he wanted was a good sign.

Sean stretched, yawned and sat up, then gave her a sharp look. “What’s up? I know you’re not this excited just because we’re ordering Chinese food.”

“The playground article. Page five.” She handed him the paper.

He scanned the photos and Megan’s byline then looked at her with another smile. “You did it. Your name in print. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“Is your boss going to run the other one?”

She felt a jolt at the mention of the street kids article. She didn’t know if he was still pissed about it, so she’d never shown him the copy to

get his approval as promised. Now she had to admit it was a done deal. Rossi planned to print her revised version.

"Probably in the next couple of weeks," she said. "As part of a series on youth in the city."

"An expose on prep schools up next, then?" Sean said, and though he still smiled, there was no humor in it.



If Sean's words of praise were few, Megan's mom more than made up for it when she called the next day after reading the paper. It amused Megan that her mom and dad had a subscription to the *Weekly Reporter* even though all she did was edit copy. Now, for the first time, there was actually something for them to get excited about.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me about this! How could you not call and tell me you'd been published? Why did I have to find out by reading it? I am so proud of you, honey."

"Thanks, Mom." Megan felt bad for not having called, but her mom rattled on, enthusing over every phrase, practically every word Megan had written. The ego-stroke felt good.

"By the way, sweetie, what about Thanksgiving? Can we expect you on Wednesday evening or Thursday?"

"Oh. I, uh, won't be able to make it for the holiday. My friend, Sasha is having dinner at her house and I promised I'd come. This is her first big holiday meal in her own home and she doesn't really have family to invite so... I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner."

"Well." There was a bit of a pause. "It's understandable you want be with your friends. But you will make it home for Christmas, won't you?"

"Of course. Wouldn't miss it."

They chatted a few minutes longer before hanging up, but only after Megan's dad got on the line to reiterate how proud they both were.

The phone call reminded Megan she hadn't talked to her sister or brother in a long time either, but to keep the conversation short and on her terms, she decided to e-mail Charlotte and Chris instead of calling. Even so, Charlotte immediately shot back an e-mail bitching her out for not coming home for the holiday and telling her she should start thinking about Mom and Dad a little instead of always doing things to please herself. And then, almost as an afterthought, she congratulated Megan on the article

"Thank you, Saint Charlotte," Megan muttered.

Soon after, Chris's message popped up. "Cool. Congrats. See you at Christmas." Chris was in college now and didn't keep in touch with Megan like he used to. But they'd always been close and his succinct message meant more to her than Charlotte's page-long tirade.

As she snapped her laptop closed for the night, Megan thought she actually wouldn't have minded a traditional Thanksgiving at home but how was she supposed to explain Sean to her family?"



The following week, Megan came home from work early on Wednesday, usually her longest day. She was feeling achy and feverish, her head was stuffed up and she wanted to nip whatever she was coming down with in the bud.

Sean wasn't there, which meant it was one of his "on" days at the construction site. He still wasn't working regularly, but he was on more often than off, so he was making pretty good money, enough that he'd insisted on giving her fifty dollars toward rent that week.

It was a relief to come home to a quiet apartment and the first real alone-time she'd had in weeks. Megan decided to take advantage of not being rushed in the bathroom. She'd have a long, hot shower, get in her PJs and crawl into bed with a bowl of chicken noodle soup and a good book.

A half-hour later, she emerged from her shower to clouds of tropical steam in her bathroom. Wiping her hand over the mirror, she peered at her reflection. Her eyebrows were a disaster. She hadn't plucked them in ages. She dropped her towel to the floor and carefully worked a wide-toothed comb through her snarled hair as she rummaged in the vanity drawer for her tweezers.

While she was in there, she came across a bottle of her favorite nail polish, which had been missing for ages and decided to apply it. She sat naked on the toilet lid, put one foot up on the sink and began brushing polish on her toenails. The purplish color wasn't as cool as she remembered.

She was working fastidiously on her second foot when suddenly the bathroom door opened.

Megan screeched and dropped both the bottle and brush to the floor. She jerked her foot down from the sink and folded her arms over her chest to cover her nudity. "Holy shit!" she shrieked, crossing her legs as well.

"Sorry!" Sean stood transfixed in the doorway, one hand gripping the handle as he stared at her with wide eyes.

Megan dropped an arm from her chest to her crotch. She didn't have enough arms to cover all of herself at once. "Get out!"

He scanned her intently for another long moment. "Sorry," he repeated, backing from the room and shutting the door. His muffled voice came through the closed door. "I didn't know you were home. I'm..."

“Sorry. Yeah, I got that.” She seized her discarded towel from the floor and wrapped it around her body. She needed to get from the bathroom to her bedroom, but hadn’t worn a robe. “Will you move away from the door? I have to go to my room.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Of course.” His voice faded down the hallway toward the living room. He sounded so flustered, she smiled. Megan dashed for her bedroom and clothed herself in pajamas and a robe, remembering Sean’s long hard look at her body before he retreated from the bathroom. Her skin was flushed and rosy, and not from the extended hot shower or her low-grade fever. She fantasized about how the scenario could have gone. In her daydream, she rose to stand boldly before him, no crossed arms or legs, and let his gaze wander up and down her body. He took another step into the room, let go of the door handle and reached for her.

Megan’s fever moved directly to her crotch and glowed there, and her hand slid in the same direction. She intercepted it, briskly toweling her hair dry and headed to the kitchen.

Sean was putting away groceries. He glanced up and quirked a lop-sided smile at her. “You’re home early today.”

“So are you.”

“There wasn’t anything for me to do at the site, so I put in a couple more applications, at a gas station and grocery store, then picked up some food.” He held up a package of Tuna Helper. “Tuna casserole for dinner?”

“I’m coming down with something. That’s why I’m home so early. I think I’ll just have soup.”

“I’ll make it. What kind do you want?”

“You don’t have to. I’m not that sick. I can do it.” Sometimes it really bugged her that he would willingly wait on her hand and foot. She walked to the cupboard to choose a can of Chicken with Stars.

As she brushed past Sean, her nipples peaked, reacting to the warmth of his body, his smell...the fact he'd just seen her naked. Every time she thought they'd established an easy friendship, sharing living space without driving each other crazy, lust reared its head again. Why couldn't she control her stupid hormones?

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, sorting vegetables and fruit into the crisper.

"Flu. Cold. I don't know. A little fever, stuffy nose, aches and pains. I probably could have taken a cold tablet and stayed at work, but what would be the fun of that? It's much more entertaining to have you catch me running around the apartment naked."

Sean closed the refrigerator door and leaned against it, arms folded, giving her one of his sultry looks. "We could go for round two and maybe you'd actually let me catch you this time."

Megan's mouth went dry as the teasing crossed the line into the realm of possibility. "Here." She tossed the can of soup at him, "Soup me up. I'm going to go lie down." She walked to her bedroom, wondering what had happened to the flustered youth of five minutes earlier. Just now, he'd been all man, exuding sexual confidence and aplomb, and he'd looked completely unflappable. Sometimes she really couldn't tell where the real Sean lay.



After a hot bowl of soup and a long nap, Megan felt much better. She joined Sean in the living room to hang out for a while and watch a movie. Since she was sick and needed pampering, she chose the movie, bypassing Sean's penchant for action films. When she pulled out her *Sleepless in Seattle* DVD, he groaned.

“You don’t have to watch. Do your schoolwork or something if the mush is too much for you.” She inserted the movie in the player and plunked down on the couch, curling in one corner and pulling an afghan up to her chin.

Sean took a seat on the other end of sofa. He pulled out his history text and flipped it open, but when Megan glanced over during the opening credits, his eyes were on the TV. By the end of the first scene, he’d moved the book from his lap to the coffee table and lounged in his corner of the couch watching the show.

When the movie ended, Megan looked over to see Sean watching her, his face blue in the flickering light from the TV.

“What?” she said. “It was so touching. So sweet!” She sniffed and wiped at the tears running down her cheeks.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can’t help it. I’m a sucker for romance.”

“You believe in that shit?” He nodded at the television.

“Yes, of course I do. You don’t?”

He snorted. “No.”

“Not ever? You don’t believe love ever works out for anyone?”

“I suppose,” he said grudgingly. “Statistically I suppose somebody somewhere in the history of the world ended up ‘happy ever after.’”

She punched him playfully in the shoulder. “But not you. Don’t you think you can find love or happiness?”

He leaned his head back on the couch, staring at the end credits of the movie. “People hook up and maybe they’re happy for a while, but eventually it goes to shit. It’s like religion. Something people make up so they can feel better about their lives, but it’s not real.”

“Oh come on. You think everyone who says they’re in love is faking it? It doesn’t always end badly. What about some old couple celebrating

their fiftieth wedding anniversary? You think they could stand to spend all those years together without love? How can you say it doesn't exist?"

He shrugged and didn't answer, and she knew that was all the sharing she was going to get out of him on the subject.

Megan suddenly became aware of how close they were sitting. The heat radiated from the skin of his arm, inches from her own. She shifted uncomfortably and looked into his face to find him staring at her with a heavy lidded gaze that made her stomach drop.

"I don't know about love, but people can hook up just to make each other feel good, you know." Sean faced her and his arm brushed hers, sending tingles of sensation through her body. His hand moved to touch her forearm and run lightly down it.

The fine hairs of her arm prickled and stood up at the passing of his fingers. She'd never in her life felt so alive, so wired. The combination of weeks of wanting him and knowing that wanting him was not allowed was a heady aphrodisiac.

He leaned toward her. Her heart pounded and her blood rushed in her ears. For a moment, she thought she might pass out, and still he waited, poised just a breath away from kissing her.

"We could do that," he murmured, "make each other feel good." The puff of air behind each word brushed her lips.

Every part of her felt boneless, drugged and dreamy. She wanted to nod and answer "yes". Yes, of course she would kiss him, would do whatever he wanted. There was no choice really. Her reason had paid the bill and checked out of Motel Megan. Instead, she closed her eyes and tilted her face up slightly to accept his kiss.

His lips touched hers as delicately as snowflakes, only warm and soft, and her lips parted of their own accord. He pressed against her more firmly, opening his mouth and closing it around her bottom lip, pulling

out gently and letting go, then continued with little nibbling kisses that made her crave more.

Megan leaned into him, opening her mouth wider and bringing her tongue into play. It was all he needed to invite him to do the same. He brushed his tongue lightly across the underside of her upper lip, tickling her and making her want to sneeze. She made a sound and he opened his eyes to look at her questioningly.

“Tickles,” she whispered with a smile.

He grinned and pulled her hard against him, laying a serious, deep, mouth-exploring kiss on her.

She pressed one hand against his chest, feeling his thumping heart under her palm, and wrapped the other around the back of his neck. Little tendrils of his hair tickled her hand. Every place where their bodies touched, she felt a heightened sensation. It was like nerve endings she never knew she possessed were suddenly waking up.

His left hand roamed up and down her back, dipping below her waist to cup the swell of her ass. His right held her jaw steady, one thumb stroking idly at her throat. He kissed her even more deeply, taking possession of her mouth and leaving her breathless.

His hand skimmed over her shoulder, slipping the strap of her tank top off then stroking down her chest.

When his palm cupped her breast, Megan abruptly realized how rapidly things were escalating. She pulled away from his urgent kiss.

“No. We can’t.” She pushed against his chest.

His eyes were dark and hungry as he stared at her. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s really not.”

He sat back, letting go of her body, but capturing one of her hands in his to maintain contact. “We don’t have to have sex if you don’t want to. We could just make out for a while.”

Megan considered the possibility of several hours of sexual frustration without a resolution and knew if they started something here, it would end up with them in bed together. Besides, even the kissing was wrong, wrong, wrong. He was a juvenile in her care and no matter how much he acted like an adult and felt like a grown man in her arms, he wasn't.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This isn't going to happen." She took her hand from his and stood.

"You think I'm too young." He gazed at her with cool appraising eyes, the unfocused look vanished. "But I know what I'm doing and what I want and I haven't been a kid for a long time. It's all right for us to fuck—or just kiss. Whichever. We can do as much or as little as you want, it's up to you."

That clinched it. When he baldly admitted that all choices were hers, she understood that while he might desire her, he was also subjugating himself to her needs. Once again, on some level, he was offering payment for all she'd done for him.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to. It's obvious we're attracted to each other, but I don't see any good coming of this. It'll be better if we keep our friendship platonic."

Megan couldn't believe she was able to find the right words without stumbling and stuttering. Her calm, rational tone sounded just like her mother.

Sean sat another moment, searching her face. She couldn't tell if he was pissed off, sexually frustrated or maybe even somewhat relieved. He stood and faced her, eyes leveled on hers. "Okay. Whatever. Your house, your rules." he added with a shrug, then turned and walked toward the bathroom.

Megan realized she'd been shaking with tension only as it began to drain out of her, leaving her feeling weak and exhausted, like she'd successfully navigated a minefield. She sank back onto the couch, unwilling to trust her legs.

When Sean returned from the bathroom, his face was set in a neutral expression. He sat in one of the chairs, deliberately avoiding the couch, in a gesture which was pure adolescent resentment, but for which she was thankful, because it meant she was physically removed from him enough to be able to think clearly.

"Sean, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let this happen. I'm the adult here and..."

He turned his face toward her, still looking blank. "It's okay. I understand. You don't need to make up excuses."

Megan frowned. "What do you mean? I'm telling you the truth. You're too young, you're supposed to be in my care, and it's just—wrong."

"And I'm a cheap street punk. A hustler. You don't want to fuck a whore. I get it." He turned away, and she wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him. He would twist her words deliberately sometimes.

"No, you're completely wrong. This has nothing to do with that. It's about responsibility and you being a kid and me..."

"I told you, I'm not a fucking kid!" he spat out, staring at the television screen in front of him. "I've lived through shit you can barely imagine. If you were out on the street, I'd be the one looking after you. Give me a break, Megan." His eyes pierced her like icy blue lasers. "You find me sexy, but you can't face fucking me because of what I am."

Megan balled her fists in frustration. She was already close to the snapping point, her nerves shot and her whole body tense with the denied anticipation of sex. She couldn't quite tell whether Sean did it on

purpose to annoy her, or whether he actually believed it. Maybe a bit of both.

“Stop it! You know it’s not that. I know what you did. I don’t care about that. But I don’t want to abuse my position. Maybe if we were on the streets, you’d look after me, but here, I’m the one in charge, and I don’t want you to think you can pay me back by having sex with me.”

Sean got up from his seat in one fluid movement and stepped toward her. He leaned over her, his hand on the arm of the couch, and stared straight into her eyes.

Megan’s pulse sped as she took in his proximity, the faint smell of soap and sweat, the warmth of his breath on her face and his hot, angry eyes.

“This isn’t about payback,” he said softly.

For a second, she thought he might kiss her again, and knew she wouldn’t have the strength to turn him away this time.

Megan stood and brushed past him to go to her room. “I’m sorry,” she repeated. It wasn’t until she reached her bedroom and shut the door behind her that she realized she’d been practically running.

Chapter Eight

Morning brought little relief. Megan woke earlier than usual, around six. The moment she opened her eyes, she remembered the kiss, the argument, and the tension that had taken over immediately afterwards. She lay in her bed, staring at the crack of light under her door. She could hear Sean moving around, treading softly down the corridor, the bathroom door shutting, and the distant noise of running water. Visions of him half-naked, getting dressed, crowded her mind, and she felt ashamed of the immediate rush of blood to her groin. Ever since Sean had moved in, Megan had had sex on the brain, like she was a mess of hormones, boy-crazy as a teenager.

But it had become ten times worse. In the back of her mind, she was still wrapped in the memory of that kiss and the feel of his hands on her throat, her back, at her waist. She closed her eyes again, and remembered his lips, his tongue, the hair on the back of his neck, so soft between her fingers, his heart beating steadily under her palm. She was appalled at how precisely she could recall every detail.

She got out of bed and pulled on some pajama bottoms as well as her robe before heading for the kitchen. Sean had already started the coffeemaker, and Megan popped a couple of slices of bread into the toaster. She wasn't hungry, but it was easy to go through the motions, get a rhythm going before Sean came out and she had to face him.

He walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, pulling a T-shirt over his head. Megan got a glimpse of his flat, ridged stomach and looked away immediately, focusing on the coffee in her hand, the clock ticking above the fridge, the steady drip of the leaking faucet in the sink, anything that could distract her mind from the trail of hair on his abdomen, and where it led.

Sean stopped in his tracks when he saw her. Megan looked back at him, and for a second, she caught something in his eyes—surprise, or vulnerability, maybe—before his usual unreadable expression slammed into place. “You’re up early.”

“Good morning,” she said with forced good humor. “Yeah, I have something to finish, so I need the extra time. I poured you some black coffee. Two sugars, right?” She felt like a fake, going through all the motions of the good hostess, pretending they hadn’t crossed a line the previous evening.

He nodded and entered the kitchen, making sure there was plenty of space between them, and grabbed his cup.

Breakfast was awkward. Megan excused herself after half a slice of toast, eaten standing at the counter, and snuck into the bathroom for a long, hot shower. When she emerged toweling her hair, he’d gone, leaving a scribbled note on the kitchen table. Megan picked it up and squinted at his untidy scrawl.

“See you later. I’ll get dinner.”

She smiled as she crumpled the piece of paper in her fist. But she was relieved he’d gone.



They kept up a rigid politeness with one another over the next few days. On Friday evening as Megan watched CNN and Sean prepared

dinner, the phone rang. Expecting it to be her mom, or maybe Sasha, Megan made no effort to get it before the machine kicked in.

It was James. "Hey Megan? Pick up, pick up, girl, I have a proposition for you, an offer you can't refuse... C'mon Meg, you know you want it, baby..."

She scrambled over the couch toward the phone, acutely aware of Sean's listening presence in the kitchen. She knew James was just playing around with his suggestive tone, but that was exactly how their relationship had slipped into its current state with the occasional fling when they were both at loose ends. They'd figured out early on they were a horrible couple, but great buddies, with some good chemistry. It seemed a shame to let it go entirely to waste.

"Hey, James," she said, trying to sound normal.

"Hah! I knew it. You were just holding out on me, making me beg."

"Cut it out, you ass. What's this about a date?"

"Well, I happen to be on the guest list for a kickass new club opening in West Hollywood, and I appear to be dateless. So I thought you and I could make a night of it. I'll buy you dinner, too."

Megan laughed. "You must be really desperate, then."

"Nothing's too good for you, Megan. And it's been too long since we've spent any quality time together." James' voice dropped slightly on the last words, and Megan could hear what he left unsaid. It had been a while since their last hook-up, and right now, James was angling for a fuck. If she was honest with herself, the prospect of getting laid was quite alluring. After the unbearable sexual frustration of the past few days, maybe that was exactly what she needed.

"Quality time, huh?"

"Or if you prefer, it's been a while since I've seen you naked." She could practically hear his smirk.

“You sleazy bastard.”

“C’mon. You can tell me more about how you conned Rossi into letting you write. I’ll tell you all about the new demo we’ve put together with the band. And then, if you’re really lucky, I’ll take you home and force you to listen to it.”

Megan couldn’t help laughing. It was so simple to fall into line with James. “Promises, promises. I might just hold you to them. So what are you offering on the dinner front?”

“What about Beppe’s for old time’s sake? You can have the linguine you always get. Tell you what, you can even have the saltimbocca. I’ll spare no expense for you.”

“Wow. Have you won the lottery or something?”

“Hey, the last couple of gigs we did, we got paid almost decently, I’ll have you know. So? You in?”

Megan closed her eyes and thought it through for a second. Sean had been cooking for the past half-hour, but she was pretty sure he wouldn’t mind too much. Besides, she needed to get out of the house and escape the physical proximity, which was driving her crazy. All the brushing past each other in the too-small kitchen, the accidental touching of hands across the table, the polite ballet around the bathroom was getting unbearable. A night with James might not get rid of the tension altogether, but it wouldn’t hurt to get laid and try to exorcise the ghost.

“Sure,” she breathed out. “Meet you there?”

“Can you make it in...forty-five minutes? I’m starving.”

“See you then,” she agreed, and she hung up.

As Megan walked into the kitchen to tell Sean, she felt a stab of guilt. The oven was on and something bubbled behind the glass door. He was elbow-deep in suds at the sink, cleaning the utensils he’d cooked with, and the whole kitchen was filled with the aroma of whatever it was. Some

dish which had taken him a while to prepare, enchiladas by the look of it. She felt like a bitch for not having checked before she agreed to go out.

“Um, Sean...”

He didn’t turn around. Something about the set of his shoulders made her think perhaps he’d heard enough of the conversation to figure out what was happening.

“Listen, I’m sorry but James called and...I’m going out for dinner. I’m really sorry. I mean, you did all this and...”

“It’s fine. No problem.” His voice sounded tight. Was he jealous?

“I’m the one missing out, by the look of it. Are those enchiladas?” She wanted to leave on a positive note, make sure they were okay.

“Yeah. And I can probably finish them on my own. No waste.” Sean took his hands out of the sink and pulled the plug. He dried them methodically on a dishtowel before finally turning around to face her.

As their eyes met, Megan realized with a jolt he was in no doubt as to the nature of her planned evening. There was a hint of mockery, and maybe anger, in his stare, as if he could see right through her. She blushed, again. Something about Sean triggered immediate physical responses in her, and that feeling of not being in control of her body in his presence was perhaps the most disturbing thing about having him around. It was definitely time to leave the house.

She dressed for clubbing in low-slung, wide-legged black jeans and a cropped, designer T-shirt which showed off her bellybutton piercing, and swapped her nose stud for the ornate Thai ring she’d worn on her trips to Santa Monica Boulevard. With the lipstick and smoky eyeliner she rarely wore, Megan felt she looked the part.

As she gathered her keys and checked her make-up in the mirror by the door, Sean walked out of the kitchen, his mouth still full of enchilada. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of her, and Megan noted

with satisfaction that his gaze lingered on the slice of skin that showed between her top and jeans. But when he looked back up at her face, his eyes were flat and blank again.

“Have a good time,” he muttered through the mouthful of food.

“Don’t wait up for me.” She hesitated for a second. “I, um, might not be back tonight.”

His complete lack of reaction showed he’d already considered that.

Megan felt like a slut, but shook off the guilt. She had every right to an evening out, spent however she chose to spend it. But she still felt really uncomfortable as she closed the front door and headed for the stairs.



As soon as she walked into the dimly-lit restaurant, she spotted James, sitting at the back of the room, drumming his fingers on the tablecloth. He was chronically incapable of sitting still, and composed songs in his spare moments. Megan swore he could spend entire evenings listening to the music in his head rather than the conversation around him.

She crossed over to his table and stood looking down at him for a couple of seconds before James noticed her presence.

He jumped to his feet and reached across the table to hug her. “You’re looking stunning, as always. Fuck print, you should be in TV.”

“Yeah.” Megan laughed as she sat down. “The networks are really into piercings these days, I’ve heard. Any more career advice you care to share?”

“Doesn’t sound like you need any these days. I’m glad Rossi’s finally letting you write. I think we should toast this, in fact. Wine?” James pointed at the bottle of Chianti on the table. Megan held out her glass.

“You actually read my piece?” she asked, skeptical.

“Of course. I’m even thinking of visiting the playground this weekend, it inspired me so much,” James mocked. “Seriously though, nice one, Meg. You’ve done well.”

“I’m hoping my street kids story is coming out soon, too. That’s more of a real test, to be honest.”

“Yeah, with all your painstaking research. So how’s your pet hustler doing?”

Megan scowled at him. “Fine. And stop calling him that. He works construction now.”

“Sorry—ex-hustler.” James gave in when Megan narrowed her eyes. “Okay, I’ll stop it. Let’s talk about me, instead. Have I told you how great our new demo is?”

Dinner was as much fun as she’d been hoping. They shared the same sense of humor, and Megan spent a lot of the time at the restaurant giggling, and occasionally bent double and crying helpless tears of laughter. The Chianti helped.

By the time they hit the club, she was more than a little tipsy and had abandoned her car. The opening night was a glittering affair with a scattering of hip minor Hollywood celebrities, TV soap stars and the like. To top it all, they were on the VIP list, and the music wasn’t bad. They hit the dance floor early on, and kept going for a while, until James begged off and dragged Megan over to some seats in the roped-off VIP lounge, and poured her more free champagne.

When at some point in the evening, or possibly morning, he slipped an arm around Megan’s shoulders and leaned over to kiss her, she was more than happy to oblige. And it felt right, too. Good old James. He knew how to make sure she had a good time. It wasn’t as hot as the kiss with Sean, but Megan firmly put that thought out of her mind.

When they broke off from the kiss, James had the slightly out-of-focus look she knew so well. She smiled at him, letting her hand linger on his neck.

“Wanna hit the road?” he whispered in her ear, over the thumping bass.

Megan nodded.

They took a cab home, and spent most of the ride making out in the back like a pair of teenagers. At one point, Megan saw a familiar neon sign and looked out the window only to realize they were on Santa Monica Boulevard, just a few yards past the point where she’d first met Sean. She automatically scanned the street for any faces she knew, but they were gone before she could recognize any of the kids. Then James pulled her back into his embrace and she stopped thinking about them altogether.

The sex with James was good, as ever—they wouldn’t have kept at it all this time otherwise—but even though she was turned on, and she liked having sex with him, it wasn’t James she was thinking about most of the time, but Sean.

Sean, whose hard, bruised body haunted her while she caressed James, Sean, whose kiss remained seared in her mind, still generating more heat than James’s best efforts, Sean, whose hooded eyes and calloused hands kept intruding on her brain in mid-fuck, so that by the time she got off, it was to the thought of him rather than the reality of James. It was all she could do not to cry out Sean’s name when she came.



When she got back home the next day around lunchtime, after sleeping in late and a lengthy detour to recover both their cars, Sean was in a surly mood.

“Hey, I’m back.” She closed the door behind her. There was no immediate reply. Maybe he was out for a run or something. He often went running on weekend mornings, borrowing Megan’s MP3 player to keep him company as he looped around her neighborhood.

Then she stepped into the living room. He was lying on the couch in the T-shirt and sweatpants he wore to bed, reading one of his schoolbooks.

Megan felt a brief pang of guilt as she remembered the way he’d looked at her as she left the previous evening. Was she being unbelievably callous—or just rational in refusing to acknowledge the tension between them?

“Hey, lazybones, it’s not like you to still be in bed at this hour,” she teased. All in all, she did feel a great deal more relaxed than she had in the previous days. Until Sean looked up from his textbook and locked eyes with her briefly and the sexual tension flooded right back in.

“Had a good time?” His tone was so neutral she couldn’t tell if it was polite or cutting.

“Yeah, we hit this new club, and it was actually pretty cool. Nowhere near as lame as I thought it was going to be.”

“Good.” He looked back at his book as though dismissing her. His attitude was just this side of rude, but Megan was willing to cut him some slack as she went to her bedroom to change out of her party clothes and into something more suitable for a weekend morning at home.

“So do you want anything to eat?” she asked when she came back to the living room, wearing jeans and a faded sweatshirt. She was still

feeling quite laid-back, and a little smug, too, as she always did when she had had decent sex the night before. The fact that Sean had featured prominently in her fantasies last night was best ignored, though.

There was a vague grunt from the general direction of the couch.

“Come on, what do you want?” She was determined to do something nice for him, after having left him in the lurch. “Late breakfast? Pancakes, omelet? Or shall I heat up some leftover tuna casserole from, er, Thursday evening?”

“Not hungry.” Sean sounded sulky.

Megan walked over to the couch and looked down at him. He ignored her gaze and stared at his book, chewing on a pencil. He might as well have had a sign on his head saying “I’m jealous”, which was quite gratifying, in a perverse sort of way, but also added to her guilt.

She sighed. “Are you going to quit being such a teenager?”

He looked up from his book, his bottom lip slightly outthrust. “It’s not like I can help it. I am a fucking teenager, remember?”

“I meant it as a joke. But are you really not hungry?”

“Not if it’s last week’s tuna casserole,” he muttered, but didn’t sound quite as sullen.

Megan smiled. “I’ll make you scrambled eggs. With ham. I know you like them. Go on—I’ll throw in some buttered toast.”

He let his head drop back on the couch and sighed, eyes half-closed. “Okay, then.”

One step at a time, thought Megan. They were still figuring out this whole living together thing. If they managed to survive the sexual tension, maybe they could find an accommodation.



Over the following few days, Sean continued to sulk. He still did his share of the housework and the food preparation, but gone was the easy camaraderie they'd painstakingly developed over the first couple of weeks of his stay. Instead, she felt she'd been saddled with her very own grumpy teenager, sulking in the living room, communicating little, and looking to break the rules whenever possible.

He reverted back to some of the habits he'd shown when he first moved in, playing loud music when she came home in the evenings—once or twice loud enough to earn pissed-off calls from the neighbors—and he started smoking in the house when she was out without bothering to air the place. A couple of evenings he came home from work late and a little drunk, which made her wonder who he was drinking with.

For the first time in a while, Megan started worrying about Sean disappearing while she was out of the house. Every time she opened the door, she would look around for signs of his presence, his coat hanging on the wall or his boots by the door, before breathing a sigh of relief.

It was unfortunate this turned out to be the week Rossi decided to publish her article on the street kids. Excited as Megan was at the sight of the piece—it was her first real story, one she had seen through from the first idea to the finished product on the page—she was really worried about Sean's reaction. They'd barely spoken about the article since he'd come to stay with her, but she knew how he felt.

As she reread the story for the tenth time, she was sure when he saw her printed words he would agree they were an accurate reflection of the street life. She hoped he would finally see the story had value.

That evening, she stopped on the way home and grabbed some pizza as a peace offering before confronting him with the *fait accompli*. When

she walked in through the front door, Sean was coming out of the bathroom, toweling his hair dry.

“I hope you haven’t started cooking anything,” she said as she walked past him to the kitchen. “It’s been ages since we’ve had pizza and I had a craving. I got some beers, too.”

“Beer and pizza? What’s the special occasion?” Sean said as he took a couple of plates from a cupboard.

Megan felt suddenly very shy, as nervous as she’d been that first night on the street when she’d talked to Sean. She put the pizza on the counter and pulled the paper out of her bag, folded to display her double spread. Without a word, she handed it to him. He quickly scanned the photos and Megan’s byline under the headline. He looked at her, his expression carefully neutral. “So. You finally got it published.”

“I hope it’s okay. I hope you like it.” She felt herself gearing up to start babbling and making excuses for why she hadn’t let him check it first. “Why don’t you read it in the living room while I get everything ready?”

As she set the table and took the pizza out of its box, she was aware of Sean in the other room reading her work. Mentally, she went through the whole article with him, starting with the striking silhouette of Sean, an eye-catching visual to draw the reader into the story, going through her first impressions of the street life and her deepening relationships with the kids, to what it really meant to be a homeless teenager. She’d ended with the story of Mr. X, the former prostitute turned client, underlining the fact that the cycle of child prostitution never ended, but the community should not give up attempts to try to help the disaffected youth. At the end of the article, she mentioned numerous agencies and groups in place to assist street kids.

She opened a beer and took a long pull to quell her nerves before walking back into the living room. Sean was still focused on the article, and something about the set of his jaw made Megan immediately apprehensive.

He looked up at her with a challenging glare. "So is that why you took me in? You pitied me, trapped in my 'never-ending cycle of prostitution and despair'? Nice cliché, by the way."

"I... No. I wanted to help you, yes, but it wasn't about pity. Look, this was written before I really got to know you. And..." Megan trailed off. The picture of Mouth as she drew him in the piece was far removed from the Sean she'd gotten to know since he moved in, but she didn't know how to tell him that.

"Don't get me wrong," Sean said, still sounding really pissed. "It's a great story and I think you captured the atmosphere of the street. Congratulations."

"I'm sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to."

"Don't be. This is a pretty good description of fucked-up kids. I just didn't realize quite how much of a charity case I am for you." He stood and handed her back the article, avoiding her eyes. Damn, he was angry.

Megan opened her mouth, ready to launch into a rebuttal, but he walked straight past her to the front door. He left, slamming the door behind him. She was too stunned to move, or do anything except stare at the closed door, willing him to reappear. How could she have gotten it so wrong?



Long after she'd given up and gone to bed, Megan lay awake constructing fanciful scenarios in her head. What if he was so angered by

her “pity” that he chose being homeless over living with her? What if he was back on the streets right now, turning tricks? God knew he could make more money with a couple of blowjobs than slaving all day on a construction site. There had to be a temptation there, and the thought made her shiver.

She finally drifted into uneasy sleep. Around four a.m, a loud bang and a muffled curse woke her up. Her heart hammered in her chest as she got out of bed and walked silently down the hall.

Sean stood just inside the front door, pulling his hooded sweatshirt over his head, his back to her. His T-shirt rode up and the foyer light shone on his white skin. There were long red marks all the way down his back.

Megan was puzzled for a second, then it clicked. Scratches. Sex. He’d been out getting laid. An irrational burst of fury ripped through her.

She cleared her throat and he froze then turned around slowly. Emotions flickered on his face, maybe embarrassment, maybe defiance. “I didn’t mean to wake you up. Sorry.”

“Yeah, well, at least now I know where you are. Next time let me know when you decide to barge in at four a.m. I thought you were a burglar!”

“You want me to check with you before I go out?” His tone was belligerent.

“No, just call me next time, okay? So I know not to worry when someone walks into the house in the middle of the night.” She struggled to sound calm and reasonable when she wanted to scream at him and demand an explanation for his scored flesh.

“You knew it was me,” he scoffed.

“No, actually, I didn’t,” she said stiffly. “Where’d you go, anyhow?”

“I went out and found my own entertainment, because the last days with you, it hasn’t been much fun.” He was almost snarling, and the bitterness in his tone shocked Megan.

“What? Look, I’m sorry if you’re feeling pissed off but...”

“You think you’re the only one who needs to blow off some steam?” he said, moving toward her, his voice so suggestive that Megan’s body responded immediately. Her pulse raced and her crotch clenched.

Sean stood too close to her and she could feel his body heat and smell his alcohol- and nicotine-laden breath, which was curiously sexy. Her nipples hardened under her light tank top and she crossed her arms protectively over her chest.

“Jesus, Sean, all I’m saying is—”

“I just got laid, okay?” He interrupted, leaning over her, his left arm braced against the door frame behind her. He was much drunker than she thought, because he slurred a little in his attempt to enunciate every word. “And no, I didn’t get paid for it, if that’s what you’re worried about. I just wanted a fuck. With a girl. End of fucking story. Sorry I woke you up. Good night.”

He hovered over her a moment longer, his eyes glittering like glass and his hot breath puffing against her face. Then he pushed himself away and turned his back on her, walked into the bathroom and banged the door shut.

Megan was dry-mouthed and short of breath. Her brain reeled with erotic images of Sean having sex with some faceless girl. Her body ached remembering his touch, and all of a sudden Megan had to exert every ounce of her self-control not to follow him into the bathroom. She forced herself into her bedroom and sat on her bed, feeling disorientated.

After a couple of minutes, she crawled between the sheets and tried to steady her breathing, but she could still hear his voice in her ear, and

it was doing things to her. She closed her eyes and whimpered under her breath. Fuck it, she wasn't going to try to fight it yet again. The only way she was going to get any sleep was if she allowed herself to masturbate. And much as she hated the idea of it, whenever she let her hand slip between her thighs and coax her willing flesh, it was the thought of Sean that fuelled her erotic fantasies.

It was enough for her to visualize the scene that had just taken place, his husky voice, his eyes, slightly menacing and dark on hers, and she was wet, her fingers slipping up and down her wet sex and toying with her clit.

In her mind's eye, Sean pulled off his T-shirt and stood shirtless in front of her so she could both look at and touch his muscled chest and abs, her fingertips skating down over smooth skin toward his groin. As she caressed herself inside her pajama pants, her fantasy self became bolder, reaching out for his waistband, unzipping his pants and freeing—God, she could just imagine his erection, the weight of it in her hand, the hitch in his breath as she touched him. In her mind, his hands took over now on her body, on her sex...

Her stroking became more urgent and the sequence of events fractured in her mind. Lost in a sea of sensations, she imagined him in turn touching, licking and fucking her, until she peaked, her hips arched high above the mattress. She bit her lip hard to stop herself from moaning and landed back on her sheets with a sigh, trembling all over.

No matter how much she fought it, Sean haunted her, and it killed her that with him in mind, she could bring herself to orgasm in just a few minutes. This was not the way to get rid of her infatuation.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Megan woke to the sound of the shower running. She was amazed Sean had made it out of bed so soon and appeared to be getting ready for work. She was in no hurry to face him again and lingered in bed until the front door closed a half hour later. But as she poured a cup of coffee and sat down to read her article in the paper once more, Megan resolved to continue to try to repair their damaged friendship. They couldn't go on like this, snapping at each other at every opportunity. They had to break through the sexual tension barrier and find a way to live together as friends.

Coming home that night, she picked up a bottle of wine as a peace offering when she stopped for food. Megan chose Thai and made sure she had enough Pad Thai and dumplings to keep carb-loving Sean happy.

He was studying at the dinette table, scribbling with a pencil in a spiral notebook Megan had given him for his schoolwork. He looked up when she came in and muttered a brief hello before focusing back on the page.

"You up for some Cabernet Sauvignon to unwind?" she asked perkily.

Sean raised his head again, this time with a look of incomprehension.

"Uh?"

She flourished the bottle at him. "Wine."

"Um, yeah, sure. Cool."

"I thought it would be nice to treat ourselves on a Friday night," Megan said with a smile. "D'you want some now or are you planning to study late?"

"Now's fine, thanks. I'm pretty much done. Give me five minutes and I'll set the table. About last night—sorry. Your story was fine. I was just being—sensitive or whatever. It was stupid. And, uh, sorry about getting wasted, too."

"No. It was wrong of me not to have run the article by you first, especially after I promised I would. I hope we can put it behind us, though."

"Sure." He smiled at her, and for the first time in ages, the atmosphere in the apartment lightened. Sean looked as relieved as she felt to have the air cleared.

The wine, and the food—Sean ate all his noodles and half of Megan's—kept them relaxed. They chatted about their day, swapping stories about their co-workers and laughing at shared jokes until their banter was interrupted by the phone ringing.

It was Sasha, in a very noisy place, and boisterously drunk. "Megan?" she shouted. "You have to come to Bar Loco tonight."

"I have to?"

"Yes, you have to. It's been ages since we last got drunk together, and I miss it. I miss you. You never come out anymore, you're always working. I have enough of that shit with Stevie. Come play with me!"

"You sound like you're well ahead of me already. I'll be playing catch-up all night."

"Well, you'll just have to drink faster when you get here. I'll buy the first round of tequilas. Come on. There's some people you know and music, and it's still happy hour."

Megan considered the possibilities. This could be the perfect opportunity to engage with Sean.

“Okay. Meet you there. And I’m bringing Sean,” she said, looking at him beseechingly.

He shrugged, his expression uncertain, but he wasn’t scowling.

“Sure,” Sasha said after a beat. “That’s a great idea. See you in half an hour?”

“Half an hour.” Megan put the phone down and turned to Sean. “You up for going out with Sasha and whoever? Try out that fake ID you got?”

He nodded. “Sure.” Not exactly enthusiasm, but it was a start.

When they got to the bar, Sasha was chatting with one of her former advertising colleagues, a guy Megan vaguely knew, and a couple of friends of his. Further along the bar, James was deep in conversation with a barmaid. Despite the crowds gathering at the bar, he managed to hold her attention, telling her God knew what anecdote from his inexhaustible supply. Megan could only see the back of his head, his spiky blond hair brushing the collar of his jacket, and felt an irrational surge of fondness for him. She prayed he wouldn’t make a big deal out of Sean’s presence—or vice versa.

By the time he’d scored the girl’s phone number and a promise to hang out when her shift ended at midnight, James was in a great mood. He hugged Megan enthusiastically and managed a polite nod toward Sean.

Sean nodded back.

What worries she had about the two of them getting along dissolved. With the buffer of Sasha’s effusive drunkenness, the presence of other guys to supply ready-made football conversations, and the free-flowing beers, the atmosphere stayed relaxed and laid-back.

It was shaping up to be a pretty fine Friday evening. Beer turned into tequila and Megan felt buoyant and light. She loved her life and her fantastic friends and her hot buddy Sean and all the wonderful people in the club. It was a damn beautiful world to live in.

A few more drinks and Megan started to catch the beat of the technopop tune that was cranked up so loud you had to shout to be heard over the thumping bass. She sipped her drink and swayed in her seat, eyes half-closed and head bobbing. Sasha had gone to the bar and Megan had tuned out the guy talk. It was too hard to hear anyway and she was in an almost meditative trance, just her and her drink and the hypnotic music.

She felt someone touch her wrist and opened her eyes to see Sean nod toward the dance floor. She stood and followed him into the sea of gyrating, sweaty bodies. They bumped their way onto the floor until they created a little space to move in and Megan swayed from side to side with a sexy shimmy. She didn't ordinarily think of herself as that great a dancer, but when she'd had a few drinks, she believed she was a dancing diva. She waved her arms and hands in intricate patterns in the air over her head, hips grinding and ass wiggling.

Sean moved into place behind her and matched his movements to hers. One of his hands rested on her bare midriff, the other on her hip, and together their lower bodies moved in sexual, tribal rhythm.

Sean's crotch ground away against her ass. Through her too-tight, too-thin skirt, his arousal was undeniable, his erection pushing against her flesh, but instead of stepping away, she leaned back into it. Her back molded itself to his solid chest, the heat of his body almost scorching her skin.

The temperature on the dance floor must have been ninety-some degrees. Megan sweated and writhed with the other dancers and wanted nothing so much as to find a dark, shadowy corner of the club, pull off

her underwear and let Sean take her from behind. For real, not mock-fucking like they were doing out here on the dance floor.

She supposed she should be worried about whether her friends were watching, but when she lifted her bleary eyes, she couldn't even spot them in the crowded place, and she didn't really care right now.

The fast number ended and a slower dance number followed—still full of bass, but much more intimate. Sean surprised her by taking her hand and spinning her around to face him, then gathering her into his arms in classic dance position, one hand on her waist and the other clasping hers.

She rested her hand on his shoulder and clutched at the damp fabric of his T-shirt.

The music was slow and erotic, but Sean kept his distance now they were face to face, keeping his pelvis a few inches away from hers and holding her politely, almost sedately, as they rocked back and forth.

Sensual and sleepy, she wanted to move in closer, rest her head on his chest and stay that way for about an hour. She glanced up and he looked down at her through his sweat-spiked fringe of bangs, not at her eyes, but at her lips. Automatically, she ran a nervous tongue over them and his lips parted slightly in response. His head started to dip toward her.

Megan gathered her wits and turned her head away before she crossed that line again. Suddenly very sober, she watched the other dancers until eventually the song ended. Sean stepped away from her and by tacit agreement they both left the dance floor.

Another round of drinks waited for them at the table. Megan tossed hers back. It burned all the way down her throat and started numbing

her almost right away. That was good. Other people were also good. She started talking to Sasha and made a conscious decision not to make eye contact with Sean again. There were darts and pool and more drinks to distract her from him. But she was aware of him all evening long whether near her or across the bar.



Megan woke with a headache. It was barely light, and she squinted at her alarm clock. Six a.m. She had a hangover and a mouth as dry as the Sahara, and she didn't even have a glass of water by her bed. Great way to start the day. She sat up and swung her legs off the bed, wobbling a little as she stood. Damn, she should have kept off the tequila. She remembered a lot of laughter, and a few beers, Sasha getting uproariously and very happily drunk, James making out with the busty waitress on the dance floor, Sean buying a last couple of tequila shots for him and Megan to slam on the bar before hitting home, which she now regretted. It had been a fun night, and she'd only got to bed at—what, one? Maybe five hours ago? No wonder she felt so tired. She needed water, immediately.

She got up, opened the door and padded into the corridor. As she walked through, she heard a rustling and peeked into the living room. In the pale dawn light, she could make out Sean's shape on the sofa.

Megan's breath caught in her throat. He was naked, the covers thrown off during the night. Evidently, he'd been a little too drunk to slip on his sweats last night. Naked, and, dear God, hard, and he was touching himself. Her knees almost gave way and she put a hand against the wall to steady herself.

She couldn't tell if he was fully awake or not, but he was stroking himself, his hand gliding up and down, and she couldn't tear her eyes

away. Here was a sight she'd imagined more times than she cared to remember, Sean naked. Her gaze was drawn inexorably down the hard muscles of his chest and stomach toward his waist, his hips, and finally his hand, fingers wrapped around his erection, stroking it.

Her mind went into overdrive, a myriad of thoughts and images tumbling through, the sexual tension and obsession of the past few weeks finally letting loose. This is wrong, she thought, but oh, so unbelievably arousing, so overwhelmingly sexy. She was reminded of something he'd said in one of their first interviews, about how some of his clients paid him to masturbate over them, and how she'd found that twisted. Now it made complete sense—and God, now she was just like one of his johns, watching him get himself off and being turned on by it. She wondered what, or who, he was thinking of to make him so hard, and hoped it was her.

Megan felt caught in a trap, unable to move, her senses on overload, and while every brain cell screamed at her to get out, step back into the corridor and ignore what she'd just seen, her animal instincts wanted her to move closer. Her body betrayed her. She felt hot and wet and melting to the core of her being, her sex aching for his touch.

Sean arched into his fist with a groan, and an involuntary whimper escaped her.

His hand stopped.

Bracing herself against the wall, Megan forced her gaze up his body toward his face. His eyes were slits, his irises just visible through the lashes. She blushed deeply, the blood rising up her neck and cheeks until she thought she must be scarlet. Neither of them said anything for a few beats. Sean made no effort to cover himself, nor did his erection subside.

Megan's mouth was even drier than it had been when she woke up. She had to say something. Or walk out. Yes, that was it, she could walk out and they could pretend this had never happened. Except she was still transfixed by Sean's gaze, and he was not looking as though nothing had happened.

He was, in fact, staring at her, and sucking in his lower lip as he did so. Megan became slowly aware that she wore very little—a strappy tank top and panties, without the sweatpants or the robe she would normally wear around the house in his presence. The thought made her even more aroused.

“I...I’m sorry.” Her voice shook. “I didn’t mean to...”

“C’mere,” he said, and his husky voice was impossible to resist. Megan found she’d walked a couple of paces toward Sean before her conscious brain registered what was happening. She felt like a sleepwalker.

Sean stood and closed the gap between them. He didn’t touch Megan, but waited, his body inches from hers, his cock still erect, his breathing shallow. She could feel his breath on her, the heat of his naked body, and she wanted to scream.

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said, low and rough. “Not when you start acting out my fucking fantasies.”

Megan processed that and realized the already faint likelihood of her walking away had just receded into nothingness. She trembled, her whole body taut in anticipation. She kept expecting his hands, or his mouth, on her, but he didn’t lay a finger on her.

Maybe he was waiting for her to say something or to make the first move. “Were you really thinking about me?” she whispered, locking her eyes on his.

He nodded slowly. “I didn’t even know whether I was asleep and dreaming or awake when I heard you.”

Megan took a deep breath in and exhaled shakily.

“But I don’t want to do this if you...” He looked down, then back up at her eyes again. “Look, I want this and I know you damn well want this, but if you can’t handle it, just tell me now.”

She closed her eyes. Her whole body yearned for him, drawn to him as if to a magnet, an irresistible force. She stretched out her right hand and placed it on his chest, his skin warm under her palm. God, she’d wanted to touch him forever, ever since she saw him that first day on the street and found her body reacting to him automatically. She’d been fighting her desires much too long.

Sean groaned and next thing she knew, his lips were on hers and all her senses focused on that point of contact. He started gently, brushing his mouth against hers, his tongue just touching hers as she opened her lips to his kiss, but within a few seconds the urgency built during their weeks of pent-up desire took over and they kissed ferociously, lips mashing against each other.

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her into his body. His erection pressed against the thin fabric of her underwear and the heat of it seared her skin. She was weak and wet with desire, and she ground against him as his hands descended down her back and cupped her ass, pulling her in tighter.

Part of her mind yelled at her to stop this—it was what they’d been avoiding all this time, how could she give in now? He was too young, she should know better, what the fuck was she doing? He was a minor, for Christ’s sake, if only for another couple of months. But the rest of her brain and body worked in tandem, whispering a siren song of seduction and surrender, and she didn’t have the physical strength to fight it. Not

when Sean's hands kneaded her flesh, and stroked her, and when his mouth was on hers and moving down her jaw to her neck, his tongue and teeth nibbling and sucking her tender skin. Not when he pressed himself and thrust against her, making her so desperately hot for him that she wasn't sure they were even going to end up on the couch, let alone her bed, miles away in the other room.

He slipped a finger into the elastic of her panties and she wriggled her ass out of them without a second thought, pulling them off with one hand while the other roamed down his shoulder and back. Nothing mattered any more except they were finally touching and the unbearable sexual frustration was at last getting released.

When Sean cupped her sex and started circling her clit with his finger, Megan let out a moan. He stroked her gently but assuredly as she held onto him, swept away by the waves of sensation coursing through her body. She thought she might come then and there, then he slipped a couple of fingers into her, his thumb still stroking her, and she realized she was going to, very soon.

"You're so fucking wet," Sean murmured into her neck as he pushed rhythmically into her. The sound of his voice, combined with the feel of his fingers was enough to topple Megan over the edge as her body erupted in orgasm and she cried out. He smiled against her skin as she clung to him, unable to stand on her own.

He held her close and wrapped his hands around her waist, lifted and spun her around then walked her back toward the couch.

Megan was still in a daze from her orgasm, and the hangover and lack of sleep meant she felt groggy and a little disoriented.

He lowered her onto the couch and braced himself over her, his gaze searching hers hungrily. He looked so fucking beautiful, his hair

tumbling messily over his forehead, his eyes dark and demanding and the curve of his lips wet from her kisses.

He held her gaze for a few seconds with a silent question and she nodded. God yes, she wanted him, now more than ever, as if that first taste of pleasure had primed her for more—as if her hunger for him had suddenly grown exponentially. She raised her hand to his cheek and stroked it, her fingers scraping slightly on his stubble, her thumb just touching the corner of his mouth.

He still looked slightly uncertain and Megan thought of their previous encounters, when she'd turned him down or pushed him away. More than a nod was needed. She closed her eyes and pushed past her natural reserve and any residual shame. Dammit, he'd just made her come under his fingers, what the fuck was she being shy about?

"You're right, I want this," she said, breathless. Okay, she could say it. "I want you...inside me... Now. Please." She stopped, listening to her heartbeat and hoping she didn't sound like a complete fool.

She opened her eyes and, God, the effort had been worth it because the look on his face, surprise and delight and desire all mixed up, was all she could wish for in the eyes of a lover.

He smiled and dipped his head and kissed her very lightly on the mouth, tracing her lips with delicate kisses which left her wanting more.

Her mouth opened despite herself and he attacked her with his tongue, pressing his whole body against her. He kissed her with such passion that she felt light-headed. His hard-on nudged her insistently, rubbing against her thigh.

He stopped kissing her for a few moments as he retrieved a condom from his jeans pocket then he was back, no longer nudging at her thigh but poised over her, grinding against her pussy. She opened up for him and when Sean thrust into her, it was as if all the waiting had been so

much foreplay because this was everything she'd ever wanted from sex, and more.

He started slow, holding back and building the pressure with light, controlled strokes, driving Megan into a frenzy until she grabbed his ass with both hands, pulling him deeper inside her.

Her gesture seemed to shatter his self-control and he started really fucking her, hard and fast. His mouth slipped down from hers to her neck, biting her, until she reached her peak again, and much to her surprise, because Megan wasn't usually a screamer, she swore and cried out, overwhelmed by the strength of the climax which ripped through her.

Sean kept going for a couple of thrusts after she peaked then his whole body went rigid as he came, groaning into her neck. He slumped onto her, his heart hammering against her chest.

She wrapped her arms around him and held him to her in a fierce embrace.

"Megan," he whispered into her ear. The sound of his voice saying her name made her shiver. He pulled back slightly to look at her face, gently brushing the hair from her eyes, and gave her a half-smile which made her heart melt. Then he sighed and dropped his head back into the crook of her neck.

Stroking his back lightly with the tips of her fingers, wanting the moment never to end. Megan drifted in sleepy contentment until she dozed off.

She dreamed of being crushed to death by a pile of blankets her sister was heaping on top of her, all the while telling her to stop being such a baby about it. As her lungs compressed, Megan woke with a gasp to find she really was being crushed. Sean was sound asleep on top of her and his weight pressed her into the couch.

She shook his shoulder. “Off. Now,” she wheezed.

He pressed up onto his elbows and smiled down at her, then lifted his weight onto his arms and rolled to one side. Megan turned so they were spooned together, but the couch wasn’t wide enough for two to cuddle comfortably.

“Want to go to my bed?” she asked through a yawn.

He kissed her shoulder. “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to hear you say that.”

Megan rose and padded naked and a little self-conscious about it, down the hall toward her room. She was aware of Sean right behind her and hoped her ass didn’t look as fat as she thought it did—well, not fat so much as saggy. She really needed to work out more and tone it up.

“Go ahead,” she said when she reached the open bathroom door. “I have to make a stop first.”

“Me too, when you’re done.”

Megan went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. The realization of what had happened between them caught up with her. It was a done deal. She couldn’t take it back. She’d ignored all the danger signals and done what she’d promised herself she’d never do. If she went out there right now and told Sean she’d made a mistake and wanted to stop this thing before they went any further, it would only hurt him deeply, make him feel used. Besides, who was she kidding? It wouldn’t be easy for her to step back, either.

She sighed and covered her eyes, rubbing them vigorously with the heels of her palms. God, her headache was back with a vengeance. She got a pair of Advil from the medicine chest. Washing them down with a tall glass of water, she rinsed her hands and face then stared in the mirror a moment, trying to decide what would happen next.

Her dark brown eyes stared back at her, looking as clueless and hung-over as she felt. “Idiot!” she hissed at her reflection before smacking the edge of the sink with her hands and turning to leave the bathroom.

Sean was waiting his turn in the hall, lounging with his back against the wall, his body as relaxed and natural as if he were clothed. While Megan had the repressed desire to cover herself, he walked past her casually with his flaccid penis swaying and a contented, almost smug smile on his face. He gave her butt a little smack as she passed him.

Megan’s room was a disaster as usual and she quickly gathered discarded clothes and threw them in the hamper, stacked some scattered books and newspapers and smoothed the covers on her rumpled bed. Hearing the toilet flush, she leaped onto bed, plumped the pillows and settled against them. Her heart beat wildly against her rib cage like a trapped bird.

The early morning sunlight was trying to work its way through her blinds and the alarm clock showed it was now seven thirty.

As she waited for Sean, Megan felt she was poised at a crossroads. Inviting him to come to her bed added a whole new layer of complexity to their relationship. If she invited him once, he’d soon be sleeping with her all the time. They could never go back to the way they’d been before. They’d be “living together” in the sexual sense of the words.

Then he appeared in her doorway, bathed in the orange glow of the sun shining through her translucent blinds, and she forgot all her fears, doubts and reservations. He was absolutely beautiful, his hair tousled, his body chiseled and solid and his eyes and cock hungry for her again. He moved toward the bed with the grace of a stalking animal, and Megan pulled back the covers to welcome him into her bed.

Chapter Ten

The immediate impact of their falling into bed together didn't quell the sexual tension that had been stalking them, but fueled it with a vengeance.

They couldn't keep their hands off each other, Megan discovered as the weekend progressed. Even when they managed to get out of bed, the urge to touch and caress and feel each other was irresistible. Clearly there was some payback for the months of build-up, of "look but don't touch", of enforced distance. Now she had a desperate need to touch, smell, taste him at every opportunity, and Sean was just as eager.

He cornered her in the kitchen when she was making a pot of coffee and she felt his hands from behind, running up her leg under her robe, his rough, work-weathered fingers grazing her soft skin in the most arousing manner. Megan caught her breath and moved slightly away from him, but his hand followed her, creeping ever higher. She wriggled a little, only to find his arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her into him. As she relaxed into his embrace, leaning her back against his chest, she realized he was still naked—he was absolutely unselfconscious about nudity, unlike her—and the thrill of the feel of his warm body against hers was enough to make her moan. He was hard again, with the amazing stamina of his seventeen years.

"I can't believe you still have energy." She sighed. "You make me feel like an old lady."

He nuzzled her neck in answer, his mouth dropping small kisses toward her throat.

“A beautiful old lady,” he murmured. “A really hot, sexy, gorgeous old lady.”

Megan shivered as his hands slipped around to her front, parting her robe and tangling in her curls. He stroked her gently at first, one finger tracing her labia, then he became more precise and she gave up all pretence of dealing with the coffee. She pressed against his body, head tipped back, her throat exposed to his kisses.

“Hang on.” Suddenly his hands were on her hips, picking her up, turning her around and sitting her on the counter, facing him. Megan was disoriented at the sudden change of position. Sean’s eyes were predatory as a jungle cat as his hands parted her legs. A surge of residual modesty kept her legs together, then lust won and she let him open her to his gaze. He stood there for a few beats looking at her, which was both embarrassing and possibly the hottest thing that had ever happened to her.

He dropped to his knees on the cold, tiled floor and pulled her legs forward slightly so she was on the edge of the counter. Megan had to brace herself on her arms not to fall back. His hot breath on her groin was intensely arousing, full of exciting promise. Would he live up to his nickname? If his proficiency with men translated across the gender divide, it meant he was also more attuned to women’s needs. Then his tongue touched her clit, and she gasped.

Maybe it was his skill or maybe because she was so completely in lust, but every stroke of his tongue on her was like a lick of fire building up to a deep burn in her core. She moaned and thrust against his mouth, wanting more.

Sean built a rhythm, his hands on her thighs holding her steady. He sucked on her clit, licked her, flicked his tongue at her relentlessly, until Megan let her body take over, surging on a wave of pleasure that tore a sob from her and left her breathless and dazed, almost falling off the counter.

“Holy fuck,” she breathed out when she’d recovered enough to speak. “No wonder they called you Mouth.” She immediately felt stupid and guilty for bringing up his past in this context. But Sean didn’t seem to mind. He pushed himself up from his kneeling position and embraced her.

“It’s not difficult with you, anyhow. You come easy.” He smirked when he released her.

Megan felt compelled to deny it, but stopped before she made a complete fool of herself. She did, with him. Easy and often. “What about you?” she whispered, looking at his jutting erection.

“Try me,” Sean said with a laugh.

So she did. First with roaming hands. When she’d grasped him and gotten him to stumble and fall back against the fridge door, his dick surrendered to her fingers and she stroked him vigorously.

He closed his eyes and let his hips rock in sync with her hand.

She wanted more and slowly knelt down at his feet, her gaze fixed on his straining cock. She was suddenly horribly shy at the thought her skills wouldn’t measure up to his experience. She’d always considered herself an adequate lover, but what if she wasn’t? Megan decided not to think too much about it or she’d get nowhere. She could make up for any shortcomings by her passion and enthusiasm. Her tongue snaked around the head of his dick and she relished the groan Sean emitted in response.

Until he pushed her back.

“What?” She looked up at him, cheeks burning. Was her technique that bad?

“I... Maybe you want to use a condom?”

All of a sudden, Megan felt completely out of her element. She sat back on her heels. “You think?”

Sean shrugged. “I’m clean, but I haven’t got any proof of it.”

“Proof?”

“I mean, you’ve only got my word for it. I haven’t had a test for a while. But the last time I had sex, I used a condom. I always do. And I never gave head without. So...”

“I...” Megan was at a loss for words. Condoms for sex, yes, but somehow she’d so far lived in a world where oral sex was still flesh-to-flesh. She had no idea what to say or how to react.

Sean sensed her discomfort and extended his hand to her. “I’m sorry. I freaked you out,” he said gently.

He was amazingly laid-back for a guy who, a few seconds ago, had been expecting a blowjob. Most men would be so focused on their own needs, they wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about her wellbeing. It said a lot about both his control over his body and his sensitivity toward her. She took his hand and he pulled her up. Stepping into his arms, she rested her forehead against his chest.

“I don’t really know what to do. I mean, I trust you, so if you tell me you’re clean, I’ll go with it.”

“As far as I know, I’m okay, and I checked regularly.” Sean stroked her hair. “But...you know you can never be a hundred percent sure. You get fluke cases and...”

“Well, I guess I can take a chance,” Megan murmured. She looked at him to find him staring into the distance. She had no idea what he was thinking, but was willing to bet it wasn’t happy memories.

She cleared her throat. “How...if it’s not rude to ask, how many people have you slept with? I mean girls, you know, not for work...” She trailed off, embarrassed.

The corner of his mouth twitched and he concentrated for a moment, but didn’t answer immediately. “Girls? I guess...with you that makes about twenty.” He looked her straight in the eye, and there was a flash of cynicism there. “Not many compared to the number of johns I sucked off. That probably runs into three figures. I didn’t keep count. What about you?”

Megan felt the now-familiar blush rising on her face. No matter what, he got under her skin. And the thought of all those men made her distinctly uncomfortable. Not to mention it brought back all the reasons she wasn’t going to sleep with him in the first place, before she got swept up into events beyond her control. Because that was exactly what Friday night had been—beyond her control.

“Um...about half as much as you,” she said, breaking eye contact. “And a couple of handjobs in high school, if you really want to know everything.”

Sean chuckled. He still had her hand in his and his thumb made gentle circles on her palm.

“Listen, I’m sorry I fucked up the mood here. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

“No, you’re right. Thank you for telling me, I guess. But no, I think...I don’t want to use a condom.”

He hugged her closer, pulling her against him and enfolding her in a bear hug. It was a close-up, full body contact hug, which left her in no doubt about his further intentions. Get over it, she chided herself, and get back down to business.

“So, I guess you haven’t had an unprotected blowjob for a while, then?”

Sean grinned. “You could say that, yeah.”

“Well, just as long as you don’t criticize my technique.”

He held her gaze as she slowly knelt back down on the cold floor and took him in her mouth.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he whispered.



When Sean dragged in through the door Monday evening covered in plaster dust from head to foot, Megan could tell he was exhausted.

He unlaced his work boots in the tiny foyer. “Sorry about the mess. I’ll clean it up.”

She stood in the doorway of the kitchen with a spatula in one hand, watching him. “Don’t worry about it. If you want to strip your stuff off and leave it there, I’ll take it right down to the laundry room.”

“Thanks.” He took off his button-down shirt, peeled off his undershirt, then unfastened his jeans and slid them over his hips. Megan looked away. This sex between them was still too new for her to feel comfortable watching him strip. Even though they’d spent the weekend doing practically nothing but having sex, today, after being apart from him all day, she was back to feeling a little shy. Besides which, all of those logical reasons for not taking Sean as a lover were back and pricking at her conscience. She returned to her cooking, listening to the rustling his clothes made as he piled them on the floor. Then she heard him pass by the kitchen on his way to the bathroom and shortly afterward the shower went on.

Megan turned down the heat on the stove, gathered together some of her own clothing that needed laundering and collected Sean’s sweaty

work clothes. A puff of dust rose as she picked them up and added them to the basket. She took the clothes downstairs to the communal laundry and started several small loads.

When she returned to the apartment, she noticed his work boots were no longer lying in the foyer and the tiles of the front hall had been wiped clean of dust. Sean sat on the couch in a pair of jeans and T-shirt, hair damp, hand wrapped around a bottle of beer, watching TV. He looked up and smiled at her. “Thanks for washing my clothes. They were pretty trashed. Drywalling.”

“What do you do when you put up drywall?” She perched on an arm of the sofa.

“Unload the sheets from the truck. Take them to whatever room we’re working on. Hold them in place while Chuck nails them with the gun. Ceilings are the worst. My arms are killing me. But the messy part is sanding the seams after they’ve been mudded. I got to do some of that this afternoon.”

“Well, you must be hungry. Dinner’s almost ready.” She got up to go to the kitchen and check.

He leaned forward and grabbed her hand, pulling her down on the couch beside him. “It can wait.” He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and gathered her to him for a kiss. His mouth tasted like toothpaste and beer, a surprisingly erotic combination.

Megan closed her eyes and relaxed into his embrace, kissing him back eagerly.

They made out for several minutes, then she pushed against his chest. “No. Stop. I have to check the dinner before it burns.” She laughed as she wiggled out of his grasp and headed for the kitchen.

She felt domestic setting two places at the table, serving up two plates of food and calling Sean to come and eat. It was gratifying to see

his appreciation of her cooking as he wolfed down several servings. Although maybe her grilled chicken wasn't so much delectable as he was simply hungry, she thought as she chewed a mouthful of the tough, overcooked meat.

After the meal, Sean helped clear the table, and as he placed the dirty dishes on the counter, he stopped to rub his shoulder. Impulsively, she took over the massage, kneading her thumbs deeply into the backs of his shoulders and working toward the tendons of his neck. Sean groaned his appreciation, dropping his head forward a little so she could rub his neck.

"God, that's good. Thanks."

Megan smoothed her hands up and down the tops of his shoulders a few times then said, "I have, uh, massage oil if you want me to really go to work on you."

He half turned and looked at her over his shoulder with eyebrows raised. "Yeah?"

She smiled and lowered her eyelids seductively. "Yeah. Leave the dishes and go lie down. I'll move the laundry along and meet you there in a few minutes."

When she returned to the apartment this time, Sean was not on the couch. It made her stomach flutter to know he waited for her in her bed, probably naked and if not naked yet, soon to be. She noticed as she passed the kitchen he'd washed and stacked the dishes and wiped down the table and she shook her head in disbelief. She really couldn't ask for a better houseguest.

Entering her dimly lit room, she saw Sean sprawled across her bed, arms behind his head, gazing at her with a flirtatious smirk. He was entirely nude.

Megan dipped her head to hide her blush. She was determined not to let him know how he affected her. He was so cool and casual about his body, she wanted to convince him she was just as relaxed. She moved around the room lighting candles and went to her closet to dig up the massage oil she hadn't used for a while. She approached the bed and set the bottle on the nightstand.

Sean's eyes glowed in the flickering candlelight as he watched her.

"Okay, this is a therapeutic massage," she informed him, standing by the bedside with arms crossed. "Nothing sexy about it. It's for your sore back muscles, so roll over."

Wordlessly, Sean followed her command, lying face down on the bed.

She straddled his body, fully clothed to prevent herself from becoming distracted and started on his scalp, running her hands through his hair, gently kneading with her fingertips from the crown of his head down to his neck. His hair felt soft and thick under her hands.

She uncapped the oil and poured some into her palm, warming it before applying it to his skin. Working the tight muscles that extended from neck through shoulders, she pulled the tension out and away. Her stroking hands over his shoulders and upper back elicited another moan of pleasure from him.

"Good, huh?" she asked.

"Mm."

She put her weight into it as she massaged the muscle groups in his back, sometimes pressing deep then easing off and releasing the tension through soft, slow strokes up and down his bare skin. The oil warmed under her hands, releasing its light sandalwood scent.

Megan worked her way down his lower back and onto his rear, continuing to knead and press his flesh firmly.

Sean shifted restively underneath her and started to roll over and reach for her.

She smacked his butt. "I'm not finished. Remember, this is therapy, not foreplay."

He chuckled into his pillow and let her carry on with her work. She massaged all the way down each leg, manipulating the muscles of his thighs and calves. When she reached his feet, she pressed and probed the arches and heels and each toe as he made more approving noises in his throat. She ended by tickling the bottoms of his feet and he jerked away from her grasp.

Megan laughed and moved back up his body, straddling him again. Now she worked his aching biceps and gave his arms and hands the same treatment as his legs and feet. When she'd finished down to the last finger and after she'd stroked her hands up and down his arms a few times, she draped herself full length on top of him and nuzzled her face into the side of his neck behind his ear.

"Good?"

He murmured, "Unbelievable. Nobody ever gave me a massage before. I think it's better than sex."

"As good as, anyway." She sucked his earlobe into her mouth for a moment then kissed her way down his jaw and neck. He stretched luxuriously as a cat underneath her.

"You want one, too?" He spoke through a yawn.

"Some other time. Just relax now." She closed her eyes and snuggled on top of him, her head resting between his shoulder blades, and in a few seconds she could tell he'd fallen asleep by his deep, steady breathing.

Megan rolled off Sean to lay beside him, watching him sleep. His hair was messy from the scalp massage and it was getting long again in back, curling up a little at the base of his neck. She couldn't resist touching

the soft strands, and he shifted in his sleep. His eyebrows were the same sandy color as his hair and they suddenly knit into a frown then relaxed. She wondered what he was dreaming. She missed seeing the blue, ever-changing eyes, but his eyelashes were almost as pretty resting in two perfect crescents against his cheeks. His nose was strong and prominent and beneath its masculinity, his bowed upper lip and full lower one looked feminine in contrast. God, his mouth was so kissable. She was tempted to lean over and take a taste, but didn't want to wake him.

She leaned against her hand and examined his body without fear of him catching her at it. He was beautiful, his well-muscled flesh covered by smooth, unblemished skin. Except on this close examination, she realized it was scarred here and there. A long white, jagged scar marked his forearm and a short ridged pucker on the side of his stomach. The top of one shoulder had a mass of scar tissue the size of her palm. She wondered what accidents, injuries or violence had caused the various wounds and if he would ever share the stories with her.

She was surprised he had no tattoos or piercings anywhere she could see. She'd assumed he would, but when she thought about it, realized he wouldn't waste his money on a useless expense like body art.

After all of the months of wanting him and resisting desire, she couldn't believe he was here now in her bed, sleeping naked and vulnerable and all hers to touch and hold and have.

Amazing and unbelievable.



On Friday, Sasha emailed Megan first thing to summon her to a girls' night out that evening. Stevie was out of town for the weekend on some business trip, so they could hit a bar then go back to Sasha's for a late night drink and a chat. It was a ritual the two of them went through a

few times a year and a rare opportunity for Megan to be a girl's girl. She always hung around with guys and it made a nice change now and then to talk fashion, boys, and cute asses with a girlfriend.

They started off slow at a bar downtown, near where Sasha worked, but Megan kept it under control because she was driving. At ten, Sasha suggested the pair of them go back to her apartment for a bottle of wine and a bite to eat as well as some more cozy girl talk. They picked up some Chinese takeout on the way home and a couple of bottles of chardonnay. Megan dug into the kung-po chicken the minute they hit the kitchen, while Sasha opened the wine. Megan was starving these days, and she wondered how much of it had to do with all the sex she was having.

When the food was dispatched, they moved to the living room, Sasha keeping up a steady stream of chatter about work, the colleagues she liked, this one girl who was a bitch, and how advertising was full of flakes. Megan listened and poured them each another glass of chardonnay. God, it had been a while since she and Sasha spent an evening together without the guys. Sometimes she almost forgot how much fun Sasha was when she wasn't busy being annoyed at Stevie.

"So, come on, Megan, enough of my bullshit," Sasha said. "What's been happening in your sex life? I mean, you know how dull mine is, what with all the working until two a.m. and weekends that Stevie's doing. I swear I should take a lover. He'd never notice."

"You? Cheating on Stevie? That'd be the day." Megan laughed. "I mean, not that you couldn't find a lover easily if you did want to."

"You say that, Meg, but you know, I've had offers..."

"Exactly, you have offers, you pass. You stay faithful to Stevie. Come on, Sash, it was the same at school. Otherwise, you would've slept with Mark Riddell. He was cute."

"I can't believe you're throwing Mark in my face again. You must still be jealous... Anyhow, you're sidestepping my question, what's been up with you?"

"Oh, you know. Nothing much." She took another long gulp of white wine.

"Nothing, really?"

Megan avoided her gaze.

"Do you and James still... get it on now and then?" Sasha asked, and Megan seized the opportunity.

"Sometimes. Not that long ago, actually."

"Oh." Sasha's mouth dropped slightly open. "I was joking. You guys really still sleep together?"

"Come on, Sash, don't be such a prude. Yes, we do. Once in a while. He never has any long-term girlfriends, and you know I don't do boyfriends these days, so..."

"Yeah. I just thought... I mean, why don't you guys go out together? Remind me."

"Because we'd kill each other inside a week, that's why. And you totally know that. Can you imagine us as a couple?"

Sasha laughed and swigged from her glass. "Well, you should consider it. You're looking happier today than I've seen you in a while. If sleeping with James puts that kind of smile on your face, then you should do it more often."

Megan bent her head down toward her wineglass in an attempt to keep her face hidden. She kept forgetting how perceptive Sasha was, how observant.

"No, it's not just that. Work's going well at the moment, you know. I got my piece published, and Rossi's going to give me more assignments. That's why I'm happy."

“Nuh-huh,” said Sasha. “That’s not a work face you’ve got on. It’s an ‘I’m getting some’ face. I’m glad you said you’ve been sleeping with James, though, because I was seriously beginning to wonder about you and Sean.”

Megan choked mid-mouthful and nearly inhaled the wine. “You what?” she spluttered, summoning as much indignation as she could muster. “You’re completely crazy.” But she couldn’t bring herself to look Sasha in the eye. She knocked her glass over accidentally on purpose so she could get up and fetch some paper towels to mop up the spill.

“Just so you know,” Sasha said when Megan walked back in with a handful of towels, “I was almost ready to believe you until you knocked the glass over.”

Megan sat down heavily, the bunched-up towels in her hand. “Oh, fuck.”

“You really are, aren’t you?” Sasha put down her glass and wrapped her hands around her knees, leaning slightly forward toward Megan.

Megan grimaced. “Yeah, okay. I am sleeping with Sean. Fuck it, Sasha, you cannot tell the guys. Stevie hasn’t even met him and he already wants to strangle him, and James—oh, Christ, James will strangle me.”

“Oh, God, I knew this was going to happen.”

“You did?”

“The sexual chemistry with this guy... I don’t know. I wasn’t really getting a gay vibe off him. And the way you guys looked at each other at the bar that night we went out was steamy! Oh, but Megan, do you really know what you’re doing?”

“I know you already think I’m crazy to have taken him in, but...”

Sasha waved her down. “Yes, well, you know how I felt about that. Moving in with a street hustler? Most stupid thing ever. And I was wrong.

He didn't try to rob you and strangle you in your bed. But sleeping with him? Getting involved with him?"

"I know. But he's... He's not a kid. He really isn't. And he's not as fucked up as you'd expect, either. He's just a young—man trying to get his life together and we kind of, you know, click together."

"He's a boy and it's statutory rape," Sasha said flatly.

Megan groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "You make it sound so...wrong. Listen, I know it's wrong. But it also feels right. And he's almost eighteen, anyhow, so no, it wouldn't count as statutory rape—please, give me a break here. I feel guilty enough as it is." She knew how hollow and fake her arguments sounded now she was serving them up to someone else. But she also knew nothing was going to stop her from sleeping with Sean. Nothing. She'd already lost that fight.

Sasha frowned. "You are just unbelievable. Is the sex worth it, at least?"

"Oh, Sasha, you have no idea," Megan answered truthfully.

Sasha snorted into her wine glass. "That amazing, huh?"

Megan looked down at her hands, torn between her natural reserve and a desire to share, fuelled by the fact she hadn't been able to talk about Sean to anyone and by the wine, which always made her more talkative. "Honestly, I've never experienced anything like that in bed. We just... I don't know. The chemistry is out of this world and he's fantastic. Unbelievably fantastic."

She smiled at Sasha, feeling suddenly shy. "I didn't know sex could be like that. And I've had, you know, my fair share of good sex. But this is..." She trailed off.

Sasha leaned back against the chair and closed her eyes. "Okay, enough. Because he's already pretty hot and if you keep going on like that, I may try to jump his bones next time I see him."

Megan smirked. "Hey, keep your filthy paws off him."

"That reminds me. You guys are coming to Thanksgiving at my house next Thursday, aren't you?"

Megan cut her off. "Yes. I already told my mom I wasn't coming home. She wasn't very happy. But I wouldn't miss Thanksgiving with you guys for the world. What do you want us to bring?"

"What can you offer?" Sasha asked, reaching over for the bottle of wine and pouring another couple of glasses.

Megan picked up her glass and considered it thoughtfully.

"I can try my mom's pumpkin pie. If it works out, it's great. And if it doesn't, I'll buy one on the way."

"Good enough for me," Sasha said. She raised her glass.

"To pumpkin pie!"

"To pumpkin pie," Megan repeated. "And to Thanksgiving with friends. Think I should tell the guys about Sean before we turn up?"

Sasha groaned. "Yes. You definitely should. I'll do you a favor and tell Stevie. But you have to tell James."

Chapter Eleven

Megan debated telling James on the phone, then turned up at the bar where he worked at the end of his shift.

He was chatting to the manager, his jacket slung over his shoulder, when she walked in. “Hey Meg! That’s a nice surprise. What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you.” She felt awkward and wished she’d stuck with the phone option.

James looked at her closely but didn’t ask. He waved a vague goodbye to his boss and followed Megan out onto the street.

“Seriously, what is up? You look tense.”

“Nothing, really,” Megan hedged. “I just want to tell you something. Can we go for a drink somewhere? Somewhere that isn’t your workplace?”

They ended up in a sports bar a couple of blocks down, which was loud enough for their conversation to be private, without being too noisy to talk.

“The thing is,” Megan said when she returned from the bar with a couple of beers, “I’m going to take Sean to Thanksgiving at Sasha’s.”

“Yeah? Well I guess he doesn’t have anywhere else to go, so... It’s cool. He’s not such a bad guy, actually. We got along the other night.”

“No, he doesn’t have anywhere to go, but it’s not just that. He’s...actually, he’s coming as my date.” Megan folded her paper napkin, bracing for James’ reaction.

He narrowed his eyes at her in disbelief. "Your date?" The word snapped with a crisp click.

"Yes."

"As in, the guy you're fucking?"

Megan breathed in, counted to three and breathed out, willing herself to be calm. "Yes."

"You're shitting me. You're fucking the hustler?" He leaned forward on his folded arms and stared at her, hard.

"Please, James, don't..." Megan began.

"Don't what? It's the truth, right? He's a whore, or ex-whore, whatever."

"James..." She clenched the napkin in her hand.

"So do you have some sort of deal? He fucks you in exchange for a roof over his head?" He gestured with his hand, almost knocking over his beer.

"No! Fuck off! It's not like that! Don't you dare accuse me of that kind of shit!" Megan's anger surged, and she fought off an undercurrent of panic. It was bad enough she'd worried about the issue. She hadn't expected her friends to think her capable of that. Then again, James had his own axe to grind.

"Why not?" he asked. "I mean, the kid's gay, right? His clients were men?"

"They were, but he isn't. He's straight."

"He's straight, and he was fucking guys for cash? That's...fucked up."

"Oral sex, not fucking." Megan tossed the crumpled napkin down, furious at herself for feeling she had to clarify what Sean had done, as if the specifics were any of James' business. "And it was a job, okay, a way to survive. It's not like there's a lot of call for heterosexual boys on the streets. You don't see women cruising to pick up kids."

“Fuck, I’d rather steal than suck some guy’s dick for cash.” James grimaced in disgust. Megan’s hand itched to slap that look off his face.

“Yeah?” she snapped. “Well try being brought up by a crackhead mom and having to look after yourself on the streets at sixteen. I’d like to see how you’d have survived what Sean went through.”

James shrugged away her accusations. “And now *you’re* fucking him? That sounds like a great idea. Way to go, Meg.”

“You’re not exactly a font of good advice on relationships yourself.” Megan took a long pull at her beer in an attempt to keep her emotions under control.

“Yeah, well at least I steer clear of actual whores. By the way, should I get tested for diseases?”

“What?” Megan spluttered. “No! If you mean... No. It all happened after that night. Fuck you! You’re just saying that to piss me off.”

“I just hope you guys practice safe sex is all.” The bitterness in James’ voice made Megan cringe. She resisted the urge to accuse him of being jealous because it was so obvious he was. This was going all wrong, and if he was going to act like this on Thanksgiving, there was little point in turning up.

“Look, can we try to keep it civilized at Thanksgiving, at any rate? You said you got along with Sean all right the other night. I know you hate what I’m doing and you’re probably angry because you’re worried about me...”

“And I think you can do a lot better than a fucking whore.”

“James! Don’t call him that!” Her protective instincts took over. She couldn’t stand to hear Sean demeaned like that. But she was supposed to be placating James, so she continued more quietly. “Can you please keep it cool on Thursday? Please?”

He drained his beer, placed the bottle carefully back on the table without looking into her eyes, and got up. "I can't promise anything. But I'll try. For you and for Sasha. But if I was doing anything half as stupid as that, you wouldn't be giving *me* the benefit of the doubt."

He stalked off.

Megan watched him go with a sinking feeling. He was absolutely right on that count. If James had been shacking up with an underage prostitute, she wouldn't have let him get away with it. She dropped her head in her hands and groaned. Perhaps Thanksgiving with her parents would've been easier.



On Thursday morning, Sean and Megan dragged themselves out of bed, a difficult task as Sean kept using very convincing arguments with fingers, mouth and tongue to get her to linger between the sheets. They attacked her mom's famous pumpkin pie recipe. Already, she'd cheated by buying a pie shell and some canned pumpkin puree.

Together they mixed the puree with cream, maple syrup, eggs, spices and flour, filled the shell and put it in the oven. While Megan took a shower and got ready, Sean watched over the baking since the oven was notoriously unreliable. The end result was a surprisingly professional-looking pie.

"I can't believe we nailed it!" This was definitely the best-looking pie she'd ever made with that recipe and she attributed it largely to Sean's even-handed measuring and ability to keep an eye on a hot oven while washing up and tidying the kitchen.

She took forever to decide what to wear. Part of her wanted to be gorgeous, glamorous and sexy for Sean and another part urged restraint. She was going to be with some of her oldest friends, and Megan's natural

style was understated. She spent a long time staring at her wardrobe, paralyzed by indecision. Finally she picked two items, a tight black tank top with spaghetti straps and a hint of glitter shimmering through the fabric, and a dark red bias-cut silk skirt, which she loved, but hardly ever wore. She was more a pants than a skirt kind of girl.

She looked at herself in the mirror and ran her hand through her hair. It had grown and needed a good cut. Still, the tousled look worked for her. With a little lipstick, mascara, and smoky eyeshadow, the whole outfit looked good. Not too dressy, not too slutty.

Still in his sweats, Sean appeared behind her in the mirror and appraised her outfit. He scanned up and down her body in a way that made Megan's mind immediately go dirty places.

He smiled lazily at her. "You're looking hot."

She smiled back. "You think?"

He walked a few paces into the room, gaze still on her. "Yeah. You look fucking sexy in a skirt." His voice dropped low and husky. "Makes me want to lift it, push you against the dresser, bend you over and fuck you." She could see evidence of his arousal through the loose material of his sweatpants and it made her tingle.

"We haven't got time." Megan was breathless despite herself. "And, Sean, we *have* to get out of the bedroom because otherwise we're never going to make it anywhere."

"Okay." He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. "But don't expect me to behave all the way through the afternoon."

"I didn't, anyhow," she whispered back, surrendering her neck and throat to his kisses. But she broke off after a minute and pulled away before her resolve crumbled. "You have to get dressed and shave off your scruff. It's a party. I want you to look smooth and sexy and wow the girls."

“What do you want me to wear?”

“What about your black jeans and dark blue button-down?”

He didn’t have much else available, but that particular combination made him look really hot, the blue of the shirt highlighting his eyes. Megan watched as he stripped, more at ease now with the casual way Sean dealt with nudity. He was never self-conscious. Nakedness just wasn’t an issue with him, and Megan was learning not to let it be an issue with her.

Instead, she enjoyed the show—the sculpted lines of his arms, the muscles playing under his skin as he pulled off his T-shirt, the graceful lines of his back and, as he slipped off his sweats, the tight curves of his ass, on which her gaze lingered despite her determination to get going.

Sean shot her a look over his shoulder, smirking. “Having second thoughts?”

Megan shook her head. “I’ll go get the pie. You just get ready. And stop looking so damn sexy.”

She slipped out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where the pie had been cooling on a rack, and transferred it to a large plastic container, a present from her mother who’d offered her a whole set the previous Christmas. It was probably the first time she used it, another sign of how her life had changed since Sean had moved in. She never used to cook much for herself, and she wouldn’t have tried anything ambitious for Sasha’s party on her own. She smiled as she busied herself with last minute preparations.

As she checked her watch—it was nearly 1:30—Sean came out of the bathroom, where he’d been shaving. His hair, which was definitely growing longer, was brushed straight, and he was buttoning his shirt. His eyes looked bluer than ever as they sparkled at her. He looked

damned good, and Megan wondered if she'd be able to keep her hands off him.

Once more Sean drew her into his embrace and nuzzled her neck. "You sure we have to go to this?"

Megan bit her lip. "Mm. We have to. We made a pie."

"I can think of other things to put the whipped cream on," he whispered in her ear, then nipped her lobe. "Other ways to eat the pie, for that matter."

"Sounds sticky and messy." She pushed her palm against his chest and looked at him. Despite the glint of arousal in his eyes, she also thought she detected nervousness. "We won't stay long if you don't feel comfortable there. Okay?"

He nodded, but his jaw tightened slightly, giving away his apprehension.

The drive to Sasha's took less than fifteen minutes. When they reached the door of the apartment, Megan's heart thumped. This was it, the first official outing with Sean as her boyfriend, and she was nervous as hell about her friends' reactions. She looked up at Sean next to her.

He chewed his lower lip and was bound to feel far more uneasy than she did.

She snuck out her hand and grabbed his, entwining their fingers.

"Whatever happens, we're together, okay? And these are my friends. They'll be cool," she whispered with more conviction than she felt.

Sean squeezed her hand and nodded.

They were the first to arrive. Stevie greeted them at the door, hugging Megan and shaking Sean's hand before taking the wine from Megan.

Megan watched him closely. Stevie was the only one of the friends present today who hadn't met Sean before finding out about their relationship. He was also thoughtful, rational, a good judge of character,

and his opinion would influence the others. So she was a little apprehensive about his reaction.

“What can I get you guys, some beer? A glass of wine? Anything else?”

“You should try Stevie’s beer. He’s got this real microbrew fetish and always has something new to try out,” Megan told Sean. “But beware of the spiel he’ll try to feed you about the best brewing methods.”

Sean looked at her, the ghost of a smile flitting across his face. “Hey, I’m a guy. I can handle beer talk,” he said, mock-serious. The tension eased in her stomach. This was working. The boys could be cool with each other.

“I’ll go see how Sasha’s doing, then. And Stevie? I’d love a white wine, please. How come James isn’t here yet? He never turns down an occasion to raid your beer cellar before eating.”

As it turned out, Megan discovered in the kitchen that James and his waitress had just called to warn they’d be late due to car trouble. Allegedly, because as Sasha told her while they took out the pumpkin pie and put it on a plate, he’d sounded very out of breath on the phone. She was prepared to bet whatever had been slowing them down wasn’t engine-related.

“You think he called you in mid-fuck?” Megan asked, chuckling.

“I think he was in the car, actually. And I think Ms. Waitress is a pretty limber girl who might just have been giving him a blowjob at that point.”

Megan laughed. “Well, at least he’s bound to be in a good mood when they arrive.”

She was right. When James walked in ten minutes later towing a very pretty, young and remarkably well-endowed blonde behind him, he was in exuberant spirits. “Hey, everybody, meet Kerry!” He kissed Megan and

Sasha, hugged Stevie, and nodded briefly at Sean, his expression neutral.

Kerry hugged everyone all around, and kissed Stevie and Sean enthusiastically to their obvious delight.

Megan bit her tongue when she saw Sean's eyes drawn to Kerry's chest for at least ten seconds before he snapped them back up. He caught her looking at him and made a sheepish face.

While everyone milled around the living room, pouring drinks and exchanging greetings, Sean pressed close to Megan and whispered in her hair, "Totally fake. I'll take yours anytime." His hand brushed against her ass in a lascivious caress that sent messages of lust through her body.

They sat down to eat shortly after. Sasha's spread was opulent enough to satisfy the most exacting of standards. Megan thought even her mom would have been impressed. She certainly was. The turkey was impressive, and the table was crammed with mounds of mashed potatoes, candied yams, cornbread, several salads, cranberry sauce and pickles.

Sean pulled up a chair directly across from Megan. James's bimbo sat next to him, flashing him a grin that slightly annoyed Megan. Less so when she felt Sean's foot slyly rubbing her ankle in a gesture designed to evoke both reassurance and desire.

Conversation flowed around the dinner table, fuelled by alcohol, food, and longstanding friendship. Megan noted with pleasure that Sean sometimes joined in, in his reserved way, and his dry humor struck a chord with her friends. She was especially pleased to see Stevie engage him a couple of times and nod approvingly at her when he caught her watching them. James was less friendly, scowling at Sean occasionally, but managed to hold back from making rude comments.

Kerry was the classic ditzy L.A. blonde, complete with aspirations to make it in the movies and a brain roughly as small as her cup size was large. The guys, of course, cut her plenty of slack. But Megan caught James's eye during a particularly inane tirade about cosmetic surgery and he looked embarrassed. She might have teased Kerry a little if Sean's sock-clad foot hadn't been insistently stroking her inner thigh in the most distracting manner.

"You can't be serious!" Sasha's voice rose with indignation. "You think it's right that teenagers should get breast implants? You don't think that's maybe a little premature?"

Sean's foot slid farther up Megan's thigh, inhibiting higher brain functions and preventing her from joining in the debate without her voice betraying her. She looked across at him.

His face was impassive, head tilted slightly to the side, as though listening to the conversation, but Megan knew he was completely focused on her right now. His eyes were the only clue to what was happening under the table, the blue edged out by his dilated pupils.

"Well, you know, Sasha, I had these done when I was nineteen. You can't see the scars. I'll show you in the bathroom if you want. The surgeon who did them was a real pro. My dad paid for them. He said nothing was too good for his princess. And I haven't regretted it yet," Kerry said proudly.

There was a pause as her words sank in. James cringed and poked at his mashed potatoes.

Megan tuned out of the conversation then as Sean's toe reached her underwear and started pressing against her crotch. She focused all her concentration on keeping her breathing even and not making any noise. She wouldn't be able to keep it going for long. He pushed against her clit, harder, and she had to bite back a moan. Kerry might be monopolizing

the attention right now, but if Megan had an orgasm at the table, she was pretty sure she'd steal the show.

Sean stared at her, lips slightly parted, and when their eyes locked, he smiled crookedly.

Megan kept her gaze on him as she slowly pushed back her chair to give him a chance to pull his foot away unobtrusively. The loss of contact made her want to cry out, but she couldn't handle the torture anymore. She stood and said in a surprisingly steady voice, "Anyone for coffee?"

In the kitchen, she filled the coffee machine with water and measured out the coffee. A couple of minutes later, Sean appeared in the doorway carrying stacks of plates. He put them on the counter and moved in on her, one arm snaking around her waist, his other hand to the back of her neck. He pulled her in close for a kiss, his mouth hungry on hers and his cock pressing into her crotch. Megan brought her hands up to either side of his face, winding her fingers into his shaggy hair. She moaned softly into his mouth as their tongues entwined, hoping the sound wouldn't carry to the main room.

They kissed urgently for a couple minutes and only pulled apart when Stevie called out to Sean, "Hey man, want to watch some football while the chicks make the coffee and clear the table? Ow! Jesus, Sash, can't you take a joke?"

"You into the football?" Megan whispered.

"Not at the moment." Sean's hand slipped down to her hip and slid under her skirt. His fingers crept up her thigh, following the trail led by his foot earlier.

Megan's every pore reacted to him. She was close to letting him fuck her in the kitchen, not caring who walked in.

"Right now I want to fuck you." His husky voice sent shivers through her body. Her nipples stood erect, pressing against the fabric of her shirt.

Sean's other hand flicked across her chest, sending fire from her sensitive tits straight down to her sex.

She caught her breath. "Go check out the game and meet me in the back bathroom in ten minutes. Through the main bedroom on the left. I'll get the coffee done and after that, I don't give a damn."

He grinned. "Good thing I came prepared, huh?"

Ten minutes later, the coffee was on the table and Megan was in the master bath, hoping neither of their hosts would feel the need to use it in the near future.

She stood in front of the sink, looking at herself in the mirror. Her face was flushed, her eyes dark and bright, and she felt wired and intensely alive. This was crazy. Any of her close friends could walk in on them, but she didn't care, as long as Sean showed up.

When he pushed open the door, she tensed. Every nerve ending tingled with anticipation and she felt as though she was poised on the edge of a precipice, ready to take flight or fall.

Sean carefully locked the door behind him, and crushed her in his arms, his hands roaming her back and waist and his mouth and tongue on hers. Their kissing became frantic, and his hands slipped down to her ass, pulling her tighter against his warm, solid body, his erection insistent against her. His mouth slid down her neck, teeth grazing her flesh

She moaned.

"Jesus, Sean, let's hurry. They're going to notice we're missing."

He lifted his face from her throat with a predatory grin, his eyes inches from hers. "You saying you want a quickie, no fancy shit, no messing around, no foreplay?" Every word felt like he touched her. His voice was so impossibly sexy. Megan felt drugged, woozy with desire, so wet already she knew she wouldn't need much at all to come.

“Yes.” She slid her hand down between their bodies and palmed the length of his dick through denim, watching as his eyes clouded and his breath caught. She popped the button and unzipped him.

He kissed her again, his tongue plundering her mouth, stealing her breath away. His hands pulled up her skirt and divested her of her panties.

They stood in front of each other, naked from the waist down, and paused for a beat. Sean scanned the bathroom quickly. It was small, and cramped, and the opportunities were limited. He placed his hands at her waist and turned her so she faced the sink.

She watched his face in the mirror. His expression was so concentrated as he parted her legs and ran his hand all the way to her crotch. His fingers caressed her swiftly, dipping into her wetness.

She pushed back against him with a moan. Bending over, Megan braced against the sink.

Sean grabbed her hips, positioned his cock at her entrance and thrust deep and fast. He pistoned his hips, pounding into her from behind. Primitive grunts accompanied every thrust.

Megan turned her mouth into her shoulder to stifle her moans. She gripped the edges of the sink as she was carried on a wave of pleasure that seemed to crest ever higher, triggering spasm after spasm in her. This was so hot, so wild, and so not her. She wanted to scream or sob.

Sean leaned forward and his hand snaked over her hip and onto her clit, rubbing and circling. He continued to slam into her hard and rough. Their harsh breaths and the slap of flesh on flesh were the only sounds in the room.

Megan whimpered as her whole body contracted and released in an amazingly powerful orgasm.

Sean pushed in deeper, two, three, four more times, then both his hands gripped her hips hard. He groaned and came, shaking with the power of his release. He collapsed against her back, panting hard. After a moment, he pulled out carefully.

Megan sighed and dropped to her knees, resting her head on her folded arms on the edge of the sink. The ceramic was cold against her bare arms and the floor hard under her knees, but she didn't care. Her body was spent and she had to rest.

Sean crouched down with her and wrapped his arms around her midriff, planting a couple of wet kisses on her shoulder. "Jesus, Megan, sex with you is always so...incredible," he murmured into her ear, his breath tickling her.

She turned her head to kiss him lightly on the lips before pushing herself to her feet. They dressed silently next to each other, and that felt even more intimate than the rushed mutual undressing.

She checked out her face in the mirror. Thankfully, nothing was too out of order. Both of them looked a little tousled and flushed, but nothing that would arouse suspicion, apart from their shared absence over the past quarter of an hour.

"How the fuck are we going to get back to the living room without anyone noticing?" she asked.

Sean smiled and produced a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "There's our alibi. I was told to smoke on the fire escape off their bedroom. You were keeping me company."

Megan beamed. "You're not just a pretty face, are you?"

Sean raised his eyebrows at her and smiled as he unlocked the door and opened it quietly. The bedroom was thankfully empty. The fire escape was straight ahead. "You're going to have to join me for a smoke now, though, because I really need one."

“Okay. But don’t you dare offer me one. And I’ll need to borrow one of Sasha’s sweaters, otherwise they’ll never believe I’ve been out all this time.”

Sean opened the window and went through first before helping her onto the narrow platform. He lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply, then turned to her. “Sasha and Stevie are nice. And they really care for you. But James hates my guts.”

“Has he said anything?”

“Not in so many words. But I can tell he’d like to knock me across the room.”

“He’s jealous,” Megan said. “And protective, and having a difficult time dealing with this. He’ll get there.”

“He better not realize I’ve been fucking you in the bathroom then,” Sean shot back with a sly grin. He looked completely relaxed leaning against the railing, blowing smoke into the chilly afternoon air, squinting at her.

Megan sighed. She felt really good—sexually satisfied, yes, but also warm, happy, and positively glowing. This thing they had going was intense, and wild, and unbelievably erotic but it was something else, too, something more, even if it was too early to put her finger on it.

Chapter Twelve

In the weeks following Thanksgiving, Megan felt like she was on an extended honeymoon except in her own apartment instead of someplace tropical. The sex was great, but beyond the physical, she and Sean clicked mentally. They were starting to finish each other's sentences and intuit each other's needs without speech. Megan added to her mental list of Sean's favorites, foods he liked to eat, TV programs he was interested in and subjects that made his eyes light up. None of these things was easy to discern. He never expressed his likes, usually deferring to whatever Megan wanted, and she had to work to get him to admit he preferred Mexican food over Chinese or that he'd watch ESPN over Lifetime Movie Network if given control of the remote.

She realized he was fascinated by archaeology after she caught him watching shows about ancient Egypt and the excavation of ruins around the world on the History Channel enough times. Megan bought him several beautifully illustrated books about archaeology from the used bookstore, and when she presented them to him, his delighted expression made her chest tighten. He was so easy to please, never expected anything, and was touched by any small kindness.

It made Megan want to do more and more for him. She had to rein herself in because he got upset if he thought she spent too much on something for him. She ordered a couple of textbooks he needed, and when the package came, she presented it to him. She expected the same

pleased reaction the archaeology books had earned. Instead, he frowned as he removed the two expensive books from the packaging.

“Why did you get these?”

“You need them. You said...”

“I can get what I need at the library or look up information online. These are too expensive.”

“I thought if you had your study materials right at hand, it would make it easier.”

“Then let me pay you for them.” He gave a short, bitter laugh. “We’ll add it to the list of what I owe you.”

Already he was turning over all his pay to her to help with rent, utilities and food, but it was never enough for him. The fact she didn’t want or need his financial help, especially with her new status at work, didn’t alleviate his issues about depending on her.

“Sean, don’t,” she protested. “It’s a gift. I *want* to give these books to you.”

“I’m sorry.” He immediately apologized when he saw he’d upset her. His frown disappeared and he leaned in to give her a kiss. “Thank you.”

When he finally pulled away, Megan stopped him with a hand cupped around his jaw. “Listen. You’ve got to get over thinking you owe me something. When I invited you here, I had no expectations and I still don’t. I just love—being with you and I hope you feel the same way. There’s no reason to measure things out, you know?”

He nodded, but his gaze slid away from hers and she thought she hadn’t really reached him. He would continue to keep an internal tally because of pride or a sense of obligation, and there was nothing she could do to change his mind.

Later that evening, she looked up from the book she was reading to see Sean chewing his pen and studying one of the new textbooks with a

frown of concentration. He was adorable with his bangs mussed upon his forehead and his eyes focused intently on his work. Megan wanted to slam her computer shut, leap over the coffee table and pin him to the ground. She considered it was a damn good thing she was on her period or they'd never have a breathing spell from all the sex.

Suddenly he looked up and smiled so sweetly it made her hurt inside.
Holy shit, am I falling in love?



A few weeks after Thanksgiving, Megan was at her computer working on yet another official assignment from Rossi when the doorbell rang. She grumbled in annoyance. There was nothing she hated worse than being interrupted just when the words were really beginning to flow.

"Can you get that, please?" she called to Sean, who was in the kitchen trying to repair her dishwasher. She'd told him not to bother. It hadn't worked when she'd moved in, but he was in Mr. Fix-It mode and insisted on tackling the project.

Concentrating on her work, she was barely aware of the sound of Sean answering the door. She assumed it was UPS with a Christmas package from her aunt or something. Then she heard her sister Charlotte's voice and Megan practically threw the computer from her lap and jumped off the bed. She tore into the other room, and there was Charlotte and her husband Greg in the foyer taking off their coats. Sean raised a questioning eyebrow at Megan, as though wondering how she was going to introduce him.

"Charlotte. Greg. How are you?" Megan forced joy into her voice. *And what the hell are you doing here?*

"Hey, Cupcake." Greg smiled broadly and reminded Megan why he was her favorite brother-in-law, other than the fact he was her only one.

“Hey, Sweet Buns.” She hugged him and turned to take Charlotte’s coat.

“Hi.” Charlotte sounded distracted and out of breath. “Need to pee. Right now.”

“Sure.” Megan showed her sister toward the bathroom, tossing the coat on the arm of the couch as she passed. “What are you doing in town?”

“Christmas shopping. Greg has some secret mission he won’t tell me about, but he insisted I come along. I told him I wasn’t in any shape to go tramping all over the city, but here we are anyway.” Charlotte straightened her maternity top over her bulging abdomen and lowered her voice confidentially. “I think it might have something to do with the jeweler’s we stopped at on our way here. And by the way, who’s the guy? He’s cute.”

“Oh, that’s, uh, Sean. I’ll introduce you after...”

But Charlotte had already shut the bathroom door.

Megan paused to breathe. All right, this was manageable. All she had to do was keep information about Sean vague, entertain Charlotte and Greg for a couple of hours then send them on their way. That was the game plan.

She found Greg and Sean in the kitchen surveying the carnage of parts that had come out of her dishwasher.

“Yeah, I think I need a new one of these,” Sean was saying, holding up a coupling, “and some new hose.”

“You’re sure it’s the water line that’s the problem?” Greg asked. “When ours broke it turned out to be...”

Megan tuned out. Hardware talk made her ears bleed. The pair of them seemed happy in their discussion, introductions apparently made and male bonding taking place, so why interrupt?

In a few minutes, Charlotte was back from the bathroom and hugged Megan around the waist with one arm. "Sorry about that. I can't wait these days. How have you been? I haven't seen you in forever! And who's your friend?"

"This is Sean. He's between apartments right now and he's crashing here for a while. Sean, this is my sister Charlotte and you've already met Greg."

Sean looked up from the parts in his hand and nodded. "Hi."

Megan patted Charlotte's stomach. "You're getting big, girl. How long now?"

"Too long! About six weeks. I can't wait. This last month has seemed to drag on forever."

"But you'll still be at Mom and Dad's for Christmas?"

"Of course. You will too, right?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided." Megan led Charlotte over to the couch. "I'm kind of busy with changes in my job right now."

"Megan, you have to come. You know Mom and Dad are counting on it. What's so important that you can't give them a couple of days out of your busy life? It was bad enough you couldn't make Thanksgiving. I'm sure Mom didn't say anything to you, but she was upset."

Megan's mouth tightened. Charlotte could never resist a good lecture. "Want some tea or a soda?" She headed toward the kitchen, to deflect the onslaught. "Cookies?"

"Do you have herbal tea?"

Megan got out a pair of mugs, filled them with water and placed them in the microwave. Sean and Greg were still conferring over the dishwasher.

“Listen,” Greg whispered to Megan, “I want you to keep Charlotte occupied for me. I have to go out and buy something I don’t want her to see.”

“Okay.” Megan smiled at his boyish excitement.

“I’m going with him and stopping at the hardware store,” Sean added, waving the hand with the piece of black tubing. “I should have this back together by later this afternoon. Sorry about messing up the kitchen.”

“No problem. It’s sweet of you to fix it.”

She caught Greg’s back and forth glance between her and Sean, but he said nothing, only collected his coat, put it on and followed Sean out of the apartment with a quick wave to Charlotte on the way past. “See you, honey. I’ve got more Christmas errands to run.”

The microwave timer rang and Megan removed the steaming cups of water and dunked in a pair of tea bags. She went into the living room and handed one to Charlotte.

Her sister blew across the surface, steam rising and fogging up her glasses. “Thanks.”

It was the same box of tea that had been in her cupboard since Charlotte’s last visit and the bags were probably stale. Megan hated tea, but she kept it on hand for her sister’s infrequent stops.

“So tell me more about this guy who’s living here.” Charlotte dunked her teabag with a spoon.

“I told you, he’s just a friend who needed a place to stay.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know yet. It depends.”

“Where does he work?” Charlotte took a sip of her tea then leaned over to set it on the end table.

“He has a job in construction and goes to school part time.”

“He’s in college? How did you meet him?”

Megan was sick of the grilling and her tone was tense. “Through work.”

“So you met this guy through your work and he’s a construction worker who’s between apartments and has to stay with you. You know him well enough for that?”

“Yes,” Megan snapped.

“But you’re not in a relationship of any kind?”

“No.” She could almost see the cogs turning in her sister’s mind.

Charlotte frowned. “I’ve read the articles you wrote, the one about the playground and the gritty one about the street kids. So was this, what’s his name, Sean? Was he one of the volunteers building the playground?”

“Yes,” Megan answered without hesitation, glad she could tell the truth.

But Charlotte was sharp as a paper cut when she sensed a secret. “Nuh-uh. Something’s up. I know when you’re lying. Your leg starts jiggling, your mouth does that twitchy thing and you won’t look me in the eye. Who is this guy really?”

“All right. Fine.” Megan felt like she was sitting inside her head observing while her mouth ran on without her. “I met him while I was doing the article—the other article, about the street kids.” Maybe there was an impish part of her that wanted to shock Charlotte, to see her eyes open wide.

“On the street? A homeless... Oh my God, he’s that kid in the picture, the silhouette, isn’t he?”

“You figured it out. You win. Yay, Charlotte.” Megan couldn’t believe she hadn’t been able to keep her mouth shut. What the hell was the matter with her?

“Wait a minute. Is he a...” Charlotte lowered her voice confidentially. “A prostitute?”

“Was,” Megan amended. “Now he’s just a kid trying to get his life straightened out.”

“A kid? How old is he?”

She didn’t answer.

“Nineteen? Eighteen? Please tell me he’s over eighteen.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not like we’re sleeping together,” Megan lied, and hated herself for it. She hoped Charlotte wouldn’t pick up on that one.

“For God’s sake, I should hope not! But you have a minor living in your house? Where’s his family?”

“He has no one. That’s why he was out on the street.”

“Well...” Charlotte seemed at a loss. “What about a foster home or an orphanage or something? You can’t have some strange boy living with you.”

“He doesn’t want to go into the system. None of those kids do. A lot of them had bad experiences in foster care and feel safer living on their own. And some of them are addicts and don’t want the regimen of living in a facility.”

“Addicts! He’s on drugs? Are you insane?”

“No. I didn’t mean Sean. He’s not like that.” Megan was exhausted by Charlotte’s barrage of questions. A trickle of sweat ran down her back. “You don’t understand.”

“No. I don’t. But I do know it’s unacceptable. You can’t—”

“Unacceptable? How dare you barge in here and start telling me how to run my life?” Megan was on her feet now, furious and feeling completely capable of kicking nosy, bossy, always-interfering Charlotte out of her house. She wished to hell Greg and Sean hadn’t left because, although she was glad Sean hadn’t witnessed this argument, she wanted Greg to take Charlotte home. Right now.

“Megan. I’m not trying to tell you how to—”

“Yes, you are. You always are.” Megan crossed her arms and tears clouded her vision, making her feel weak and childish.

“I’m only saying...”

“I know. I understand your concerns.” Megan took a breath and spoke calmly. “But I’m not discussing this. I’m not going to spend all afternoon listening to you try to change my mind. So, Charlotte, how are you decorating the nursery?”

Charlotte clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Grow up, Megan. You can’t simply refuse to talk about it.”

“Watch me,” Megan replied. “It’s either that or we’re going to end up screaming at each other until Greg and Sean get back.”

“Fine.” Charlotte spread her hands in a dismissive gesture. “Whatever.”

They passed the rest of the time until the men returned in stilted conversation about the coming birth of Megan’s first niece or nephew, both of them carefully, icily polite.

Oblivious to the tension between the sisters, Greg wouldn’t leave right away, but insisted on helping Sean put the dishwasher back together. The machine worked, and the two men high-fived each other as water filled it. Megan smiled to see Sean so happy, despite the tension eating her inside. But she couldn’t actually relax until Charlotte and Greg were out the door, especially since Charlotte kept watching Sean like he was something on a microscope slide.

She walked into the kitchen after closing the door behind them, heaving a relieved sigh, “Finally!” Then she caught sight of Sean’s tight expression.

“Your sister knows about me,” he half-stated, half-asked, his face an unreadable mask. He folded the sack from the hardware store into a neat square.

“Yes,” she admitted, leaning against the counter and watching him.

He nodded. “I could tell from the way she looked at me after we got back. Why did you tell her?”

“I didn’t mean to say anything, but she kept asking questions and it kind of slipped out.”

“Kind of slipped out,” he repeated.

From his measured tone, Megan knew he was supremely pissed off. “She already guessed anyway, because of the article. I only confirmed it because she wouldn’t drop it.”

“Your sister knows I’m a whore. Nice.” His jaw clenched and eyes narrowed.

“You’re not a... Not anymore.” She reached toward him then realized he was in no mood to be touched and her hand dropped to her side. It hadn’t seemed to bother him too much that her friends knew about him, why was he upset now?

“Does she know I’m fucking you?” His harsh tone made it sound dirty. He tossed the folded bag on the counter.

“No,” Megan said quietly.

“Well, that’s something then, isn’t it?” He dropped to his knees and began picking up spare bits from the dishwasher repair project.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I didn’t ask her to come and visit.”

He continued cleaning the floor. “Doesn’t matter. It’s the truth. Your whole family might as well know. I’m sure they will now.”

Suddenly his angry reaction made sense. He was meeting Megan’s family at Christmas; they’d already discussed visiting them. Sean was

afraid of their disapproval. By letting his secret slip, Megan had ensured he was walking into an awkward situation. She apologized again. “I’m sorry.”

He got up from the floor and threw away the trash. “Forget it. It’s not your fault.” He stalked from the room, obviously still humiliated and angry.

Dinner was uncomfortable. Sean sat across from her, head bent, eating methodically. Their talk stayed practical, “pass the salt” and the like. Megan felt her whole day had been filled with stilted conversation and awkward silences.

As they filled the dishwasher after the meal, Megan thanked Sean for repairing it, but her enthusiasm failed to thaw him. She watched him fiddle with the settings on the machine, and wondered how she could make up for upsetting him.

“I’m really sorry, Sean,” she repeated once more. “Of all the people I’d rather not tell anything about your life, or mine, Charlotte’s pretty much top of the list. I’m sorry I lost my temper and told her.”

He didn’t say anything, but paused.

Megan realized she was twisting her amethyst ring nervously around her finger and stopped. She had no idea how to resolve the situation if apologizing wasn’t enough. Right now, she wasn’t even sure whether Sean was planning to sleep in her bed—their bed, now—or on the couch. That’s how pissed he’d looked all night.

“Okay,” he finally said. “I guess they had to find out sometime.” He turned the machine on then walked past her to the bathroom and shut the door. He’d accepted her apology, but Megan didn’t feel forgiven. What else could she offer?

The rest of the evening, the tension and silence continued. Sean sat on the couch reading coursework and studying. Megan sat in bed with her laptop, trying to piece together the notes she'd taken at a local AIDS campaign meeting that morning. She'd completely lost her earlier focus on the article, and kept listening for noises from the living room instead of concentrating on work. At about half past ten, she gave up and shut the laptop. She had another twenty-four hours to hand in the copy.

After preparing for bed, she looked at Sean from the living room doorway. She felt a pang of desire remembering the first night they'd had sex, how it had started with her catching him masturbating. She still had a very clear picture of him stroking himself etched into her mind and the image never failed to arouse her when she thought about it, which was more often than she cared to admit. Tonight he lay in that same position, but clothed, his eyes riveted on the basketball game on TV and his hand toying with an unlit cigarette.

"Are you coming to bed?" She tried to sound unconcerned, uncertain how she'd react if he wasn't willing to share her bed tonight.

Sean looked up, his face blank. "What?"

"I'm going to bed. Are you coming? I mean, after the game is finished?"

"What time is it?"

"Half past ten. I have to work on that article tomorrow, so I thought I'd try to sleep early," Megan said. And she couldn't wait any longer to know whether he was still pissed at her.

He yawned and stretched his arms. "Yeah, I'll be along. Game's not that good anyway."

Megan breathed a sigh of relief as she went to the bedroom and got into bed. She'd been wearing a tank top and pajama bottoms, but decided to take them off and pretend nothing was wrong. They always

slept together naked. She picked up a random book on her bedside table, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, which she'd been neglecting recently, and started reading. But her mind wasn't in it and kept drifting as she listened to Sean get up and move around the apartment, putting things away and turning lights off before hitting the bathroom. She gave up on reading, but left her light on, waiting for his arrival.

Finally, a good twenty minutes after her, he got to the bedroom. He stripped down to his boxers, his back to her, and hesitated for a second before he pulled them off, too. He slipped into the bed and lay on his back next to her. After a couple minutes, he turned onto his side to face her. She must have looked worried because he gave her a small smile. "It's okay. Really. I mean, I was pissed, but..."

"No. You're right. I shouldn't have told Charlotte about you without discussing it with you first. I can understand how you wouldn't want my family to know. I'm sorry."

She extended her arm toward Sean, her hand stroking his cheek, where the stubble was beginning to grow. Her fingers trailed across his mouth, his lips opening slightly under her touch. God, that was all it took and already she felt the blood pounding in her temples and crotch.

"I'd like to..." Her voice was hesitant. "I mean...let me do something for you."

He looked at her quizzically, but with a sparkle in his blue eyes. Yes, he was getting the message, all right.

"Mind if I...head down there?" She licked her lips as she stared him in the eye, doing her damndest to sound seductive and brazen. "I'm feeling kind of hungry."

Sean didn't answer, but his eyes darkened immediately, and his breath quickened.

She smiled and kissed him lightly, her tongue tracing his lips before dipping into his mouth.

He captured it, kissing her back eagerly.

She didn't let herself get carried away by the kiss. She had to focus if she wanted to achieve her objective. This one was for Sean—well, mainly, because Megan wasn't going to deny giving him head was also giving her an erotic thrill.

Every time she went down on him, she wondered how she rated in his eyes. She tried to forget about his experiences, and the fact he'd given hundreds more blowjobs than she had—and received a fair few—but it kept coming up in her head. With pictures. She was deeply ashamed of herself for being aroused by mental images of Sean with his mouth stretched around a cock, but she couldn't banish them as she did the same thing to him.

Although she'd never admitted her fears of inadequacy to him, she could tell he'd realized, because he was very...appreciative of her efforts.

She left his mouth and kissed down his throat, light kisses alternating with little nips and licks, tracing a path down his pecs toward his left nipple. Sean had very sensitive nipples, and she spent some time on one then the other, licking, sucking and biting until he groaned and pressed his erection into her side. Her hand snaked down between their bodies and grasped it, never tiring of the thrill of the hot, smooth hardness of his cock in her hand.

Sean pushed into her fist.

Megan's heart raced and her arousal grew as her tongue trailed down his abs, following the line of hair, teasing him slowly while she stroked his length. Fleeting, she wondered whether she'd be getting anything back later, then chided herself for thinking of her desires when she was supposed to be focusing on him.

As her tongue reached his dick, she stopped and looked up at him.

Sean had propped himself on his elbows and gazed at her hungrily, his lips parted, panting slightly. He liked to look at her when she sucked him off. Maybe it was his way of reassuring her this was different from his experiences with clients, when he'd fantasize about girls while some guy got him off. Or maybe it was about anchoring him in the reality of her blowjobs. Either way, it turned her on to know he watched as she took the head of his cock between her lips, sheathing him slowly in her mouth. She loved the slight tang of salty bitterness that was her first taste of him.

He hissed as she worked her way up and down, using her tongue and the pads of her fingers. She wanted to give him as much pleasure as she could to make up for her crass behavior earlier and intended to work him up good and slow until he begged for release. As she applied herself to the task, her senses opened to his presence—not just his taste but his smell, musky and so masculine, the feel of his shaft under her fingers and tongue, hard and hot, the sound of his breathing, interspersed with groans and gasps, and the sight of him, from his jutting cock to those eyes, burning on her, making her wet and hot and melting inside.

Sean's fingers ran through her hair as her head bobbed. His hand slipped down, the weight of it warm against the back of her neck, pressing just slightly, almost but not quite guiding her. She took him in deeper, increasing pressure, eliciting more groans of pleasure, but keeping her rhythm slow to drag it out.

"Fuck," Sean moaned. His eyes were half-closed and he looked drugged with pleasure.

Megan released him from her mouth and kissed his stomach, drawing patterns with her mouth and tongue on his abdomen.

He bucked under her and gently tried to push her back to his cock, but she resisted.

“You want more?” she said, playing innocent.

“Yesss,” he breathed out, “Please, God, yes!”

The sound of his pleading sent an erotic charge through her that made her pussy clench. She decided to give him the release he craved and her tongue swirled back toward his cock. She paused for a fraction of a second and their eyes locked as she very slowly parted her lips and engulfed him again, gripping him tightly with her hand.

He thrust into her with a long, drawn-out moan, and she focused all her efforts on satisfying him, following his lead and taking in as much of him as she could. She sped up until Sean was fucking her mouth and she was almost breathless. Taking him even deeper into her throat, she felt him shudder and explode with a cry and swallowed every last burst.

When he was spent, Megan crawled back up his body. Her jaw was slightly sore but she was elated, and immensely gratified by his orgasm. She was desperately wet and in need of her own release, but she was ready to ignore it. This had been her gift to Sean, the physical expression of her apology to him.

He'd evidently enjoyed it. He relaxed against the pillows and lay with eyes half-closed, breathing shallowly.

Megan heard his heart beating wildly in his chest as she stretched over him and brought her face within a few inches of his. “Well,” she said softly, “feeling better?”

“Fuck, yes. You're amazing, Meg. Just...amazing.”

“Am I forgiven?”

Sean nodded. “Can't refuse you anything. Too good.” His arms wrapped around her.

Megan smiled and cuddled against his warm chest. She could almost fall asleep now, if she ignored the itch between her legs. His breathing slowed and deepened and she wondered whether he'd drop off immediately.

After a few minutes, though, Sean began stroke her back, progressively getting lower, until he cupped her ass, his fingers reaching round her buttocks toward her wet sex.

"You don't have to..."

"Shhh."

"I didn't expect—"

"Yeah, well I did." He suddenly pulled her up, rolled them both onto their sides and moved his hand to her crotch, probing, stroking and pushing.

Megan's body was already so wet and ready for him she was incredibly close to orgasm. She moaned, her breath coming out in little gasps, and rode his fingers until she peaked and came violently, shaking in his arms.

"Oh, Christ," she said weakly, as the throbbing slowly subsided.

Sean chuckled and hugged her tighter. "Did you really think I'd let you go to sleep without that?" he murmured, kissing her collarbone and her neck, slow, tender kisses that made her body tingle.

Megan shook her head and snuggled into his arms, feeling warm, relaxed and finally rid of the irritation that had plagued her since Charlotte turned up. In minutes she was asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

After Charlotte and Greg's visit, Megan knew she couldn't put off explaining Sean to her mom and asking if she could bring him home at Christmas. With Charlotte's big mouth, there would be no hiding the facts about Sean. So she called, prepared to face an inquisition, but her mom surprised her by abstaining from the litany of warnings her friends and sister had already delivered.

"Certainly. Bring your friend along. I look forward to meeting him."

Megan was so surprised by the lack of opposition that she launched into her counter-argument anyway. "You'll see. Sean's a nice guy despite his background. He's not dangerous or a freeloader or anything. He just needs a place to stay while he gets himself figured out."

"All right. I believe you."

They chatted several more minutes about work and various relatives and the employee problems Megan's dad was dealing with at his hardware store. Then Megan hung up, unable to believe her mom was going to let it drop that easily. There'd probably be more discussion when she got home.



Two weeks later, as Megan packed a last pair of socks into her suitcase, a strong arm snaked around her waist and pulled her against a warm, hard body.

She smiled and reached over her shoulder to cup Sean's jaw.

He kissed the palm of her hand, then nuzzled the side of her neck.

"You about ready?" she asked.

"Almost. There's one last thing I need to take care of." He reached a hand down to her crotch and rubbed it through the stiff fabric of her jeans. "These have to go." He unfastened the button and zipper, sliding his hand inside the fly.

She pushed into his circling finger on her clit and turned her face to kiss him over her shoulder.

He inclined his head and covered her lips with his. Sean's kisses always began soft and searching, as if tasting her to see what she was made of and discovering her anew every time they kissed.

After several moments, he took his hand from inside her pants and turned her around to face him. They kissed desperately, like lovers who'd only recently rediscovered each other after a long absence. Megan pushed her hands into his thick hair and cupped his neck and the back of his head. She stood on tiptoe leaning into him, angling her mouth and latching onto his fiercely.

Sean broke away from the kiss, stooped to slip his arm around the back of her knees and swept her off her feet. He carried her to the bed, dumping her unceremoniously on it, then pushed her suitcase to the floor.

Megan struggled out of her clothes and cast them aside.

Sean stripped off his clothes, crawling onto the bed until he was suspended above her, looking down with dark, lust-filled eyes. He stayed

that way for several seconds, just watching her. His biceps were corded with the strain of supporting his weight.

The sight of the straining muscles made Megan's heart flutter in her throat. She squeezed her vaginal muscles tight, trying to relieve the empty ache in her pussy.

Slowly Sean lowered himself until he covered her body, his heaviness pressing her down, making her feel delicate and small. His lips settled warmly over hers once more.

Sean reached between them, dipping his finger in the wetness from her body and smearing it up and down her seam. He teased her clit until she moaned and writhed beneath him then guided his erection to her opening.

"I love making love to you." His whisper was as soft as feathers tickling her ear.

Megan smiled and her body melted and molded to his even more. She felt pliant and boneless as she wrapped her arms and legs around Sean and held him close.

He moved within her, slow, steady strokes that sent pulses of delight through her. His pace was measured and even but unrelenting.

Megan lifted her hips to meet his thrusts, her eyes half-closed in pleasure. Wave after wave of desire coursed through her, building higher and higher until they crashed in a powerful orgasm. She caught her breath and froze as sparkles of ecstasy shimmered through her.

Sean moved faster then, bringing himself to a swift climax. He pressed his face to her shoulder and groaned low, as he shuddered against her. When he was finished, Sean rolled off her and lay on his back breathing heavily, one arm stretched above his head.

Megan turned on her side to face him and trailed a hand up his sweaty stomach and chest. The muscles of his torso twitched under her touch and she tickled her hand up his side.

He brought his arm down to grab her wrist and hold her hand tight against his chest to stop the tickling.

She smiled contentedly and concentrated on the steady thump of his heartbeat under her hand. They should lie like this forever, she thought. Megan eyes drifted closed. "We should get going," she said.

"Just another minute." His voice was husky and half asleep.

"Okay," she murmured. "One more minute."

Within seconds they were both asleep.

Megan woke spooned in Sean's embrace with the weight of his arm draped over her. She cuddled back into him, then her eyes flew open and she looked at the bedside clock. It was four-thirty.

"Shit!" She sat up. "Shit! Shit! Shit! Wake up!" She cast his arm off her, rolled out of bed and scrambled for her clothes. "We're late. There's no way we can make dinner now."

"Then what's your hurry?" Sean stretched and blinked sleepily up at her. "Call and say we'll be late."

"I guess I'll have to." Megan frowned. He didn't understand she was perpetually running late and it was what her family expected from her. She didn't like living down to their long held belief that she was a procrastinator and scatterbrain. Maybe she used to be, but she'd grown up since then. She was rarely late anymore, seldom forgot her possessions or left them lying around and never turned in a work assignment past deadline, but her parents and Charlotte didn't seem to realize she'd changed. Being late for this family dinner would be another nail in her proverbial coffin of shame.

Sitting on the edge of the bed to make the call, Megan was aware of Sean behind her, getting up and dressed. She wondered if he'd even packed yet. It was clear he wasn't in any rush to take this trip to her parents' home. Maybe she should have begged off and celebrated Christmas here in her apartment with him. Maybe meeting the family was going to be too intimidating for him.

On the three hour ride to her parents' home, Sean was silent.

Megan babbled a stream of family stories and small town anecdotes, trying to set him at ease and give him an idea of the people he was about to meet. "...then Charlotte screamed and came running out of her bedroom with her Diamond Dewdrop Barbie in one hand. Chris and I cracked up. We knew she was going to kill both of us, but it was so damn funny."

Megan smiled, remembering Barbie, shorn of her beautiful waist-length hair and embellished with inked-on tattoos and eyeliner. Chris had even tried to put red streaks in her punk hair with food coloring, but that hadn't worked too well and ended up bleeding onto her face so her forehead was bright red.

"What did your mom do?" For the first time since they'd gotten into the car, Sean turned from staring out the window and looked at her.

"She got mad, of course. First she had to stop Charlotte from smacking us and send her to her room to cool down. Then she sat Chris and me down and gave us a long speech about respecting other people's things and told us we'd have to save our allowances to buy Charlotte a new Barbie, then she grounded us a while for good measure." Megan laughed. "But it was worth it. Poor Charlotte. We gave her a hell of a time over the years. Like when she was getting ready for her eighth grade winter formal and Chris super-glued her dress shoes to the floor of her

closet, or the time I told Dan Pratley she had a crush on him. We were evil.”

“Why?” Sean sounded genuinely curious.

Megan thought about it. “Because we could be, I guess. She made herself a target, she was so easy to upset. And she was so bossy all the time, she deserved it.”

“Maybe she was bossy because you were mean to her.”

“That’s what my mom always said.”

“How about your dad?” Sean continued to watch her. “What’s he like?”

“Well, he’s just...Dad. He was there at the end of the day and he supported whatever decisions Mom made about disciplining us, but he was kind of clueless. My mom ran the house.” Megan thought about her easygoing father and tried to recall a special story about him.

“Dad loves fishing and sometimes, when I was little, he took me. It was pretty boring out on the river, but I did love spending time with just him and me.” She considered those long, hot summer afternoons and how it was the only time she really talked at length with her dad. She’d never thought about it before, but realized now it was his way of keeping in touch with what was going on in her life. She wished she hadn’t been so rude when she reached high school and turned down his offers of fishing trips. It had obviously meant a lot to him, but she hadn’t seen it back then.

“Fishing. That must have been nice.” Sean turned back to the window.

She looked over at his profile against the darkness and realized he’d probably never had a father figure to take him fishing or play ball or teach him to do guy stuff. It made Megan feel even worse for taking her own father for granted. She should really call home more often.

“Your family sounds...nice,” Sean said suddenly. “Normal. Like a TV family.”

“Yeah.” Megan didn’t know what else to say. When your template for a “normal” family came from television, it wasn’t a good sign. She had a lump in her throat as she pictured what Sean must have endured living with a crack addict mother and a revolving door of her abusive boyfriends. He’d told her little about his past, but the few details he occasionally shared echoed stories she’d heard again and again during her interviews with the street kids.

When they finally pulled into her parents’ driveway, Megan parked her Saturn behind Charlotte and Greg’s Lexus. The engine made the rattling sound it always did as it cooled. Megan wondered if it was something she needed to have looked at.

She watched Sean take in her childhood home and wondered what he thought of it. The two-storey farmhouse glowed white even in the dim light. The porch light was on, the eaves were strung with multicolored lights and an electric candle burned in every window. For a moment, Megan forgot how nervous she was about this visit and simply remembered how much she loved Christmas. The house looked like the holidays. It looked like home, and it’d been way too long since she’d last visited.

Megan opened her car door at the same time the front door of the house opened. Mom was silhouetted in the rectangle of light. Buttons bounded out barking wildly, followed more slowly by Grover. Megan got out of the car and Buttons, a hyper brown and white dog of uncertain heritage but predominantly beagle, jumped up on her. She pushed the dog’s paws off her coat, annoyed to see muddy prints. “Down, Buttons. Bad girl!”

Buttons gave her a happy, doggy grin with her tongue lolling then raced around the car to greet Sean.

"That's my mom's new dog. Charlotte and Greg decided she needed a puppy to help with her empty nest syndrome, so they gave her Buttons last Christmas. She's so spoiled. Mom's not training her well at all."

"I heard that," her mom called from the front porch.

"And this," Megan knelt on the ground and wrapped her arms around Grover's big neck, "Is the real family dog. This is my good boy, Grover." She let the ancient Golden Retriever lick her face, then glanced at Sean.

He was bent over, scratching twitchy Buttons behind the ears and almost smiling. It was the least tense he'd looked the whole drive, and suddenly Megan didn't despise Buttons after all.

"Come in. It's freezing out here!" Her mom beckoned them forward.

Megan gave her mother a big hug, then pulled back to look at her. It had been months since her parents' last visit to L.A. and she noted new wrinkles fanning out from the corners of her mom's eyes. She really was getting older.

"Mom, this is my friend, Sean." She waved him up from the bottom step where he stood waiting.

"I'm so pleased to meet you. Welcome to our home." Mom reached out and took Sean's hand.

Megan was proud of her mother's graciousness. There'd been times in her childhood when Megan had shown up at dinner with at least three friends along and her mom always made room for them at the table.

"Megan!" Her dad's big frame crowded the doorway.

Megan leaped into his bear hug. "How are you?"

"Just fine. How was the drive?"

"Great. Dad, this is Sean." She turned to introduce him.

Her father shook his hand with a firm grip and said, “Good to have you here.”

Sean’s expression was reserved. Megan thought he was nervous, but he always managed to keep his face so expressionless that, even after all these weeks, she really couldn’t always read him.

“Well, come inside. It’s freezing.” Her mom ushered them inside.

In the foyer, there was a second wave of welcome from Chris, Greg and a hugely pregnant Charlotte. The dogs twined in and out of legs, while Megan and Sean removed their coats and exchanged greetings with everyone.

Chris lifted Megan off the floor in a bone-crunching hug before setting her down. “Hey. Missed ya.” He added in a whisper, “We need to talk later.”

“Sean, this is my brother, Chris.”

“Hey.” Chris scanned Sean.

Sean nodded politely then asked Megan, “Do you want me to get the luggage?”

Megan thought he looked a bit overwhelmed by the sheer enthusiasm of her loud family, so she said, “Sure.”

“I’ll help.” Chris followed Sean outside.

“Look at you!” Megan put a hand on Charlotte’s round belly. “You’re getting enormous!”

“I know. Only one more month, give or take.” Charlotte managed to look smug and nervous at the same time. “I’m so ready for it to be over.”

“Honey, it’s only the beginning.” Mom turned from hanging Megan’s coat in the hall closet.

“How about you? Are you ready to be a dad?” Megan asked Greg.

“Hell, I love kids. It’s going to be a hoot.” Greg wrapped his arm around Charlotte’s shoulders and squeezed.

“You love kids because you *are* a big kid,” Charlotte said, nudging him in the ribs with her elbow. She turned to Megan. “Do you know this guy has been dying for you to get here so we could play Monopoly? He still wants payback for last time.”

“Oh, no. Not another Monopoly tournament. It was a long drive. I’m not up for it, Greg.”

“Aw, come on. It’ll be fun. Good ice breaker for your friend, too.” He gave her a wink.

Megan was touched he realized how uncomfortable this visit might be for Sean and was trying to put him at ease. “Monopoly it is,” Megan agreed with a smile.

As they walked from the front hall, Megan came up beside Charlotte, hooked her arm through her sister’s and leaned in to say, “Hey, sorry about the argument when you came to visit.”

“No, I am,” Charlotte said. “I still think you’re crazy to take this guy in, but it’s none of my business.”

That was Charlotte all over, wrapping her apology around a little dig and offering it like cake with poison frosting.

In the living room, Megan breathed in the Christmas tree’s sharp pine scent and felt a wave of nostalgia. She remembered how exciting it had been when she and her brother and sister were small and beside themselves waiting for Christmas morning. It would be nice when she had a little niece or nephew to spoil.

As the rest of the family sat and talked, Chris and Sean returned with the luggage and placed it in the bedrooms, then Sean stood next to Megan’s armchair. Breathing in his familiar cigarette-and-Sean odor, she understood why retrieving the bags had taken so long. She smiled up at him.

He returned the smile, but seemed ill at ease standing there.

“How about that Monopoly game, then,” Greg said. “I feel the need to kick Megan’s ass.”

Chris went to get the game while the rest of them gathered snacks and drinks from the kitchen and brought an extra chair to the dining room table. Their parents abstained, preferring to sit in front of the fireplace and listen to Christmas music turned low and the sounds of their grown children playing in the other room.

“God, remember when we used to have tournaments with the Schuderman kids? Five bucks a head to play, winner takes all. That was so much fun,” Megan recalled as she counted out piles of pastel money.

“Jenn would always lose, pitch a fit and go home mad.” Charlotte laughed. “Didn’t you used to date her for, like, five seconds freshman year?” she asked Chris.

He gave a non-committal “Hm”, then held out a palmful of tokens for Sean to choose from. “Shoe, hat, dog, racehorse, wheelbarrow?”

Sean shrugged. “Whichever. Doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, but it does,” Greg said. “Choosing your playing piece is crucial to winning. You pick the wrong token and you’re jinxed.”

“He’s right,” Megan agreed. “The hat is lucky.” She snatched it from Chris’s hand. “And that’s why it’s always mine!”

Sean selected the dog and placed it on the Go square beside Megan’s hat. Megan cut a sideways glance at Charlotte and noticed her quick frown of annoyance. Charlotte always had the dog.

“So, how do you play this?” Sean asked and everyone fell silent.

“You’ve never played Monopoly?” Chris asked. “Ever?”

“I was never much into board games.” Sean looked uncomfortable with all eyes on him.

“Well, okay,” Greg said. “It’s not hard. It’s capitalism at work. You buy all the land you can, build houses and hotels and collect rent from

everybody who lands on it. The point is to amass wealth and force everybody else into bankruptcy.”

“The American way,” Chris added dryly. His cell phone rang and he practically jumped from his seat. He fumbled the phone from his pocket and answered, “Hey. How’s it going?”

Megan raised her eyebrows and Charlotte said, “New girlfriend. He’s talked to her twice already since we’ve been here. Guess it’s true love this time.”

Chris frowned and smacked the back of Charlotte’s head as he passed her. “Ma, take my place,” he said as he walked through the living room.

She good-naturedly filled in for Chris at the table then everyone spoke across each other for several minutes explaining the rules of the game to Sean. Finally, they began play. Dice rolled, property was bought, sold or traded and eventually houses and hotels erected.

Megan’s top hat wasn’t working for her. Within twenty minutes, she went completely broke and was forced from the game. She fondled Grover’s soft muzzle resting on her lap and watched Sean examine his Marvin Gardens card to see how much Charlotte owed him with three houses on the property. Eight-hundred fifty dollars,” he said with a smug smile.

Charlotte, on the verge of bankruptcy, grumbled as she mortgaged properties to pay her debt.

Megan exchanged a look with Greg and he gave her a broad grin. He was such a sweetheart. He was going to make a great dad.

Pushing Grover’s head off her lap, she got up from the table to talk with her dad in the living room for a while. He told her about what was going on in the hardware world and she was bored to tears but smiled and nodded at the right parts. Then he asked about her job and she told

him how exciting it was to finally be assigned articles, even if they weren't really hard news.

As they talked, Chris wandered in and flopped down on the couch. That had been one hell of a long phone call, and Megan wondered how serious he was about this new girl. Dad asked Chris about his college courses and Megan half listened, but was getting drowsy sitting in front of the warm fire, lulled by Bing Crosby's crooning.

"Megan." She startled awake as her mom touched her shoulder. "Time for bed, honey."

"Kay," Megan murmured, feeling about six years old and wishing someone would carry her upstairs—maybe Sean.

"I had Chris blow up the air mattress so Sean can share his room. Your bags are in your old room."

"Love you, Mom." Megan hugged and kissed her goodnight and went upstairs. She could hear male voices coming from Chris' room and she knocked, then pushed open the door.

Sean and Chris looked up from spreading a blanket over the air mattress. Megan was struck by how young they both looked, like a pair of boys having a sleepover. She didn't appreciate the reminder that her live-in lover was three years younger than her kid brother. In fact, it freaked her out. "You got everything you need?" she asked Sean.

He nodded.

She smiled and waggled her fingers. "Well... 'Night."

"Good night." His eyes told her he wished he was going with her.

Chris looked back and forth between them.

"Good night, loser," she said conversationally to her brother and shut the door behind her.

Lying in bed alone that night for the first time in over a month, Megan longed for Sean's warm body and strong arms wrapped around

her. It was amazing and kind of frightening how quickly she'd gotten used to sleeping with him and how cold and lonely the bed seemed without him. Thoughts like that inevitably led to thoughts of the future, something Megan wasn't ready to explore. She didn't know how long they could be together or where they were headed. But she did know she'd already reached the point where it would hurt if their relationship ended.

She wondered if Sean felt the same way about her.

Chapter Fourteen

Christmas Eve morning, Megan's dad went to open his hardware store for a half day in case somebody needed a last minute hammer to fill a stocking or something. He was insane, but he'd never slow down and stop working too hard.

By mid-morning, Greg, Chris and Sean were outside playing basketball in the driveway, Buttons getting underfoot and tripping them. Megan considered joining them, but her mom sidetracked her.

"Megan, can you help me in the kitchen? I have two more kinds of cookies to make."

"Mother, how many people do you think you're feeding? You've already made enough for a small African nation."

"We have to have sugar cookies and orange blossoms, Megan. We always do." Charlotte stood at the counter, taking ingredients from a cupboard.

"Fine. What do you want me to do?"

"Melt these." Charlotte tossed a bag of chocolate chips at her.

Megan poured the chocolate in into a bowl then set it in the microwave.

"You should melt those in the double boiler," her sister pointed out.

"Why? The microwave is quicker." Megan jabbed the minute button.

"So," Mom interrupted before they could begin bickering. "Tell me more about your friend."

“What do you want to know?” Megan asked, preparing herself for a double grilling from her mother and sister.

“How is he doing? He seems like a nice boy. Quiet. Is he behaving for you?”

Megan had just popped a chocolate morsel into her mouth and almost choked. “Uh, yeah. He’s a good houseguest. Cleans up after himself, and me. He’s working at a construction job, so he contributes to the household expenses.”

“What about school? Shouldn’t he be in school?” Charlotte asked.

“He’s studying to pass his high school equivalency. He doesn’t take classes, he does the work at home.”

“And by ‘home’ you mean your home.”

“You have a problem with that?” Megan snapped, ready to rumble.

“Megan, he’s underage. It’s illegal for you to keep him like some kind of—pet. There are agencies to deal with kids in his situation. You should contact the authorities and—”

“All right. Enough, Charlotte,” Mom said firmly.

Charlotte subsided, sulkily turning her attention to making sugar cookie dough, her mouth a thin, sharp line.

“So after he gets his degree, what does he plan on doing?” Mom asked. “What are his plans for the future?”

“I don’t think he’s thought all that through yet,” Megan admitted. “I hope he’ll eventually take college classes and figure out what career he’s interested in, but for now he’s concentrating on passing high school. He’s still young.”

“Yes. He is.” Her mother’s tone was pregnant with meaning. “Are you sure you’re ready to help this child figure out his future?”

The word “child” was like a blow to her gut. “He’s not a...” Megan broke off. How could she explain to her mother why Sean wasn’t, and hadn’t been, a child for a long time?

“He’s had a very difficult life. He was forced into the role of caretaker for his mother when he was small and managed to survive on his own on the streets for over a year. I don’t think you can think of him as a child in the conventional sense.”

Megan added, “Besides, he’s almost eighteen now and even if he was in a group home, he’d be released after his birthday, pushed out to fend for himself again. I read up about this. I didn’t go into it completely blind.” She removed the hot bowl from the microwave and whisked the melted chocolate with crushed vanilla wafers.

“Well, I think it’s admirable you’re trying to help the boy.” Mom assembled the ingredients for her cranberry salad on the counter. “But I want to make sure you’re aware of the seriousness of what you’re undertaking. This isn’t a stray cat you can get rid of if it doesn’t work out.”

“Oh. That’s too much!” Megan slammed the bowl on the counter and turned to face her mother, hands on hips. “That was two years ago and that cat had a problem. He peed on everything! And I felt terrible when I had to give him away. How can you even bring that up? How can you even compare that to this?” Her tone rose and she felt like throwing the bowl of cookie dough across the room.

Her mom held up a placating hand. “Maybe that’s a bad analogy. But you understand my point.”

Megan angrily turned back to her task, afraid of what she might say if she kept talking.

“Megan—” Charlotte began.

“What is this? Tag team wrestling?” Megan turned to face her sister. “What?”

“Why him?” Charlotte sounded like she was trying to be calm and reasonable. She molded a piece of cookie dough into a freeform snowman as she said, “Seriously. I’m not trying to piss you off. I really want to know. When you were researching this article, there must have been little girls out there on the street who needed help a lot more than a practically grown young man. Why did you bring him home?”

The sincere look on her sister’s face went a long way toward dissolving Megan’s anger. She took the time to think about her answer before she spoke. “God, Charlotte. I can’t begin to tell you what it was really like. Most of those kids are addicts and so messed up it makes you cry. I wished I could take every one of them some place safe. At least get them to trust the system enough to go to Child Protective Services. But they’re so fucked up, excuse the language, Mom, there’s no helping most of them.” She shook her head, remembering Ricky. “There really isn’t any hope for them. But Sean was different. He was trying to save money to get out of that life.”

She looked from her sister to her mother, both of whom looked doubtful.

“Doing *that*?” Charlotte said. “If he’s working construction now, why didn’t he try it before?”

Megan shrugged. Who knew what desperation or feelings of inadequacy made anyone on the street do the things they did for quick money. Not having an address made it hard to get legitimate work. Sean was paid cash under the table right now, but she didn’t know why he hadn’t tried to get that type of job before. Maybe he had.

“I don’t know,” she said.

The women were interrupted by a burst of cold air as the three athletes trooped into the kitchen. They were sweaty, loud and hungry, grabbing handfuls of cookies from the counter.

Megan smiled at Sean's red cheeks and bright blue eyes. It was good to see him so energized and happy.

He came over to where she was shaping orange blossoms in round balls and popped one in his mouth. The cold air rolled off him.

He chewed and swallowed the cookie. "Good." His tongue darted out to lick his lips.

Megan's crotch contracted and released wetly. That pink flash of tongue did it to her every time. Not to mention the teasing look in his eyes that told her what he'd rather be doing with his mouth.

She dragged her eyes back to her task. "Orange blossoms. You can help roll if you want."

He reached toward the bowl.

"Wash your hands first!"

He obeyed, sauntering over to the sink.

Megan pulled her gaze away from his ass and looked up to see Chris watching her. He cocked his head toward the door. "Walk with me?"

Megan darted a glance at Sean, then looked to Chris again with questioning eyebrows, but he shook his head slightly, letting her know he wanted to talk to her alone. When Sean came over, displaying clean hands, she asked him to take over her cookie job so she could spend some time with her brother.

He nodded agreeably.

Mom came over to stand beside Sean. "The trick with orange blossoms is to roll the balls small enough. Warm the dough in your hand and it will stick together instead of crumble. Then we have colored sugar, red and green for the holidays, to roll them in."

Megan grabbed an old jacket and joined Chris on the back step.
“Where to?”

“The fort.”

They crunched across the frosty, dead grass and the field behind the house, headed for the woods where they’d built their fort. As children, Megan and Chris had always referred to it as “woods”, but now she could see the place they’d imagined a wild, scary, fairytale forest was a modest stand of trees.

Buttons frisked ahead, behind and all around them while Grover plodded sedately at Megan’s side. Megan could tell Chris was dying to talk. It wasn’t like him not to spill whatever was on his mind immediately. This mysterious new girlfriend must be tying him up in knots. Maybe he was considering getting engaged or something.

“So what’s up with your new girlfriend? You’re on the phone with her all the time. She must be somebody pretty special.”

“Pretty special,” he agreed, then fell silent.

“Well, you should have asked her to Christmas, then.”

He shrugged and pushed aside a tree branch as they entered the overgrown path to their hideaway.

After following him in silence for another few yards, Megan couldn’t stand it any more. “Okay, what’s up? Spit it out.”

Chris muttered, “Shit,” then turned and faced her in the dim light beneath the canopy of trees. As he looked down at her, Megan remembered when she towered over him.

“It’s not a *girlfriend*,” he said.

She continued to stare at him blankly.

Chris raised his eyebrows and nodded significantly.

Megan blinked then said, “Oh” and “*Oh!*” as realization dawned. “Oh, Chris, when did this happen?”

“Last semester. A couple of months ago. Maybe a lot longer ago than that. I don’t know.” He turned from her to continue pressing through the underbrush toward the clearing that used to be in the middle of these trees, but now seemed unlikely to still exist.

“But in high school you were... There was Wendy, Beth, Alliya...” Megan knew she sounded shocked and tried to control her voice.

“I know, but this is different, so much—more. I can’t explain it, Meg, but I know for the first time I really feel something, you know?” He stopped walking and leaned against a tree. “It’s just,” he paused, searching for the right words, “him. He does it for me.”

Megan fished in the pockets of her old coat and pulled out a pair of mismatched gloves. She worked her icy fingers into them. “What’s his name?”

“Ben.”

“When are you going to tell—?”

He cut her off. “I don’t know. After Christmas.”

“What are you waiting for? Do you think you’re going to ruin their Christmas or something? Mom and Dad are open-minded. They’re not going to have a problem with this.”

Chris brushed his bangs out of his eyes, then picked at the bark on the tree.

“They’re not!” Megan said as if he’d argued.

“Yeah. Right. It’s one thing to believe in being gay in theory. It’s another to have your son come out on Christmas Eve.”

She shrugged. “Well, do whatever you want, but I think you’re making yourself miserable for no reason. I’d get it over with if I were you.”

“Yeah? Like the way you’re telling the family about you and Sean?”

Megan’s stomach flipped. “What?”

“Oh, come on.” He tossed a piece of bark at her and hit the front of her coat. “He’s not just crashing at your apartment.”

“Well of course he is. I wouldn’t... I would never...”

Chris raised one eloquent eyebrow.

Megan gave up. She could never bullshit him. Never had been able to. “Oh fuck. Is it that obvious?”

“Only when you’re looking at him or he’s looking at you, which is about all the time.”

“Crap!”

“How did it happen? I mean, I know how it happened because, damn, look at him. He’s hot. But really, Megan, are you nuts?”

“Don’t even start. I’ve already been through it with my friends. I don’t know how it happened. It just did.” The fact her brother was aware of her lover’s good looks freaked her out a bit no matter how un-homophobic she might be. And the fact she’d just mentally referred to Sean as her “lover” freaked her out even more.

“Well, I’m not judging.” Christopher shrugged. “Just saying ‘be careful’ is all.” He put his arm around her neck and dragged her head down to give her a noogie and break the tension.

Megan shrieked and fought back and soon they were wrestling on the carpet of leaves and getting stuck with burrs and briars.

“Cut it out!” she shrieked, punching him hard in the stomach.

He wasn’t prepared and she knocked the breath from him in a whoosh.

Megan wiggled from his hold. “Loser!” She slapped Chris’s shoulder. Pushing back her hair, she looked around for her lost hat in the leaves.

“Cradle robber,” he retorted, holding his stomach and reaching to punch her arm.

“Oh-ho, we’re gonna do this now?” She tugged a handful of his hair. “Fag.”

“Bitch.” He stood and reached down to grab Megan’s hand and pull her to her feet.

“Brat.” She picked at the burrs infesting her coat. “You know, I don’t think there’s anything left of our fort. It’s too overgrown and there’s, like, brambles everywhere, plus my face is freezing. I can’t feel my nose anymore. Let’s go home.”

“Baby. You’re such a city girl now,” Chris taunted, but he followed her back up the trampled trail they’d made through the woods.



Back in the house, Megan found Sean still in the kitchen with her mom. They were frosting Charlotte’s sugar cookies.

Megan didn’t announce her presence, but stood in the doorway watching for a minute. She listened to her mom tell Sean a story about the time Megan got lost in the mall when she was six, while he carefully frosted a Christmas tree-shaped cookie and added artistic sprinkles.

Megan backed out of doorway, leaving them to their bonding.

Her dad returned from the store and, after a light lunch, the afternoon was quiet while everyone kicked back and relaxed. Charlotte and her big belly went to her room for a nap. Greg retreated to Dad’s study to wrap last minute Christmas gifts. The rest of them sat around the living room dozing through *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

Sean sat on the floor playing tug-of-war with Buttons and looking adorable. His rumpled blond hair, dark blue eyes and full lips, smiling as he wrestled with the dog, made Megan go weak inside. Not being able to touch him, to stroke his hair, hold his hand or rub his shoulders,

brought her back to those desperate, hungry days when he'd first moved in, before they started their affair.

After a while, Megan caught his eye and winked. She was about to direct him outside with eye signals because she'd had enough of being so close and not touching, when her mom announced it was time to start dinner.

When the flurry of preparing, eating and cleaning up after the meal was over, it was almost time for church. Megan wasn't sure what her religious convictions were anymore, but it was family tradition to go to the nine o'clock service and it meant so much to her parents, she went without argument.

"Do you mind going?" she asked Sean before she went to slip into her dress. "You can stay here if you like. Have some time alone."

"No. It's fine. I'm just along for the ride. Whatever your family does is cool."

Megan walked downstairs a half-hour later, wearing her most conservative dress, the one she used for the occasional funeral or black tie affair. It was the classic "little black dress" with a scoop neck that showed just a hint of cleavage and a small split up the back. It smoothed over her hips and clung to her breasts. A simple gold chain accented her throat, and she wore high-heeled shoes with an ankle strap she rarely wore in town since she could neither walk nor drive in them. But she loved the way they made her legs look long and slender.

When she caught Sean's gaze as she descended the stairs, she felt like the most elegant, beautiful woman in the world. His eyes looked slightly glazed as he stared up at her, and she remembered what he'd said the last time he'd seen her in a skirt. She clearly didn't wear them often enough. A smile stole over his face, then he looked away lest someone should catch him staring.

Megan felt smug and gorgeous and incredibly horny. She knew she wouldn't be concentrating on the sermon or the solemnity of Jesus' birth tonight.

Sean cleaned up well, too. He looked incredibly hot in her brother's old sport coat over a crisp white shirt and pair of jeans.

When she slid in next to him in the back of Charlotte and Greg's car, she leaned over to tell him, "You look very nice."

He whispered almost soundlessly, "And you are so beautiful."

In the dark back seat, he allowed his hand to wander over and up her nylon-clad thigh, stroking the inside lightly until Megan thought she would come right there in the back of her sister's car. She finally had to scoot away from his searching fingers.

The evening service was as beautiful, solemn and ethereal as she remembered it from every other year of her life. The choir sang familiar carols by candlelight and the lectors gravely intoned the readings. Megan felt warm and comforted. She glanced at Sean.

He was watching her mother and father intently. Since they'd arrived late and had to sit in whatever space was available, Megan and Sean happened to be behind her parents.

They were holding hands and Megan's dad leaned to whisper something in her mom's ear. She smiled and nodded then turned her face up to give him a peck on the lips. The brief look of love they exchanged was so touching and sweet Megan's heart lurched. Her view of them had always been as child to parent. This was the first time she'd thought of them as a pair of lovers, and not in an icky "I don't want to ever imagine my parents naked" kind of way.

Sean seemed transfixed by them. He swallowed. His eyes were shiny. He blinked quickly then looked away across the church at the other people, the candles and the stained glass windows.

What must it be like for him, visiting with her family and seeing something he'd never had, parents and a stable, loving home? Megan reached out and took his hand. Charlotte and Greg were three pews ahead, Chris, who was standing on her left, already knew about them and there was no one else to see.

She needed to connect with Sean. Slipping her fingers into his palm, she curled her thumb around the back of his hand.

He looked down at their joined hands, smiled and gripped hers tightly.



Back home after church, they sat in the living room for a while making more small talk. Megan thought they'd covered about every conceivable topic—their jobs, the weather, world affairs and the coming baby...again. She remembered why several days was enough time for visiting family.

Sean left the room, probably going out for a smoke

She got up to follow him.

Outdoors, the night was clear and cool. Away from the city, the sky was like black velvet sprinkled with a glitter of diamonds. That's one thing Megan missed in L.A. She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering in her skimpy dress and wishing she'd stopped to put on a jacket.

Sean stood away from the house, at the edge of the circle of light cast from inside. He looked off into the dark night, lighting a cigarette that dangled from his lips.

Megan came up beside him, slipping her arm around his waist. "Beautiful night." She tilted her head to look up at the sky again.

"Yeah. It's different out here. Brighter."

The country night was infinitely darker than the neon blaze of city streets, but she understood what he meant.

“So, what do you think of my family? A little overwhelming?”

“They’re nice.” He took a drag on the cigarette and the tip glowed orange. “Your mom, she’s...” He paused so long Megan thought he wasn’t going to finish the thought, then he finally said softly, “She’s really nice.”

“What did you two talk about today?”

He shrugged. “Stuff.”

Megan understood. His talk with her mother was private. She would’ve liked to have been a bug on the wall listening to that conversation. She reached for the cigarette. “Let me have a puff.”

“You don’t smoke.”

“I used to,” she reminded him. “I miss it.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t want to start again, believe me.” He tossed the cigarette on the ground and crushed it under his heel.

Megan sighed with regret, but only for a second because suddenly he’d spun her around and pulled her into his arms. His mouth crushed hers and she caught the secondhand smoke from his lungs and tasted nicotine on his tongue.

He kissed her hard and deep, then pulled away to murmur, “I’ve been missing you.” His eyes glittered hungrily.

Megan’s nipples hardened. Her pussy was soaked in a sudden rush of lust. She wanted to grab Sean’s hand and haul him off to the shadows behind the shed, fall down into the frosty grass or lean up against the cold wall and let him fuck her senseless.

She leaned into him for another kiss, her arms wrapped around his back, her crotch grinding against him.

His warm hand held and lifted her almost naked thigh.

Suddenly the back door opened.

“Out you go.” Megan’s mom released the dogs. They bounded into the yard and circled Megan and Sean.

Megan froze like a deer in headlights, her bare leg wrapped around Sean’s thigh.

At the same moment, her mother caught sight of them twined together in an undeniable embrace.

Megan’s mind raced trying to come up with some way to spin this, Before she could open her mouth to explain, her mother dropped her gaze and silently retreated into the house. The door closed behind her.

“Oh fuck!” Megan hissed. “Fuck! Damn! Fuck!” She let go of Sean and stepped away from him.

He let her go, the warmth of his hands leaving an impression behind. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

She shook her head. “Not your fault. Don’t be sorry. She was going to find out eventually.”

“Was she?” Sean crossed his arms over his chest. “Cause it kinda seemed like you weren’t going to tell your family about me at all. Ever.” There was an edge of bitterness in his tone.

Megan stopped thinking about the scolding her mom was going to give her for this inappropriate relationship, and for the first time registered how Sean might interpret her insistence on secrecy. He probably thought she saw him as a dirty secret she needed to hide from her family because she was ashamed of him.

“I’m not embarrassed to be with you, Sean. Well, I am, but only because of the age difference, not because of your past. I’m ashamed of myself, not of you or the things you’ve done.”

He looked into her eyes and answered quietly, “You should be.”

She frowned and started to protest

He spoke over her. "I've watched your family and seen how they look at me. They're polite and nice, but I make them nervous. They know what I am and that I don't belong here."

"No. That's not true."

"And now your mom knows about us," he continued. "She's going to want to protect you. She's going to want me out of your life."

"That's not going to happen," she said firmly. "I'm an adult. I'll run my life the way I see fit, whether they approve or not."

"But you admit they won't approve." He gave a humorless smile.

"God! You're the most annoying... They won't approve of *me* having sex with a minor! I'm older. I should know better and I'm taking advantage of you." She emphasized the important points, hoping she could finally get through to him. "They don't understand how it is between us."

"Whatever." He shrugged. "It's going to make trouble with your family. It's not worth it. *I'm* not worth it." His eyes on hers were so dark and intense they appeared almost black.

"Don't say that!" Megan gripped his hand, pulling him close. She kissed him and caressed his cheek with one cold hand. "Let me worry about my family. It'll be okay."

Chapter Fifteen

On the surface, Christmas morning was like it had been every year of Megan's life, although everyone woke considerably later than they used to. The rabid excitement with which Charlotte, Megan and Chris once greeted the acquisition of loot was long gone. But still, a sense of mystery pervaded the living room as they assembled to open their gifts.

However, this year for Megan the mystery of when her mom was going to take her aside and talk to her about Sean outweighed any interest she might have had in what color sweater she received or whether someone had sprung for the rock climbing boots she'd requested.

There was plenty for everyone, even Sean. Her mom wouldn't let a guest sit through the gift giving without something to open. Megan had scribbled her name and Sean's on all the presents she gave, but was surprised to discover Sean had brought his own presents for her family. They were small enough that he'd carried them in his duffle bag along with his clothes. They were simple gifts, Swiss Army penknives for the three men, and little compact mirrors in pretty tortoiseshell designs for the two women. Megan was touched he'd made the effort for her family, taken time to find gifts, and chosen so well.

Afterward, they were picking up torn Christmas wrap and broken ribbons from the living room floor when Chris's cell phone rang. He

fished it out of his bathrobe pocket and flipped it open. “Hi. Merry Christmas.”

“He carries his phone in his bathrobe now? It must be love,” Charlotte teased.

Chris glared at her and walked from the room, talking in a low voice.

“If that sweater doesn’t fit, I have the receipt. Or if you don’t like the color.”

“No. It’s beautiful, Mom. I love it,” Megan assured her. She knew her mom was only going through the motions of a normal Christmas day because her smile was tight as she gave Megan a quick hug.

“We need to talk later,” she whispered.

Megan nodded, pulling away from her embrace and folding the navy sweater to put it back in the box. She saw Sean from the corner of her eye looking wary and uncomfortable. He sat on the floor amid the neatly piled gifts he’d been given, gloves and a shirt from Megan’s parents, a gift certificate from Charlotte and Greg, and a book on archeology from Megan. He took his time organizing them so he wouldn’t have to interact with anyone.

Greg and Dad were deep in discussion of lures and flies, oblivious to everything but their shared passion for fishing. Charlotte quietly hummed along with White Christmas and flipped through the art book Megan had bought her. Greg’s surprise jewelry gift had been a pair of diamond earrings that sparkled in Charlotte’s ears in interesting contrast with her tatty, old robe.

When Chris returned to the room, Charlotte grinned and started in on him again. “Come on, Chrissy, give us details. You’ve been on the phone with this girl practically all weekend; the least you could do is tell us her name.”

From Chris's expression, Megan knew what he was going to do before he spoke. "Ben. His name's Ben."

There was a moment of silence as Charlotte continued to stare at him, the grin on her face turning to a cartoonish expression of bemusement. She looked like she was trying to match up jigsaw pieces from different puzzles. Megan smiled. She'd probably appeared pretty much the same way yesterday when Chris told her his news.

"He's my—boyfriend," Chris clarified, hesitating only slightly before defining his relationship. He looked from Charlotte to their mom, waiting for her reaction.

Mom's face gear-shifted through emotions at lightning speed and finally locked in on a warm smile. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it and simply held her arms open for Chris to step into her embrace. He gave her a hard hug, and she patted his back as she held him.

Megan glanced at Sean, who watched the exchange intently, then at Charlotte, whose mouth literally hung open, then at her dad and Greg. Both were still so deep in conversation about fishing they hadn't even heard the announcement.

"Well, you can use a barrel knot to tie the leader to the fly line if you want, but I find a surgeon's knot works better," her dad said.

"Really?" Greg replied. "Show me how to tie a streamer later?"

It was so typical of them, Megan burst out laughing. The pent-up tension of the last couple days broke loose and she giggled almost hysterically.

Everyone in the room looked at her.

"I'm sorry," she said through snorts of laughter. "It's...Dad...and Greg...and the f-fishing."

Where Megan led, Chris followed. A smile crept over his mouth then widened to a grin when Greg asked, “What? What’d I miss?”

Tears streamed down Megan’s cheeks as she struggled to control herself. Chris chuckled, and Greg and Dad both had tentative smiles on their faces, ready to join in the laughter, whatever it was about.

“Stop it!” Charlotte snapped. “This isn’t funny.” She turned to Chris. “How is this possible? You dated, like, fifty girls in high school. How can you be gay?”

Chris stopped laughing long enough to say, “Guess that’s why I never had more than a date or two with any girl. It wasn’t working for me.”

Megan couldn’t resist. “Oh, that’s not what Sarah Rhodes told me. She seemed to think it worked just fine.” She snorted.

Chris rolled his eyes.

“You already knew about this.” Charlotte frowned at Megan. “He told you.”

Megan shrugged. Here they were again, back to Megan and Chris sharing secrets and totally getting each other, and Charlotte excluded from their circle of two. It had always been like that, and it looked like it was something they’d never outgrow.

“Chris.” Their dad spoke from where he sat, a feathered lure still clutched in one hand. “Is this true?”

Chris turned, the smile fading from his face. “Yeah, Dad.”

There was a moment of silence before their dad said vaguely, “Oh. Well then.” He frowned slightly then gave Chris quick, reflexive smile and a nod. “Well.”

“Gay as a maypole,” Megan burst out, breaking into another fit of giggles.

“How can you make a joke out of it? This is serious.” Charlotte rose to her feet. “Chris’s whole life is changed and you’re making stupid jokes.”

“Oh lighten up, Char,” Megan said. “You make it sound like he’s dying of cancer or something. It’s not a big deal. Just because people don’t fit into your cardboard cutout world doesn’t mean their life is over.”

“Pardon me for not adjusting as quickly as you to the idea of my brother being gay. I’m sorry. I guess that makes me a narrow-minded prude.” Charlotte teared up as she folded her arms over the top of her swollen belly. “Go ahead. Say it Megan, ‘cause I know you think it. Ever since you moved to L.A., you think you’re so hip. Well, dragging home stray street kids, doesn’t make you cool and edgy—just irresponsible.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.” Megan stepped closer, pointing a finger at her sister. “I choose to have a friend stay at my apartment and you’re rude and judgmental. Chris tells us he’s gay and you act like it’s a personal affront.”

“I’m sorry, but inviting perfect strangers to live with you is not a mature, rational decision,” Charlotte yelled. “As much as you like to think you’re grown up, you still act like an impulsive kid.”

“Oh it’s even worse than you think, Charlotte,” Megan yelled back. “He’s not just staying with me. He’s my boyfriend.”

Complete silence followed her statement, but, glancing around at their faces, Megan saw Charlotte was the only one who looked shocked. Chris and Megan’s mom already knew. Mom told Dad everything, and Greg had seemed speculative about their relationship when he first met Sean. But Charlotte’s amazement more than made up for the lack of reaction from the others.

“What? You’re not serious, Megan.” Her eyes were wide.

In the heat of anger, Megan hadn't bothered to check Sean's reaction to the quarrelling until now. He sat on the floor, knees drawn to his chest, one arm wrapped around them, the other resting on top of them. He stared fixedly at the floor as if he'd like to sink into it.

Megan abruptly realized admitting to their relationship during a screaming match with her sister wasn't the ideal way to claim him in front of her family. It certainly wasn't what he'd hoped for.

She stopped thinking about herself and winning points against Charlotte and walked across the room toward Sean.

He looked up at her. His face had that cold, shuttered expression it used to wear all the time when she first met him.

Megan extended her hand and, after a moment's hesitation, he took it. She pulled him to his feet, turning to face her family. "Sean is my boyfriend."

Charlotte shook her head, giving a bitter bark of a laugh. "Oh, this is quite a Christmas. Chris is gay and Megan's shacking up with some whore."

"Charlotte!" Greg snapped, cutting across that final word. "Don't!"

No one moved or even seemed to breathe for a beat. Only the quiet harmonies of a Christmas choir on the stereo disturbed the silence.

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Without another word, Charlotte walked from the room, crying. Greg followed her.

Megan squeezed Sean's hand even tighter and whispered, "She didn't mean that."

His eyes were blank as a doll's. "Excuse me," he muttered. He pulled his hand from her grip and stalked through the opposite door of the living room.

Megan hurried after him, but he was through the kitchen and out the back door before she caught up with him. "Sean, wait." She trotted down the steps and reached for his arm.

He shook her hand off and kept walking. "Go back inside."

"Listen. I didn't mean to..." She touched his shoulder, wanting to make some kind of connection.

He whirled to face her, knocking her hand away harder this time. His eyes were narrow and glinting and his voice harsh. "Leave me alone. I don't want to talk right now."

"All right." Megan stepped back. "Okay." She retreated into the house, watching as he walked to the far corner of the yard and pulled out his cigarettes.

Her mother waited for her in the kitchen, and Megan quickly dashed tears from her eyes before facing her.

"You know everything I'm going to say, all the reasons having an affair with this boy is wrong, so I'm not going to list them."

Megan nodded. She knew all those reasons, had reviewed them herself a hundred times, but it didn't make staying away from Sean or giving him up any easier.

"Megan!" Her mom's voice was stern, but not angry. "You have to end it. You know that."

"I never meant for this to happen, and I don't want you to think it's only lust. I really care for Sean. A lot." She sounded whiny and childish even to herself.

"I know. I can tell. But it doesn't make it right. He's far too young and too damaged for you to have a mature relationship. Be the adult, Megan."

Be gentle with him, but end it.” She gazed into Megan’s eyes a moment, then turned to the kitchen window. Together they watched Sean standing and smoking, gazing off across the field. “Now I think it’s probably best if you get your things together and take him home.”

“You’re—asking me to leave?” Not that Megan didn’t want to go, but her mother’s reaction shocked her.

“No! I’m considering that boy’s feelings. *His* needs. Something you should have been doing all along. How do you think he felt about you keeping the relationship a secret? What do you think it made him feel like? Right now he’s probably humiliated and angry and wants to get away from here as soon as possible. Were you honestly going to make him sit through breakfast with the family after Charlotte’s outburst?”

Megan’s voice rose angrily. “God, what she said was unforgivable!”

“Oh, honey, nothing in this world is unforgivable, especially with family. Charlotte was wrong. I’m not defending her, but don’t hold a grudge, and when she offers an apology, which she will eventually, take it.” She wrapped her arms around Megan and hugged her. “Do the right thing. I know you will.”

Megan nodded. She left to get her bags and ran into Chris in the hall.

“Shit, I really got things stirred up with my announcement,” he said, “Got Charlotte all wired.”

“How’d it go with Dad?” Megan asked. “Did he have anything else to say?”

Chris laughed. “He wanted to know if I thought Ben might like to come fishing with him and Greg some day. He gave up on me a long time ago, but I think he’s holding out for another fisherman in the family. I guess he can overcome the gay thing. It’s the not fishing that kills him.”

Megan smiled. "He's such a sweetie. See, I told you mom and dad would take it well. You want to help me carry my bags out? Sean seems pretty upset, so we're leaving."

"I still can't believe Charlotte said that. Look, why don't you get your bags and I'll go out back and talk to him. Let him know at least one of your siblings isn't a psycho bitch."

"Thanks. That'd really help. He sure doesn't want to talk to me right now."

As Megan packed, she thought about what her mom had said about putting Sean's needs first. She knew her mother was probably right about their relationship, but there was absolutely no way she was going to be able to force herself to give him up.



Later, after they'd carried their bags to the car, Megan hugged her parents and promised to call, write and come to visit more often. Charlotte and Greg were still absent.

"Thank you for inviting me," Sean said quietly. "I'm sorry if I made a problem."

"No. You didn't do anything wrong." Mom stepped forward and gave him a hug, which he endured with rigid surprise. "These girls always find something to fight about, and I apologize for Charlotte's rudeness."

Megan's dad didn't say anything, but stuck out his hand.

Sean cautiously shook it.

Chris walked them to the car, and Megan gave him a hug. He turned to Sean and extended his fist to tap knuckles. "Take care, man. Don't let her boss you around." He smiled, and Sean nodded with a slight smile of his own.

“Study hard. Get good grades. Don’t party too hard and bring your friend home to meet us next time,” Megan ordered her brother.

“Maybe.”

Megan and Sean got in the car. With a last look in the rearview mirror at Chris and her parents, Megan exhaled in relief as she drove away from her family home.

“I’m sorry I put you in such an uncomfortable situation. I let Charlotte get to me and... That isn’t the way I wanted to tell my family. It was thoughtless of me to put you in the middle of our argument like that. I’m really sorry.”

“There’s no way you could’ve told them that wouldn’t have freaked them out.” Sean sounded calm and when Megan stole a quick glance, he was expressionless. “Besides, your sister didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

“Don’t say that. You’re not a...”

“Whore or former whore, what’s the difference? I didn’t belong there and they all knew it. I shouldn’t have come with you.”

“Of course you should have. I...”

“Listen, can we just not talk about it? It happened. It’s over. Forget it.” He turned toward the window and stared out.

Megan studied his profile before focusing her eyes on the road. She would make it better, somehow, when they got home.

But her mother’s words echoed in her head, and her mind went back to the shuttered look in Sean’s eyes during the outburst by the Christmas tree. It wasn’t going to be an easy fix.

Chapter Sixteen

“You’ll have fun tonight. You’ll see.” Megan put her arms around Sean from behind, stood on her tiptoes and rested her chin on his shoulder. “James will behave and Sasha loves you. I really want us to be able to hang with my friends sometimes, you know? And it seems like we haven’t been out anywhere since before Christmas.”

Sean nodded and turned his face to kiss her. “It’s fine. I don’t mind going.”

But Megan knew better. She rested her head between his shoulder blades and held him tight, thinking about the slow changes that had occurred in the last weeks. When they came back home after what she came to call the Christmas of dramatic revelations, something had definitely changed in Sean. She’d hoped meeting her family would bring him closer to her. Instead, it pulled them apart.

It wasn’t anything very noticeable, but he seemed less happy, more silent and withdrawn. Of course, there was his GED exam coming up and he was studying a lot more as the date came closer, but Megan felt he used this as an excuse. She turned out to be right, because after taking the exam, and acing it, Sean still seemed distant.

Part of their increasing separation had to do with the fact Sean was no longer needed at his construction job and had begun working evenings at a convenience store, instead. The pay was a lot less and he couldn’t contribute as much to the household, which bothered him, but

also the new job put them on opposite schedules. When Megan came home from the office, he'd already gone to work, and by the time he returned, she was sound asleep. She would wake when he climbed into bed with her and sometimes rouse herself enough to make love, but often she'd simply fall back to sleep.

Then Megan got the call that her new nephew had arrived two weeks early. Greg told her his son's weight, length, hair color, time of birth, all the stuff that was so exciting to a new parent. As she listened to her brother-in-law enthuse over the perfection of his baby, she knew she had to patch up her rift with Charlotte. She planned to see the baby that weekend, but knew she couldn't invite Sean along. There was no reason to upset Charlotte and make things uncomfortable for Sean to prove some kind of point. Besides, he had a Saturday shift he couldn't get out of.

Although Sean was cool with it when she told him about the baby's birth and her upcoming visit, she still felt like she was abandoning him when she packed and drove away that Friday night.

Little Richard, as Megan dubbed the baby, was downy-headed, wrinkly and red-faced, and when Megan saw her sister's elemental joy at becoming a mother, it was hard to stay mad at her. Charlotte immediately apologized for the things she'd said at Christmas, blaming the hormones, which made her more emotional and irrational than usual, and acknowledging she'd been unforgivably rude.

Megan returned home after the brief visit to find Sean once again at work and the apartment empty. She made a point to stay up watching late night TV until he came home, and their sexual reunion was as hot and hungry as ever, but later that night when she woke up, his side of the bed was empty. When he didn't return after fifteen minutes, she rose and went to find him.

He sat by the open window in the living room, his profile a dark silhouette against the streetlight outside. He lifted a cigarette to his lips and the orange tip glowed. She suddenly realized he hadn't smoked much since they'd gotten together—until recently.

Megan rested an arm across his shoulders, leaning her hip against his side. "Can't sleep?"

"Naw." He wrapped his arm around her waist

"Is there something bothering you?" She knew there was, had known it ever since they returned from Christmas, but hadn't asked him point blank before.

"Not really." He paused so long she thought that was all he was going to say. "Just getting used to the new job and everything."

"Because if there's something I've done to upset you, or haven't done that I should do..."

"No. It's not you. It's—nothing." He hugged her waist reassuringly.

She ran her hand through the hair at the nape of his neck and wished she could believe him.

He ground out the cigarette and tossed the butt from the window. "Adjustments to work. Not a big deal." He stood and took her hand. "Come on. Let's go back to bed."

She crawled into bed and snuggled into his delicious warmth, and in his embrace, she could almost pretend everything was okay. Megan vowed to give him time and avoid crowding him, but felt uneasy now, with a slight dread gnawing at her.

So when James called to invite them to a party he was throwing in honor of nothing in particular—"It's January, Meg, and it's crappy weather, and I'm bored. Nothing ever happens in January. Come and get wasted"—she gladly accepted. She managed to convince herself it would be a fun distraction and that James and Sean could learn to be friends.

James's apartment throbbed to the sound of seventies disco music when they arrived. The minute they walked in, Sasha staggered toward them with Stevie in tow and flung her arms around Megan's neck, planting a soppy kiss on her mouth, then did the same to Sean, much to his stunned surprise.

"You guys! I haven't seen you in such a long time! Oh, Megan, it's been ages. How was Christmas? Have you heard the good news?"

"Uh, fine, Christmas was fine. What good news? No." Megan tried to keep up with the whirlwind and greet Stevie, who hung back with a big, stupid grin on his face, watching Sasha with a look that reminded Megan every time of why the two were such a good fit.

"Stevie's promotion? He's finally starting to make some real money to make up for the awful hours he has to work. Our next aim is to get him down to fewer than eighty hours a week, but in the meantime, we can finally buy me a new car. Yay, Stevie!"

Megan laughed. Sasha was such a happy drunk. It was a joy to get smashed with her. "Good job, man," she said to Stevie, giving him a hug. "So have you sold your soul to the devil now?"

"I guess so. I think my firstborn is already promised away. How are you guys doing?" Megan appreciated the effort to include Sean in the greeting. Stevie could be surprisingly attentive sometimes.

She shrugged, and turned to look at Sean. "Not bad, actually." She paused, waiting to see whether Sean would give her the go-ahead to mention his exam. His eyes flicked to hers and he nodded assent. "Sean got great scores on his GED last week. We thought we'd come celebrate tonight."

Stevie looked genuinely pleased at the news, which, considering he'd barely met Sean, pleased Megan. "Congratulations, dude. You must be thrilled." He extended a hand to Sean, who took it.

“Yeah, I am. Thanks.” He sounded upbeat, which made Megan hopeful that coming to the party had been the right decision.

They got rid of their coats and moved into the living room, where maybe twenty people were bumping and grinding to the strains of classic disco anthems. Maybe later they’d join the crowd. Megan spied James in the kitchen surrounded by a few people she knew and made a beeline for him with Sean following. James smiled a welcome at Megan and nodded curtly at Sean, offering them both beer.

Within a few minutes, they were both drinking and Megan was engaged in lively conversation with a couple of James’s musician friends with whom he played occasionally, although they weren’t really a band. Yet. One of them, a punky guy called Dan, tried to convince her to cover their next gig for the paper. Megan was explaining to him it wasn’t really what she did when Sean interrupted her. “You could.”

“What?”

“You could go to the gig and write something about it. Worse that’ll happen is Rossi won’t accept it.”

Megan bit her lip. He was right. She’d written her first article on spec and that had turned out well. She smiled at Dan. “So where are you guys playing next week?”

A few beers and more music talk later, Megan enticed Sean onto the dance floor for some dirty dancing, rubbing her crotch against his thigh as she wiggled her ass to the strains of Lady Marmalade. Sean was more relaxed than he’d been for days, and was definitely getting into it, pulling Megan closer and pressing his groin against her belly, teasing her with his erection until she her panties were damp.

He looked at her in an unmistakably predatory mode. Megan wondered whether there would be any opportunity for a repeat of the stealth fucking they’d indulged in at Thanksgiving. Suddenly, Sean

grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her, his tongue hot and demanding, one hand sliding into her hair.

As always when he kissed her, she lost all sense of time and space, and focused on nothing but returning his kiss. The burn in her crotch blossomed up into her belly and down her legs in long languorous licks of fire, and she was breathless for lack of oxygen. She knew they had to stop and tear themselves apart or risk making a complete spectacle of themselves here in James's living room in front of several of her oldest friends. But it was so damn hard to stop kissing Sean.

She pulled away for a deep breath and put her hands on his chest.

He looked at her, his eyes out of focus and swimming with arousal.

"Sean," she said, just loud enough for him to hear her over the music. "Stop. We can't. Not here."

"Let's go home, then." The hunger in his voice tugged at her. It was almost irresistible.

"Soon," Megan promised. "Let me go to the bathroom and—"

"I could go with you," Sean interrupted, with a smirk full of dirty promise.

She caught her breath and laughed. It was tempting. Stupid, but tempting.

Then someone behind her wrapped drew her into a bear hug. Caught by surprise, Megan turned to look at the enthusiastic hugger.

"Terry! Oh, man, James said you were in town, but I was beginning to think he'd lied! How are you?" She glanced at James standing next to Terry. "You didn't tell me he was coming, you bastard."

"Surprise! I like to keep some guests secret. Makes the party interesting."

Terry held her at arms' length to look at her. "Well, he didn't mention you either, but I was hoping. I hear you've been a busy girl."

She laughed. "Sean here has been keeping me busy." She waved a hand toward him. "Sean, Terry. Terry, Sean. Also, I've been working my ass off because I'm getting reporting assignments now and things are going really well at the paper. What about you?"

Terry looked slightly dazed. "Uh? What? Yeah. Fine. Busy. Very." He seemed to have turned monosyllabic all of a sudden, and Megan wondered how much he'd had to drink. From what she remembered, Terry wasn't great at holding his liquor. Evidently, some things didn't change.

James clearly thought the same thing because he punched Terry's arm and launched into an elaborate story involving the three of them at a college kegger that ended up with Terry making an ass of himself. Come to think of it, it ended up with the three of them making asses of themselves.

Sasha and Stevie joined them, and Sasha groaned, "Oh Jesus, not this one again! James, it's not so much funny as it is long. And besides, I was there and it didn't happen the way you tell it."

"I'm going to get a drink," Sean murmured to Megan. She nodded without taking her attention from James's story. When he reached the punch line, which all of the friends knew by heart, she yelled out Terry's line along with the others. "But, officer, I didn't know it was occupied."

"God, what an idiot," James said as they all laughed at the familiar tale.

Megan felt Sean return to her side and when she glanced over, noted he'd moved from beer to a mixed drink of some kind. She reached for the plastic cup and he surrendered it so she could take a sip. She almost spit it out. It was whiskey, straight, no ice, no mixer.

"Jesus, somebody wants to get drunk tonight." She handed it back to him with a grimace.

He shrugged and took a swig.

Megan frowned. It wasn't like him to drink like that.

"Hey guys, remember the time..." Stevie began and Megan's attention was drawn back to her friends.

One college story led to another and about twenty minutes passed in reminiscing when Megan felt Sean's arm around her waist. He'd been so quiet and she so involved in the conversation that she'd almost forgotten he was there. His hand stroked her belly underneath her shirt and pulled lightly on her navel ring.

Megan pushed his hand down, embarrassed at the PDA in front of her friends.

Sean leaned in and with alcohol-drenched breath whispered hoarsely and much too loudly, "Let's go home. I wanna fuck."

Megan was mortified.

Sasha, who was even drunker than Sean, giggled and snorted, but Stevie and James frowned. Terry, who'd been uncharacteristically quiet all evening, excused himself to go to the bathroom.

Sean lifted his glass to take another swallow and Megan realized it was a fresh drink. She hadn't even noticed him leave to get it.

"Don't you think maybe you've had enough?" she whispered. She didn't want to reprimand him in front of her friends, but also didn't want to deal with him smashed off his ass.

Sean removed the cup from his lips to say, "No. Not if I have to listen to more of this shit." He swayed slightly and Megan removed his arm from her waist and took his hand.

She faced her friends. "I think we'll be leaving now."

"Aw, Meg, no!" James glared at Sean and his tone was condescending as he said, "Hey buddy, why don't you chill? I'll find you someplace to crash until Megan's ready to go."

"Buddy?" Sean drawled. "You're my 'buddy' now?"

"Look, man, you've had too much." James reached out and touched Sean's wrist, ready to take his drink away.

Sean flung out his arm, tossing off James's hand and sloshing his drink on the floor.

"Don't fucking touch me," he hissed. In a second he was up in James's face, his eyes burning like two hard sapphires. He'd dropped Megan's hand and his was clenched into a fist at his side.

"Sean. Stop!" she cried.

His jaw tightened in a hard knot and for a second she thought he would actually hit James. The moment spun out in that elastic way where seconds seem like hours before he finally backed off a step. Nostrils flaring and jaw working, he turned to Megan.

"Fuck it. Stay with your fucking friends. Enjoy your fucking party."

She opened her mouth, but before she could get anything out, he turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry," she murmured to her friends before she followed him.

The effects of all the alcohol weren't apparent as Sean strode straight and fast toward the door.

Megan shouldered her way past the other party guests, but didn't catch up with him until she got outside. He was already a half block away when Megan hit the sidewalk in front of James' building.

"Wait!" She hurried after him. "Sean, stop!"

For a moment she thought he'd ignore her, then he halted, back still turned to her.

"What the hell just happened in there?" she demanded when she reached him. She was astounded by the abrupt escalation of his temper. He was usually so cool and collected.

"Nothing. Guess I'm just not in the mood for a party."

“If you were bored, if you wanted to go home sooner or wanted my attention, there are better ways you could have told me.”

He looked down at her, his jaw clenching again. “Look, I’m sorry if I embarrassed you in front of your friends. Why don’t you go back to the party and I’ll see you later.”

“No. You wanted to go home. We’ll go home. I don’t know what the hell you’re so upset about, but we’ll go home. We’ll discuss it and fix it.” Megan sighed extravagantly. She was sick of playing the “what’s wrong with Sean today?” game. She’d been trying to figure him out ever since Christmas.

“I’m not ready to go back to the apartment and I don’t want to talk. I’m going out for a while.”

“You know what? Fine! You go on and do whatever it is you think you need to do and I’ll see you whenever.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You know, mostly my friends have been very welcoming to you and I don’t appreciate you acting like an ass to them.”

“You’re right, I was an ass,” he said woodenly. “Apologize for me. Tell them I don’t know any better.” He stared down at her, his eyes flat and unreadable. He looked like the boy she’d interviewed in a coffee shop almost six months earlier. He looked like a stranger.



Megan returned to the party and stayed another hour but, although she smiled and responded to people, she wasn’t really listening. She slipped away before midnight, took a cab home, let herself into the apartment and knew right away Sean wasn’t there. Her stomach dropped as she remembered those nerve-wracking days when he’d disappeared only to turn up again beaten and bruised. She prayed he was all right

and would come home by morning so she could kick his ass for worrying her.

Megan changed into her nightshirt, washed off her makeup and lay down in bed. Staring up at the ceiling in the dark, she was sure she wouldn't be able to sleep until he was home safe and this latest argument laid to rest, but after a few moments, she drifted off.

Sean climbed into bed with her later that night and her eyes opened long enough to register it was four fifteen. She should've been angry, but was so grateful to have his warm body lying next to her she simply turned and snuggled against his naked chest without saying a word. The smell of cigarette smoke and Sean enveloped her as he put his arm around her, stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

When Megan woke again, it was with the sun in her eyes and the pillow beside her empty. She blinked. For a second she thought she'd imagined Sean coming in last night, then she heard him moving around in the kitchen.

Sean's back was to her when she entered the kitchen, and he stared at the toaster with intense concentration.

"Hey." She felt ridiculously shy and awkward, as if she was the one who'd acted out at the party.

"Hey." He put a piece of toast on the plate in front of him and began buttering. "Do you want me to make you some eggs?"

"No. Toast and coffee is fine." Megan went to the cupboard, got out a pair of mugs and waited by the coffeemaker while it finished percolating.

"I'm sorry about all that shit last night," he said. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

"It's okay. We all get stupid when we're drunk sometimes." She reached for the carafe and poured. "What happened? I know something upset you, but I have no idea what it was."

Sean's head was down, concentrating on the toast. "Nothing really. I...saw someone I knew. From before. It took me by surprise, I guess."

Megan's mind flashed through the events of the night and suddenly registered Terry's face when she'd introduced him to Sean. He'd looked shocked. Not dazed and drunk, but appalled. It didn't take much connecting of dots to figure out Terry was the person Sean knew from his past and to conclude he was a former client.

"Terry? Oh my God." Megan's stomach dropped. She'd seen Sean get into cars with customers, had seen johns solicited by hustlers repeatedly last summer. But to discover a friend, someone she'd gotten drunk with many times, whose bed she'd slept in after crazy-ass parties, who'd confided in her one evening, stoned, that he had a crush the size of Alaska on her best friend James, was one of them? That was unthinkable. It brought a stark sense of reality to the whole seedy business of the client/provider relationship. A reality she'd overlooked until now. It made her question the habits of every last male she knew. It made her feel sick.

"My God," she repeated, rubbing her hands over her face.

Sean set down the butter knife, carried the plate of toast to the table and placed it in front of the chair where Megan usually sat. He pulled out her chair. "I think you should sit down."

Megan's stomach lurched again at his tone. She put down the coffee mugs and took her seat.

Sean stood with his hands braced against the back of the chair across from hers, staring down at the table. "I've been thinking for a while now..." He paused. "I can't stay here any more."

She thought her heart stopped for a moment before it began beating rapidly as if she were running a race.

"I was going to go last night. I packed my things and took off. But I had to come back first and thank you for everything." He met her eyes with a level gaze and his voice was solemn. "Sometimes...I think maybe you saved my life." An embarrassed smile at the melodramatic words flashed across his mouth like lightning.

"Why? Why would you leave?" Megan's voice sounded breathy and weak.

His hands clenched the chair. "I don't belong in your life. You have your friends and family and your job. I don't fit here." As she opened her mouth to protest, he continued, "I have nothing except what you've given me. I need to make my own life, to succeed at something on my own."

"But you have! You took the GED and passed it." Megan swallowed before she spoke again. "Do you really think you're financially ready to be on your own? Can you afford rent? What about food and clothes and medicine if you get sick and...?"

She trailed off. The last thing she wanted was to sound like a shrewish bitch, but inside she was screaming, "How can you do this to me? Do I mean nothing to you?"

She lowered her voice when she spoke again. "'What I mean is, have you really thought this through?"

"Yes, I have." Sean's expression was calm and composed, making Megan feel even more frantic.

She stood abruptly, bumping the table and sloshing the coffee. "What about us? Was that just...after everything, was it just you paying me back for letting you stay here? Is that all it meant to you?"

"No." He frowned. "You know that's not true."

"Then how can you leave?" She caught her breath to keep from.

Sean straightened, letting go of the chair. "I'm sorry." He hesitated for a second then repeated, "I'm sorry," and walked out the kitchen door.

Megan stood there a moment, shocked. How could she have been so oblivious last night to the fact his things were missing? The front door shutting would be the last thing she heard if she didn't get her ass out there and plead with him. Megan followed Sean to the living room.

He had his jacket on and was slinging the strap of his duffel over one shoulder.

Megan felt vulnerable wearing only an oversized T-shirt and a pair of underwear. She folded her arms over her chest as she approached him. "Where will you go?"

"I have a couple of places in mind," he hedged.

Which meant he'd be squatting somewhere. "Can I at least give you some extra money to get started?" She realized the moment the words were out of her mouth it was the wrong thing to say.

"Don't! I don't want to take anything more from you. Just let me go." Sean frowned as he stared at her, his eyes an unearthly shade of blue in the sunlight flooding through the living room window. He shifted the duffel on his shoulder. "There's something you need to understand. Doing the things I did on the street, I shut down and felt nothing. I spent a whole lot of the last few years feeling nothing, even before I was out on my own." He continued to speak slowly and haltingly. "Being with you, I started to care. And I can't deal with it right now, having all that...emotion for you. It's too much."

"You think it doesn't scare me, too?" Megan's chest ached and her pulse pounded. This was as close as Sean had come to admitting he loved her. "Falling in love is terrifying."

"Love?"

"I think it is, don't you?"

He frowned. "Maybe."

"So then why would you leave?"

“You don’t understand.” His voice was bleak. “This isn’t just about dealing with us. Remember when I told you when I sucked cock, I felt nothing?”

Megan nodded. How could she forget? His casual admission had given her more of an insight into the kind of life he led on the streets than the bare facts of his selling sex ever could.

“Well, a lot of that shit I’d shut out has been coming back to me lately. It’s almost like I get flashbacks. I can taste the latex, smell the fucking rank stink of the johns, remember how it made me gag, how I hated every minute of it. It scares me I could bury this in me so deep and still it comes out.” His voice was strangled, his eyes fixed on a point on the floor.

Megan listened, her heart breaking as she understood what he was telling her.

He looked at her and flashed a quick, mirthless smile. “Maybe I’ll have to talk to someone about it sometime. But not you. I think maybe it’s good that it hurts, but I can’t deal with it as long as I’m here. Even before last night, I knew I needed to leave to sort my shit out. Seeing that guy, your friend Terry, made me sure of it.”

Megan finally realized the truth of her mother’s words. Sean was figuring out his life and she would be a needy, selfish bitch if she kept him from it. She bit her lip, afraid if she opened her mouth, she’d start to cry.

“I understand,” she finally said. “But please, I need to know you’re safe. Please keep in touch. Don’t just disappear.”

“I won’t.” He looked at her one last time, a long level gaze that tore out her heart. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.” Then he turned the knob and walked out the door.

Between one breath and the next, he was gone.

The door closed behind him with a quiet click in the empty apartment. Megan stared at it for a full minute before starting to weep.

She covered her face with her hands and sank to her knees. Hoarse sobs wracked her body. She cried until her tears subsided into silent shudders. Then she curled up on her side on the living room floor and watched the patch of sunlight from the window slowly move across the room, marking the passing of the day.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a sultry June day, the air redolent of exhaust fumes and the sky a smoggy brown arc overhead. Megan was late. As she walked briskly along the sidewalk toward the restaurant where she was meeting Rossi, sweat trickled down her spine.

She'd cut her hair short a couple of weeks ago and the springy curls that framed her face had melted to damp and straggling tendrils in the humidity. But despite her physical discomfort from the heat wave, she hadn't felt this good in a long time. It had been a long, painful six months. Only now was she beginning to surface back into normality.

January had been hell.

After Sean left, she moved through her days like a sleepwalker, saying and doing the appropriate things at work and with her friends, but feeling drugged. It was like watching someone else living her life. She constantly thought of him, where he might be, what he was doing, how things could have been different, what she should have said or done to get him to stay, how she should never have allowed the relationship to start.

Worst of all were the nights. After three months spent sharing a bed with Sean, Megan found she could no longer sleep alone. All she could feel was his absence next to her, the memory of his warm body, his arms around her, his steady breathing. She'd never felt so alone as she did in her own bed. She didn't change the sheets for weeks after he left, until

she could no longer smell even the faintest trace of him, then she finally stripped the bed one night, sobbing.

Her loneliness was increased by a terrible sexual longing, which hit her at unexpected times. Standing at the checkout at a convenience store, she'd remember a certain look Sean would give her or the sound of his husky voice when he whispered filthy endearments in her ear. The sudden rush of desire made her giddy.

At night, she masturbated to the memory of their lovemaking, ashamed at how hot he still made her, how the thought of him could bring her to orgasm in a few short minutes. Sometimes the release was so potent she cried. Her body missed him almost as much as her mind did.

She was lost. Bereft. For the first time, she truly understood the meaning of the word.



February had been almost worse.

Sean didn't call like he'd promised to. Megan's depression over his absence was compounded by a constant fear for his welfare. She imagined all sorts of terrible scenarios, picturing him back on the streets, ill, beaten up or worse.

Megan visited Charlotte and Greg and spent time with her baby nephew. Little Richard made easy demands of her: he wanted to be held, rocked to sleep, changed, fed. She spent a peaceful afternoon cuddling him and talking with Charlotte and Greg, amazed at how parenthood had transformed their lives. Char's devoted love for her son had softened her sharp angles, although she still had the power to annoy Megan beyond belief.

“You know,” Megan told Charlotte, “they say motherhood changes women, and I think they’re right. Where’s my cranky older sister gone? You barely even tell me off these days.”

“It’s not much fun when you’re depressed all the time,” Charlotte snapped with a little of her old bite. “Seriously, Meg, are you okay? You look so thin and sad. Isn’t it time you bounced back? You have to get over that boy, pull yourself together. Nobody’s worth this much moping.”

Megan bristled. “Nice pep talk, Char. I guess I was wrong. You haven’t changed all that much after all.”

But Greg, who’d become, as expected, a doting dad, let her deal with it without asking questions, just offering cups of coffee for comfort and talking baby with her.

Megan envied their new life, focused around her nephew, a constant source of love, joy, and hard work. Near the end of February, Sean finally called.

Megan came home from work to a phone machine message.

“Hey, it’s me. Just wanted to let you know I’m doing okay. I’ve got a place to stay and a lead on a job. I...” There was a long enough pause she had time to think he was going to say how much he missed her, then he ended with, “I’ll be in touch.”

Megan wanted to crawl inside the machine and reach him somehow, and she wanted to scream and punch him in the face for not having the guts to talk to her directly. The phone message was the first of several, always left during a time when he knew she wouldn’t be home. She saved and replayed every one over and over.



In March she started pretending she could cope.

That meant avoiding most of her friends, since they could tell she was just going through the motions.

Sasha was the only one she'd occasionally see for a good cry over a bottle of wine. Sasha, who told her things would look up and yes, Sean must miss her, too. Megan's life shrunk to eating, sleeping and working. There was plenty of work to keep her busy, since Rossi sent her to cover assignments on a regular basis: a local bake-off or the unveiling of a new neighborhood library. She was now half copy editor, half reporter, and her pay had been hiked in consequence.

For the first time in her life, she had more money than she needed. Not because her pay was so high, but because she had nothing to spend it on. Most nights she stayed home, watching TV or reading, and often with a beer or a bottle of wine to keep her company.

Sometimes she went down to Santa Monica Boulevard. If she saw kids she knew, she'd buy them dinner and listen to their stories. She'd ask if they'd seen Mouth, but they never had. She learned little Elf had killed himself, cut his wrists a few weeks after Ricky was taken into foster care. The boy's death tore at her already shredded heart.

Other evenings, she forced herself out to the gym or for a run in the streets. She managed not to start smoking again, even though the temptation was almost unbearable. But she clung to these small things as evidence she'd eventually pull out of this funk and get back to being the Megan she knew.



By April, Sasha stopped being sympathetic.

"You've got to get past it. This is getting seriously unhealthy. You're hardly eating." She leaned across the café table and patted Megan's hand. "The boy's gone. He's moved on and you have to do the same."

"I'm working on it," Megan snapped. "Sasha, imagine what a wreck you'd be if Stevie suddenly left you. It's not fucking easy to 'just get over it'."

"Come on Meg, Stevie and I have been together for four years. It's a bit different."

Megan shrugged. "You know what I mean."

Sasha was silent for a moment. "Well, you're not going to like this but—"

"Then don't say it."

"You took Sean in off the street. You were only with him about three months. How well did you really know him other than the fact he was great in bed?"

Megan bit down on her cheek to keep from screaming at her friend.

"I'm just saying, maybe you mistook lust for love." As if realizing how condescending she sounded, Sasha amended it. "Or maybe you were in love but he was..."

"Just using me?" Megan said tightly. "I thought you'd gotten to know Sean a little bit, but it's obvious you never did. He wasn't like that."

Sasha sighed. "Okay. But any way you look at it, he's gone and hasn't contacted you beyond those few phone calls. It's time to put it to rest and live your life. How about we go to Bar Loco this weekend? There's this guy at my work you should meet."

Megan tuned her out. After that conversation, she didn't talk to Sasha for several weeks.



May was the cut-off point.

Her friends made a concerted effort to get her out of her shell. James called every day, and even turned up on her doorstep a couple of times, until Megan caved in and invited him to stay for dinner. She got a lecture for the privilege and the promise of more to come if she didn't come out of her self-imposed exile.

She made up with Sasha and hung out with the old gang again, slowly rebuilding her social life. Megan began to look at her time with Sean through fresh eyes and admitted the fact he didn't call her was pretty telling. Maybe Sasha was right and Megan had read a lot into their relationship that was never really there.

Megan put on some of the weight she'd lost, making herself eat healthy food. She worked hard, focused on her career, and sometimes managed to go a whole day without thinking about Sean.

Her brother called now and then, keeping tabs on her. He was never taken in by her "I'm fine, leave me alone" attitude.

"Hey sis, how's the job?"

"Chris! What are you doing at home on a Saturday night? Shouldn't you be out partying with Ben?"

"I could ask you the same thing, but I guess you're taking it easy, right?"

"Actually, I'm working on a couple of longer pieces for the paper. The job is going well. At this rate I might join the reporting team full time by the end of the year." Megan was really proud of this, and Chris would understand that.

They bantered amicably for a few minutes, without mentioning Sean.

But Chris always asked. "Heard from Sean, then?"

“Not for a while, no. The last message said he was doing okay, new place, new job. I guess it’s time I forgot about him. He sure as hell has moved on.” Her throat constricted.

“Hey, Meg, it’s okay,” Chris said in soothing tones. “He’s probably doing what he needs to do. I bet you he gets back in touch some day. I keep saying that, but hang in there. It will get easier.”

“Yeah,” she snorted. “It better.”

But it touched her that Chris, of all her family and friends, seemed to be the only one who understood how important Sean was to her, and who respected what they’d had. Maybe coming out had made him more sensitive to other people’s relationships, the way they led their lives. Or maybe he just knew her best.



By June, Megan was ready to take Sasha’s advice and go on a few dates with promising guys, but she couldn’t help comparing them to Sean. Even though a couple were good-looking, fun guys with decent jobs, she never wanted to go further. A few drinks, maybe a dinner date was fine, but as far as getting physical was concerned, no. She just wasn’t interested. It annoyed Megan she felt like that, because she knew from experience that one way of getting through heartbreak was to find a good rebound guy to work it out of her system.

She even got it on with James one epic drunk night, to see whether that would help. They were both wasted, had fun, and ended up in bed at his place. But the sex left her unfulfilled, even though she came. And she couldn’t help but remember the last time they’d slept together, and how already, it had been all about Sean.

Still, it was nice to lie next to a warm body, even if it was the wrong one, and have a cuddle.

While James smoked a post-coital cigarette, he prodded her. “How are you feeling, Meg? Because that was fun, but I’m not sure you were all there.”

She didn’t reply immediately.

“Is this still about Sean?”

Megan groaned. “Maybe. I’m sorry, James. It just feels a bit...”

“Off?” he suggested, his voice gentle. He reached over his shoulder, put his cigarette out in the ashtray by the side of the bed, and turned to face her. “You don’t really seem all that happy. And while I know we’re not doing this with any romantic illusions, I like to think our—whatever this is—is something nice for us to share, right? This time, you were somewhere else. Which is a little off-putting. Also, I worry about you.”

Megan sighed and placed the back of her hand over her eyes, shielding herself from his gaze. She felt embarrassed, and mean, because she’d been using him, and James deserved more than that, even from a fuck buddy.

“Okay, yes, it’s taking me longer than I thought,” she admitted. “Much longer. I knew it was going to hurt, but, oh, James, I didn’t realize how much.” She lifted her hand and peered at him from underneath. “I’m sorry I kind of used you.”

He smiled. “It’s okay, I’m a guy. I can handle being used for my body. But, maybe you’re not quite ready for that.”

“Maybe not,” she sighed. “But I have to start living again, don’t you think? Even if it’s just one step at a time.”

James didn’t say anything, just pulled her to his chest in an affectionate hug. As she rested her head on his shoulder, Megan reflected she was really lucky to have such good friends.



Now it was the end of June.

She was definitely recovering. The pain was duller and in a few more months, she might actually look at another guy with interest. In the meantime, she could enjoy the fact her career was taking off. Megan crossed the street and entered the Jade Garden Restaurant to meet her boss.

Rossi stood at the bar, sipping what looked like a scotch on the rocks, but was probably a ginger ale. He was in his late fifties, and had started off as an old-fashioned, hard-drinking reporter before his liver put the kibosh on alcohol.

Rossi greeted her warmly, and they settled at a corner table and ordered a variety of dim sum. They chatted about the latest issue of the paper, about the atmosphere in the office, the weather, everything and nothing.

Megan grew antsy by the minute. She hoped she was right in assuming this lunch was about a promotion, that Rossi wasn't going to tell her there was no opportunity for anything permanent at the moment.

A waiter bustled around them with more bamboo steamers. When he left, Megan seized the opportunity to change the conversation.

"Gerald, you haven't asked me here to talk about the sunny weather in L.A., or the latest smog report. Can you put me out of my misery, please?"

He smiled, his eyes crinkling in his jowly face. "You know, we've been doing well on the advertising front in the past couple of months. It looks like we're going to be able to expand our reporting team."

"You mean..."

“I mean I can offer you a full-time post as a reporter starting in September.”

“September? Wow.” Megan grinned, feeling dazed at the abrupt reality of her long held dream.

“We can discuss the details of your salary package, but obviously it will be going up. I’m thinking of putting you in charge of occasional series, too. You did well with the articles about local schools, and I liked your ideas on taking it further. You have a good campaigning journalist’s mind, Megan. That first piece you wrote about the homeless kids, you put a lot of yourself into that, and it showed.”

You have no idea, Megan thought. She fought an urge to giggle like a schoolgirl. Instead, she lunged across the table and hugged Rossi, startling him. “I swear you won’t regret it,” she said as she settled back into her seat.

“I’ll probably lose you to the L.A. Times in a few years, anyhow. You have talent, Megan. I might as well make use of it.” Rossi picked up a prawn dumpling with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth.

For the rest of the lunch, Megan floated on a happy pink cloud above the table. She hadn’t felt that good in months. Fuck moping about Sean. This was what her life was about: hard work, professional recognition and success. And she deserved it.



Toward the end of that week, Megan was busy folding laundry and putting it away, when the doorbell rang. It was nearly seven-thirty, and she couldn’t think of anyone who’d be dropping by at that time.

She checked the peephole and froze in shock. It was Sean.

Her heart thudded in her chest and panic surged through her. This was a moment Megan had dreamed about so many times, but had

convinced herself would never happen. Now she had no idea what to do, torn between elation and fear.

She hesitated so long, the doorbell rang again. Taking a deep breath, Megan opened the door.

Sean looked pale. And more handsome than she ever remembered him, his shaggy hair falling in his eyes, making her want to brush it away so she could see them clearly. He wore faded jeans and a black T-shirt, and looked incredibly attractive.

Her heart caught in her throat.

“Hey.” His voice sounded hoarse. “Can I come in?”

Megan hesitated. But she had no choice. She couldn’t just send him off.

“Sure.” She stepped back, leaving ample space for him to walk past her, but as she caught his familiar smell her stomach flipped, her body betraying her instantly.

She gestured vaguely toward the living room and followed him.

Sean sat on the couch that had been his bed for a few weeks and looked up at her. He seemed uncertain and apologetic.

A huge part of Megan wanted to sit next to him and let him wrap his arms around her. But her brain screamed at her to keep her distance. If they touched, she knew she couldn’t rely on her body to obey her.

“Want anything to drink?” she asked. “Beer? Soda? Coffee?”

Sean smiled tentatively, his eyes crinkling. “Beer would be nice. Especially if you still have some of that Pilsner.”

As she opened the fridge and pulled out two bottles, Megan felt the back of her neck prickle. It was as if he’d never left. She knew in her heart if he asked to come back, she’d find it almost impossible to turn him down. Except that she’d have to. He was never going to ask anyway,

and she was only just managing to get over him, and what the hell was he doing in her apartment anyhow?

She handed him the cold beer, making sure their fingers didn't touch, and asked him point blank. "So what brings you here after all this time?"

Sean stayed silent for a beat, his gaze fixed on the beer bottle loosely held between his fingers. He cleared his throat, but when he spoke, his voice was still hoarse.

"I wanted to see you. See how you were doing."

"Why now?" she asked.

Sean shrugged. "Because I couldn't earlier."

"What do you mean?" She willed her voice to stay calm when she wanted to scream. Earlier? As in, maybe one, or three, or five months ago, when she was going crazy with worry and the pain of missing him. "Why not?"

He spoke slowly, not meeting her eyes. "I couldn't, because it would have been too hard. I was trying to stay away from you, to stand on my own two feet." He looked straight at her. "I couldn't see you, Megan. I wouldn't have been able to stay away."

She blinked. Already, tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. There was no way she was going to start crying in front of him. Not now, not when she was getting back on track. She latched on to the one thing she could control—her anger.

"Did it occur to you maybe to call more often than once every two months or so?"

Sean's eyes widened. "Uh...I didn't want to harass you. And to be honest, at first, it was just easier not to talk to you."

"Easier for you."

"I'm sorry if I was—"

She cut him off. "Do you have any idea what it was like for me after you left? I didn't know where you were, and how you were surviving. God, I was trying to cope with life without you, and you never even called? For weeks? Did you ever think about how that felt?" She knew she sounded shrill, bitter and hurt, but couldn't help it. All the pain and loneliness of the past six months poured out like venom.

"I didn't..." He frowned, bewildered.

"You didn't realize? Fuck, Sean, it hurt so fucking much when you left." Her voice broke.

Sean looked shocked. "I'm sorry. I thought...you'd find it easier without me. Without having to explain me to your family, to your friends. I didn't think you'd really miss me. I mean, not in the long run."

Megan stared at him. "Are you serious?"

Sean ran his hands through his hair, his face distraught. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

She sighed. "Yeah, well, you did. A lot. But...I'm getting over it. Finally. Which is why I'm asking you, why are you showing up now?"

Sean pushed up from the couch and paced the living room, swigging from his beer. He was silent for a minute, and Megan wondered whether she was going to get an answer.

"Last week, I went back to the boulevard, to see how the kids were doing. I ran into Ricky. He was in a foster home for a few months, but ran off. He's back on the street turning tricks. The thing is, while he was away Elf couldn't handle it, losing his buddy. He slit his wrists."

"I know." Megan nodded. "I heard."

He stopped pacing, his blue eyes reflecting pain and guilt. "I never went back to check on him. I knew he was fragile. But I left and wanted to make a clean break, so I just ditched all those kids, cut them loose,

forgot about them. It was the same when I walked away from my mom. I keep cutting and running from my life. I leave people behind.”

He paused and took a deep breath before plowing on.

“I don’t want to leave you behind. I want us to be, I don’t know, friends at least. I care for you more than I’ve cared for anyone else and I don’t want to let that disappear. I don’t know how your life is now, whether you still have any space for me, whether you have a boyfriend or what. But I’d like us to keep in touch.”

He stopped again, and turned away from her so she couldn’t see his face. “I don’t want to lose you, too, Megan.” He sounded on the verge of tears.

Megan was speechless. In her constant thoughts about him, she’d always pictured him as the one who left because he needed to, but also because he wanted to. Now it turned out she’d been almost as blind as he had.

“I don’t want to lose you, either,” she said tentatively. “I’m glad you came over. But it’s going to take a while before this stops being weird.”

He turned toward her, relief etched on his features. It was odd how hesitant they were with each other, how unsure of the other’s reaction.

“So what have you been doing since you left?” she asked. “You said you had a job, a place to stay. How did it go?”

He sat again. “I started off in a Salvation Army shelter. I figured it was best if I didn’t try squatting or hanging with any of the people I knew. I wanted to keep away from my old life.”

“Don’t you have to be eighteen to go to shelters?” Megan asked. “I thought they sent kids back into foster care.”

“There are ways of getting around it. You know I have fake ID. They don’t check that closely. And I turned eighteen in March, anyhow.”

Megan knew, of course. It was strange to think, after all her soul-searching over his underage status, he was now legal.

“And what about now?” she asked.

“I have a room in a shared house with a couple of guys, I work at a garage as a trainee mechanic, and take evening courses at a junior college.”

Megan was amazed at his casual tone. This was a kid who, nine months ago, was blowing guys in cars for cash. For a second, she stopped thinking about Sean as her lover and saw him as a young man making his way in the world relying on no one but himself. She was awed.

“Wow, Sean, that’s... That’s fantastic.”

“Fantastic? No. But, even though it’s hard working and going to school, it’s cool. I feel like I can handle it. The guys at the Salvation Army were kind of okay. I met some other fucked up kids. We talked about stuff. It helped.”

Megan felt faint all of a sudden. She had no idea what to do. Part of her was still processing the fact that, after all this time, Sean was in her living room, in the flesh, not another daydream she’d summoned from her fantasies. The rest of her tried to catch up with what he was telling her. It was all too much.

She had to make a decision quickly, otherwise she was going to fall apart.

“Sean, I’m glad you came,” she said, taking a step toward him. “But I think you should go home. For now. I’m really glad you found a place to stay, and a job, and everything, and that your life is shaping up, but right now, I need...I need time to figure this out.”

There was a moment of complete silence. Megan thought maybe she’d just fucked it up. Then Sean smiled, and she breathed again.

“You can have all the time in the world,” he said. “After I took off for six months, you can take as much as you need. Just...don’t forget me, is all.”

Megan snorted. “Yeah, like I could. I tried, and just as it was getting easier, you show up.”

“Can I leave you my number?”

“If you can find a pen and paper anywhere.” She gestured at the living room table. Since Sean had left, it had reverted to being a pile of unsorted papers, magazines, CDs and unopened junk mail. He bit his lip, either in annoyance or amusement. Locating a working pen and paper, he scribbled a number on it before handing it to her. This time their fingers touched fleetingly, and a tingle of electricity shot through her. That hadn’t changed.

“I promise I’ll call you,” she said. “It might not be right now. But I will.”

He looked into her eyes for a moment, then grinned, a crooked, delighted smile that made her heart skip a beat. There was something so familiar about the shape of him in her apartment, even after six months, something so right.

He walked to the door, flashed her a last smile over his shoulder as he opened it, then he was gone.

Chapter Eighteen

The week following Sean's return was unsettling and Megan kept wavering between exhilaration and anxiety. On one hand, she was overjoyed he was back, had sought her out and asked her to keep in touch. On the other, she was terrified of facing another heartbreak. Every night, she looked at the piece of paper he'd given her with his number on it and decided not to call him. On some level she knew she was making him pay for all her weeks of waiting during those bleak winter months.

She focused on writing, working on articles to keep her mind off Sean. On Friday afternoon as she composed a piece for the following week's issue, the phone rang. She refused to answer it and interrupt her flow. That's what machines were for.

After the fifth annoying ring, the answering machine kicked in, reminding Megan she still had that ridiculous drunken message from over a year ago representing her to the world. She really needed to change it.

"Hello, Megan?" It was Charlotte. "Please, if you're there pick up. It's important."

Charlotte's definition of "important" and hers didn't often coincide. Megan waited to hear more. "Call me right away. It's—it's about Mom." Charlotte's voice broke.

A lightning bolt of fear lanced through Megan. She leaped off the bed and grabbed the phone. "What? What happened?"

“Oh, Megan,” Charlotte choked through her tears. “She’s... Mom had a heart attack. She’s dead.”

“What? That’s impossible. She doesn’t have heart problems.”

“Dad says she complained of shortness of breath and pain in her arm. He finally convinced her to let him take her to the emergency room.”

“She’s not even sixty yet. It doesn’t make sense.”

“On the way there, she went into cardiac arrest. By the time he got her to the hospital, it was already too late.”

“Oh my God. No.” Megan sank down to the floor, her legs too weak to support her.

“Daddy just called. Greg and I are almost to the hospital now. I’ll call you back as soon as I get there, but I thought you’d want to get on the road right away.”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Megan, are you going to be okay to drive?” Charlotte’s voice sounded exactly like her mom’s, disorienting Megan. “Maybe you should call one of your friends to go with you.”

“No. I’ll be okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can. What hospital?”

Charlotte told her. “I’ll see you whenever you get here. Don’t speed. Seriously, I think you should call someone to come with you.”

“Maybe.” Megan had no intention of calling anyone. “I’ll be there soon.”

Megan sat for a moment in stunned silence trying to process how her whole world could change in one blink of an eye. She got up and went to the bathroom, poured herself a glass of water and sipped it while staring at the chalk white face in the mirror.

Her ears rang and her vision blackened around the edges. Megan set down the glass and dropped to her knees, pressing her forehead to the

floor and breathing raggedly as blood rushed back to her head. Then she sat up slowly.

Maybe Charlotte was right. She didn't know if she could drive three hours straight all by herself. Megan got her phone and started to press the auto-dial for James since she knew Sasha and Stevie were out of town. But her finger hovered over the keypad and she didn't press it.

Instead, she went to her bedroom and took Sean's number out of the drawer of her nightstand. He answered after only two rings.

"Hello?"

"It's Megan. Can you... You're probably busy. I don't know why I called you, really."

"What is it? Are you all right?" He sounded alarmed.

"It's my mom..."



An hour later, Megan looked over at Sean guiding the car through the busy Friday afternoon traffic on the freeway. "Thanks for going with me. I didn't feel like I could drive."

"I'm glad to do it."

"I hope it's not going to be a problem for you to miss work or classes."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it."

The sound of his familiar voice, so deep and reassuring, comforted Megan even though her chest was still constricted with grief. It touched her that Sean had dropped everything to come when she needed him. She was embarrassed at her childishness in refusing to call him over these past few days.

They rode most of the way in silence punctuated only by a call from Charlotte updating Megan on where to meet them. The family was no

longer at the hospital but at home. Her mom's body had already been sent to the mortuary. Chris and Megan would have to wait until the visitation to see her remains.

Megan couldn't believe Charlotte actually said those words "See her remains". It sounded so clinical, so unbelievable. This was all a dream from which she must soon wake up.

The rest of the day continued in a surrealistic jumble of impressions passing by in a blur. Later, when she thought of the day her mother died, she'd remember Sean's hand at her elbow guiding her toward the house, the strong scent of Greg's aftershave when he embraced her, the soft touch of Charlotte's hair brushing against her cheek as they hugged and Dad's unfocused eyes when he murmured a greeting. She held on to him for a very long time then sat in the living room listening to the story of Mom's heart attack and death related in detail not once but twice because Chris and Ben arrived halfway through.

Chris's eyes were wide and shocked. Ben's presence barely registered, Megan was so distraught, but her impression was of a dark-haired, slightly-built guy hovering near Chris.

At one point it occurred to Megan she was sitting in her mom's chair. The blue upholstered easy chair was the one her mom always sat in, just like her dad was permanently attached to his La-Z-Boy. She whimpered.

Sean touched her arm and she suddenly realized he'd been kneeling beside her chair the whole time.

"Okay?" His eyes searched hers with concern.

Megan nodded. "Thanks for coming."

She couldn't say it enough. She was so grateful for his presence.



The days before the funeral were filled with phone calls to make, condolences to receive and neighbors and friends stopping by with casseroles and cakes. Megan tired of hearing “She was a wonderful woman” and “I’m so sorry” over and over. Jamming another lasagna dish into the freezer, Megan looked over at Charlotte, jiggling her baby on one hip while leafing through Mom’s address book on the counter. She was determined to make sure there was no old friend or distant relative they’d forgotten to contact.

“Here. Let me take him.” Megan closed the freezer door and reached for Little Richard. He hadn’t hit the shy stage yet and held his arms out to her with a toothless smile. She tweaked his tiny nose and kissed his round baby cheek. “God, he’s so cute, Char.”

“I know.” Charlotte gazed fondly at her perfect progeny. “Do you know he already has an ear for music? I’m serious. When I play rock, he bounces in time to the beat and when I play classical, he stops what he’s doing and listens. Just wait until he’s old enough to learn an instrument.”

“Poor kid,” Megan whispered. “I foresee hours of piano practice in your future.”

Richard chortled at her tickling breath against his ear and hit her in the face with his pudgy fist.

“So, Megan, are you and Sean together now?” Charlotte asked. “Last time we talked, he still hadn’t called you.”

“He got back in touch recently. But we’re just friends.”

Megan’s tone must have been defensive because Charlotte said, “I’m not being negative, only curious. I think it’s nice he came with you. He seems very supportive.”

“Yeah.” Megan didn’t know how to respond to non-confrontational Charlotte. This was uncharted territory for them.

Charlotte flipped a page of the address book. "I've been sort of—judgmental in the past. I know that. I freaked out about both you and Chris, but now I just want both of you guys to be happy, as happy as I am."

"Jesus, are you supposed to be smoking weed while you're breast-feeding? You've never been so mellow in your life." Megan crossed the kitchen to hug her sister, squeezing the baby between them until he whined. "I've been a real bitch to you over the years and I promise to stop. Besides, you're no fun to tease when you're not uptight."

When Megan pulled away, Charlotte was crying and smiling at the same time. "God, Mom would have loved to see us finally getting along. I can't believe she's..."

"I know. It's so inconceivable."

"Dad's going to need us around a lot for the next few months."

"I can come down some weekends." Megan didn't want Charlotte to feel the burden of supporting their father would fall on her.

"I don't know how he's going to get along without her."

"He's got the store and his fishing and a whole community of people who care about him. I think Dad's stronger than we think. He'll be okay."

Sean entered the kitchen just then with a pie. "From Mrs.—" He hesitated over the name. "—Janovitch, I think."

Charlotte accepted it with a smile and placed it on the counter.

He stepped back and gestured at Richard. "Nice, uh, baby."

"Thanks." Charlotte's smile broadened. "You want to hold him?"

Megan expected Sean to get flustered the way men sometimes did about holding small babies, but he said "Sure" and held out his arms to accept Richard. He held the child assuredly, close but not too tightly in the crook of his arm. The baby regarded him solemnly for a moment, but

when Sean grinned, Richard reached his fingers out to poke them into his mouth.

“How do you know how to handle babies?” Megan asked.

Sean removed Richard’s fingers to answer. “Babysitting kids in my neighborhood growing up.”

Richard’s hand went right back to his mouth. Sean intercepted the little fist and kissed it. Megan about swooned at the cuteness.

If Charlotte hadn’t been won over by Sean before, the baby love-fest sold her on him. “Sean, I told Megan how sorry I was for the way I acted at Christmas, but I owe you an apology, too. I’m sorry for being so rude and I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Sean nodded. “It’s okay.”

A moment of awkwardness fell. Luckily, Richard chose that moment to release a loud fart. They all laughed while the baby gazed around with wide eyes. Sean looked down the back of Richard’s diaper to make sure he didn’t need a change, and Megan was amazed at his competence. She wouldn’t have thought of that.

Sean carried the baby as they left the kitchen to join the others in the living room. They were going through photo albums, choosing pictures for a memorial display for the visitation.

Megan noticed how haggard her father was. He looked completely exhausted. She went to him and leaned over to rest a hand on his shoulder.

“You want to go lie down for a while? Or would you rather take a walk with me?” Somehow she felt a walk would be more refreshing for him than trying to sleep in the bed he’d shared with his wife for almost thirty-five years, knowing she’d never lie there again.

“A walk sounds real nice.” He patted her hand.



Megan hooked her arm through her father's and they walked up the road. It was a balmy afternoon. Bird song floated from the trees and the sky was blue and cloudless. It was the kind of a Saturday on which her mom would have been out gardening, adding some late-blooming plants to her flower beds.

Megan didn't ask her dad how he was doing since Charlotte had covered that every half hour or so. She walked quietly, waiting for him to talk.

"Remember the time we took that canoe trip up the Rifle River? You and Chris missed the take-out point and had to go an extra three miles 'til you reached the next one. We told you to stay with the group, but you wouldn't listen. Had to forge ahead."

Megan laughed. "We were so burnt and dehydrated and hungry. It was the most miserable experience of my life. I haven't been canoeing since, it was so traumatic! But good old Mom had no sympathy whatsoever. She just slapped a tube of aloe ointment in my hand and said, 'Maybe you'll pay attention to your dad next time'."

He chuckled. "That was your mother."

"Jesus, Daddy!" Megan was stricken. "I didn't think. I'm sorry."

"Megan. It's okay to talk about her. We need to."

"How can you be so calm?" she asked. "You've been like a rock for the rest of us."

"Well, I suppose partly because it hasn't sunk in yet, but also..." He paused. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone but your mom. Something that happened to me in Viet Nam in '67."

Megan looked at him, intrigued. He never talked about his experiences in the war.

"You know I got shot?"

She nodded. She'd heard that much.

"I was lying there waiting for my transport. It took a while because there were a lot of us and only so many choppers. I started to feel really strange, not like I was about to pass out, but kind of light. Then I just lifted up and out of my body. As clear as I see you now, I could see myself, the other guys, the whole countryside around us and the sky all at the same time." He frowned, concentrating on the memory. "It was more than seeing. It was a kind of—perception. I felt this presence with me and wasn't afraid at all. It was indescribable, beyond words."

"Wow," Megan whispered.

"I've never forgotten that experience. I don't know how much time passed, but when I came back into my body, the stretcher was on the chopper."

He squeezed Megan's hand in his. "I don't know how good of a job your mom and I did with you kids' religious training, but I wanted you to know what happened to me. I know without a doubt there's some kind of life beyond this world and your mom is there now. I'll miss her like hell, but at least I know that."

"Wow," Megan said again. "Thank you for sharing."

Dad unlinked his fingers from hers and put an arm around her shoulders, giving her a squeeze. "So, how are things with you these days?" He changed the subject. "Enjoying your work?"

"Yeah. I'm writing a lot more and, while it might not be the most interesting news in L.A., at least it's a beginning."

"How about this young man you keep bringing home with you? How's that going?"

Megan couldn't believe it. He'd never quizzed her about a boyfriend in her life. "Sean's just a friend. We used to, uh, date, but now we're friends."

“Hm.”

She glanced at him.

He smiled as he gazed at one of the neighbor’s yards.

“What?”

“Well, honey, once you’ve been head-over-heels in love with somebody, you don’t go back to being ‘friends’. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Who said I was...? I never...” she stammered.

He grinned wider.

“Cut it out!”

“I’m old. Not blind or stupid. When you visited in February, I could tell you were pining.”

“All right. Quit playing the wise old codger. You’re freaking me out, Dad.”

He laughed aloud and Megan thought she hadn’t heard anything sound so good in days.



The next day there was a private viewing for their family before guests arrived at the funeral home.

Megan and Chris approached the coffin together. Megan’s heart pounded.

“This is strange. Really strange,” Chris muttered to her as they stood in front of their mother’s body. “What a fucking weird custom.”

“I know.”

“How long do we stay here?”

“I don’t know.”

Their hands were clasped together tightly. Megan had an image of them as Hansel and Gretel, like in the picture book their mom used to

read to them. She remembered watching her mom's face as she did the scary witch-voice with an accompanying scowl. Megan remembered her smell, the softness of her lap and the sound of her voice.

"This is not Mom. She would hate this," she whispered to Chris.

"I know."

Together they moved away from the coffin.

The afternoon passed in another blur of faces half remembered from Megan's childhood and voices she couldn't quite place. She looked at her dad, who wore the suit he'd bought for Charlotte's wedding six years ago, accepting condolences from yet one more family friend. If he could do it with such grace, she certainly could, too.

She shored up her smile and turned to greet Mrs. Janovitch.



That night, Megan tossed and turned on her bed, dry-eyed and sleepless despite her exhaustion. She was numb, and her mind wouldn't accept her mother's death. There was no way someone so alive could cease to exist.

There was a tap on her door, then it opened and Sean was silhouetted in the frame. He closed the door and came to sit on the edge of the bed. He reached for her hand in the dark and held it securely between his two warm palms. "Long day, huh?"

"Yes."

He stroked her hair back from her forehead. It felt soothing and nice. "Can I lie with you?"

She nodded.

He pulled back the covers and climbed in next to her, taking her in his arms.

She nestled against his chest, breathing in the sweet scent of fabric softener on his T-shirt and his underlying male scent. In the months without him, she'd forgotten how strong and safe his arms felt around her.

"Want to talk?" His voice reverberated under her ear.

"I've talked to so many people today. I have nothing left to say."

"Okay." He petted her hair for a while, then moved his hand down to rub slow circles on her back. The sweetness of his comfort was too much.

At long last, Megan began to cry. Tears ran down her face and soaked into his shirt. She sniffled and tried to control herself, but that only made her cry harder.

He kissed the top of her head. "It's okay. It's all right."

Megan clung to him, her fist clenched in the material of his shirtsleeve. "I'm s-sorry. God, I hate crying."

"Go ahead. Let it out." He continued to rub her back.

She let go then and loud, ugly cries ripped through her. She shook against him and gasped for air as she sobbed.

Finally her tears subsided to ragged breaths and slowly her breath evened out. She grew aware of Sean's body pressed full length against hers.

He was aroused by their closeness; evidence of it pushed into her hip. Sean pulled away from her, tilted her face up and wiped the tracks of tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. "Better?"

She nodded.

Their eyes met and held. The moment spun out like a filament of spider web, tenuous, fragile and shining. The sexual charge between them was as strong as it had ever been and here in the quiet bedroom, lying in each other's arms, there seemed no point in denying it.

Sean lowered his head and kissed her.

It was as if no time had passed. His lips were firm yet pliant and soft, just as she remembered, and molded warmly to hers. They kissed slowly and gently. His hand cupped her face. His thumb moved on her cheek and his tongue pressed lightly into her mouth. It was so familiar, so comfortable and right.

Sean pulled away after several moments. "God, I've missed this," he said huskily. "I've missed you."

Her crotch contracted and Megan remembered what his voice alone could do to her. She rested her head on his chest and he held her loosely. She felt his body still yearning for hers, but he kept his hands safely above her waist, rubbing up and down her back. He'd drawn a line and unless she wanted him to cross it, he would go no further.

Her body yearned to encourage his hands to roam farther, to release him and be swallowed up in the sweetness of their joining. She had a hard time remembering why this wasn't a good idea. But her brain reminded her it was this kind of instant gratification that had steered them last time. If they were going to have a new relationship, she didn't want it to begin with a comfort fuck.

So Megan continued to lie still and quiet in his embrace and eventually she felt the hard urgency of his cock fade. They lay together, warm and easy, for a long time, until she thought Sean might have fallen asleep.

But he asked, "Do you want me to stay the night or go?"

"Can you hold me a little longer, please?" The idea of being alone was unbearable.

"Sure. Whatever you want."

His words confirmed she'd made the right choice in not letting kissing escalate. She wanted to make absolutely sure sex was what Sean wanted and not something he did to ease her pain.



When Megan woke in the morning, it was late and the bed beside her was empty. She wandered down to the kitchen and found Chris's Ben, sitting at the table sipping a cup of coffee.

"Good morning," she said. "Where is everybody?"

"Your dad decided he needed a new shirt for the funeral. Chris went to the store with him. Sean is out running."

Charlotte, Greg and Little Richard had gone to their own home last night.

Megan poured herself a cup of coffee and sat across from Ben. "You don't shop or run?"

"I thought Chris and your dad needed some time alone together and no, I don't run. Do I look athletic to you?" He grinned and flexed a slender bicep. Megan was struck by his charm. No wonder Chris fell for this one.

"What do you do?" she asked. "What's your major?"

"Art history, of all things." He rolled his eyes. "I know. I'm setting myself up to be jobless, or so my parents keep telling me."

"Well, you can always work at a museum, right? Isn't that what you art history types do?"

Ben smiled ruefully. "Yeah, that's a possible avenue, or maybe an art gallery. I don't really know what I want to do yet. Chris always teases me about it. I tell him not everybody's cut out to be an engineer. Some of us need a little more fantasy in our lives."

"He likes the fantasy, too, you know. When we were kids, he was always the creative one. He tries to keep it in check because he thinks that's what he has to do to become a grownup. But at heart, he's a dreamer. I guess you figured that out already."

“Well, I think that’s why we get along so well. He keeps me grounded in reality and I let him express his romantic side.” Ben blushed slightly. “It’s sort of a tradeoff.”

“It seems to work,” Megan said. “You guys look really happy together.”

He grinned. “You know, a year ago, if anyone had told me I’d be going out with an engineering major whose previous experience had been dating lots of girls, I’d have told them they were crazy. Just goes to show you can never tell.”

Megan smiled. She was really starting to like this boy, with his quiet manner, his love of Chris and his thoughtfulness. But she wondered how they’d gotten together in the first place, what it had taken for Chris to realize he was more into boys than girls.

“How did...” she started, then stopped, aware she was trespassing the boundaries of their acquaintance. “Never mind.”

“How did we get together? It’s okay, it’s not a secret or anything. Actually, I asked Chris out.”

“You did? But...how did you know he...?” Megan stopped again, flustered.

“We met at a friend’s party then started hanging out. I could feel there was more to it than friendship so I figured, nothing ventured, nothing gained and asked him for a real ‘date’.”

“But you didn’t know how he’d react.” Megan was amazed he’d taken such a leap of faith.

“No. You have to take a gamble sometimes,” Ben replied, his tone confident. “I think Chris realized that, too. So he said yes. That’s how it started.”

A gamble. Just as she’d told Sean when she took him in. Megan blinked, surprised to find her eyes prickling again, but with tears that

had nothing to do with her mother this time. She was impressed by the quiet strength emanating from Ben's slight frame, at his calm, and absolute certainty he was doing the right thing with Chris. It had been very much in evidence over the past couple of days, as Chris obviously drew comfort from Ben's unwavering presence. They really made a good couple.

"I'm glad you did." She set her cup on the table and got up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get ready for the service. It was nice having a few moments to talk to you."

Ben smiled and nodded. "And I enjoyed finally meeting Chris's wild sister. By the way, your friend, Sean is a sweetheart. I wouldn't let that one get away."

As Megan walked from the kitchen, she wondered if Ben realized she'd interpret his comments about his and Chris's relationship with Sean in mind, and decided he probably did.



The funeral was well attended by the many people who'd known and respected her mom. Megan made it through the eulogy, hymns and readings without crying, but when Mom's favorite song and the photo presentation began, she broke down.

Sean's arm slipped around her waist, and she leaned into his side and accepted his comfort and strength. Afterward, there was a buffet dinner and more condolences before the family could finally return to the house and collapse. By then, Megan was ready to go home. As soon as it was decently possible, she said her goodbyes, hugged everyone and promised her dad she'd come the following weekend.

With the first stars appearing in the sky, she and Sean drove off.

An hour later, Megan fell in a trance watching the river of red taillights in front of her leading the way to L.A. when suddenly Sean's voice startled her awake.

"Will you go out with me?"

"What?" She glanced at him and saw only a shadowy profile behind the steering wheel. For a second, she wondered whether she'd imagined the words, if her fevered imagination had made up something she actually wanted to hear.

"When we're back in the city, if I call some time, will you go out?"

"I... Sean, I...don't know what to say." His abrupt offer surprised her and her mind was already on overload. She didn't know if she could process one more thing, no matter how much she'd thought about what he was suggesting. "Right now, with my dad and everything, I don't know if I'm ready to start a relationship again."

"We already *have* a relationship. Why pretend we don't?"

There was a pause as Megan tried to sort out her jumble of conflicting emotions and think of an appropriate response. He was right. They were already entangled in a web of emotional commitments, they had a shared past, and over the last few days it had become clear their past was neither dead nor buried.

"Look, I know this is really bad timing. I shouldn't even be bringing it up right now. But I want you. I miss you and I don't want to fuck around and waste any more time." Sean tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He glanced at Megan then back at the road. "Before you say anything, let me tell you something, about me and my mom and why I left before."

"Okay." She nodded even though it was probably too dark for him to see.

"Your mom's funeral today showed how much she affected everyone around her, how she made her life matter to other people." He paused.

“There was no one there for my mom. I didn’t even know she died until later, so there was no one to see her buried. By the time I found out, it was already done, by the state. But she made it like that. The way she lived her life, you know?”

“I’m sorry,” Megan murmured.

“No. That’s not why I’m telling you. The point is, I was headed that way, too. I spent so many years looking after her, trying to keep her from drinking too much, making sure the rent got paid and we had some food in the house before she spent all the money on drugs. I cleaned up her puke, her blood when some guy whaled on her, carried her ass home unconscious when she partied too hard, all that shit. So when I was finally on my own, I didn’t want to take care of anyone else ever again. That’s why I didn’t hook up with any of the other kids. I did at first and right away people started wanting things from me.”

Megan could picture that. Sean was a natural leader, the type other kids would look to for guidance, and she could see how he would shy away from having them depend on him.

“I wanted to be alone. It was great only having myself to take care of. But, you know, it’s pretty cold not having anyone give a fuck whether you exist or not. Look at Elf. He couldn’t stand to live that way.”

Sean was silent for a moment, guiding the car through the night traffic. “No one can live like that, I guess. It just took me some time to figure it out. So, when I left you last winter, it was for all the reasons I told you. I needed to earn my own way and figure things out, but I also had to be alone for a while to learn that—I don’t want to be alone.”

Megan glanced at his profile, thinking this was the most she’d ever heard him say at one time.

“I mean, when you’ve got someone who actually cares about you, maybe loves you, you’d have to be a real asshole to throw it away,” he concluded.

He looked straight at her then, the oncoming car headlights reflecting off the whites of his eyes, making them shine. “I don’t want to be the person who only thinks about himself and goes through life not feeling anything or caring for anyone. When I told you last week I didn’t want to lose you, I meant it. You’re the only person who’s ever really given a shit about me.”

Megan’s pulse pounded in her throat. Her feelings tore her apart. Yes, she wanted Sean back in her life, but what if it turned sour, what if he decided he couldn’t take it and ran off again? She wouldn’t be able to cope with the pain a second time. And it was so hard to figure out what to do when she was still numbed by the shock of losing her mother.

She had no idea what to say.

Her pause must have been longer than she thought, because Sean added, “This is a really bad time to lay all this on you. I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m...” Megan breathed deeply, eons of time passed and she formulated and discarded a hundred different answers before she finally said in a rush, “What the hell. Yes, I’ll go out with you.” As Megan said the words, a giddy rush of excitement coursed through her veins.

There was really no other answer she could give. He was right. They already had a relationship. A six-month separation hadn’t changed that. He was so deeply rooted in her she didn’t think she could ever weed him out of her life even if she wanted to, which she didn’t.

“Yeah?” His teeth flashed in the darkness. “Cool.”

“We’ll start slow this time, though, okay?” she said. “Go out on a few actual dates and see how it feels.”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Dinner and a movie and a goodnight kiss at the front door.”

He nodded and teased, “Can I at least hold your hand during the movie?”

“Negotiable.”

“More talking, less touching. Got it.”

They were both kidding around, keeping it light, but Megan had to let him know she really was taking this seriously. “You know, I was pretty messed up last winter after you left. I can’t imagine going through that again. All I want to say is, if we start going out and things escalate and we end up doing more than having an occasional date, don’t take off on me again.”

“I won’t.” He reached for her hand, which rested on the seat between them, and wrapped it tightly in his. “I promise. If you want to get rid of me this time, you’ll have to file a restraining order to keep me away.”

“Now that’s just creepy.” Megan grinned.

He squeezed her hand, then let go, but after a few silent moments he asked, “So how soon can we go out?”

Chapter Nineteen

The first night back in her apartment, Megan slept heavily, drained by the emotional intensity of the day. Work the next day was weird. She was still numbed by the shock of her mom's abrupt death, and it hit her again and again throughout the day. Rossi made it clear she wouldn't be expected to do much that week, and was welcome to knock off early if she wanted to, but Megan tried to find solace in work. After all, it had kept her sane during the months after Sean left.

That evening, when she came home, she cried. It was so unfair that the moment Sean reappeared, this should happen. What fucked up karma decreed if one thing in her life was going well, another collapsed? Her career had only really taken off when Sean left, and now he was back, it was her mom she'd had to sacrifice. All the words of comfort she'd heard over the past few days made no difference. Even her dad's assurance he knew this wasn't the end meant nothing. She just hurt.

The one bright point in her week was her prospective date with Sean. They'd settled on Thursday. Sean was to meet her near work for a lunch date. The brief time Megan had allotted and the public venue would ensure they'd behave and not spend the time groping each other. It was going to be a real test.

By Wednesday evening, she wondered why on earth they'd decided to take it so slow. Her rational side knew she shouldn't launch herself headfirst into a relationship, but damn, she missed him! His body, the

feel of his lips on hers, his touch... just the thought of him sent her into lust-filled daydreams.

Megan dragged her mind back to the article she was writing about the closing of another L.A. trauma center. Her interviews with protestors were going to be part of a longer piece about the issue of shrinking emergency provision in the city. Megan noticed the light in the living room fading abruptly and raised her head to look out the window. The sky had gone dark and fat drops of rains were falling. Within minutes, it turned into a rare event in Southern California, a tropical downpour. Megan spared a thought for pissed-off pedestrians and unwary convertible drivers.

Ten minutes later, as the rain eased, her doorbell rang. Perhaps Sasha was back in town and had decided to drop in and seek shelter from the storm.

When Megan looked through the peephole, her heart leaped. Sean stood in her hallway.

She ran her hands through her hair, fluffing it up and hoping she wasn't just creating a tangled mess, then unlocked the door and opened it. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

He'd been standing in profile, gazing down the hall, and turned when she opened the door. He was soaked. Rain dripped from the hair plastered to his head, darkening the gold to brown. His face shone wetly and his eyelashes were clumped into spikes that shed tiny droplets when he blinked. "Hi."

"Come in." Megan stepped aside to let him into the apartment. His T-shirt was molded to every muscle of his torso and the soggy denim of his jeans made a chuffing noise as he walked past her. "Did you walk here?"

"From the bus stop."

“Let me get you a towel.” She turned, but he caught her wrist in his cool, damp hand.

“I know I should have called first, and I know we said we’d take things slow, but I couldn’t wait ‘til tomorrow.” Sean pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Beneath the cold clamminess of his shirt, his skin burned hot. Her hands pressed against the solid muscle of his chest, behind which his heart hammered. His hungry kiss assaulted her mouth. He half-lifted Megan off her feet and pressed her up against the wall of the foyer.

Her hands slipped from his chest, to his shoulders then around his neck. They threaded through his cold, wet hair, grabbing fistfuls so she could press his mouth even tighter to hers.

His lips pressed against hers and his tongue explored her mouth, flicking lightly across her palate and tangling with her tongue. The kiss went on and on. When he finally pulled back, they were both gasping for air.

Sean looked at her through half-lidded eyes, so sultry Megan’s crotch tightened then released in response. Her shirt was wet through from contact with his soaking clothes. A shiver passed through her, a combination of chill from the cool air against her damp skin and pure, naked lust.

“I couldn’t wait any more.” His voice was rough as sandpaper. He leaned slowly back in for another kiss, giving her plenty of time to refuse if she desired.

But Megan fisted her hands in his hair and pulled him to her again. “Good, ‘cause neither could I,” she murmured.

His mouth was warm, soft and giving at first as it moved against hers, but soon grew more urgent, feeding at her lips and sucking her tongue greedily.

Megan kissed back just as hungrily, her hands moving from his hair to clutch the back of his shirt and twist the sodden material in a tight grip.

He pulled away once more, resting his forehead against hers, his eyes closed and his breath panting between parted lips. "Sorry. I know we shouldn't be doing this. I know we were supposed to be friends for a while first, but God, I've missed you so much. I think about you all the time."

"It's okay. I don't care about waiting or being cautious anymore. I just want you." She stroked the side of his face with one hand. It was rough with stubble, wet and warm under her palm.

Sean's eyes flickered open and he looked deep into hers from so close she could see the gradations of color in his irises and the expansion and contraction of his pupils. "I love you," he said hoarsely.

Megan's insides liquefied at the words she'd never expected to hear from him. Her breath caught and she felt lightheaded and disconnected from reality for a moment.

"Love you, too." A high, squeaky voice that couldn't possibly be hers answered him. Tears prickled her eyes and she blinked fiercely. "Damn it!"

He grinned at her loss of control and lifted her up again in a hard embrace. Megan pressed her face into his neck and smelled his rain-soaked skin. She straddled his hips with her legs, locking her ankles around his waist. He supported her ass and carried her through the apartment to her bedroom.

Laying her gently on the bed, he straightened, peeled off his wet T-shirt and unfastened his dark blue jeans. Because they were so soaked and stiff, he struggled to push them down over his hips.

Megan laughed when he lost his balance and almost fell over.

After kicking off his shoes and stripping the jeans the rest of the way off, he pounced on her. “You think that’s funny?” He tickled her mercilessly

She shrieked and laughed until tears ran from her eyes. “Stop! I give!” As her laughter subsided, she eagerly scanned him. “God, just let me look at you. It’s been so long.”

Sean crouched over her, unbuttoning the front of her shirt with a frown of concentration. As each button parted, he caressed the exposed skin behind it with his calloused fingertips, sending shivers of delight up Megan’s body.

She stretched, exposing more skin to his touch, until her shirt was open and his hands caressed her breasts through her bra.

“Seriously,” she said. “I want to look at you.”

Sean let go of her and sat back. He towered over her, knees on either side of her hips, wearing only a damp pair of boxer briefs. They molded to his body, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. Megan’s gaze glided from the bulge in his underwear upwards, along his flat stomach with its tightly defined abs. A faint trail of hair led toward his chest. She examined the hard planes of his chest, his peaked nipples, the sharp lines of his collarbones and his broad, muscled shoulders. The curve of his neck led to his face.

Sean looked down at her, lips slightly parted, his wet hair messy on his forehead, his blue eyes caught between arousal and amusement. As their eyes locked, he ran his tongue across his lips.

Megan sighed. “Jesus, Sean,” she breathed. “You’re beautiful.”

She was gratified to see blood rise to his cheeks for a change. He could parade naked in front of her without the faintest trace of embarrassment. Yet a simple compliment made him blush.

“I’m...no. You’re beautiful, Megan,” Sean whispered. He leaned forward and slipped her shirt down her arms. Megan lifted her shoulders to help. He slid a hand behind her back and undid her bra then removed it and trailed his fingers along her torso, sending shivers down her body. He didn’t stop to caress her, but zeroed in on her jeans, unbuttoning them, undoing the zipper and pulling them off her with her panties. When she was entirely naked, he gazed at her body.

Megan lay immobile and completely exposed. The naked desire in his eyes fed her arousal in turn. Her heart beat in her throat as his gaze roamed hungrily over her body, his look so intense it made her skin burn. It was unbelievably erotic, like foreplay without touching.

But she wanted him completely naked, too, and she reached toward him. Running her nails lightly up the sides of his thighs, his muscles twitching under her touch, she hooked her fingers in the waistband of his boxers and tugged them down, peeling the fabric away from his skin, until his erection was revealed.

Sean pulled off his underwear and lay down, facing her.

Megan exerted all her willpower to stop herself from grabbing him, and focused on using just her eyes for now.

They stayed that way for several minutes, drinking in the sight of each other like parched earth soaking in the rain after a drought. Megan thought she’d never tire of his body, with its hard angles and planes of solid muscle, its soft nuzzling spots, the hollow of his neck, his full mouth, the crook of his arm, and its irresistible sex appeal.

Sean was the first to crack, his hand reaching to touch her cheek, grazing her mouth with the tips of his fingers. Megan’s lips parted under his touch. His fingers slipped in, stroking her lower lip, a caress so delicate and incredibly arousing it melted her.

His voice was husky. “You don’t know how much I’ve thought of this.”

Megan nodded, her tongue darting out to touch each of his fingers in turn. She did know, she knew exactly how much he'd been thinking of it. She could tell by looking at his eyes, gradually losing focus as desire took over, because she mirrored his arousal in her own. This barely-touching game, with the intense sensation concentrated on the tips of his fingers and her mouth, drove her crazy.

She had to make a move. Hesitant at first, she placed her palm flat against his chest, feeling his heart beating under the skin. She stroked him, her hand gradually descending down his abdomen, tracing the hard muscles of his stomach, until her fingers tangled in his light brown curls.

Sean's entire body was taut and shivering with anticipation. He caught his breath with a whimper as she slid a hand over his cock. His eyes stared into hers, but he wasn't really seeing her, overwhelmed by her touch. When she wrapped her hand around him he groaned in pleasure, pushing into her fist.

Megan slid her hand up and down his shaft. God, she'd missed the feel of him. She tried to keep to the slow rhythm they'd adopted, but her resolve faltered.

Sean slipped his fingers from her mouth and leaned in to kiss her, a deep sensual kiss which turned into a hungry mashing of lips and tongues. Suddenly everything sped up, acquiring an urgency which had, until now, been contained under the surface. Sean's hand wandered to her crotch, slipping inside her damp cleft.

Megan's whole body arched in response, her clit eager for his touch. When he circled the erect nub with his fingers simultaneously entering her, she cried out. She'd waited so long for this, for him.

It was as if the past six months had been erased, and the world was once again focused on the two of them, on their bodies coming together,

each so attuned to the other they knew exactly what to do, when and how.

They kissed and stroked each other until Megan came, riding his fingers, gasping out his name, on a wave of intense pleasure. She was still throbbing, coming down off it, when Sean gave her a meaningful stare then sheathed himself in a condom.

She lay back, legs spread for him, waiting, welcoming, expecting, and when he thrust into her, she grabbed his ass and pulled him deeper, as if she'd never let him escape again.

They rocked, hip to hip, slowly, deeply, the contact between them intense, their bodies fused together.

As the heat and friction increased slowly, so did the steady rocking, until Sean plunged deeply into her, eliciting a moan from Megan. She peaked again, pleasure radiating throughout her, the tingle spreading to her fingers and toes. She breathlessly muttered obscenities as Sean pounded into her, his grunts adding to her excitement. By the time the climax tore through her, she was moaning continuously, oblivious to her surroundings, her mind entirely focused on her pleasure.

Sean stiffened and came on the heels of her orgasm, biting her neck as he found his release, then he collapsed against her breast, panting.

She stroked the back of his neck, felt the softly curling hair at the nape tickle her hand. His hot breaths blew over her skin and his fingers kneaded lightly at her upper arms, clenching and unclenching with the dying waves of his orgasm. It all felt so familiar, so perfectly—right.

Remembering the barren months without Sean, Megan felt she'd aged several years during that time and even more since this past weekend. It was as if the elusive maturity she'd been chasing had finally come to her, attracted by pain, loss and loneliness. She'd always known one of the reasons Sean was so adult for his age was the amount of heartache and

trauma he'd dealt with from an early age, but now she understood it a lot better.

Even though Megan had recovered and found herself again on the other side of the pain, her life without Sean had been a pale, poor thing compared to this. God, she never, ever wanted to be without him again.

"Well..." She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This kind of pre-empts our official 'first date', doesn't it?"

She felt his smile against her skin. "Yeah, I guess." He turned his head and kissed the top of her breast. "So, are we still on for lunch tomorrow?"

"Sure." She scratched his spine lightly with her nails and said thoughtfully, "Or maybe you could just spend the night and we could go for an early breakfast before work. What's your schedule like?"

"I wasn't going in tomorrow until after lunch so, yeah, staying overnight sounds great to me." He nuzzled her neck. "Besides, I think we have some catching up to do."

Megan sighed contentedly. The rain drummed on the windowpane and the warm weight of her lover pinned her to the bed. She was so glad he didn't have to leave tonight.

After a moment, Sean lifted up on one arm and looked at her with a little frown furrowing his brows. "Is this going to be okay? I don't want to fuck things up moving too fast. I know you said—"

"Screw what I said. I don't want to wait anymore, either."

He grinned.

She felt a jolt in her chest at the beauty of his rarely bestowed smile. Yes, she'd seen him smile politely at people, but that full-on, broad and happy grin was a rare treasure reserved for her.

“Good.” He crawled up farther so he could reach her mouth, gave her a big, wet kiss, then rolled over to lie beside her with his head on the pillow facing hers.

Megan knew there were difficulties still facing them—given Sean’s background and the disparity of their ages, it was inevitable—but at this moment, she couldn’t imagine what those difficulties might be. She was completely and absolutely happy and whatever came later, they’d deal with together.

She turned her head to the side to look into his eyes. Reaching her hand out, she stroked his face. Her voice was hoarse with contained emotion as she whispered, “Welcome home, Sean.”

About the Author

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Sometimes the only way to find your way home is to leave

Leaving Mama

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Smoking weed while perched on top of her grandmother's coffin in the middle of a downpour was not how Jillian had seen the trip from Oklahoma to Minnesota as happening. With flights canceled and the airline employees striking, she had no choice but to improvise and use her rock band's hearse. And when Gran exits the hearse after the tires skid on a rain slick highway and the back door flies open, Jillian decides to make the best of the moment.

Things only get worse when they arrive in Minnesota and her oldest sister, Shari, has a stroke at the memorial service. Toss in the fact that their grandmother had led two lives—there was a whole other family they'd known nothing about waiting for them in Minnesota—and life suddenly becomes more complicated...even for Jilly and Shari's mother, Donna...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Leaving Mama*:

He sat beside me. "You're not dying."

"Then why does it feel like I am?" My eyes filled with tears again.

"Because you just buried your mother a few weeks ago, and because for the first time since Shari was born, you and I are going to be all alone. Just the two of us. And maybe you don't want that."

I digested his words. "You think...you think what? That I don't want to be alone with you?"

“That’s what I fear most,” he said. “You’re afraid you won’t be missed, and I’m afraid I won’t be enough for you. Afraid I won’t be able to make you happy once we’re alone again.”

“Oh, Jim!” I burst into tears and shook my head. “I am so sorry. I never meant...I mean, you’re right...we’ll be alone. But...you have to know how much I love you!”

“Sure.” He sighed and dropped his hands to his lap and stared ahead, past the door, into some corner of his mind where I couldn’t find him. “That’s why I wanted to pick up golf again, why I wanted to eat out more, do things as a couple. We haven’t done anything in so long, that I was afraid we wouldn’t know what to do with one another.”

Sure? My husband sounded confused, like he dreaded our being alone while wanting it, nonetheless. My declaration of love only elicited a *sure* from him. Like it was something he believed but didn’t *feel*. Like nothing I said could possibly strike a welcoming chord within him, as if the words *I love you* didn’t mean as much as they once did when I said them. Had I not said them enough?

“What do you mean, *sure?*” I asked. “Don’t you believe me?”

“I hear what you’re saying, Donna, but to tell the truth I don’t feel it. I don’t...I guess I just don’t remember the last time you said *I love you* with passion. I used to make your toes curl—I used to be able to drive you crazy. I don’t feel the crazy any more. Maybe it’s just me. But I don’t see the girls being together—away from us for a while—as all that bad. I miss Shari and Jilly as much as you do, but I figured we’d comfort one another and even find that we enjoyed one another’s company again.”

“I enjoy your company!” I cried.

“You and I tolerate one another, and we’ve settled into a very blasé form of coexistence—we’re comfortable together. But we’re not passionate. We don’t have the same feeling we once had for one another.

I just hoped that you'd look forward to spending time alone with me. That's all."

"You want passion?"

"I deserve passion—we both do," he replied.

"What about last night?" Now I was outraged.

"Last night was wonderful!" He turned to face me. "But today, it's back to paychecks and promises, the kids, how we spend the day, everything but us. It's not about *us* today, and it rarely is any more. I don't see why we have to go through this drama every time one of the girls does something we don't like. This isn't the end of the world, Donna—Shari is in the hospital, and she wants to see her daughter. It's not like they're never coming back."

Overwhelmed with grief over the pain my oldest daughters had inflicted and the fear that something might happen if I wasn't there to protect them, I'd never considered my husband's pain. The love of my life—the man I'd wanted to marry and have children with, the cornerstone of my very existence...and I'd taken him for granted. At least, he felt that I had.

His eyes stared ahead, the lines around them deeper than I'd seen in a long time, his jaw taut with tension, shoulders slumped as though he carried the weight of the world on them. How awful he must feel. I felt as though I were losing my children...and he seemed to feel he'd lost me, which meant there was obviously something else I hadn't done right over the past few years if I'd alienated my children *and* made my husband feel as though he wasn't important.

I felt hopeless. "What do you want, Jim? You want me to send the girls to the library or the neighborhood pool so that you and I can stay in bed and make love or read the comics or go play golf or do whatever it is that will make you happy?" My voice became shrill the longer I talked. "I feel betrayed—by Jillian and Shari! I resent the position they've put me

in, and I am sorry if you don't feel fulfilled with our relationship, but right now I am hurt and angry!"

He rose. "Well, don't kid yourself if you think that's going to solve anything. You'll just manage to make everyone else's day miserable if all you're going to do is have a pity party every time you think of tomorrow."

Pity party?

I ground my teeth and forced myself off the bed, snatching the clothes I'd shed off the bed and returning them to the closet where I grabbed the first pair of shoes I could find and slammed them onto my feet. I'd show him. He wanted happy, I would be bigod happy or die trying.

As for passion? Jim was nuts if he thought I'd want to make love to him after this. His words stung—I thought the previous night had been fantastic. And here he thought...whatever he thought. Did he think I'd wake up begging for more, when my life was falling apart? Fat chance.

Sexual intimacy was one thing—and we'd had that last night. But passion in the midst of turmoil, gut-wrenching fear, and pain for the loss I was feeling was something else entirely. How did he expect me to be passionate about anything when I was worried and hurt? Why did men always seem to think that sex solved everything.

Passion. I snorted. I felt tempted to tell him that if he wanted passion and felt I was so damned unable to give it to him, he should go get another haircut or buy another set of golf clubs and take Phyllis Wheat with him.

I was silent as we all climbed in the car and headed toward the restaurant the girls had chosen. Passion. My anger subsided as I took a long, honest look back at what he'd said. He hadn't said sex...he'd said passion. A thirst for living, is what he meant. And I hadn't been thirsty for anything that concerned just him in so many years that I couldn't remember. Neither of us had craved passion in decades. Or had *he*

wanted this, and I'd just been so wrapped up with paying bills and raising children that I hadn't noticed?

Dear God. What the hell did he want, for me to buy some French maid's costume or learn belly dancing, for me to buy sex toys or naughty lingerie? Give him a gift subscription to *Playboy* magazine or *Golf Digest*? Go down on him more than once a month?

Shame on you! I cautioned myself. *If you have that particular sex act down to the point where you can count the number of times you've done it per month, then you've considered it an obligation instead of a pleasure.*

One ordinary woman...two extraordinary hunks.

The Life and Loves of April Johnson

© 2006 *Eve Vaughn*

April Johnson is just a regular woman, taking one day at a time, who always manages to get into sticky situations.

At her high school reunion April's life changes forever when she finds herself falling for Richard Slick, nerd turned hunk. Matters are only complicated when Marcus, the man who broke her heart in high school and who's now a big time actor, makes a stunning declaration.

April lands smack in the middle of a love triangle and must decide between these two studs. Her choice leads to heartbreak, the discovery of her self-worth and learning that it just might be possible to love two men. Some lessons are worth learning.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Life and Loves of April Johnson*:

"Marcus?" I asked in confusion. The sudden sexual tension between us could be cut with a knife.

The next thing I knew, he lowered his head and crushed my lips with his.

I froze. This was something I'd fantasized about since the moment I laid eyes on him, but I couldn't believe he was holding and kissing me as though he couldn't get enough.

Marcus lifted his head to look down at me, never letting go of my trembling body. "Don't you like this? I thought you had a crush on me."

I tried to push him away, but he wouldn't budge. "I don't need a pity kiss."

“This just underlines the fact that you know absolutely nothing about me, because if you did, you’d know I don’t do anything I don’t want to do.”

“And why would you want to kiss me after everything you’ve said?”

“I don’t know. Damn, April, I just felt like kissing you, and I’d actually like to kiss you again, so how about shutting up and letting me?” He lowered his head again.

I stood still as his mouth moved over mine. It wasn’t as though I’d never been kissed before, but the lazy fumbling of two experimenting adolescents didn’t count. This was my first kiss of passion and I didn’t know how to handle it. “Let me taste you, April,” he muttered, pushing me against the wall and grinding his cock against my thigh.

My lips parted slightly, just enough to let his tongue slide into my hesitant mouth. He tasted of mint, spices, and a flavor unique to him. I could feel my body softening against his. My nipples grew hard as rocks and I was sure they’d poke holes right through my robe.

My pussy clenched, responding to the new sensations coursing through my body. I’d fingered myself plenty of times before, but never had I felt this hot, needy feeling before. In that moment, I didn’t know what Marcus’s motives were for kissing me like this, but I didn’t care.

All I wanted was for him to keep kissing me like this, but soon, even that wasn’t enough. I wanted more. As if he’d read my mind, he lifted his head, a surprised expression in his eyes. “Whoa. I never thought...” He broke off and buried his face in my neck, trailing kisses over my heated flesh.

I reached up and threaded my fingers through his silky blond locks. His tongue grazed my throat. Moisture formed between my legs.

Damn I was horny.

Marcus’s hand slid lower to squeeze my ample bottom, pulling me closer still. He squeezed and kneaded my ass in his palm as though it

was a lump of clay and he was a sculptor. "Yes, Marcus. That feels so good," I moaned, leaning my head against the wall.

"Let's go up to your room," he muttered against my neck.

I opened my eyes to look at him, not believing what he was asking. I knew if we went up to my room what could happen. Did I dare take this irreversible step that would probably change both our lives forever? My head said no, but my pussy screamed yes.

"Well?" He lifted a dark blond brow, waiting for my answer.

My pussy won. "Okay." I took his hand in mine. I wasn't thinking straight at the moment. The only thought in my mind was letting Marcus have his way with me.

I led him up the stairs to my room, my breathing shallow with anticipation for what was soon to happen. "Nice room," he casually commented and closed the door behind him.

"Thanks." I gulped.

This was it.

I watched in fascination as he began to remove his jacket and then his T-shirt. This was the first time I'd seen him without his shirt on and his torso was everything I'd imagined it would be. He was lean with a well-sculpted chest and ripped stomach. You could probably bounce a quarter off those tight abs. It was easy to see he was an athlete. My eyes widened as his hands unbuckled his belt and undid his pants.

Just when he was about to slide his jeans down his narrow hips, Marcus paused, and smiled. My heart skipped a beat. I'd seen that smile before, but it had never been for me. I blinked hard to make sure this wasn't some dream I'd wake up from feeling unsatisfied.

"Aren't you going to take off your robe?"

Heat flooded my cheeks. How dense could I have been? In my horniness I didn't think about getting undressed in front of him. A wave of fear swept towards me. Marcus was used to dating thin, all-American

girl types like Keely. What would he think when he saw me in all my chubby glory? "Can we turn the lights out?" I bit my bottom lip in my nervousness.

He looked puzzled. "Why?"

"Because...I...I just want to do this with the lights off."

"Don't you like what you see?"

"Very much, but I'm just afraid you won't like what you see." I'm sure if my skin were lighter, my face would be flame red.

"I don't care about that. I'm here, aren't I?" He shrugged.

"It doesn't mean you won't change your mind when you see me."

"I'm not the shallow bastard you think I am. Come on, April, let me see you." He took a step forward and I clutched my robe together as if my life depended on it.

"No."

"Come on. We've come this far. You don't have anything to worry about."

"Don't I?"

"Do you want me to go first? I will." He removed his pants and then took off his boxers. "See? Now it's your turn."

My jaw dropped. I'd never seen a cock in person before. My cousin Jennifer and I had sneaked a *Playgirl* from my aunt's bedroom once but it had not prepared me for this.

I suppose Marcus's cock was average, just short of seven inches if I were guessing, but it was so thick. He stood there in all of his perfect, naked glory. Marcus was hot with clothes, but when he wasn't wearing any, he looked like a fine work of art. I couldn't believe such a perfect specimen of man-flesh was standing in my room, let alone a naked one.

I thought I'd faint that very moment, especially when he started walking towards me, his cock bobbing up and down with each step he took. "Now it's your turn."

I took a step back until the back of my legs hit my bed. “Umm, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“April, stop playing games. Let me see you.” He stepped in front of me and grabbed the sides of my robe.

What was the point of fighting? He would take one look at my love handles and change his mind. I dropped my hands and closed my eyes, squeezing them tightly shut. I didn’t want to see an expression of disgust on his face when I stood exposed before him.

I felt the cool air brush against my skin as Marcus parted my robe. His hands touched my shoulders and seconds later, I felt the robe falling off my body. I opened one of my eyes, to see what was going on.

To my surprise, there was no revulsion on his face. Could it be that he liked what he saw? Marcus reached out, cupping my breasts. His thumbs gently brushed my nipples, making the breath catch in my throat.

The heady sensation of Marcus’s skin against mine was like nothing I’d ever experienced. The intimacy of his touch was deliciously wicked. “I don’t know what you were so ashamed of. I love your big, beautiful breasts,” he whispered as though he couldn’t take his eyes off of them.

“Really?” I shivered at the newness of what I felt.

“Yes, really.” He pushed me back on the bed before falling on top of me. His mouth descended on mine, and this time I was ready to receive his hungry kiss. My tongue darted out to meet his. I loved the taste of him, just as he seemed to enjoy me as well.

He lifted his head slightly to trace my lips with his tongue. I’d seen things like this in the movies, but never imagined it would happen to me. I moaned his name in delight. “Oh, Marcus. I love the way you kiss.”

A slight smile touched his lips. “You’re not so bad yourself.” He planted kisses on my neck and face. My body began to shake and

convulse in reaction. I didn't really know how to handle this fire burning within me, but I intended to try my damndest.

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