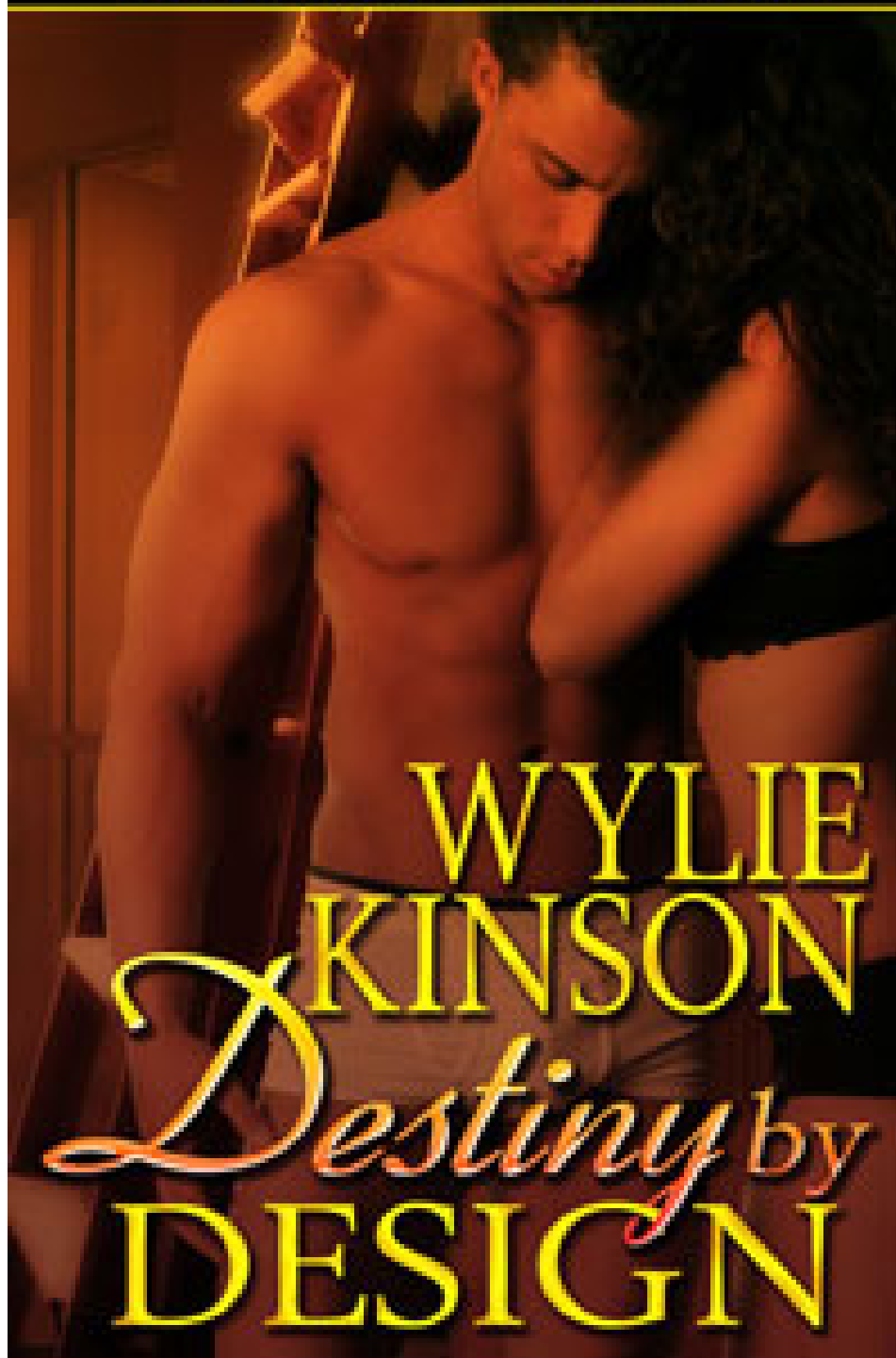


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Destiny by Design

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DESTINY BY DESIGN

Wylie Kinson

Dedication

To my best friend and soul mate—my husband, Simon—who inspired this story when he painted our bathroom in his underwear. He spoils me with love and laughter.

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Chapter One

“Miss Strathmore? Hmpf! I thought this competition was exclusive to *professionals*,” Cynthia drawled for the benefit of her tittering entourage. The catty performance, punctuated by the click-clack of her four-inch stilettos on the parquet floor, echoed through the halls of the enormous empty house.

“Ignore her,” suggested Remi through clenched teeth. “Just take a deep breath and let it go.”

They watched Cynthia, her lackeys trailing a respectful distance behind, breeze up the grand, curving, Scarlett O’Hara staircase toward the master bedroom on the second floor.

“Cynthia’s never been easy to ignore,” Ellis replied as she stopped to admire the opulent crystal chandelier reigning over the double-story reception hall. “Her stink tends to linger long after she’s left the room.”

The five-thousand-square-foot home was completely bare. No furnishings or wall hangings, no knickknacks or area rugs—nothing that made a house a home. An elderly man in a hard hat frantically placed cardboard mats and sheets of plastic over the parquet and marble flooring. Enthusiastic design teams poured through the front doors, mindlessly bumping into burly construction workers in a race to see their assigned rooms and begin the competition. Ellis turned her attention to the unfurled floor plan in Remi’s latté-colored hands. They located the room entitled “home office” and headed for the west wing.

“Here we go,” Ellis mumbled, entering the room that would become her world for the next three weeks. She closed her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath. She needed to empty her mind of all thoughts for this process. She liked to walk into a new room with no advance planning or preparation. No preconceived thoughts, no knowledge of

the room's history or purpose. Many designers could look at a floor plan and have the room designed before they stepped foot into the physical space. Not Ellis. She needed to feel the space, breathe the air and listen as the room spoke to her – the lines and curves, height and light, all longed to be noticed and appreciated. Each architectural element of the room wanted to stand out and it was Ellis' job to enhance and flatter through fabrics, furniture and flow. Keeping in mind a room's function, she would tap into its mood and infuse it with a sense of harmony.

Remi aimed his Mont Blanc at a fresh page in his notebook, prepared to jot down Ellis' rambling thoughts as she surveyed the empty room. After two years of working together, Remi anticipated Ellis' peculiar routine. She was like no other interior designer he had ever encountered and he was consistently awed by her talent. Ellis could walk into a raw space and absorb every detail of a room. She would close her eyes, breathe deeply and go into a trance-like state. She would run her palms over the walls and floors, trace shadows with her long, neat fingers and emit little whistling noises to hear the room's echo. She'd mumbled ideas – colors, dimensions, placement, patterns – then turn to Remi blankly and ask, "What did I just say?" He learned shorthand very quickly lest he lose one of her ingenious musings.

Ellis knew what other designers thought of her methods. She heard what they called her – "loopy", "wacky", "Ellis the eccentric" and her favorite, "the room whisperer" – but Ellis refused to pay heed. She had confidence in her talent and as long as her clients were pleased, and they *always* were, she would continue to do her job the best and only way she knew how.

Remi's admiration for Ellis' unique style grew with each project they tackled, but more importantly, she impressed their clients. He never regretted leaving Cynthia Travers' company, Affairs, to partner with Ellis. Remi had loathed being Cynthia's token.

Ellis did a complete turn in the empty fifteen-by-eighteen-foot room and smiled with anticipation. The Oak Ridges Development Competition was an opportunity to

really prove her moxie. Only ten designers were chosen to showcase their talents in the model home of this exclusive enclave. Ellis was still considered a novice and barely had enough in her portfolio to qualify for entry. She was as surprised as Cynthia that Strathmore Interiors had made the cut.

Each designer had been given a room or room-combination in the show house to decorate. The two-story house featured five bedrooms plus master suite, formal living and dining rooms, a massive kitchen in the rear that extended the entire length of the house, a home office, and a family room cum recreation center in the basement. The grand-prize winner, chosen by a panel of judges from the National Design Guild, would have the opportunity to design the interiors of the next three houses in the development, working directly with the contractors and clients as the homes were constructed. The winner would have an enviable client base that would ensure referral work for years and years to come.

She may have been chosen for the competition, but Ellis wasn't experienced enough to get one of the "wow" rooms like the formal living room, the kitchen or master bedroom, the latter of which went to Afflairs.

No, Ellis was assigned the home office with an adjoining half bathroom. In other words, she didn't have a chance in hell at winning. Offices were meant to be practical, not artistic statements. Bookshelves, drawers and computer cables didn't lend themselves to flash and sass. Ellis' ingenuity would truly be put to the test and she was eager to begin transforming the small, unassuming little room into a quirky but functional showstopper.

"Remi, please go find out what crew we're working with while I finish up here." Ellis stood and stretched her back and legs. They'd been sitting on the floor in the middle of an empty room for almost four hours, discussing endless design possibilities. She was grateful for Remi—for his patience, his ability to define ideas that were foggy notions in Ellis' creative brain and his energy. He made her laugh, he kept her focused

and best of all, took care of the business end of things. She had considered herself very fortunate when he made the risky move of following her own departure from Affairs. She couldn't have asked for a better assistant.

Ellis sorted through their mound of scribbled drawings and hasty notes, pleased with what they'd accomplished. This wasn't going to be a traditional home office. Oh no. Ellis had done some research and discovered that women, more than ever, were working from home, so her design was going to cater to the working mother. She planned to install a visual monitor with a link to the nursery so that mom could keep an eye on a sleeping baby, and an enclosed area for safe play so children could be in the room while she worked, paid bills and managed the household. She and Remi had come up with a purpose-built entertainment center that she was hoping could be custom made by the construction firm's carpenters. It was going to be difficult to do all that she'd envisioned on the assigned budget but experience had taught her how to spend wisely, and on what materials she couldn't, and shouldn't, compromise.

Ellis was returning the colored pencils back into their case in precise order when Remi returned with a short, stocky olive-skinned man in tow.

"Ellis, this is Marco. He's a foreman with Callon & Son Construction. His crew is assigned to work with us."

"Hello Marco," Ellis offered her hand.

"My pleasure, miss," Marco replied in an Old Country accent Ellis couldn't quite place.

"What's the earliest we can meet, Marco, to go over our needs?" Ellis smiled politely.

"I'll be available first thing Thursday morning. I'll need a fairly good idea of what you want so I can schedule the workers accordingly."

“Thursday?” Remi asked, biting a ragged thumbnail. They had barely three weeks from concept to completion and that didn’t give them a lot of time. “Is that your earliest time?”

“With all due respect ma’am, it’s already Monday. We’ll need drawings for any custom work, you know. Are you sure *you’re* going to know what you’ll need done in less than three days?”

“Oh yes. I’m sure we’ll have our concept all figured out by then, won’t we Remi?”

Remi smiled and nodded, knowing perfectly well that the room was already complete to the last detail in her mind.

“One last thing, Marco. Could I have your pager number? In case I have any questions.”

* * * * *

Ellis sat at her scarred oak desk, which was perfectly positioned against the west wall of her Strathmore Interiors office for optimum sunlight, and sorted through swatches of fabric. Stripes, solids and florals all had a turn being paired with a series of two-inch painted squares.

Eschewing the notion that one had to follow fads and trends, Ellis took her color combinations very seriously. The science of color had fascinated her for as long as she could remember. Black is usually associated with evil, but it also implies submission. Men of the cloth wear black robes to signify submission to God. White is associated with sterility or pureness. Red, the most emotionally intense color, stimulates a faster heartbeat and breathing, yet when white is added to make pink, the result is tranquilizing. Ellis once heard of a sports team painting the walls in the visitors’ locker room pink so their opposition would lose energy. Colors, hues, tones...they all had profound psychological effects that few people considered when decorating.

This is also why Ellis chose to wear neutral colors when on a job. She didn’t want her wardrobe competing with the energy of the room she was designing. Cynthia, a

walking fashion show, could never understand this and often belittled Ellis' poor sense of style.

For her show-house room, Ellis chose an analogous combination of warm oranges, with a few complimentary hues for accent. Orange increases oxygen to the brain, produces an invigorating effect and stimulates mental activity. It's also a kid-friendly color, icing on the cake, but she was careful with tints and shades. Darker orange could illicit feelings of distrust while reddish-orange corresponded to desire, sexual passion and aggression. Not an ideal profile for a child-friendly work environment. Ellis was looking for golden undertones. Gold evoked feelings of prestige, wisdom and wealth. It was the perfect palette for a home office.

"Cynthia was pretty surprised to see us," she said to Remi, who was sorting through two sizeable plastic storage cupboards.

"And she's probably taking full credit for our being there," Remi shot back.

"No doubt," Ellis agreed, aware of Cynthia's penchant for deception. "Let's just try to stay out of her way for the next few weeks. The less we see of her, the calmer I'll be."

"We can try, but I predict she's going to be especially difficult on this project," Remi warned.

"According to your crystal ball?" Ellis jested.

"No girl, according to the latest and hottest gossip from my peeps."

Remi had an enviable position on the grapevine.

"Remington," Ellis mocked. "You know how I feel about idle gossip."

"You want the short or the long?"

"The long! Definitely the long," Ellis urged as she pasted and pinned samples on the mood boards she was creating. By putting color and texture options together, she could see how the paint, fabrics and wood finishes would create harmony in the room. She intended to put a few together before testing them out on location, to see if her mood boards looked and felt the same in the show-house office.

Remi, meanwhile, had taken on the tedious task of organizing what he affectionately referred to as Ellis' Essential Decorators' Toolkits, scheduled for temporary relocation to the show house. Most interior designers did the bulk of their work from their studios or workshops, but not Ellis. She liked being on-site as much as possible, to see her work take shape in front of her eyes, to work alongside the homeowner or construction crew—hence, her Essential Decorator's Toolkits.

Each bin was compartmentalized, housing everything she could possibly need on the job—hanging implements like picture wire, anchors and push pins; attachment things like glue guns, twist ties, needles and thread; cutting tools like scissors, utility knife and light handsaw; measuring devices, everything from tape measure to t-square; and an assortment of basic tools, including hammers, c-clamps and screwdrivers.

Remi did a quick visual inventory and began the process of restocking as he related his recent acquisition. "Do you remember the accident last year?"

"Vaguely. I was in England for my cousin's wedding. By the time I got back the dust had settled." Ellis drew her brows together trying to access her memory. "Did someone get killed by a falling picture or something?"

"One of Cynthia's interns," Remi filled in. "But she wasn't killed and it wasn't a picture. It was so tragic. The poor girl was making the bed, fluffing the throw pillows, that sort of thing, and the mirror that had just been installed on the ceiling fell right on top of her. She was cut up pretty badly and suffered some head injury. Anyway, the girl isn't quite right anymore, if you know what I mean," he said, tapping his temple.

"How horrible," sympathized Ellis. "But it was an accident, right? It had nothing to do with Cynthia..."

"Aha," he said, finding the staple gun he'd been rummaging for. "I haven't told you the interesting part yet.

"According to my sources, the mirror wasn't installed correctly. Cynthia wanted a bigger mirror than the one originally planned for in the design—you know her, bigger is always better—but the supports weren't strong enough. She was on a pretty tight

deadline, not to mention budget, so she bribed some poor immigrant worker, who has since been deported, to install the bigger, *much heavier* mirror.”

“Don’t tell me,” Ellis interjected. “They couldn’t prove who was at fault so nothing happened.”

“That, and Cynthia’s a force to be reckoned with in this town, so no one dared point the finger at her. There was also rumor of a payoff, but who knows.”

“But Cynthia’s company is still in business and although it makes me choke to say it, she’s a talented designer, so it doesn’t explain your prediction that Cynthia’s going to be especially difficult on this project.” Ellis dropped her completed mood boards and moved to help Remi with the toolkits.

“She needs the money, girl—and she needs to win this competition. You’d never know it from her extravagant habits and her never-ending entourage of interns, but business at Affairs has hit the skids since the incident last summer. She’s barely hanging on, despite maintaining a good façade. Her bank account is nearly empty.”

They finished sorting through the toolkits in silence, lost in thought, each trying to gather their focus for the task at hand.

Chapter Two

Simon Callon had been over the moon when his construction firm won the coveted contract for the Oak Ridges Development. Had he known what a full-scale pain in the ass the show-house competition was going to be, he would have sold Callon & Son Construction and opened a donut shop. How could ten talented designers make his life such a living hell? Barely a week into the project and some of his men were on the verge of walking off the job, thanks in part to two especially difficult design divas.

Simon had worked with Cynthia Travers before. She was an icon in the design world and at fifty-something, still looked hot. Her coiffed red hair, classic face and diminutive figure belied her feisty, difficult personality. The few times they'd worked together, Cynthia shamelessly flirted with Simon despite their vast age difference.

"Call me Cyn, darling. It's my nature," she purred on their first meeting. He always graciously avoided her come-ons because, quite frankly, she scared the shit out of him.

Cynthia Travers was a very demanding woman. Wherever she went, she was followed by a group of interns who buzzed around her like a swarm of bees on a flower cart. They worked very long hours for very little pay and it was well known that Cynthia enjoyed reducing them to tears with her scathing comments. It was amazing what these fledglings would put up with just to have Affairs on their résumés. As soon as Simon saw her name on the Oak Ridges roster, he knew he'd have to make the largest crew available to the obdurate Ms. Travers, if only to save himself a few migraines.

Meanwhile, one week into the job and some newcomer named Ellis Strathmore had his best foreman swigging directly from a bottle of pink antacid. Unflappable Marco, who'd worked with Simon for years, kept mumbling about the wacky lady who kept phoning him—he had no idea how she'd gotten his cell number—questioning the

experience of his crew, telling him how to do his job. No, Marco assured Simon, she didn't yell or make demands like the Travers woman, always said "please", "thank you" and "sorry to bother you", but how was he supposed to get his work done with her constantly phoning?

"And now," Marco moaned, "she called to say there is something wrong with the floor! We just finished the floor to her exact specifications! What can this woman possibly want?"

Simon had never met, nor heard of, Ellis Strathmore, but promised Marco he would have a word with her.

"Leave it with me, Marco. As soon as I'm done installing these in Cynthia's closet, I'll go have a word with Miss Strathmore."

"Thank you," Marco said gratefully. "I've never before worked with a woman who makes me so dizzy!"

"No problem," Simon said, hauling a box of cedar panels onto his shoulder for the trip up the stairs. "Oh Marco, one more thing. We seem to have an inventory problem. Let's meet later this afternoon to go over the onsite supplies."

Simon couldn't understand why his crews were experiencing shortages on everything from lumber to tiles. They'd built this house on time, on spec and under budget but this past week saw his paperwork go from organized to exasperating. He needed to get to the bottom of this. Simon trusted his workers, trusted their skill and integrity, so the problems must stem from human error. Hopefully Marco would have some answers.

The issue of the inventory was all but forgotten as he fit the brownish-red tongue-and-groove panels together against the rear wall of the walk-in closet in the master bedroom. He drank in the rich woodsy smell. It reminded him of the cedar chest his mother kept in her bedroom. She opened it twice per year to exchange the heavy winter bedding with the lighter blankets. As a special treat when he was a child, Mom let him

fall asleep in their bed so he would be surrounded by the spicy, earthy smell, before his father's strong arms ferried him back to his own bedroom.

Simon sighed as he headed in Ellis' direction. He hated confrontation but he needed to nip this situation in the bud before it got out of hand. Marco always did fine—no, *excellent* work, and Simon was eager to see the exotic Brazilian cherry floor that Miss Strathmore apparently had issues with. Even as he approached the office door he could see the glow of golden luster beneath the reddish brown wood. *Gorgeous*. So warm you wanted to reach out and stroke it.

He crossed the threshold mentally prepared for a face-to-face confrontation with a raving harridan. Instead, Simon found a perfectly shaped denim-covered bottom poking up into the air.

"Ahem," Simon cleared his throat loudly.

Ellis was on her hands and knees in the corner, her eyes level to the floor as if lining up a perfect putt. "There's a dent here," she said, pointing at a spot on the floor. "Did Marco send you to fix it?"

"No, I came to—"

"Here! Come and see." Ellis didn't want to hear his excuses, she wanted the spot acknowledged and fixed.

Reluctantly, Simon lowered himself to the hardwood floor until he was almost nose-to-nose with Ellis.

"Where?"

"There, see?" she asked, running her finger over a small nick in the wood. "It's got to be fixed."

"Uh...lady? Aren't you putting built-ins across this wall?"

Ellis met his gaze, only inches away. For a split second, she was distracted by the depth of the gray-green eyes framed in sooty black lashes. Good Lord, what man-planet

did he come from? He smelled of sweat and cedar—not a bad combination. She gave her head a small shake before continuing. “It still has to be fixed.”

“Why?”

“The room is uncomfortable with it. It’s embarrassed.”

Simon lifted his brows in disbelief. “It’s *embarrassed*? It’s a room! It doesn’t *have* feelings. *It’s a fucking room!*”

Ellis was momentarily taken aback. She would have to speak to Marco about this rude worker.

“Fix it. Please,” she said, and sauntered out of the room.

Simon shook his head and watched her leave. Marco had warned him that Ellis was a whack-job but he failed to mention her saucy figure. He failed to mention that Ellis Strathmore, with the golden shards in her brown eyes, tanned complexion and shiny brown hair, looked like she’d been dipped in honey.

* * * * *

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Ellis sighed, running her hand along the smooth grain. “Just wait until they affix the cherry accents and apply the finish coat. It’ll positively glow!”

Ellis and Remi were inspecting the wood and pre-made supports for the built-ins at the Callon & Son workshop. It’s not that she didn’t trust Marco, but she really needed to see and feel the material they were going to use for the piece that would become the focus of the room.

“Yes, this will do nicely,” Ellis agreed, responding to Remi’s wolf whistle.

“Yeah, but that’s not what I’m admiring,” Remi replied.

Ellis followed his gaze past the open double doors to see Marco’s insolent workman striding toward them from the other side of the yard.

“Who, him?” Ellis asked.

“Yes, girl! Just look at the way his tool belt hangs all low on his hips, like he’s Gary Cooper going to fight the bad dudes at high noon. You’ve got to admit he’s hot.”

“Okay, I’ll give you hot, but Remi you know me. I don’t go for muscle heads and this guy is practically dripping testosterone.” Ellis had two good eyes. She could see and appreciate the guy’s finely honed physique, but men like that weren’t her type. She preferred someone like her father, a worldly intellectual who could carry on a conversation. Some of her earliest teenage crushes landed squarely on her father’s young protégés and other professors from the university at which he taught music.

Ellis admired men who had a well-developed mind, who could discuss a good book, enjoy an art show and know which fork to use for salad. Men who were in touch with their emotional and sensitive sides. She suspected the he-man bearing toward them exhibited none of these qualities, as demonstrated by his language and attitude. His idea of fine dining was likely the big value meal at Burger Heaven. Ellis was sure this dude could build a nice brick wall, but could he hold a conversation over dinner? Probably not.

“Oh yeah, Simon is all Mister Man...mmm, mmmm!”

“His name is Simon? Remi, let me tell you a little secret. Despite appearances, he’s a bad guy. The Simon character in books and movies always turns out to be the villain.”

“For example?”

“For example, Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Hello? Evil slave master! And in the romance novel I just finished, Simon kidnapped the winsome bride of the Duke of Carberry and raped her. On her wedding night! E-V-I-L! It’s a really good read, by the way. I’ll lend it to you if you want. And don’t forget Simon Cowell from *Idol*. He’s rude and nasty.”

“I counterpoint with Simon Templar, aka, ‘The Saint’.”

“Then there’s Simon Says, who’s really bossy, and Simple Simon who’s just plain stupid.”

“You’re stretching.”

"Yeah, but this Simon is a rude pig. Do you know how he spoke to me?" Ellis said in an undertone as Simon strutted to within hearing range.

"Well, I guess he can speak to you anyway he likes 'cause he's —"

"Shhhh," Ellis hissed as Simon came within earshot, sure that Remi was going to say something inappropriate about his extraordinary physique. As she watched his approach, Ellis had to admit that he had a natural air about him that shouted confidence. He really was a fine specimen, with his tousled black hair and shoulders an acre wide. His jeans, faded to a soft grayish blue, hugged his hips and muscular thighs. She wished she could get a view from the rear.

"May I help you, Miss Strathmore?" Simon asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"We've come to see your boss. Is he around?"

"My what? My boss?"

"Yes, Marco. Is he here?"

"I'm afraid he's not," Simon smirked, looking down as if something on the ground caught his attention. He managed to compose himself before meeting her eye. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I don't think so Mister, um... I'm sorry. I don't believe I got your name."

"Callon, ma'am. Simon Callon."

* * * * *

"How could you not tell me he owned the company?" Ellis wailed to Remi as they drove away from the Callon & Son yard. "I've never been so embarrassed!"

"I thought you knew! How could you *not* know? He's been at the house everyday for the past week! All the designers have been 'oh-ing' and 'ah-ing' over his butt! Where have you been girl?"

Typical, thought Remi. Ellis was so caught up in her work that she couldn't see past the office door. Besides, Simon had mostly been working on the second floor with Cynthia.

"Don't lose sleep Ellis. I'm sure Mister Man thought it was all a big joke. And by the way, he was totally checking out your ass when we left."

"Ohhhh," Ellis groaned again, putting her head on the dashboard of Remi's car. "Give me the dirt, Remi. Tell me everything I need to know."

"I don't know much," Remi admitted, wishing he'd had more time to pay attention to the coffee-break gossip. "Just that the company has been around for about six, seven years, is very well respected and that Simon is currently single. And hot. Oh, and most of the Afflairs interns melt when he's in their space but Cynthia shows her claws if they flirt. That tidbit I got from Valentina, who is doing the room next door."

"Okay, currently single, but which Callon is he, the father or the son?"

"Don't know, girl. You'll have to ask him."

"Ask him? I don't think I could face him," Ellis said, wiping her palms over her cheeks.

"Look on the bright side. Now that you know who's boss, you can go over Marco's head."

Simon watched Ellis and Remi drive off before breaking into the grin that he'd successfully swallowed in their presence. So she thought he worked for Marco. He'd have to share that with his foreman over the beer they normally shared at the end of the day. For all the headaches she'd given him, Marco would get a kick out of it.

The blush that kissed her cheeks played in Simon's mind. *She looked so vulnerable – and embarrassed*, he thought with a chuckle. But it gave her bossy demeanor an air of charm. She barely met his eyes when she apologized for her error, which was a shame because Simon liked her expressive eyes, which tended to betray her emotions before

any words came out of her heart-shaped lips. And the way he'd seen her rubbing her hands along the cherry. How many women could admire a good cut of wood like she could? Certainly none that he'd ever met. She knew good material and craftsmanship when she saw it. There was definitely more to this gal than just being a high-strung artsy-fartsy decorator.

Good God. Simon shook himself. What was he doing? He couldn't possibly find Ellis attractive. She wasn't his type at all. When he had time to date, which hadn't been often in the years since he'd started Callon & Son, he liked his women soft-spoken and charming, preferably blonde, big tits an asset—but definitely not bossy and melodramatic.

And definitely not a woman who heard rooms "speak" to her.

Chapter Three

Ellis pulled her car into the circular driveway of the show house. A long line of cars, construction trucks and work vans was already in place. She wasn't used to parking this far down the line as she was usually one of the first to arrive, but this morning she had gone to her studio to check the progress of the draperies and other fabric accent pieces. Remi was doing a fabulous job, as usual. He had a way of adding little details to their creations...embellishments that turned simple decorative pieces into talking points. He once added a hidden pocket to an ornamental throw cushion so that a very particular and fussy client could keep the television remote tucked out of sight and off her Queen Anne side tables.

Ellis was thrilled with the progress on her designer showcase room. Everything was coming together fabulously, and so far on time! The electricians had worked overtime the night before putting in the sconces and pot lights, the furniture had arrived and was tucked safely in the storage area, and the custom-made built-in and matching desk were almost finished. The painters, who had started earlier that morning, were probably almost done and she was looking forward to seeing the transformation. With any luck, she would see the moulding installed first thing tomorrow and then she could begin work on the hearth.

She practically skipped into the house, waving hello to the familiar faces of the workmen and designers wandering about. Some even smiled back. Her day could not get any better.

Ellis caught a whiff of expensive perfume before actually seeing Cynthia, who strode toward her with obvious purpose.

"Once a thief, always a thief," Cynthia practically shouted in her direction.

"Good morning to you too, Cynthia. Problem?"

"You stole my design once and now you're stealing my color scheme? No original ideas in that wacky head of yours?"

"What are you talking about? I didn't steal that design and you know it! What color scheme —"

"Don't deny it! You will *not* get away with this!"

Cynthia stomped off before Ellis could catch her breath. What on earth was she going on about and why was she bringing back ancient history? Ellis continued toward the office, shaking her head. She rounded the corner and stopped dead in her tracks.

The office had been painted silvery green.

No! she silently screamed. "No, no, no!"

She grabbed her cell phone and hit redial.

"Damn! Damn, damn, damn!" She stamped her feet when she heard Simon's voice mail message. First an encounter with Cynthia, now this!

"Mr. Callon? This is Ellis. There's been a horrible mistake. My room, my office, it's green! It's not supposed to be green! It's supposed to be Caramel Sundae, not green! Caramel! The color is wrong!"

"I know."

Ellis was startled to hear his voice in the room. Simon must have come up behind her as she was having her tantrum. He was with an older man with sparse gray hair and anxious blue eyes. Ellis wondered for a moment if this was Callon Senior.

"My fault, ma'am," he drawled thickly. "The paperwork got screwed up. Not sure how, but..."

"We're not looking to place blame, Jeb," Simon calmly assured before addressing Ellis. "Sorry Ellis, seems there was a mix-up. You ordered, um," he consulted his clipboard, "Caramel Sundae, and Cynthia Travers has Sunday Sage for the master bedroom. God, who comes up with these damn names? Anyway, what's done is done."

"But you'll fix it right?" She looked from Simon to Jeb. "Right?"

"Of course we'll fix it. Tomorrow...maybe the next day."

"But that'll put me behind! We want to bring in the fabrics tomorrow and —"

"I'll do what I can but —" Simon tried to interject, but Jeb put his hand up to both.

"I'm on a pretty tight leash today and won't git to the paint shop 'til later, but if you ain't troubled," he directed to Simon, "I'm happy to come back tonight so the pretty lady can hang her curtains."

"Oh thank you, Jeb. I would really, really, *really* be so grateful!" Ellis beamed.

Simon reluctantly agreed. Ellis had almost a full week left in which to hang her blasted curtains and he hated seeing Jeb overtaxed at his age. Good grief! He'd be glad when this competition was over and these divas out of his life.

"He seems nice," Ellis said to Simon when Jeb excused himself. "Is he your father?"

"My what? No, Jeb's a painter," Simon said. "What made you think he was my dad?"

"Well, your company is called Callon & Son and I figured you're too young to have a son old enough to be a partner, which makes you the Son."

Simon smirked. He'd never had to tell the story behind the company name before—nobody had ever asked. Men never asked questions like that. Like asking for directions, it fell under the masculine pretense of knowing all. Figures Ellis Strathmore would be the one to call his bluff.

"There was never a father or a son," he began, "just me. I started the company when I was twenty-eight but nobody worth their salt would work for me, and I had a hard time getting contracts because of my age and *perceived* lack of experience. When I added '& Son' to the title, folks just assumed I was the bright protégé of a talented master builder. In fact, my real father is a banker in the city."

Ellis' impulsive fishing expedition paid off. Remi was going to love this. And she had a touch of admiration for someone who knew what he wanted so young, and had the moxie to get it.

* * * * *

"Mr. Callon?" Simon heard the female voice ask on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah," he answered groggily, eyeing the clock radio next to his bed, the faintest glow of dawn visible beyond his open window.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. You are awake, aren't you? Don't you construction folk rise early?" Simon finally recognized the caller.

"It's five-thirty in the morning, Miss Strathmore. This isn't early – this is the middle of the night."

"Oh, sorry." He clearly heard the chagrin in her voice.

"What?"

"I could call back in an hour if you'd like."

"I'm awake now. What."

"Well, it's the paint. It's not *right*."

"It was fine at six-thirty last night when Jeb put the final coat on. I inspected myself. How is it not *right* now?"

"The color's not right. I'm not blaming Jeb," she hastened, "he did a terrific job. But the color is off. My fault."

Oh God, what now? He knew the color was correct because he – Simon Callon, owner of his own construction company with all kinds of very important things to do – personally, *personally*, picked up her damn Caramel Sundae.

"The color is fine Miss Strathmore. You probably just had a nightmare and –"

"No, no," she explained. "It didn't look right in the evening light. And now, at dawn, it's really off. It's too, too, um...too caramel."

"Miss Strathmore, am I to understand that you're at the show house now? At five-thirty a.m.?" Simon asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

Ellis was met with silence. *He thinks I'm a nut, but that's his prerogative*, Ellis thought. This was her career, her reputation at stake.

"Actually Mr. Callon, I spent the night," she proclaimed proudly.

"Wait there," he groaned, getting out of bed. "I'll be right over."

* * * * *

The hot spray combined with the fresh scent of his shower gel finished what Ellis began—that of waking Simon from a restless sleep. He'd tossed and turned well into the wee hours, his mind heavy with worry. He was facing cost overruns and his crews were falling behind schedule waiting for new supply deliveries. Marco had checked and double-checked the storage areas at the site and back at the company yard, and they both combed through the paperwork looking for irregularities. They pulled up invoices, talked to suppliers and questioned some of the men. Simon had looked at this problem from every angle and the evidence was beginning to point toward theft. But this team was a scaled-down version of the crew that had built the house—the same trustworthy, hardworking guys, damn it! He couldn't believe that any of them would steal from the company—until yesterday, when three of the men reported tools missing.

His neck and shoulders were knotted with tension so he turned the shower spray to pulse, bent his head and let the steaming water pound at his muscles. His temples stopped throbbing and his mind sifted through the issues that plagued him. The outline of a plan began swirling through his brain—one that Ellis had unknowingly inspired.

Truth be told, Simon enjoyed Ellis. Yes, she was a unique character, yes they sparred more than talked, and yes she was demanding, but he also found her refreshing and original. He found himself passing her show room for no reason other than to catch a glimpse of her at work. He had caught her mumbling to herself on more than one occasion. Oh hell, knowing Ellis, she was probably talking to the fireplace or the wood screws. Often he was treated to the sight of her perfectly proportioned backside as she

bent to pick up a tool, or was gifted with a glance at her bare abdomen, flat and creamy smooth, as she stretched to reach something.

Simon could feel himself begin to stiffen, so he edged the tap toward cold. The trick was getting past her room before she saw him because then it was “Oh, Simon, please could you look at this” or “Simon, the bathroom isn’t happy. It needs better lighting” or “Simon, I’m so glad you happened by! I’m having a problem with mood and was wondering if you could...” The hardest part was containing the deep urge to jump her, tear off her clothes and taste every inch of her skin.

Frustrated that the cooler water was having no effect on his rising lust, he pumped liquid soap onto his palm and wrapped his fingers around the base of his engorged cock. With a tightened grip, he slid his fist up and down his shaft, giving in to the images that played through his mind...

Ellis, standing in his bedroom, shimmies out of her hip-hugging jeans, pushes her black thong underwear down her thighs and kicks them off her feet. She stands there naked from the belly button down and winks before she pulls her tight T-shirt up and off. She isn’t wearing a bra. She runs her hands over her pert breasts, stopping to pinch her nipples, down her creamy flat stomach and stops at her thighs. She giggles and sprawls naked on his bed.

Simon held his breath and squeezed his eyes shut tight to capture the erotic picture of Ellis in his mind.

She crooks her finger at him. “Oh Simon, could you help me with this.” She opens her legs, inviting him to look at her, wanting him to see her secrets, taste her gleaming wet pussy.

Panting, Simon pumped harder, bracing his other hand against the shower wall. His thigh and ass muscles clenched, poised for his release.

Ellis licks her middle finger then slides it through her tawny curls, moaning with pleasure as she rubs herself.

He groaned and dropped his chin to his chest, letting the water pound against the taut muscles of his back and shoulders. His forearm burned with tension as he quickened his movements.

Ellis rubs herself with two fingers, frantically, moaning and crying for him to come with her. She gyrates her hips, arches her back, convulses.

Simon pounded his free hand against the wet tile as he shot his seed almost to the top of the shower stall.

"Good God," Simon gasped as the cool water washed away his fantasy. "How on earth can this woman be responsible for giving me both a hard-on and a headache?"

* * * * *

"There's too much orange," she explained, arms raised like a game-show hostess. "See how it argues with the floor?"

"Argues?"

"Yes, argues. Look in the direction of the grain and let your eyes travel up the wall."

Simon emitted a throaty groan, more of a growl. He took a sip of steaming coffee from a takeout cup. At least she had the forethought to have a hot coffee waiting for him when he arrived. It took the edge off the crankiness caused by lust for this confounding woman.

He played along and took a hard look at the colors and he had to admit, after looking at the walls in the early morning sunlight, she had a point. Only Ellis could describe a wall and a floor arguing and have it actually make sense.

Pretending to further scrutinize the arguing colors, he relied on his peripheral vision to admire Ellis. For someone who didn't get much sleep, she looked good enough to eat, even in a wrinkled T-shirt and baggy denim overalls. The morning sun shone on her mussed shoulder-length hair. He had thought it was brown but that one simple word couldn't begin to fairly describe it. Like a piece of polished, exotic wood with a rich grain, her hair was shot with streaks of amber and gold, red oak and maple. She looked fresh, young and entirely sexy. Try as he might, he couldn't shake the picture of her naked, *in his bed*, out of his mind. He wondered if her honey complexion

would taste as scrumptious as it looked. He wondered if he ran his tongue along the curve of her jaw, it would lose its stubborn set —

“So do you agree?”

Simon raked his fingers through his hair, a mixture of lust and frustration. This woman had him completely off balance.

“Oh yeah, I see.”

“But do you *agree*? Because there is no harmony, and if there’s no harmony, there’s no mood. And we already know that if the room isn’t in a good mood, it won’t work.” She continued, despite Simon’s raised eyebrows. “Now, if we add a little bit of a deeper gold, like in this sample called Divine Caravan, I think we’ll nail it.”

“Won’t it be too dark?” Simon suggested, hoping desperately not to have to repaint.

“This is a large enough room to support the tonal depth.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that it’s not too dark,” she stated firmly.

“Problem is, Ellis—can I call you Ellis? I usually call the women who I’ve shared my morning coffee with by their first names.” *And women I masturbate to*, Simon thought.

She nodded in embarrassment, giving Simon a glimmer of satisfaction. Damn, how can a woman who’d spent the night on an air mattress in a house reeking with paint fumes possibly look so damned perky? And edible.

“Problem is, Ellis, I don’t know if I can pull Jeb off another job. He’s on a pretty tight rotation between all the designers,” and before Ellis popped a vein, he added, “but I’ll certainly see what I can do.”

“It just has to get done Simon! We’re running out of time!”

“Well you should have thought of that before you chose Caramel Sundae!”

“But it worked on the sample board and —”

“Enough,” he interrupted, in no mood to argue with her. “I said I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” she said humbly, her eyes locked on his. That little glint of anger she saw made her pulse quicken and pushed her to ask, “Are there a lot?”

“A lot of what?”

“A lot of women with whom you share your morning coffee?”

Simon leaned in close—close enough for her to smell the fresh scent of his wet hair. Close enough for his heat to make her knees wobble.

“None as annoying,” Simon said in a husky voice, “or as gorgeous as you.”

He crushed the empty cup in his fist and strode from the room without a backward glance.

Chapter Four

Ellis adeptly placed a shard of burnt umber tile onto the mosaic she was creating around the hearth. She fought to stay focused, to concentrate on the perfect placement of tile chips to get the effect she envisioned, frustrated that she wouldn't complete it before her four o'clock appointment. She was scheduled to meet with Valentina, the designer in charge of the children's suites, which included both a bedroom and adjoining playroom-nursery. Ellis gave a passing mention of having a visual baby monitor linked to the office and Val loved the idea. Today, in a matter of hours, they would meet to finalize the integration of the system into their perspective rooms.

Ellis dug her trowel into the bottom of the pail and sighed in resignation. The cement compound was stiffening up as she struggled to work at her normally spry pace. It was Simon's fault. His eyes, those shoulders, the way the worn denim of his pants accentuated his solid thighs...she just couldn't get him out of her head. More than once over the past few days, Simon had appeared just as she'd immersed herself in a project, distracting her, making her say stupid things. When he left, she couldn't get the sexy scent of him out of her nose or his devil-may-care grin out of her mind. He was making a mess of her typically steely concentration, her ability to block out the world and be in emotional harmony with the rooms she decorated.

She hadn't seen him since their early morning meeting but the image of him with damp, curling hair and a day's stubble on his angled jaw kept repeating in front of her like a slide show, interrupting her artistic flow. She felt the warmth rise from her groin to her cheeks just remembering his gravelly morning voice, telling her she was gorgeous. How could she get him out of her head? *Oh hell*, she thought with a ripple of humor, *maybe I should have wild, hot monkey-sex with him and get him out of my system*. She

imagined running her hands over the ridges of his well-defined abdomen, tracing her fingertips down the line of hair that disappeared under the waistband of his jeans.

"You okay Ellis?" Remi asked, looking down at her from his perch on the stepstool where he was mounting a curtain rod. "You're looking a little flushed."

"Fine, it's nothing."

"Come on, girlfriend, tell Auntie Remi what's got you all hot and bothered. And don't lie to me because you've not been yourself in days."

"Nothing, it's just—"

"Hey," Simon poked his head around the corner. "Someone in here order a cabinet?"

Simon stepped aside to let Marco and his crew haul in the pre-made sections of Ellis' built-in. Remi, vexed at the interruption, noticed a blush creep from Ellis' neck to her hairline. *Ah ha! So that's what's been bothering her.* He should have known. There were some strong vibes bouncing between these two lately.

"I thought it wasn't coming until tomorrow!" Ellis rose from her kneeling position and unconsciously brushed the ceramic dust, and the blush, from her cheeks.

They stood back while the men bolted in the supports, then began to piece sections of the cabinet together using glue, nails and screws. Ellis watched with giddy pleasure as the unit began to take shape. She was relieved that Simon had left the room while his men installed it, leaving her to continue the mosaic in peace. Mr. Callon had a talent for causing complete uproar to her emotional nervous system with his mere presence. Every time he had stopped by during the past few days, she found herself babbling inanely and asking him for silly favors, just to cover her nerves.

An hour later, the carpenters had the pieces installed, the hardware mounted and the holes puttied. The hearth mosaic was only three quarters complete and Ellis had just enough time to splash some water on her face and grab a coffee before meeting with Val.

“Those two.”

Surprised, she turned to see Simon standing in the room. Lost in her work, she hadn’t heard or seen him come in. He separated two landscape scenes from the six framed pictures that were propped against the opposite wall.

Ellis had borrowed two abstracts, three landscapes and a large still life from a local gallery, intent on seeing how they looked in the changing light before making her final decision on which prints to hang. She hadn’t quite decided what she preferred, and was interested in Simon’s rationale. “Why those?” she asked, fully expecting him to say something inane like he was partial to the pretty colors.

“They’re reminiscent of RGK’s Northern Africa works, my favorite of all her periods.”

Ellis stared, stunned. “Are you telling me you’re familiar with an obscure artist like Regina Gertrude King?”

“Sure,” Simon grinned, showing off his stunning teeth. “And she’s hardly obscure. She was one of the foremost women painters of her time. Although, not many people knew the paintings were done by a woman because she only signed her initials.”

Ellis shook her head in disbelief. This burly alpha male, who should have been spewing the latest football stats, was actually giving her a lesson on a woman painter whose career spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This had to be a lucky coincidence. Perhaps RGK was mentioned in *He-Man Weekly*—“How to Hook a Chick at an Art Show”.

“Really?” asked Ellis, a hint of skepticism in her undertone. “I didn’t know she was trying to hide her gender. I assumed her name was too long to sign on canvas.”

Simon realized that he’d confounded Ellis and felt the corners of his mouth twitch in amusement. He was going to make her work for this one.

“Oh no, she probably wouldn’t have sold much if her sex was common knowledge. Did you know her husband was a British diplomat and she traveled around the world

with him, painting landscapes in all the exotic places he was posted—the Far East, India, Northern Africa, even Bermuda. Personally, I didn't like her Bermuda works. They were too pastel-y for my taste."

"How can you possibly know all this?" Ellis asked, suspicious.

"My sister."

"Is she an artist?"

"Nope, she's a curator at the Atlantic Museum of Arts and Antiquities."

"Your sister works at AMAA? So you like art too?" Ellis was visibly impressed.

"Not initially." Leave her hanging. Make her beg.

"I don't follow."

"Claire is almost ten years my senior. Our parents worked so she was saddled with me a lot. Instead of sitting me in front of the television like most babysitters would, she dragged me to every museum, gallery and art exhibition within a hundred miles. I spent hours sitting in stuffy old halls full of ancient paintings while Claire scribbled notes for her art history classes, lecturing me every chance she got. Eventually, I guess it stuck."

"Have you ever heard of Suzanne Strathmore?"

"Of course," Simon said, realization dawning on him seconds later. "Is she a rel —"

"My mother," Ellis nodded.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding." He'd heard of her mother. For some reason, this pleased Ellis immensely. And he liked art. Perhaps he wasn't the Neanderthal she'd pegged him for.

They stood like that for a pause, in comfortable silence, each considering what they'd learned about the other.

"That's quite a design," Simon said, remarking on her mosaic. "Come up with it yourself?"

"Of course."

"Of course." He surveyed the fragments of glazed tile in an array of shades—yellow, orange, gold, brown and red, though he suspected Ellis would have exotic names for them like golden sands, tangerine dream, saffron and liquid fire. He smiled at the thought. It looked a little like a sunset but he couldn't be sure at this stage. If it was as wacky as the cabinet she designed, there was no telling. She'd had his carpenters completely puzzled with the odd-shaped sections and nontraditional hardware configurations. He felt a bit sorry for the poor man who would be expected to make use of this business center. How could he write on a two-foot white-board that was four inches off the floor and mounted on the inside of a door? And what could he store in the tall skinny cupboard on the side? It resembled a tray cupboard like the one in the kitchen—too tall and too narrow for anything else Simon could think of.

"So, you're happy with the built-in?" Simon asked tentatively.

"Couldn't be more pleased."

"Those odd-shaped nooks to your specifications?"

"Yup."

"I've never seen or built anything like it. Mind telling me what those little holes are for under the hinged doors?" he asked.

"Toys."

"Toys?"

"And other kiddie stuff."

"Thought this was an office?"

"It is. It's a working mother's office," she stated proudly.

"Ah," he said skeptically.

"Come here, I'll show you." Ellis led Simon to the unit and started lifting the hinged doors that resembled little apothecary drawers on the bottom half of the unit.

"Kids love little nooks, moms like toys to be neat, organized and off the floor. I've got little baskets that slide into these nooks so mom can fill them up with dolls, trains,

blocks, books or whatever. This little erasable board," she opened the side door, "is for drawing pictures with nontoxic washable markers.

"And this," Ellis announced proudly, opening the tall tray cupboard that Simon had puzzled over, "is for the barricade."

"Barricade?"

"Baby gates, safety gates or whatever parents call them. It works just like those retractable guides that are used to control queues at the airport or bank. See this roller? A nylon mesh screen, like on a playpen, wraps around it. When mom wants to cordon off this area, she simply pulls it out, guides it around padded removable posts that screw into those holes," Ellis gestured to the small brass keyholes in the floor, "and then hooks into the brass loops on the wall and voilà – instant playpen!"

"Very clever," Simon muttered as he squatted to test the spring on the roller that would rewind the screen with a tug.

"Cool, isn't it?" Ellis beamed, relieved that he understood. "And even if this becomes dad's office, he can still watch the kids. Fathers are much more hands-on these days, right? And if the new homeowners don't have children, they can stash anything in these cubbies – CDs, magazines, wine bottles..."

"Well, I'll be," Simon nodded, impressed.

Pride swelled through Ellis, making the corners of her mouth curl in a goofy schoolgirl smile. She shouldn't have cared that Simon liked her work. It shouldn't matter this much. But it did. She was flattered, positively exuberant over his "very clever" comment.

Ellis stood back as Simon opened drawers and peeked into nooks. Now that it made sense to him, she could see that he appreciated her concept, and while he admired the cabinet, she admired him. His worn-almost-to-tatters white polo shirt was pulled tight across his strong back, his jeans hung low on his hips and the ever-present tool belt completed the macho image. As he knelt and reached forward, testing the depth of one of the cubbies, his shirt rode up just enough on his sides to show those G.I. Joe

muscles that reminded Ellis of Brad Pitt in the movie *Troy*. Her fingers were itching to reach out and touch his flesh, feel the warmth and hardness of him. To hell with Brad Pitt! Simon Callon made her heart pound at the thought of him in a leather skirt and wielding a sword.

And speaking of swords, Ellis couldn't stop her mind from wondering if Simon's own sword would be proportionate to his tall, broad body. Ellis wiggled her toes in her shoes as a hot flash spread through her body. When he turned around and caught her staring at his backside, her cheeks burned red.

"Why, Miss Strathmore, I do believe you're blushing. Is it modesty about your creative design, I wonder, or were you staring at—"

"Ahem."

They both turned to see Remi standing behind them, arms crossed over his chest. He had been working so quietly in the adjoining bathroom that Ellis completely forgot he was there.

"It's getting hot in here. I'm leaving," Remi deadpanned, one eyebrow raised.

Shoulder to shoulder, Simon and Ellis watched Remi sashay out of the room with dramatic flair. He had a knack for breaking any tension that built up around him.

"He's quite a character," Simon chuckled, drawing Ellis' agreement. "Is he right?"

"No, he's gay," Ellis answered.

"I didn't ask if he was *straight*, I asked if he was *right*."

"Right about what?"

"Right about the heat," Simon said. He reached out and ran a callused hand up her bare forearm.

Ellis' legs turned to liquid at his touch. She met his eyes and saw the green flecks glitter with emotion, with lust, as his hand trailed a caress up her arm then reached around her waist. She felt a tightening in her loins as Simon firmly tugged her toward him. The heat of him seared her everywhere their bodies made contact—thighs, groin,

stomach, chest—all of it on fire. Blood roared through her system, making her heart pound against his chest.

His mouth inches from hers, he asked again, “Are you hot, Ellis?”

Yes, yes, yes! her mind screamed. Leaning into him was like being engulfed by flames. She couldn’t take her eyes off his shapely lips—the perfectly sculpted top and full lower lip, a mere breath away from her own. She wanted to taste them, nibble them with her teeth, run the tip of her tongue along his closed mouth before seductively stealing inside. Anticipating the mind-shattering kiss they were about to share, her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. She felt his other hand slide up her back until his fingers were entangled in her hair.

“Maybe a little warm,” she breathed as she moved forward to close the gap between their mouths.

“Knock, knock!”

Ellis jumped away from Simon just as Valentina entered.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked, pausing mid-stride in the doorway, her mind quickly registering the implications of what her eyes just witnessed. “I’m sorry, Ellis. I didn’t know if we were meeting here or upstairs...” she trailed, looking between a very flushed Ellis and a frustrated Simon. “Am I early?”

“No, it’s fine Val,” Ellis assured, finding a smile for her friend. “Simon and I were just discussing...um, he was just leaving. Come in.”

Simon, adjusting his tool belt as he headed toward the door. He turned at the doorway and gave Ellis a wink. A wink that could have meant a hundred things Ellis was sure to agonize about later. She felt terribly cold all of a sudden and reached for her sweater, thankful for a reason not to make eye contact with Val, who was busy watching Simon’s backside as he exited.

“Oh. My. God!” Val whispered, her luminous blue eyes as wide as saucers. “You and Simon Callon?”

“Val, it’s not what you think.”

“It *better* be what I think. He is so gorgeous!” Val punctuated by giving her a punch on the arm. “You lucky dog! What’s he like in the sack?”

“Val, please! There’s nothing going on, really.”

“That’s not what it looked like from where I was standing,” Val retorted, arms akimbo.

“Simon and I were just admiring the built-in and got caught up in the moment, you know?” Val simply raised her eyebrows. “And besides, you interrupted what would have been our first kiss.”

“Ooh, my bad,” Val winced.

Ellis, eager to change the subject, turned the conversation to business. Together, she and Val worked out the details of the visual and audio systems, discussed sharing the budget and came to a mutually satisfying agreement. Ellis’ office was already hardwired for most of the system but Val’s room would need some work, so they planned to discuss their idea with the IT experts in the morning.

“How’s it going up there in kiddy land?”

“Are you referring to the average age of Cynthia’s interns or my nursery?” Val asked, smiling at her own joke. “The kids’ room is almost finished, the bathroom between the bedroom and nursery is complete expect for accessories and the nursery is still a nightmare. Did you hear what happened?”

Ellis shook her head so Val explained, “I found this really pretty wall border with antique trains and teddy bear conductors in a shop that was going out of business. I’ve had it in my stock for ages and when I was chosen for this project, I knew it would be perfect. I based the entire color scheme of the room on that border and now it’s missing. Can you believe it?”

“Missing? Missing from where, here at the show house or from your shop?”

"Here! I brought it in a few days ago, left it in the bathtub with some other odds and ends so it would be out of the way and when I went to get it this morning, poof! Gone. Disappeared. Vanished."

"Did you ask around? Maybe someone picked it up by mistake."

"I hope you're right. I've talked to a few people upstairs but I'm going to hunt up our foreman and see if he knows what's going on."

"And I'll mention it to Simon if I see him before you do," Ellis promised.

"Speaking of which," Val paused in the doorway, "does Cynthia know what's going on between you two?"

"Between Simon and me? Which is nothing, I might add," Ellis joked. "No, why?"

"Ellis," Val said gravely, "Cynthia has let it be known via her interns that Mr. Callon is hands-off."

"Maybe she doesn't want any hanky-panky when they should be focusing on the project," Ellis offered naïvely.

"Or maybe she wants him for herself."

"But that's ridiculous," Ellis scoffed. "Cynthia's almost old enough to be his mother."

"Well koo-koo-ka-choo. Just don't let 'Mrs. Robinson' know what's cooking down here," Val said, leaning one shoulder against the jamb. "Why does she hate you so much anyway? Didn't you used to work for her?"

"I sure did." It seemed like years ago, another lifetime even, since her years as one of Cynthia's peons. "After my internship at Afflairs, Cynthia hired me on full-time. I must admit I learned a lot from her but I didn't enjoy working for her. She's a terrific designer but she has a mean streak a mile wide."

Val gave an understanding nod. "That explains why her interns are always running off in tears."

"That's Cynthia's style. Make them feel stupid and incompetent. She had me reaching for tissues on more than one occasion but that's not why I left." Ellis leaned against the wall near Valentina so she could keep an eye on the hallway. Ellis didn't take pleasure in telling the story. She didn't enjoy discrediting anyone and tried to leave the gossip to Remi, but she liked Val and wanted her to hear the correct account of the scandal, not Cynthia's nasty version. She dropped her voice so none of the passing workers could hear. "I left because Cynthia took credit for a job that she'd given me complete control over."

"Oh that's harsh. But it *is* her company," Val offered, knowing that the figurehead of any company usually gets the accolades when in fact it was a team effort.

"No Val, it wasn't like that," Ellis explained. "We had a contract for the interior of a brand-new home owned by a wealthy bioengineer. He wanted it completely environmentally friendly. A 'green' house, so to speak. Cynthia couldn't be bothered so she handed it over to me. Gave me *complete* control. I did months of research on everything—paint, fabric, wood furniture. I worked with the architect on window direction, use of skylights and solar panels. Val, my life was consumed with the project for six months. I ate, slept and breathed environmentalism.

"When it was complete, the bioengineer gave Afflairs a huge bonus, not one measly dime of which I saw but I let it go. Chalk it up to experience. But Val, when the house won an award from a major environmental agency and Cynthia didn't so much as mention my name when interviewed for *Designers Weekly*, that's when I'd had it. She had the nerve to take full credit! She talked about the sense of 'environmental responsibility' she'd felt when *she* chose each element of the overall design and then refused to give any specifics to the interviewer, saying that they were industry secrets."

Val shook her head in disbelief.

"I know!" Ellis agreed. "That's why I gave her my letter of resignation. That's why I left Afflairs and that's why Cynthia hates me. She lost control of me."

“But Cynthia tells anyone who asks that she fired you because you tried to take credit for one of her designs.”

“Ah, so you *have* heard her version. Damage control,” Ellis confirmed. “Cynthia would never admit that someone actually left her firm. I dare anyone to ask Cynthia about the specifics of that house and she wouldn’t know where to begin. Thankfully, the architect I worked with was brilliant and has given me loads of recommendations, so my business hasn’t suffered because of her lies. But what gets my ass is that Cynthia is such a good designer, she doesn’t *need* to take credit for other people’s work. Why couldn’t she share the limelight? Why wouldn’t she give one of her own employees a pat on the back? That makes no sense to me.”

“Well good for you for not sticking around and taking Cynthia’s crap. Personally, I love your work and have enjoyed our little project together.”

Ellis smiled as her friend left the room. At least she had one ally besides Remi in this house.

Chapter Five

Tired from another long day racing between the show house, her office and various suppliers, Ellis decided that hanging the prints was her last job of the day. She centered the landscapes on the wall beside the hearth and stepped back to admire the effect. She—and Simon—had chosen well. Ellis was sure that even RGK herself would approve.

The mosaic, complete but for grout sealer, turned out even better than she'd envisioned. It could be a sunset or a sunrise, she supposed, depending on who was admiring it. Maybe the frequent and distracting fantasies of Simon were actually enhancing her creativity.

It was after five and she hadn't seen him all day. Not that she'd been looking for him. Not really. But when a movement in the doorway caught her eye, her heart beat a little two-step before she realized it wasn't Simon but Jeb, ladder in one hand, roller in the other, standing in her doorway.

"Hey Miss Strathmore, okay if I get in here now?"

"Jeb! Thank you so much for finding the time to squeeze me in." Her delight at getting the paint job redone quickly melted to guilt when she saw how tired he looked. "Are you sure? It's so late and you've been at it all day."

"It only needs one coat and I'd just as soon git it done now," he said, consulting his watch. "But I'll leave the cutting 'til the morn, when the sun's on it."

"Thanks Jeb," Ellis said. "You're a sweetheart for putting up with me."

"Yes ma'am, I am," he said, giving her a flirtatious wink as he dropped his tools.

"I'll just get out of your way then," Ellis said, smiling at the old man's verve.

* * * * *

Sandwiched between him and the couch, Ellis ran the pad of her thumb across Simon's lower lip. It was full and oh-so sensual. She reached up around the back of his neck, slid her hand under his dark wavy hair and pulled his mouth toward hers. Her tongue swept across his partially open lips, following the trail her thumb had made. He tasted like apples, the kind baked in the oven with a sprinkle of cinnamon—warm, delicious and spicy-sweet. She tugged on his lower lip with her teeth, lightly, playfully teasing him.

She squirmed under the weight of his body, his naked flesh against hers. He took one of her hands and guided it between their bodies so she could feel his solid arousal. He was bigger than she'd anticipated, than she'd hoped, but in perfect proportion with his large, muscular physique. His hand lingered over hers as she slid her fingers along the length of his thick shaft, gently kneading until he groaned with pleasure against her mouth.

He let go of her to do his own exploring, caressing her inner thigh, trailing his fingers down to the sensitive hollow behind her knee and back up her satiny flesh until his fingers rested at her apex. She pressed her sex into his palm, encouraging him. Simon slipped two fingers inside her and her hips bucked, silently begging him for more. He explored her slick wet folds, torpidly moving his fingers up and down as she writhed under him.

The couch was too narrow to do this, she realized. She needed to get them onto the floor where there was room for a night of sexual gymnastics. She wiggled and shifted under him so he could roll beside her but something went wrong. They lost their grip on one another and Ellis watched in dismay as Simon tumbled to the floor, out of sight. Ellis felt a flash of cold air hit her naked skin like a pail of ice water. She looked over the edge of the sofa but instead of seeing Simon in his naked glory, she found Jeb, eyes open in a dead stare and lying in a pool of blood. Only it wasn't blood, it was red paint, and in one of his outstretched hands he held a red-tipped brush in a death grip...

Ellis' eyes flew open as she jerked awake. She was aroused, disturbed, disoriented. Dressed only in a T-shirt and panties, she shivered and reached for the worn, multi-hued afghan that had fallen to the floor. Her senses struggled into full consciousness. In the dim emptiness of her own home, Ellis felt a blush of awareness wash over her. Her panties were soaking wet. She'd never had a dream so deliciously erotic or so frightening. How would she be able to face Simon in the light of day without picturing him naked on her sofa? Could she find the strength not to look at his long, tapered fingers and not imagine them pressed deeply into her sex?

She got up, stretched the kinks out of her long legs and shivered again. The glow from the tiny muted television set across the room offered just enough light for her to clear the remnants of her dinner—microwaved leftovers and an apple-cinnamon granola bar. She took a swig from the can of warm soda to clear her mouth and checked her watch. She must have fallen asleep during *Jeopardy* and now, nearly midnight, Ellis was wide awake and shaken.

Guilt. The perfect sex dream ended horribly because she felt bad about poor old Jeb having to repaint. Again. She should have done it herself. Ellis decided to go back to the show house and do the tedious cutting to save Jeb the trouble in the morning. With any luck, she'd be home in a couple hours to get some guilt-free sleep. Maybe her dream would pick up where it left off. Wishful thinking.

She took a quick shower, colder than usual, threw on an old Black Sabbath T-shirt and a pair of jeans. Trying desperately to get her mind away from lascivious visions of Simon, Ellis tried to remember where in the house she'd seen the portable construction spotlights. She would need extra lighting to do a decent paint job around the window frames, ceiling and other tight spots.

"Damn," she said to no one as she pulled out of the driveway. "I don't know who won Final Jeopardy."

* * * * *

Instead of parking in the driveway of the show house like she usually did, Ellis drove around the western side of the house and positioned her car so it faced the office windows. If she didn't find the portable lights, she could shine her headlights in.

She walked over the muddy un-landscaped yard to the front entrance, master key in hand, prepared to dash in and punch the alarm code. Ellis did so much work after hours that Marco, tired of his pager going off after five o'clock, finally gave in and told her the system code. He'd also given her the key to open the padlocked chain meant to warn off trespassers at the entrance to the Oak Ridges Development.

She made her way down the darkened hallway to the office, hoping that Jeb left the paint, drop cloths and brushes. The enormous house was isolated on acres and acres of empty land, but Ellis wasn't spooked. She loved being alone with the creaks and groans of the structure settling on its foundation, the smell of wood shavings and fresh paint, and the play of light and shadows created by the moonlight that streamed in through untreated windows.

She switched on the office lights, both the pots and sconces, and confirmed her suspicion. The insufficient lighting would make her task difficult. She definitely needed the portable spots.

Ellis scanned the common areas, looking for the bright yellow cage-headed poles, but suspected that the crew had probably put them outside under the tent where most of their equipment was moved when not in use. She made her way to the backyard via the kitchen, stopping only for a moment to admire the work in progress. The cabinets looked like hickory but it was hard to tell in the dark. Stainless steel appliances, still wrapped in protective plastic, lined the wall, waiting patiently for placement. The butcher-block topped island, complete with vegetable sink, was practically the size of Ellis' entire kitchen...a chef's dream.

Once past the covered back porch, she entered Callon Construction's onsite work zone. It was covered in a colossal white canopy that practically engulfed the entire

backyard. The transparent plastic sides of the canopy could be tied down and secured, making the structure water and windproof if needed. Tonight, some panels were rolled up and others were left down to flap and sway in the evening wind. Ellis ducked in and by the light of the moon, could make out several neat work tables, a pile of saw horses and a circular table saw, its vicious jagged teeth barely visible in the shadows.

Ellis froze. She heard a noise—a shuffle. Was someone there? A gust of warm breeze lifted her hair, causing a shiver to run down her spine.

“Hello?” she called, just above a whisper.

She strained to listen but could hear nothing but the wind through the forest of tall pines that surrounded the estate. She scanned the moon-washed grounds but could see only construction stuff—piles of lumber and brick, boxes of tile, large drums of who-knows-what, extension ladders and two trailers sitting end to end—one was the site office, the other full of supplies.

“Nobody here but me,” she said, dropping her shoulders. Her eyes darted back to the trailers.

“Lovely,” Ellis said. “I’ll bet the spotlights are in the trailer and it would be just my luck that it’s locked.”

Her nerves forgotten, Ellis crossed her fingers and headed for the trailers about thirty feet away from the tented area. The storage trailer was the farthest of the two. Ellis was crossing the gap between the trailers when she felt a hand clamp over her mouth and a vice-like arm encircle her body, pinning her arms to her side. Cold fear drenched her. She was dragged back, into the darkness between the trailers where the moonlight didn’t penetrate. She felt smothered. Ellis started to panic, her heartbeat thundered in her ears as she struggled for a deep breath. She tried to scream but it was nothing more than a muffled whimper against the rough hand.

“Shhh, it’s me!” a gravelly voice hissed in her ear.

She froze at the sound of the familiar voice. She knew his smell. She could feel his hot breath on her cheek. Simon Callon. Her terror dissolved into fury.

“What the hell are you doing?” came out as “Mm mm MMMM mm mm mm-mm?”

“Shhh! Do not make a sound. I’m going to move my hand but do not move and do not make a sound,” he said, emphasizing every word.

She felt his grip loosen but before he released her, he said quietly in her ear, “We’ve got company.”

Ellis, about to berate him for scaring the living daylights out of her, saw a vehicle swing into the backyard. She’d been so frightened that she hadn’t heard its approach. Windows open, headlights off, the dark-colored pickup swung around and reversed into position between the trailer and the tent. Simon, who still had his arm around Ellis’ middle, pulled her back deeper into the shadows.

“What’s going—” Ellis began to ask in a whisper, but Simon’s tightened grip warning her to be silent.

They watched two men get out of the truck. Ellis noticed that the larger man, a flat-nosed goon in a muscle shirt, had a visible bulge in the small of his back. He would be perfectly cast as Thug Number One in a mob movie. Thug’s buddy, the driver, was a short, wiry man. They looked familiar...

She knew the little guy. It was Jim! Why was Simon hiding and shushing her when one of his employees was here? She’d run into Jim a number of times in the house, most recently when he stopped by one evening to pick up some tools he’d left behind.

Ellis’ Spidey sense finally kicked in. She needed to tell Simon. Her back was still firmly held against him so she stood on her tiptoes and turned her head, motioning for his ear.

“It’s Jim,” she said in the quietest possible whisper.

She felt Simon’s nod against her hair.

“Here last night too,” she breathed against his ear.

He pulled his head back for a moment, as if in thought, before he dropped his ear back to her lips.

"Came after midnight. Surprised I was here. Said he forgot tools." After each phrase, Simon gave her a little squeeze indicating that he understood. "Came in alone — Thug stayed in car. I recognize his silhouette." She could feel Simon nodding his head. "He's got a gun."

"What was that?" Jim said, stopping in mid-stride. While Ellis was talking, the trespassers had dropped the tailgate and laid out some sheets of blue tarp.

"I didn't hear nothin'. You're being paranoid," Thug said.

Jim looked around, squinting into the moonlit yard. He scanned the grounds, passing right over Ellis and Simon huddled in the shadows.

"Probably just the wind."

"What am I looking for?" Thug asked, shining his flashlight over the stacked boxes of tiles resting on pallets.

"M7," Jim replied.

Ellis stiffened, knowing exactly what the code meant. The "M" indicated main floor and "7" was the number assigned to her bathroom. What did they want with her stuff?

Simon, reading her mind, squeezed her lightly and whispered, "Just watch and try to remember everything we're seeing."

"You got the hammer?" Jim asked.

"Nah, don't need one."

They watched in silence as Thug and Jim lifted three cardboard boxes of her precious Tuscan Sun tiles and threw them hard onto the ground, one after the other. She could hear the muffled shatter of the ceramic tiles. They picked up each box and put them back randomly among the other untouched boxes.

"Any more?"

"No. She said no more than three."

Ellis knew exactly what “she” was up to. One box of shattered tiles wouldn’t hinder the job. They always ordered about ten percent more tiles than needed to make up for waste, off-cuts, etc. But three boxes meant that there was no way the installers could finish the job without a reorder. Why would someone want to sabotage her bathroom?

“What a waste, man,” Thug said. “Why couldn’t we just take them?”

“She said we could take other stuff, but she wanted the M7s smashed.”

“Yeah, but we could have sold these dude.”

“Don’t be greedy,” Jim said and they both burst out laughing at some private joke.

Ellis and Simon watched as the truck was loaded with odd boxes of supplies. Thug and Jim were careful not to take much of any one item. The morning crew wouldn’t even be aware that there was a theft. They took lumber, a ladder and a selection of miscellaneous hardware, just enough to cause delays and have a few folks scratching their heads thinking “now where did I leave that” or “I must have miscalculated the order”.

“Let’s do the inside,” Jim said, standing back and surveying their hoard.

They hopped in the truck and drove around to the front.

As soon as the tail lights rounded the eastern corner of the house, Simon grabbed her by the hand. “Come on. We’ve got to get in the back door before they get in the front.”

They took off at a run toward the back door. Ellis struggled to keep pace with Simon’s long-legged stride. He flung the back door open, pausing only for a split second to listen for the position of the two men, who had not yet entered the house.

“Stay here,” Simon instructed.

Like hell, thought Ellis, following closely behind Simon as he ran toward the foyer. He needed to turn on the alarm so the thieves wouldn’t be tipped off to their presence. He got to the numbered pad just as the thugs were slamming the doors of the truck outside.

Four, eight, fifteen, sixteen, twenty-three, forty-five —

“Two!” Ellis hissed. “Forty-two!”

“Damn it!” He stole a glance through the sidelights and saw them coming up the porch steps.

Four, eight, fifteen, sixteen, twenty-three, forty-two, ON. The digital display read “alarm enabled”.

The key slid into the lock, trapping Simon and Ellis in the foyer. They had no time to run across the endless front hall back to the kitchen. As Simon was judging the distance to the west hall, Ellis pulled him toward the coat closet near to the front door. It was a risky move, going toward the entrance instead of away from it, and they ducked in just as Jim swung the front door open. The alarm beeped in two-second intervals, warning the entrants to punch in the alarm code within thirty seconds. Simon heard them fumbling at the keypad inches away from the closet.

“Where to, man?” Thug asked.

“Just gimme a sec. I gotta think,” Jim said as the keypad continued to beep. “Four, eight...” He continued until the beeping stopped.

They could hear Thug’s heavy footsteps retreat across the hall then back again.

“Jim, there’s a light on down there,” he said quietly.

Ellis froze. Thug must have looked down the west wing hall and seen the office lights on. They would know she was here. She found Simon’s hand in the empty darkness of the cramped two-by-four enclosure and squeezed, communicating both apology for leaving the light on and fear.

“You stay here,” Jim ordered. “It’s probably just Goldilocks.”

Who? Simon squeezed her hand reassuringly while they waited. If the situation wasn’t so horrible, Ellis might have enjoyed the closeness. His strong callused hand spread warmth through her every fiber. She could hear his low shallow breaths and it somehow calmed her frantically beating heart.

"No sign of Goldilocks tonight," Jim said, returning. "She must have left the light on."

"Who's Goldilocks?"

"That chick from last night."

"Think she suspected?"

"Nah. She's whacked, man. You know what she said to me when I asked her what she was doin' here so late? She says 'watching paint dry'. How fucked-up is that? I mean, shit, get a life. Get fuckin' laid or somethin'!" Jim said, laughing wickedly.

"She was hot," Thug offered. "I'd do her,"

"How the hell would you know? You were in the car."

"I saw her when she came out on the porch to watch you leave. But why you callin' her Goldilocks, man? She ain't blonde." Their voices drifted in and out as they began to walk away from the closet. Their footsteps on the stairs rang through the hall. Ellis pressed her ear to the door but wished she hadn't. Their conversation echoed loudly from the upper landing.

"No, but she's got Goldilocks tits. You know—not too big, not too small, but juuuuuust right!"

Simon's palm connected with her mouth just before Ellis could start swearing. He knew the comment wouldn't be appreciated and reacted as soon as he anticipated Jim's comment. Quite frankly, he agreed with the assessment but —

Ouch! She bit his hand! Could she read his mind?

"I could barely breathe," she hissed into the blackness. "Your hands are too big."

"I'd say they're juuuuuust right."

Ellis could hear the smirk in his voice. Pigs, all of them. She was about to share her views when Simon asked, "Where is your car?"

"Around the side," Ellis said. Realizing Simon would be wondering why, she added, "I'll explain later."

"Did you know what was going down?" Simon asked. "Is that why you're here?"

"No. I came back to do some work. What's going on?"

"Too many odd things happening," he explained. "I decided to stake out the place. I thought maybe it was kids making mischief. Never expected..."

Ellis could visualize Simon shaking his head, upset at the fact that one of his own men was stealing from him, not to mention the designers.

They couldn't hear any sounds from the front hall, so Simon opened the door a crack and looked out. From his vantage point he could see the entire front hall and up the stairs onto the balcony landing. Jim and Thug hadn't turned on any lights but Simon could see the arcing beam of Thug's flashlight coming from an upstairs bedroom.

Simon froze when Jim appeared on the landing. He pulled the door slightly but didn't dare close it lest Jim hear the click.

They remained as still as possible, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand. Through the slight gap in the door, they listening to Thug and Jim walk in and out of rooms, picking through the site, discussing what would bring a better price, the kitchen cabinet hardware or the brushed nickel bathroom faucets.

"Just take a few of those, man! We can't make it obvious! It's got to look like someone made a mistake counting or whatever. Duh!" Jim said.

He was obviously the brains behind this charade.

"You got that stuff we're supposed to put in the glue?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. What does it do, anyway?"

"Messes with the chemical structure. When it dries, the wallpaper will fall off. You go do that while I scope out the kitchen."

Ellis waited for the footsteps to fade before she whispered, "Simon?"

Simon turned toward her and pulled her in close so she wouldn't have to talk so loudly. "Hmmm?"

The temperature in the closet rose as his hard chest pressed against her breasts, and it felt just right. She longed to run her fingers up his abdomen, feel his heart beat beneath her palms. She stood on tiptoe, her body sliding against his. How easy would it be to simply kiss him...to take that luscious lower lip she'd been fantasizing about between her teeth...to reach down and caress the bulge she felt against her tummy? She gave her head a little shake. How could she be horny at a time like this? She rested her cheek against his and whispered in his ear, "This closet is unhappy."

He rubbed his hands protectively up her arms and felt her shiver. *Poor kid must be pretty scared*, Simon thought. Thug had a gun and they were talking about her in a base and demeaning way.

"They won't be here much longer," he reassured. "You're doing great, darlin'. Just hold on to me."

Ellis' arm exploded into goose bumps at his touch. He had no idea what he was doing to her. She was trying to explain something to him and he was distracting her, again, with lascivious thoughts.

"No, I'm talking about—" She stopped at the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Hold this bag," Jim said.

Thug grunted and heaved a clanking bag over his shoulder. "You're pretty strong for a little dude," he muttered. "Forget somethin'?"

Jim, halfway up the stairs, replied, "Our cash. She said she'd leave it upstairs in a secret spot."

Ellis and Simon held their breath as Thug stood in the foyer, inches away from the closet door. Through the slight crack, they saw his face as he registered the fact that there was a door in front of him. His meaty hand reached for the knob. Simon pushed his body against Ellis', pinning her deep in the corner, shielding her from what may come.

The door started to swing open when Thug turned his attention to Jim, who came bounding down the stairs.

"That bitch!" Jim spit. "She shorted us, man."

Thug let go of the handle with a little shove, clicking the door closed. Ellis felt Simon exhale against her.

"Whad'ya mean?" Thug's voice was safely on the other side of the door.

"She said five hundred but she only left two-fifty and a note saying the rest would come at the end of the job."

"Bitch. But you're gonna hand over my share now," Thug said with more than a hint of menace.

"Yeah, course, man."

"Well that was fun," Simon whispered in the dark confines of the closet the moment he heard the front door click.

"As a broken rollercoaster," Ellis replied. Her heart was pounding but she couldn't decide if the cause was fear or the weight of Simon pressed against her—maybe both. All of a sudden she was overcome with self-consciousness. Her breasts squashed against his unyielding body, his thigh against her crotch. "Can we get off the ride now?"

"Soon as we hear the engine, darlin'," he said.

Ellis reached her hands up between them and pushed against his chest. She felt his heart pounding erratically and muscle—hot and hard beneath his dark T-shirt. His face was inches from hers and she could feel his hot breath against her lips. Adrenaline coursed through her system—fear, anger, excitement, need.

She leaned forward and let her lips bump into his, accidentally on purpose. She pulled back slightly but Simon wound his arm around her waist and pulled her forward. Their lips melted together, tasting, soothing and overriding the tension that built up in the closet over the last ten minutes.

Ellis broke their kiss. Simon froze, unable to read her intentions in the dark. Her palms cupped his rigid jaw and with silent accord, she took the lead. Just like her fantasy, better than her dream, she nipped at his lower lip with her teeth, softly, hungrily. He didn't resist or try to regain control as she ran her tongue along the seam of his mouth, probing tentatively. She feasted on his mouth, alternately biting and sucking his lips, before allowing him to join her. Her tongue parted his lips, inviting him to play. A throaty groan escaped Simon as Ellis pressed her hips against his solid erection. Their tongues thrust and parried as they tasted and teased one another, their teeth clashing with urgency.

Ellis, eager to feel more of his flesh, ran her hands down his chest and slipped her fingers under his shirt. His abdomen contracted as she grazed the ripples of muscle. Palms flat, fingers spread, Ellis' roaming hands attempted to absorb as much of his energy as possible. His skin was hot and firm, smooth and brawny. Ellis loved touching him, couldn't get enough of the strength she could sense beneath the surface of his skin. She rolled her palms over his lightly furred chest and felt him quiver when she skimmed his pebbly nipples. Unable to resist, she squeezed them between her thumbs and forefingers.

Simon broke their kiss and, groaning, buried his face against her neck. He put his hands on her bottom and lifted her up against him, grinding his erection into her, proving the effect she was having. Again she thought of her dream—he tasted much better in real life—and let one hand slip between them to see if he measured up to her fantasy.

Simon froze in surprise and pleasure as her long fingers stroked the prominent bulge at the front of his pants. He rocked against her hand in counter pressure, moving slowly, fighting for control. He nuzzled her neck, nipping, kissing and sucking on her flesh.

"God Ellis, you have no idea what you're doing to me."

"Oh but I do."

She felt his abdomen clench as she popped his button and urged his fly open to release the turgid beast. He gave a quick intake of breath against her ear as she ran her fingers down his steely erection and back up again. She touched the bead of pre-cum and swirled it around the head of his cock. Simon moaned low and deep when she wrapped her fingers best she could around the base of his thick, velvety shaft.

CLICK.

Shrouded with desire, the lovers didn't notice that the truck's engine hadn't started, hadn't noticed the sound of footsteps on the front steps, barely registered the sound of the metal key scraping in the lock. But they froze in a Rodin-esque pose at the sound of the opening door.

The footsteps in the hall stopped, seemingly in front of the closet door.

Ellis could feel Simon's body brace, could hear him struggle for even breaths.

They heard the beeps of the alarm code being punched in, more footsteps then the front door closing. They remained perfectly still until the sound of the engine drifted away into the night.

Awareness flooded through Ellis. The house had been robbed, her tiles destroyed, she'd been physically belittled and here she was with her fingers wrapped around some guy's cock. What the hell was she doing acting like a horny teenager in a closet? Claustrophobia took over and Ellis shouldered past Simon in an effort to get out of the confined space. She took a few deep breaths to regain her composure. It was all too much. What the hell did she do? She kissed him! And he kissed her back. Oh boy, did he kiss her back. Her knees wobbled at the thought of what they just did. Ellis needed to get her head back on straight.

"Okay?" Simon asked, clearly concerned. She could hear him adjusting his pants.

"Yeah, good." She kept her eyes averted in embarrassment.

"Still unhappy?"

“Unhappy?” That was an interesting way to describe her fear, disgust, desire and the rest of the emotions coursing through her nervous system.

“Yeah, when you were scared, you said you were unhappy in the closet.”

“No, no,” Ellis corrected, confused. “That’s not what I meant. It wasn’t me that was unhappy – it’s the *closet* that’s unhappy.”

Simon raised one eyebrow.

“The door isn’t right. The closet would prefer louvers and a light.”

“What are you –”

“And a little shelf above the rod and a couple of hooks on the side wall.”

“Ellis...” Simon couldn’t believe his ears. How could she go from jerking him off to louvers in less than twenty seconds?

“It feels it would be better as a sports closet instead of –”

“Oh my God, Ellis! Are you out of your mind? With everything we’ve been through, that’s all you can say?” He glared at her, bewildered. He drove his fingers through his hair and shook his head. “It’s a closet! It’s a fucking CLOSET!”

Taken aback by his outburst, Ellis turned on her heel without another word and went to finish the job she’d come here to do.

Chapter Six

When Ellis woke up it was after ten, and she couldn't remember if the events of the night before were real or just another dream. The paint on her hands confirmed that she had indeed been working at the house well into the night. She had worked and fumed—angry at thieves for breaking her tile, angry at whoever told them to do it, angry at Simon for scaring her, making her lose her head to lust then making fun of her. She was angry at Simon for making her talk to his detective friend until four a.m. and finally, angry at Simon for being such a beefed-up sexy beast.

She was no calmer this morning. She doffed her cotton khakis before even doing up the fly and tugged at the buttons of her white blouse. She searched with frantic abandon through her wardrobe, angry at Simon for making her want to doll herself up. With a measure of self-disgust, she donned a camel-colored skirt, black short-sleeved sweater—showing an extraordinary amount of cleavage—and knee-high black boots. She positively hated herself for digging out the studs that matched her single-strand pearls.

Ellis entered the show house much later than her usual time and passed two workmen removing the coat closet door. She noticed the electrician standing by to rewire for an overhead light. Ellis smiled.

He was waiting for her when she entered the office. He leaned casually against the built-in, wearing the same clothes as the night before. He hadn't shaved, his hair was a tousled mess and he looked completely exhausted. *My God he's beautiful*, she thought, regretting what she needed to do.

"Close the door," he said in greeting.

"Hey, yourself," she replied coolly, kicking the door shut with her boot and setting down her Starbucks cup on the worktable. "You look worse than I feel. Sleep badly?"

"No, in fact, I didn't sleep at all. After the walk-through I did with Detective Novak to see what was missing, I ended up going to the station to file a formal report. Then she let me go with her and her men when they picked up Jim at dawn. They found a ton of our stuff in his garage but so far the little bastard is not cooperating. He won't identify Thug or the person who's paying him. Novak said to play it cool. Whoever is behind this doesn't know that Jim's been arrested and they're going to hold him until Thug is picked up."

"Do you know if they found Valentina's wall border?" Ellis asked, handing Simon her coffee, which he finished in three large gulps.

"If they did find it, it's evidence. She's won't be able to use it, at least not in this competition. Ellis, don't tell anyone what we know, what we saw. Keep your eyes and ears open and tell me if you see anything suspicious. Novak is going to quietly check out the designers who are doing rooms upstairs. Cynthia, Karen, Valentina, all of them. Someone will be linked to Jim. There's got to be phone records, past relationships, something."

"Not Valentina."

"Everyone up there is a suspect at this point. Ellis, look at me. Do *not* tell anyone. Not even Remi."

"Okay, okay. I get it." Man, Remi was going to be pissed when he realized she'd held out.

"Anyway, I didn't have time to get home so I came back here, replaced some tools and sent Marco to pick up more tiles. They'll be doing your bathroom this afternoon so you'll have to stay out of there overnight, okay?"

"Do you have any suspicions about who's behind this?"

"Yeah," Simon said as he yawned and stretched. His shirt rode up, exposing his rippling abs and the line of hair running down his belly into the waistband of his jeans. Ellis swallowed the gasp that threatened to escape. Her nervous system flashed back to their closet encounter, sending currents through her body, making her hands want to

reach out and touch the hard, muscled flesh. She wanted to push him onto the floor and let her tongue explore every wicked inch of him. She wanted to –

“Cynthia.”

“What?” The mention of her archrival was enough to drench her naughtiest thoughts.

“You used to work for her, what are your thoughts?”

“No...no,” Ellis began. “Not her. Couldn’t be. The original paint screwup involved her and me, right?”

“Yes, but the master bedroom was never painted. The mistake was corrected after the office was done. Come to think of it, she requested a later painting date, which had me puzzled since she usually wants everything done yesterday. Your room was done first.”

“I don’t know. She might be a nasty cow, but she’s very good at what she does and I find it hard to swallow that she would resort to sabotage in order to win the competition. I don’t like her Simon, and I have my reasons, but I don’t think she would stoop to illegal means. She doesn’t have to, despite what Remi thinks. You’ve seen her work. She’s brilliant.”

“What do you mean, ‘despite what Remi thinks’? What does Remi think?”

“Oh it’s just a silly bit of gossip,” she said, but Simon urged her to relate the story of the falling mirror.

“You’re right. It does sound farfetched but I’ll mention it to Detective Novak and let her do what she needs to do. She can probably get access to Cyn’s financial records, see if anything looks dubious.

“Now, about last night,” he continued, walking over to her and rubbing her forearms.

About what part of last night, she wondered – the ground-dropping kiss, the fondling or the insults? She did her best to mask her emotions before looking directly at him. He

searched her face, looked for a clue to her mood but he wasn't able to read her normally expressive golden-brown eyes.

Ellis took advantage of his momentary silence to jump in. "Yeah, about that," she began bravely. "Let's just forget about it, okay?"

"No," Simon said, shaking his head. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "I can't forget about it. I'm sorry I yelled at you, Ellis. I was rude and I'm sorry."

He misunderstood again. Ellis swallowed. "No. I meant the other part."

"Oh, the fun part," he said, treating her to a wolfish grin.

"No. Well, yeah," she said, looking down and wishing he would stop looking like a schoolboy who had been groped by the prom queen in the closet. She'd probably hate herself later but it had to be done. She needed to get back to work. She needed to focus and rid herself of all distractions. In her memory, she'd never felt this conflicted about a man. She wanted him with a desire so fierce it hurt, yet a relationship was out of the question. This man was not her type, clearly not the kind of person she'd seek for a relationship, so she had to get past this silly hormonal lust and get her heart back into the competition. "It probably wasn't such a good idea, you know, considering we're working together, so let's just forget it happened and —"

"Don't play games with me, Ellis," Simon said.

"I'm not playing games! But I can't do this..." She paused, grasping for a word but unable to articulate the status of their relationship. "This *thing* with you. This is an important competition and I need all of my focus, all my energy and you're a distraction —"

Simon yanked Ellis against him, cutting her off. He tilted her chin up until her eyes met his. He squinted, trying to read her soul, before he crushed her mouth beneath his. The kiss was hard, fast, cruel...but he made his point. He took a menacing step forward, backing her into the collapsible worktable.

"You have the nerve to speak of distraction? Do you have any idea how difficult it is to walk around with a police detective all night with an aching, semi-hard cock?"

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice sounding small in her own ears.

"And what were you thinking when you put on this tight little sweater? Hmmm, Goldilocks?"

Simon was mocking her and she didn't like it. He ran his hands up her sides until his thumbs rested under the swell of her breasts. Ellis' breath hitched. "I..."

"You don't mind distracting *me*, do you? The way it forms to your 'just right' assets? Let's see," Simon said, as he laid both hands over her breasts.

She could feel her nipples tightening—straining against the lace of her bra, desperately seeking the attention he was so aptly providing. Her mind might have been advising her to end this silly game but her body yearned for his touch. He gave a gentle squeeze that evoked a shiver of pleasure.

"Yes, I have to agree, Goldilocks. They're perfect."

He bent his head and ran his tongue along the rising swell of flesh between her pearl necklace and cleavage. His low, throaty chuckle ignited a spark that rocked her body—alarm and desire.

He encircled her wrists and manually fixed them around his neck before his large hands resume their exploration of her sweater. Simon's mouth skimmed her jaw, pressing kisses down the side of her neck. Ellis winced at the pleasure-pain abrasion of his day-old whiskers and arched her neck to offer fuller access. She breathed in his heady masculine scent and found herself intoxicated by the smell of his skin. His hands roamed her back, kneading her shoulder blades, massaging her spine, working his way lower, lower, until both hands cupped her curved bottom. He squeezed, enjoying the roundness of her flesh and moaning in delight against her neck. She pressed her hips against his groin, at which point he stopped nipping her earlobe and whispered, "Oh no, Goldilocks. Not this time."

He hoisted her up onto the edge of the table and with gentle force, spread her legs apart as far as her skirt would allow. He was inches from her face, a mischievous glint

in the gray-green eyes that bore into hers with a mix of lust and joyful revenge. Ellis inhaled sharply as his calloused hand stroked the inside of her knee, caressing her supple flesh, inching higher and higher toward her inner thigh. A familiar tightening seized her loins, radiating pulses of pleasure from her center.

His fingers traced the edge of her panties and still he held her gaze—unwavering. His lips curled up at the edges with a hint of amusement, a hint of malice. This was no dream. Not this time.

Simon fingered the edge of the soft material, tugging and playing with the lace trim, letting his fingers skim the silky curls and satiny flesh between her legs. With a barely audible whimper, she tilted her hips forward, pushing against his hand. She saw his jaw clench, a slight movement that betrayed his intensity, divulged his satisfaction in the power he had over her.

Finally, with a languid advance, his long middle finger penetrated her warmth. He impaled her, pushed deep inside without warning and watched her eyes grow big. Her muscles constricted around him. She felt a gush of pleasure, a cold-hot shiver as he moved in and out with subtle force, watching her face, every expression. He enjoyed her reactions as he played with her, burying his finger as far as it would go, turning it and pressing against the walls of her channel, making her moan with every thrust. He reveled in his control.

Ellis gasped and caught his lower lip between her teeth. She longed for the feel of his mouth against her but he wouldn't allow it. He pulled away and tormented her with a throaty chuckle. "You like this, Goldilocks?"

"Hmmm," was all Ellis could manage, looking up at him through half-closed lids. She was desperate for more, wanted him deeper, more fully inside of her. She hooked her legs around the back of Simon's, her skirt hem cutting into her mid-thigh, and urged him closer. Her inner muscles clenched around his probing finger and gyrated against his hand, anxious for release.

With deliberate slowness, he withdrew and slid his fingers up through her slick folds, exploring the silken flesh with an intense mixture of pressure and play. Up and down, his fingers tormented her, pinching, plying, teasing her flesh. She dug her fingers into his shoulders and dropped her head back, giving in to the blissful sensations that flooded her system.

“Look at me,” he said in a rumbling baritone.

“Mmm-mm,” she mumbled, shaking her head.

“Look at me.”

She raised her head and locked eyes with him and what she saw frightened her—the gray depths flashed with desire, anger, passion, revenge. At that moment, he flicked the pad of his finger over her clit. Ellis’ body clenched involuntarily and her fingers cut into the back of his shoulders. But her eyes didn’t leave his.

With perfect pressure, Simon slid the length of his finger down the side of her clitoris and back up again in a swift motion. Her hips bucked, pressing her harder against his hand. He pressed his palm against her, calming her need, claiming *her*. And he looked into her eyes, watching her expression when he used the tip of his finger to encircle the hard nubbin, round and round, increasing pressure and speed until her breathing became uncontrolled and her lids started to close. Ellis was on the brink of ecstasy. Her body poised to let go, ready to explode...

And then he stopped. She pressed into him, urging him to take her to release but he didn’t move.

“And now, my dear Goldilocks,” he breathed against her mouth, “we’re both distracted.”

He planted a sweet kiss on her lips as he casually removed his hand from her panties and closed her knees. He walked away abruptly, leaving Ellis stunned and off balance, an unrequited need for release throbbing at her core.

“And that was only one finger,” he said, pausing as he opened the door. “Imagine what I could do with all ten.” And without another word, he strode from the room.

Chapter Seven

On the final work day of the Oak Ridges Competition, Simon leapt out of bed feeling a combination of trepidation and relief. It was almost over and although he had a busy day ahead of him, the end was finally in sight. Simon enjoyed a challenge but the pace they'd maintained to meet the three-week deadline had him working fourteen- and sixteen-hour days. He was a stickler for detail and demanded a great deal from every craftsman and laborer privileged to wear the Callon & Son logo on their shirt. It was a relief to solve the theft issue as well, and Simon was grateful to the efficiency of Detective Novak and her team. Jim was still being held as the charges against him piled up, the latest being in possession of an unregistered firearm.

Simon stretched, feeling a few pains in his shoulders from the heavy lifting he'd done the previous day when most of the designers called on him to get their furniture in place. But it wasn't the physical work that drained him, it was playing nursemaid to the cranky, demanding designers. He realized they were under pressure, that their reputations were on the line, but he couldn't—and wouldn't—deliver a less than excellent product, and they had a knack for changing their minds, thinking he could fix anything "in a jiffy".

Aside from the paint fiasco, Ellis was the only designer who really stuck to her original plan, down to the last detail. From the beginning she knew she wanted California shutters, ordered the wood varnish ahead of time and had not only provided Marco with the exact lengths of crown moulding required, but the Home Depot SKU numbers too.

He'd done his best to avoid her during the past week, for both their sakes, but Lord have mercy he missed her. He missed the soft feel of her lips and the way her hair caught the light. He even missed her wacky notions about how the rooms feel. Hell, he

missed sparring with her and feeling her pressed against him. Damn, if he kept up these thoughts, he'd be back in the shower with the hand soap.

* * * * *

Ellis, kneeling on the wood floor, examined the twisted hinge with a mix of sadness and desperation.

"It was an accident Ellis, don't beat yourself up," Remi said, patting her back like a consoling mother.

They had arrived at the crack of dawn, eager to put the finishing touches in their show room before the noon deadline. And until the blasted hinge was ripped off, everything was perfect. Divine Caravan graced the walls, the floor was stunning and the built-in wall unit was the *pièce de résistance*. Remi's fabric choices for the swags and loveseat flawlessly complimented the room. The tile mosaic blended in beautifully. The entire effect was warm, cozy, practical and, Ellis thought with smug satisfaction, sassy. She was sure that some working mother was going to love it.

Remi had been giving the wall unit a final dusting when Ellis came crashing down from her step stool. One of the pillar candles in the top section was *apparently* askew – though Remi argued it was just fine – and Ellis, who single-mindedly tried to fix it without getting in Remi's way, placed the step stool too far to the side. She overextended her reach and fell, pushing the stool against an open cubby door with just enough force to bend the hinge.

"Damn, damn, damn. Remi," Ellis sighed and banged her palm against her forehead, "look at the way it pulled the screw out!"

"Thank goodness the stool is plastic and didn't mar the wood," he offered.

"I've got to find Marco. Better yet, I'll get Simon."

"We can probably fix it ourselves," Remi chimed in, reviewing the damage. "We just need some wood glue."

“No way. Uh-uh. I’m not touching this masterpiece. We need an expert, and I’m pretty sure I saw Simon go upstairs a while ago. I’ll just run up and see if I can find him.”

Ellis bounded up the central staircase past dozens of workers all frantically buzzing around. It was quieter on the second floor as most of the bedroom designers were finished for the day. She switched to a quiet tiptoe as she approached the double doors leading to the master suite, desperate to avoid a confrontation with Cynthia. Thanks to her standard attire of Manolo Blahniks and an overpowering application of Chanel N° 19, Ellis could usually hear or smell Cynthia moments before she actually appeared.

But was it an unwanted meeting with Cynthia that had her heart hammering in her chest or the thought of seeing Simon? He certainly had a gift for making her body react in all sorts of strange and not-necessarily-unwanted ways. They’d managed to avoid one another quite successfully for days, but Ellis looked forward to discovering if their chemistry was tied to the excitement and hype of the competition or had a basis in the real world. She desperately hoped it was the latter. God, she missed bantering with him.

Coast clear, she entered Cynthia’s domain. Her eyes drank in the richness of the fabrics and textures and she begrudgingly felt in awe of the beauty and serenity of the décor. Much as she loathed admitting it, Cynthia’s work was outstanding. Ellis still felt like a novice. She brushed her fingertips over the shimmering silk bedspread and wondered where on Earth Cynthia managed to find such stunning silks and beautiful brocades, even with the generous budgets they were allowed.

She was jolted out of her collegial admiration when her ears picked up a conversation that made her stomach lurch.

“Come on, I’ve clearly got this competition wrapped up. Help me celebrate my win. There’s champagne in the fridge downstairs. We could go back to my place and...”

She trailed off to a whisper Ellis couldn’t pick up. There was a second voice but whoever it was spoke so low that she couldn’t hear. But she knew it was a man and,

judging by the way the hair on her neck stood up, she thought she knew exactly *which* man.

“Darling, haven’t we played games long enough?” Cynthia purred. “I know you want me. I feel your eyes on me...feel your heat whenever we’re close.”

The intimate conversation was coming from the bathroom. Ignoring the voice screaming in her head to turn around and run as fast as she could, Ellis drew closer until she could see the couple’s reflection in the mirrored closet door, which stood slightly ajar.

Simon was sitting on the edge of the gigantic corner bathtub, nose-to-nose with Cynthia, who straddled his lap. Her flouncy black skirt rested high on her thigh, exposing the clips of her old-fashioned stockings, which was where, Ellis noted with disgust, Simon’s hand was firmly planted. Cynthia’s long, lacquered nails played seductively with his shirt collar, her red pouty lips mere inches from his.

“Of course I want you,” Simon’s voice, low and gravelly, answered. “What red-blooded man with good eyesight wouldn’t want to take you home and make you howl until the sun rises?”

Ellis had seen and heard enough. Her mouth was suddenly dry and her stomach felt nauseous. She backed out of the room, quickly, quietly, before her presence was noticed. Her ears were ringing and she longed for a Q-Tip to remove any vestiges of the conversation she’d just overheard. If only she could figure out a way to wash Simon out of her mind, out of her heart. She couldn’t decide what emotion was stronger, disgust or heartache.

I obviously read the signals wrong, she thought as she made her way downstairs, *or he’s a randy bugger who likes to have a few fish in his pond*. She chided herself for believing, hoping that some sort of relationship was waiting for her at the end of the competition. A wave of intense claustrophobia hit her. She needed to get out of the house, needed fresh air...needed to get as far away from Simon Callon as humanly possible.

“Miss Strathmore, you okay?” Marco had never seen Ellis looking so forlorn when he bumped into her on the landing. He listened to her briefly explain about the hinge but didn’t dare tell this poor woman, who looked as if the world was ending, that he had no time to deal with it in the fifteen minutes left before deadline. He would do this one last thing for her. She might be a little loco, but at least she always said please and thank you.

* * * * *

The cocktail reception held by the developers was a lavish affair, complete with string quartet and champagne, but Ellis knew its main purpose was to entice the potential buyers who were in attendance, rather than “graciously acknowledge the hard work of all participants in the Oak Ridges Development Competition”, as the invitation had stated.

Emotionally raw, Ellis contemplated skipping the reception. It would have been much easier to console her wounded ego with a pint of Cherry Garcia. Instead, she decided to give Simon a little dose of you-coulda-had-it-but-you-blew-it. It was a matter of dignity to go to the party with her head held high, looking absolutely smashing. Hell, she had a knack for colors and accessorizing, she may as well use it for something other than empty rooms.

She arrived fashionably late and scanned the assembled crowd for three people—Simon and Cynthia so she could avoid them, and Remi, whom she intended to keep close for emotional support.

Her scum radar locked on Simon within moments, almost as if they had a psychic connection. Steely knives sliced through her gut at the thought of Cynthia and Simon spending the afternoon screwing. He smiled and raised his hand but Ellis turned away and practically assaulted one of the judges, shaking hands and babbling about the “terrific experience” she’d had.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Remi, but her intentions of shadowing him were dashed when she noticed he was in full-flirtation mode with another guest. Fortunately, there was no sign of Ms. Travers. She might not have been able to stop herself from clawing the bitch's eyes out.

Ellis continued 'round the room, mingling with designers and answering the myriad questions thrown at her by the press and potential investors. Perhaps she laughed a little too loudly, tried a bit too hard, but she was determined to be charming. Every time she spotted Simon making his way toward her she managed to engage someone in conversation, but the inevitable happened and they found themselves in the same group chat.

Awkward minutes passed as the group talked around them. Ellis examined her shoe, turned her gaze to the giant chandelier, which dripped from above, studied the faces of everyone in the group...anything to avoid eye contact with Simon. Then his cell phone rang and he turned away for privacy. Ellis stole the moment to admire the way his navy dress jacket hung perfectly on his back and shoulders, the way his dark hair curled over the collar. She thought back to the morning he showed up fresh from the shower, with his hair still wet. Simon cleaned up beautifully, despite the fact that he was such a scoundrel. Even among the metrosexual businessmen and polished real estate tycoons, he was without a doubt the finest-looking man in the room.

Simon turned around quite suddenly, his eyes boring into her. Ellis felt abashed—he'd caught her staring! She could feel her face redden as he made his apologies to the group and left the room.

He was leaving. Ellis felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. The tension in her neck and shoulders drained as she watched him exit without a backward glance. He was clearly walking trouble, and Ellis hated him for making her feel so unsure of herself. Thank heavens the competition was over. She never had to see him again.

So why should that thought make her panic?

Ellis glanced between the clock and the door for the next half hour. He wasn't coming back. She could shelve her show of bravado and go home to soak her sore feet and dive into the Cherry Garcia. She wished she had a cat, a little furry friend who would be waiting for her, happy she was home, if only because she had the opposable thumbs necessary to operate a can opener.

She knew it was against the rules but Ellis couldn't help sneaking one last peek at the project that had consumed her life for the past few weeks. It was strictly forbidden to enter the house after the noon deadline but she decided that one stolen glance through the windows surely couldn't be cause for disqualification.

Relieved to finally be able to kick off her high heels, she turned her car in the direction of the show house and pressed her bare foot on the accelerator. It was a short drive from the stuffy club to Oak Ridges. As she got within sight, Ellis pondered the thirty-six acre estate and could imagine the future of this place—children running around perfectly manicured lawns, gardeners trimming hedges, moms maneuvering their minivans into the circular driveways. A tinge of sadness washed over her, a feeling of regret that she couldn't see her own future as someone's wife, as someone's mother. Ridiculous really, to feel sorry for herself, especially since Simon's behavior proved her right on two counts—testosterone-dripping alpha males are not her type and all men named "Simon" are scoundrels.

She turned onto the narrow road that led to the show house and surveyed the dusty flat of land, lined with rows of Victorian street lamps and dotted with concrete foundations. Abandoned front loaders, backhoes and bobcats stood like silhouetted behemoths guarding the landscape.

Lost in her musings, Ellis didn't take any notice to the black Mustang that buzzed past her going in the opposite direction.

Ellis killed her headlights and parked in the shadows away from the solitary house, where no one would see her car. She got out and noticed that the construction trailers

had been moved to another area in the development, the gardens had been cleaned up and all signs of the past weeks' frenzy were erased. The beautifully landscaped yard was well lit but the only lights she could see burning in the house were those in the foyer and main hall.

"Oh hell," she mumbled in the dark. She'd come for nothing. She wouldn't be able to see through the windows after all. But as the disappointment was settling in her chest, she detected a faint glow coming from the far side of the house where the office was located. Ellis strolled through the front yard, enjoying the feel of the freshly laid Bermuda grass between her toes and admiring the quick work of the gardening firm. They made it look as if the hostas and dahlias had had been blooming in the winding front garden for a full season.

She rounded the corner. Finally, a lucky break! The office lights had been left on.

But as she drew closer, Ellis knew that her luck had just run out.

* * * * *

Simon left the Oak Ridges Development madder than a wet cat. This damned project was supposed to be over but thanks to the call he'd received at the reception, he faced a long night of work. He contemplated phoning Ellis but despite her chilliness toward him, he didn't want her dragged into this mess. It was hard enough on *him*. Emotionally, it would crush her. He wasn't sure how he was going to handle Cynthia but something had to be done.

Goddamned women! Why did they get caught up in this pettiness? It was only a contest for damn sake. Simon shook his head with disgust and forced his fingers to relax on the wheel. Before he tackled the problem at the show house, he was going home to pour himself a very large brandy and change out of his monkey suit. Thoughts of his wardrobe brought a vision of Ellis to mind.

Simon had arrived at the cocktail party and done a cursory search of the room, but he hadn't seen the perky golden-brown eyes he was looking for. He was searching out

Ellis, who had left the show house before he had the chance to catch her. It wasn't like her to leave before the absolute deadline, he'd thought at the time, just ten minutes before noon. He'd expected her to be fiddling with this and that until the last strike of the bell.

Cocktail in hand, Simon mingled, caught up with a few acquaintances, his father's friends among them, but couldn't stop himself from looking toward the door, eager to see that shy little smile form whenever their eyes met. He probably should have offered to pick her up but she was the one who insisted they keep things low-key – or no-key – until after the competition, so he hadn't bothered to ask.

Then WHAM! When she had finally arrived, it was if someone had squeezed the air out of his lungs. Simon didn't know anything about women's fashion, but that dress! It was milk-chocolate brown, with thin straps that showed off her toned shoulders and graceful neck. The tailored sheath molded over her breasts and skimmed her body to mid-calf, and when she walked, Simon could see her long leg through the peek-a-boo slit up the side. He could imagine those long, honey-colored legs wrapped around his waist. Her bare arms had moved with the grace of a ballerina, waving at friends and acquaintances scattered throughout the room. The light from above played with the gold and amber streaks in her hair. The only jewelry she wore was a thick gold bangle. It was all she needed. Ellis had a casual beauty that didn't need the distraction of sparkling gems.

Simon had needed to be at her side and to hell with the competition or what the others thought. He had weaved his way through the crowd, only a few steps away when she'd caught his eye. Instead of the slow grin he had expected, she turned away. Perhaps she didn't see him? No, Simon caught the icy glare on her face before she abruptly turned her back.

Man, would he ever understand women? First Cynthia had thrown herself at him with a level of aggression he just wasn't used to, then sweet Ellis gave him the frosty shoulder.

* * * * *

“No, no, no, no...” Ellis chanted as she stumbled through the garden to the main entrance. She dug the master key from her handbag and raced for the alarm system. She reached the panel and was surprised to see it was already off. Still in shock over what she’d just seen through the window, she didn’t stop to think about the implications. Ellis made her way to the office, her bare feet doing double-time over the cold gray marble.

“NO!” she cried. It wasn’t a trick of the night. Two of the office walls were pink. Pepto-Bismol pink! How? She’d only left it nine hours ago and it was perfect. Someone had destroyed her work. She would be the laughing stock of the competition! Her reputation would be ruined! But why?

First Simon, now this! Ellis sank to her knees as her eyes filled with tears—tears of rage, frustration and sadness. She allowed herself five minutes. Just five minutes to be upset and then she would have to take action. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply and tried to come up with a plan. Surely something could be done to fix this mess. Ellis stared at the floor. She concentrated on relaxing her body while the thoughts in her brain swirled until they began to align and form a pattern, like the interlocking grain of the gleaming wood. First she’d call Remi. Between them, they would come up with a plan to overcome this situation and redeem their design in the next thirteen hours.

She took another deep breath and opened her eyes. That’s when she noticed the paint tins in the corner—the unopened, full cans clearly labeled Divine Caravan, and resting alongside were brushes, rollers and a pile of drop cloths. “What the hell is going on?”

No matter, she thought, my action plan just got a jump-start. Ellis threw aside her clutch and began laying drop cloths on the floor and furniture. She surveyed the room and decided to roll first and cut around the edges later, once her hands stopped shaking. Prep work complete, she carefully tipped the tin of primer, letting the viscous liquid overtake the brim to pool in the plastic tray below. She popped a yellow fuzzy

roller onto the handle and was about to dip in when she caught sight of the hem of her dress, mere inches away from the paint.

"This won't do," she said, looking down at her fancy outfit. She put the roller back down and stripped out of her three-quarter-length cocktail dress, leaving her clad only in a black lace strapless bra and matching panties. If she wasn't so upset Ellis would probably find humor in her attire, but that was one emotion she didn't have time for.

Ellis had been at it awhile when the sweat began to bead on her forehead. Her technique was rusty and she was determined to keep it neat. She'd worked as a painter with a group of college classmates one summer. Up and down, up and down, slowly and carefully so as not to leave splatter, she moved the roller over the walls of the office. She had nearly completed the primer coat when she heard the chuckle.

"My, my, aren't you a picture."

She turned to see Simon leaning on the doorjamb with a cocky expression on his face.

Ellis was just too tired and too angry to worry about her state of dress—or undress, as was the case.

"Well don't just stand there! Pick up a goddamned brush and get to work! And while you're at it, please explain to me why these walls are pink!"

"Why don't you give me that," Simon said, holding his hand out for the roller.

"No. You cut. My hands are too unsteady."

"I don't like cutting."

"Well neither do I," Ellis lied as she turned her back to him. She quite liked the precision involved in tape-free cutting. It was extremely satisfying, watching that fine bead on the edge of the bristles create a perfect line. But not now, not when her hands were shaking and her nerves in a state of near panic.

Simon grunted but picked up the three-inch brush and purposely let her question go unanswered. They worked in silence, their backs to one another, until the first coat

was almost complete. Simon concentrated hard, focusing on the edge of his brush, anything to get his mind off her perfect ass under a scrap of lace he longed to rip off with his teeth. It was hard to deny the urge to turn around to look at her working in that sexy getup. Every time he blinked he saw her image, like she was imbedded on the inside of his eyelids, teasing him, taunting him.

Ellis, meanwhile, didn't have it any easier. Embarrassment, anger and longing, three very different emotions, battled inside her. How could he carry on with Cynthia when he'd led her to believe they had something special together? He made her believe that after the competition they might pick up where they'd left off. But now, here she was feeling underdressed and exposed. He didn't so much as offer her his T-shirt!

Oh God, she wanted him. Her heart pounded, throwing off the rhythm of her strokes. She gritted her teeth and began to prepare a new can of paint.

Simon finished cutting and turned to catch Ellis stirring the can of Divine Caravan. His stomach muscles clenched as he watched the way her hips swayed from side to side as she turned the big wooden stick through the thick paint. Her black lace panties resembled little shorts—they rode low on her hips and barely covered her bum. Her just-right breasts, ready to spill out of the top of her bra, shimmied with every rotation of the stirrer. Simon tried to produce enough saliva to swallow but his mouth suddenly felt dry. There was a familiar tightening in his groin, a pressure against the front of his jeans that caused him to growl with annoyance.

"Here, put this on," Simon peeled off his T-shirt and threw it at Ellis.

"I'm not wearing your sweaty old shirt." Ellis caught it one-handed, threw it to the floor in feigned disgust and stomped barefoot from the room. She just needed a moment to breathe, a moment away from his sexy eyes, his made-for-sex body and especially away from his visible arousal. She opened the kitchen fridge, grateful to whoever left the case of water. She chugged one bottle down, grabbed two more and headed back to the office, slowly, allowing her emotions to settle before she had to go

back in. Maybe she would put on his shirt and spare herself any more humiliation. Besides, it would smell like him and that couldn't be a bad thing.

Ellis walked in to find Simon wearing nothing but a tight pair of white knit boxers.

"Very cute, Simon," Ellis said, acting angry to cover the surprising shock wave of lust sweeping through her. "You think this is funny?"

"Hey, just trying to break the tension," he said. "I also thought I'd give you a taste of my agony."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Put your pants back on," she said, tossing a water bottle in his direction.

"Only if you put on my T-shirt," he said, catching it deftly in his left hand, the paintbrush still in the other. "I can't work with a half-naked woman."

"And speaking of..." Ellis muttered.

"Speaking of what?"

"Speaking of half-naked women, did you enjoy your afternoon tête-à-tête with Cynthia?" Determined not to show any sign of emotion, especially jealousy, Ellis forced a halfhearted laugh.

"Eavesdropping?"

"No!" Ellis protested, wondering why she felt she needed to defend herself. "I just happened to be walking by."

"Well, your timing was a bit off."

"You could say."

Their gazes locked, each trying to determine how the other felt. Ellis wanted an explanation but she would never admit it.

Simon desperately wanted to explain but his stubborn pride prevented him. After all, he didn't do anything wrong and it rankled him that Ellis believed that he would betray her with Cynthia, of all people. Besides, she was the one who had wanted to

brush him off after the closet affair. He'd have been happy to take her home to bed that very night!

"Nothing happened," he growled.

"Never mind, Simon," Ellis said with a hint of bitterness in her voice. She turned with intent to nonchalantly walk away but her foot came down on the paint key and she stumbled forward. Ellis bit her lip to stop herself from yelping and steadied herself on a nearby chair.

Damn it! Her heart ached, she was half-naked and this whole situation had her feeling vulnerable and flustered. She had to regain a sense of control.

"It's none of my business how many designers you carry on with, just leave me out of your harem, please."

"Nothing happened Ellis, nothing," Simon said, raising his volume a frustrated notch. "Cynthia and I have worked together on a number of projects and she throws herself at me every time. I try to avoid her when I can but it's not always possible, so I pretend to play along but I always, *always* walk away."

"Yeah, that's exactly what it sounded like, especially the part where you want to take her home and make her howl until the sun rises."

"Oh, ouch. You heard the best part, didn't you?" Simon chuckled.

"I didn't just hear you Simon, I saw you!" Ellis shouted, angry that he seemed to find amusement in the incident that had plagued her all afternoon. "I saw her legs wrapped around you, saw your hand up her skirt! That was interesting *pretending*, Simon. Did you just *pretend* to fuck her, too?"

Simon dropped his head, realizing how it must have looked. "I say things like that to Cynthia because that's what she wants to hear. And that's what keeps our working relationship a pleasant one. I *pretend* to enjoy her attention and she doesn't have temper tantrums on me, okay? You obviously didn't see the whole incident or you would have seen me cautiously extricate myself from underneath her and get the hell out of there as

fast as I could." He wanted to confess that he told Cynthia he was involved with someone else but it was too soon for that. Those details would surface eventually.

"Good story Simon. I'll *pretend* to believe you."

"What do you want from me Ellis?"

"Nothing!" she shouted, pushing the chair she'd been white-knuckling. "I want nothing from you!"

"Oh really? That's rich! What about 'oh Simon, fix the closet' and 'please get the special wood' and 'get out of bed at five-o'-bloody-clock in the morning and come and repaint'! That's not *nothing* Ellis!"

With each mimicking phrase he took a step closer, until he was in her personal space, but Ellis refused to be intimidated, fighting every instinct to step back. "Well I'm so sorry to have bothered you," she countered, stepping forward to initiate some intimidation of her own. "After tomorrow we won't ever have to work together again."

"Damn right, sister. It'll be a cold day in hell before I get involved in another project with you!"

"Then leave! I didn't ask you –"

"You are the most annoying –"

"What? I'm the most annoying *what*?"

"Woman!"

"Woman?" Hardly the insult Ellis was expecting.

"Oh Christ," he growled softly, dangerously. He leaned into her. "Yes, *woman*. You're the most annoying, gorgeous, sexy woman..." Simon lowered his head and pressed his lips hard against her partially open mouth.

She wasn't surprised. She could feign shock and indignation but the truth was Ellis could feel the sexual tension between them whenever they were in the same room. Primal instincts were bound to override their clashing personalities. He was like cold

hard steel and Ellis an electric magnet. Once their bodies were in close proximity—CLANG—they couldn't fight the elemental attraction.

Simon's powerful arms wrapped around her as their mouths collided. There was no gentleness in their kisses, only desperate need. They punished each other with dueling tongues, nipping and sucking at each other's lips. Her fingers played over the hard ripples of his abdomen. The feel of his muscular flesh, hot, hard and smooth, made Ellis moan. Like the walls that spoke to her, his skin begged to be touched, rubbed, stroked.

Simon stepped back, momentarily stunned by a rush of pure emotional heat. It wasn't more than a split second and their mouths reconnected with such force that Ellis lost her balance and clung to him. Without breaking their connection, Simon picked her up and carried her to the cloth-covered desk. She wantonly locked her long legs around him, her hips writhing as she pushed against the glorious strength of his erection.

Simon let out a throaty growl and lowered Ellis onto her back. He broke contact with her mouth and let his tongue roam over her neck and down to her ample cleavage. Ellis shivered with pleasure as he kissed her breasts through the lace fabric of her bra. He tugged the delicate material down to let one succulent orb free.

"Ahhh, Goldilocks." As close as they'd physically been with their previous petting, Simon hadn't laid eyes on her naked breasts. He touched one delicately, like it was the finest Fabergé egg, glorying in its beauty. He leaned forward and kissed the vulnerable underside, working around in a broad circle until he kissed the entire perimeter of her breast.

She felt the day's growth of his stubble on the tender, sensitive flesh and arched her back in response. His mouth ravished her perfect brown nipple, laving it, flicking its tight peak with his tongue, gripping it gently between his teeth. Ellis gasped with pleasure when he sucked it hard, pulling half her breast into his mouth. He licked his way over to her other breast, released it from the restraining lace and gave it the same treatment.

While his mouth was otherwise occupied, his rough hands roamed her abdomen and thighs, feeling, kneading, memorizing every curve and hollow of her flesh. Every nerve he touched sent sparks of white-hot intensity up her spine until she was writhing with need. She tugged at his triceps, trying to pull him closer, craving body-to-body contact.

His fingers brushed against the crotch of her panties. Her hips rose instinctively as he pressed his palm into her. He could feel the dampness, the heat, the need. She was ready for him – and this time he wasn't going to disappoint her.

Ellis' abdominal muscles shivered as his mouth left her ravished breasts and glided lower, kissing and licking her tummy and sides. It was if he couldn't let a square inch of her go untasted. His tongue playfully delved into the tiny depression of her belly button, eliciting a schoolgirl giggle, then stopped at the lace waistband of her panties.

The tug and rip came a split second before she felt his mouth descend on her pussy. He nudged her knees apart and nibbled the soft lips, sending shimmering waves of profound bliss over and through her. He was tender yet needy, gentle but for his whiskers that grazed the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs. No longer able to reach his shoulders, grab his muscled flesh, she grabbed a fistful of the drop cloth that covered the desk.

Deeper...she yearned for him to be inside her completely. She wiggled against him. She felt his thumbs part her flesh and moaned, knowing that he was seeing her most secret spot, knowing that his intuitive gray-green eyes were drinking in her luscious core. He flicked the tip of his hard tongue against her clitoris, eliciting a powerful convulsion that rocked her body. But he didn't bring her to orgasm. He pressed his mouth into her, feasting on her, probing her core and causing lava waves of pleasure that had her rocking her hips against him, building the intensity until she was aching to release.

He slipped two fingers inside her, testing her, stretching her, making her moan one word over and over. "Yes!"

His mouth nuzzled her clitoris, sucking and nipping the hard, sensitive nub. When Ellis began to mewl, Simon changed to a rhythmic pressure of his tongue, sending her crashing over the edge of climactic ecstasy. Her pelvic muscles clenched and released involuntarily around the fingers that were still embedded inside her. He eased out slowly, waiting for her shudders to cease before standing to position himself between her legs.

She opened her eyes long enough to appreciate his muscled chest and rippling torso as he prepared to enter her with his steely erection. He slipped the head of his cock between her folds, moving it up and down the wet slit. Ellis gasped and gripped the sides of the desk when it touched her still-throbbing clitoris.

“Please,” she whimpered, begging him to complete entry. He leaned down and brushed his mouth against hers. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and released it. Then he pushed his cock into her, slowly, gently, about halfway before drawing back. Ellis, wide-eyed, moaned as he repeated the gesture over and over, each time sinking a bit farther in. He was enormous, this master builder, but she loved the feel of him, loved the girth of his sex inside her.

Simon withdrew so only the tip of his cock was inside her. He paused, teasing her, relishing their shared moment of intensity. Ellis shuddered and wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him to her, hungry for him to fill her. He gave a throaty growl and plowed into her. His hand splayed across her pelvis possessively as he thrust in and out with urgency. Ellis rocked her hips in motion, urging him harder, deeper.

Denying himself a quick release, he changed position slightly and rotated his hips with each plunge. He closed his eyes so he couldn’t see her beauty, her erotic body, her own passionate response—anything to prolong his experience. He used the pad of his thumb to stimulate her clitoris, making tight circles around the hypersensitive nub. He waited until her hips began to buck wildly against him and her inner muscles pulsed and squeezed, milking him to orgasm before letting go, shooting his seed deep within her.

The sensation, a thousand volts of pure pleasure, shocked them both. He collapsed on top of her, his body trembling. Ellis buried her face in his neck and breathed in his musky scent. She could feel his heart pounding against her chest, matching her own erratic rhythm.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Simon..."

"Shhhh," he groaned, barely able to speak. "Don't say anything."

"What if I told you that was the best, most mind-blowing sex I've ever had?"

Simon lay still, breathing in her feminine scent, the taste of her still on his lips. He smiled against her hair.

"Well, okay then." *Me too*, he thought, but would never dare say it aloud.

"How 'bout you?"

Oh shit. Now he had to come up with something. He raised his head and looked down at this woman who tumbled into his life a few short weeks ago. Her honey-brown hair was mussed, flecks of paint dotted her shoulders, nose and forehead, her cheeks were dark pink with whisker burn, her golden-flecked eyes watery and her lips puffy and swollen. She was a mess. But her beauty rendered him breathless.

"I think you blinded me," he said with a smile in his whisper and planted a kiss on her paint-smeared nose.

If he wasn't blind already then surely Ellis' smile would have finished him off.

"I really need to go wash up. My hands are starting to stiffen from this paint."

Simon was struck by a bolt of inspiration and felt himself getting aroused again. He lifted her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Despite her giggling protests, he carried her half-naked form out of the office, through the hallway, up the stairs and into the darkness of Cynthia's beautifully appointed master bedroom.

"What are you —"

"Just be quiet, woman. We're not finished yet," Simon growled as he carried Ellis into the bathroom and plopped her into the immense soaker tub.

Ellis watched, shocked, as he filled up the bath.

"Simon, we can't do this," she said, backing away from the initial splash of cool water. "It's not our...I mean...the open house, it's tomorrow. We can't do this in the —"

"Course we can."

"No Simon," she protested and started to rise. "We can't. I will *not* do this to another designer. It's...it's..." Before she could spit out the right word, Simon continued.

"Before you get on your moral high horse, there's something you should know." He waited a beat as Ellis sat back down in the rising water. "Cynthia was the one who gave your office a pink makeover. This afternoon, when you saw us...what you *didn't* see was me telling Cynthia that I couldn't help *her* celebrate because I was celebrating with somebody else."

Simon sighed. He really didn't want to hurt Ellis by relating the scathing things Cynthia had said but she needed to hear the truth. "Cyn had heard rumors about us Ellis, but she as much admitted that she didn't believe they were true. She suggested that the little talent you had you stole from her and that I was embarrassing myself by association. I got defensive and downright mad so I made some remarks about how brilliant I thought you were. That you may have learned how to be a good designer from her but you'd now left her in the dust. I provoked her by saying you'd probably win the competition. I'm sorry babe, but *I'm* the reason she tried to sabotage you."

He admitted his interest in her! He championed her! That was so out of character for a "Simon" she almost didn't know what to say — so much for her bad-guy theory.

Before she could thank him, the reality of Cynthia's actions hit her square in the gut. "What? After I stuck up for her? That no-good tramp! Slut, liar, cheater —"

Simon leaned down to kiss her mouth. "Hold that rage. Anger makes for great sex."

His smile was so naughty that Ellis' fury abated as quickly as it arrived.

"Be right back," he said, leaving her to appreciate his naked Greek-god ass.

She watched until he was no longer in sight then rested her head on the back of the tub, the warm water swirling around the tops of her legs. The absurdity of the situation was too much for Ellis. After all, if it wasn't for the sabotage...

A glimmer on the ceiling caught her eye and she squinted up into the shadows. The fractured light from the hallway offered little more than a gray wash to the surroundings, though Ellis could clearly see that Cynthia had done a marvelous job on the luxurious bathroom. The bath was surrounded by candles and baskets of upscale spa products in fancy glass bottles. The judges looked for these little details but Ellis wondered how Cynthia could afford all these extras on the budget she was given. She and Remi had scarcely enough for a few pillar candles and a vase. And if the fixture that hung above her was what she suspected, something smelled like rotten carp. It didn't make sense! And from what she saw earlier, Cynthia hadn't scrimped on any of the materials in the bedroom to be able to afford to outlay the bathroom in such luxury.

"Found these downstairs," Simon said as he entered with a bottle, two glasses and a lighter. "Guess they're for the opening tomorrow. I'm sure no one will miss them."

"Turn on the light, please."

"But I was going to light the candles," Simon said, suspicious of the seriousness of her tone.

"Please Simon, just humor me."

Simon pushed his elbow up the dimmer switch, illuminating the room in a soft glow.

"Oh. My. God. That," Ellis said, pointing straight up, "is a Zaremsky chandelier."

Ellis was awed by its beauty. Small crystal teardrops were threaded irregularly onto a circular curtain of the finest silver threads. Frosted pale blue-green glass covered the bulb at the center of the circle, giving the impression of a shimmering waterfall.

"Simon, it retails for about two thousand."

"Couldn't be! For that little thing?"

"Never mind couldn't be. I know what it is and exactly what it costs because my last client desperately wanted one in her dining room and was mortified to find that even the smallest Zaremskys were so costly."

Simon only shook his head before sliding the dimmer back down.

"And see this stuff?" Ellis asked, picking up a bottle of scented bath oil. "I've seen this brand in a boutique. It's about three hundred a bottle. And she's practically got the entire product line here. How can she afford these accessories?"

"She probably sleeps with suppliers and gets freebies," Simon joked while he lit the candles around the tub and slipped in behind her, pulling her to rest against his chest. The water rose almost to their necks, so he turned the elegantly curved taps off.

"But she can't. The rules are strict about getting products at fair market price so no designer will have an advantage. She may be a cheating liar, but this? She doesn't need it. This room is beautiful without the Zaremsky, without these little baskets of stuff."

"Well then, let's even the score," Simon said, pouring the bath oil into the tub. "Why do you keep sticking up for her anyway?"

"I don't know...maybe because I don't want to believe that anyone in my profession would stoop so low. She wronged me, damaged my career, but I still credit her for teaching me almost everything I know. And in my mind, I just can't understand why she, a very talented, gorgeous woman, would ever sabotage anyone else's work."

"You're very naïve Ellis, but in a kindhearted way," Simon said gently, placing a kiss on the top of her head. "Cynthia is indeed talented but she probably feels threatened by you and other up-and-coming designers. For a woman who takes great pride in appearances and has always relied heavily on her looks, it can't be easy giving in to fifty. She can't be queen of the castle forever and I suspect her actions show how desperate she's getting to stay at the top of her game."

"Then again," he added thoughtfully, "I couldn't believe that one of my own men would steal from me."

"You're more astute than I thought, Mr. Callon," she replied, surprised at the logic of his reasoning. She chose a second bottle of oil from the basket, vanilla spice, and watched the viscous drops bead on the surface of the water. She swept her hand through the warm liquid on the pretence of stirring it up, playfully tickling his thigh as she did.

Ellis felt gleefully naughty. She let the warm water swirl around her, washing away her anger at Cynthia and her guilt over this shameless encounter.

"To a successful competition." Ellis held up her glass.

"To fucking in a two-million-dollar show house," offered Simon to the sound of clinking crystal. He drained his champagne and set the glass on the rim of the tub.

"They were right you know, Goldilocks," he said, sliding one hand down her shoulder to settle on her breast.

Ellis sank deeper into him, letting him fondle her, adoring the sensation of his large hands and tapered fingers caressing her shoulders, neck and chest. He cupped her breasts from the bottom, squeezing tenderly. He used the pads of his thumbs to circle her areolas, round and round, leisurely in his exploration. He flicked her taut nipples. The surprise movement caused her to shiver against him, making the water undulate around them.

He picked up the dainty curved bar of vanilla-lavender soap and sniffed it. He held it to her nose, sharing the subtle aroma. She nodded against his neck. He slid it over her shoulders, down one arm and up, down the other arm and up. She languidly held her limbs out, watching the soap slide over her skin. Ellis drew a deep breath and sighed. She found this simple act of being washed by a lover so primal, so erotic, so powerfully intimate.

Simon continued, down into the valley between her breasts, working the soap up over one mound, down and over the other. His other hand followed, working the lather over her skin. He used the cambered side to concentrate on her peaked nipples, applying enough pressure to send embers of excitement straight to her loins.

She melted into him as he glided the scented bar down her ribs, across her abdomen, lower and lower, drifting back and forth. Her tummy quivered and she felt her muscles go liquid. She raised her knees, letting her legs fall open. Simon edged closer, finally brushing against her pubis. She pressed her shoulders back, arching with need. He played with her curls, lightly tugging and parting them with his fingers. He used the bar to tickle the top of her slit.

Simon's movements were tender and fluid, unlike their last frantic encounter. Ever so gently, he moved up her leg, lingering on the soft flesh of her inner thigh. She wiggled against him, silently begging him to return to her core, give her the release her body craved. Reading her unspoken request, he let the soap sink to the bottom of the tub as he parted her plump lips and began a languorous exploration.

He nudged her head so he could kiss the side of her neck, that delicate spot right behind the ear, and down her shoulder. How can this hard-as-nails, tough construction he-man be this gentle? His fingertips stimulated her with lazy control while his mouth left butterfly kisses up and down her nape and shoulder. Ellis trembled. She couldn't contain her mounting arousal. She wanted him, needed to feel him deep inside of her.

The oils in the bath facilitated an effortless maneuver. She rolled over and straddled him, sliding her chest against his, until she could feel the head of his cock against her pussy. She looked him in the eyes and was surprised by what she saw. Instead of half-lidded lust, Simon's eyes were clear, full of longing, overflowing with tenderness and desire. She pressed her lips against his, letting the passion flow between them. It was slow and dreamy and incredibly satisfying. Her lips still throbbed from their first tryst but it wasn't pain she felt. She just *felt*. She felt alive, desired, sexy.

She parted her lips and let her tongue slide forward, tasting him, teasing him. She slid farther down his chest until she felt him inside her. Grabbing the sides of the bath for balance, she sat up as straight as she could, impaled on his lap.

Ellis began to rock, tilting her pelvis back and forth, testing the depth, searching for the perfect pivot point. Using her thighs, she rose until she was halfway up his shaft

and sat down again, reveling in the fullness. She repeated it, this time constricting her muscles as she lowered herself, making a tighter glove for Simon.

He moaned and seized her around the hips and when she did it a third time, he thrust up, pushing deeper, harder. Again she raised herself, this time rocking forward as she sat, letting him guide her hips. Together they thrust and counterthrust, their bodies perfectly in synch while water sloshed, spilling unnoticed onto the floor.

He took her hand and pushed it against her pussy, which was barely peeking atop the surface of the water. He guided her fingers into her slit, coaxing her to touch, yearning to see her pleasure herself into orgasm. She stopped bouncing up and down and with a capricious grin, began to perform. Her hips rocked against him, rode him slowly. She tilted her pelvis up to expose more of her pussy and arched back as far as she could without falling backward. With one hand she spread her labia, giving him an unhindered view. She used the fore and middle fingers to play with herself—squeezing, rubbing and pinching her clit.

Simon groaned, his buttocks clenching as he thrust deep into her. He couldn't believe Ellis was this refreshingly uninhibited, willing to share such an intimate act. He was astonished, grateful even. But mostly he was ablaze with lust. He fought the urge to grab her hips and drive into her, pump her until he came. He was mesmerized by her undulating hips, the friction of her fingers moving on either side of her clit, faster, harder, squeezing the nub between her knuckles. He watched in fascination, holding himself back until she shuddered. Her back arched, breasts heaved and her inner muscles contracted spasmodically.

He couldn't be a bystander any longer. As soon as her chest stopped heaving, he wrapped his hands around her hips, lifted her up and let her fall back on him, over and over, faster and faster.

Ellis gripped Simon's shoulders until she felt him spasm beneath her. His final thrust forced her into another racking climax. She tossed her head back, closed her eyes and rode high on the crest of pleasure.

Ellis sat perfectly still, waiting for her muscles to stop convulsing, her heart to stop its erratic pace. She inhaled deeply, the smell of vanilla and lavender wafting up around her carried by the steam from the tub. The water, what was left of it, was cool and oily. She cranked the hot water faucet, a slim brushed-nickel wave, and admired Simon's peaceful face. His eyes were closed and his head reclined against the side of the tub.

"How did you know?" Ellis asked.

"Know what?" Simon said sleepily.

"How did you know to come back tonight? How did you know about the pink paint?"

"Jeb called me."

Ellis waited for him to explain. Her leg muscles began to cramp so she dismounted and stretched out beside him, one leg and arm draped casually over him.

"You know that call I got at the party?" Simon asked, stroking her hair.

"Mmmm."

"It was Jeb calling. He returned to pick up some things from the trailer out back and saw Cynthia leaving with some guy, maybe Thug, and they were carrying empty paint tins. Anyone else may not have noticed or cared but painting is Jeb's baby, and he couldn't see a logical reason for her to be coming out of the house, *after* deadline, with paint cans."

"Bless his heart," Ellis said. "He went in to check things out and discovered the mess."

"Mostly," Simon said. "Jeb had a little look-see, mostly upstairs in Cynthia's area, to see if anything had been changed. Nothing had but he saw a light on in your office, so he wandered over and discovered the pink walls. He called me as soon as he got home. He knew you'd been duped, especially after the bloody scene you made about the color."

"So while you all were cocktailing the night away, I slipped out to get more Divine Caravan, dropped it off here, then to the yard to pick up the big fans to help the paint

dry faster. Course, I didn't have your imagination in painting attire, so I went home to get some grubby clothes. Ouch!"

Ellis rewarded him with a playful pinch on his nipple.

"Well, what's done is done," she added. "Let's go put on the second coat."

"Naked?" he asked with a sly grin.

Chapter Eight

Ellis got to the unveiling uncharacteristically late. She managed to assemble an outfit and hide the black circles under her eyes with a dab of concealer. Not bad, considering she'd only managed a couple hours of sleep. She and Simon painted and restaged the office until early dawn, pausing only to christen the tiny love seat with another round of steamy sex. They also took a moment to give Cynthia's bathroom a perfunctory wipe down.

Tired, yes, but she was on top of the world today! Her nerves were steady and, thanks to Simon, at about four a.m. she adopted a new attitude—it's only a room!

Remi, dramatic and distressed, met her in the driveway.

"You're ten minutes late, girl! I've been calling and calling! Where have you been? Why is your cell off?"

"Everything is fine, Remington. Calm down."

"Calm down? I've had to tour four of the judges so far."

"I'm sure you did fine. It's only a room for heaven's sake."

"*Only a room?* Okay. Now you're scaring me. Who are you and what have you done with Ellis?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"*What's that supposed to mean?*"

Ellis just smiled at Remi's histrionics. He shook his head in puzzlement as they made their way up the front walk.

"Oh shit, slow down Ellis." He pulled her back just as she was about to step into the foyer. "You've got me so flustered I almost forgot—Cynthia has been a raving lunatic

since the moment she arrived and your name has come up. Several times. High decibels."

"What? Why?" Ellis feigned concern.

"Apparently, someone tampered with her bathroom."

"Oh my," Ellis smirked as she entered the house. She strolled casually to her creation just in time to introduce herself to two of the judges who wandered in. Turning on the charm, she greeted them warmly and began the tour.

Remi stood back and watched. He had never seen Ellis so calm. She radiated confidence. She was positively shining.

"That girl is finally getting some," he muttered to no one.

* * * * *

"There she is! There she is! I insist that you disqualify her!" Cynthia bellowed as she entered the office with six of the judges in tow.

"Can I help you, Cynthia?"

"I know what you did, you wacky bitch, and you will be disqualified from this competition!"

"I have no idea to what you're referring," Ellis remarked calmly, glad that Remi had taken his place by her side.

"Don't play stupid with me, Ellis Strathmore. It doesn't become you. You and that, that...fruitcake assistant sullied my masterpiece!" Cynthia spat like a feral cat.

"Miss Strathmore," asked Rebecca Ford, the head judge who looked embarrassed and uncomfortable, "did you or your colleague, um, *sully* the master bath?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about Mrs. Ford," Ellis answered earnestly. "Remi? Are you aware of this...*sullying*?"

"Oh no, ma'am! I am completely ignorant of any *sullying* that may have occurred." Remi should have been a drama coach.

"They're liars!" Cynthia raved. "Ask her where she was last night! I'll tell you. Her and her cohort snuck back into the house last night, *after deadline*, and repainted her room. Smell it!" she demanded, poking her nose up and sniffing the air like a dog at a barbeque. "Then she sullied my beautiful creation!"

"I think perhaps you're overreacting," interjected the judge. "What possible reason would Miss Strathmore have for —"

"*Jealousy!* Everyone knows that I fired Ellis for trying to take credit for one of my most famous, award-winning designs. She's been trying to get back at me ever since!"

It was Ellis' turn to show her fury. "That's a bloody lie, Cynthia! I *quit* Affairs after you took credit for my green house. You don't know the first thing about environmentalism —"

"Ladies, please," the judge pleaded, trying to gain control of the situation.

The judges were obviously embarrassed and uncomfortable with the heated exchange. Rebecca Ford turned to Ellis. "Miss Strathmore, I apologize for this. It's none of our business, but could you perhaps tell us where you were last night?"

"Hello Goldilocks," Simon leaned down to graze her cheek and wrap a possessive arm around Ellis' waist. "What's going on?"

Remi and Cynthia shared the same shocked expressions.

"They want to know where I was last night. Apparently someone *sullied* Cynthia's bathroom."

"Oh, what a shame," he said with feigned concern. "Why would anyone want to sully you, Cynthia?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," she replied. "So, Miss Strathmore, you haven't answered the question. Tell the truth. You came back and you *repainted* the office!"

"And why would I do that Cynthia? The office is the exact color it should be. The same color I left it yesterday at the noon deadline. Isn't that right? Remi? Is this the

exact wall color that you saw when we left yesterday?" She turned to the other designers who'd been drawn by the commotion.

"Most of you saw the office yesterday at deadline. Did I change a thing? Is it the same color?" There were small gestures of affirmation. No one but Valentina dared speak out against Cynthia, but they were clearly uncomfortable with her accusation.

"Excuse me Rebecca, but I can vouch for Ellis," Simon said. "She was with me last night." He turned his glare to Cynthia and added, "All night."

"They're lying," Cynthia hissed, squinting at the lovers.

"Would you like me to call in Jeb to verify the color, Cynthia? He did the job to spec, didn't he Ellis?"

"Dead on."

"In fact, Jeb was here last night. Late. I'm sure he could verify that it's the correct color *and* tell us if he saw anybody around here with painting equipment," Simon mocked.

"He could indeed, Simon," Ellis said, handing him her cell phone.

"Oh never mind!" Cynthia seethed and stalked off. Her entourage, never more than a foot behind, were hesitant, unsure if they should follow.

Simon leaned down and pressed his lip softly onto Ellis' upturned mouth. She could feel the heat creep up her spine until her head was swirling with a lascivious replay of the night previous. Lost in the depths of their soul-stirring kiss, she barely registered the sound of applause coming from Remi, Valentina and the other designers.

"Excuse me." Detective Novak was standing in the doorway, holding her badge out for all to see. "I'm looking for Cynthia Travers. Is she here?"

The entire group pointed at the figure retreating up the stairs.

* * * * *

"Are you disappointed?" Simon asked, just loud enough to be heard over the rowdy crowd.

"Hell no!" Ellis clutched the small crystal trophy in her hand. "Second place is nothing to sneeze at, and I'm glad Valentina won. She deserved it."

"Second place with special mention for innovation," Simon reminded her, with a touching sense of pride. "But if not for the discretionary points you lost for the confrontation with Cynthia, who knows?"

"Thanks Simon, for your faith in me and for sticking up for me today," she said, squeezing his fingers across the bar table. "But Val clearly had the better design, even without the antique teddy-bear border."

"What's next for you?"

"I've got a pocket full of people to call next week," Ellis beamed, relishing the positive comments she'd received from the judges. "The home office generated a fair bit of interest when the invitees came through after judging. Looks like Remi and I are going to be very busy."

She knew Simon spoke to the police after they came to question Cynthia but hesitated to press him for details. She should feel some level of satisfaction after seeing the woman who made her life hell being dragged off in a most undignified manner, but somehow she couldn't muster up the bitterness. "So what's next for Cynthia?"

"Detective Novak has plenty of evidence linking Cynthia to Jim. Phone records, eyewitness accounts of them meeting after hours, bank statements. It doesn't look good for our Ms. Travers. I also mentioned that mirror incident from last year and Novak is going to see if any criminal negligence charges are applicable. Hey, did the judges know about her blown budget?"

"Oh yes! She probably could have gotten away with the spa products but the chandelier was a really cocky move. She recorded the cost at three hundred and had some bogus receipt from a lighting warehouse. Rebecca Ford saw right through it," Ellis said.

"She made her bed, as they say."

"I don't know why, and I shouldn't, but part of me still feels bad for her."

"I know kiddo, but even the great ones fall sometimes."

"As for Jim," Ellis spat, "he can rot for his Goldilocks comment."

"Oh, I dunno, seems rather inspired to me," his chuckle faded to a wince as Ellis squeezed his fingers harder.

"Hey you two," Remi called, holding his colorful drink—complete with cocktail umbrella—up over his head so it wouldn't be jostled by the crowd of revelers. "It's my turn to hold the trophy."

"All yours, Remington," Ellis said, handing it over with ceremony as she pushed back her chair. "Don't forget to bring it to the office on Monday."

"What, you're leaving? Already? The party is just starting. They haven't even brought out the food."

Simon and Ellis exchanged a mischievous look.

"We're really tired, Rem," Simon explained, taking his lover by the hand, "and Ellis promised to give me some decorating tips for my forlorn, lonesome bedroom."

The End

About the Author

Wylie Kinson grew up cold in Northwestern Ontario, Canada. Longing to ditch her parka, she moved to Bermuda and spent seventeen warm, wonderful years basking on the pink sand beaches and frolicking in the turquoise surf. When scuba diving on ship wrecks and riding her moped down hibiscus-lined roads grew tedious, Wylie packed up her husband and two children and dragged them back to Canada. Thanks to global warming, the weather isn't nearly as bad as she expected.

A multi-published author, Ms. Kinson keeps herself warm by writing erotic romance and shopping the big box stores at an aerobic pace.

Wylie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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