



**FANTASIES FOREVER:
ANYWHERE, ANYTIME,
ANYWAY
FINALE**

by

Barbara J. Baldwin

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-59374-871-5

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston
Editor: Chere Gruver

Printed in the United States of America

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Dedication

For Jan and Chere,
two incredible editors who encourage and applaud,
and for Jinger,
whose extraordinary artistic talent ALWAYS captures the
essence of my stories.
Thank you ever so much for all you three have done for me.

Prologue

“Whew, the last baby’s finally asleep.” Morgan followed Katie Jo into the living room. “I’m sure glad I only had Becky instead of twins. I don’t know how you do it, Keva.”

“Gage helps a lot,” Keva replied, then grinned. “If he doesn’t, he knows he’ll be sleeping in there with the boys.”

The other ladies nodded in agreement. They all had their own methods of getting their husbands to help, but for the McVicker men, sex was a major negotiating tool.

“Speaking of, I wonder how they’re all doing,” Penny said. “I don’t remember the last time all six of them went to Colorado to the cabin. It was a brilliant idea, Suzy, to have them take John and Michael out there for their birthday.”

“I don’t understand, though.” Morgan frowned. “Before Travis left, he closed a savings account and gave me the money. He said to buy Becky’s baby furniture and that his brothers were paying for it. Do you know what that’s all about?”

Penny and Suzy laughed. “I’d forgotten about their bet,” Penny said.

“Bet?” Katie Jo asked.

Penny nodded. “When Gordon and Suzy got married, the other five guys each put one hundred dollars into a savings account. Whoever got married last got the whole pot. You know, each of them figuring they’d be the last to fall. And, you gals,” she nodded at the three youngest women, “knocked them down like dominoes. Keva and Steve—whoops. That’s Gage to

you,” she pointed to Keva, who insisted on calling her husband by his middle name, since that was how she had met him. “Then Chase and our darling Katie Jo, and finally Travis and Morgan, who somehow manage working together at the newspaper, which I could never do with Mike.”

“So that’s how Travis got the pot,” Suzy said. “Lucky you. Gordon would have probably bought a new set of golf clubs with it.”

“But John’s not married,” Morgan replied. Even though she and Travis had been married a year and a half, she was still learning about the McVicker family. “Why would Travis get the money?”

Keva and Katie Jo echoed her question, so Morgan knew she wasn’t the only one out of the loop.

Penny pursed her lips and looked at Suzy. Their husbands, Mike and Gordon, were the two oldest, and like the brothers, the two women were often the ones who controlled the clan, so to speak. Well, Mike and John were twins, but in this case, that didn’t count.

“Does anyone want a margarita?” Suzy perkily asked as she hopped up from the sofa and headed toward the kitchen. Morgan was close behind, followed by the others.

“Spill it,” Keva said.

“We were sworn to secrecy,” Suzy practically whined, digging into the freezer for ice.

“We might as well tell them,” Penny said. “It could save someone from putting their foot in their mouth later on.”

“If you don’t tell, Suzy, I’ll tell Gordon how much you really spent on the remodeling,” Morgan stated, not above using blackmail to get a juicy story. It was the reporter in her. All the girls turned to her, mouths open.

Penny smiled. “Spoken like a true McVicker sister-in-law.” She turned to Suzy. “Better make those margaritas extra strong.”

Penny looked at each woman in turn. “If we tell, you have got to promise never to breathe a word of it. The guys know, of course, but nobody talks about it. It’s just too embarrassing.”

Morgan noticed the shift in body language as all the women leaned forward. She gazed around the circle of women, all in comfy pajamas and enjoying a weekend of sisterhood at Suzy’s home in Boston while their husbands were off fishing in Colorado. She dearly loved belonging to this family, just one more plus to being married to Travis.

“John was married,” Penny began, and then held up her hand before anyone could utter a question, “soon after Michael and I were. But less than six months later, he found out she was cheating on him.”

“So he divorced her,” Suzy picked up the story, handing each woman a salt-rimmed glass of frosty margarita.

“There’s nothing embarrassing about that,” Katie Jo said.

Penny bit her lip, then scrunched up her mouth. “He found her cheating with another *woman*. John was terribly hurt over the deception, and I think he feels he can’t trust his instincts when it comes to women.”

“Huh? I don’t understand,” Katie Jo broke the silence that met Penny’s pronouncement.

“Come on, Katie, surely you can’t be that naive,” Penny commented. “His wife was a lesbian.”

“Oh.” Katie Jo’s cheeks stained bright red with embarrassment.

The sisters-in-law knew some of Katie’s background, and Morgan suspected perhaps, she was that naive. She quickly jumped into the conversation. “You know, maybe he just hasn’t found the right woman.”

“Someone he could be his totally macho, totally *McVicker male* self around,” Keva added.

Penny and Suzy adamantly shook their heads. “No. Don’t even think it. He’s just not interested.”

“What if we introduced him to friends?”

“Tried that.”

“Set him up on a blind date?”

“Been there, done that,” Suzy stated.

“What if he were being stalked?” Keva questioned.

“You can’t do that!” Penny’s exclamation was met with firm nods of the head, but Morgan was interested.

“Explain.”

Keva, who edited romance for a large New York publishing company, grinned. “Okay, so maybe stalked is too strong of a word, but it’s like a good plot. If John knows we’re setting him up, of course he’s going to get defensive. Whoever we choose needs to be secretive and very subtle in her approach; sly almost, so he doesn’t suspect a thing.”

The women now nodded in agreement. “What we have to do is find someone soft-spoken and gentle and totally feminine,” Katie Jo suggested. “Someone to trigger his protective instincts.” Morgan knew Katie Jo was thinking of her husband, Chase, who had rescued her from an abusive ex-husband and was still very protective of her.

“Does anyone know a woman like that?”

All five women shook their heads.

“Maybe we don’t need to actually find someone.” Keva grinned and Morgan knew there was nothing she liked better than a good plot. “Let’s play *what if*,” Keva continued. “What would happen if we started sending him flowers or something and sign them *from a secret admirer*?”

“That might at least get him to looking at the women around him,” Penny said thoughtfully. “Maybe if he thought one of them liked him, he might actually come out of his shell and ask her out.”

“Here’s a *what if*,” Suzy said. “What if we just ask our husbands to find someone?”

Her question was met with hoots of laughter.

“You actually want to rely on our husbands to find a soul mate for John?” Morgan asked. Although she had been married less time than the other women, she knew the McVicker men well enough to guess what type of woman they would pick for sweet-hearted John. “We want soft and feminine.”

“Yeah, shy and reserved,” Katie Jo added.

“I think John can do this; he just needs a kick-start,” Keva said.

“Okay, we go with Keva’s plan,” Penny stated, getting out paper and pencils so they could take notes as to who would do what and when.

By the third round of margaritas, the five women, all of whom dearly loved their husbands and the entire McVicker family, had, in their slightly inebriated minds, successfully plotted the downfall of the last hold out—John Jefferson McVicker.

Chapter 1

John looked at the latest delivery. “Who are those from?” he asked wearily, not really expecting an answer.

“Don’t know, sir.”

John took the envelope hooked to the vase of gerber daisies. He knew even before he opened it what it would say. *From your secret admirer* were four words he was coming to hate. He tipped the young man and walked back into his office, leaving the vase of flowers on the counter. His customers might as well enjoy them, because he would not.

The deliveries had begun a month ago, and he was about at his wits’ end. His favorite flowers, his favorite chocolate from *Lindt’s*. He had even received a box of *éclairs* from *The North End Bakery* at *Faneuil Hall Market Place* and he thought nobody else in the world knew he loved those sweets. And those four words always on the card.

He thought he had figured it out when Doris Glade stopped at the store twice in one week. While she was a regular customer, she more often called than visited, and lately, she seemed inclined to linger. She was a tall, slender woman about his age and she loved antiques as much as he did. He thought if she were subtly trying to gauge his interest, it wouldn’t hurt to ask her out. But the next time she had come in, a man was with her and she introduced him to John as her fiancé.

“That’s why I don’t date,” he grumbled to himself.

"It's June eighth," Agnes Kregley stated from her desk across the room from him.

"What?"

"You asked the date."

He shook his head. Agnes was almost as old as some of the antiques he had in the store, but he just couldn't let her go. She waited on customers, kept the books, answered the phone, and knew as much about his business as he did. The fact that she was hard of hearing and wore thick bifocals was usually a minor hindrance.

Sighing, he tossed the plain white card in the trash and turned to his computer. He needed to make travel arrangements for his trip west. There were two major auctions he wanted to attend, already mentally running through his customer list for items he knew would be of interest to them.

* * * *

Two weeks and more mysterious phone call hang-ups and cookie deliveries later, John had had it. Especially in the face of the break-in at his store. The back door had been jimmied and his desk rifled through, but since he didn't keep any cash in the office after hours, nothing seemed to be gone. Apparently the robbers didn't feel like hauling off antique furniture.

He filed a police report, but doubted anything would come of it, especially since nothing had been stolen. He hadn't told the police about the other strange things happening to him. When he thought about the different incidents individually, they appeared rather insignificant. Only when he put everything together with this latest trouble did he wonder if someone was after him. There was just one thing he could do, so he sent Agnes home for the day, locked up the shop, and headed downtown.

* * * *

John burst through the door of Gordon's law office, ignoring the secretary as he claimed his brother's attention with a single statement.

"I'm being stalked."

Gordon stopped his phone conversation mid-sentence.

"You have a client," Steve commented over the speakerphone. "Call me back."

"No," Gordon replied. "It's John."

"What the hell?" Steve said. "Did he say he's being stalked?"

Gordon raised a brow to John, who had stopped at the edge of his desk. He ran a hand through his hair, which was already sticking up on end. Normally, John's appearance was neat to a fault, but today, Gordon noticed the wrinkled shirt, tie askew, and his brother's bloodshot eyes.

"Are you in town, Steve?" John leaned his hands on the desk, talking directly into the speakerphone. "I need your help."

"I thought that's why you came slamming into my office," Gordon stated.

"Can you stop it?" John questioned.

"I don't even know what you're talking about," Gordon said.

"Exactly. You can't," his brother immediately replied.

"John, I—"

"Forget it." John turned to leave.

"JJ," Steve's voice came sharply across the speakerphone, the use of his pet name for his older brother stopping John in his tracks. "Are you listening?"

"Yeah," John replied sullenly, his shoulders slumping.

"I'm in New York but can get to Boston by tonight. We'll get everyone together and decide what to do. Okay?"

"I have to leave for California this afternoon," John said.

"Can you postpone?"

"No, but I'll tell Gordy what I know and he can fill you in."

“Alright. We’ll get this taken care of, big brother,” Steve said reassuringly. “And whoever the bastard is, we’ll make sure he pays. Nobody messes with the McVickers.”

* * * *

The click of colliding pool balls accented the conversation in the basement of Gordon’s house later that night. Gordon lined up another shot in the grudge match against his brother, Michael. Travis sat nursing a beer in the oversized chair facing the television.

“Sorry I’m late,” Steve said as he trotted down the stairs. “Damn fog had the airport just about socked in.” Another man Gordon hadn’t seen in quite a while followed him. “This is Bob Taggart, in case you don’t remember him. Not only is he my pilot, but he’s head of security at *SGM Enterprises* and a whiz at ferreting out information.”

“That’s no shit,” Travis said, and Gordon knew he was thinking of the time his wife, Morgan, had gotten kidnapped. Bob was like an adopted brother, and had helped his brothers out on numerous occasions.

“I talked to Chase on the way here. He’s tied up with some corporate gig out in Vegas. We could put him on speakerphone, but he said it would be easier, given the time change, to call him once we know what’s happening. He’ll help anyway he can.” Steve paced around the pool table, swigging from a bottle of water. “So, what’s the scoop?”

Gordon turned and canted a hip on the edge of the pool table, casually rolling the cue ball between his palms. As he related what John had told him, he shook his head, still not able to understand why someone would be after his brother.

“There hadn’t been anything overt to call the police about until last night. He would get hang-ups on his work phone and cell; even his home phone, which is unlisted. He swears he’s being followed, but can never find the same person when he

scans a crowd. He also says gifts—flowers and cookies—are being delivered or show up on the doorstep of the store.”

“Cookies,” Travis perked up. “What kind? Were they any good?”

“Christ, TJ, he didn’t eat them! What if they were poisoned?” Gordon scowled at his youngest brother, who seemed to have a hollow leg.

“So what happened last night?” Steve asked.

“There was a break-in. Since he doesn’t keep cash at the store, it appears they simply went through his desk. Nothing was taken. John doesn’t even know if the incidents are related, but then I doubt he was thinking too clearly when he came and talked to me,” Gordon concluded.

“He probably shouldn’t have left town,” Travis said. “What if whoever it is followed him?”

“I think the trip to California will do him good. I’m sure he’ll be better when he returns,” Mike countered.

“Does he have any of the items that had been delivered?” Bob brought the discussion back to the more concrete.

Gordon shook his head. “He threw everything out.”

“First thing is to keep the stuff. Maybe we can get fingerprints. Then, we’ll need a list of his enemies,” Bob continued.

“What? We’re talking JJ here,” Travis said. “John has no enemies. He’s the epitome of nice; the person who gets invited to all the best parties in town and has a client list of the richest and most influential people anywhere. In his line of work, you might say he’s the equivalent of *Christie’s* here in Boston.”

“He’s an auctioneer?” Bob asked.

“No, but he deals in antiques—only the high-end stuff dating back a couple of centuries.”

“Maybe he screwed someone out of a purchase or something was fake?” Bob questioned.

Michael snorted. "I doubt that someone would have it in for John if he outbid them on a Louis XIII armchair."

"You know," Steve commented, "from what Gordon says, it doesn't sound like this person is trying to hurt John. Even the break-in was at night when John wouldn't be there, and nothing was taken. Besides, flowers and cookies? We're automatically assuming it's a man, when in fact, it might very well be a female."

Travis, the connoisseur of the female gender until he had married Morgan, laughed outright. "Today's woman doesn't need to stalk a guy. They just jump right into bed with you, no questions asked." He scoffed at Steve. "You've been spending too much time with your wife and all those romances she edits."

"Do they really?" Gordon asked. "I mean, just jump right in bed with you? Sex whenever you want it without all the wining and dining first?" At forty-four, Gordon was fifteen years older than Travis, and while he figured things had changed some over the years, this sounded like a free-for-all.

Mike slapped Gordon on the back on the way to the mini-fridge. "Forget it, Gordo. You wouldn't know what to do with it at your age anyway."

"I'm not that much older than you and John, and I certainly haven't forgotten what sex is."

"Guys, I did not fly down here in the middle of the night to listen to you brag, or whine, about your sex lives. Besides, we pretty much killed that topic of discussion out in Colorado and decided that TJ gets more only because he's technically still a newlywed."

Travis grinned as he lifted his beer in salute.

"So what would you suggest we do?" Mike asked.

Bob spoke up. "You can hire a private detective to do surveillance on your brother, but a PI would be looking from the outside in, so to speak. While he can keep an eye on John, that

doesn't necessarily mean he'll see the periphery, which is where your culprit is."

"In other words, it would be better to hire John a bodyguard?" Travis asked.

"Bodyguard? You think our brother is that much of a wimp?" Mike asked.

"Don't get your *twin-ness* in a knot, Mikey," his brother retorted. "We won't use the word bodyguard. How about security consultant or personal assistant? We just need someone to look after him until this gets sorted out."

Bob nodded. "Whatever, you need someone who stays with him, eats with him, follows him to work, the gym—everywhere. He would have the advantage of being right there, should something happen. We can tap the phones, but having a man on the inside is your best bet."

"Uh-oh," Travis shook his head. "Ain't going to work."

"Why not?" Gordon asked. "It's the perfect solution."

"Since this would be hush-hush and nobody would know it's security, how's it going to look for John to suddenly have a *male* roommate? Especially after what happened with Joanie."

"Shit, you're right," Gordon agreed.

"So, hire a female," Bob stated the obvious. "In fact, that might be all that's needed to deter this stalker if it's a woman, as Steve thinks. If she sees that John has a live-in, she might just give up and go find someone else to bother."

"Man, that's a great plan," Travis said and the other guys nodded in agreement.

"What's a great plan?" Suzy asked, stepping into the room with a tray full of food. Gordon gave a very slight shake of his head. Travis jumped up to help her out.

"I knew there were drinks in the mini-fridge, but figured you all might need something to soak up the beer." She reached

up to give Steve a kiss on the cheek. "Must be something important to drag you out of New York."

"Bob and I had some stuff to do at *SGM* this week, anyway," Steve replied.

"I'll be back with the brownies," she said as she turned.

"Suzy, you don't have to feed these guys," Gordon said. "You know what they say about strays. You feed them and they never leave."

His wife was halfway up the stairs before she replied, "You can't plot some devious adventure without food. Besides, Travis would never come see the kids again if I didn't feed him."

"That's what I mean," Gordon grumbled.

After Suzy made a second trip to the game room with brownies and chips and Travis was happily snarfing down a huge sandwich, Gordon restarted the conversation. "Whatever we decide to do for John, no one, under any circumstances, tells our wives what's going on. Every single one of those women would be carrying on like it's John's last day on earth. They'd all be over there so often, it would definitely give the game away."

No one disagreed with Gordon's statement. All his sisters-in-law were wonderful and would do anything for the family if it made someone happy. That's why they needed to keep this quiet. It would never work with a bunch of meddling women involved.

"Say," Travis said in mid-chew. "As long as we're looking at female security, who for all appearances will be his girlfriend, why not set him up for real? He hasn't dated since Joanie, and he really should get out more."

Mike shook his head. "Just because you're still in the honeymoon stage, doesn't mean marriage is for everyone. And you know how he feels about it. Our wives have tried with a number of their friends and John won't have anything to do with them."

“That’s probably because all those women were the wrong side of silly and feminine,” Travis retorted. “What John needs is someone strong and outspoken to bring him out of his shell; someone who would take control.”

“I don’t know,” Mike hesitated. “John won’t take kindly to our interfering with his life.”

“What are you talking about? He asked for our help.”

“Not with his love life,” Mike retorted.

Travis shrugged. “We can’t help it if she becomes overzealous in her job. Besides, we don’t tell John.”

“Maybe that would work,” Steve said, “but where do we find a female bodyguard who is also looking for a relationship with someone as quiet and reserved as John? I think we’re asking the impossible.”

“Maybe not,” Bob smiled as he stroked his chin. “I know a former Presidential bodyguard—thirty-two and cute...” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, she can take down someone twice her weight and shoot off your pinkie when your fist is closed.”

“Do you think she’ll take the job?”

“She’s my sister; she’ll do it if I ask,” Bob retorted.

“You’re willing to set your sister up with our brother; knowing what we’d like to see happen?” Gordon asked. “Aren’t you supposed to protect her from guys like us?”

Bob laughed. “Hell, she can protect herself. Besides, she’s always been jealous of my relationship with your family. She thinks you’re all wonderful. In addition, it’s time she settled down with some great guy so I don’t have to keep worrying about her.”

* * * *

Cori Taggart nonchalantly crossed one booted foot over the other, leaning back against the wall of the alley. She had a perfect view of *Main Street Antiques* from here, but in the hour she’d been surveying the store, had seen nothing out of the ordinary. A few

people had entered the store, one man leaving with a small table and probably a much lighter wallet.

John McVicker wasn't even due back in town until tonight sometime, but when she had accepted the job of providing him protection and looking for his stalker, she had decided to come to Boston early. She always stayed with her brother, Bob, when she was in the area, but they rarely came into the city itself, preferring to stay out at his house in the country, where they could ride horses and she could work on her painting.

She tensed as a woman carrying flowers entered the antique store, but exited within minutes still carrying her bouquet. When Bob approached her with this job request from his friends, she had hesitated. Her instincts were rusty and she didn't want to let him down. But Bob had insisted it would be a piece of cake and not in the least dangerous. She couldn't turn him down, especially since it involved John McVicker.

Cori had first met John several years ago when she had gone with Bob to a *SGM Enterprises* party. Most of the McVicker brothers were there, and she had found the contrast between John and his brothers remarkable. All the men were incredibly handsome—tall, broad-shouldered with dark brown hair and deliciously sexy brown eyes. But where his brothers were totally extroverted and most in very public, people type jobs, John was quiet and reserved. She had only spoken to him briefly, but he had haunted her ever since.

There was something about his control, like he was afraid to let loose and smile. Or let anyone get too close. His gentle voice and attitude called to something deep inside her, and all of her protective instincts rose to the surface. To say they were opposites was an understatement. For one thing, John had parents and numerous brothers and had grown up in the same house on the same street in the same town.

She had grown up rough and tumble with only Bob to look after her. They had lived on the streets for awhile after running away from their last foster home. But Bob, who was ten years older than her, had worked two jobs, kept them both in school, and had taught her to take care of herself, both mentally and physically. In the process, she had learned not to depend on anyone but herself. That lesson had been dramatically reinforced with Zack.

Cori shook loose from her musings when she saw the clerk lock the front door of the store and walk away. Her surveillance was done for the day. Checking her watch, she had a couple of hours before John was due at the airport. She flipped the key his brothers had given her, figuring she had time to get to his place, shower, and check out the security before he arrived.

* * * *

John stifled a yawn as he opened the door to his condo, tossed his keys and the mail on a side table, and dropped his computer case next to it. The trip to California had been well worth the trouble, and he would be extremely busy the next couple of weeks as the inventory he had purchased was delivered to his store. It sounded heartless, but as the World War II generation died off, his business picked up.

“Hold it right there,” a steely voice came from the left just before he heard what could only be the click of a gun hammer. He froze in place. *Was this his stalker? But why did the voice sound female?*

He smelled her before he saw her and he automatically sucked in a deep whiff of her citrus scent. Then her hands were on him from behind, patting him down.

“Hey!” He finally came to his senses when she dipped a hand into his front pocket, feeling around for more than his change. And in the midst of what could possibly be danger, his damn penis was swelling under the attention.

“Okay, you can relax,” the voice said.

He lowered his hands, slowly turning as she flipped on a table lamp. Short, curly black hair surrounded a pale face; green eyes glittered in the light. She was built like a man—more straight down from the shoulders and flat chested, but there was something in her smile...

“Do I know you?” he asked.

Her smile turned to a grin as she stuck out her hand. “Cori Taggart, Bob’s sister. We met at *SGM* one year.”

“Ah.” He slowly nodded. He shook her hand and frowned, unfamiliar with the warmth and the tingling that streaked up his arm. “And the fact we met *once* would be why you’re in my apartment?”

“Well, yes and no. Would you like something to drink? I made some herbal tea.”

“Tea?” He shook his head to clear it. “Excuse me if I appear a little dense. It may be jet lag, or it may have to do with you offering me a drink as though this was your place instead of mine.”

“It might as well be. I’ll be here for awhile.” He watched her walk toward the kitchen, her words not having the same effect on him that her slightly swaying behind did. She wore tight black jeans and he found himself responding to her. What was wrong with him? Had it been that long?

Chapter 2

Cori distanced herself as fast as she could from John by hurrying to the kitchen. She had forgotten how devastating his dark brown eyes were, and how his size made her five foot nine inch frame feel small. Seeing him again had awakened desires she hadn't felt since...well, she hadn't felt anything in some time.

She hadn't needed to pat him down; she knew who he was. But it had given her an excuse to touch him. Her hand shook as she poured herself a cup of tea, her fingers still tingling from where she had gotten pretty damn close to the erection he couldn't hide.

She closed her eyes and sniffed, hoping the chamomile would calm her. She heard the fridge door open then shut, the soft *psst* of a bottle being opened.

With a sigh, she turned to face him, leaning back against the counter for support. She kept her eyes on his face, but even so, her heart beat a little faster than normal. Why did he have to devastate her with a single glance?

"What's wrong?" He raised a brow in question, his eyes gentle as they searched her face. Gentle; that was the quintessential word for John. She had always thought she liked the macho, tough type, but...

"Cori, why are you here?"

Good, talk about her job, not her reaction to him, or his equally interesting reaction to her.

“I’m your bodyguard, excuse me, your personal security consultant.”

His eyebrows scrunched together. “What? Gordon called while I was in California and told me they wanted to hire a bodyguard until we could figure out what was going on, but I told him that wasn’t necessary. All I need is a private investigator to track the deliveries and get them to stop. Besides, he never said anything about a female.”

“You don’t think I can do the job?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I used to be with the Secret Service, you know.”

“*Used to be*; why did you leave?”

“Not because I couldn’t do the job.”

He actually rolled his eyes at her, turned and walked back into the living room. “I told him I didn’t need a babysitter.”

She followed. “Do you want to argue?”

“No, I just want to be left alone.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen. Your brothers are worried about you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Cori looked around the messy apartment. “I can see that.” She turned, bending over to pick up a week old newspaper.

“Leave it alone,” he said, grabbing her wrist from behind.

Reflexes honed from years of training had her grabbing, jerking and flipping. Within the blink of an eye, she had him flat on his back on the carpet, straddling his lean waist with his arms pinned over his head with her hands.

He stared wide-eyed up at her, not saying a word. As adrenaline rushed through her, she became aware of him as a man, his heat penetrating her jeans, the rapid rise and fall of his chest bringing him within close proximity to her. As she licked her suddenly dry lips, she watched his pupils dilate.

A sudden muscle cramp in her calf had her wiggling, and she could feel his erection when she scooted backwards.

He groaned and lifted his hips.

She bent to kiss him. His lips were firm, yielding instantly under hers. Before she could change her mind, realizing in some far reaches of her brain that this probably wasn't a good idea, he tilted his head, opening his mouth.

Hunger and frighteningly potent lust consumed her as she deepened the kiss; her tongue exploring, teasing his to follow her back, to fuck her mouth.

She released his hands to reach for his shirt, jerking it open without regard to buttons or ripping fabric. When he reached for her, she sat up, groaning as she left his mouth. She scooted forward, pinning his arms with her knees as she yanked at her shirt, flipping it over her head.

John could feel his eyes widen as he took in Cori's bulletproof vest, which she disposed of quickly. He groaned as full, voluptuous breasts spilled free, his hands itching to latch on to them. And here he had thought her flat-chested.

Her legs were spread wide, her crotch almost to his chin and he could smell her arousal. Her take charge attitude turned him on and while casual sex had never been his *forté*, in fact, sex was not in his daily planner any more at all, he wanted her with an urgency that bordered on pain.

"You like?" She teased him with her nipples, leaning forward to rub them across his face. He fisted his hands, searching for the control he had exerted for so long, it was second nature. It had deserted him, leaving in its wake an incredible ache to be fucked. It was a word he never used, but somehow seemed appropriate for what he wanted to happen.

He managed to capture a nipple with his teeth, and when he thought he had bitten too rough, she only groaned, her knees relaxing the pressure on his arms as she leaned forward, allowing

him to suck her further into his mouth. His arms came up around her, pulling her closer still, burying his face in her delicious mounds.

She stretched out on top of him and together, they rolled over and over, his mouth sucking hard, her nails digging into his back before she slid them around and grabbed for his belt. In a frenzy of buttons and zippers, she practically ripped his clothes off, all the while his mouth sucked anywhere he could find—collarbone, shoulder, belly.

She flipped over on her back to kick off her jeans and he knew his face showed surprise when he saw her partially shaved mound. Only a thin strip of hair lay at the top, her feminine lips and folds smooth as a peach. Before he could form a thought about what it would be like to taste her there, she rolled over, burying her face in his groin, one hand capturing his balls. His hips jerked as she licked him from base to tip, then nibbled down the back side. Nothing had ever felt so close to heaven as her hot mouth devouring him.

He reached over and caressed her hip, sliding his hand around her bottom and between the crease of her ass cheeks. Without relinquishing him, she bent her leg, opening herself and he slid a finger into her heat.

“More!” She pushed against his hand as she circled the tip of him with her tongue.

He inserted another digit and she sucked him into her mouth. He rubbed her clit with his thumb. She nipped the tip of him with her sharp teeth. For every move he made, she made two and just when John knew he couldn’t last much longer, she turned and straddled him again, his penis throbbing against her belly as she leaned toward him.

“How long has it been?”

“Five years,” he grunted out the answer.

“Four for me. Are you safe?” She had her hands on him again, stroking, squeezing.

“Honey, what I feel is anything but safe. I feel like I’m going up in flames.”

She squeezed harder and he groaned. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t have any protection. Haven’t exactly needed it. Are you?”

He thought he heard her say *pill*, but his brain was beyond thinking. His body was one complete mass of nerve endings, every gasping breath sharper, the colors behind his closed eyes brilliant and bursting like a kaleidoscope. If she stroked him one more time, he knew he was going to come.

“What should we do?” He reached up and pinched her nipples, tugging slightly.

“Quit talking and fuck me,” she gasped, raising her hips and sliding down on him.

She was so wet and hot, she had no trouble taking all of him at once. The impact of her hips meshing with his totally broke John. He bucked; she lifted and he slammed into her again. Within seconds, he could feel her muscles clench around him and when she stiffened and moaned, it was all over. He spurted hotly, over and over; the explosion of his orgasm slamming through his groin, down his legs and up to his belly. And then he may have actually blacked out.

* * * *

Damn, he was incredible. Cori’s training failed her as she tried unsuccessfully to get her breathing under control. Her vagina was still throbbing and her legs tingled, even after the most phenomenal multiple climax she had ever had.

Since John didn’t seem inclined to move, she didn’t either, instead sitting astride him with his cock still buried deep. She

watched as his face finally relaxed, his hands sliding away from where he had clutched her thighs.

She felt no remorse for what they had done, no guilt. If the fact he was still fairly hard inside her was any indication, it was mutual pleasure. She had forgotten how sweet good sex could be.

She squeezed her inner muscles and his eyelids flickered.

She wiggled and clenched again and his eyes opened, but she wasn't at all sure he saw her. He had a sort of dazed expression. When he opened his mouth, she touched a finger to his lips.

"Did you like that?"

He smiled—the first she had seen, and her stomach flipped over. What the man could do with a simple smile.

"Then just lie there and enjoy."

* * * *

John wondered what price he would have to pay for the pleasure Cori had given him—in fact, was still giving him. In his business life, he had found there was a price for everything; it was just a matter of whether a person was willing to pay it or not.

Cori did a funny little hip movement and John could feel himself swell inside her. As she began to move slowly up and down on him, he throbbed harder and he forgot about paying the piper, and about her reasons for being there, and gave himself up to the spine-tingling sensations she created with each clench of her muscles.

He should probably exert some effort, the dominant male part of his brain said. She said to lay back and enjoy, he argued, and the fact of the matter was he was thoroughly enjoying the way her breasts bounced as she moved, the little groaning sounds that came from deep in her throat, and the incredible squeeze of her muscles. If she wanted to be in charge, who was he to argue?

And then he couldn't think at all as Cori increased her pace, dragging John from passive to active as his balls tightened, the rush of orgasm on him once again.

As Cori came back to earth after another incredible orgasm, she wondered how they would get past the always awkward *moment after*. She couldn't keep riding him like she had just done. Whereas after the first time for both of them he had still been ready to go again, this time she could feel him slipping from her wet passage as he shrank in size.

To be honest, she doubted she could do it again anyway. She felt raw, her nerve endings still tingling from overstimulation. But she wasn't about to tell John that; to give him that kind of power over her.

She glanced down at him and thought he probably wouldn't take advantage of her in that way, but then again, he was a male. And while he had been a great fuck, she wasn't about to change a lifetime of survival instincts because of one night.

She bent down and gave him a quick kiss on the lips and then hopped off him. "How about you fixing us something to eat while I get in the shower?" she asked.

"How about if I order pizza?" he replied. "What kind do you like?"

She stopped at the door to his bedroom, turning fully around, knowing from his reaction that her body still turned him on.

"Do you have any idea how bad that is for you?"

His gaze slid up and down her body and she felt herself warm under the appraisal. "No, but I suppose you're going to tell me."

"Alright, I won't, but first thing tomorrow, we're going shopping for some healthy food." She turned and headed for the shower.

* * * *

“Thanks, Rick,” John said to the delivery kid as he took the pizza and handed him a twenty. When Rick didn’t answer in his usual monotone, John looked up, saw Rick’s mouth gaping, and turned quickly around.

“Hello, there.” Cori stood across the room, her long, bare legs showing beneath one of his shirts. A shirt that gaped in the front showing her cleavage as well.

Growling, he stuffed the money in Rick’s shirt pocket, gave him a shove and slammed the door in his face.

“If you wanted the entire city to know you’re here, you couldn’t have picked a better way to do it.” He headed for the kitchen with the pizza. He dug around for some paper plates.

“Why’s that?”

“Rick’s mom is the worse gossip in the neighborhood. If you took Boston and divided it into say,” he shrugged, “six zones, his mom controls what goes on in this zone, which also includes my store.” He turned from the counter with a plate of pizza and practically ran into her as she hopped up on the counter. Her bare legs beckoned his gaze, and as he stared, she snatched the plate out of his hands.

“Thought you didn’t eat pizza.”

“Didn’t say that; just said it was bad for you.” She swigged his beer, also left sitting on the counter, handed it to him and said, “Continue.”

He grabbed another plate. “Luckily, if Mrs. Parnelly rules zone six, my mother lives across town in zone one, so although everyone in the neighborhood will know about you by morning, it may take a few days for the news to reach Mom.”

“Will your mom be upset?”

He snorted. “Mother will be ecstatic, thinking soon all her sons will be happily married.” He looked at her and for just a second, the hurt surfaced. “I have been a source of disappointment.”

Cori couldn't relate, never having had parents to embarrass or disappoint. She shrugged. "Well, look at it this way. Your brothers were hoping if whoever is doing the flower thing is a female, that having me in the vicinity will deter her and she'll find someone else to harass."

John perked up. "I hadn't thought of that." Then he immediately frowned. "But I wish Mom didn't hear the gossip. She'll be mad that I didn't bring you over to meet her first."

"We can do that." She shrugged nonchalantly.

"No," John stated emphatically. "I can't lie to my mom, and you are not really my girlfriend; it's all a ruse. Besides, you need to stay away from my sisters-in-law. They have a way of sucking you into the family that..." He just shook his head.

They finished off the pizza without any more discussion, which was all right with Cori. It was one thing to have sex with a guy she was supposed to protect. It was something else to get too involved and that included learning more about his family. Even though she liked John, and what she already knew of his family, this was a job.

John left her to pick up the kitchen while he showered. Cori checked out the hall closet and found a pillow and blanket, and had just made up her bed on the couch when he came back into the room.

"What are you doing?"

"You have one bedroom and one study, in which I didn't see a bed. So I'll sleep on the couch."

"But I thought..." An hour ago, they had been rolling around on the floor having hot, raw sex, and now she was going to sleep on the couch?

"That was personal," she said as though she could read his mind.

"I'd say it was pretty personal."

"This is business. I'm getting paid to protect you."

John ground his teeth. “I’m so glad you distinguished that for me.” He turned and stomped into his room, knowing he was acting like an angry child but unable to help it. In all the more rational reaches of his mind, he knew she was right. But on the emotional level, he was having trouble letting go of the way she had made him feel, and of the mind-boggling sex. Maybe if it hadn’t been five years; maybe if she hadn’t turned him on so much with her attitude; maybe...

John shook his head to clear it. He couldn’t deal with *maybes* in his life. He had more immediate problems, like facing work tomorrow and whatever the stalker had in store for him. He heard a delicate cough from the other room as he crawled into bed. Why did he have the sneaking suspicion the woman in the other room was more of a danger to him than any stalker thought to be?

Chapter 3

Cori was up and dressed by the time John woke the next morning. The rich smell of coffee trailed through the apartment. He couldn't remember the last time someone, specifically female, had spent the night in his condo. And while he and Cori hadn't exactly spent the night in the same bed, they had certainly heated up other areas of the place.

As he dressed, he wondered what was going to happen. He really didn't need or want a bodyguard, but he found he wanted Cori. The sex they had experienced was explosive, and while John might not actively search out a relationship, he couldn't deny she had awakened his thoroughly dormant libido.

But she was here on business; he reminded himself of her comments. How could she so calculatingly separate the two and why should it even matter to him? The image of breasts that were more than a handful and tight, wet heat that had sucked him dry was exactly why it mattered. Damn, she was sexy.

"Yeah, but you found Joanie sexy enough to marry, and look how that turned out," he lectured his reflection in the mirror. His short-lived marriage had been a disaster from the beginning, and in retrospect, he didn't understand how he missed all the signs.

He shook his head to clear it. Cori wasn't Joanie. Even as he told himself that, a small part of him still had questions, and he wondered if the physical craving Cori had unleashed was blinding him to the realities. After all, what did he really know about her?

It had been too long since he'd had a date, much less anything resembling a relationship.

He rubbed his hands over his face. It was entirely too early in the day for those kinds of thoughts. With a sigh, he realized that the organized, methodical person he was, in this instance, would have to play it by ear.

"Ready to go?" Cori met him at the door. She was certainly back in business mode dressed all in black. He could tell by the way she looked that she wore her vest, and that turned his focus to wondering what they were up against.

* * * *

Cori had to keep telling herself she was on the job; that her client's safety came before anything else. She checked doorways and kept a vigilant eye to rooftops and alleyways as she and John walked to his store. She would have preferred a vehicle, but John insisted he wasn't going to ride in a car for a whole two blocks. Besides, the parking was limited and he'd end up parking farther away from his shop than his condo garage anyway.

She didn't breathe easy until they entered the shop and the door closed behind them. Since it was earlier than opening hours, John relocked the door, and she made a mental note to check the lock systems at both front and back. Only then did she relax enough for her thoughts to drift to last night.

As John went through his morning routine, she observed his efficient, orderly processes. She watched his hands opening the mail and remembered how they had felt squeezing, molding her breasts. As he sat on the edge of his desk, one leg bent and the other braced on the floor, her gaze drifted to his crotch. She couldn't help herself. She had known better than to mix business with pleasure but last night had just happened. And while she wasn't the least bit sorry because sex with John had been beyond phenomenal, she wondered if she would be able to do her job.

She mentally chastised herself. She was a professional; of course she could do her job. There would not be a repeat of what happened four years ago.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” John said and she saw him gazing around the office, a confused look on his face and a paper in his hand.

“What?” She came over to him, taking the paper and perusing the writing. It appeared to be an invoice.

“Not that, this.” John spread his arms wide, encompassing the entire place. “I told Agnes not to throw anything away; to keep anything that came in.”

“So?”

“There’s nothing here. No deliveries from a secret admirer have been made in the two weeks I’ve been gone.”

Cori took a closer look around the store. It was neatly arranged with antiques and collectibles, and although she didn’t know anything about antiques, she did realize that there were no flowers or dishes of candy or cookies—the items his brothers had indicated seemed to be the admirer’s forte.

“There’s nothing here that shouldn’t be?” she questioned him anyway as she walked to the front of the store. There were no shades on the windows and she casually glanced up and down the street, looking for anything out of place; any people who appeared to be loitering.

“No, thank God. Maybe it’s stopped.” She could hear the relief in his voice.

She swung back to face him. “Or maybe someone knows your schedule.” She watched his face fall and his shoulders slump.

“Sorry, but that’s a consideration. Who knew you would be out of town?”

He shrugged. “Just Agnes, and my brothers.”

“No one else? Friends, or acquaintances?”

He shook his head. "If customers call and I'm out, Agnes just tells them I'll call when I get back. She never says how long I'll be gone—nothing like that."

"Don't leave." She commanded as she stepped out the front door, closing it softly behind her. She casually walked to the end of the block and back, but her glances took in everything—number of doorways, the alley, the amount of parking and the types of cars already lining the curbs. She turned and walked up the other side of the street, keeping the *Main Street Antiques* doorway in her peripheral vision at all times.

The minute she came back into the store, she grabbed a notepad from the counter and quickly sketched the street, adding all the items she had observed, including the license tags of the parked cars.

"That's really good," John commented over her shoulder.

"My memory? That's part of why I'm good at my job."

"No, I meant the sketch. You drew actual buildings and cars, not just blocks to represent them."

Not used to compliments because her art was a very private thing, she blushed.

John crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the counter close by. "We have a little time before Agnes comes in and the store opens. Tell me about Cori Taggart. Why do you get defensive about your ability to do your job?"

Her brows scrunched. "I don't get defensive." Her voice betrayed her words, the edges rough and angry.

"I don't get defensive," he mimicked her.

"Just because I'm your bodyguard, doesn't give you the right to get personal," she growled, unable to keep the anger from her voice.

John considered himself a quiet, reserved sort of guy. Some might even call him boring, but right at that moment, he wanted to strangle Cori. *Not get personal?* "I would say we're a little

beyond personal,” he growled right back at her, his memory of last night making the blood rush to his groin. What was it about her that raised his hackles? “Besides, if I ask about your ability to do your job, that’s purely business!” His voice had steadily risen in volume and he snapped his mouth shut, appalled to realize she had egged him into shouting.

“Am I here at an inconvenient time?” Gordon asked, the bell over the front door announcing his presence.

John turned toward his brother, glad of any excuse to get his thoughts away from Cori and the overtly sexy way she canted her hips out when she leaned back against the counter.

“Actually, it’s the perfect time,” John replied. “I want to talk to you.” Even though Gordon was older, John’s voice was firm as he glared at his brother before turning and walking back to his office. When Cori tried to follow, he stopped her with a hand. “Sorry, this is *personal*. Perhaps you need to stay out front and *guard* the place.”

She looked at him and then her gaze fell to the floor. He felt immediately guilty for his sarcastic tone of voice. He quickly closed the door and turned his anger on his brother.

“She’s driving me nuts! You don’t know what you’ve done.”

Gordon gave him his *I-know-what’s-best-for-you* smile—the one he used to use as the older brother and now turned on the juries in the courtroom, but all he said was, “I see you’ve met Cori.”

“Did you hear me? She’s worse than the flowers and cookies.” John paced the small confines of his office.

“Why are you so upset, John? She just started work yesterday. What has she done?”

It was a good thing John had his back to his brother at that moment so Gordon couldn’t see the blush that John knew heated his face. There was no way he could tell Gordon what had

transpired last night. Hell, he didn't know how he could rationally explain it to himself; it had just happened.

"Why *her*?" he asked instead.

"Look, I explained that when I called you last week. You need someone to look into the secret admirer thing, and with the break-in," he shrugged, "it just seemed like a good idea for you to have a little protection."

"Why *her*?" he asked again, emphasizing the gender.

Gordon smiled. "I would tell you we decided to set you up, but knowing how you feel about that sort of thing, we just figured having a female around might deter the stalker, since it appears to be a love interest."

John bent his head, massaging his brow with his fingertips. What Gordon said made sense, but could he handle having Cori around twenty-four/seven? Having sampled her body last night after such a long hiatus from any kind of physical relationship, he was confused. Did he want *her*, or just the physical act of sex? And now she seemed intent on just doing her job.

"But did you hear me, Gordy? I almost yelled. I never yell," he finished on a sigh.

Gordon laughed at him. "Just give it a chance, JJ." He walked to the door, then paused. "You know, it really doesn't hurt to let loose with a yell now and then." He was gone before John could ask if he was really referring to the tone of his voice.

* * * *

John knew he would have to apologize to Cori but it was late afternoon before he had the chance. The shop was unusually busy most of the day and besides, Agnes was around. Even though she was hard of hearing, she seemed to pick up on the unspoken tension and kept giving Cori looks. John had introduced the two women, using the excuse that Cori would be around for awhile, learning the business.

Finally, at four, he left Agnes to close up, and walked to the front door, Cori close behind him. She had been quiet for most of the day, and when John glanced her way, he could see the hurt still in her expression.

“Look, I’m sorry for yelling at you this morning,” he stated as soon as the door closed behind them.

“I’m just doing my job,” she said at the same time.

“Truce?” he replied.

For the first time that day, she smiled at him. “Alright, but only if we go to the grocery store for some real food.”

He laughed, surprised at how that made him feel. It had been too long since he felt like laughing. “Do you know how to cook real food?”

She shrugged. “That’s not in my job description.”

Since she seemed determined now to keep their relationship strictly business, he decided he would have to control his wayward thoughts about cooking her a good meal and then making love to her. That thought made him frown, because there was something about Cori that he wanted to explore more fully.

She must have misinterpreted his expression, because she blurted out, “I do cook, just not very well.”

“That makes two of us. Perhaps together, we can manage not to burn the condo down.”

* * * *

“This is not going well,” Morgan stated as soon as Keva and her sisters-in-law connected for their weekly conference call. “It’s been weeks, and John’s not showing the slightest interest in any women.”

“The fake secret admirer was fine to begin with,” Katie Jo agreed, “but eventually, we’re going to have to come up with a real person.”

“As far as anyone knows, has John had a date since we started this?” Keva asked.

“No,” Suzy said, “but lately, there’s been a woman constantly at the store.”

“That’s strange,” Penny said. “The last I knew, only Mrs. Kregley worked for him, doing the books, and she’s so old, she can hardly get around.”

“Ladies, we knew it would take time,” Suzy reminded them.

“Well, there’s time, and then there’s eternity,” Keva stated flatly. “If a plot doesn’t move forward, everybody’s going to lose interest.”

Suzy cut in, “I think I may just go and ask who that woman is.”

“That might not be a good idea. There could be any number of reasons why she’s there. She could be a buyer, or some business associate. If we look too interested, he may become suspicious and think it’s a set-up even when it’s not.”

The women decided not to send anything for a week or two, just to see if it piqued John’s interest. Then, they’d give their plan a little more time. The conversation turned to updating each other on all their children’s progress before saying good night.

Keva hung up the phone and turned, running smack into Gage.

“What’s going on?” her husband asked, scrutinizing her in that way he had that still made Keva hot inside.

“Hmmm?” She tried to get around him, but he grabbed her, circling her waist and pulling her back against his chest.

“Keva?” Her name hummed as he nibbled on her earlobe. Dang, she hated when he did that. No, actually she loved it, but she knew she couldn’t resist him when he attacked her senses.

“Just plotting a story,” she said, then sighed as his hands skimmed down her stomach and pulled her hips back against his. She could feel his erection nudging through the thin fabric of her nightgown.

“You’re plotting alright, but I doubt it’s for some book. Did I hear John’s name mentioned?”

When she didn’t answer right away, Gage picked her up and tossed her on their bed, following her down. He scrunched up her nightie and jerked off the bath towel he had around his hips. From the first time she had seen Gage, she had fallen fast and hard for him, and even after three years of marriage, she burned for his touch. She spread her legs, gasping as the hot tip of him rubbed against her sex.

“What are you up to, darling wife of mine?” Gage nudged forward just a little but when Keva opened for him, he pulled back. “Uh-uh. Not unless you tell me.”

“Gage,” she whined, “that’s not fair. It’s a sisterhood thing.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “If it involves John, then it’s the brotherhood you have to deal with.”

Keva knew Gage wouldn’t relent; not when it came to protecting his brothers. His slightest touch had her hot and achy and she desperately wanted him inside her. She tweaked his nipples and he groaned, but refused to budge. With a huff, she relented. “You have to promise not to tell John, but we’re trying to set him up.”

“You’re what?” Gage reared back, arms braced on either side of her, staring at her with what Keva could only describe as incredulity.

The longer he stared, the more uncomfortable Keva became. “We just thought he should have a woman friend, and since we knew he probably wouldn’t appreciate a blind date, we decided to be a little sneakier. We’ve been sending him things from a secret admirer, hoping he’ll think they’re from some of

his female acquaintances. Then maybe he'll come out of his shell and ask one of them out."

She watched as her husband's brow cleared and then he began to laugh. His arms gave way and he rolled to his side, sex forgotten as he just kept laughing.

Keva turned and punched him in the arm. "What's so funny about our wanting him to be happy?"

"Nothing," Gage gasped between bouts of laughter. "Not a...damn...thing." He pinched his lips together, but the minute he glanced at her, he started laughing again. Keva narrowed her gaze.

"Ha, ha. I'm glad you think this is so funny," she huffed, rolling away to swing her legs over the side of the bed.

"Sweetheart, wait," Gage gasped as he grabbed her around the waist, hauling her back into bed. He immediately kissed her, knowing her hot lips would turn his humor to passion, and the only way he could keep from telling her what was going on was to get his mind off it. She stiffened beneath him, but with a little coaxing, she softened, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Ouch!" he yelped as she tugged his hair hard enough to make him release her lips. The fire of indignation danced in her gaze.

"Don't think you can distract me with your kisses." She pouted.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he replied as he began kissing forays down the side of her neck.

"I want to know what's so funny."

"Nothing, honest." He pulled the strap of her gown down her shoulder and kissed across her collarbone. When he realized she wasn't responding to his seduction, he gave what he hoped sounded like a sigh of surrender.

“Okay. It’s just that we’ve all tried to set John up over the years, and it just struck me as funny that Penny and Suzy would agree to trying it again.”

“That’s it?” She squinted at him with one eye.

Gage never lied to Keva and only when it was in the best interest of his family did he occasionally omit details. He thought over what he had said and decided this was one of those times. “Baby, would I lie to you?”

She pushed, rolling them over so she was on top. She gave him a look that Gage knew *she thought* would keep him in place. “Only if it’s a day you want to die,” she said sweetly, before sliding down his chest, kissing her way lower and lower until she showed him that she did, indeed, hold his life in her delightfully wicked hands.

* * * *

Gage waited to visit with his brothers until he flew to Boston later that week. They gathered at his office, got Chase on conference call, and all chuckled over their wives’ plan.

“You know,” he said, “I don’t think we should tell Cori or John that we know. I definitely don’t think we should tell our wives, especially since we’re doing basically the same thing by putting Cori in John’s path.”

“Doesn’t Keva think you’ll tell us?”

“Well, we never got to that discussion and I think she believes if she doesn’t say anything else, I’ll forget it, too. As long as we now know John’s not in danger, it should be interesting to see what happens.”

“If Cori stays around John very long, *something* should happen,” Travis said. “After all, John’s no saint and Cori is damn good-looking.”

“And,” Chase added, “it would be interesting to see who wins.” All the McVickers were competitive by nature, so his comment really didn’t surprise anyone. “Will we, if by hiring

Cori, she and John manage to hook up? Or will it be our wives, if John actually starts dating someone else?”

“You’re tinkering with our brother’s life,” Michael stated flatly. He always defended his twin, no matter what.

The other three all looked at Michael and slowly, one by one, they grinned.

“Yeah,” Travis drawled as he held his hand in the air and Gage and Gordon gave him a high five. Michael just scowled.

“So that solves the stalker issue,” Chase’s voice came across the speakerphone, “but what about the break-in? I know none of your wives would do that.”

Travis spoke up. “I talked to Tanner at police headquarters before I came over here. He said they just nabbed some high school kids with a cache of business cards. Apparently the newest way to get high is to break into a store, take a business card and not get caught. The kid with the address closest to the police station wins.”

“Dumb kids.” Gordon shook his head.

“Anyway,” Travis continued, “one of the perps had a card from *Main Street Antiques*.”

“So now will you just leave John alone and let nature take its course?” Mike asked.

Travis grinned. “*Let nature take its course*—now that’s an interesting metaphor.”

Chase spoke up again. “I gotta run, but maybe we should tell John about the break-in anyway so he has one less thing to worry about. And, perhaps gauge his interest in Cori?”

“The one time I stopped at the store, they were fighting like cats and dogs,” Gordon commented. “Is that a good thing?”

Gage laughed. Gordon had been married the longest and he doubted that he and Suzy ever argued. “Arguing is good, depending on how you make up.” He recalled the steamy

lovemaking with Keva just before he had left New York. And that hadn't even been because of an argument.

Gordon said he would call John, and as soon as Chase signed off, he dialed John's number at the store. John had already heard from the police, so Gordon broached the other reason for the call.

"You know, I've been thinking about what you said last week when I was in. You're probably right and you don't need a security consultant. Why don't you tell Cori she's no longer needed and to stop by my office and I'll write her a check for her time?"

"No!" his brother shouted into the phone. Gordon held it away from his ear, looking at Gage and Travis in surprise. John never yelled.

"Why?" Gordon asked.

He could hear the hesitation in John's voice. "Well, that is, even if the break-in was just kids, there's still the deliveries."

Gordon felt a moment of guilt for deceiving his brother now that they knew the truth. "I thought you didn't want a bodyguard."

"Maybe I changed my mind. Look, I'll pay Cori's salary; you don't need to worry about that."

"No, that's fine," Gordon replied, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice. "We're in this together." He gave his brothers a thumbs up. "Keep Cori on in...whatever capacity you need."

Chapter 4

John sat and stared at the phone after he hung up. Why had he told his brother he would keep Cori on? Was it really to find the flower stalker, who was a decided nuisance, even though he had never really felt physically threatened? Or was there more to it?

He tilted his head to see past his open doorway into the store. Agnes was on her lunch hour and Cori stood, elbows on the counter, browsing one of his antique books. Bent at the waist with her butt stuck out, she wore her perpetual black, but he recalled all too vividly what she looked like stripped down to pale skin.

The past week or more had been both a pleasure and a pain. Cori insisted on being by his side everywhere he went, but none of his clients seemed to mind her presence when he made calls on them. In fact, Henry Longfoot had outright invited her to stay at his place for dinner the afternoon they visited. Cori had acted delighted, and couldn't understand why John had been adamant about getting back to the store, and taking Cori with him.

"He collects sex toys and erotica," John had finally told her in the car as they had driven back to the city.

"So? He's your client. Does that mean you're his procurer?" she had sarcastically replied.

John had understood exactly what she meant, and hadn't tried to defend his own actions. "He has quite an extensive

collection, and he makes use of all of it.” He had given her a sidelong look to make sure she understood him.

She had looked surprised. “Is there a lot of antique erotica?”

“Several versions of the Kama Sutra, among other things.”

“What kinds of things?” she had pressed.

John could feel his cheeks grow warm even now as he recalled their conversation. Buying antique erotica for a client was one thing; discussing it with Cori was something else entirely. Especially when she had caught him blushing.

John closed his eyes for a moment, but when he opened them, her swaying fanny still filled his vision. Every day found him more hard pressed to keep his hands to himself when around her. She didn’t know anything about antiques and seemed disinclined to learn, yet she charmed his clients and customers and made him smile at the stories she told about her brother.

He frowned, recalling how she immediately clammed up if he asked about her life. Anything personal, unless she volunteered it, seemed to be off limits. And the more she sidestepped his questions, the more intrigued he became as to how she had become the woman she was.

Upon reflection, John realized he had not really enjoyed his life for some time. Oh, he lived well enough, and traveled extensively, but it was just routine—boring at times. He was boring, he decided. Being around Cori, with her bubbly laughter, made him want to laugh too. It also made him want to take her in his arms and hold her tight and kiss her laughing lips.

And therein lay the painful part of knowing her. After that first wild encounter the night they had met, Cori’s body language said *hands off*. He could somewhat understand that she needed to keep her mind on the business at hand, but she was driving him nuts living in such close proximity. Her shampoo and deodorant were in his bathroom. She had come in the other

morning while he was shaving and casually grabbed her hairbrush.

It was more than a man could take.

"Hey, John," Cori called him from the other room, shaking him loose from his daydream.

"How come none of your antique books carry that erotica stuff you sell Mr. Longfoot?" she asked when he got to her side.

Doesn't she realize what she's doing? John wondered. Not only did she tantalize him with her constant presence, she wanted to talk about erotica. He gritted his teeth as he none too gently tugged the book away from her and slammed it closed.

"Some items are bought and sold...discreetly," he managed to say, his voice slightly higher pitched. He cleared his throat.

She turned toward him, leaning her elbows on the counter behind her, which jutted her breasts practically in his face. "You mean like buying and selling drugs, or guns?"

"I certainly don't deal in illegal products of any kind!" He straightened with affronted dignity before he realized she was smiling.

The twinkle in her green eyes should have warned him she was teasing, even before she said, "Lighten up, I was just kidding."

It was a good thing the bell over the door chimed at that moment, because John thought he might have just grabbed Cori and kissed her smiling lips right then and there. *How much more...* Maybe he should tell her that he didn't need her anymore. As he walked to the front of the store to greet a customer, he knew that wasn't going to happen. Even if she drove him half mad, there was something about her that he craved.

* * * *

Cori watched John saunter to the front, his long stride tightening the muscles of his butt and thighs. *Why did I egg him on?* she wondered. He probably thought she was a totally

lascivious brat. She was finding it harder and harder to keep her mind on business. Since she had started this job, there hadn't been any deliveries and she had plenty of time to think about the sex they had shared.

It would probably have been better if she had remained celibate. While she had thought about sex in the past four years, she had refrained from indulging. Now that she had, she wanted more.

She heard John murmur something to the lady customer. Just his voice turned her on, not to mention what she knew was hidden beneath his casual business attire.

She knew what could happen if she got involved in a relationship while working. But John wasn't Zack, she reminded herself. It wouldn't happen again. Still, until she knew what kind of threat they were up against, she should keep her distance.

"A young man gave me these just as I opened the door," Agnes said as she walked in from lunch with a bouquet of flowers. "Isn't that nice? I'd been missing all the flowers we used to get."

Cori grabbed the card she saw protruding from the daisies, read the few words and swore.

She raced to the front door, jerking it open to look up and down the street. There were no young men in sight. She raced to the corner and looked both ways.

"Shit." She clenched her fists as she walked back to *Main Street Antiques*.

John looked a little pale and was scowling at the colorful bunch of flowers Agnes still held.

"You okay?" she asked him.

He seemed to shake himself out of his stupor. "Yeah, I just thought, after so long, that maybe it was over."

"Well, we have a card now, and hopefully, there will be fingerprints on it." She looked down at the plain white note card

and envelope. "That is, other than mine." She hadn't even thought about handling the card until she had seen *from your secret admirer* written in neat black handwriting. It was the only thing they might have to go on since there was no identifying florist or return address.

"Look, since you've gotten a delivery, chances are there will be no more today. And this time, the person didn't even come inside, so it appears your admirer is just interested in you getting these things, not in seeing your reaction or anything else." As she talked, she slipped the card and envelope into one of the clear covers John used for some of his older books and letters. There was no sense in getting more of her prints on the card or destroying the ones that may be there. "If you'll be alright, I'll take this over to Bob right away and see if he can get any fingerprints off it."

"Of course, I'll be alright," John huffed.

She just shook her head. Just like a man not to want to show the least weakness. "If I'm not back by closing time, wait for me."

"If you're not back, I'm going home. There's been no physical threat and always before, I've only received one delivery a day. That means nothing else is going to happen. I'm not going to stay here like some eight year old."

"Then quit acting like one and learn to follow directions."

"I can fire you anytime, you know!" he hollered at her as she reached the front door.

"Try it and I might just have to shoot you," she said over her shoulder.

"Oh, my, is she going to shoot somebody?" she heard Agnes ask John and she grinned. Let him explain that while she was gone.

* * * *

John ate alone, flipped through the television channels and tried to stay awake until Cori arrived. By midnight, he finally crawled into bed; telling himself not to worry and that she could take care of herself. Or at least if she was with Bob, he would take care of her. Still, he tossed and turned and kept watching the clock until he finally heard the outside door click closed.

After the bathroom light had gone on and minutes later off again, he thought he could settle down and sleep, but the living room light remained on. Wondering what was keeping Cori up, he slipped into the living room, hoping she had learned something about the stalker.

He opened his mouth to speak, but anything he might have said flew right out of his head as he saw her silhouetted near the windows. The full moon outlined her shape; whatever she was wearing was practically transparent in the pale light.

“You look...what are you wearing?” he finally managed to choke out.

She turned slightly and he could clearly see the outline of her breasts, the shimmery fabric of her top swaying with her movements. He swallowed hard.

“Do you think I wear a bulletproof vest all the time?”

“Well, no, I mean, I try not to think of you one way or the other.” If she only knew what a lie that was. He constantly tried and failed.

She moved away from the window, padding closer and he could smell the citrus scent of her soap. “Why not, John? I have to admit, I’ve been spending a whole lot of my time thinking of you.”

She was standing close enough for him to feel her heat. The energy that surrounded her pulled at him, urging him closer.

“You’re getting paid to think of me. Well, at least to keep track of me. I mean...” He honestly didn’t know what he meant

at that moment because she was sliding her hands up his chest and around his neck.

“I’m definitely not getting paid for what I’m thinking I want to do to you right this moment,” she murmured as she kissed his chin.

“Oh?” His voice came out a squawk when she stepped closer, forcing him against the wall. Her hips slid against his groin, making him ache.

“Oh, yeah,” she purred, sliding her hands up under his tee shirt, taking it with her up and over his head. He couldn’t protest because her lips were kissing a hot trail to one nipple, which she then tongued. John groaned as she nibbled on the tip, then jerked as her warm hands slid beneath the waistband of his boxers and she began caressing his butt.

All John had thought about for over a week was making love to Cori again, but at the moment, so many sensations swirled through his body that he just stood there trying to take it all in. His boxers dropped to the floor and his penis jutted between them. The hem of her top slid over the very tip of him, the cool silk more erotic than her caressing hands. He must have made some sound, because she swayed again, then stood on tiptoes, letting the hem slide up the underside of him, then down between his belly and his shaft.

“You like?” she cooed, her hands massaging down his arms. When she got to his fingers, she laced her smaller ones with his, then used them to balance herself as she slowly kissed her way down his breastbone, his stomach, his hip. As she crouched down, her silky top again slid over that hot stiff part of him. For just an instant, he felt the cool night air before her hot mouth consumed him.

He clutched her hands, his hips jerking forward, plunging himself deeper and she took him greedily. Her teeth nibbled, her tongue stroked. John looked down to see her dark head bob

against the pale skin of his hips and it cost him what little control he had left.

“Cori,” he groaned her name as he pulled on her hands, knowing she needed to release him before he came.

She didn’t seem so inclined.

“Now!” He shook free of her hands, clutching her head in his hands and gently urging her upward. She released him slowly, sucking hard one last time. John’s knees almost gave out.

“Your bed or mine,” she whispered as she slid back up his body.

John had no desire to make love to her with his feet dangling off the end of the couch. He took her hand and led her back to his bedroom. When he sat down on the edge of the bed, she stopped in front of him.

He had to exercise extreme patience not to rip off her top and panties. He wanted her that bad. As she had done, he slid his hands up under her hem and caressed her smooth belly, gradually sliding the silky fabric up and off. With his hands splayed across her back, he urged her closer, burying his face in the cleft of her breasts. That was as far as his patience went. The minute he latched onto one perky nipple, he realized how greedy he was. He wanted all of her at once.

Cori had no trouble understanding exactly how hungry John was because her own body was screaming for fulfillment. As he sucked on her breast, she straddled his thigh, spreading her feet apart so her sex rubbed against his coarse hair. It gave her a little relief through her panties, but it was short-lived. She throbbed and ached, needing more.

Pushing against his shoulders, she followed him down as he fell back onto the bed. She plucked at the ties of her panties, yanking them off as she straddled his hips. He didn’t seem to mind her being in control and at the moment, Cori thought that

a very good thing, because she needed him inside her right this very minute.

“Do I ever get to be on top?” he asked, reading her mind.

“Next time,” she moaned as she slid down his length, her hot wet sheath taking all of him. She took his hands and put them on her breasts, urging him to squeeze. Then she began to move.

John didn’t care in the least whether he or Cori was in control of their lovemaking because she felt so damn good as she lifted her hips until he was at the very edge of her, then slid back down, her hot body gobbling up everything he had to give. He pumped into her to the rhythm of her two words that stuck in his mind before he lost all ability to think—*next time*.

“Now,” she commanded, moving faster, urging him over the crest with her. John felt her muscles clutch him and she stopped with her hips meshed to his. He watched in awe as her orgasm overtook her, her face alight with pleasure, her nipples distended, the rosy aureoles puckered.

The bliss she was experiencing, and the knowledge that he had caused it, drew John higher until he couldn’t hold back, his climax spurting hot and heavy into her. He groaned, the electrifying sensations shooting through his body almost to the point of pain. His arms shook as they fell away from her body to lay limp on the mattress.

He could explain her effect on him the first time as having been from abstinence. But this time was just as incredible, and even as his body calmed, he knew he could take her again within minutes. She had some dizzying effect on him that he didn’t care to analyze, at least not at the moment with her breasts crushed against his chest.

“Nice,” she murmured as she kissed his neck and slid off to the side. When the bed creaked, he realized she was leaving. He grabbed her arm.

“Where are you going?”

“Out to the couch.”

“You can’t be serious. After what just happened?”

“My job is to make sure nobody gets to you. The couch is between your bedroom and the door.” He knew she took her job seriously, but he thought he heard some hesitancy in her voice.

“Cori, stay.” It wasn’t exactly a plea, or a command, which he knew would ruffle her feathers. He wished he had turned on the light so he could read her expression.

The bed moved again, then she was pushing against his shoulder.

“Fine, but move over so I can sleep on this side. At least I’ll still be between you and the door.”

She was a hard woman and disinclined to give in easily. John smiled in the dark, feeling pretty full of himself for what felt was a definite score for his side.

* * * *

“He couldn’t find anything?” John asked as they walked toward the store the next morning.

Cori was glad he wanted to discuss the business at hand, because she didn’t want to think too deeply about sleeping with him last night. Great sex was one thing, but sleeping together was just more intimate and she had told herself she wasn’t going for a relationship. Now, she concentrated on what Bob had told her last night.

“There were plenty of fingerprints on the card and envelope, but mine were the only ones that could be identified. The others didn’t show up in the database he accessed, which at least means whoever is sending you stuff doesn’t have a criminal record.”

“But it doesn’t help us, either.”

Cori shrugged. “Something will turn up.”

John held the door open for her, but before she could enter, a young girl came out. It was just a few minutes past nine,

and Cori didn't think the girl was the type to be interested in antiques. Her instincts came to full alert.

As she watched the girl walk away, not in any hurry, she said to John, "Quick, find out if that girl just delivered anything."

She held the door, keeping the girl in sight, as John hurried inside to speak to Agnes.

"Candy!" he shouted in her ear, practically running into her in his haste to get back to the sidewalk. "Let's go."

"You stay here. This is my job," she commanded and when he started to protest, she put a hand on his chest. "I mean it, John." She gave him a quick glance before she headed down the street at a fast pace so she wouldn't lose the girl. She would deal with the hurt look she had seen on John's face later. At the moment, all her years of training kicked in, bringing her entire focus to the matter at hand.

Eight blocks later, the girl turned a corner and Cori almost lost her. If it hadn't been for her colorful tee shirt, she wouldn't have seen her slip into a doorway halfway down the block. Cori was at the storefront seconds later. *Lindt's Chocolates*. She squared her shoulders, determined to get some answers.

"Good morning," the lady behind the counter smiled at her as she came in.

"I want to know about the chocolates that girl just delivered to *Main Street Antiques*." Now that she actually had a lead, she didn't feel like wasting time on pleasantries.

The woman was clearly frightened and backed away from the counter. Cori sighed. She was dealing with someone who bought candy and flowers, not a terrorist. She softened her expression.

"Look, all I want is a name."

Carolyn, her nametag said, hesitated, then reached for the notepad by the register, still casting wary glances Cori's way. She flipped through a few pages and then stopped.

“McVicker,” she said.

Cori frowned. “I know it was delivered to a McVicker. I want to know who ordered it.”

“No,” Carolyn looked confused. “That’s who placed the order—Morgan McVicker.”

“May I see that please?” Cori asked. The woman handed her the pad. Apparently, she kept orders by customer, because not only was today’s chocolate listed, but several orders over the past six to eight weeks—all delivered to John at the store. She handed the lady back the notepad and walked outside to stand on the sidewalk.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she mumbled to herself. She pulled a small notebook from her pocket, flipping to the page where she had jotted information about the McVicker family when Bob had first talked her into taking this job. All the brothers were listed, and as she slid a finger down the page, she came to Morgan’s name. She was married to Travis.

Why the hell would she be sending candy to her brother-in-law? Especially with a secret admirer card? She narrowed her gaze. There was just one way to find out. She checked to see if she had Morgan’s address, then called John as she headed for the subway.

“I have a lead I need to pursue. You should be alright at the store until I get back.”

“What did you find out?”

Cori really didn’t want to tell him his sister-in-law had the hots for him. “I’ll tell you when I get back.” To keep from lying, she hung up on him.

Ten minutes later, she was at the *Boston Chronicle* office, second floor newsroom.

She leaned across the desk where Morgan McVicker sat engrossed with something on her computer.

“I know what you’re doing,” Cori stated in her most menacing voice.

Chapter 5

Morgan McVicker, a petite blonde, looked up in surprise.
“Excuse me, but who are you?”

Cori thumped the *Lindt’s Chocolate* business card down on the desk. “I want to know why.”

Morgan looked down at the card and her face paled. Her gaze flickered to the office off to the side and Cori glanced that way to see two men talking behind closed doors.

“What do you want?” Morgan whispered.

“I told you. Why?”

“We...I,” the woman stammered but Cori caught her slip.

“You’re not in this alone?”

With a sigh Cori knew was resignation, the woman’s shoulders slumped. “No, it’s all of us.”

“All of who?”

She again looked toward the glass-enclosed office, a worried look on her face. “We can’t talk here. If Travis or his brothers find out...” She let the sentence fade.

Morgan didn’t look the least guilty about cheating on her husband, if that’s what she was doing, but Cori was confused. Morgan had indicated she wasn’t the only one involved.

“Start calling. I want whoever it is down here right now.”

“Not here. Besides, they’re not all in town.” Her voice held more conviction this time, and Cori watched as she straightened. So, John’s sister-in-law had a little backbone. That still didn’t excuse her behavior.

“Call. Set up a meeting.” She pointed to the phone.

A few minutes later, Cori was hustled into the elevator. It wasn’t until the doors closed that she saw Morgan breathe a sigh of relief.

“You can ride with me,” she said as they walked across the parking lot. “We’re going to my sister-in-law, Penny’s, house. You just have to promise not to tell our husbands what’s going on.”

“I’ll determine that once I *know* what’s going on,” Cori stated, again amazed that the woman showed no guilt.

When they pulled up to a large two-story house on a tree-lined street in west Boston, another car pulled in directly behind them. Morgan hugged the woman who got out of the car, and as they hurried up the walk, another woman opened the door to them. They all hugged and started chatting as if absolutely nothing was wrong.

Cori stood on the step, thinking *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The McVicker women acted strangely like those old maiden aunts.

“Hello, I’m Penny McVicker. You’ve already met Morgan, and this is another sister-in-law, Suzy. Katie Jo is in Texas and Keva’s in New York, so obviously they can’t be here. You’re the young lady who’s been at John’s store recently, aren’t you? May I ask your name?”

“Cori Taggart.”

“Taggart? Why does that sound familiar?” Morgan turned to look at her.

“My brother, Bob, works for *SGM Enterprises*.”

All three women’s mouths dropped open as they stared at her. Penny recovered first.

“Please come in, Cori. Would you like some coffee?” she asked, closing the door behind all the women.

"I think we need to get the tequila out," Suzy muttered just loud enough for Cori to hear as she followed the women through several rooms to a bright, cozy kitchen.

"Is Steve trying to set you up with John?" Penny asked the minute all four women sat down at the kitchen table.

"Oh, I'll just bet there's more than Steve involved," Suzy stated. "Remember when I told you all about that meeting they had in the rec room?"

"You know, now that I think about it, Travis has been acting really strange lately," Morgan added.

Cori looked from one woman to the next. When had she lost control of the situation, and what the hell were they talking about? *Definitely* Arsenic and Old Lace, she thought as she casually pushed her coffee cup away without tasting the rich-smelling brew.

"Since I caught Morgan, here, sending secret admirer notes to John on a box of chocolates, I think I'll be the one to ask the questions," Cori steered the conversation back in the direction she wanted.

"Morgan, you're an investigative reporter. Couldn't you have been just a little sneakier?" Penny scowled at her sister-in-law.

"I did just what we had agreed on," Morgan replied.

"Look," Cori interrupted, "just tell me what the hell is going on."

"We just wanted John to be happy," Suzy stated, "so we thought to set him up with a lady friend."

"But we couldn't seem to come up with one," Penny added, "so we decided to *pretend* that he had a secret admirer."

Cori shook her head, not quite following their line of thinking. "Why would a fictitious admirer make John happy?"

Penny actually *tsked* her. "If John thought someone secretly liked him, we thought he might begin to take a closer look at his

female acquaintances and maybe start dating, or even get married.”

“That’s the stupidest thing—” Cori started. “Do you realize John thinks he’s being stalked by some psycho?” She was suddenly angry on John’s behalf.

“Oh, dear. Why would he think that?” Penny asked, then gasped. “If the guys aren’t trying to set you up with John, exactly why have you been hanging around the antique shop?”

“I was *hired* as a personal security consultant—a bodyguard really, to find out who the stalker is.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Crap.”

“Geez.”

Their exclamations were mild in comparison to what Cori wanted to say. *What a fucking mess.*

“Let me get this straight. You,” she pointed to the women, “are all trying to set John up by sending him flowers, candy and cookies from a secret admirer who doesn’t exist?”

They all nodded, then Morgan asked, “And you were hired to find out who we are?”

“Affirmative.”

“We are in so much trouble,” Suzy moaned, covering her face with her hands.

Penny seemed a little more philosophical. “Oh, I doubt it. The guys won’t yell. They’ll be too busy laughing at us.”

“Maybe not.” Morgan propped her chin on her hand, looking directly at Cori. “Are you going to rat us out?”

Cori thought about it. If she told, these women, who were only concerned for John’s welfare, might each get in some kind of trouble with their husbands, regardless of what Penny said. And despite her earlier misgivings, she sort of liked them. They were certainly full of life, and didn’t seem the least bit intimidated by her. That said a lot.

Then there was the fact that if she identified the stalker, her job would be done, and she wouldn't have an excuse to hang around John. She pursed her lips in concentration. She'd eventually have to give her paycheck back, because she couldn't ethically accept it if she knew she wasn't really on the job anymore. But she was enjoying John's company, in more ways than one, and maybe she could work out a deal where she could continue.

"I won't tell John, or my employers, who you are, but you have got to quit with the *secret admirer* crap. It really bothers John, and he's got way too much on his mind to keep worrying about someone stalking him." The minute she spoke, she knew she had said way more than she should have. Every one of the other women looked at her with various expressions ranging from surprise to measured curiosity.

"If you don't tell, does that mean you're going to keep seeing John?" Penny asked.

Cori could feel her face grow warm.

"Just exactly what are your intentions toward our brother-in-law?" Morgan narrowed her gaze at her.

Cori wasn't about to tell these women anything, especially knowing their interest in getting John married. They probably wouldn't like it if they knew she was just in it for the great sex. "Whatever happens from here on out is between John and me, got it? You ladies are to back off." She tried to sound tough.

They all had the audacity to smile at her.

"And if we don't?" Morgan asked.

Cori scowled. "I just might have to shoot one of you."

Their smiles turned to grins.

Fuck. That was the second time in as many days where she'd threatened to shoot someone, and nobody seemed to notice she wasn't even wearing her gun.

* * * *

John waited for Cori at the store, anxiously hoping she had tracked down the gift sender. He really didn't think of the person as a stalker anymore because, as Cori said, the gifts seemed intended to pique his interest, not to threaten him. As he paced to the front window, glancing up and down the street, then back to his office, it suddenly dawned on him that if Cori did find the perpetrator, her job would be over.

Damn, what was he thinking? He dropped to his chair in agitation. While she frustrated him with her bossiness, she intrigued him with her sexy body. Did he want to give that up and go back to the way he was just a few short weeks ago? He thought about the recent changes in his life. Cori was light and teasing when she wasn't on the job. He was...stolid and, he sighed, boring.

Even though he had traveled extensively, he somehow felt Cori knew more about living than he did. What could she possibly see in him anyway? If there was still time, could he learn from her? John knew from past experience that appearances could be deceiving, and he knew he would be taking a leap of faith to give himself over to Cori's tutelage. And while he hadn't trusted his instincts for years, he felt it was time to take a chance. That is, *if* Cori would be remaining.

The bell over the door chimed and John spun around. "Well?" he asked the minute Cori got to his office.

She glanced around as though looking for suspects, then closed and locked the door behind her. "It didn't quite lead me to what I expected."

He frowned. *What did that mean?* "So?" He didn't normally have to pry information out of her, but she was standing on the other side of his desk just looking at him, and John couldn't discern her thoughts. Then he decided he didn't want to as Cori slowly started undressing.

Off came the black oversized shirt. Then she pulled the tabs on her bulletproof vest, sliding it over her head and dropping it on the floor. She wore only a thin tank top beneath the vest, and John could see her nipples peak beneath the white fabric.

He cleared his throat as she came around his desk and reached for his zipper. The instant he sprang free, she stood back, just staring at his groin, making him grow harder by the second.

“Are you still on the job?” His voice rose as she shucked her jeans and panties, and then straddled his thighs.

“Oh, yeah,” she answered as she sank down on him, burying his shaft deep. “I’m sticking to you like glue.”

* * * *

“Do you have a passport?” John asked her the next morning at breakfast.

“Yeah, but it’s out at Bob’s with the rest of my stuff.” She had been staying with her brother while she did minor jobs for him, having given up her apartment in DC months ago. “Why?”

“Well, if you insist on going everywhere with me, you may have to travel to Europe,” he said casually as he walked past her to sit at the table with his coffee.

Cori felt immediately guilty. She should tell John there was no stalker anymore—actually, there never had been—and she didn’t need to go anywhere with him. But something besides her agreement with the wives made her hesitate. She wasn’t ready to give up John, or the fabulous sex they had. If she were no longer in his brothers’ employ, would John consider their personal relationship over, too?

“Look, no stalker is going to bother following you clear to Europe just to give you a bunch of flowers,” Cori told him instead.

He studiously stared at his coffee cup and she wondered what was up. He didn’t say anything for several minutes and

when he finally looked up, she thought his cheeks looked a little ruddier than usual.

“We probably shouldn’t take any chances though, should we?” He wouldn’t meet her gaze and Cori’s eyes narrowed.

“What’s really up?”

He scowled, shoving back from the table, the chair irritatingly scraping against the tile. His brothers had told her that John was very quiet and mild-mannered, but since she had met him, he had been rude at times, had yelled at her, and had lost all control when they had sex. She had to smile. Coming unglued during sex was understandable, but John just didn’t seem to be who his brothers thought he was.

Like right now. He paced the small area between the sink and the table, running his fingers through his hair. He frowned at her; opened his mouth, then snapped it shut again.

Cori’s feelings of guilt deepened. *He knows*. One of the fickle wives must have told her husband Cori had been to see them. And of course, the husband would have told his brothers. But if John knew there was no threat to him, why would he want her to go to Europe with him?

“John, I—”

“Listen, I’m not very good at relationships,” he interrupted her. “Actually, I’m lousy at them. I was married once and—”

“I’m really not into confessions,” Cori said, because receiving a confidence usually meant giving one in return, and no way was she going to discuss Zack with anybody. The year she’d spent in therapy doing that had been more than enough.

“Damn it, Cori, would you just listen a minute?”

She jerked back in surprise. “Whoa, what happened to quiet and reserved?”

He plopped down in the chair across from her, rubbing his face with his hands. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. After my marriage broke up, I closed myself off from everyone and

everything. I worked. That was it. I became more than quiet and reserved. I was boring.”

He dropped his hands to his lap and looked her straight in the eyes. “I don’t want to be boring anymore.”

Cori hadn’t wanted the sex to end, but she wasn’t sure she was ready for this. Even if she wasn’t exactly sure what *this* involved, she knew he was asking her for something more than sex. She actually thought John was sort of cute, being dull and all. He was very much a *Clark Kent/Superman* kind of guy, except that Superman only saw action behind closed doors. She grinned.

“So you do think I’m boring.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Well, sorta,” she added with a smile.

He frowned at her.

“It’s just who you are. Not everybody can be the life of the party. Besides, you do have hidden qualities that aren’t in the least boring.” She thought about their lovemaking, and the fact she hadn’t slept on the couch for several nights.

The smile Cori’s comment brought to his lips changed his entire countenance, and she decided then and there she would work to make him smile more often. He looked younger, his brown eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I’ll only go to Europe with you if it’s off the clock,” she said.

“Great,” he replied, getting up and walking toward the door. “Oh, and when you go get your passport, grab some clothes that aren’t black.” He disappeared down the hall.

“Give a guy a compliment and he suddenly gets all bossy,” Cori grumbled as she put the dishes in the dishwasher. But she was smiling.

* * * *

“The game is up,” Travis said after Gordon had finally gotten through to Steve in New York. Chase was off to the West

Coast somewhere, and Michael couldn't get away from his practice. "Cori came to the *Chronicle* office and spoke to Morgan, then they left together. Morgan didn't look too happy, so I followed them. They went to Penny's and Suzy pulled up right afterward."

"So, Cori found out the wives are responsible for the secret admirer messages. *We* already knew they were," Steve said over the speakerphone.

"Yeah, but what if Cori told them *we* hired her."

Gordon shook his head. "That shouldn't make any difference. We were just seeing to our brother's welfare. And since Cori doesn't know we hope she and John will hook up, it's no big deal."

"Yeah, except if Cori knows our wives were sending the stuff, then the problem is solved and it's the end of her job," Travis said. "Do you suppose they've had enough time to find out if they like each other?"

"There's only one way to find out," Steve commented. "Give him a call and call me back."

Gordon hung up and then called John's store.

"Hi, I was just going to call you," John said. "I'm heading to Europe for a few weeks."

"Europe? But what about the stalker? Does Cori have any leads?"

"She thought she did, but she said it didn't turn out like she expected," John replied. "So I guess the short answer is no."

"No?" Gordon echoed. He knew better than that.

"Anyway, she's going with me. I doubt anyone will follow me to Italy, but we don't want to take any chances."

"Oh-kay," Gordon said. "Have a great time." He almost choked trying not to laugh.

"This is business, Gordon." John sounded disgruntled and Gordon wondered if John wanted it to be more than business.

Cori should have already come in for a final paycheck, so it did appear *she* was making it personal.

He hung up the phone and turned to Travis with a huge grin. “Oh, this is getting good.”

Chapter 6

The flight to Italy was interminable and Cori realized she hadn't missed a thing by not traveling abroad. In fact, as she squirmed in her seat trying to get comfortable, she questioned why she was even doing it now.

She turned at John's soft snore and smiled. She guessed she was a sucker for a pretty face. Of course, with John, there was also the incredible sex. She sighed, deciding as long as she couldn't sleep, she might as well do some soul-searching and figure out her true reasons for being here.

She wasn't really into analyzing her motives for doing things; she acted mostly on instinct. But John was making her think—to look beyond her daily life and to want something more.

Last night when they had crawled into bed and he'd learned she'd never been out of the country, instead of making love, he had told her about places he'd been, things he'd seen. Lying there with his arm curled around her, touching but not intimate, had been a truly unique experience for Cori. In the past, her personal relationships were usually as physical as her work.

There was a gentleness in the way John had absently rubbed her back as he spoke, his voice soft and soothing. As he had cradled her close and tenderly kissed her good night, Cori had found herself precariously close to liking this side of him as much as she did the combustible, sexy part. She had fallen asleep

thinking that even if he did like junk food way too much and didn't like to cook, John was nice to have around.

* * * *

They had flown into Naples, rented a car and gotten to the hotel without mishap. John hadn't been to Italy in some years, and had wondered if he would remember his way around. The hotel was situated up on a hillside, overlooking the city and the bay, but was convenient enough that he didn't have to take the car out until they went to the estate sale.

Now, he paced the small lobby waiting for Cori to appear. She had insisted she needed privacy to dress, and John hoped she didn't regret his only getting one room. He told himself there was nothing to be nervous about, but bringing her with him was taking their relationship to the next level. And up until the time she had agreed to come with him, he hadn't even considered that they *had* a relationship. He just hoped now that they were here, she didn't intend to sleep on the couch.

He reached for the house phone when the elevator dinged and he turned toward the sound. His breath caught. He had seen Cori naked and with jeans on, with and without makeup, but the vision who walked toward him was beautiful. Her black hair curled around her pale face; her darkly lined eyes appeared large and inviting. But it was her outfit that had his heart thumping. She wore an off-the-shoulder white top that hugged her curves like a second skin. Her skirt was mid-thigh, bright and multicolored, and swayed as she walked. Strappy sandals accented her attire and not a bit of it was black. There was something very mysterious and intriguing about a dressed-up woman.

He swallowed hard. She stopped in front of him and cleared her throat before he could manage to drag his eyes from her painted toenails up her legs to her face.

“Welcome to Napoli,” he said, using the Italian pronunciation of Naples as he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. As they started down the street, he realized the *passaggiata*, a tradition among Italians to promenade in the evening—to see and be seen—was at its height and he enjoyed the looks they got. Well, actually, the men were all looking at Cori, with her bare legs and sexy, swirling skirt. “You look very chic,” he told her.

“I do know how to dress.” She scowled at him and he realized she wasn’t good at receiving compliments. Or maybe she wasn’t used to them from the men in her life. He would have to work on that.

“Without being obvious, take a look at the men around us.” When she had done so, he asked, “Do you see them staring?”

“Yeah, and if they’re staring at you, they’re gay. If it’s me and they know what’s good for them, they’ll knock it off. If I had my gun...” she let the sentence trail off as John laughed.

“Thank you for coming with me.” He placed his hand on top of hers and squeezed. “All these men are jealous of me, which feeds my ego. And being with you makes me laugh. I haven’t done much of that over the past several years, and I’m finding I like it.”

“Don’t go all mushy on me or I may have to hurt you.”

He glanced over at her. She wasn’t exactly frowning, but neither was she smiling in jest. She had come with him, so she must have some kind thoughts for him. As for his feelings, every day with Cori was not only a surprise but a delight, and he had wanted her with him to give them a chance to explore whatever was between them. He had the feeling she was just as tentative about relationships as he was and wondered why. He decided their first night in Italy wasn’t the time to find out.

“We have to eat pizza for dinner,” he said as they walked past a pizzeria.

“And here I thought I had broken you of that bad eating habit.”

“You don’t understand.” He held a chair out for her at the sidewalk café. “Naples invented pizza. You truly can’t experience the culture if you don’t try their food.”

He ordered their meal and a bottle of wine and they ate in companionable silence.

“Tell me more about your work and why we’re here,” Cori said as they lingered over the last of the wine.

He shrugged. “What’s there to tell? I buy old stuff.”

She shook her head at him. “You knew all those weird words on the menu and ordered our meal in Italian. You can even drive these crazy streets without swearing or hitting one of those people on scooters. I suppose you’ve been here dozens of times.”

John shrugged. “Only a few, and that’s because of business. I buy and sell antiques and very unique collectibles.”

“Like Longfoot’s porn toys?”

He opened his mouth to refute the word when he noticed her eyes twinkling. He had to remember how she liked to push his buttons.

Deciding to ignore her barb, he continued, “Although we have antique sales back home, there is much more history involved with what I can find in Europe. I get any number of flyers, and when I can see several sales close to the same dates so a trip will be worthwhile, I usually come over.”

“Where’s this sale we’re going to tomorrow?”

“It’s not for a couple of days. I wanted to arrive early enough to take a look at some items before the sale, in case there’s anything I need to check out prior to bidding. But to answer your question, there’s a little village called Caserta Vecchia, just north of here. It’s where everyone lived before the royal palace was built in Caserta. Now, it’s almost deserted and

apparently one of the very old, very established families is selling out. I guess whatever relatives are left don't live in the area and are trying to liquidate the assets."

"What are you looking for and how do you know it's there?"

John smiled at her questions. For not showing the least interest in antiques, she was very interested in his business.

"I have a client list and am always on the look out for particular items of interest for them."

"Like Long—"

"Forget Henry. Believe it or not, I also do business with normal people."

She grinned.

"Anyway, I'm on several listservs and email loops. My contacts let me know when there are items of value to me."

"Why not just let them buy and ship to you?" She swirled her wineglass then took a sip. He watched as she licked a drop off her lips and wondered how long he would have to talk business before he could take her back to the hotel and kiss every inch of her body, including those wine-touched lips.

"I would never leave the authentication of an eighteenth century piece of furniture to the auctioneer. He's trying to make money, too, remember?"

"What will you need me to do?"

"Distract the other bidders with those legs of yours?" He couldn't believe he had said that out loud, and by the surprised look on her face, Cori couldn't either.

"Do not turn sexist on me, Mister, or you're just asking for trouble."

"So you uncovered those legs just for me?" It was the first time he had seen her in a dress, and he was really enjoying the view as she sat beside him, her legs crossed at the knee.

“My legs are mine, and I only do what and to whom I want with them.” Her voice had dropped to a smoky whisper as she leaned close.

John hadn’t indulged in sexual banter in so long, he suddenly didn’t know what to say. He just sat there staring at her, feeling the sexual vibes bouncing between them.

“It’s just sex, John, it doesn’t have to mean anything,” Cori said.

John could feel his eyes narrow. “I don’t think it always works that way.”

“Look, we’re both adults. We don’t want entanglements. Why can’t we just enjoy each other?”

“Why don’t you want entan—”

“That’s an old story better left alone,” she interrupted. “You’ve got to admit, we’re dynamite together.” Her hand was suddenly on his thigh, her hot fingers sliding upward until she rubbed a finger across his groin. “Now, John.”

He didn’t need her command to hastily drop enough Euros on the table to take care of their tab. When he hesitated to stand up, knowing his erection would be clearly evident to anyone who happened to look their way, she gave him another sexy smile.

“It’s getting dark. Nobody will notice how hot you are.” She took his hand and pulled him to his feet, but when he would have hurried her down the street, she now seemed content to dawdle.

“We have plenty of time. In fact, we have all night. Are you thinking about what you want to do with my legs, John?”

He practically groaned, tugging her arm to move her along.

She pulled back. “Don’t hurry. I want you hot, really hot, by the time we reach the room.”

“You don’t have to worry about that!”

“Let’s see,” she said, suddenly pulling him around the corner to an alley. She quickly turned, pushing him up against

the wall and then she kissed him. But it was more than a kiss. She used her tongue and hands and hips, touching him in all the right places until he thought he might explode right there.

He felt her tight butt muscles as he pulled her hard against him, letting her know exactly what she did to him.

“Night and day,” she breathed against his neck, nipping the sensitive skin there before licking a hot trail up to his ear. “*Clark Kent* and *Superman*.” She sucked on his earlobe before flicking her tongue in and out of his ear. John’s knees trembled and he locked them as she straddled him, wiggling closer.

“What?” he growled, even as his hands dipped into the front of her blouse.

“Are you hot?”

“I’m going to melt onto the sidewalk if I get any hotter.”

He could feel her grin against his neck. “Ah, I’d hate to have to scoop you off the pavement.”

He reached up and unwound her arms from around his neck, grabbing her wrist and hurrying her down the sidewalk. “If we’re not back to the hotel in less than a minute, you may have to bail me out of jail, because what I want to do to you could get me arrested.”

* * * *

Cori grinned as John hustled her into the hotel and smashed his palm against the button for the elevator. When the doors didn’t immediately open, he punched it again, then again.

“Hell,” he growled and headed for the stairwell, still dragging her behind him. It was definitely a good thing their room was on the second floor.

As soon as the door closed behind them, he spun her around, flattened his palms on her bottom and lifted her clear off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her shoes dropping to the floor with a dull thud.

“This time, I’m going to be on top,” he growled between kisses across her collarbone as he hurried across the suite to the bedroom. “And, I’m in charge.” He leaned over, gently laying her on the bed and Cori quickly hid her smile. She had wondered what John would be like if he finally took the initiative. Oh, she liked being in control, and for just a moment thought to wrest the power back from him, but when she looked up and saw the almost fierce expression on his face as his gaze slid down her body, she knew that tonight, John was not going to let her have any say. He was definitely in *Superman* mode.

He wasted no time stripping her of skirt and blouse, but when he pulled her top over her head, he paused, slowly drawing a finger along the lacy top of her bra. Cori shivered in delight. He reached for her straps, but instead of pulling them down her arms, he let his fingers slide along them, up over her breasts to hover momentarily at her nipples. Cori thought she would die from the exquisite feel of him—the slight pressure of his palms through the fabric was more erotic than skin against bare skin.

She watched his face as his hands continued their exploration of her ribs, stomach, then hips. His eyes were dark chocolate, his nostrils flared as he took her in. His mouth was slightly parted, and Cori wanted to sit up and kiss him, but tonight, the ball was in his court. After he had traced along the top of her thong, he hooked his thumbs in the elastic and slid them down her legs.

Her legs hung off the bed, and now John knelt between them, lifting one foot and planting tingling kisses on her arch. As she gave a sigh of pleasure, he slowly kissed his way up her calf, tickled the sensitive skin behind her knee with his tongue, then licked a trail along the inside of her thigh. She knew where he was heading. In anticipation, she spread her legs wider and felt

his shoulders touch each thigh as he turned toward the very center of her being.

She screamed when his tongue finally found her clit, even though she had known it was coming. She hadn't realized it would feel so incredibly good as he licked her again and again. Then she couldn't think as she climaxed, his mouth still on her, sucking until she arched her hips off the bed, intense pleasure shooting through her.

"Stop, oh God, stop," she moaned, clutching his hair and tugging him upward.

When he braced himself above her, she pushed on his chest to turn him over because she wanted to crawl all over him.

He shook his head, a devastating smile touching his mouth and eyes and Cori stilled. "Not going to happen tonight, babe. I told you—I'm in charge." With that comment, he wiggled his hips, paused for just a second, and then slid into her, never taking his gaze from hers. In that instant when their hips meshed, Cori wondered how much longer she could continue the battle to remain detached.

* * * *

John's spirit soared as Cori opened herself totally to him. Her shaved mound had been smooth as silk against his lips and he hadn't wanted to stop tasting her. It was something he had never done with another woman. Now she was a wildcat in bed; her tight sheath pulling him in; clutching him when he withdrew; taking him faster with each thrust until he knew he couldn't hold on much longer. But he wanted to give her more pleasure; wanted her to come again with him, so he slowed, barely moving within her. He propped his weight on one elbow, caressing her breast, then bent to suck her nipple into his mouth. He tongued the pebbly tip and felt her arch beneath him.

He was over forty years old, and he had never known sex could be this gratifying. In the past, he had always made it a

point to see to his partner's pleasure, but this was the first time he wanted to ensure her pleasure was even greater than his.

Cori dug her fingers into his butt cheeks, urging him to move faster. He reluctantly released her nipple, lifting his head to gaze at her.

"Cori?" Her eyes were closed, her hips undulating beneath his. "Look at me."

She slowly opened her eyes and John was pleased to see them glazed with passion.

"I want you to come again, with me this time." He thrust slowly into her.

She shook her head. "No...can't...too much."

He thrust deeper, stopped, then slowly withdrew. "Yes, you can. I know you can." He slid deep again.

Her eyes closed on a sigh but she tightened her legs around him and John could feel her squeeze him as she clenched her muscles.

He slid his hand between their bodies, dipping low to tease her clit as he began to move. Within seconds, Cori's eyes popped open and she lifted her hips hard against his.

"Like it?" He bent to kiss her, his finger flicking in rhythm with his thrusts.

"Oh, man, I don't believe you!" She jerked her lips away from his, her voice rising almost to a wail. Her nails dug into his back as she met him thrust for thrust.

John groaned and stiffened just as Cori's inner muscles tightened around him. He finally let himself go; his climax so potent from holding back that he couldn't seem to stop. He came over and over, his body shaking as though bolts of high-powered electricity were slamming through him.

He collapsed on top of her, so depleted he couldn't hold himself up. Cori didn't seem to mind, her legs and arms still wrapped tightly around him. He sucked in a much needed

breath, the air in the room heavy with the musk of sex. By the time he had himself somewhat under control, Cori was squirming beneath him.

"Sorry," he managed as he rolled to his side. A groan escaped.

"Never...nobody has ever..." She let the sentence trail off but he knew what she meant. And he felt the same. Something about the two of them together was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

"Just look what you've done to me." He turned his head to the side and grinned at her. "I've become a sex-crazed maniac."

"You said you were tired of being boring," she quipped, rolling toward him to pepper kisses across his bare chest.

"Yes, but considering I'm here on business and now I doubt we'll leave this hotel room for the next two days, that does not bode well for my financial statement."

She popped her head up to give him a worried look. "You won't go broke, will you?"

He chuckled. "Well, no, but..."

She slid her leg over his, her knee nudging his now limp member. "Would you rather be rich and boring, or middle class and sexy?"

John didn't bother telling her that one sale wouldn't bring him that low because he didn't think she would have listened. She appeared more intent on arousing him again, her tongue lapping at his nipple while her hand slid south. And frankly, at that moment, John couldn't say he actually gave a damn about anything except what she was doing with her incredible body.

Chapter 7

Cori looked blurrily up at John when he woke her before dawn. “You’d better have a cup of coffee in your other hand,” she grumbled as he caressed her breast.

“We have to hit the road. Since you kept me as your sex hostage for the past two days, I want to get to the estate early enough to check some things out.” There was a challenge in his voice.

She had let loose a monster. Not only had he totally worn her out in bed, but now he had developed a sense of humor. She grabbed his wrist and rolled, dragging him across her back to flop onto the bed, precariously close to the edge. She pounced onto his chest.

“I told you never to sneak up on me,” she said in warning, even though she couldn’t really be mad with the comical look of surprise on his face. Besides, his scent was imprinted on her brain and she had recognized him even before she was quite awake.

“Good thing I didn’t have that coffee with me,” he murmured, lifting his head to kiss her cheek.

“Don’t even think it,” she said, scrubbing at her cheek. She didn’t know why she was so bitchy, but his good humor only darkened her own. She crawled into the shower, letting the hot water beat down on her to wash away the cobwebs, but had no further time to think before John was pounding on the door. She

hurriedly dressed, wolfed down some breakfast and was hustled out the door with her coffee cup in her hand.

"You can open your eyes now," John said some thirty minutes later.

"Are we out of the city?" Cori kept her eyes scrunched shut. There had been a near miss—a very, skin-of-the-teeth near miss—with a scooter just as they had left the hotel, and from that point, she hadn't wanted to watch as John drove like a crazy man through traffic.

Cori kept her eyes closed for a few more minutes trying to regroup and pull her defenses around her. Their lovemaking for the past two days had totally devastated her, and she had woken up more than once, ready to turn and tell John she loved him. *That just won't do*, she reprimanded herself sternly. Besides the fact that she didn't believe in love at first sight, John was a job.

Yeah, right, one side of her brain argued. *You're off the clock, remember?*

John was devilishly handsome today in a blue shirt open at the throat and beige Dockers. The breeze ruffled his hair, causing a lock to fall across his brow. The sunglasses he wore gave him a mysterious air. Not Secret Service mysterious, more like movie star incognito. Now that he had started to relax and come out of his shell, he was beginning to fascinate her. He knew three languages, had been in the military, voted totally opposite from her, and loved the opera and all things old and musty. He had begun to talk candidly about his life, if not his marriage, and she found him a very interesting man. After all, they hadn't been able to make love for forty-eight hours straight.

Cori had let John do most of the talking because her life was nothing to bring out and show off. The more he told her about his life and his family, the deeper she had fallen under his spell, which was *not* supposed to happen. That's probably why she was in such a shitty mood.

“Ah, look at that gorgeous sunrise.” She heard John sigh before he reached over and tugged her earlobe. “Hey, you with me here?”

She finally looked at him. “Yeah, now that I’m almost awake.” There was no sense brooding over what couldn’t be changed, and for the time being, Cori was *stuck* in Europe with an incredible man who was turning her insides upside down.

And he was right. The sunrise, which she rarely saw unless she’d been up all night, was a spectacular display of color in the clouds that just topped the hillside. Oranges and reds softened to pink before fading entirely as the sun rose higher.

“What are those?” she asked, pointing to a grove of trees that ran parallel to the road.

“Olive trees. But those olives don’t taste anything like the ones we have in the States. Sort of like the pizza we had.”

Cori had to admit that Italian pizza was great. Maybe it was the fresh herbs, the fresh air, or the company. *Don’t go there*, she warned herself.

Minutes later, John turned off the curving asphalt onto a gravel road that continued to wind around and through a thick stand of trees. They turned one more corner and came to a clearing and Cori was entranced.

The mansion, and she could only think of it as such given the wrecks she had lived in growing up, sat on a small knoll overlooking a huge green lawn and what appeared to be a rose garden. The house, a two-story affair made of stone, had tall white pillars across the front, supporting a second floor balcony. Wide steps led up to a huge front door. There were no shutters on the windows or dried flower arrangement on the door but it wasn’t needed. The centuries-old house had a majesty that didn’t need dressing up. The only drawback to what would make a beautiful picture was that currently, the lawn was strewn with all manner of furniture and boxes.

It is a perfect day to have the sale outside, Cori thought as they got out of the car. She grabbed her backpack from the rear seat.

"I have to register and get a number," John said as he came around to her side. "Then I really do need to look at a few things I saw advertised on the flyers."

"Knock yourself out," Cori said. "I think I'll just find a tree to sit under and finish my night's sleep."

He brushed a finger down her cheek. "Did I really do that much damage?" His face was totally serious, but Cori heard hopeful glee in his voice. It appeared John's ego needed stroking and for just a moment, she thought about cutting him down, but she knew that wouldn't be fair because she had thoroughly enjoyed herself. Besides, she wasn't a good liar.

"You absolutely, totally, insanely wore me out."

His smile grew larger with each word, and then he kissed her on the lips. Unlike the tongue dueling, lip-smashing kisses they had shared at night, this was a gentle, feather-light caress. *Clark Kent* had taken over, and he made her just as dizzy as *Superman*.

She pushed against his chest. "Go do your thing. I'll plant myself somewhere over there in the shade." She waved absently to a grassy area to one side of most of the auction items.

* * * *

A couple of hours later, John searched the grounds for Cori, wanting her opinion on a box of merchandise before he discussed a price with the man. He came up behind her as she sat cross-legged in the grass, a sketchpad and pencil in her hand.

"It's a good thing I recognize your scent," she said without looking up from her work, "or I'd have you flipped over my head and you'd be flat on your back by now."

"I'm very glad your nose is working," he replied. "Hey, that's very good." The sketch she had made was of the house, the grounds and items set up for the auction. He picked up another

paper from the ground beside her. The auction furniture was gone, and in its place was a long line of carriages on the circular drive. Ladies and gentlemen in old-fashioned dress were scattered about.

“Cori, these are wonderful.” He looked at her to find her blushing. “Do you ever water color happy trees?” He didn’t know much about art, and had only watched *The Joy of Painting* once when his cable went out and all he could get was PBS.

She shook her head at him as she stood. “Bob Ross used oils. I don’t do oils. Once in a while, I use water colors, but mostly I just sketch and use pastels.”

“Well, I’m glad you have artistic talent. There’s something over there I want your opinion on.”

“I don’t do antiques, either, but you go right ahead.” She seemed disinclined to go with him.

“What do you like?” John was confused because they had been getting along so well. “Surely we have something in common.”

She gave him a winsome smile. “With you, I like sex.”

“Cori,” he gently chastised, even though that had also been on his mind most of the past two days. Cori had given him back his self-esteem after Joanie had left him feeling emasculated. He should be satisfied with that. So why did he feel as if he wanted more?

He heard the auctioneer’s chatter in the background and knew they didn’t have time to discuss their relationship now. And they *did* have a relationship, even if she refused to admit it. He grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him.

“Take a look at these tiles,” he said when they stopped near several boxes set off to one side. As Cori sorted through a box, the man he had previously begun bartering with moved closer. He wasn’t part of the official auction group because he had on a faded plaid shirt instead of one with the logo the others wore.

John knew when there was a big sale, often times people would bring things and hang along the fringes, hoping to make a private deal with someone and not have to pay an exorbitant commission. John had bought things a time or two this way, although he preferred to work through a licensed auctioneer.

But the boxes of tile had caught his eye. “What do you think?” He crouched down near Cori.

“The colors are a little dull, like they’ve been out in the sun. I don’t know what the tile is made of—stone or plaster—so I don’t know if they’ll clean up well. And I can’t tell without getting every one of them out if they make a pattern or not.” She shifted to the next box. “See, where those have mostly reds and browns, this box is full of yellow, and the ones over there are all green and blue.

“If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say they were hand cut. They’re all only about an inch square, too small for the standard commercial tile.”

She looked around at the boxes. “There must be thousands of them. Where did they come from?”

John turned and asked the man a question in Italian.

“I believe he said not far from here, in an old ruin of a house.”

Cori was turning one over in her hands, then picked up another and did the same. “There are marks on the back corners, but they don’t match.” She seemed to shrug off any other thought she might have had and stood. “What would you do with them?”

“I have a client who’s remodeling and wants to do a mosaic in her great room. Judging from how many boxes are here, I would say she could probably figure out something to do with them.”

“Well, I doubt they’re worth much,” Cori said in a louder voice and John realized she was looking at the Italian. “I

wouldn't pay too high a price for them." She turned her back on the man, winked at John, and wandered off as though no longer interested in buying anything.

It didn't take John long to barter the man down to a ridiculously low price. It seemed he didn't want to cart them back home and his mule was tired, or that's what John thought he said. Since it was a side sale, John paid the man in cash. He'd have to remember to make a note for his business records. He then put a numbered sticker on each of the boxes that matched his auction number so the shippers could keep everything together. He knew the auctioneer well enough that he would have no trouble getting him to ship the tiles along with the armoire and secretary he had purchased earlier. After all, John paid the freight, along with the man's commission.

He found Cori standing at the back of the crowd, yawning and stretching her arms over her head. He yanked them down. "I hope you didn't just buy that ugly picture," he said, nodding at the huge, gilt-framed hunting picture being walked around by a handler.

"Why would I buy that?" she asked, and then her frown cleared as she understood she had been waving her arms like she was bidding. She buried her face in his chest. "I didn't, did I?"

"No, but you may have helped make a little more money for the estate. There's a gentleman up front waving his paddle in the air and giving us a dirty look."

"I'm so embarrassed. Did I tell you I don't do auctions, either?"

He laughed, giving her a hug. "How about we get back to the hotel and you can work on something you *can* do well?"

Her head popped up at that. "Sketching?" she asked, but her voice was low and sexy.

He quickly kissed the tip of her nose. "That, too."

* * * *

It wasn't until after dinner as Cori began packing for their departure in the morning that she realized she had kept the two small tiles from the boxes she and John had looked at. She pulled them from her jeans pocket, flipping them over in her hands. One was a pale rose color and the other brighter blue, reminding her of the sky that morning as the sun rose. It was a good thing John had purchased the boxes of tile so she didn't have to feel guilty about stealing from someone else.

She smiled as she tucked the tiles into a side pocket of her backpack. She doubted anyone would miss a couple of tiles out of the thousands that were in the boxes. Besides, they would remind her of the day, and gave her an idea of a watercolor she wanted to do for John. She finished her packing, then followed the sounds from the TV out into the main part of the suite. John was slouched on the couch, remote in hand and finger on the channel changer button, fast asleep.

She removed the remote, flipped off the television and sat down beside him as he woke.

"All done?" he questioned.

"Yeah, it doesn't take me long to pack. I've always traveled light." Her entire childhood had been spent moving from foster home to foster home, then hiding from social workers. Why she thought of that now, she didn't know, because that part of her life was a long time ago. Maybe it was because John's and her dirty clothes had been mixed up together in a pile and she had started thinking, while she was packing, about what it would be like not to live out of a suitcase—to have somewhere permanent to call home.

Dangerous thoughts for her, the woman who shunned commitments.

"Why the frown?" John tucked a curl behind her ear, and then gently pulled her forward to kiss her. It wasn't a kiss of passion, for they had exhausted themselves from the minute they

had returned to the hotel until they went to dinner. This was more a comfortable kiss—probably the most dangerous kind.

She still hadn't told him anything about her earlier life and decided this was not the time to do so. Instead, she just shrugged as she settled next to him. "You really never told me much about our itinerary. Where are we heading and how many more sales do I have to endure?" she teased.

"We're heading for Marseilles, but there's not a sale there. I have to see an antique dealer. So I thought we'd take the train north and maybe make some stops along the way." He paused, then returned her teasing. "I'm sure I can find some more estate sales if you want—you seem to enjoy them so much."

"You'd better bring some rope to tie my hands behind my back then."

"Ah, now that conjures up some very interesting possibilities."

She poked him in the ribs with her elbow. "Just tell me what you're looking at next."

"I received an email from a gentleman in Marseilles who I've done business with before. He has some French letters I want to look at. If they're authentic and I can make the right deal, I'll get them for...a client."

Cori heard the hesitation but didn't think much about it. While she was developing a slight interest in John's world of antiques, she really didn't care about his client list.

"Why would letters in French be worth anything to someone in the States? I mean, unless they're from some king or someone famous."

He laughed as he pulled her to her feet and headed to the bedroom. "I guess you'll just have to wait and see."

Chapter 8

They spent two days traveling by train up the coast of Italy, stopping in Rome and then Livorno, an enjoyable town full of friendly people, shady narrow streets with shops and vendors everywhere.

“Aha,” John said, stopping at a store when something caught his eye, mumbling about a client.

“So in addition to a sex pervert, who else do you have on your list?”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?” John grinned at her.

“He pinched my ass!” Cori replied. She hadn’t been afraid of Longfoot, knowing she could have him on the floor in seconds. “Besides, I like to hassle you about him.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “So what kind of kinky stuff is this one into?”

“Winston Singleton likes wine. Not necessarily expensive brands—he’s more eclectic. That’s why I thought he’d like this Limoncello.”

Cori helped him pick out the bottles because, unlike regular wine, this came in decorative bottles and no two were the same. Once they had chosen twelve for Singleton and the storekeeper boxed them to ship, John bought an extra one and they drank it in the small park across the street.

“It tastes just like lemon drops,” Cori said as she took another swallow from the bottle before handing it to John. “I’m enjoying the relaxed atmosphere of these towns,” she told him,

“and your history lessons have really expanded my horizons. I think it only fair that I reciprocate by showing you some new moves in bed.”

“You’re tipsy,” he said.

“But not drunk,” she whispered in his ear. “As soon as we board the train, I’ll show you just how much wine does not affect me.”

They had a sleeping berth on this train and it was a unique experience for both of them to make love to the rocking, clickety-clack rhythm of the train. She fell asleep with John at her back and woke later when he slid into her from behind, his hand cupping her breast, and he took her on a wild ride to a screaming fast climax. It was fortunate for them that the train whistle blew at the same time Cori’s orgasm hit, because she couldn’t keep quiet, and her cries of ecstasy filled the small compartment.

The next day, they had just returned from the dining car as the train wove its way around the coast toward France, when Cori sensed a change in the small cabin.

“Do you smell that?” she asked as they entered.

John turned from closing the door. “What?”

“Someone’s been in here.” Cori’s training had taught her to use all her senses, and while she wasn’t technically on duty, she instinctively felt something wasn’t right. “There’s an odor; like a man’s aftershave cologne. Sharp and just barely discernible, but it’s here.”

She scanned the room. John’s suitcase leaned against one wall, right where it had been before dinner when he closed it after dressing. She looked for her backpack. *Had it been moved?* She couldn’t remember exactly where she had left it, and told herself she needed to start making mental sketches every time they left the room.

“Sweetheart, the room is made up for the night. It was probably the cabin attendant.” John came up behind her and circled her waist. “Why are you getting paranoid now? Nothing’s happened since we started this trip.”

Cori knew nothing would happen, either, since his sisters-in-law were far away in the States. Besides, she had threatened them with bodily harm if they continued their pranks. John was probably right, but somehow, Cori couldn’t totally convince herself that nothing was going on.

* * * *

John stood in the shower thinking the more he was around Cori, and not just when they were making love, the more he wanted her all to himself. It had been a long time since his marriage, but he didn’t think his growing feelings were just because this was the first time he’d been deeply involved with a woman. After all, he had dated, albeit not very much, but he’d had no desire to take any of those relationships to the next level.

There was still a lot he didn’t know about Cori, and he didn’t miss the fact she always changed the subject whenever he asked personal questions. He didn’t know her brother, Bob, other than he worked for Steve. He knew nothing of her life before him, yet none of that seemed to matter to him.

What did matter was the way she smiled at him when she teased; her inquisitive nature and the intelligent questions she asked and her totally giving nature. He would eventually find out the rest. If nothing else, his brothers had connections—especially Steve—and he could ferret out anybody’s background.

He stepped out of the shower stall to grab a towel and banged his hip on the sink. There were several ranges of comfort between trains on the Trenitalia system, and John had sprung for the more expensive, wanting privacy for himself and Cori. The train’s luxury also afforded them a private bathroom within their

compartment, and even though it was compact, it was nice not to have to walk down the corridor to a communal shower.

He wrapped the towel around his waist, and then lathered his face to shave. He had never shaved at night until Cori had come into his life. As he ran the razor up his neck, his shaft swelled to attention at the thought of not wanting to leave whisker burns on her sensitive thighs.

“Hey,” she said from the doorway.

“Hey, yourself.” He swished his razor in the water in the basin and stroked under his chin.

“I don’t think I’ve ever watched a man shave,” Cori said. “My brother wanders around in the morning with an electric razor as he fixes coffee and reads the paper.”

Swish, swish. Concentrate on shaving, not on the fact Cori is in her bra and panties. Hell, they had made love countless times and he had seen her naked. What was there about her in that lacy bra and those skimpy bikini undies that had the lower regions of his body throbbing?

“Ouch!” he jerked as he nicked his chin.

She laughed, her hips sliding across his buttocks as she scooted around him; the bathroom was that small. John turned and caught her around the waist.

“Since I let you watch me shave, will you return the favor?” He thought of watching her shave her mound and his shaft jerked against her thigh.

“You can do it for me, if you want,” she cooed, her hand sliding up his bare chest.

Cori was totally open in her sexuality, and didn’t think twice about saying things like that. For some reason, shaving her seemed even more intimate than making love, and John could feel his face grow warm.

Cori lightly laughed. “I hate shaving my legs.”

John could feel disappointment mix with his embarrassment.

She slid a finger along his cheek, then dabbed the shaving cream on his nose. "You're so cute." Stepping past him, she turned the knob to the shower. Stripping out of her bra and panties, she stepped under the spray. "Don't fall asleep before I get there or I'll have to wake you up in a very unconventional way."

As she pulled the curtain closed, blocking his view of her luscious body, John wondered how fast he could fall asleep just to find out what she had in mind.

* * * *

The train rolled into Marseilles early the next morning. When Cori and John took a cab to the *Hôtel de Ville* on the north edge of Vieux Port, it was still too early to check in. John had the concierge tag their luggage for storage while Cori wandered around the gift shop.

"We can take a cab down to the beach if you'd like," he said when he caught up with her.

"I've heard about French beaches. I don't want to see nudes," Cori replied.

He looked totally surprised by the notion. "Good heavens, that's not why I would go."

They had walked back into the lobby, which had a huge indoor garden. Cori pulled him behind a potted tree. "I take that back. The only nude I want to see is you."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to show up nude at the beach!"

He was so cute in his affronted dignity that Cori just had to kiss him. No matter how intimate they had been, John still expressed puritan outrage at the most unique times.

Now, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to meet her lips. At first stiff, after all they were in a

public place, he quickly yielded in her embrace, sliding his hands around her waist to flatten his palms on her butt.

“Wow. We’d better take a walk somewhere. Nudes on the beach might be permissible, but I doubt the hotel manager would approve of me taking you down and making love to you in the middle of his lobby.” Cori backed away, giving herself room to breathe without inhaling John’s unique scent.

It certainly wasn’t getting any easier. The longer they remained together, the closer Cori wanted to become. And while she told herself she did not want a long-term relationship, especially after Zack, she no longer believed that. John pulled at her heartstrings.

John’s breath was as harsh as hers and he paced round and round the potted plant, hands on hips. He then turned and gave her a rather irritated look. She didn’t blame him because it took very little to ignite their passion, and it wasn’t the easiest thing to douse the flame without satisfying it.

She tried to look contrite. “Sorry,” she said in a small voice.

With a sigh, John took her hand and led her outside. “It’s not exactly your fault. Well, yes, it is, but I’m not going to hassle you about it.”

“You’re not? That’s quite nice of you,” she teased, considering that was exactly what he was doing. “Where are we going?” They were walking along the inner harbor where ropes and masts clanged as sailboats rocked at anchor.

“I’m taking you shopping.”

“I don’t shop,” she stated.

He turned and looked at her. “I have five sisters-in-law. They shop. Women are known for their shopping skills.”

She shrugged. “I’m not your typical woman.”

He looked her up and down. Cori rarely got embarrassed, but she could feel her cheeks heat under his potent perusal.

“You are certainly not typical. I’ve traveled all over the world in my business, and I’ve seen many magnificent sights—rare and beautiful artifacts, even the crown jewels of Scotland. But not until I met you had I found a person of such rare and genuine good nature—a prize that is truly priceless.”

Cori was speechless. Not used to such flowery compliments from the men of her acquaintance, she blurted out, “That is such a piece of bullshit.”

He narrowed his gaze at her. “It was a compliment, Cori. Learn to accept them because I don’t plan to stop making them.” He took her hand and started walking.

Every once in a while, *Superman* puffed up his chest and popped a button on *Clark’s* shirt, trying to get loose.

They walked up and down the narrow streets, past an open-air market full of fresh fruit and flowers, then on by a fish market. Cori noticed they were even selling fish heads and she decided then and there she would not order fish for supper.

When John stopped in one of the small stores on a side street for a bottle of pop, she studied the items in the window. There were the usual touristy things—dishes and trays with stalks of some kind of purple grain painted on them. She didn’t know if it was lavender or heather and would have to ask John. Other items had a huge bug embossed on them. Cori thought it strange that these people would consider a cicada as a national symbol.

Some small clay figurines lined up along one shelf caught her interest. Each was a little different. One woman looked like she had a bundle of wheat in her arms, and another carried that purple stuff. The figures were only about three inches high, yet the delicate features were perfectly painted.

“Are those figures something specific to this region?” she asked John when he emerged from the store, a bottle of Coke in his hand. He unscrewed the top, took a swig then handed it to

her. They had drunk a lot of wine in Italy and the bubbly Coke tasted good for a change.

“Those are *Santons*, or ‘little saints’. They’re unique to the Provence area, which is where we are now. They’re made locally, probably have been since around the early eighteen hundreds. Back then when the churches were closed, depriving the people of crèches to observe during the Christmas holiday, *Santons* were created from the idea of the Provencal people on their way to the nativity with their humble offerings.”

She turned to study the figurines again. “Is that a fisherman?” She pointed to one of the men.

“Probably. *Santons* were created to depict the traditional trades, activities and costumes of Provence. You see how they’re all portrayed in dress from the eighteen hundreds?”

“Is there anything you don’t know?” She was amazed at the wealth of knowledge he possessed.

He grinned at her. “Are you impressed?”

“Yes. Do you know this because of your business?”

He shrugged. “They may be collectibles, but I don’t have any clients who are interested in them. I probably came across the information in one of my books. What would you have been if you had lived back in the nineteenth century?” he asked her, taking back the Coke and chugging what remained.

Cori thought for a moment, studying the *Santons*. “Do they have any knights?”

“You can’t be a knight. You’re a woman.”

“Didn’t Joan of Arc wield a sword back then?”

He shook his head. “You have a warped sense of history. Joan lived clear back in the fourteen hundreds. If she was a knight, she was probably the only woman who was. Besides, *Santons* were of the common people.”

Cori sidled up close and bit John lightly on the ear, whispering, "I'll show you warped, just as soon as we have a key at the hotel."

John coughed, glancing hurriedly at his watch. "They probably have our room ready by now."

"You hope," she replied as they turned and walked back toward the hotel.

They were about a block away when Cori got a prickly feeling down her spine. She tried as casually as she could to look around, trying to figure out what had put her senses on alert. They were being observed, she was sure of it, and she made a mental note of everyone she saw who looked as though they might not be a resident. It was the second time in as many days that this had happened. The whole stalker thing with his sisters-in-law had been a prank. This had the feel of something much more ominous but Cori had no idea why.

* * * *

Their bags had already been delivered to their room by the time John finished checking in when they returned to the hotel.

"I'm taking a shower," Cori stated the minute they got to the room. She opened her suitcase, grabbed some toiletries and headed for the bathroom.

John sat down to check his email.

"Wow! You gotta check this out." Cori hollered at him from the other room.

He slid the computer off his lap and walked to the bathroom. She was already in the shower stall, which was larger than the entire bathroom on the train. She had left the glass door partly open as she stood under a wide circle of water that sprayed straight down from the ceiling. Two adjustable jets shot out from the wall.

John could feel his body responding as he watched water sluice down her curves. He was okay with that until she tilted the lower side jet upward.

“Oh, man, I could get used to this.” She canted her hips and spread her legs to let the jet of water hit her vulva and John found himself jealous of a stream of water.

“You don’t have to stand there and stare. You could join me.” She raised her arms to push back her hair. John stared at her breasts, slick with soap.

“In the shower?” he managed to stammer, his brain in a complete fog as he watched her.

“It’s okay, John. We’re adults. We can do it anywhere, anytime, and anyway we want. Haven’t you realized by now that there are no sex police, especially not in Europe.”

As John stripped off his clothes, he realized that the majority of their lovemaking had been in a bed, whether it was a king-sized hotel bed or the small, cramped train berth.

Why not make love in a shower?

Cori had thought he knew everything because of his grasp of history, whether it pertained to business or not, but he had nothing on her when it came to inventive ways to have sex.

The shower door clicked closed behind him and they were enveloped in a sensual fog of warm steam.

“Stand right here,” she said, pulling him close to stand under the circle of hot water with her. She wrapped her arms around his waist, soap in hand, and began washing his back. This brought her very wet and soapy chest right up against his, and she wiggled and squirmed, using her body as a washcloth.

She was definitely right. He could get very used to this.

“Doesn’t that feel good?” The wall jet hit the small of his back, gently massaging, but John was more focused on the kisses Cori was planting across his wet chest.

“Oh, yeah, you sure do.” He slid his hands down her slick back, urging her closer.

“I meant the water.”

“Mmmm.” John had no desire to talk; he just wanted to absorb the erotic feel of Cori’s body rubbing against his. Thinking about how she had looked when he first saw her in the shower, he had an idea.

“Turn around,” he said, tucking her backside close to his front. He then maneuvered them so she was between him and the jets of water. He turned the higher one down just a little so it hit Cori in the chest, and then tilted the bottom one toward her hips.

He leaned his back against the opposite wall, bringing Cori with him. Then he slid his hands down her breasts, pausing momentarily to caress the soft mounds and roll her nipples between his fingers, bringing them to peaks. His hands moved down her smooth stomach, across her hips and between her thighs.

She had placed her feet on the outside of his, but he wanted her more fully opened. He slid wet fingers between her lips, separating them, opening her to the pulsing water. He bent his leg, pushing slightly against her, forcing her to tilt her hips up.

“Oh.” Her head lulled back against his shoulder as she began moving her hips against the water. Since his erection was in full force at her back, her movements caused her heated body to rub against him, stroking him even as the water beat against her clit.

John nibbled across the back of her neck, sucking hard at the sensitive skin right where her neck met her shoulder. He wanted to give her a hickey; a primal mark that said she belonged to him. She reached up and behind her, holding on to him tight as she came.

The minute John felt her stiffen, he slid two fingers inside her, wanting to feel her climax course through her. As her

muscles clutched him, he watched her from the side, marveling at how she let go so completely. When she finally relaxed against him, he released her, but couldn't quite let go. His fingers played along the smooth lips of her vulva, teasing until she twisted in his arms to face him.

Her eyes were closed, but she found his lips with unerring accuracy. As he slanted his mouth across hers, she opened beneath him, her tongue tracing the ridge of his teeth before touching his own, urging him to mate with her. Their kisses, so earthy and deep, made John want to penetrate her and take her completely.

"Can you hold me?" Cori whispered, raising one leg to his hip. When he moved his hands to her bottom, she lifted the other leg and locked her ankles at the small of his back, her arms around his neck.

"I think that's why they put this shelf in here," John gasped, turning and sitting on the tile bench that ran the width of the shower stall. He held Cori close as he reached around her to turn the wall jets until they sprayed water on the two of them, keeping them warm.

Palming her bottom, he lifted her. His penis, throbbing with want, stood fully erect and ready. When he moved his hands to her waist, Cori was already lowering herself, taking him slowly, inch by inch.

"That feels so good," he groaned, wanting her to go faster, yet anticipating each movement with hunger.

She lifted, then slid down further until he was buried deep inside her. As they started to move together, his lips found hers, fusing their mouths the same way their hips meshed. She sucked his bottom lip, his tongue, all the while her hips moved, caressing his shaft, squeezing, grinding until John exploded.

He squeezed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth as liquid fire raced through his veins. His arms and legs shook in the aftermath

of such a phenomenal orgasm; it left him absolutely weak. How could it have gotten better this time than all the wonderful times before?

And how could he tell Cori what he felt? There was no doubt in his mind any longer that she belonged to him. That thought should scare him, but this was Cori, and he was beginning to understand the word *love* in all its infinite variations.

Chapter 9

John woke her up with breakfast in bed the next morning, but it certainly wasn't the usual hotel fare. The fresh strawberries he fed her were first warmed against her skin as he slid them from breast to breast. Then, as she munched the sweet berry, John lapped the juice off her breasts. She trickled orange juice down his belly to his groin, following it with her tongue, slurping and sucking until breakfast was forgotten and they satisfied what were becoming vicarious sexual appetites.

"Are we just trying to make up for years of abstinence?" John gasped as he fell to the bed beside her. "I can't get enough of you."

She turned on her side to study him. "I don't know about you, but even when I was sexually active, I never got it two or three times a day." She bent and kissed his nipple. "And I never had multiple orgasms." This last was said in a whisper, and was the first time she admitted to John anything about how she felt.

"Cori, tell me about yourself, before we met." His soft, puppy-dog eyes beseeched her.

She shook her head. She should have figured this was coming. What she had said was about physical feelings, not emotional ones, but he was trying to turn it all around and make it something mushy. She probably shouldn't have said anything.

"Don't get all sappy on me," she said, swinging her legs off the side of the bed.

“Cori, asking about you is not being sappy.” He scowled at her.

She knew at some point, she would have to tell John what happened four years ago—about Zack and his betrayal. But not now. Right now, she wanted him all to herself without any ghosts interfering. She turned and headed for the bathroom. “It is when it comes on the tail of a discussion of sex.”

She swung the door closed behind her, but still heard his muffled reply.

“If you won’t talk after sex, then maybe I’ll just go back to being celibate and see if I can get some information out of you.”

She grinned and opened the door. He was standing by the window, his back to her. *Damn*, he was one fine looking man. The muscles of his back and ass were tight and well defined and she recalled how she could make them quiver when she ran her fingers over his skin. His hair was longer than when they first met, but she liked the way it curled a little at his nape.

She tucked a bare foot at each corner of the doorframe and then stretched her arms up, spread-eagling herself.

“Do you want to see how long you would last?” she said, her voice low and husky. He swiveled around and stared at her. “I’ve been trained in several torture techniques.”

He grinned, sauntering toward her. “I never would have made a very good monk.” Before Cori could blink, he lifted her at the waist, tossed her over his shoulder, and headed back to the fruity scented bed.

* * * *

Somewhere between rounds two and three, John called the antique store and rescheduled his appointment. After round four in the huge bathtub, they called room service but they never heard the waiter knock, and it was much later when Cori peeked her head outside the door to find a tray of cold food and warm wine.

They ate it anyway.

She wondered idly how many calories they had burned up that day because John wasn't a passive participant in their lovemaking and of course, neither was she. They did a lot of wrestling for control, and John laughingly said at one point they would have to flip a coin and then take turns because while he loved lying flat on his back while she rode him, he thought there were probably a few things he could teach her.

And he was right, she thought when her brain functioned again. She hadn't thought there was any way for them to get closer; for him to penetrate her any deeper, but oh man, had he. Propping her legs on his shoulders while he rammed into her had sent her into a frenzy quicker than ever before.

Now, lying with her head on his chest, she listened to his heartbeat while he flipped through the channels on the television. He had one arm curled around her shoulders, his fingers idly twirling a strand of her hair.

She realized she was content for the first time in what seemed like forever. That was a dangerous thought and she tried to push it to the back of her mind. It was too soon; they hadn't known each other all that long; she didn't want a relationship. All the reasons she had initially used were fast becoming excuses, and she was smart enough to know it. At the same time, she wasn't about to say anything out loud and have John deny he had feelings for her. She wasn't up to that kind of self-abuse.

So where did that leave her? That was the million dollar question for sure.

To take her mind off those troubling thoughts, she focused on the television program only to realize it was in French.

"What are they saying?" she asked.

"Hmm?" He absently kissed the top of her head. "He's telling her they should get married, and she's giving him the runaround."

Cori sat straight up in bed, staring first at him, then switching her gaze to the television. Had John somehow read her mind? Was he thinking that, or were the actors really saying it? She didn't remember much of high school French, but she caught the word *amour* just before the guy wrapped the woman in a passionate embrace.

She looked at John but couldn't tell from his expression what he was thinking. She willed her heart to slow down. *It's only a television program*, she told herself.

"*Je vous aime*," John said when he caught her staring at him.

She narrowed her gaze. "What does that mean?"

He gently slid one finger down her cheek, his eyes darkening as they slid over her face, down to her breasts, then further to where she sat cross-legged, open to his gaze. She felt her skin heat beneath his perusal, and as quickly as always, passion ignited.

"I like you," John whispered as he bent forward and then kissed her belly.

"I don't believe you."

"What? That *je vous aime* means I like you?" He continued kissing her, his hot mouth moving across to her hip then down her thigh.

"No," Cori dragged the word out, her brain already shutting down as her senses took over.

"You don't believe I speak French?" His words were muffled as his lips trailed hotly up the inside of her thigh.

Cori flopped onto her back, opening herself completely to his ravaging mouth. With her last coherent thought, she said, "I don't believe you're ready to do *this* again."

"*Je suis toujours prêt à faire l'amour avec toi*," John whispered just before his tongue flicked between her inner lips, sending her soaring.

Later, the only thing Cori could remember was he had used that word *amour* again.

* * * *

This time, they ate breakfast in the hotel dining room. John told her that if he didn't get her out of the hotel room, his passport was liable to expire before they ever got back to the States. Cori blushed at the reminder of everything they had done—numerous times—the night before.

"Speaking of, when are we going home?" she asked as they had a second cup of coffee. "When you asked me to come with you, you never said it was permanent."

He laughed. "I know. I planned the itinerary with extra days built in because first, I didn't know how long my business would take." He gave her that slow, steamy look that always tied Cori's stomach in knots. "And second, I didn't want to rush us, in case we found something interesting along the way."

"Interesting, like visiting Pompeii?" she teased, knowing that wasn't what he had in mind at all.

His next comment proved her point. "Interesting like the shower in our room."

Her coffee cup clattered onto the saucer. John had definitely come into his own, and Cori found this outgoing man not only gentle and solicitous, but also provocative and extremely dangerous.

"Uh-oh," John grimaced. "I'm doing it again. I swore I wouldn't think of making love to you for at least half a day so I could get some business done."

"And it's not working?"

"Come on, while I still have a little willpower left." John stood and offered his hand.

"Do you mind walking?" he asked as they exited the hotel. "It's not that far."

Cori hadn't forgotten the uneasiness she had felt the last time they were outside the hotel, but she didn't want to bring it up to John because as far as she knew, there was nothing to it. She did, however, take care as they started down the sidewalk.

The day was fresh and cloudless, a gentle breeze drifting across the harbor. As they walked, John gave her another history lesson, pointing out the beautiful Abbey of Saint-Victor and other sites.

"How do you know all this?" she finally asked. "I have trouble remembering the states and capitals."

"I love reading. I have to do a lot of it when I'm researching a particular antique, but history has always fascinated me. In fact, that's probably why I went into the antique business in the first place."

She made a face.

"What would you do, Cori, if you could do anything in the world you wanted? Isn't there something that fascinates you enough?"

Besides you? John was truly interested in her, and she knew it was time to divulge some of her secrets. She hadn't even discussed her passion with her brother.

"I would own an art gallery," she said almost shyly.

"Really? To sell your own work?"

She looked at him in surprise. "God, no. Why would I do that?"

"Why not?" he asked. "You're very talented."

She blushed under his praise. She had never thought about selling her drawings, although Bob had several framed and hanging at his house. Well, maybe in some deep, secret part of her she had wondered if she was talented enough that anyone would buy something she had created. Now John was telling her she was.

“Maybe. Someday.” She shrugged nonchalantly, not wanting her dream to take root and start to grow. Yet, if John believed in her...

“Here we are.” John opened a door for her.

“Is this the place that had the *French letters* you were interested in?” she asked as she walked into a dim, musty shop. There was so much stuff crammed into the small space that it left little room to maneuver. John led the way deeper into the labyrinth of chairs, desks, piles of books and dishes stacked precariously on tables.

“Ah, Monsieur McVicker, *Vous êtes arrivés. Comment sont vous?*”

Cori heard the deep voice but they wove around two more ornate, stuffed chairs and a sofa before she ever saw its owner—a short, rotund man with a mass of brown hair and a beard.

“I am fine,” John replied to his question. “If you wouldn’t mind, may we speak English? This is my friend, Cori, and she doesn’t understand French.”

“But of course.” The man stepped forward and took her hand, bending at the waist and planting a wet kiss on her knuckles. “Octave Saville Raison, your very humble servant.” He straightened and winked at her. “I think I am in love.”

Cori jerked her hand back but refrained from rubbing it on her slacks. After all, he was a business associate of John’s and she didn’t want to appear rude. She looked at John and he had the audacity to grin at her and shrug.

Not knowing exactly how to respond, she stammered, “You have a very...unique name, Mr. Raison.”

He dramatically placed one hand over his heart. “Ah, my mother, she is a romantic, giving all her children names full of meaning. I am the eighth child of ten, thus Octave.”

“And Saville?” she couldn’t help but be intrigued.

"It means from the willow farm," he sighed, almost as though in resignation.

"Oh, you grew up on a tree farm," Cori said, at least understanding that much.

"*Non*." He shook his head.

"But you said..."

"My mother gave us names with meaning, but I did not say they made any sense at all." He laughed heartily at his joke. "You may call me Orson, which means little bear, and at least that fits me, don't you think?" He patted his round belly and laughed again.

This time, Cori and John laughed too. He really was nice, but Cori tucked her hands in her pockets just in case.

When the guys started discussing business in a mixture of French and English, Cori wandered around the shop, peeking in desk drawers and thumbing through books. She really didn't see what interested John so much.

"Cori, come look at this," John called to her.

She found him at the back counter, a desk lamp positioned over a large magnifying glass. He was holding something under the lens. Mr. Raison had stepped into a back room somewhere.

"Find a treasure?" she teased.

"I just might have." He scooted to the side so she could take a look.

He was holding an elongated tube of what looked like linen with a ribbon at one end. She tilted her head to the side, trying to make out the picture that had been drawn in ink on the material. She gasped. It was a miniature scene depicting two couples engaged in sexual intercourse. She looked at the entire piece again before realizing exactly what John was holding.

She popped her head up, almost cracking him on the chin. "That's not a *French letter*! That's a rubber!" she hissed at him

before another thought surfaced. “You’re buying that for Henry Longfoot, aren’t you?”

Before John could answer, Raison came hurrying out, carefully taking the linen sheath from John. “*French letter*, non!” he began hollering, then proceeded to chatter rapidly in French, waving his arms, and the condom, in the air.

The only words Cori understood sounded like *English Riding Coats*. She thought about that for a minute, then smiled. “Now that, I understand.”

Her comment was meant for John, but of course, Raison heard, and understood. He gave her a grin that Cori thought was close to a leer. Talking about sex with John was one thing, but she was suddenly embarrassed that this man would think she knew things like that.

She quickly turned and walked to the front of the store, pretending interest in an old relic of a radio. She only half listened to the conversation as the two bartered, and she finally heard Raison agree with John’s offer of fifteen.

Minutes later, John escorted her out of the store.

“So, did you get it?”

He smiled. “And for a song—only fifteen hundred dollars.”

She coughed.

“It’s from the eighteenth century and remember, it’s illustrated,” he said. “Do you want to see the picture again?” He started to pull the package out of the bag he carried. She looked at the grin he wore. He was like a kid with the prize in a *Cracker Jack* box. She could only shake her head.

“I can’t believe you paid that for a rubber. I thought you were talking fifteen dollars.”

“It’s a bargain when it makes me money. I can get two or three times what I paid for this from Longfoot.”

“Pervert.”

“Me?”

“No, him. You, I like.”

“Good,” he said, “because I like you, too.” He pulled her to a stop and turned to face her. Tugging her close with an arm around her waist, he bent to kiss her. The gentleness of his kiss tugged at her heart. When he lifted his head, he held her gaze. “*Je vous aime beaucoup*. I like you very much.”

* * * *

John glanced across the candlelit table, wondering what Cori was thinking. Ever since they had returned from Raison’s, she had been too quiet. He watched as she took a sip of wine, a very expensive Chablis Grand Cru, and reacted as though it were water.

John knew it was time to head home. In fact, they had discussed it and he had confirmed airline reservations for midday tomorrow. In a way, he was anxious to return to Boston where he could pursue their relationship in a normal setting, possibly getting Cori to admit, and accept, that they were right for each other. For the past week, they had been living in a fantasy world, making love whenever they wanted, secluding themselves away from anyone and everything for as long as they wanted. Could their relationship, and all the feelings and emotions he was experiencing, be sustained in the workaday world? Or had their time just been an illusion to be left on the shores of France when they boarded the plane?

He reached across the table and took her hand, not sure how to approach her but desperately wanting her to open up to him. She watched their hands as he laced her fingers with his. Her hand quivered slightly and then she tightly gripped his, her tension a tangible force.

“So, why did good ole Orson get so mad and call your condom an *English Riding Coat* instead of a *French letter*? After all, we are in France.” Her voice was a bit too perky; her smile forced.

John would rather talk about them, but at least she was talking. If history was where they had to start, so be it.

“Back in the early eighteen hundreds, the English and French didn’t get along. In fact, they were great enemies, so among the English, anything French was considered wicked, sexual, and decadent, and the French suffered more than their share of abuse from England.”

Her lips twitched and John thought he saw the beginnings of a real smile. He continued. “Condoms, because of their association with sex, were therefore called *French letters* by the English. Of course, the French couldn’t let that pass, so they called condoms *English Riding Coats*.”

She did smile then. “*Riding Coat* makes much more sense than *letter*. Wonder where they got that?”

Her thumb was brushing back and forth across John’s and he doubted she even realized the intimate gesture.

“Hard to say. They’ve also been called *English Overcoats* and hoods.”

She started giggling.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“I just have this mental image of your shaft standing at attention with this little hood over its head.” She clapped a hand over her mouth but her giggles seeped out around the edges.

John smiled and shook his head. This was the Cori he loved; not at all surprised to find himself labeling his emotions with that word. He didn’t know when it had happened, but he was absolutely positive he loved her—no hesitation, no question.

Now, the only problem was getting the pensive, hesitant woman sitting across from him to give up control of her emotions and trust him to take care of her. John knew she was hanging on tight to old fears or hurts. He just couldn’t figure out why.

Her laughter stopped and when he glanced at her, she was staring at him.

“John, I—”

“Cori, tell me—” They spoke at the same time. When she didn’t continue, John decided the only way he was going to find out anything about her was to ask, over and over again until she finally told him. “Tell me what happened to you. Did some guy hurt you?”

Cori let her gaze travel over John’s face, even though his chiseled features and dark brown eyes were already etched into her memory forever. *Can I hold on tight enough, love deep enough?* she wondered. But she knew it wasn’t a matter of loving him, which she finally admitted to herself she did. It was a matter of trust, which was much harder to give.

His hand tightened ever so slightly on hers and Cori realized he would wait, for as long as it took. His belief in her gave her the courage she needed.

“Up until the time I joined the Secret Service, I had drifted from job to job, never finding anything that piqued my interest and made me want to stick with it. The Secret Service was awesome—like a special brotherhood—and I finally felt like I belonged somewhere.” Her chest tightened even now thinking about it.

“Then something happened?” He placed his other hand over hers and Cori could feel his strength flowing into her.

“I was a newbie, right out of training. I hadn’t been there a year when I met Zack. He was older, had been with the Service longer, and was wiser.” She snorted. “Or so I thought. Zack said he wanted me for a special assignment; that it was a covert operation and nobody could know. Then he seduced me to ensure my compliance.”

Cori turned her head to the side, gazing at nothing but not willing to watch John’s reaction when she told the rest of the

story. "By the time I realized Zack was about to commit treason, I thought myself in love with him. Instead of turning him in, I tried to talk him out of it."

"You're not the traitor, Cori," John's voice was soft and urgent. "Your only crime was loving the wrong man."

She choked on a sob. "It was more than that. I know he used me, but I let my personal feelings interfere with my job and it almost cost the President his life. I hesitated when I had the opportunity to shoot the bastard and he almost got away with it." She sighed. It was such a long time ago, but some days, she felt the pain of betrayal all over again.

"If it hadn't been for my brother, Bob, who was a S.E.A.L. back then, I'm sure I would have had to do jail time."

They sat in silence for a few minutes until Cori couldn't stand it any longer.

"Well?" she stated the single word in anger, waiting for John's condemnation.

"You think I'm like Zack, don't you? You think I'll betray you?"

She looked at him in confusion. There was no censure in his voice, and his gaze held tenderness and, hurt?

"No," she shook her head, then paused. "I don't know. It's hard to trust."

John nodded his head. "I can understand that, but let me ask you a question. Are you a lesbian?"

She jerked her hand from his. "You've got to be kidding me!" She scooted back her chair to leave.

He reached across the table and grabbed her wrist. "No, please, hear me out."

Cori knew she could break his hold if she wanted, but she sank back down in her chair.

"Look, it's confusing and I know this isn't the same as what happened to you. But I thought I was in love with Joanie, too."

Six months after we were married, I caught her with another woman in a total sexual entanglement. The whole time we were together, before and after our marriage, she was still involved with this woman.”

Cori didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t the same as treason, but she somehow knew why he was telling her this.

He tilted her chin so she had to look at him. “After her betrayal, I didn’t trust my instincts about women for a long time, just like you don’t trust men. But now I know I can still fall in love. I love you. I trust you not to hurt me. Can you trust me to do the same?”

Cori’s heart started pounding. She heard his declaration but couldn’t react. Just beyond him in her field of vision was a man she swore she had seen on the train from Italy. He had a long scar down one cheek—something so distinctive, she had no trouble remembering it. That might not have been so strange, but this man was studying them as he spoke on a cell phone. When she stared him down, he flipped the phone closed and left, walking directly past their table. Cori smelled a hint of cologne and knew.

“Cori?” John’s voice brought her back. “Can you trust me?”

All her senses were on high alert. Damn, she had let herself be lulled into a sense of serenity again. “It’s more like professional conflict. John, we’re—”

“Then I’ll fire you,” he growled. “If you’re no longer my bodyguard, there won’t be any conflict.”

“That might have to wait awhile,” she replied, getting up. “We’re being followed.” She turned and hurried out of the restaurant but in the few seconds she had spoken to John, the man had disappeared.

Chapter 10

John was too stunned to move, so he sat like a lump until Cori returned.

“I’ve called a cab. We have to get back to the hotel,” she stated when she got back to the table. “I don’t want to get caught out in the open.” Instead of sitting down while he paid the check, she stood slightly behind him. When he stood and turned, he noticed her stiff posture, her eyes darting constantly around the room.

“I...we...” He shook his head. Somewhere in the time it took to lay his heart on the line and confess his love, Cori had switched from passionate lover to bodyguard. As he followed her out of the restaurant and got into the cab, he wondered if she had even heard what he said.

“We’ve been all over two countries. How could anyone keep up with us?” he asked as the cab took them the three blocks to their hotel.

Cori tossed the driver some bills, opened the door to look up and down the street, then grabbed John’s hand and pulled him from the cab. “Come on.”

John certainly wasn’t given to hysteria, being a McVicker male and all, but he had the sudden urge to giggle as they rode the elevator to their suite. Here he was, a grown man, allowing a woman to protect him. When he had thought of her more as a personal security consultant—after all, how dangerous was a

person who sent flowers?—he'd had no trouble having her around.

But things between them had changed dramatically, even if Cori couldn't, or wouldn't admit it. He loved her, and that meant it was his job to protect her and take care of her. *Not* the other way around.

Cori entered the room first before letting him past the threshold. The minute they were both inside, she closed and locked the door, throwing the security chain in place. He watched as she started going through the suite, a section at a time, searching, hunting for whatever it was she thought would justify her abrupt change in behavior.

"Would you please tell me what the hell is going on?" He couldn't stand her silence, or the totally professional, detached way she was now going through the suitcase he had left open on the luggage rack.

"I told you, someone is following us. He's been in here, too. I can still smell his cologne."

John sniffed. He couldn't smell anything strange. "Why on earth would someone—anyone—be following us?" He watched as she methodically removed every piece of clothing, patted it down, and then slid her fingers along the lining of the bag. He had to admit, he was a little in awe as he watched her do her job, but it was beyond his comprehension that anyone would have an interest in someone who bought and sold antiques. "Aren't there terrorists and kidnappers and bombers out there who need apprehending first?"

She straightened up and glared at him. "I do not appreciate your humor. This is serious."

She plopped her backpack on the bed and began her search process all over again.

John couldn't stand the slight quiver he heard in her voice. She did love him, he knew it. Otherwise, she wouldn't be so

upset now. He walked over to the bed and slid his arms around her waist, pulling her back against him.

"I am serious. I love you." He kissed the side of her neck.

"I heard you at the restaurant, and I—" She gasped before finishing her sentence.

Damn. What now?

"Those two tiles I kept from the boxes you bought. They're gone."

"Maybe you left them in the hotel in Naples."

* * * *

"I did not. They've been in my backpack pocket every day." Cori knew that for a fact because she usually took them out and looked at them at least once a day, thinking about the picture she would start for John as soon as they got back to Boston. Sometimes, she even carried them in her pocket because they reminded her of how he had asked her opinion on purchasing them. He had valued her opinion and Cori kept that knowledge in a little secret place near her heart.

"Well, I don't know why anyone would want a couple of tiles but if that's all they took, we're lucky."

"If they took them, there's a reason for it," Cori replied, "although nothing else seems to be gone."

"I can't imagine what that reason would be, but we're going home tomorrow, so we shouldn't have any more trouble."

"Shit! Where are the airline tickets?"

"In my computer bag, why?"

Cori carefully went through the bag, but since she didn't know how John had stored anything, she couldn't tell if it had been tampered with. All she could do was check for bugs.

"We need to change to an earlier flight," she told him.

"That'll cost a fortune."

"Damn it, I'll pay for it. We need to get out before they know. I can only hope they're not watching us. We'll leave

early, drive around and get to the airport with just enough time to board. That way there won't be time for them to get tickets."

"Sweetheart, you keep saying *they*. Who are you talking about?"

Cori dropped down on the bed, rubbing her hands over her face. "I don't know."

She was supposed to be tough and professional and didn't want John to see her cry. But he knew, and came to sit beside her, curling an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Sweetheart, let me help. Tell me what's wrong."

"I should be taking better care of someone I love." She sniffled.

"Say that again," he said, his voice gruff with emotion.

Cori jerked away and began pacing the room from bed to dresser.

"Cori?"

She whirled to face him. "Yes, I love you!" she shouted.

"Well, you don't have to yell." He grinned. "A simple yes would suffice."

Cori couldn't believe they were having this conversation when someone was after them. She scowled at John. "If I hadn't been so busy falling in love with you, I would have noticed something; seen someone lurking around."

He grabbed her hand as she paced by, pulling her between his legs.

"You can't believe the two things are related."

"I should have been more alert, but your sisters-in-law promised..." She suddenly realized what she had said when John's eyes narrowed.

"Tell me you are not here because my brothers' batty wives set me up again."

Cori could tell by his voice that what she said next could make or break their relationship. If he thought she was only here

because of some deal with his relatives, the wonderful connection she just now understood would vanish before her eyes.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, tilting his face up. She bent and kissed him gently.

“Your sisters-in-law have nothing to do with the way I feel about you.”

“But then what were you saying?”

She kissed him again. “Never mind. It’s not important.” But perhaps it was, because if those women were behind this latest occurrence, they had at least made Cori see how important John had become to her.

John deepened the kiss, pulling her back with him onto the bed. Her hips landed right at the juncture of his and she rubbed herself against him.

“Tell me again,” he whispered against her breasts after he had pulled her shirt over her head.

“Tell you what?” she teased.

He nipped her nipple and the friction of the lace against her skin had her groaning. She rubbed harder against him.

He held her hips still. “Not until you tell me.”

“Is this something I’m going to have to do all the time now?” She gave a dramatic sigh.

“Probably. I’m an insecure male and I need constant reassurance.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right. You’re *Clark Kent* and *Superman*.”

He laughed outright then gave her the gentlest smile. Cori didn’t think he minded the comparison when, almost as quickly as *Superman* changed in the phone booth, John had them both naked. He rolled them over, pressed his erection against her mound and braced himself on his arms, staring down at her.

“Who do you want making love to you tonight?”

“Oh, any combination of the two will do, as long as there’s plenty of it before we go to sleep.”

“Sweetheart, you’re not going to be sleeping tonight.”

He was right. She had to be alert in case the intruder came back.

“I’ll have to stay on the couch.”

“There is no couch, and that’s not what I meant, anyway. I’m not letting you out of this bed.”

“Well then, you know the drill. I get the outside of the bed.” Her voice rose as he slid into her, pushing hard, impaling her totally. No preliminaries, no foreplay, but she was already wet and ready for him.

“After we’re through here, of course,” she added.

In the end, John was right and they hardly slept at all. *Clark* and *Superman* kept switching off, his loving gentle then torrid, taking her to extremes of rapture regardless of whether they made love slow or furiously. She finally decided he was neither fiction hero. He was John, a man of varying appetites who was making Cori’s life more interesting by the minute.

* * * *

They got to the airport, checked in and passed security just as the flight was boarding. Cori kept a constant vigil for the scar-faced man; even knowing he was probably not working alone and anyone could be assigned to follow them. If she had her cell phone and if they weren’t overseas, she’d be making some calls and finding out what the hell they were up against. As it was, she would have to wait until they landed back in Boston.

She carefully checked every passenger they passed as they headed to their seats on the jumbo jet. No one appeared to be scrutinizing them as hard as she was, but then Cori couldn’t honestly say anyone would try something in a plane. Besides, no one would have a weapon, so she should feel relatively safe.

John insisted on taking the aisle seat so he could stretch his legs, even though Cori would rather have sat on the outside. The minute they were airborne, he pulled out his laptop.

“Do you have to work?” Cori asked.

“It’s better than sitting here stewing about whether someone is following us.” He slid her a sideways look.

“I’m doing my job.”

“You’re being paranoid is what you’re doing,” he replied. “I still don’t have any idea why someone would want to follow us. We’re not terrorists.”

“John, last night you asked me to trust you.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t think I ever answered you.”

She unbuckled her safety belt and wiggled down into the seat trying to get comfortable.

“Did you bring that up for a reason?” He grumbled and she heard the sarcasm in his voice.

“I’m getting there,” she said slowly, knowing what she was about to tell him would mean a very serious commitment on her part. Long after John had fallen asleep last night, she had lain there thinking about them, about the fact he loved her, even though she wasn’t a flowery, sweet type woman. She knew that, and had accepted herself years before. The fact John could accept her that way just made her love him more.

When she didn’t answer him right away, he began typing on his computer. She put one hand over his, tilting the screen down with her other hand.

He turned to look at her, one brow raised.

“I do trust you not to betray or hurt me. I know every male isn’t like Zack.”

“And you’ll let me love you and take care of you?”

“You can love me all you want,” she said then leaned close. “In fact, you are very, very good at loving me.” When she saw

him blush slightly, she hurried on, hoping to get through her little speech. "But it's my job to take care of you. And if I can trust you, then you have to trust me to know if something is out of whack."

He looked as though he were about to protest, so Cori stopped him with a kiss. As her tongue darted into his mouth, she slid a hand under the cover of his lap tray up to his groin, squeezing gently.

"No arguing."

"I trust your instincts, Cori, but I do not need taken care of."

She could feel him swell beneath her strokes. His comment brought a smile to her face.

"Oh, I would say there is something that needs taken care of."

"Be serious."

"Oh, I am," she whispered, letting her voice drop an octave as she continued to stroke him.

She thought she heard him groan. "That's not in the least fair."

"Life's not fair. Now, are you going to admit that I take care of you?"

* * * *

John knew when he'd been had, but admitting that Cori was taking care of him did not preclude him from doing the same in return.

"Yes, fine. Knock yourself out taking care of me," he grumbled as he reached down and removed her hand from his aching shaft. "And if you don't stop that right now, there's no telling how much care I will need by the time we get home." He glanced her way to find her grinning at him. "It may be days and days before I feel well enough to leave the condo."

She seemed satisfied with that and settled down next to him, their shoulders touching in companionable silence. John finally went back to his computer, entering data on the purchases he had made in Italy and France. He computed the cost of the tickets and expenses for the trip and figured what he had to make to show a profit. He also calculated the purchases times his normal commission rate, minus expenses, to see the difference in profit.

“Are you trying to see how you can make the most money?” Cori was watching his computer screen.

“What’s wrong with that? I provide a service at whatever the market will bear.”

“Is that ethical?”

He laughed. “I always have a fairly high margin on the objects I sell. That way, my clients can barter with me, and when I drop the price, they feel they’re getting a bargain and I still make a profit.”

“And all this makes you enough to live on?”

Her question reminded John of a thought he’d had last night. “Antiques and collectibles make me a good living but I’m thinking about expanding—diversifying in a way.”

“To what?”

He turned to watch her face. “How about adding an art gallery and frame shop?”

Cori stared at him, not speaking. After all, he was asking for a commitment, and he sensed her hesitation. He hurried on.

“Look, I love you, you love me. So why not do something permanent?”

“You’re going to get mushy on me, aren’t you?”

“My family is really into *mushy*, as you so delicately put it. Mom doesn’t believe in couples living together.”

“Okay, so we don’t live together. We just have lots and lots of sex.”

He smiled at that, but still asked, "What's wrong with a commitment?"

"You just said it—your family. I don't know them; they don't know me. What if they don't like me?"

He wrapped her in an embrace, kissing her on the forehead. "They will love you because I do. Mom always told us, 'If she makes you happy, then I'm happy for you.'"

Cori opened her mouth to argue further but he put a finger to her lips. "You don't have to decide anything right this minute. Just think about it." He turned and dug into his computer bag.

"Here. In our rush to leave the hotel, I almost forgot to pick this up at the front desk. I had it delivered since you never let me out of our room."

She took the small bag and untied the ribbon holding it shut. "This isn't one of those *French letters*, is it?" She dangled the ribbon under his nose.

"No, but I'll write you one if you want," he replied, deliberately misunderstanding.

She frowned. "I think I'd rather have the action instead of some flowery words on paper."

"That's easily arranged." He gave her a wicked grin.

John found it hard to believe but Cori actually blushed. He enjoyed teasing her, something he never used to do.

"Oh, it's a *Santon*," she exclaimed when she pulled the small figurine on a horse out of the bag. "And it's a knight! You said there weren't any."

"You don't know how many places I had to call every time you were in the bathroom. But to be truthful, it's really called *The Hunter*. I think this little stick is his gun, not a sword."

Cori hugged it to her chest and her eyes grew damp. She quietly said, "Thank you. If it's alright with you, I think he looks more like a knight."

"There's something else in there." He pointed to the bag.

She pulled out some tissue, unwrapping the other *Santon* he had purchased—a little clay man loaded down with boxes and pots. “No matter how far away the peddler goes to buy and sell his wares, he’ll always return to the castle and the knight, because that is where his heart is.”

He watched her eyes well over. He knew she hated showing emotion, so she tucked her face against his neck, but he still heard her whisper, “You are so sappy.”

Chapter 11

Cori and John arrived back in Boston well after midnight, took a cab from the airport and fell into bed without doing anything more than stripping naked. As John surfaced the next morning, he decided there was definitely something special about waking up with a hard-on; Cori's naked butt pressed firmly against his erection. He wrapped his arm around her, cupping her breast. She moaned softly and wiggled.

He peppered kisses across the back of her shoulders, his hand wandering down her stomach to her mound. Her muscles quivered, and he smiled, liking the way she so easily responded to his touch, even in her sleep. He slid his fingers through her pubic hair, which she had quit shaving. He loved the feel of the tight black curls as he delved deeper, searching for her wet heat.

Cori rolled to her back, opening herself to his touch and he took advantage, slipping two fingers inside her slick depths as he laved her breast with his tongue before sucking a nipple into his mouth.

"Oh, yeah," Cori moaned. "I was dreaming we were back in the hotel in France, where nobody could interfere with us screwing our brains out."

He released her breast and look up at her, chuckling. "Speaking of, I probably should call Gordon and see if they've found out anything about the flower stalker while we were gone."

“John, there’s something I—”

The phone rang, interrupting whatever Cori was about to say. With a groan, John rolled over and read the caller ID. “It’s Michael. He always knows when I get home from a trip.” He picked up. “Why do you always know where I am, but it doesn’t work the other way around?” he asked his twin without even a hello.

“Because I’m the sensitive one,” Michael answered with a laugh. “I do wish you’d arrange your schedule better, though, because I shot out of bed at twelve thirty with my heart pounding.”

John knew that was the exact time they had touched down. Although he and Michael were close, he didn’t have the same gift and sometimes, Michael’s ability to read him was scary.

“Okay, so you know I’m home and next time I’ll consult your receptionist before I make my travel plans. Now can I go back to sleep?”

“I just called to remind you it’s Sunday, and as long as you’re home, it’s dinner at Mom’s.”

John groaned. Cori was licking her way down his chest and it was extremely hard to concentrate on a phone conversation. Besides, he knew Cori would worry about meeting his family.

“We got in late,” he told his brother.

“No excuses. Besides, I thought you might want to bring Cori with you to meet everybody.”

How the hell did his brother know anything about Cori? Granted, the guys had hired her, but they couldn’t possibly know where their relationship had gone since then. He did a mental head slap. Michael would know. He sensed a lot about John, but anything of an emotional nature came across even stronger.

Cori nipped the sensitive skin at his hip and John had to swallow a moan.

"I've got to go," he told his brother.

As though knowing exactly what was happening in his bedroom, Michael tried to prolong the conversation. "How was the trip? Did you find anything remarkable?"

"I'll see you at five." John slammed the phone down, growling as he tried to roll Cori over.

She was having none of it. She pushed him back down with one hand, the other cupping his balls and squeezing slightly while her mouth... John quivered beneath the stroke of her tongue, as it slid up one side of his shaft and down the other. Then she nibbled on the very tip before sucking the head into her hot mouth. John's hips came off the bed.

"What did your brother want?" she asked, blowing hot air against his wet length, making it jerk against her mouth.

"I don't want to talk," John could barely get the words out.

"Oh?" Her tongue swirled around and around, up and down. "I hear most relationships fail because of a lack of communication." She sucked him into her mouth again.

"Not if they have something like this to wake up to in the morning." He couldn't take the intense assault on his most sensitive organ, and he reached down to drag Cori up his body. She wiggled until he was probing between her legs as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

Their tongues met, teasing, tasting and John knew he wanted to wake up every morning with Cori in his arms. Without releasing her sweet mouth, he rolled and when she brought her knees up to brace her feet on the bed, he unerringly found her hot sheath, sliding deep and stopping, their hips tight.

Cori wiggled beneath him, releasing his mouth. "What's wrong?"

"I love you."

She reached up to caress his cheek, her lower lip quivering. He knew she loved him but she was still afraid of giving him her heart.

He kissed her gently. "Remember the peddler? I'll always come home to you; always be here for you."

She smiled then. "And you'll bring me little pots and pans?"

"Filled with my love." He began moving then, trying to show her with his body how much he worshipped her. He had never thought to love this deeply, and if they ever found the secret admirer, John would have to thank him or her because it had brought him Cori.

Cori gave herself over to John's loving, the passion that always ignited between them sweeter and more intense than ever. She wrapped her legs around his lean waist, urging him to go faster. Her heart pounded as the tension built and within minutes, she was on the edge of the precipice. Her inner muscles squeezed, urging John along with her.

"Now," she whispered, hugging him tight and he responded, pumping hard and fast into her, taking them both into a blissful oblivion she had only found in his arms.

Cori moaned John's name as her climax hit, the contractions pulling over and over as spasms shot down her legs and into her belly. She felt it everywhere, the sweet vibrations rocking her to the core.

As John held her tight in the aftermath of passion, she could feel tears seeping down her face into her hair. She had grown up tough because she'd had to, and she had never relied on anyone for anything, except maybe her brother. But she knew there had always been a little place in her heart that wanted something more. Did that make her a sap? She certainly couldn't be one of those googly-eyed women who mooned over a guy.

"I can't change who I am, you know," she said.

"I wouldn't want you to. I love the tough, hard-nosed bodyguard type." He grinned at her, then added almost hesitantly, "And my family will love you, too."

"You don't sound too sure about that."

"No, they will. You'll find out...tonight."

"Tonight? Is that what Michael was calling about?"

He nodded. "Usually Sunday night is dinner at Mom's, especially if Chase or Steve are in town since they don't live here."

Cori shrugged, not really minding, since she had her own reasons for wanting to see his family, in particular, the meddlesome wives. "I suppose it was inevitable," she said, sliding a hand down his chest and giving him a sexy grin. "So, if I have to be prim and proper and on my best behavior tonight, can we work on decadent and depraved until we have to go?"

* * * *

Cori played nice as she was introduced to John's family, pretending she hadn't already met most of the wives. His brother Chase and his wife Katie Jo were in from Texas, and although she hadn't met this one, she knew the woman was in on the scheme to set John up. They all were.

The minute the guys went outside to start the grill, she threw Penny a look and the woman quickly shooed the kids outside to play.

"I thought I told you ladies to back off." Cori wasted no time the minute they were alone.

"What are you taking about?" Katie Jo asked.

Suzy sighed. "She knows about our scheme."

"Yes, and we had this discussion before John and I went to Europe. You were not to do anything else."

"But we haven't," Morgan said.

This really shouldn't have surprised Cori. "What do you mean?" Her stomach pitched. *If the wives weren't responsible for the break-in in France, then who was?*

Penny, Suzy, Morgan and Katie Jo were all shaking their heads. "You said stop. We stopped," Suzy reiterated. "Do you think we wanted you shooting us?"

Cori had the grace to blush. "Geez, I wouldn't really shoot you. How would that have looked to John?"

"So," Penny immediately latched onto her mention of John and Cori saw the speculative gleam in her eye. "How are things with John?"

All the sisters-in-law leaned forward.

"What did I tell you before?" Cori growled.

Their eyes immediately opened wide and Cori figured they all wondered if she had a gun hidden under her shirt. She didn't know yet what was to happen with their relationship and certainly didn't want to tell these women anything before John said something.

She softened her voice. "What's between John and me is private."

"Hmmm." Penny pursed her lips but her eyes twinkled.

"Oh, I see." Morgan nodded.

"Well, what do you know?" Katie Jo joined in.

Suzy just sat there, a smug smile on her face as she lifted her glass of iced tea in salute and Cori could only assume that at least Suzy was on her side. Instead of interrogating her further, the women started chatting about kids and baseball schedules and Cori figured she was off the hook.

As she sat and half listened to the conversation, she thought about the incidents in France. She had known these women probably weren't involved, but had felt she had to ask. That left an unknown factor. She would have to visit with Bob, even if she

wasn't sure what to have him look for. And she would have to remain vigilant.

* * * *

The next few weeks went by in a blur for Cori. One day she went out to Bob's for her paints and canvases and when she returned, John showed her the building next to his store, handed her the title and introduced her to a contractor.

"He'll be knocking out the wall between this store and mine, but you have total control on the design of the interior."

"I don't have this kind of money," Cori exclaimed, overwhelmed by what he was offering.

"The title to the building is a gift, sweetheart." He kissed the tip of her nose. "If you want, I'll bill you for the contractor and we can figure out a trade." He gave her a sexy grin. "In the meantime, you can work on your paintings and sketches in the extra storeroom in my shop. It's not very big, but it will give you a place to start so you have some finished pictures by the time your gallery is done."

He didn't say anything about marriage. He didn't tell her she had to find an apartment because of his family's morals. And when Cori came back from Bob's the second time, she carted the rest of her belongings into John's condo, taking over the study for storage. And he just smiled and took her to bed, loving her with a gentle intensity that made Cori think about permanent.

So they settled into a routine. John fixed her breakfast every morning and then they walked to the shop. While he attended to business, she worked in her makeshift studio on the painting she had conceived in her mind while they were in Italy. She didn't have the tiles, but she vividly remembered the colors of the sky, and she had her sketches of the mansion they had visited for the auction.

One night after dinner, Bob called.

"I can't find any unauthorized entries into the States from Italy or France," he told her. "If someone followed you home, they don't show up on any database as being troublemakers."

"I know we were being followed," she told him.

"I believe you, Cori. I just can't find anything. Have there been any incidents since you returned?"

"No, nothing."

"Well, keep a lookout. If you do stumble across anything out of the ordinary, call me right away."

Cori told him good-bye and set her phone on the coffee table. She leaned back against John with a sigh.

"What's up?"

"Bob can't find anything about a scar-faced man who might have followed us home."

"I know you're good at your job, but maybe the man you saw was studying us for some other reason. Maybe he hoped to rob us or something."

Since Cori didn't have anything else to go on except two missing tiles, she couldn't argue the point.

"Have you gotten your shipments from Italy yet?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I expect the Limoncello for Singleton to arrive any day. I'll probably wait and deliver Longfoot's *French letter* at the same time. I already called him about it and he's very anxious to see it."

Cori snorted. "He probably wants to try it out. What about the tiles?"

"They'll take a bit longer to arrive, as will the furniture. I'm sure the shipper had to break up the boxes because of the weight."

He slid an arm around her back and now caressed the side of her breast. As always when he touched her, she began throbbing. She turned and placed her hand on his crotch, gently squeezing before sliding his zipper down.

He scooted down on the couch so she could unbuckle his pants. Cori slid her hand into his briefs, squeezing him tightly. He groaned.

John bent his head to kiss her. Tongues dueled and his arms tightened around her. The kiss was deep and erotic, his tongue making love to her mouth. Cori's insides heated up and all she could think of was stripping them both naked.

She wiggled around and grabbed the tails of his shirt, sliding it up his muscular chest. With a moan, she released his lips so she could lift the shirt over his head.

On her knees on the couch, she jerked her tee shirt over her head, then reached around to unhook her bra. John watched her movements and it turned her on.

He pulled her to him, sucking her breast into his hot mouth. His hands found the fastener of her pants and slid them down to her knees. One hand cupped her, his fingers sliding through her curls. Cori knew she was already wet.

"This couch sucks. We need more room," she complained as she wiggled around and almost fell off the edge.

"Easily fixed." John rose, letting his pants fall to the floor and stepping out of them. He grabbed her hand and pulled her up, but not before he tugged her slacks down and off, followed by her bikini briefs.

The covers of the bed were mussed from the morning as Cori was last out of bed and hadn't taken the time to make it. John jerked the coverlet down to the bottom, pulled her around and tossed her into the middle of it.

He had become more aggressive in their lovemaking and Cori loved it. While he could be gentle, she liked it rough and tumble at times, and John always seemed to sense that.

Tonight was one of those times.

Chapter 12

John stripped off his briefs, and then just stood and looked at her, his gaze sliding from her breasts down to her parted legs. He could set her on fire without even touching her.

“You are so beautiful,” he said softly and Cori blushed, still not used to the compliments he generously lavished on her. She lifted her foot and rubbed it along his erection.

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

He grabbed her ankle and rolled her over, coming down on top of her, pinning her to the mattress. He kissed along her back, nipping the side of her neck.

Cori wiggled and stretched beneath him, loving the feel of his weight on her. She spread her legs and felt his hot length probing her from behind.

“No fair. It’s my turn to be on top.” It was an ongoing argument between them as to who got to be in control now that John had assumed *Superman* mode more often than not.

“You had your turn this morning, remember?” He slid his hand between her and the sheet, cupping her breast; finding her nipple and lightly pinching.

Cori found it hard to concentrate on anything except the erotic sensations zipping through her body. It didn’t really matter who did what, as long as John made her come. And there was no problem with that.

“Being between me and the shower wall does not constitute being on the bottom.” She pushed against the mattress, trying to dislodge him but he held firm.

“Cori,” he growled. “Lie still or I’ll come before I ever get inside you.”

She smiled. It was hard not to love him when he made her feel sexy and very, very wanted. She wiggled.

“That’s it.” John rose up on his knees behind her, sliding his hands down to her butt. “Get your ass in the air.” He lifted her and she brought her knees under her, immediately feeling him slide between her legs.

“Just remember, turnabout’s fair play,” she managed to say before he slid into her, his hips bumping her butt. “Oh, that feels good.” He filled her more than ever this way and as he started to move, Cori could feel him deep inside her.

This position put John in total control, and all Cori could do was grab a hunk of sheet and hold on. He slammed into her hard, then gently withdrew and pumped into her again, slower this time. The varied rhythm had her writhing in anguish because she would be on the brink of coming and then he would relax his strokes, keeping her tilting wildly on the edge of her climax.

His grip on her hips varied with his strokes, tight, then caressing. Then he slid his hands up her back as he leaned forward. When he covered her completely and cupped her breasts, Cori came unglued.

She pushed back against him and his hard chest slid along her back. He totally surrounded her. In any other instance, Cori would be fighting her way free, but she realized she loved John’s total domination of her. Maybe because she knew he would let her do the same; perhaps because she was discovering she loved him so much she was willing to give up control, knowing he would never hurt her.

She sensed his change in rhythm even before he straightened up. He pumped hard now, and Cori's inner muscles tightened in anticipation of climax. John squeezed her ass cheeks, sliding in and out fast but always pushing deep to the edge of her womb. The pressure tipped her over the edge, her orgasm flooding through her with an intensity that had her shaking.

The instant Cori's sheath squeezed around him, John knew her climax had hit. He stroked her again, in and out, her muscles sucking him deep. With a shout, he let himself go, spurting hot and strong. His hips twitched as he held himself tight against her. Every time they made love, he didn't think it could get any better, but every time it did. When his tremors subsided, he leaned forward, supporting himself on his hands, his chest brushing against Cori's back as he tried to get his breathing under control. Damn, she was wearing him out.

As he rolled over and pulled Cori into his side, doubts surfaced. Cori was only in her early thirties, and for all he knew that was when a woman hit her sexual peak. At forty-one, he sometimes felt he was on the downhill slide. Did he have the right to ask her for a commitment with the age difference? If it didn't matter at the moment, it certainly would in ten or so years.

Cori nipped his chin and he turned to look at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glowed. Lips swollen from his kisses tilted up just slightly and he bent to brush his mouth against hers. The little half smiles she gave him were sexy as hell and always made his heart trip.

"Can I tell you something without you getting all mushy on me?" she asked.

He tried not to smile. She had this thing about being sappy. So many times John wanted to tell her how much he loved her and that he wanted to marry her and grow old with her, but she stopped him anytime he broached the subject. Usually the

stopping was in the form of screwing his balls off, and John wondered if it was her way of expressing her feelings without being a sap, as she called him.

“I’m a man. I don’t get mushy,” he stated.

She gave a dainty snort. “You always get sappy.”

“Is there a difference between sappy and mushy?” he asked just to tease her.

She gave a huge sigh. “Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?” She narrowed her eyes at him, and John realized she was being serious.

He quickly kissed her pouting lips. “I’m sorry. Of course I want to hear.”

She cleared her throat, and John could see a faint blush stain her cheeks. His heart began to pound.

“I know I told you before that I loved you, but it was in response to you saying it first. So,” she took a deep breath, “I really, really love you very, very much.”

Apparently totally embarrassed by making that declaration, she rolled away to the edge of the bed but John was faster. He snagged her arm and dragged her back across his chest.

He had known she loved him, but to hear her say it, to actually put voice to her feelings, was something that he knew was extremely hard for her. And for that reason, it was so much more special to him. He tucked her words away in his heart where they would always be safe and then he kissed her, letting his lips gently caress her mouth, absorbing the scent and taste of her.

So she wouldn’t think he was being mushy, even though that was exactly how he felt, he finally released her lips and gave her a smile.

“Thank you,” he said, holding her gaze. And in her eyes, he saw her understanding of all he hadn’t said—that she was cherished, that he loved her totally and would keep her safe.

* * * *

“Let’s go, sleepyhead,” John roused Cori out of bed early Wednesday morning.

With a groan, Cori rolled over, the sheet slipping down past her hips. John began to rethink having scheduled an appointment this early when her pert, rosy nipples bobbed gently with her movements.

“Where are we going?” She stretched her arms, then brought her legs up and over her head to hook her toes on the headboard. It was her morning ritual, these bed aerobics, but John wasn’t usually standing at the end of the bed where he had a perfect view of her bare butt.

If they hadn’t spent the majority of last night making love, John might be inclined to climb back into bed and kiss the pale cheeks so prominently displayed for him. Kiss them, her breasts and a whole lot more.

Cori put her hands behind her knees as she rocked to an upright position. She tilted her head and looked at him through narrowed eyes. “You’re not tempted; even a little?”

John laughed as he caught her by the ankle and pulled her from the bed, wrapping his arms around her when she stood. His mouth came down on hers, kissing her good morning.

“Does a bear like honey?” He asked the rhetorical question. “You are temptation manifest, but since we can’t live on sex, I’d better make us some money, don’t you think?”

“Hmmm. We do pretty good with sex instead of dinner some nights.”

“That’s why I’m breaking down and cooking this morning. I’m starved!” Neither he nor Cori was a great cook, but they managed well enough. He released her and turned. “Hop in the shower and I’ll have breakfast ready in a bit. Then if you want to take a drive, I’m going to see your favorite pervert.”

“I’m thinking you’ve become my favorite pervert,” she tossed over her shoulder as she closed the bathroom door behind her. And John figured she just might be right because he did things with her in the bedroom he never thought he would do. Nothing kinky, just plenty of hot, demanding sex in a variety of positions.

He just about burnt the bacon as he continued thinking about making love to Cori in some positions they hadn’t yet tried. He was hot and bothered by the time she walked into the kitchen, and her appearance didn’t help at all. Her black hair curled about her face in wet ringlets, and she wore one of his tee shirts. He knew from past experience that she had nothing on under it. She didn’t even make it to the coffee pot before he had her pinned against the counter, his mouth searching hers.

“Wow,” she breathed when he finally released her lips. “Was that breakfast?” She licked her lips.

He growled, taking her lips again, slanting his mouth across hers and devouring her sweet taste. She had his pants unbuckled in an instant, her hands cool against his fevered skin. When he lifted her onto the edge of the counter, she hooked her heels against the back of his thighs, urging him closer and he quickly filled her. He was so hot and hard for her that within seconds, he knew he was ready to explode.

“Christ, I can’t wait,” he growled against her neck.

She bit his shoulder. “Do it, John. Fuck me hard.”

Her words sent him over the edge, jolting his world and everything in it. He slid a hand between them as he pushed into her one last time, his finger finding her clit and with just a little pressure, she climaxed with him, the force of her inner muscles prolonging his orgasm as she sucked him dry.

His arms shook as he braced his hands on the counter, his head dropping to her shoulder.

Her fingers twined in his hair as she nibbled on his earlobe.

“Now, *that* was breakfast,” he said when he could finally breathe. “Are you ready for brunch?”

She laughed as she pushed him away, hopping down from the counter. “I think you were right earlier when you said we really do need to eat.”

John looked over at the breakfast he had cooked but quickly forgotten. “How about a cold egg and bacon sandwich?”

Cori screwed up her face. “It’s probably a good thing you have a microwave, or we would never have a hot meal.”

* * * *

Cori rode with John out to Longfoot’s residence but stayed in the car while John transacted his business with the man. Sex was a private matter, and she just didn’t feel comfortable being present when Henry Longfoot examined the *French letter-slash-condom*. And she especially didn’t want to know if the man was planning on using it as John had indicated he did with his other erotic toys.

“To each his own,” she murmured as she tipped her head back against the headrest, preparing to close her eyes and daydream about John. A flash of light in the rearview mirror had her turning to look down the street. A car pulled against the curb on the other side halfway down the block. She watched but nobody got out. Five minutes went by and still no one left the vehicle. *Why would someone park on the street and then sit in the car?* Well, she was doing just that, but then she was waiting for someone who had gotten out. Was she being paranoid?

“Well, that takes care of one piece of business,” John said as he opened the door.

Cori shrieked. “Shit, don’t sneak up on me! You scared me to death.”

“What? Were you sleeping? Sorry,” he offered offhandedly as he started the car.

“John, instead of going straight, u-turn and drive the other way.” She wanted to see who was sitting in the car down the road.

He gave her a look, but did as she asked. When he slowly drove past the green sedan, Cori mentally noted the license tag, but when she glanced in the side window, nobody was there. Her eyes narrowed. She knew no one had gotten out of that car, which meant he had probably seen them turn around and was scrunched down in the seat so she couldn’t see him.

Not knowing who it was or why they felt the need to hide, she didn’t dare confront them. Instead, she pulled her cell phone out and called Bob, giving him the license tag.

“What’s going on, Cori?” John asked.

“Just drive. You don’t want Winston Singleton’s wine to ferment before you get it delivered, do you?” She knew how John felt about her intuition, as he called it, so she wasn’t about to say anything until she *knew* something.

“It’s a rental. Some corporate name with no trace on the actual driver,” Bob’s voice came back on the phone.

“Figures. Thanks anyway.” Cori snapped her phone shut.

“You seeing furtive people again?” John asked, a smile tugging at his lips.

“How did Longfoot like his condom?” she asked instead of answering him.

“You don’t care about Henry and his erotic collection.” John guessed her ploy. “Come here.” He tugged her closer until she was sitting right beside him. “Besides, you don’t have to worry about stalkers anymore. My brothers told me what their crazy wives had done.”

She looked at him in surprise. “You know?” At his nod and grin, she became suspicious. “How long have you known?” She clamped her hand on his thigh and squeezed, right above the knee.

“Youch.” John grabbed her hand. “Easy, that’s the foot on the accelerator. Besides, apparently you know, too.”

“I haven’t been charging your brothers for my time since I found out.” She squeezed again. “How long, McVicker?”

“Only since we got back from Europe; when we had dinner at Mom’s. Michael had already guessed how I felt about you, and when I told them I wanted to marry you, they finally confessed that they had known about their wives’ prank.” He gave her a smile. “I really should send all my sisters-in-law flowers and a thank you. If I hadn’t thought I was being stalked, my brothers wouldn’t have hired you and we never would have met.”

“You told them what?” She hadn’t heard anything after the *m* word. This was getting worse and worse.

John pulled the car over to the side of the street and parked. He turned to face her.

“You told me you loved me. In fact, you said *very, very much*.”

“Well yes, but that doesn’t mean we have to get married.” Her heart throbbed rapidly at the word.

“You weren’t listening to what I said. I told them I *wanted* to marry you; not that I had asked, or that we were going to.”

Her heart calmed a little. He reached over to caress her cheek, turning her face and capturing her gaze.

“I won’t rush you, Cori. I love you and would do anything for you, but I won’t pressure you into marriage.”

She stared into dark brown eyes full of love and knew she was very lucky to have this chance at happiness. “John, you are such a...”

“Sap,” he finished for her, turning back to put the car in gear. “I know.”

“Actually, I was going to say a romantic.” She slid her arm around his shoulders and reached over to kiss his ear as he drove

to the other side of town to deliver Singleton's case of Limoncello.

* * * *

Cori woke up alone in bed on Sunday morning but heard the radio from the kitchen as she padded to the bathroom and hoped John had the coffee going. Hanging around him, she had soon given up on herbal tea and health food, although she did try to cook vegetables once in awhile. In fact, it was actually her turn to cook this week, but knowing John, he would have something going by the time she took a shower and dressed. He was so good to her and every day found her closer and closer to telling him that marriage might not be such a bad thing.

After all, they were already living together. The sex was unbelievably great and they talked about anything and everything when they weren't in bed. The art gallery was almost finished, and John had helped her pick out the colors for the interior, had given her an antique desk for her office in the back, and was already planning a grand opening. His pride in the sketches and paintings she already had framed and ready to hang was just one more reason she loved him.

And they had done it all without arguing. Well, except for once or twice.

"Good morning. Why didn't you wake me?" Cori stopped at the kitchen door when she realized she was talking to herself. She saw the note as she reached for the coffeepot.

"Sweetheart. Thought I'd let you sleep in while I got some actual work done. Expecting the rest of the Italy shipment anytime and need to make room. Some beautiful artist has taken over my storeroom and left me with only a fainting couch. If you have any ideas as to what I can do with that, come down and show me." He had signed it *Love and my heart are yours, J.*

She smiled as she dug through the fridge. She could definitely think of a few things they could do *on* that couch. Not

finding anything that looked good to eat, she decided she would stop at the bakery and get some éclairs on the way to the shop. It had to be love, she thought wryly, when she was willing to sacrifice her hips and buy totally fattening food just because it was John's favorite.

The phone rang as she reached for her purse. She didn't recognize the caller ID but then it was John's apartment phone so that wasn't unusual.

"Hello?"

"Cori, it's Gordon." His voice was loud and harsh. "Come down to the store right away. John's been mugged."

Chapter 13

Cori ran the few blocks to the shop, her heart pounding as tears streamed down her face. She rattled the door but it was locked and she fumbled for her keys, realizing she didn't have one to the antique store.

Racing next door, her hands shook before she finally got the gallery door open and ran through the empty space, shrieking John's name.

"We're back here!" Gordon called from John's office.

She skidded to a halt, her hand covering her mouth to stifle a sob. John sat at his desk, his shirt torn at the shoulder and his hair standing wildly on end.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he mumbled around the ice pack he held to his face. His eye was already discoloring and she could see his lip was swollen.

"Oh, God. What happened?" She sank to her knees in front of him. She raised a shaking hand to touch his face and he flinched. Cori had to bite her lip to keep from crying harder.

"Someone broke in the back door," Gordon answered for him. "John said the man wanted some tiles." He looked to her in question.

"The Italian tiles?" Cori swung her gaze back to John. He nodded.

"I told him I didn't have them." He removed the ice bag from his face and Cori lifted his hand to hold it back in place. "So he started going through everything and when he got to the

storeroom, he started tearing things apart.” The look he gave Cori told her how sorry he was. The storeroom was her studio; where she had been painting.

“It’s alright,” she whispered.

“It’s not, damn it!” John replied. “He destroyed your paintings, so I hit him.”

Cori’s heart had begun to settle down now that she knew John wasn’t seriously injured. But when the gist of his comment soaked in, anger replaced her concern. She stood, placing her hands on her hips.

“You hit him first?” she asked, glaring at him.

“Yes.”

“What were you thinking?” she yelled. “The paintings can be replaced.”

“They were originals,” he replied, his voice raising.

“Screw the paintings, John! You could have been killed.” She began pacing. “Why do I think I’m in love with you? You’re an idiot!”

She turned and just about ran into him. He tossed the ice bag down on his desk and stood there glaring at her.

“There’s a thin line between strong and assertive and bitchy and rude,” he growled.

She looked at him in surprise. “Are you saying I’ve crossed that line?”

He hesitated for just a second, then glared at her with the one eye not swollen shut. “Yes.”

“Damn straight!” she fired right back. “Because you’re not fucking *Superman*. You’re *Clark Kent*, and you’re not invincible!”

Their shouting match was disrupted by a roar of laughter and they both turned to where Gordon leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, his eyes twinkling.

“Don’t you have some place to go?” John growled at him.

Gordon shook his head. "Oh, hell no. This is too entertaining. I was out for a Sunday drive and stopped by. Which, by the way, was a fortunate thing for you. Whoever was beating you up took off when I rattled the doorknob."

Gordon's reminder of the intruder effectively deflated Cori's anger. She turned to apologize for yelling, but instead began crying when she looked at John's battered face. He opened his arms and she stepped into his embrace.

"I was so scared," she whispered into his chest. "I'm supposed to protect you and you scared the shit out of me." She thumped him. "Don't ever do that again."

She heard a hoarse chuckle rumble in his chest. "I promise."

* * * *

Gordon helped them lock both stores, then called Michael to meet them at the condo. John hurt like hell, but after a couple of beers, he no longer felt the worst of the aches. Well, maybe it wasn't so much the alcohol as it was Cori's hovering.

Nothing could have spoken louder of her love than the fact she wouldn't let him out of her sight. Yeah, she had yelled at him, but to be fair, he deserved it. It had been stupid of him to try and fight a man who outweighed him by more than fifty pounds.

"The man had a scar across his face, Cori," he said as he circled her waist and drew her to his side.

She gasped. "The same one from France?"

He shrugged. "I never saw that one. He might not have been on the same flight but he's apparently found us anyway. I just can't imagine why he wants some old ceramic tiles."

"Tell me about the tiles," Gordon said.

"Can you at least wait until I finish examining him?" Michael grumbled. He had been waiting at the condo when they arrived, having left his house even before Gordon had called. Penny had told Gordon that Michael had felt a sharp pain in his side and

knew John was in trouble. John figured his twin couldn't hurt as bad as he did, regardless of his brotherly intuition.

"I bought several boxes of small colored tiles at an estate auction in Italy," John spoke around Michael's probing. "Nothing really special about them, except that the man who sold them to me was a side vendor, not with the main auction, and I got them extremely cheap."

"So maybe the tiles weren't really his to sell," Gordon theorized.

"Could be, but that still doesn't explain why anyone would go to so much trouble to get them back."

"You know," Cori said, "I remember looking at the backs of several tiles and wondering about the strange markings on the corners of them."

"Like what?" Michael asked, finally snapping his bag shut and handing John a bottle of pain pills. He put up two fingers.

Cori slipped out of his grasp while he took the pills and dug through a drawer for a pad and pencil. She sat down opposite him and drew a couple of squares, then made some doodles on the corners.

"The two tiles I had for awhile had marks like these, but they don't match each other."

"But maybe those," Gordon pointed to her tile drawings, "match some other tiles in the boxes that John bought."

"Like a puzzle?" John asked.

"The tiles were all different colors," Cori said. "I think the markings on the back are a code, so when they're matched up and the tiles are turned over, the colors will form a pattern or picture."

"Of what, I wonder," John murmured.

"There's one way to find out," Gordon said. "When the tiles are delivered, we'll pick the boxes up in my SUV and take them over to the car garage and put together the puzzle."

“Right,” Michael agreed. “Sounds like a plan.”

“No,” John shook his head. “Someone wants those tiles back, for whatever reason, and I don’t want your families involved. It could be dangerous.”

“Nonsense. This is more fun and excitement than I’ve had in a long while,” Gordon argued. “We’ll use the storage garage—move the cars out—and since it’s across town from the house, nobody will connect us. Besides, if there’s as many tiles as you said, and each corner has a different mark, we’ll figure it out faster with everybody looking.”

“Everybody?” Cori asked.

Gordon grinned and John just shook his head.

“The McVicker men have been known to help each other out once in a while,” Michael told her.

“All the time,” Gordon corrected him. “So we call Chase and Steve. By the time your tiles arrive, so will the rest of our helpers.”

John knew no amount of persuasion would change his brothers’ minds. And besides, there was power in numbers. As he looked across the table at Cori, he knew he wanted his brothers here to help him protect her. Whoever this scar-faced man was, he was no match for six McVicker brothers.

* * * *

When Michael and Gordon left, John let Cori fix him soup for supper. He usually didn’t take advantage and they worked together to make a meal and clean up afterwards, but he hurt like a son of a bitch. Not only was his eye swollen shut and his lip cut and swollen, but his ribs ached if he moved his arms too far from his sides. Michael had offered to tape them, even though he said they were just bruised, not broken.

“Do you need your pain pills?” Cori hollered at him from the bathroom where she was brushing her teeth.

"I'll be fine," he said, biting his lip to keep from groaning as he sank down in bed. "It's a good thing Michael's a doctor so I didn't have to go to emergency. How would I explain all this?" He weakly pointed to his face when she stood at the end of the bed. "It wouldn't look good if I told them you hit me."

"That's not even funny." She pouted, crawling into bed beside him and reaching across to turn off the bedside lamp.

"Shit," John couldn't prevent the groan when she leaned against his chest.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry." She jerked back.

John had to turn his head to see her out of his good eye. "It's alright."

"No, it's not. Someone tried to hurt you. Don't even think about leaving the house without me tomorrow or I'll handcuff you to this bed."

He tried to smile, as much as his swollen lip would allow. "Oh, you have handcuffs? We haven't tried that yet."

"I'm serious. Damn it, you're making me mad."

"You love me, remember?"

"And I'd like you to be around for awhile," she mumbled as she punched her pillow to settle in for the night.

"A while?"

"Do I have to say it?" She gave him the evil eye.

"Yes."

"Like years and years, okay? Are you happy now?"

"Ecstatic." He slowly rolled over and kissed her, and even though his lips and practically every other part of his body hurt like hell, he let the kiss linger, savoring her sweetness.

* * * *

John ached so badly the next morning he could hardly crawl out of bed, but he had things that needed done. In particular, getting in touch with the freight carrier he used and changing the delivery address for the Italian tiles. He had no doubt now that

someone would be watching the shop, waiting for the right moment to rob him. He still had no idea why the tiles were so important, but he was going to find out.

He downed a couple of pain pills and then stood under the hot shower, hoping it would loosen his muscles. When he finally managed to get dressed, he found Cori already in the kitchen, fixing breakfast.

She was back in black from head to steel-toed boots, and he could tell by her shape, she wore her bulletproof vest. She hadn't dressed in black since their trip and he had gotten used to her sexy legs showing beneath short skirts. That and the tight tops she liked to wear.

"You look like shit, McVicker," she said by way of greeting and he had to agree with her. He hadn't shaved since with only one good eye, he had been afraid he'd slit his throat, and his eye and lips were three shades of black and blue.

"Gee, thanks, I like you too, with your chest all smashed like a guy's." He took a sip of hot coffee and flinched, deciding instead that orange juice sounded better this morning.

"I've already checked the perimeter of the building and didn't see anything suspicious, but I know they'll be watching every move we make," Cori stated. He suspected it was her way of explaining her appearance.

"I'm calling the freight carrier and changing the delivery address. Maybe if they're watching the shop, they won't be staking out Gordon's place."

"Good idea." She sat some soft-boiled eggs on a plate in front of him. "Michael called while you were in the shower to see how you were. He also wanted to know why we didn't call the cops."

John shrugged. "There's no evidence, no reason that we know of, so nothing to go on really."

“Still, I wonder if there’s something they can find that we can’t.”

“You have Bob working on it. I’d say if he can’t find it, the cops sure wouldn’t.”

After breakfast, Cori picked up the kitchen while John called the freight carrier. She had checked the condo for bugs, but had insisted he not make any calls from the office that would give anything away, since she hadn’t yet cleared that.

When they were done, they took the stairs instead of the elevator down to the street so they could leave through the back gate. As much as they could, they circumvented the streets they usually walked and snuck in the back door of the gallery. Workmen were already busy there, and Cori scrutinized all of them, looking for any unfamiliar face. As far as she could tell, they were the same guys who had been remodeling for the past weeks.

She knew, though, that there would be someone watching the shop, even if they hadn’t followed her and John from home. It was the store they were interested in, not his condo. She carefully checked John’s office, dismantling the telephone and checking the air vents for any type of recording device. John watched her until she signaled he could speak.

“What about Agnes?” he asked.

“What about her?”

“Is it safe for her to be here?”

Cori thought about that. “I don’t think we’ll have any trouble until the tiles are delivered. Since they’re not coming here, she should be safe enough. The problem is what to do when we have to be elsewhere. Besides, I’m sure someone will make a move if they don’t see action by the end of the week.”

“When the time comes, I’ll close the shop and send her home. I don’t want her here if we’re not.”

The time came quicker than Cori had anticipated. Gordon called midafternoon. When John got off the phone, he turned and said, "The eagle has landed."

Cori rolled her eyes. "That is so hokey."

"Hey, those were Gordon's words, not mine. How are we going to get to the garage without being tailed?"

"We need a diversion," Cori thought out loud. She paced the office, keeping an eye toward the rest of the shop, half expecting the scar-faced man to bang open the door and start shooting. She hadn't told John, but her gun was snugged up against her back under her vest. She just hoped like hell she wouldn't have to use it.

Agnes was humming away as she dusted furniture and straightened books. "Agnes, we need to send you home."

"What?" she asked.

"She's right, Agnes," John agreed. "We have to check on a delivery and are closing up the shop for a bit."

She frowned at the two of them. "You never closed the shop before. Don't you think I can do my job anymore?"

"It's not that." John gave a sigh. "There's some trouble with the tiles I bought in Italy, and, well, we had a break-in yesterday. I don't want you in the middle of something dangerous."

"Wondered what hit you in the face," she said. "Thought maybe you'd gotten fresh with Cori and she decked you." She snorted with laughter. "You've got to watch these men, nowadays," she said to Cori. "They're always trying to get fresh."

Cori tried to hide her smile as John scowled.

"I can stay. It's been too quiet here, anyway, since all those flowers and candy quit being delivered. Does this have to do with the stalker?" Her eyes lit up behind the coke bottle lens of her glasses. "I've still got that baseball bat behind the counter from the last time we had trouble with those young hoodlums."

John shook his head. “That was fifteen years ago and you ended up in the hospital.”

Cori snapped her fingers as a plan formed. “Agnes, I know how you can help. We need a diversion so we’re not followed when we leave. Aren’t you feeling a little ill?”

Chapter 14

Twenty minutes later, Cori, John and Agnes were racing across town in the back of a private ambulance. Cori kept an eye out the back window to make sure they weren't being followed as Agnes chortled at having outsmarted the stalker.

It had taken a few phone calls and an assurance to the ambulance company by Michael that this was necessary before the driver agreed to take Agnes to Michael's office instead of the hospital. As soon as they pulled into the parking lot of the small practice, Michael met them with his car keys.

He was quite disgruntled that he couldn't go with them right away. "Don't finish before I get there," he said as he settled Agnes into a wheelchair and turned to push her inside. "Penny and I want to help."

"Don't worry about that," John said. "With more than a thousand tiles, it will take us awhile." He and Cori climbed into Michael's sedan and left, knowing Michael would see Agnes home.

"You look quite the international spy," Cori commented as she looked over at John. His sunglasses hid his eyes and gave him a mysterious look.

"I'm not sure how I feel about being an international spy," he replied. "I wish the freight carrier had been delayed a few days."

"You should have let me drive," she said. "I'm sure you're still sore."

He glanced her way and smiled. "Come here."

She scooted closer as he stopped at a corner. He took time to kiss her, his lips warm and inviting, and as always, Cori's insides turned to liquid.

"I'm in *Superman* mode," he whispered huskily. "And as soon as we solve this mystery, I'm going to keep you in bed for a week to prove it."

John was on a mission, and while Cori liked his assertiveness, she still worried. They didn't know what they were up against. "John, you are not—"

He stopped her with another kiss. "Do I have to prove it right here and now?"

A car honked behind them. She grinned. "There's probably a law or two about indecent exposure in a public place, so maybe we'd better wait until tonight."

He grunted like some Neanderthal man before easing the car through the intersection. He tried so hard to be macho, but that just wasn't John. John was sensitive and quiet, except in the bedroom, which was fine with her. He always seemed to know what she needed, whether it was tender loving or a cup of tea instead of coffee. And he wanted to take care of her. Truth be told, she was getting used to the idea and was thinking about hanging up her bulletproof vest for good.

They swung into the driveway of Gordon's storage garage, and something inside her tightened just like it used to do before a mission. Adrenalin pumped through her veins. The time for retirement wasn't here quite yet.

* * * *

"I can't believe you willingly put your antique cars outside in the elements," John said to Gordon when they walked through the side door into the huge, now empty garage.

"They're covered," his brother replied. "You look like shit."

Cori tried to hide her smile as John ignored his brother, tucking his sunglasses into his shirt pocket. "Are you ready to get busy?"

The boxes had been lined up just inside one of the slide up doors and the three of them moved to open one.

"Suzy was really upset that I wouldn't let her come over," Gordon said. "But I have a feeling that as soon as the other women get here, they'll corral the kids at Mom's and head over anyway."

"You talked to Chase and Steve?"

"Yeah. Bob left with the jet last night for New York to pick up Steve and Keva, then he'll swing down to San Antonio for Chase and Katie Jo."

"Everybody's coming to help?" Cori asked.

Gordon shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Why not? she thought, unable to wrap her mind around so many people willing to give up their time for each other. It was something she would have to get used to, if she continued to hang around John.

"Where do we start?" John asked, as they looked down at the first box, most of which seemed to be red tones.

Cori thought about the markings and reached down to pick up several tiles. Flipping them over, she was glad she had remembered correctly. There were small marks in most corners, but with so many, how would they ever be able to match them up, even with everybody helping?

She briefly closed her eyes, analyzing the data, sifting through possibilities, but colors floated through her mental image—the sunrise as they drove through the country side, the blue of the Mediterranean—and she realized she had been looking at this all wrong.

“Let’s assume this is a picture puzzle. We’ve already decided that the marks on the back probably match to put the puzzle together. What else do we know about puzzles?”

“I always used to find the straight edges and make the frame first,” Gordon said.

Cori nodded, looking at a group of tiles she had laid on the floor. “Okay, so the straight edge probably wouldn’t have marks on that side since it wouldn’t have to match anything else.” She pointed to two tiles. “Like those.”

“You also sort by color,” John added. “You know, if there’s a lake in the puzzle, you’d sort all the blues and try to put together a batch of pieces to form that chunk.”

Soon, the only sounds to be heard were the soft murmur of the radio on the workbench and the clink of the tiles. Taking one box at a time, John and Gordon sorted by color, lining the tiles up in rows. Cori began sorting by the markings, scanning the tiles back and forth, pulling out the ones that matched and laying them in the middle of the garage. Gradually, that group grew larger, the picture indefinable since the marked sides were up, but Cori knew they were on the right track and her excitement grew.

Late in the afternoon, Cori tensed when she heard voices outside the building. She straightened, reaching toward her back, reassured by the bulky feel of her gun. The side door opened and she heard laughter and realized it must be John’s family, since no thief would make that kind of noise.

“Hey, we heard there was a little excitement in Bean Town and decided we didn’t want to miss out on the party.” A tall man entered who Cori hadn’t met, but knew had to be John’s brother, Steve. They looked incredibly alike, although this was a slightly younger version.

John grinned, walking over to shake the man’s hand. A woman, then Chase and Katie Jo, who Cori had met, followed

him in. Her brother, Bob, trailed in last, closing the door behind him. He saw her and winked, and she gave a sigh of relief, not realizing how tense she had been trying to handle this on her own.

"You look like crap," Chase told John, taking his brother's chin in his hand and turning his face this way and that. John's eye was still swollen, but his lips were fairly normal.

"So I've been told," John replied, slapping Chase's hand away. "If you only came to pick on me, go away." He turned and grabbed Cori's hand, tugging her to his side. "Cori, this is Steve and his wife Keva. You haven't met them yet."

Cori nodded. "Hi."

Steve glanced down to where John still held her hand and Cori could feel her face warm, though she didn't know why. It was none of these people's business if she and John liked each other.

When Steve looked back up, his eyes crinkled. "Why do you put up with him?" He nodded toward John.

"She loves me," John replied for her and Cori knew her face turned from pink to bright red.

Steve snorted. "Well, that explains it. Brain fever."

Steve's wife swatted at him. "Honestly, men. Ignore them," she said, curling her arm in Cori's and drawing her away from John. "I'm Keva. Tell me about this mystery we're trying to solve."

When they had gotten out of hearing of the guys, Keva whispered, "I'm sorry we duped you and John with our little scheme, but it looks like it worked out for the best."

"You were in on it, too?" Cori asked as Katie Jo came to her other side.

Keva laughed and Katie Jo smiled. "You'll find that when one McVicker, whether male or female, is involved in something, we're usually all involved. Like now."

Cori glanced over at John, who had taken his brothers and Bob over to where Gordon had another box of tiles opened, and was explaining the process they were using. She knew the other brothers would be here as soon as they got off work, and it amazed and fascinated her that they all helped and took care of each other.

She and Bob had always been close, and he had taken care of her, but then there had only been the two of them, living off the streets and fending for themselves. *How would it be to have ten sisters and brothers, even if they would only be in-laws?*

Her gaze was drawn to John, who was watching her across the distance. As the others chatted and started sorting tiles, he smiled, his eyes warm, telling her without words that she belonged here with him and his family.

I love you, he mouthed the words, and finally, that small, empty place in Cori's heart filled to overflowing.

* * * *

Everyone finally called it quits at midnight and John fell into bed exhausted. Michael and Travis had shown up at six, their wives coming later with sandwiches and drinks, and between all of them, they had made headway, although they probably weren't a third of the way through the boxes.

Cori hadn't wanted him to return to the condo, figuring it may be under surveillance, so they were staying at Steve's house, along with Chase and Katie Jo. It was great to see his brothers again, and it made him realize how much he missed the times they were all together. For some reason, he felt much more a part of the family now. It wasn't that anyone ever treated him like an outsider, but in the past, he had been the one to stand to the side, not really involved, because they were all happily married.

"You asleep?" Cori asked as she climbed into bed beside him. Her naked breasts rubbed against his arm and his heart

began a rapid tattoo. It wasn't his family who had made such a change in his life recently. He turned and draped a leg over her hip. Cori was the reason he felt so complete, and he promised himself he would make sure she knew it every day for the rest of his life.

"I love you," he said as he began kissing her, trailing his lips across her forehead and down her nose.

"Yes, I know, because you're a sap and I'm a sucker for a pretty face," she teased him just before her hand curled around his shaft, which was engorged and throbbing between them.

She still seldom articulated her feelings, but John knew she loved him. She expressed it in everything she did; like now, as she slid down his body, her hands gently massaging his sore muscles, her hot lips zeroing in on the very center of him. He reached for her but she tucked his hand back at his side.

"Let me make love to you," she whispered against his shaft, her breath hotter than his own fevered skin. He couldn't relax as her tongue trailed up his length and then back down, her hand sliding up the inside of his thigh to cup him. His hips came off the bed when she nibbled on the very tip of him before sucking him into her mouth.

"God, Cori, you're killing me," he groaned, even though he was thoroughly enjoying the sensations rushing through his body.

"I thought about doing that all day." She sighed as she slid back up his body, bracing her hands on the bed to hold herself above him. "Every time I saw you bent over, your tight ass taunting me, I just wanted to take you down and screw you right there." She wiggled her shoulders, her breasts brushing his lips and John latched onto one, sucking the nipple into his mouth. She moaned.

"I even thought about taking you into the bathroom with me." She rubbed her mound against his stomach and John could feel her wetness. His shaft throbbed harder against her buttocks.

"The only thing that stopped me was wondering what your family would have thought of me."

John chuckled, wrapping his arms around her and rolling them over. He gazed down at her and saw his future in her eyes. "My brothers would have been jealous as hell. But your brother would have probably beat me to a pulp."

She laughed lightly. "Oh, no. He would pay you to take me off his hands."

When she curled her legs around his waist, John slid into her hot sheath, their coming together making him feel complete.

"Your brother doesn't have enough money to make me do that." He gazed at her, dark hair framing her pale face, her lips now forming a pout. He began the slow glide in and out that would take them to heaven, but Cori dug in her heels, trying to hold him still.

"Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"I mean," he broke her hold and pushed tightly into her, meshing their hips, "there's not enough money in the world to *make* me take you when I would do it for free." He pumped faster, watching her eyes glaze with passion. "You're mine," *thrust*, "forever," *thrust*, "and always."

Cori heard the word *forever* but by this time, she was mindless with lust, her body craving the thick fullness of John's cock impelling her, pushing her rapidly toward orgasm. With a cry, she came, the intensity of her climax shaking her legs so hard she couldn't keep them locked around his waist. Even when they fell open, he continued to pump into her and the friction against her clit sent her over the edge again.

She hollered his name and his mouth clamped down on hers, his tongue flicking in and out as his hips continued the ancient dance of lovers. She dug her nails into his butt, urging him faster and he responded with such force the bed banged against the wall. With a muffled shout, he came and Cori felt

him spurt hot and strong within her. It was long minutes before she felt the contractions ease, and even then, her nerve endings kept igniting, shooting sparks of lust down her legs and up into her belly.

She pulled John down on top of her when he tried to move away. She loved to feel the weight of him; his heat against her breasts and clear down to her spread legs.

"You are awesome." She hugged him tight and kissed his ear. She could feel him smile against her neck. Having just had stupendous multiple orgasms, she not only felt very thankful, but also very complimentary. "In fact, make that incredibly, erotically awesome."

He playfully bit her neck, then rolled over to lie beside her, catching her hand and bringing it to his mouth to kiss her palm. She felt the sting of tears at his tenderness and wondered if loving him would make her start to think mushy thoughts. She giggled, deciding it really didn't matter.

"I like to hear you laugh," John sighed in the dark. "I'm glad you're not always the tough, growling bodyguard."

She turned and draped a leg over his hips, feeling him twitch beneath her but knowing he wouldn't be able to get it up again this soon. Not after what they had just done.

"I'll always be your *body guard*," she said, emphasizing the two words separately so he knew exactly what she meant.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," John said and she heard some hesitancy in his voice. "There's almost ten years between our ages. Will you still love me when I'm sixty and you're only fifty?"

She rubbed her leg up and down between his, feeling a little more life in his shaft.

"Will you still *make love* to me like we just did when you're past sixty and I'm a springy fifty?"

"Lord, I hope so."

* * * *

"If we'd known there would be this much excitement," Keva commented the next morning at breakfast, "we'd have made different arrangements. Penny, Suzy and I have to keep the kids corralled until we can find a sitter. Michael has already called and was grumbling about missing out on all the action. Gordon has a court case he can't postpone and Travis and Morgan both have deadlines at the newspaper."

"Yeah, and I have some fires to put out at *SGM Enterprises* before I can make it over," Steve commented, leaning against the counter drinking coffee. John figured that was the price of running a million dollar business.

"It's not like we planned this," he said, shaking his head. "I never would have thought some boxes of ceramics would cause all this trouble. And to think, I was going to sell them to Doris Glade for a song."

"Well, that leaves you and Cori, Chase and Katie Jo," Keva nodded at the four sitting at the table. "The girls and I should be able to get there by noon, with food."

"Are you going to bring us one of your world famous pecan pies?" Chase asked around a mouthful of egg.

"One?" Keva snorted delicately. "Gage can eat one all by himself. I'd need half a dozen if we all end up over there."

"Who's Gage?" Cori asked and everyone in the kitchen groaned.

"It's a good thing John's the last of the McVickers to get marr—ouch!" Chase shot his wife a glare as John coughed. "What did you kick me for?"

John glanced at Cori to see if she caught Chase's slip but she was listening to Steve explain his two names.

"I'm Stephen Gage—Steve to my family and Gage to my wife. I was using my middle name when we met."

“He was misrepresenting himself,” Keva broke in. “He’s lucky I had anything to do with him once I found out.” But the look she gave his brother told John it hadn’t really mattered and she loved him anyway.

He had always envied his brothers a little for the women they had married, even after his own disastrous marriage when he no longer trusted the female sex. He reached under the table and squeezed Cori’s knee, thinking it was still hard to believe he had finally found a love like they all had.

“We’d better get going,” he said as he rose.

“Take the Jeep,” Steve tossed him the keys. “We’ll all catch up with you as soon as we can.”

It only took a few minutes to drive to Gordon’s garage and soon the four of them were busy working on the tiles. While Chase and John sorted, Cori showed Katie Jo how to match the markings and as Katie Jo did that, Cori started carefully turning over the tiles.

Chase caught John up on business and his horse ranch as they mindlessly sorted colors.

“Holy crap!” Cori exclaimed an hour later. “Look at this.”

John hurried over to the front of the garage where Cori squatted on the floor. She had turned over enough tiles for them to recognize a horse and rider.

“He looks like a Roman warrior,” John said. The tiles were faded but he knew enough history to see the resemblance in the clothes and breastplate on the mural that was taking shape. He pulled out his phone, took a picture, and then dialed Travis at the newspaper office.

“TJ, I’m sending you a photo,” he told his brother when he answered. “I have some research for you.” As an investigative reporter, his brother could dig up the dirt on anyone anywhere, but he also had a unique ability to recall endless information. If

anyone could recognize what this tile mosaic was becoming, it would be Travis.

“Got it,” Travis said in just seconds. “Hmm, that doesn’t look familiar. Are those the tiles?”

“Yes. It’s only a very small part of the larger picture, but if you can find anything, it would make putting the rest of the tiles together a whole lot easier.”

“Be back at you ASAP, hopefully in person, if I can get my editor off my back long enough to slip away.”

“Whenever,” John replied. “Looks like we’ll be here for awhile.”

* * * *

Cori’s knees were killing her after crawling around on the concrete floor for hours. She’d go from squatting to kneeling and finally sitting cross-legged and scooting. It would help if she didn’t have her vest on, but for some reason, she felt the need to wear it. Besides, it hid her gun and that was something she hadn’t been without ever since John got mugged.

With a groan, she stood looking at what they had accomplished. All John’s brothers had been in and out as their schedules permitted to see the progress, and the sisters-in-law had come to drop off food on the way to the park with all the kids. Apparently there was no babysitter to be had in Boston who wanted to take on twelve kids, three of whom were babies.

“I wish Travis would uncover something to help us out,” John said as he came to stand behind her and rub her neck.

“Speak of the devil,” Chase said as Travis came in through the side door.

“Man, you won’t believe what I found.” Travis hurried over to where Cori and John stood. “You guys are in some deep shit.” He held out what looked like a faxed news article to John, but Cori never got a good look at it.

Both side doors to the garage slammed open at the same time, the building suddenly swarming with armed men.

“FBI. Everyone stay right where you are with your hands in the air!”

Chapter 15

Cori knew better than to reach for her gun, as she was totally outnumbered. Besides, these were the Feds; they were supposed to be the good guys.

She was patted down along with the guys and her gun was taken. Once they were all lined up against the wall, she noticed that additional men had come into the garage after the FBI. These men wore suits, not uniforms.

“Christ, McVicker, how the hell do you get involved in shit like this?” One of the men walked up to where Travis stood.

“Easily explained, Lieutenant Tanner,” Travis replied, taking a step forward.

Twelve assault weapons immediately pointed in his direction.

The man he had called Tanner grinned. “You don’t know how many times I’ve wanted to see you with your hands in the air.” He turned to the uniforms. “You can lower your weapons, but stay alert.”

One of the Feds and another man in a suit stepped forward. “You know these people?”

Tanner nodded. “Meet the notorious McVicker brothers. This is the worst of the lot.” He stabbed a finger at Travis. Cori could feel the undercurrent between the two men even from where she stood.

“Give me a break,” Travis retorted, apparently not in the least intimidated by either Tanner or all the uniforms now lining

the perimeter of where they stood. “You know this can be explained.”

“Then explain,” the Fed growled. “Beginning with why this woman had a gun.” He pointed to Cori, and her hackles immediately rose from the snide way he spoke.

The man in a suit nudged the Fed, turned his back on John and his brothers and the three men began talking in low murmurs. Cori rolled her eyes. Intimidation and threats—she knew how they worked. They’d probably try the good cop, bad cop routine when all they had to do was ask a few simple questions.

“My name is Monsieur Jean Savion.” The suit stepped forward, introducing himself. “I work for Interpol and have asked your FBI and local law enforcement for assistance in apprehending an international artifact theft ring. Our investigation has led us to you, so you will confess and we will be done, oui?” He said it all so politely.

“Artifact theft?” John echoed.

“That’s what I started to tell you,” Travis said. “The picture you sent is part of some stolen mosaic from Pompeii. I found a news article from an Italian paper.”

Cori’s stomach felt like it hit the floor. She glanced at John, who looked just as sick as she felt. *He had purchased stolen goods? How will we ever explain that?*

* * * *

“It’s a good thing you know a good lawyer,” Gordon said facetiously as they sat around the table at Steve’s very late that night.

John smiled wearily. After hours of explanation, his brothers had been released but he and Cori had been taken to the regional FBI headquarters for interrogation. He had worried about her when they had been put in separate rooms, and had

insisted that Gordon stay with her in the ensuing hours it took to get it all straightened out.

“Tell us what happened,” Penny stated. Everyone was there, having refused to go to their separate homes until they knew Cori and John were okay. And, because the FBI had confiscated the tiles, they had been disappointed not to see what the mystery had been about.

“The tiles originally came from a floor mosaic uncovered at Pompeii,” John said. “They had been crated up for transport to a museum when they were stolen.”

“Then John bought the tiles from a middleman who had decided to double cross the actual thieves,” Cori said. “The thieves were using this guy to get the tiles to the coast, where they would be transported out of Italy and sold on the black market for an exorbitant price. In route, this guy decided just to sell the merchandise and pocket the money. It wasn’t just the tiles that had been stolen. I guess he also sold some jewelry stolen from one of the museums.”

“And that’s when they caught him,” John picked up the story. “After the guy confessed to selling the stolen merchandise, Interpol was able to backtrack to the auction company at the estate sale, who, of course, had my name and address for delivery, so they thought I was in on the theft. Once Cori gave them a description of this scar-faced man, they pulled his picture up on Interpol. It seems they’ve run into him before.”

“I think that beats Morgan being kidnapped by drug dealers,” Travis stated, referring to the story he and Morgan had worked on involving doctors’ murdered wives that had rocked Boston over a year and a half ago and had ended with her being kidnapped on Christmas Eve.

John rubbed his face with both hands. “Believe me, we weren’t trying to beat any of your records for getting into trouble.”

“Well, I think it’s time we all went to bed and got a good night’s sleep. It’s all over now, and things can get back to normal,” Keva said, getting up from where she sat on her husband’s lap.

John glanced at Cori, knowing exactly what she was thinking. *It wasn’t over yet.*

* * * *

“You okay?” John asked when Cori and he finally went to bed in his own condo.

“Tired is all.”

He curled an arm around her and pulled her close, sliding his hand down her bare back.

“You’re not wearing your gun to bed?”

“Don’t be a toad. There’s nowhere to tuck it.” She snuggled closer. “It’s under my pillow.”

He chuckled. “You really know how to shot that thing?” For some reason, he had been shocked when the FBI had frisked her and pulled the gun from under her vest. He should have known, but naively, had not really thought about her carrying a weapon in her professional capacity as a bodyguard.

“John, I don’t want to talk about it. Just hold me, okay.”

He felt a shiver go through her and wrapped her tighter in his embrace. He knew exactly how she felt. They had decided on the drive back from FBI headquarters that they wouldn’t tell his family about the FBI’s plan because he knew they would be against either Cori or him being used as bait to catch the leader of the artifact theft ring. But they had agreed that the only way to really finish this thing was to flush out the scar-faced man. Otherwise, he and Cori would forever be looking over their shoulders, even if they were no longer in possession of the tiles.

He just hoped the FBI and Interpol knew what they were doing and that everything would happen quickly so they could get on with their lives. Where not so long ago he had

complained about being boring, now the mundane day-to-day operation of his business was looking better and better.

* * * *

Cori walked to the shop with John the next morning as if nothing were out of the ordinary. She tried not to scrutinize everyone they passed because they were actually hoping they were being observed. It was all part of the plan.

When she opened the door to the art gallery, she was greeted by the noise of construction. Jim Cornish, the director of the regional FBI, gave her the slightest nod as he hefted a two-by-four and walked to the front of the store. He certainly looked different in construction clothes, but she had no trouble identifying the bulk of his bulletproof vest beneath the flannel shirt he wore.

From John and Cori's description, Interpol had gotten a photo of the man whom they felt was the top dog in the thefts. When Cori told them the man was here in Boston, they had devised a plan to smoke him out. Members of the FBI would be acting as workmen to deliver boxes to the store, knowing the thief probably had the store under surveillance waiting for the tiles to arrive before he broke in and stole them. The boxes would be empty since the tiles had been crated and were already on their way back to Italy under the watchful eyes of Monsieur Savion's men.

Cornish was on the inside in case scar-face decided to cause trouble during business hours, but it was hoped the theft would occur at night when no civilians were in the area.

And all she and John could do was wait. The boxes were set to arrive at ten, and by ten thirty, Cori was sweating. She tried to stay as close to John as possible without looking suspicious, because she had no idea what could be seen from outside the store.

Just as she heard a knock on the back door indicating the truck had arrived, the bell over the front door tinkled and a man walked in. He pulled a gun before Cori could move from behind the counter.

"It would be convenient if the boxes were left on the truck," he said with a heavy accent, walking cautiously toward them. "In fact, it would have been very convenient if my merchandise had not left the country without my knowledge. You two," he waved the gun at Cori and John, "have disrupted my life quite enough, I believe."

As he talked, Cori slid her hand carefully behind her back, easing her gun from beneath her vest, the counter giving her cover. *Where the hell is Cornish?* she thought, her eyes darting to the open archway between the antique store and the gallery.

"Since you can identify me, you shall have to become casualties." The scar on the man's face puckered as he smiled. "Too bad, really, because I found you quite a capable adversary." He raised his gun and Cori knew she was staring death in the face.

At that instant, someone started a saw in the other room, the noise both deafening and startling. The scar-faced man started to turn toward the unknown noise and John moved to her right. The man spun back around, shifted his gun arm toward John and fired.

"No!" Cori dove to the right, the impact from the bullet hitting her chest and driving her back; the pain so intense, she blacked out.

* * * *

John's heart stopped when Cori threw herself in front of a bullet meant for him. As she slammed back against him, taking them both to the floor, he saw Cornish draw his gun and shoot the thief before he could fire another shot. The saw shut off and the room grew quiet as death.

“Is she alright?” He shook himself from the horrific images of the past hour as he stood by Cori’s hospital bed while Michael examined her. His brother was a pediatrician, but John hadn’t let anyone else touch Cori, hovering at her side until Michael arrived.

“If you would shut up long enough for me to hear her heartbeat,” his brother growled. John managed to keep his mouth closed until Michael looped his stethoscope around his neck.

“Well?”

“The impact of the bullet bruised her, but thanks to her vest, it didn’t penetrate the skin. She’ll hurt, but x-rays don’t show any internal damage.”

“Why doesn’t she wake up then?” John’s heart was breaking bit by bit the longer Cori remained unconscious.

“She has a nasty bump on her head, apparently from falling, but it doesn’t appear to be serious.”

“But—”

“John, she’ll be alright,” Michael interrupted gruffly as he rubbed his chest. “Man, I hope you two are done with this adventure. My heart can’t take much more of this.”

“Your heart?” John echoed, his voice rising. “What the hell do you have to do with this?”

“My blood pressure is up and my heart has ten more beats per minute than normal,” Michael growled. “All because you are in love.”

How John managed to forget his twin had such a close emotional tie to him, he couldn’t imagine. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll calm down, as long as you say Cori will be alright.”

“I’ll be fine,” Cori’s weak voice reached him and he quickly turned, hearing his brother give a sigh of relief.

“Hey,” was all John managed to choke out, his throat thick with tears. When Cori lifted her hand, he pressed it against his cheek, and then turned to kiss her palm. He knew he was crying and if she thought him a sap because of it, so be it.

“Is it over?” she asked.

All he could do was nod.

“You okay?”

He looked at her lying flat on her back in a hospital bed, her skin as pale as a ghost, her voice faint and his stomach turned over. What if he had lost her? How could he live without her teasing and taunting him out of his boring existence? Where would he be without her love and the aggressive way she could take him to the height of passion?

“Hell no, I’m not okay,” he growled at her, the emotional roller coaster he had been on the past days—no, weeks—finally taking its toll. “To misquote you, you’re not fucking *Superwoman*, and no wife of mine is going to go around getting shot at.”

She smiled at him, her green eyes twinkling. “I totally, wholeheartedly agree with you.”

His heart pounded. “And from now on, all you want to do is love me?”

This time, her entire face glowed with her love. “Forever,” she whispered just as he bent to kiss her.

* * * *

Rose McVicker wandered around the gallery before the official ceremony, admiring her newest daughter-in-law’s paintings and sketches. The focal piece for the exhibit was a beautiful painting of a mansion, the colors of the sky reminding her of sunsets she and her husband used to observe during her courting days. She looked at the unique signature Cori used on her work, a miniature knight on a horse, but instead of a sword, this one brandished a tiny paintbrush.

She knew the painting was not for sale, for it had been a wedding gift from Cori to her son and she was sure both the picture and the tiny knight were of special significance that only those two knew about.

"If I may have your attention," John said and Rose turned. "I think everyone is here, so we might as well begin."

Rose watched as Cori and John together cut the ribbon to officially open *Main Street Antiques and Art Gallery*. The look they shared told Rose everything she needed to know. At last, all her boys were happy.

She had worried about John more than any of the others, hoping he would find the one woman who would make him happy. He was the quiet and sensitive one and Cori seemed to be his perfect match, bringing out the best in him.

As the applause died down and people began to mingle, her attention was diverted to where her other sons and their wives had begun a somewhat heated discussion.

"If we hadn't hired Cori, they never would have met," Travis was saying, "So we win."

"But if we hadn't started the secret admirer scheme," Penny retorted, "you men wouldn't have hired Cori, so I'd say we were responsible for bringing them together."

"You can't take the credit when Cori knew about your scheme almost from the start," Stephen Gage argued. Rose smiled to herself, unable to think of him only as Steve since Keva married into the family.

"Well, it really doesn't matter," she heard Katie Jo say in her soft-spoken voice. "They are so happy together, I'd say we should all take the credit."

Ah, Katie Jo, always the peacemaker.

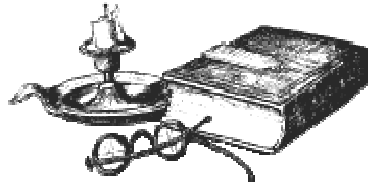
"Hmm." Rose saw Suzy thoughtfully tap a finger to her lips. She was the plotter, and Rose didn't have to wait long to find out what her eldest daughter-in-law was thinking.

“Do we know anyone special we can set up with that cute friend of Steve’s, Bob Taggart?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barb was born in California, married in Iowa and now resides in Kansas. The years in-between were lived in most of the southern states and three in Japan because her father was an Air Force pilot. That probably explains why she still loves to travel and explore new places, using her travels as an excuse to write a new book (or it might be that writing a new book is a good excuse to travel). Barb can be reached at writer0926@yahoo.com or through her website at www.authorsden.com/barbarajbaldwin.

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