



APPLE PIE

...God, the way her body had fit against his...

At the bar, Catherine's hot, dangerous curves had melted into Mark's body as if he were concocted of wax, and she'd swayed in a sexy dance for a few moments before her senses—and inhibitions—returned. *Damn inhibitions.*

The moment he'd watched her teeter off to the ladies room—there was something indeed charming about a girl who *looked* like she could handle her liquor, but couldn't—he'd decided to tuck her safely in bed, and give her nothing more than a wave from the field tomorrow. As impossible a task as it seemed, he'd leave her as untouched as his Great Aunt Buffy's Hummel collection.

But now, after a few drinks more, she was leaning against the door of her third-floor suite, looking like a pin-up doll. Her chin pointed downward, as if she were studying the patterns in the carpeting, and disheveled hair spilled around her heart-shaped face like an ebony river. Her uptight businesswoman blouse was no longer tucked in evenly. If he'd looked, and heaven help him, he'd looked more than once, the graceful curve of her generous breasts taunted him from beneath the buttons.

Lick me, they seemed to say. *Suck me good.* Someone should, and he'd love to be the candidate....

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APPLE PIE

BY

PENNY DAWN

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APPLE PIE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*For my daddy,
who taught me how to hit the ol' apple...and not like a girl.*

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for your unending support.*

CHAPTER 1

Gator Recreation
Clearwater, Florida

He had good hands. He knew that. Good with the grab, quick instincts, good eye.

Being good might have been enough in bed with the bikini-clad girls hanging around the dugout at batting practice, but *good* wasn't good enough in this business. If he wanted to make it to the big leagues, he had to be outstanding.

Mark Hennessy swung his Easton Stealth Composite Carbon Nanotube bat, designed to enhance the sweet spot with increased barrel flex. He couldn't use this bat during games—he had an SB-73 Pro Maple for regulation play—but this one sure was fun to use.

He beat the hell out of another ball, and spat shells of sunflower seeds to the concrete floor of the batting cage. Last season, his batting

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average had been .270. Not bad, but not curl-your-toes-fantastic. In the majors, .270 was respectable, but in double-A ball, he'd have to hit well over .300 to shine.

This season, the whole damn world would need shades when he stepped up to home plate. He *had* to hit .350, or .320 at least. Didn't have a choice. He refused to be one of those guys content with playing in the minors for life. Not naïve enough to assume he'd fly straight to the majors, he'd drawn up a plan. Spending a few years at each level, he would slowly but steadily climb the ladder.

He'd skipped the first rung, but he'd been lingering on the second since the scouts had plucked him from his "studies" at Florida State four years ago. He'd been playing AA ball for beans ever since. While baseball was a gamble for which he'd gladly wagered the rest of his life, he often wished he'd finished school. Even still, nothing replaced the rush of tagging third and firing the ball off to first for a double play, or swinging on-deck under the adoring gazes of local fans. And stealing home? Forget about it. It rivaled orgasm. But as the years passed, he felt less like a talented ballplayer, and more like a little boy playing make-believe.

If he didn't make it to triple-A this season, he'd hang up his hat, while he still loved the game. No career would satisfy him the way professional baseball had, but major league players who'd lost their love for the game represented the saddest type of victory in the history of American sports.

The season began the day after tomorrow with an exhibition game, and rumor had it scouts for clubs in Denver, Raleigh, and Chicago would be there. He didn't know what he'd do if it he wasn't offered a position or asked to try out for one of their AAA teams. Go back to college, maybe, to pursue a degree in physical education, or coach at his old high school. Volunteer for local Little League for all he cared, as long as he kept a hand in the game.

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The cell phone at his hip vibrated. When he saw his sister's cell phone number glowing up at him, his heart raced. Faith never called, unless there was an emergency, but recently, they'd had more than a few. Two months ago, their father had been diagnosed with cardio-something. He didn't know what the disease entailed because his sister and mother had provided him with the luxury of not knowing, but in the split second before he answered the call, he wished he'd learned more.

He stepped out of the cage and brought the phone to his ear. "Faith? What's up? Dad okay?"

"As okay as he can be. How are things in Florida? What's the weather like?"

Tell me she called to discuss the weather. He wiped sweat from under the brim of his cap. "A little chilly. High sixties. Maybe seventy. Typical for early spring."

"Listen to you." She sounded tired. Then again, she always did. Her career as a youth counselor didn't end when she left the office in the evening. She gave two-hundred percent and raked in even less than he did. "It's twenty-two degrees here, and you're shivering in 'maybe seventy.'"

His entire family lived in the north suburbs of Chicago, and as crazy as it sounded, he often ached for below-zero wind chill the way morphine patients missed the fix. Of the many cities in which the Hennessys had lived, Chicago was the first and only one that felt like home. The move had coincided with Major Hennessy's retirement, and real family time had been the drug that numbed the sting of the cold for all them.

Often, when he covered his head with a pillow to muffle Gretchen and Rex, the couple next door, noisily getting it on, he ached for a good night's sleep at home. "Is it snowing?"

"Not at the moment, but we have a fair amount on the ground from

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last week's storm. Mom hired a snow-removal guy. Rest assured, Dad's not shoveling."

He stopped the "Good" before it slipped out from between his lips. "What's Kyle doing that he can't clear the drive for them?"

"Well...that's why I'm calling. Our little brother has gotten himself into a spot of trouble."

Mark's mouth dried instantly, and the battle between anger and guilt started deep in his gut. On one hand, Kyle was twenty-one, old enough to fight his own battles and sort out his own trouble.

Damn him for worrying Faith.

On the other hand, if Mark had been there to set a better example, perhaps Kyle wouldn't have found trouble, period. "Big trouble?"

"Yeah." Faith sighed. "Pretty damn big."

* * *

*Lake Shore Drive
Chicago, Illinois*

Catherine Ramsey-Hart drummed the blunt end of a baseball-bat-shaped pen against a bright yellow tag asking her to "Please sign here." What nerve did her soon-to-be-ex-husband's boneheaded lawyer have being polite—if only on a sticky note?

She sat on what had been her father's favorite burgundy naughehyde desk chair, and looked around the boys' club she'd recently inherited. Walnut wainscot covered the lower half of the walls, and forest green, gold, and burgundy striped wallpaper covered the rest. Black-and-white photos of baseball legends graced the west wall, and windows opened the east side of the room to Chicago's gray skyline. In the distance, Lake Michigan sprawled in its cold, blue glory. Flurries of lake effect snow whipped in the wind.

This side of two weeks ago, her husband of ten years, former major league infielder LJ Hart, had flown to Europe with an Italian

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supermodel. Eleven years Catherine's senior, LJ had acquired Bellia Scuzzi for his forty-third birthday. The too-polite "Please sign here" on the divorce papers had been the end result of her husband's undeserved midlife crisis. There was nothing polite about dumping your wife for a woman whose ribcage was displayed on billboards across the world.

Tears welled up again. *What else is new?* Catherine, insanely exhausted by the concept of shedding tears, let them fall anyway. She'd grown tired of fighting a flood of waterworks every time the thought of LJ entwined with that stick crossed her mind, and her every nerve was raw. Although her marriage hadn't been warm and loving for years, although she'd been bitter and full of resentment for half a decade, rejection stung like an angry bumblebee, to speak nothing of the embarrassment and emotional drain the subject had caused her.

While LJ dined in Paris with a barely-legal girl who never ate, Catherine sorted out her late father's estate. "Rock" Ramsey had chosen a terrible time to surrender to a fatal heart attack. He'd left his major league ball club in his daughter's hands at the onset of spring training. Some said LJ Hart left her only when Rock would allow it—over his dead body.

She fiddled with her wedding ring, still perched on her finger, and sorrow filled her soul. The day she'd said "I do," she'd been so hopeful, so optimistic...so naïve.

"Miss Ramsey?"

Everyone who'd known her before she'd fallen for LJ still called her by that name, and Lou "Scout" Fiston had been her father's eyes on faraway fields since before she was born. While he insisted calling her Miss Ramsey was just a formality at the office, over the years, it had become a cherished nickname.

He stuck his long nose and handlebar moustache into her office. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure." With trembling fingers, she gathered her divorce papers,

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tucked them into a manila file, and, for lack of anywhere else to put them, tossed them into the trash can. Everyone knew LJ was gone—*thank you*, Chicago Tribune—but Catherine hadn't told a soul about the divorce filing. Once he took off, she'd hoped to beat her husband—make that soon-to-be *ex*-husband—to the punch, but apparently, LJ had gotten the ball rolling *before* he hopped a flight with Bellia.

Scout ran a hand across his comb-over and coerced his overweight body into the chair opposite Catherine. He propped two red files against his rotund belly. "We have a problem."

As far as Catherine's personal life went, she had several problems. Any professional dilemma at this point would be a mere hiccup—annoying, but nothing she couldn't handle. "What's up?"

"Ryger's jumping ship."

"Shit." Not a very ladylike thing to say, especially in front of her father's two-time best man, but that about summed it up.

"He's going to San Fran. Just heard the word."

No team would make it to the all-star break, let alone the series, without a pick-of-the-litter third baseman, and hers had just made the most of free-agency. "Tell me you've got your eye on his replacement."

"A few actually."

Catherine finally allowed herself to breathe and drummed her fingertips against the cracked leather armchair. "Who's on the list?"

"No one you've heard of, I'm sure. A couple kids might be ready to move up from the minors. One out of Kansas, and—"

"Minors? Can't we poach someone from—"

"We'll start Jerald, and I'll find a kid for the coaching staff to groom for next season. We don't have the bucks to make an offer to any big name, if we're sticking with your father's business plan. That's why Ryger walked in the first place."

Plan-shman. Nothing had worked out the way she'd planned, least of all her marriage, but she didn't have time to formulate monetary

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changes with the team this year. “Bellia Scuzzi’s a kid.”

She cracked a smile at her inappropriate comment. Better to address the issue than pretend it wasn’t happening, which was what everyone else around the club seemed to be doing. “Maybe *she*’ll play third base for us. Word has it a baseman’s been playing her.”

Scout cleared his throat and straightened an already straight tie. “There’s no one in this club that won’t be giving that husband of yours a piece of his mind, should the S.O.B. show his sorry face here again.” He pointed a plump finger at her. “I promise you.”

“Is Jerald healthy enough to play?”

“The doc gave him clearance, but we’ll see.”

Her gaze trailed to the east, and she drank in the serenity of Chicago’s Loop at dusk. They were twenty floors up, and the skyline was a force to be reckoned with. More than once, LJ had seduced her under the influence of such a sight. What did it for her was the sleepy, comfortable feeling it conveyed. Funny how the Loop of a jam-packed city turned nearly desolate an hour past quitting time. She blinked away from the window and met her guest’s gaze. “Get me someone good, Scout. I could use the distraction of a pennant race this season.”

“What you need is a vacation. Everything came down on you at once. First your father, then LJ, and now the pressure of putting together a winning team. What do you say you take a look at these kids yourself?” He laid the two file folders on the desktop and gave them a shove toward her.

Catherine had had more than her fair share of looks at the boys of summer. That’s how she’d spent her childhood. While she might stand behind her eye for a man with talent between the sheets—not that *one man* made a history, but she and LJ had certainly lit a few mattresses on fire—she didn’t trust her ability to gauge his value on the field. “I’ve never...Scout, I don’t know if I—”

“Let me put it to you this way. I’ll do all the evaluating, while you

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hit the spa. Sue could use the company, you'll keep her out of my hair, and my mind will rest easy. You're my responsibility now your dad's gone, and he'd want you to take some time to deal with LJ's stunt. He wouldn't like to know you're in this spot."

Well, that was probably true. She imagined Rock's fiery glare hitting LJ like a bolt of lightning out of the sky, and smiled at the thought of her father's looking out for her from the great beyond. Hesitantly, she opened the first file and perused the brief biography. "This kid's playing double-A ball."

"Diamond in the rough. He's been passed over. Unjustly."

".270 average?" She raised an eyebrow the way she imagined Rock would have. "My father can hit .270 against a double-A pitcher, and he's been in the ground for two months."

"Miss Ramsey, we don't need a powerhouse hitter, we need a third baseman. I've been doing this a long time, and trust me, this kid's got the hooch." Scout tapped his index finger against the name on the file tab as he stood. "You tag along, and you'll see for yourself."

Two seconds after Scout disappeared behind the heavy door, Catherine let out a long sigh of frustration. Five days playing referee to the bickering Fists—Scout always traveled with his wife, who, on the surface, appeared to despise him—might be more nerve-wracking than dodging the local press' questions about both LJ and the upcoming season. However, the idea of foot reflexology treatment, hot stone massages, and Swedish facials held merit.

And so did watching young blood in action.

She pulled her divorce papers out of the trash. After what LJ had put her through, one might have expected baseball to have been soured for her, but when a sport had been as much a part of a person as, say, the inclination to open her eyes in the morning, the thought of watching bodies on a field exhilarated her, gave her new hope. Hope for a winning season. Hope for survival.

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Scents of a baseball arena—hotdogs, roasted peanuts, and ice cold beer—rose around her whenever she closed her eyes. A crowd roared and an organ piped in her “happy place.” No gurgling brooks and lazy surf needed to relax her and bring her back to center.

LJ had been the first and only man to bend her over in a dugout—how naughty he’d been, making love to the owner’s daughter—but her passion for baseball had begun well before that sexual moment. Rather, she’d always paralleled happiness with the energy of the stadium, and that equation had spurred the sneaky rendezvous with her father’s infielder, not vice versa.

On the most magical night of her life, her then-boyfriend had raised the stakes, had rivaled the rush baseball had always provided.

Inching his hands up the insides of her thighs, LJ had nuzzled her ear. Although she’d had experience with normal men—she’d never gone all the way—she hadn’t done more than hold hands with a ballplayer, for fear of disappointing her father.

No fool, she’d heard of the infamous locker room discussions. Furthermore, she’d overheard a few. Ballplayers talked. She’d had no choice but to remain celibate in their company because anything she might have done would’ve been public knowledge. And she’d become quite good at resisting ballplayers’ advances. Until, that is, LJ had sparked a livewire with his tongue, drawing circles at the base of her throat and trailing between her breasts.

“Ever get to third base with a major league baseman?” Such a corny line. She’d thought so as much then as she did now, but LJ had never been known for his wit.

“I never finish three-quarters of a task.” She’d yanked at his belt, as if chasing her nervousness into the dark of the night. “If a job’s worth doing, I not only do it well, Mr. Hart, I finish it with gusto.” What a bluff that had been, coming from a twenty-two-year-old virgin. LJ hadn’t bought it, judging by his sly smile—the one that said *I know*

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you, baby—but he'd allowed her to pretend to be experienced.

The memory turned her on even more today than it had then, although LJ's interest in her had waned. He'd made love to her only a handful of times over the latter half of their marriage, and not once had his heart been it. To think they'd once been bold and adventurous together. To think he'd actually *wanted* her once upon a time, that he'd been the one to strip away her inhibitions.

She'd spread her legs for him, bent over the bench in the dugout. He'd eaten her from behind with long, languid licks, his nose buried in her ass. The grumbling sounds of a satisfied man had been music to her ears, when at last he'd filled her—first with his fingers, later with his thick, hard cock, sheathed in a red, ribbed condom. He'd worked his way in slowly.

Remembering it now, she slipped a hand under the hem of her rayon skirt. Her fingers grazed against her silk panties. Her clit was hard and tingling, in dangerous need of release. She fixated on the stack of papers before her. *Please sign here.*

Years ago, with a death grip on the pine bench, she'd bucked back to meet LJ's slow, too patient thrusts. "Please. Fuck me." Her "please" had been no more appropriate in that dugout years ago than it was on her divorce papers today, yet the transformation of the polite girl into the ravenous, sexual being she'd become that night titillated her.

With precise rhythm, she rubbed her swollen nub, remembering carefree romps in centerfield at midnight, secret meetings in locker rooms, when all other players had gone. Her nipples hardened, peeking through her lace bra and chiffon blouse. Dewy sweat appeared at her temples and behind her knees. She imagined a young athlete would lick perspiration from her flesh as she masturbated.

Young. Not Bellia-Scuzzi-young, but younger than LJ. Younger than her. The taboo of a younger man and a bolder woman spiked the flame in her Victoria's Secret Angels thong. Damn, she needed a man

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with stamina, a man who could outlast her. A man who, overcome with desire, would impatiently and thoroughly tongue her cunt before she'd withdrawn her fingers, licking her essence from her digits as if her juices flowed with nectar of the gods.

She pinched her eyes shut and, spreading her legs wider beneath the desk, rubbed furiously, her panties yanked aside, giving her full access. Inching closer and closer to the crucial height of passion, memories flashed like a slide show in her mind: strong hands squeezing her hips, the scent of sex embedded in damp sheets, hard flesh probing her needy cavity. She tightened her grip on her pen.

Penetration. That's what she needed. It had been so long. Despite LJ's obvious disinterest in her aging body—not that thirty-two was old, but how could she compete with the body of a nineteen-year-old jeans model?—she'd remained faithful to him. He'd been fucking a stick without breasts, and she hadn't so much as purchased a vibrator.

Please sign here.

It would all be over, once she scrawled her name on that line. *So close. So close now.* She bit her lip, stifling the messages sent from below her belt. She needed to feel wanted again, to recreate the magic she'd found in that dugout years ago.

Her other hand joined the first, with tense fingers clamped against her hot labia. The blunt end of the bat-shaped pen grazed against her hole.

“Ohhh.” A nearly silent groan, but proof she was alive.

Inch by inch, she sank the pen into her pussy, and massaged her clit faster and faster. The pipe organ in her mind resounded with *Charge!* and she came in a gush. Nine months of celibacy poured out of her, drenching her panties, her skirt, and her father's favorite chair.

She relented pressure and, still rolling her clit beneath her finger, she slowly withdrew the pen from her depths. Her juices moistened the divorce papers when she dropped the mini bat atop the stack. The sight

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of it embarrassed her, and with heat flushing her cheeks, she gasped as she caught her breath. While LJ, somewhere across the Atlantic, laughed with a young, vibrant creature, Catherine kept company with a tiny blunt object.

Tears burned her eyes. Could she have stooped any lower? Sad but true—the mini-bat represented her only prospect for the future.

How could a once-desirous woman become the ignored wife of a passionate man? How could such a man insist he'd adored her curves, only to become enthralled with a girl—Catherine refused to think of Miss Scuzzi as a woman—who'd gone to obvious lengths to keep her prepubescent figure? Catherine didn't know, but however it had happened, LJ came out on the long end of the stick simply because he had someone to talk to as he fell asleep.

Catherine hadn't fallen for an adulterous sleaze, but she'd been married to one for years. What LJ had done was unforgivable. She'd sign the papers.

But she couldn't do it now. Not here. Not surrounded by what had once brought she and LJ together with fierce passion and emotion.

With a deep breath, she wiped hot tears from her cheeks and dialed the lawyer who'd handled—was *still* handling—Rock's estate.

"Jennifer, hi. It's Catherine Ramsey." It felt funny, leaving off the -Hart. "There's been a development. No, not with the estate." She twisted her diamond ring until it finally, painfully slipped past her knuckle. "With my marriage."

* * *

Gator Recreation Clearwater, Florida

"Possession with intent to distribute."

"Jesus." Mark nearly choked on his sunflower seeds, when Faith relayed the detail's of their younger brother's arrest last night. "How

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much pot can one kid crotch?"

"Well, he didn't crotch it. It was under the front seat in his girlfriend's car. Unfortunately, he's been borrowing the car this semester, while she's in culinary school abroad. Captain Whalen's daughter, an honor roll student, and—"

"What's the MP Captain's daughter doing with Kyle?"

"Mark, listen to me! She's an honor roll student, and no one suspects this stash was hers, which means it has to be his."

"How much did they find?"

"Two-point-six grams."

"Is that a lot?"

"It's one-tenth over the limit for a minimum jail sentence." Faith used her counselor's lecturing voice. "If he's convicted, he's looking at six months in prison, at least."

"He'll be lucky with half a year, compared to what's going to happen once Dad gets a hold of him."

"The dad you had in high school is no longer available to force you to run laps of the barracks and give him a hundred push-ups, Mark. He's aged ten years in the past two months, and he can't handle knowing this type of thing. Not right now."

Ten years? Would Mark even recognize his father when he returned home?

"You can't tell Mom either," Faith continued. "They have enough to deal with—all Dad's tests, his surgery's coming up..."

No wonder Faith sounded tired. With their father's health, the stress of her job—she steered wayward, pregnant teens in the right direction—and now with Kyle's trouble, she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"So maybe a few months in the county clink will straighten the kid out. What's his fine? A grand? Two?"

"Normally, possession of this amount carries a fine of fifteen

hundred, but—”

“So, let him scrape it together. Faith, this isn’t our problem. It’s Kyle’s.”

His sister exhaled a long breath, and he pictured her twirling her straight hair around a finger. “He needs a lawyer, Mark. He was pulled over in a school zone, thus the intent to distribute. And because he was in a school zone, allegedly preparing to sell this stash to children, this misdemeanor became a felony, which carries a fine of twenty-five thousand dollars, and he could get up to three years in prison.”

Fuck. Mark tapped dirt from his cross-trainers with his bat and fought the impulse to suggest the most logical money source. Recently, Faith had befriended former rock-n-roll drummer, Troy Douglas, in some mysterious definition of the word. The guy had cash well beyond what Kyle might need—or so Mark assumed. “Twenty-five thousand?”

“I managed to bail him out, but tell me, how do I hide an indictment and a trial from our sick father and worry-wart mother?”

“It sounds like a fairly circumstantial case. Maybe it’ll be thrown out.”

“What do you know about circumstantial? And we can’t bank on *maybe*, here.” His sister’s voice wavered, and he knew she was on the verge of tears. “I don’t ask you for anything, do I? When Dad had a heart attack, did I ask you to come home? When the doctors told us he had an irreversible heart condition, were you at the hospital, consoling our mother? Have you filled in at the army base for her scheduled arts and crafts hours and the bake sales she refuses to cancel, although she can’t bear to leave our father’s side?”

He smoothed the hair on the back of his neck, which suddenly stood upright. “Listen, I know I don’t say it enough, but I appreciate all you do for them.”

Silence filled the airwaves, a surefire indication Mark’s late-to-the-game thanks was as good as nothing. He’d been selfish, and he knew

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that. But he'd remained in Florida, in the league, because he truly thought he'd make it big. Who could fault him for following his dreams? Hadn't his sister recently done the same, when she'd met and befriended Troy Douglas?

"I've spoken with a lawyer," Faith finally said. "But before he can take the first step, he needs to be retained."

Mark popped a few more sunflower seeds and let things sink in. Had he hit a pop fly in the bottom of the ninth? Perhaps his career was in the third-out stage, and it was time to grow up, put away his toys, and go home.

"Are you going to help me or not?" Faith sounded as exasperated as he'd ever heard her.

"Yeah. Of course." He weighed the Easton in his hands. He'd been swinging three hundred ninety-five dollars of recreational fun, while Faith had been taking care of the dirty work. "How much do you need?"

She sniffled. "Three thousand."

Ouch. He didn't have two fifties to rub together, but if he cashed in what little he'd put away for retirement, he'd be able to contribute. "I'll wire what I can tonight. You'll get the rest by the end of the week. Whatever you need, just let me know."

While he knew she wouldn't say it, what she really needed was for him to come home. He might have a spot in triple-A as early as tomorrow, with the scouts scheduled to attend his next game. Then again, maybe he'd be home for good a lot sooner than anyone expected him.

* * *

*Fort Sheridan
Waukegan, Illinois*

Kyle Hennessy was in deep shit. And for once, he didn't deserve it.

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In the darkness of his bedroom in his parents' home, he sank to his mattress. Seven o'clock in the evening, by any normal standards, was far too early for sleep, but when a guy hadn't slept in thirty-six hours, it may as well have been three a.m. Exhaustion pulsed through him as if it were his blood.

He was no angel. He'd drunk his first beer—and had fallen in love with the liquid courage—at age fourteen. He'd mastered the art of joint-rolling two years later. As far as vices went, he had many, ranging from caffeine to women, alcohol to maryjane.

But his reputation couldn't convict him. He'd never stashed anything in Brittney's car. Furthermore, he didn't sell his pot, he smoked it. And Faith would personally kick his ass if he'd tried to distribute it among kids. He knew that, and he wouldn't wish the wrath of his do-good sister on his worst enemy.

The question was, who'd set him up?

Nothing about the scene made sense. He hadn't even been speeding when the MPs had pulled him over in front of the charter school on the army base, and he hadn't misused a lane, let alone given the uniforms reason to order him out from behind the wheel.

He laid his head down, but he knew he wouldn't sleep. *God bless Faith.* If there was a way, she'd help him out of this mess. *If* there was a way.

And that was one hell of an if.

* * *

*Garden Hotel
Clearwater, Florida*

"I think I'll go red tomorrow at the salon. Red as a fire engine." Sue Fiston sprayed her coif with half a can of AquaNet, Extra Hold. "What do you think?"

Two steps inside the door of the Fistons' suite, Catherine mulled

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over the best possible way to answer the question, when Scout, lumbering across the room to an easy chair, piped in. "I think that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." He shoved a foot into a loafer. He never wore shoes that tied, on account of his difficulty reaching the laces. "Fire engine red hair on a head as old as yours."

"I'm only sixty-five." Sue glared her husband's reflection in the mirror. "And I was talking to Miss Ramsey."

Scout harrumphed. "Doesn't change how ridiculous it is."

"Ridiculous? *You're* going to tell *me* about ridiculous hair? Check the mirror, and count how many strands you rake across that bald spot. It doesn't look good, Lou. You're not fooling anyone."

"Neither are you. Just because you buy a size six shoe doesn't mean it fits on those clod-hoppers of yours. Why a woman would rather pay a cobbler to stretch something not meant to be stretched than buy a size seven is beyond me."

"I only stretch shoes that used to fit, but don't anymore. Women's feet expand with age. Ask Miss Ramsey. She'll tell you." Sue's tone softened. "Honey, you aren't the same shoe size as you were in college, are you?"

Catherine, wishing she could fade into the floral wallpaper, inched back toward the door. "Actually, I—"

Each of them glanced in her direction.

"Now you've made her uncomfortable," Scout said.

"Why ever should she be uncomfortable around *me*? You're the one harassing me about—"

"I'm not uncomfortable," Catherine lied, but she doubted either of the Fistons heard her anyway.

"Well, she won't be honest with you about your hair, or your shoes." Scout maneuvered his large body out of the chair. "So you'll have to take my word for it. Ridiculous." He pointed to Sue's head. "And ridiculous." He pointed to her feet.

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“And you have the fashion degree to back that?”

“Rock raised a polite girl, and she won’t—”

“I only came to say I’m taking a pass on dinner.” Catherine spoke in a raised voice, something she rarely had to do, and suddenly she knew why they hadn’t answered their phone. They probably hadn’t heard it ring over their arguing.

Scout and Sue were at it again, quibbling over which of their comments were driving their dinner guest away. It was harmless. They wouldn’t know how to live without the bickering, but with her heart exposed and raw, Catherine didn’t have the energy to endure it tonight.

“I’m going to grab a salad down at the bar, but I’ll see you tomorrow.” She stepped out onto the patio and pivoted toward the Ivy League Bar.

Warm, evening breezes fingered through Catherine’s hair as she walked across the red-bricked floor of the open atrium. Her stomach grumbled with hunger. She didn’t usually like to dine alone, but if she had to defend Sue Fiston’s right to flamboyant hair-coloring one more time this evening, she might scream.

She loved the Fistons—they were family—but, God, they’d worn her out by the time they left O’Hare Airport.

Holding her head high had been a constant challenge since LJ had made his public departure, but no one knew her here. Perhaps she had a real shot at anonymity tonight. She crossed the threshold into the Ivy League Bar, where her eyes took a minute to adjust to dim surroundings.

The décor resembled that of her father’s—actually, *her*—office in Chicago. Masculine, traditional. Jewel tones and mahogany. However, a bouquet of jasmine and hyacinth scented the air, giving the space a feminine touch. Quaint, synthesized elevator music piped in from hidden speakers, but the elevated dance floor at the far end of the bar and the jukebox to her right suggested the place might transform into a

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hopping club later. For a fleeting moment, she found a sisterhood with the building she'd just entered. On the surface, prim, yet bubbling beneath was a raging fire, begging to let loose.

For now, the place was barren, save one man wearing faded jeans and a shirt with a rumpled collar at the bar. A worn baseball cap boasting the logo of her very own double-A affiliate hung on the back of his stool. Well, at least they'd have something to discuss, should he decide to strike up a conversation with her.

She approached and selected a seat, leaving one space between her and the gentleman whose collar desperately needed straightening.

He kept his dark hair cropped short, his chin closely shaven, and his mouth shut. Such a lovely mouth, yet drawn down, like a wilting bow. His hands cupped the mug he stared down into. She might have studied him for hours, wondering why he seemed withdrawn—either rude or shy, she couldn't decide—had the bartender not arrived to take her order.

"I'll have a bottle of Heineken, and may I see your menu, please?"

She found a tiny, laminated booklet in her hands, and as she perused its assortment of fried and unhealthy appetizers, Barry Manilow's "Mandy" faded into Abba's "Angel Eyes." A cold bottle and a frosted glass clinked as they were put atop the granite in front of her. "I don't need the glass," she murmured, "but thanks."

"The hot wings are good." A deep voice with even cadence caressed her ears.

She looked up, but the bartender had already turned his back to wash the refused and nary used pilsner glass.

"If you like hot wings, that is."

There it was again. She turned toward the quiet man, who didn't know how to use an iron. He looked up at her with vibrant eyes as green as sage.

Oh, wow. Young, but delicious revenge. Do you want that? "I do."

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Her teeth tapped together when she managed to close her mouth. “I mean, I like hot wings.”

“I thought so. Any woman who drinks beer right out of the bottle...”

Was he insulting her? Or flirting? Jeez, it had been so long she couldn’t tell the difference. And what did it matter if she drank from a bottle or out of a glass? She preferred to avoid the mustache accompanying the foamy head of drafts, thank you very much, and it wasn’t anyone’s business but hers.

A hint of a smile twitched at the corner of his lips. “You’re from Chicago, right?”

Was it stamped on her forehead? “Yes.”

“You don’t have much of an accent, but I’ve been here for a while now.” He brought the mug to his lips. After a silent swig, he licked his lips. “I sniff it out like the smell of homemade bread. Call it a yearning for home.”

“You’re from Chicago?”

“I was. Lived there for a while, when I was a kid.”

When he was a kid? She refrained from demanding proof of age in the form of a birth certificate—if she had to guess, she’d place him in his early twenties—and gulped her beer. “Where?”

“North suburbs.”

“I live in Winnetka.” She’d spent the past five years’ unsatisfied sexual energy unnecessarily redecorating their beautiful, custom-built house, but with her prince gone, the castle in Winnetka didn’t feel much like home. Perhaps it wouldn’t be for much longer, should the state of Illinois rule sale of the place.

He lifted his mug, saluting her. “Thanks for the slice of home.”

She turned back to the menu. Whatever this get-to-know-you was—innocent and friendly, or flirtatious and suggestive—she wasn’t ready for it. Sure, she’d taken off her wedding ring, but she hadn’t come to

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the Ivy League Bar to meet a man, especially when she'd yet to sign her divorce papers. She wanted something to eat, plain and simple. A salad, to be exact, but now she was craving something spicier, since he mentioned—

“Hot wings for the lady.”

—hot wings.

He'd yet to smile, but his stare burned its way beneath her clothing. Sexual interest sparked underneath her crisp, Dior blouse and tailored skirt. She pulled at her collar, uncomfortable with this unfamiliar, instant attraction.

And why was she feeling it? First of all, he was a kid. *A kid!* Could it be, on some subconscious level, she was trying to give LJ a taste of his own medicine?

“You can put it on my tab.”

And when he said that, the heat climbed up to her breasts, sending a tingling sensation to her nipples. *A gentleman.* She hadn't met one of those in a while, although to be fair, the only man she'd known had just fled and filed.

“You aren't, by any chance, going to pay your tab one of these days?” The bartender leaned over and refilled the stranger's mug with decaffeinated coffee.

“In full, I assure you.” He gave the bartender half a nod and then turned one hundred percent of his attention back to her. “What's your name?”

She looked back to the menu and feigned disinterest. Such a difficult task, considering the even tenor of his voice, his shockingly green eyes. And the fact he'd just moved onto the one stool separating them. “Catherine.”

“Can I call you Cathy?”

“No.”

“How about Caty?”

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"Everyone calls me Catherine."

"I'm Mark."

"Nice to meet you."

"You, too."

"I can pay for my own dinner."

"There's no way you can eat an entire order of hot wings, so I thought we'd split a platter." He shrugged. "But if *you'd* rather treat *me*, I won't complain. I've had a shitty couple of days. I could use a little coddling."

"I've had a shitty couple of *months*." The moment she said it, she regretted it. She glanced at him over the menu.

"Oh yeah?" Still no smile. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"What is it about women who can handle everything?" He bit his succulent lower lip and engaged her stare. "My sister's like that. She'd juggle the planets, if someone asked her to. A fraction of what she handles day-in, day-out comes my way, and *shazam!* My life is over."

"Over?" She widened her eyes for a split second. "You win. I'll pay for the hot wings."

* * *

Mark took a good, hard look at the woman who'd just made a joke. First the swear word, and now this. At first glance, she'd appeared as prim and proper as could be. What other secrets might he unveil beneath that conservative exterior?

Spunky, this one. She was a familiar presence somehow, and he felt as if he knew her on some level. He'd seen her somewhere. On a billboard maybe? On a cat food commercial? No, and...no.

Her mannerisms...her voice... A longing stirred within him, as his admiration for her grew by the second. Not in the way fans confuse actors with their characters, but as if he respected her mind as much as he wanted to work over her body. That didn't usually happen until

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somewhere around date number three, and he rarely saw women more than twice. Usually, he didn't have time for romantic hassles.

Had he met her before tonight? However, with long, thick hair the color of charcoal, a contrast to her pale skin, she was striking, not the type of woman a man forgets. *And her eyes...hot damn.* Bluish purple, like the sky before a storm rolling in off the Gulf.

The dented flesh on her left ring finger meant one of two things. Either she was looking for an extra-marital good time, or she was recently divorced. Which meant he hadn't rolled in the hay with her before. Unlike some ballplayers, he had a strict policy against whooping it up with other men's wives. But those eyes—so intriguing—haunted him. He might've made an exception for her.

"You're married?" Better to get the truth out in the open.

"Um..." Her thumb rubbed the empty space where a ring normally sat. "Not anymore, I guess. My husband...he, uh, left. Left the country. And me, I guess, in the process." She shook a jet black curl from her forehead, and the tendril bounced against the rest of the loose curls at her shoulders. "I'm in the middle of a divorce."

That's who she is! Once her identity hit him like an anvil in the chest, a sinking feeling settled in Mark's stomach. The news of LJ Hart's sudden fleeing had been all over the tube a couple of weeks ago. He'd felt sorry for the raven-haired beauty then, but now... Hell, seeing her in the flesh, listening to her blunder through an answer to a simple question made him want to take her in his arms and make it all better. First her father's passing, and then her husband skipping out on her, and to top it all off, Ryger had slipped through her fingers... *She must be exhausted.*

Yet she was here in Clearwater for one thing—a third baseman. If she'd pulled someone up from triple-A, he hadn't heard about it, but there were reasons to keep that sort of thing under wraps. He wasn't naïve enough to think she'd be considering him for the big league, but

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maybe she was here to send him up to triple-A. As if he hadn't put enough pressure on himself for tomorrow's game...

She gulped her beer, her lips encircling the bottle in a manner that told him she'd sipped a few in her time. He suddenly pictured her in jeans and a simple, white t-shirt—a v-neck, maybe, which would show off her more-than-decent cleavage—at a backyard barbeque. Down-home, down to earth. This lovely woman could hang with the best of the boys, yet her curves and tailored ensemble emphasized her femininity. She was so much more of a woman than the childlike twig with whom her husband had flown to Europe. Who did LJ think he was anyway? Leaving this woman was a crime.

To be fair, men became bored even with the most gorgeous women in the world, and Mark had no idea what kind of shit Catherine Ramsey-Hart might have pulled behind closed doors. However, he was a good judge of character. Over the years, Mark had become a sort of expert at determining which sprouts were weeds and which were roses. *If LJ hadn't realized he'd plucked the former for safekeeping and tossed away the latter like spoiled meat...* “Fool.”

“I suppose I *was* foolish not to see it coming. Albeit, it hasn't been much of a marriage lately, but...” Catherine swiped her tongue across her lower lip and then followed the path with a maroon-nailed finger. “I didn't see it coming. It was—”

“Not you.”

She set the green bottle atop the bar and rubbed the condensation from the label. Beer swished just under the halfway mark.

Thirsty girl.

Or perhaps she was in the mood to drink away the past few weeks. Either way, he couldn't ignore the possible benefit of the situation. In addition to getting to know an interesting woman—and damn him, if she wasn't!—this acquaintance could mean phenomenal things for his career.

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Ryger leaving the club left an opening in her roster. A signing bonus with a major league team would cover more than the cost of Kyle's lawyer, to say nothing of the yearly salary, even if he brought in the league minimum. And he'd be home, back in Chi-town, where he could help Faith shoulder the growing responsibility of their parents—as well as the continuing liability of their baby brother.

It was a long shot. Catherine probably had a ton of triple-A guys to look at, too. But she could make it all happen for him. Befriending her couldn't be a poor decision.

Chicago fans—he knew from having been one—adored an athlete who performed for the media, and he'd enjoy the hell out of pre- and post-game interviews, signing autographs during batting practice. The city was hungry for a media darling. Humble, appreciative, and all-American, he'd be the athlete equivalent of apple pie.

Mark would prove his worth on the field tomorrow, for Scout Fiston's eyes. But tonight, he'd put on a charismatic show for the woman whose opinion held more water than all of those below her—the woman on top of the totem pole.

“Another Heineken for the lady.”

After a few silent moments, she realized he'd ordered for her and began to shake her head. “Oh, I don't usually—”

But Brown, always quick on the draw during lag times at the bar, had already deposited one in front of her.

She raised her right eyebrow. The spitting image of her father, the late Rock Ramsey, she brought a softer quality—obviously—to the gene pool. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Uh, no.” He placed his mug on the lower rim of the bar for a refill.

“Straight decaf?”

“I can't afford to spend the night wide awake, and I cannot have the slightest hangover in the morning. I have a big week at work, and it starts tomorrow.”

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“I have a big day at the spa tomorrow.” Her indigo eyes rolled. “I hate saying that. I’m not the type of woman who spends her days getting facials.”

Mark knew that. He also knew she’d practically lived at the stadium as a child, and at her father’s office as an adult. Her image, shadowed by Rock’s, had graced several front pages of sports sections, citing headlines such as...

DADDY’S LITTLE GIRL: SOLE HEIR TO THE THRONE

...and...

ROCK’S ROCK: A WOMAN AS RIGHT-HAND MAN

Losing Rock had to have been among the hardest events she’d endured. He didn’t doubt she’d lost her best friend the day Rock had died. Someday—maybe soon—he’d know what it felt like to lose a father, but he because he spoke to his father only a couple of times a month, he doubted he’d experience the emptiness Catherine probably felt every waking second of her day.

Major Hennessy would soon undergo open heart surgery. Bypass, valve replacement...he had no idea what the procedure entailed. He should’ve asked more questions when Faith had called with the news. All he knew was that, while the operation wouldn’t cure the condition, it could prolong the major’s life up to fifteen years.

Lucky. Rock Ramsey had died suddenly, without warning. Mark had been given a gift—a chance to cherish his father before the time came to say goodbye. What would Catherine think of him, knowing he’d been given this chance and was spending it on the gulf coast of Florida, attempting to rule third base?

Brown arrived with a massive platter of hot wings, two glasses of

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water, and a stack of napkins. With raised brows, he gave a sideways glance in the lady's direction.

Catherine didn't notice because she was attending to her ringing cell phone.

Half a smile escaped Mark, and he shook his head slightly in return. This wasn't your average quest for a one-night-stand. This was his future—and it had nothing to do with getting the lady in the sack.

"He can't do that." Catherine grasped her Heineken with an ivory, soft-looking hand and took a healthy swig. "It's my club. My father left it to *me*, and according to the pre-nups—" She slid the bottle back onto the bar top. "I don't care how much it costs. Buy him out."

* * *

Oh, no. Catherine was not going to cry. Not tonight. Not in front of the bartender, and certainly not in front of the guy who still hadn't straightened his collar. Releasing the tension in her jaw, which was harder to do than she'd anticipated, she emptied the first bottle of beer down her throat, and glanced at Mark's semi-wrinkled, button-down shirt, with the collar half up and half down—and not in a way that said fashion statement.

Jeez, that's annoying. What was he, fourteen? Wasn't he uncomfortable like that? Didn't he know how disheveled he looked? How very "freshman on the first day of school." Yet somehow...appealing.

She took a pull off the second beer, knowing she should take it easy with the alcohol. After all, she rarely finished a drink these days, and she'd just chugged down an entire bottle in a matter of minutes. Yet the sleepy sensation in her digits and at the tip of her tongue had a relaxing effect on her, and lately, relaxation was about as natural as Botox.

Wrong or not—if her father had taught her anything, it was the safety of moderation—it felt good to be numbed by something other than her cheating husband.

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“Everything okay?” Mark chewed on a hot wing.

Okay was the last way she would describe anything since her father had checked out, but she nodded and looked to the platter of spicy goods. Eating things like that might have been what had landed her curvaceous ass without a husband, but what the hell. Starving wouldn’t bring LJ back. Might as well indulge. In everything. She sipped again and glanced at her new acquaintance. Well, *almost* everything. Everything of legal age maybe.

Before she thought long enough to convince herself not to, she reached for his askew collar. “You’re a little crooked.” The soft hair at the nape of his neck—a little longer than LJ’s—caressed her fingers, and his tanned skin was smooth to the touch. What it wouldn’t feel like to put her mouth on that neck...

He toasted her by raising a chicken bone, and smiled. A full-fledged grin that sent fireworks popping along her spine.

Oh, wow. What was wrong with her? At the ballpark, she’d been around men his age throughout her entire marriage. Never had one had affected her so. Why had this particular youngster—not that he was *that* young, but he was young enough—set her panties aflame?

She bit into a wing and found a flame of another kind. Her tongue felt like fire, and no amount of coughing, breathing, or spitting out—surely, that was attractive—relieved the burning of the sauce.

Mark chuckled—*Great, the first time I hear his laugh, and it’s while I’m burning off my tongue*—and shoved a bottle into her hand. “Drink. Drink.”

She sucked down several gulps of beer, and the cold liquid soothed like icy balm on a pulled muscle.

“Too hot for you?” His lopsided grin was almost practical-joker-like, but she didn’t have time to seethe before he spoke again. “I should’ve warned you. Sorry.”

One more cough. “It’s all right. A little hotter”—another cough—

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“than I expected, but I’m fine.”

“Try these, on the other side of the celery sticks. They’re mild.”

The wings held a certain appeal, but at the moment, she’d just as soon have donned them and flown away like a fairy as eaten them. Damn it, why were they the only two people in the whole blessed bar? In addition to retirees, wasn’t Florida notorious for hot blondes, who would certainly draw Mark’s attention away from the girl who couldn’t handle her hot wings?

Or, apparently, her beer. Man, she had to pee. The urge overcame her suddenly, with pressure more intense than the butting of big-horn rams. First she’d nearly coughed up her lungs, and now she was in severe danger of losing the contents of her bladder. She sure knew how to leave an impression.

Must get to the ladies’ room. And now, she was talking to herself, and she didn’t even know if she was doing so aloud. Was she drunk? Already? So soon? In answer to her internal questions, the room spun for a split second, when she hopped off her barstool. Instinctively, she clung to the side of bar to keep from falling.

A strong hand cupped her elbow, and she found herself standing torso to hard torso with a man at least six—but more likely eight-to-ten—years her junior. His eyes, without a single wrinkle creasing around them, ignited her flesh when they settled on her, and his long, lean body swayed against hers, in time with Abba. Or maybe that was just her imbalance because, suddenly, the whole world went vertigo.

She looked up and focused on his eyes. Such energy. Catherine couldn’t ignore the desire shooting from her core to every nerve ending. Only a physically adept man could’ve predicted and prevented her unsteadiness. And one thing she’d learned from LJ Hart was that she loved a physically adept man.

* * *

APPLE PIE

Waukegan, Illinois

The military police said they'd pulled him over after an anonymous caller tipped them off.

Two hours of staring at the cracked paint on the ceiling, and Kyle still didn't have a prayer of sleeping a wink.

After a quick calculation, he determined it would be the middle of the night in Spain, but he didn't care if it wasn't an ideal time for a phone call. On his drunk nights, he'd woken Brittney at odd hours because he'd done something goofy, like driving through the Taco Bell drive-through in reverse. Usually, she wasn't amused with his inebriated antics, but surely, she'd understand his calling for a genuine reason.

However, he didn't want her to know he'd gotten her car impounded, and he especially didn't want her to know why. Or maybe he didn't want to know what he'd been suspecting since the officers told him about the anonymous call—that Brittney was tired of hearing his late night, slurred voice over the line. Perhaps she'd hidden the stash of two-point-six grams before she left the country. Maybe she'd been on the other end of that anonymous tip.

* * *

Garden Hotel Clearwater, Florida

God, the way her body had fit against his...

At the bar, Catherine's hot, dangerous curves had melted into Mark's body as if he were concocted of wax, and she'd swayed in a sexy dance for a few moments before her senses—and inhibitions—returned. *Damn inhibitions.*

If she were any other woman, he would've been halfway up to her suite right then and there, but no. She had to be Rock Ramsey's

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daughter, quite possibly the most respected female icon in sports today. He couldn't very well ball her senseless.

Well, he could, actually, but he wouldn't. Not that her position with major league baseball garnered her more respect than other women deserved, but... *Damn it.* He could overlook lots of things for an experience with a woman like that, but he couldn't overlook her role in the MLB.

The moment he'd watched her teeter off to the ladies room—there was something indeed charming about a girl who *looked* like she could handle her liquor, but couldn't—he'd decided to tuck her safely in bed, and give her nothing more than a wave from the field tomorrow. As impossible a task as it seemed, he'd leave her as untouched as his Great Aunt Buffy's Hummel collection.

But now, after a few drinks more, she was leaning against the door of her third-floor suite, looking like a pin-up doll. Her chin pointed downward, as if she were studying the patterns in the carpeting, and disheveled hair spilled around her heart-shaped face like an ebony river. Her uptight businesswoman blouse was no longer tucked in evenly. If he'd looked, and heaven help him, he'd looked more than once, the graceful curve of her generous breasts taunted him from beneath the buttons.

Lick me, they seemed to say. *Suck me good.* Someone should, and he'd love to be the candidate. Unfortunately, there was no way to do so without her thinking he was sleeping his way to the top. Perhaps Catherine Ramsey-Hart was yet another reason to hang up his baseball hat. If he took his skills—or lack thereof—as a third baseman out of the equation, she might take him as seriously as he was contemplating taking her toes.

Her shoes weren't on her feet anymore. She'd walked right out of one in the atrium, and he'd steadied her whilst she'd removed the other. Now, the pristine, two-inch-heeled sandals dangled from her hand. One

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of her feet, clad in snagged nylon, propped against the door, and all of her toes wiggled.

They, too, begged for oral attention, and so did her soft, ivory neck. The entire package was refreshing. Girls he'd been with recently were bronzed with sun, showed their bodies as if they wanted a leg-up on nudist colonies—ultra low-rise pants and cropped shirts. In recent years, he'd seen more ass-cracks on girls at the stadium than on plumbers.

But Catherine... Catherine's body was a mystery. People didn't lock rolls of pennies in safe deposit boxes. They hid only the extraordinary. And whatever this woman had locked away beneath her tailored garments, he was sure it was phenomenal, if not magical.

"Thanks for walking me back." Her voice was soft and sleepy, sexy to the nth degree. "I don't usually drink this much."

"That's all right." Mark locked his gaze on her violet eyes. A guy could get lost in them, if he wasn't careful. *And the scent of her...good God.* He pictured her spraying some romantic—probably expensive—aromatic mixture onto a number of private places on her body. Behind her knees, across her belly...*Oh, Lord...* between her thighs.

His eyes rolled back amid a shiver of joy. Yet a moment before the joy perked a party in his jeans, he snapped back to reality. Nice—make that incredibly naughty—thoughts danced in his head, but this bodacious woman was off limits. He drew in a long breath. *She's not for you. Not tonight. Not ever.*

He inserted the key card, turned the knob, and opened the door just enough to release the lock. If he'd opened it all the way, his lovely companion might've stumbled backward onto her ass.

Such a sweet ass it was, too. He imagined squeezing it as they made out, pulling her voluptuous body to him. Too many women these days were all skin and bones. He loved a woman with a body, and a body was definitely something this woman had.

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“Again...” Her propped foot slid its way to the floor, and she nudged her way into the room. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” It was more a grumble in his throat than a sentence. “Can I make you some coffee?” The second the offer escaped him, he bit his tongue. Hadn’t he tortured himself enough?

“That would be”—she tossed her shoes to the floor and sank to the blue-and-white striped sofa—“wonderful.”

He cleared his throat and busied his suddenly shaky hands with the in-room coffee pot. “Decaf, I assume?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. As I understand it, you can’t afford to be awake all night.”

A quick glance over his shoulder awarded him a view of Rock’s daughter no reporter had ever pasted on the front page of a sports section. Catherine was rolling lace-top thigh-high stockings down her shapely legs. Hard to believe she’d grown up without much of a woman’s influence.

According to Rock’s biographies, he’d raised her since her second birthday, upon the death of her mother. His attempts to provide his baby girl with a mother figure were fruitless in that his second wife showed no interest in the game, and by then, Catherine had been hooked on baseball, a bona fide tomboy. But how did a tomboy grow up to look like *that*? She exuded more femininity than all three of Hef’s triplets combined.

“Here you are, taking care of me.” With half-closed eyes, she pressed a hand to her cleavage. “Men don’t take care of a girl who’s just one of the guys, and here *you* are, taking care of *me*.”

He swallowed hard. How this woman could see herself as just one of the guys was beyond him. “You’re hardly—”

“I’m sure you think I have a severe drinking problem, and I don’t blame you.” She leaned against the lumbar pillows and pulled her shirt from her waistband. “I’d probably think the same thing if I happened

upon me tonight.”

He shook off the heady effects of the stolen glimpse of her bare belly. “You’ve had a rough time.”

“You don’t know the half of it. My husband left. I told you that. Lord knows why I’m telling you anything, but I told you that.”

“Good riddance.” Mark turned back to the coffee pot.

“Maybe. But what hurts the most isn’t that he’s gone. I don’t even care that he left me for a child. A *child*, who weighs eighty-three pounds when dipped in caramel.” She licked her lips and breathed, “Ooh, caramel.”

After a shake of her head and a murmured command to stay focused, she continued. “What’s worse is he left only weeks after I buried my father. My *father*! And now Rock is gone, LJ’s trying to take away my te—” She stopped. “He’s trying to snag my family’s business.”

“Asshole.” *What a retort to her heart-wrenching words.* No matter how true, she didn’t need to hear the obvious. “I mean...I can’t imagine how anyone would...” At a loss for anything else to say, he took a deep breath and uttered the words he’d yet to share with anyone. “My father’s sick. It’s only a matter of time before he...goes.”

“Make the most of that time, young blood.” She drummed her fingers on the cushion next to her.

Young blood. Behind him, the coffeemaker bubbled and percolated, and the scent of Columbian beans filled the room. Mark fixated on Catherine’s fingers, which seemed to signal come hither.

On my way. “I’m not that young, you know.”

“How young are you?”

Not willing to lie for the sake of a lay—which, he remembered with gritted teeth, he wasn’t going to pursue anyway—he chewed his lip for a moment. If she sent him packing once he told her his age, so be it. But...would she? Sexually or not, he enjoyed her company, and come

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on, who wouldn't? Beautiful woman, into sports...owns a major league team. How young was too young to stay with her?

None of Rock's biographies had disclosed his daughter's birth date, but she couldn't be more than thirty...could she?

"Twenty-one?" she guessed.

He sat next to her. "Twenty-three." He fought the urge to tack on, "And-a-half," but it didn't take much willpower because suddenly, her mouth sealed around his. However old she happened to be, twenty-three-year-old goods interested her.

Her soft tongue dipped and flirted like a maestro, and she cradled his face with a tenderness he'd never seen the likes of.

His hands itched to roam over her curvy terrain, but settled for diving into her silky hair. An intimate decision and one he'd remember always.

In the few moments he'd been taking LJ Hart's place in Catherine's arms, Mark knew what it felt like to be a major league player. If he never saw home plate from the infield of Fenway, the new Comisky, or Yankee Stadium, he'd survive, because *this* was what mattered. Not talking about women in a random dugout. Talking to a woman who could talk about baseball.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father." Her whisper was a hot, feathering caress at his ear.

"I was sorry to hear about yours." Their noses grazed against each other, and he nipped at her mouth again.

A soft groan escaped her, but half a moment later, her fingers tensed at his jaw. "I—" She withdrew and wiggled off the sofa. "I, um...I'm sorry." She took a few backwards steps toward the bedroom before spinning around and racing to hide there.

"Wait." Mark bounced up from the sofa.

The door, open only a crack, muffled her words. "I don't usually...please understand, I'm—"

APPLE PIE

"I'll get you a cup of coffee." The ache of an erection stopped him in his tracks. One kiss, and he was up for the night. He walked more slowly.

"I can't imagine what you must think of me." Her babbling died behind the nearly closed door as he adjusted his rod and meandered to the brewed coffee.

What he must think of her. As if he considered her anything less than a goddess. She'd probably faint if she knew the truth. Occupationally, he admired her. Physically, he wanted to devour every last inch of her. Emotionally, he felt a strange fulfillment, as if they understood each other. And he'd been in her company for only a handful of hours. What might he feel if they spent real time together someday?

"Catherine?" He brushed a knuckle against the door. No answer. "Catherine, I have your coffee."

No answer again.

He pushed the door open to find her perched on the side of the bed. She hugged one leg to her chest, and the purple satin robe she wore, sash undone, revealed a hint of her curves. Unfortunately—or perhaps thankfully, depending on how he chose to look at things—it also hid all things private.

However, a scrap of satin discarded on the carpeting caught his eye. *Her panties?*

A soft whimper reached his ears, and he snapped his gaze to her. She was crying.

An imaginary fist knocked the wind out of him with a sucker punch. There was no sadder sight than a beautiful woman in tears.

While he wanted to wrap his arms around her and console her, he didn't want to appear to be stalking vulnerable prey. He was tempted to leave her alone to deal with her life's traumas, but he didn't want to seem inconsiderate. There was no right thing to do, no right words to

APPLE PIE

say. He looked at the ceiling, as if the perfect turn-of-phrase were written there.

Worse yet, the tent in his pants had yet to collapse. What kind of pervert could maintain an arousal at a time like this? He couldn't help it. She seemed so...human, so real, so in need. The American public saw her only perfectly coiffed and put together. This scene brought them closer somehow, and if that wasn't a turn-on...

"What can I do?" Wow, that sounded like his voice.

A sob answered him.

He'd never before asked a woman what she'd needed; rather, he'd always assumed he'd already known. In a blink, he realized, with all his sexual experience—playing third base, even for a double-A team, had its advantages—he didn't know anything about women. This woman would be his private tutor when it came to matters of the heart. "Catherine?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Her curled-up body rolled to the mattress, and she lay in a fetal position.

"I'll just...I'll leave your coffee right here, and I'll—"

"Call me Cathy."

A flutter of passion kicked up in his gut. "Cathy."

"Better yet, Caty. Sounds younger, doesn't it?"

He was about to negate her assumption, when the tightly-wound ball her body had become began to unravel. One of her arms gradually fell to the bed, and along with it, the lapel of the robe, treating him to a delicious view of nearly-D bosoms. Bare. Enticing. Caty was no younger than Catherine, but Mark wanted to cup all of her in his hands, to feel the fullness of her breasts against his palms, to flick at those gorgeous, pink nipples with his thumbs.

Breasts like that ought to be worshipped. With hands, with a mouth. Hell, with a cock. Shame on LJ for leaving. *On second thought, thanks, LJ.* Mark imagined taking one heavy tit into his mouth at a time,

APPLE PIE

caressing, sucking. Kneading with his fingertips, gentle but firm.

His gaze trailed from her mountainous region to her parts south of the border, still concealed by the robe. Her right leg, crossed over the left in some wanton pose, dared him from between the folds of purple satin. He wondered if her thighs were as muscular as they'd looked beneath her skirt. Strong, yet fleshy, he imagined. Good to kiss, yet tight around his waist...or around his head.

What would turn Catherine Ramsey-Hart to butter? What would make her quiver with pleasure enough to forget all about her idiot husband's severely poor decision and even worse timing? In search of a clue, he studied her soft-looking face, where her liquid violet eyes slowly blinked. She stared at the ceiling, and judging by her relaxed posture, she probably hadn't realized her breasts' exposure. Suddenly, he felt like a peeping tom, taking advantage of a drunken beauty who'd forgotten to close her draperies.

But he couldn't look away. Quiet tears streamed over her lovely cheekbones.

The urge to comfort her overcame him, and he found himself standing over her, brushing away a fat tear with a finger. Their gazes locked.

"Captivating," he heard himself say.

"Thank you," she whispered half a second before she closed her eyes.

* * *

*Fort Sheridan
Waukegan, Illinois*

What better way for Brittney to take back her vintage 1987 Firebird—and possibly loan it to some other guy—than to have it impounded? Her father could pay the three-hundred-eighty-five dollars to release the car, and Kyle couldn't blame her for changing her mind

APPLE PIE

about letting him use it until she returned. He'd been lucky to pull through the winter without an accident, considering how often he'd driven while lit like a candle. Especially because the tasty car had absolutely no traction on icy roads, it really had been a miracle now he thought about it.

This time, when he reached for the phone, he actually finished dialing.

After a terrifying four rings, Brittney answered with a yawn. "This better be good. I have a test tomorrow."

"Don't hang up, Britt. I'm not drunk."

"Well, that's something new."

His heart beat a racket inside his chest, and perhaps he was more nervous now than he'd been under the scrutiny of the MPs. "I have something to tell you."

"About my car? I already know, and if you think you're gonna—"

"I love you."

A deep sigh answered him.

"I do, Brittney."

"You can't love someone and do the things you do."

"What they found...it wasn't mine, and I'm wondering...did you know it was there?"

"As if! I've never smoked a regular cigarette, Kyle Robert Hennessy, let alone anything illegal, and to think you're suggesting—"

"I didn't mean that it was yours. I meant...did you put it there, knowing I'd fuck up a hundred times? Did you call—"

"I need to get some sleep."

"You have to believe me, baby, I—"

"Don't you 'baby' me! You got what you deserved. Good bye."

The hang-up resonated all the way across the Atlantic.

* * *

APPLE PIE

Clearwater, Florida

Catherine—she was too sophisticated to be a “Caty”—Ramsey-Hart and her blessed body had foiled Mark’s decaffeinated precautions, and now he was wide awake. He closed his eyes, but his efforts didn’t take him to dreamland. Instead, with every miniscule blink, he found himself back in the third floor suite at the Garden Hotel, salivating over a luscious, ivory body.

The hazy vision beckoned to him, and he was still impressed with his leaving her untouched. Once he’d realized she’d fallen asleep, he’d covered her with a blanket and respectfully left her to dream of better days.

Despite the late hour, Gretchen and Rex in two-o-five weren’t sleeping either.

“Ohhhh, yessss!” Gretchen’s sultry voice sounded over the pounding of their headboard against the wall. “Fuck my tight pussy! Fuck it good! Harder!”

Oftentimes, if Mark concentrated hard enough, the voices ceased to belong to the nice, average-looking couple he saw in the parking lot—wasn’t it always the normal ones who were *crazy* in bed?—and became anonymous characters in a pornographic film playing in his mind. But tonight, Catherine consumed his thoughts.

He imagined gliding his dick between her tits, her glorious, huge tits. Probing the head between them, pressing their silky-smoothness around his shaft. Their supple, firm, and silky texture might be enough to finish him after a few strokes, but he had other plans for the woman LJ Hart had neglected.

As enjoyable as tit-fucking could be, it probably would do little to fulfill Catherine. For that, Mark had other plans, including hours of oral sex. He’d lick her labia and suck on her clit until she begged for penetration. She probably tasted every bit as lovely as she smelled.

APPLE PIE

Just thinking about it, his pole grew another half inch. His member twitched, as if pleading to be rubbed.

All in good time.

Although it was tempting to speculate on what Catherine's hands might feel like on his cock, he forced the thought away. When they happened to get together—not that they ever would—he didn't want to be selfish. Rather, he wanted to please her fifty times over, before she laid hand or tongue on him.

Had to think about that pink tongue, didn't you?

He refocused on another-something-pink and imagined Catherine's thighs tight around his head, her pelvis bucking up to meet his mouth, while he dipped his tongue into her depths. He could almost discern the distinct taste of pussy, the palette of which he could never get enough. Catherine would be on the sweet side.

"Ohhhhh, I fucking love your fucking dick." Gretchen again. But, damn, to hear Catherine Ramsey-Hart say such a thing to him...it was enough to give into the pulsating between his legs. Did she like dirty talk? Could he talk her into an orgasm over the phone?

Mark's right hand went instinctively to his shaft, pumping it through his fist with vigor. With his left hand, he fumbled in his nightstand drawer for a bottle of liquid lubricant. The last time he'd used it, he'd been ramming one of the Davies girls, who weren't related, but liked to tell people they were sisters, with the biggest, blackest dildo he'd ever seen. Had it been Jamie? Or Jessie? He couldn't remember which, but the noise Jamie/Jessie had made rivaled that of his neighbors. It wasn't that long ago, but it seemed as if years had passed since he'd met Catherine at the Ivy League. He'd matured over the past several hours—in a sexual sense. He didn't want dildos and the Davies girls. He wanted sophisticated sex, with a sophisticated woman.

Squeeze. A stream of lube trickled through his fingers and dripped

APPLE PIE

over his balls like hot saliva.

He tossed aside the bottle and tended to his testicles, kneading them with his fingertips, building pleasure.

“Oh, I’m gonna come! I’m gonna come!”

His wet palm became her cunt, and the neighbor’s cries sounded in Catherine’s voice. He pinched his eyes shut and pretended a curvaceous body was pumping over his cock.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!”

He wanted to come with a mouthful of breast and Catherine quivering all around him. Her soft skin dewy with sweat, her screams drowning out the sounds of the traffic outside, and the noise next door. Come, all-consumed with her, with her body.

“Ohhhh, sugar!”

Catherine would never call him “sugar,” he’d bet, but the make-believe scene in his mind was doing the trick without the vocal incentive.

He imagined the hot, wet walls of the ideal woman dripping like ice cream down a cone, her juices streaming over his balls. Tensing, massaging his shaft with muscular walls, she neared orgasm, yelped when he sucked hard on her nipples.

“I’m coming!”

“Don’t stop,” Mark grumbled, working his hand faster and faster. “Don’t stop.”

In lieu of sucking a tit, he bit his lip, as cum built in his balls.

“Never,” he imagined she’d whisper.

“Oh, God.” He came in a hot spurt and continued to pump his cock without reprieve, the memory of Catherine Ramsey-Hart’s body—complete with plump breasts taunting him from beneath a silky, purple robe—in the forefront of his mind.

Someday, he might come all over those breasts. Someday, she might ask for it. Someday, he might come inside her.

APPLE PIE

His rapid breaths began to even, and he gave his rod one final milking.

Good hands. He'd heard that hundreds of times.

If only he could be that good on the field tomorrow.

* * *

Garden Hotel

Clearwater, Florida

The sound of pounding threatened to lure Catherine from a dreamy slumber involving wet kisses—in verrrrry nice places.

"Miss Ramsey?" came a cloudy inquiry, but the talented lips massaging her inner thighs gave her reason to ignore the voice.

Mmmm, more. Vibrant, green eyes stared up at her from the apex of her legs, and a soft tongue drew a moist line from her rectum to her clit.

"Miss Ramsey, are you in there, dear?"

Mmmm, that's right. In there.

"Miss Ramsey!"

When she opened her eyes, the green eyes faded, along with the talented mouth that had entertained her during her sleep. Bright sunlight accosted her.

More pounding. Whether or not it was completely contained in her head she didn't know, until she recognized the screech of Sue Fiston's voice. "Miss Ramsey!" Pound, pound, pound. "Lou, break down the door."

"I'm not gonna br—"

"She could be unconscious in there! Goodness, maybe she had an aneurism! Heart trouble is genetic, you know. Do it, Lou!"

Despite his age, the man had size on his side, and he probably *could* do it.

"Wait." Catherine put a hand to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. *Ouch.* "I'm coming." Her voice sounded, barely above a whisper.

APPLE PIE

She licked the cottony roof of her mouth and smacked her dry lips. As her surroundings bled into view, she tried to recall what had happened last night.

Young blood. Hot wings. Lots—lots—of Heineken. How she'd gotten back to the room in one piece last night was anyone's guess.

"Then you just step aside," Sue squealed, "and I'll do it myself. Hmpf! Big, strong man, who needs you?" Pound, pound, pound. "Miss Ramsey!"

Catherine swung her legs over the side of the bed and caught a draft as her robe—

Robe? At least she'd had sense enough to slip out of her business wardrobe and don her robe.

Bringing a hand to her chest, she confirmed what she suspected—she was nude beneath the single garment covering her. She rubbed her eyes, and when her vision improved from blurred to fuzzy, she caught glimpses of her clothing strewn about the room. Panties on the floor, bra dangling off the dresser...

Goodness, what did I do?

"Miss Ramsey!" Lou's voice that time.

"I'm coming." She coughed and cleared her throat. "I'm coming!" When she stood, nausea churned in her gut, and the room spun. Her hand landed upon her discarded blouse, when she reached for the armchair for balance.

After grabbing blindly for the apparently absent sash, she clutched her robe closed and, squinting to block out the seven-hundred watt sunlight, wobbled toward the Fistons' wailing.

Sue nearly tumbled into the room when Catherine opened the door. The scorching red shade of her hair was harder on the eyes than the sun. *Scout was right. That was a bad idea.*

"Morning, Miss Ramsey. Are we...oh, my." With bugging eyes—a.k.a., the expression one used when she encountered the living dead—

APPLE PIE

Sue touched the back of her hand to Catherine's cheek. "Are you ill?"

"I'm running late, but I'll—"

"Now we know she's breathing, give her some space." Even as he ushered his wife back into the hallway, Scout fixed his eyes on the sofa across the room. "I've got to get to the clubhouse, have a look at Hennessy..." His eyes grew larger with every word. "And Miss Ramsey needs some time. Obviously."

Catherine glanced over her shoulder and did a double take. Her stockings—*stockings*—lay in a shimmery pile on the cushion. "Oh!"

The details of last night came back to her in hazy increments. *The sofa. A kiss. The young guy with longing in his green eyes. What did I do?*

Sue was rambling about the spa and pedicures, but Catherine couldn't focus when pictures of wrinkled collars and tight, young buns flitted through her mind like butterflies through a field.

"Sue will meet you at the spa."

The door slammed. Through it, she heard mumblings she wished she hadn't.

"Do you think she had a man in there?"

"Rock didn't raise her to—"

"What do you suppose she was doing with a man in her room?"

Good question.

Their speculating voices faded as Sue and Scout made their way down the corridor. Catherine collapsed onto the sofa and gathered the nylons. She'd removed her stockings like a trollop. Right in front of—what was his name? Matt? Mike?—Mark. And she'd left them there, where the Fists viewed them this morning.

Judging by the clothes strewn about the place, she pieced together what she figured she'd done with the young stud-muffin. Obviously, she'd shed her clothing along the way to the bed, then they'd gotten her money's worth out of the mattress.

APPLE PIE

Tears crept into her eyes as a feeling of inadequacy overcame her. No one had command over everything, and she'd long ago come to grips with knowing things happened beyond her control. But did she have to lose her grip on everything at once? First her father, then her husband and marriage, then her third baseman, and now she'd lost her integrity—sexually speaking.

What must Scout think of her? What would Rock have thought, if he'd happened upon her at such an inopportune time? She hadn't even signed her divorce papers yet, and there she was...her first night in Florida...fucking some random twenty-one—twenty-*three*—year-old to avenge LJ's poor judgment.

Funny how drunk and horny seemed to look just fine on a ballplayer, but on an owner's daughter...not so much. She wiped tears from her cheeks.

"Well." Sighing, she peeled herself up from the couch and headed for her bottle of extra strength aspirin and the shower. "I sure as hell hope I enjoy it."

* * *

Gator Field
Clearwater, Florida

Would she enjoy it as much as he would?

Now was not the time to ponder having his way with the voluptuous Catherine Ramsey-Hart, but try as he might, Mark couldn't forget the way she'd looked, sprawled across the bed.

In the bottom of the sixth, he swung on-deck under the watchful eyes of three major league scouts. Thus far, he'd hit mediocre at best—a double, a strikeout, and a pop fly—but he'd excelled with his fielding. He'd put his body in front of a nasty line drive, and now sported a huge, purple bruise on his bicep. As it turned out, the play had been worth the pain. The ball had ricocheted off his arm and into his glove.

APPLE PIE

What should've been a foul ball had become a double play, and the crowd had gone wild, chanting "Hen-ah-see! Hen-ah-see!"

Crack!

Rodriguez slammed one out to centerfield and had rounded first before Mark had time to blink. His teammate, safe at second, removed his batting glove, while the crowd cheered.

"Next up at bat, number eleven," the man behind the loud speaker announced. "Third baseman, Mark Hennessy. Hennessy."

Mark spat out sunflower seed shells and sauntered up to the plate. He took a deep breath and, holding his SP-73 Pro Maple bat between his knees, adjusted his batting gloves.

"Hen-ah-see! Hen-ah-see!" The crowd clapped in time with their chants.

He smiled and nodded toward the group of regulars seated behind the dugout. For a moment, he pushed out of his mind the money Kyle needed, and tried to forget about his father's condition.

Forget about why you must conquer this pitcher. Forget about the scouts. Remember the day you first swung a bat. Remember the day you fell in love with the game.

While cheering rang in his ears and the energy of the stadium buzzed in his nerves, his love for the game was the only thing that mattered.

He'd faced this pitcher, Randolph, before. This guy liked to take his time with each pitch, wiggle and dance, check all bases—even those unoccupied. *Quite all right. Two could play at that game.* When Randolph was finally set to pitch, Mark held up his hand and called time. The crowd went wild.

"Hen-ah-see! Hen-ah-see!"

Mark adjusted his gloves again, shifted his helmet, checked his bat. Killed time.

"Hen-ah-see! Hen-ah-see!"

APPLE PIE

He stepped up to the plate.
Randolph went through his ritual again. Pitched.
Mark swung. And connected.

* * *

Fort Sheridan
Waukegan, Illinois

After a night of no sleep, the last thing Kyle needed was to be summoned to the police station to answer more questions. Faith had talked to a lawyer, but she'd yet to retain one on his behalf. What was he supposed to do? Wing it at the station today? He didn't know much about the way the law worked on an army base, but what he knew he'd learned from *Law & Order*. He shouldn't talk without a lawyer present, and he knew, growing up in a military family, he should always address the officers as "sir."

He reached for his cell phone and dialed. "Faith, it's Kyle."

"I'm at work." She sounded impatient and overworked, as usual. Why anyone would go to college to get a shit-paying job that wore her to the bone was beyond him.

"I know you're busy. But...hey, any luck with Mark and the money to retain my lawyer?"

"He said he'd send what he could by tonight."

Kyle gritted his teeth. Tonight was too late. "Any chance you can float me a loan until—"

"Look, I don't know how else to say this. I'm tapped out. I have nothing left to offer you. When I say nothing, I mean nothing. I don't have anything green in my wallet, and I'm saving my coins for the tollway."

"Can you..." He took a deep breath. "I know you've done all you can, but...Faithy, this is my life we're talking about. Can you put the retainer on your credit card?"

APPLE PIE

“And who’s going to pay the bill? I don’t even have a card with that high a limit. Anyone would be crazy to give me one.”

“Do you think I like asking? I don’t know how to handle this deposition without a lawyer, Faith!”

His sister sighed and, after a moment, Kyle deduced she’d been fighting tears. There was one more option, and although he was fairly certain pursuing it was a bad idea, he said, “How about...you could ask Troy.”

“Absolutely not! You’re going to have to tell Mom and Dad, and ask them for a loan. I’ve done all I can.”

He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Thank you.”

As he hung up the phone, he vowed never to take this particular piece of advice, as it wasn’t Faith’s best. He’d simply do what they did on television—refuse to answer until his lawyer could be present. *Unless...*

Maybe Mark could offer some advice. Now.

* * *

Garden Hotel
Clearwater, Florida

Although Catherine had spent the entire day at the spa, she did not feel pampered, or even well-rested. For once, she couldn’t blame Sue Fiston’s incessant chatter for the stars circling her head. While her hangover had subsided, the dull sense of regret nagged where her headache once had pained her.

Thirty-two years old was not the age to start notching one-night-stands on her bedpost. For one thing, she was still married. By doing what she’d done with that kid last night, she’d stooped to LJ’s level. Obviously, LJ didn’t see anything wrong with extra-marital screwing, but she had morals, for Christ’s sake. And thanks to Mark, rather what she’d done with him, she was no better.

APPLE PIE

The bitch of it all was she'd actually enjoyed his company, until they'd ruined it by hitting the sheets.

Her cell phone buzzed, and she lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello."

"I hear you're being stubborn about our team."

All moisture left her tongue and her stomach flip-flopped when she recognized her husband's voice. "It isn't *our* team, LJ. Rock left it to me."

"As your spouse, I'm entitled to half. What do you say? You take the outfield, give me the infield." He chuckled.

"This isn't funny."

"Come on, lighten up."

"Lighten up? Lighten up! You're halfway across the world with another wom—with a girl who should be in study hall right now!"

"Let's be honest, Catherine. You weren't happy either."

"No, I wasn't, but I was trying, LJ." Tears burned down her cheeks, and it took all the willpower she could muster not to sob wildly in his ear. "I'm your wife, and I never broke my vows to you." She bit her lip. That wasn't true anymore. "Through it all, through the years you refused to touch me, when you didn't look at me for months—"

"Listen, I gave you the best I had."

"Should I be thankful your best involved neglect and adultery?" When she rolled her eyes, more tears fell.

"Guys like me...professional athletes...we're not made for monogamy. I did the best I could."

"So why not leave it with walking away? Why are you threatening to take my team?"

"Bellia's a little more demanding than you were. I don't think I can afford her shopping habit without a little extra income."

"A little extra? LJ, you grossed two-point-one million a year the last four years of your career! You were the highest paid infielder in the league!"

APPLE PIE

“You spent a lot of that, pumpkin, redecorating the house.”

Flames climbed up her spine and blazed out her ears. “I didn’t even make a *dent* in your pocketbook, you pompous ass!”

“No need for name-calling. I can be reasonable.”

“In that case, so can I. I won’t pursue half your assets, if you’ll forfeit half of mine. And from now on, if you have something to say, say it to my lawyer.” When she punched the end button on her cell phone, she cracked the nail on her index finger in half. “Damn! Damn, damn, damn!”

Five seconds later, before she’d managed to stop cursing or crying, Scout Fiston called with a dinner invitation. He’d found a third baseman.

* * *

Pier Eight Restaurant Clearwater, Florida

“Verve!” Scout pounded a fist onto a mahogany table.

Catherine, whose mind was stuck on her unpleasant conversation with LJ, jumped in surprise, but Sue didn’t so much as glance away from her compact. “Honey, do I have lipstick on my teeth?”

How the woman could see anything in that tiny mirror, with the lack of light in the restaurant, was a mystery. Catherine leaned in for a closer look. “No.”

“The kid’s got just what the city needs,” Scout continued.

Catherine refocused on her father’s best man. “What’s that, Scout?”

“All-American. This kid is baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet, and boy, did he have a good game!”

She painted on a smile. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

“You will. He’s meeting us here tonight to discuss his options.”

All she needed was another late night with another young man for company. Guilt rose up in her gut again.

APPLE PIE

"I think it's best to seal the deal," Scout continued. "He got another offer this afternoon, but we can lure him north with the right amount of incentive." Scout rubbed his thumb against his fingers, indicating he meant monetary incentive, as if there were any other kind in this business. "He has family in Chicago, and—" Scout's eyes lit up as he gazed over her shoulder. "Here he is now."

Catherine turned around, and she was too busy keeping her jaw from hitting the terra cotta floor to stop her eyes from growing as big as saucers. Her hands trembled and her heart clamored, as Mark—Mark from last night—strode toward her. "Low ball him," she whispered, grasping the back of her chair.

"He's exactly what we're looking for, Miss Ramsey. Great hands."

"Excuse me." She shot out of her seat like a firecracker and spun toward the ladies' room.

"Dear?" Sue finally looked up from her compact and reached—powder puff still in hand—for Catherine's wrist.

She rushed in the direction opposite the young stallion she'd met in the bar last night. "My apologies." She waved over her shoulder and bolted.

Safe in the confines of a pink quartzite bathroom, she splashed cold water onto her cheeks and swore some more. "This can't be happening."

"Was it something I said?"

When she looked up, she met Mark's gaze in the mirror. Jeez, he was a good-looking guy. Not a single wrinkle around his eyes, though there were plenty in his shirt. And, Mother Mary, did he know how to wear a pair of Levis! She took a deep breath, warding off the pheromones spiking the temperature between her legs.

"Did you miss the stick figure on the door? She's wearing a dress." Her glance traveled from his head to his toes—pausing only briefly at his well-packaged crotch—and back again. "Unless there's something I

APPLE PIE

don't know about you."

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

"I think I know more than enough."

"About last night—"

"Spare me the explanation." Suddenly, she realized that bent over the sink, she was offering him a full view of her ass. She stood and leaned a hip against the stone countertop. "I don't do...what we did last night."

"About that. We—"

"You knew who I was, and you took advantage of my condition."

"I knew who you were, Catherine, but I—"

"I hear you have another offer on the table."

He began to nod.

"I suggest you take it. I can't dissuade Scout from extending an offer. It seems you've impressed him, but our offer won't be a good one. And you may call me Ms. Ramsey." She brushed past him on her way toward the door.

He grasped her upper arm. "Last night, you asked me to call you—"

"I wasn't myself last night." Goose flesh rose on her arm where he held her and tingles sprinted up her spine. *Damn good hands.* Her reaction to his touch angered her, more perhaps than her poor judgment the night before. She pulled free.

"Catherine, I—"

"You thought you could sleep your way to the top of this ladder? Think again."

His tempting lips parted, but she escaped before he uttered a word. She didn't seat herself at the Fistons' table. Rather, she mumbled another apology, an order to low-ball-I'm-talking-league-minimum, and headed straight to the cab stand. She'd pack and catch the earliest flight back to O'Hare tomorrow morning. Scout and Sue would have to finish the trip without her.

APPLE PIE

* * *

*Fort Sheridan
Waukegan, Illinois*

Kyle did what Mark had told him to do. He'd requested Captain Whalen's presence at the questioning. Several times, he'd had dinner at the man's house before Brittney had crossed the ocean, and Kyle had been on his best behavior every time. He'd arrived with a bouquet, never drunk or the slightest bit high. He'd always been polite, and he'd never tried to lay a hand on Britt inside their home. He'd shaken the captain's hand. He'd worn a god-damned tie.

The captain didn't like him, per se, but he might see him as more human, due to their personal contact. Maybe the captain would protect him by association, Mark said, like any man would, and because of that, Kyle hoped to sleep well tonight.

"Have you anything to say before this round of questioning begins?" an MP asked.

"I know I have a reputation." He regarded the captain only, and drummed his fingers atop the metal table. No frills in this office, no frills in the Army. "But I maintain my innocence. Someone set me up."

Captain Whalen's mouth was a hard line, and his eyes were sharp as flint. "I'm trying not to make this personal, but you concern me. Not only because of my daughter, but because of your father."

"Permission to speak freely?"

The captain nodded.

"My father can't know about this. He's due for a triple bypass next week."

"We're aware." Captain Whalen turned toward his MPs. "Continue."

"You deny possession of the substance in question?"

"Yes, sir. It isn't my car, sir."

APPLE PIE

“Are you implying Captain Whalen’s daughter is to blame?”

“No, sir.”

A bag of crinkled, olive-green leaves settled on the table before him. “Recognize this?”

Kyle couldn’t stop the smile coming on. Who did these guys think they were dealing with? He might’ve been a screw-up, but he wasn’t a moron. “Yes, sir. But it isn’t mine, sir. I have no use for that sort of thing.”

* * *

*675 Madera Terrace, Apartment #206
Clearwater, Florida*

She thought they’d slept together!

Mark tossed his keys to his bureau and yanked his shirt from his waistband.

God, if he knew she’d assume so anyway, he would’ve spent the night. Not to fuck her—when, or if, *that* happened, he wanted her full participation—but he would’ve stayed just to be with her. He’d done the right thing, and look where it had landed him.

“Ohhhh, baby!” came a moan from next door.

And he did not have the energy to listen to Gretchen-come-lately tonight. After emptying his pockets of change, dryer lint, and his cell phone, he turned up the volume on the ten o’clock news.

Catherine had been right about her team’s offer, which couldn’t have been any lower. No surprise, when he considered his batting average. Scout Fiston had suggested he think about the offer over night, and asked that he keep possible promotional opportunities in mind.

“Verve!” Scout had said. “And you’re a hometown kind of boy! I smell endorsements!”

Everyone expected him to go for the higher dollar amount, and he might’ve done so without a thought, had Kyle not called earlier,

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begging for help.

Obviously, their sister was at the end of her rope, and it was time to take the burden off her back. In the past, baseball had kept Mark away from his family. It was time the sport brought him back home. But could he afford to take the lower salary? What kind of fool turned down nearly double the money for virtually the same job?

It came down to what he thought his family needed most. Him? Or his money? No matter how he tried to convince himself, the latter was most likely more important. Money could provide an at-home nurse for his father after the operation. Money would retain Kyle's lawyer and pay his fees. Money could send Faith on a vacation every now and then.

In time with Gretchen's next crescendo-like scream, Mark groaned and lowered his tired body to the mattress.

* * *

Lake Shore Drive
Chicago, Illinois

Surrounded by the walls of her father's—that is, *her*—office, Catherine stared at her divorce papers, which multiplied every time she turned around. That morning, her lawyer had sent LJ's a petition for spousal support via courier. She didn't need alimony. Didn't want it either. But it was leverage, a scare tactic. If LJ wanted to violate the prenuptial agreements—they'd each signed one—and go after half the team, she had to fight for half his assets, too.

What a headache.

Worse, whilst she dealt with all the drama in her marriage—or rather what had happened outside her marriage—and tied up the loose ends of Rock's estate, she'd left the team in management's hands. The season would begin without her close supervision, which Rock never would have wanted. Thankfully, things were running like a fine-oiled

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cog.

No one needs an owner, especially a female one, except on payday.

Scout, now home with a third baseman in tow, assured her the new kid's salary was in compliance with Rock's business plan. Jerald would start the season, just as Scout had suggested, but in the event his ankle wasn't as ready as the team physicians thought, the new player would be ready by the all-star break to take the diamond by storm. She wondered if this mysterious third baseman's hands were as good as Mark Hennessy's, and whether she'd done the team a disservice by low-balling the poor kid just because she'd had a lapse in good judgment.

If recent events proved anything, it was that Catherine had no business running a major league ball club. Already, she'd let her feelings get in the way of the game, and while she had several good reasons for being emotional, she felt like one of those women who used that-time-of-the-month as an excuse to lose her mind for a few days.

Men didn't carry on this way, weeping over spouses lost to stick figures, wondering how Rock would've handled this or that. Men would've handled things, period. Baseball was a boys' club, and maybe it did make sense to allow a former player to run it. LJ had played the game after all, and the closest she'd come to playing involved the removal of her panties on center field at midnight.

Revelations be damned, half a second later, she scrawled her name over the first of many documents. There was no way LJ was going to lay claim to her team. *No way at all!* And if divorce was what he wanted, if he wanted to give up on their vows, fine. *Good riddance! The sooner I move on, the better!*

"Ms. Ramsey?"

"What?" Her retort sounded full of irritability, but she didn't have time to care. She was on a roll, signing, scrawling. Such catharsis!

"May I..."

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She glanced up from her stack of paperwork and did a double-take. There, standing in her doorway, wearing a denim oxford, complete with rumpled collar, and grasping a black-and-white jersey sporting the number eleven, was the guy she'd met in Clearwater. *Mark, with the intriguing eyes and the gorgeous everything else.* An urgent rush of need tantalized the tender flesh between her thighs. If only she could remember how he'd satisfied that need for her. Had he employed oral tactics in foreplay? Had he fingered the oblivion out of her? Perhaps she'd been ready enough not to need foreplay. Maybe he'd gotten right down to business with her.

He chewed on his lip and gave her a nod. Finally, his lower lip rolled out from between his teeth, as if inviting her to suck on it.

She shook some sense into herself and reconnected with his gaze. "What can I do for you?"

"I know this highly unorthodox, but Scout let me in."

Thanks, Scout.

"I wanted to thank you."

Again, she employed Rock's eyebrow lift. "For?" The moment she said it, she prayed for a less than tawdry reply. For the great, no-strings sex, she imagined he might say. For making a complete fool of yourself and making yourself available.

"For giving me a chance."

She hadn't given him a chance. She'd given him a reason to go to Denver. Who knew the kid actually had ideals, and would actually follow his heart?

"League minimum is hardly a chance," she said.

"It is for a guy like me." Steadily, he approached and, flashing a grin, splayed his jersey across her desk—directly atop her divorce papers. "They even gave me my favorite number."

"Congratulations." She tried to sound unaffected, but she knew her eyes told another story. "Welcome to the bigs."

APPLE PIE

He leaned over her desk and his masculine scent wafted over her, turning her knees to jelly and stealing her breath.

She dropped her pen.

"Listen." His voice was like a sultry lullaby. "About what happened that night."

"I don't think we should discuss that night."

"I think you're an amazing woman."

Perspiration kissed her bosom like morning dew. "I don't usually drink like that, and I—"

"It's all right. I know my place."

At the moment, the place she wanted to be was spread eagle on the floor with this hunk's cock sliding in and out of her like a piston. Had she wanted LJ like this—with such wanton lust? And why did she want one of her players at all? Regardless of what had happened in Florida, following this urge wasn't a good idea.

His eyes narrowed, and he cracked a smile. "I don't expect special treatment just because—"

"Yes, you do." She sat up straight. *Of course! He was here for one thing—to romance a larger salary out of her!* "You do expect special treatment because we did...what we did...that night."

He was closer now, leaning in, whispering in her ear. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. I respect you, Catherine."

When she looked into his eyes, glimpses of a profound connection surfaced. There was a reason she'd kissed him that night, and now she felt her insides softening, begging her to do it again.

"Thank you for bringing me back home. To my family."

Family. The single word made her like him, when she wanted to treat him with indifference.

"My father's operation is coming up, and I can't tell you..."

His words faded, replaced with memories of their night in Florida. The sofa, the kiss. Her eyes glazed over, as she remembered. *That's*

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why she'd kissed him. "That's right. Your father."

She knew what it felt like to watch a strong man slip away, and she used to think she was too young to lose the man who'd influenced her more than anyone. But looking at Mark...she had nine years on him, and she couldn't imagine going through the tragedy of burying a parent at twenty-three.

With a somber look on his face, he licked his lips and nodded. "I haven't been here for them, you know? But now I can be."

"Good." She nodded, entranced with his serious expression...and intrigued by his dedication to his family. *Scout was right about him. All-American. Apple pie.* "Congratulations."

"Well, I just wanted to say thanks." He gathered his jersey and winked. "I'll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing."

She blinked away the glaze in her eyes in time to catch him before he'd exited. "Wait a minute."

He looked over his shoulder.

"I'll arrange for tickets to our season opener for your family."

"That'll be nice. Thanks."

"Your father...and your sister ...How many tickets do you need?"

"There are four of them."

"They'll be at the Will Call window."

"I appreciate that." He disappeared behind the door.

After a few moments, she picked up her pen and signed her name to yet another page.

"Hey, just a thought." He peeked back in. "Want to grab dinner?"

"Dinner?"

"Nothing too fancy. I mean, I only make the league minimum." His smile illuminated his entire face.

She smiled in return. "Sure."

* * *

APPLE PIE

Waukegan, Illinois

"Thanks for bailing me out." Kyle climbed out of Faith's Ford Escort and looked at her across the hood. She would've been at the Fort Sheridan lock-up earlier, if she'd have considered skipping half a day of work.

"Don't thank me. Thank Mark."

Mark? "He sent the money?"

"No, he brought it personally."

"He's home?"

"Yeah. He said he was coming to help out with Dad...and you." She didn't smile, but she looked much calmer than she'd sounded the other day. "And you have to learn to watch your tongue. Mocking a superior officer! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking his men arrested me for possession of his daughter's dried herbs." He'd yet to prove his theory, but he shrugged and hiked his backpack up another inch on his shoulder, as if he were home free. "And he knew he was doing it, too."

"Superior officers don't do that sort of thing."

"Fathers of daughters do, when they hate their boyfriends." Kyle didn't elaborate, but during his night in the clink, he'd learned Brittney hadn't been quiet about his late night phone calls. The captain threatened that if Kyle didn't break it off with his daughter, there'd be more trouble—more than two-point-six grams of trouble. "And if that bag wasn't full of oregano, it was more pot than I've seen at one time."

"More than two-point-six grams?"

"Believe it or not, Faith, I don't know what two-point-six grams looks like."

"You really think he's trying to scare you away from his daughter?" Faith tapped her fingernails against the rust spot on the roof of her car.

Kyle nodded. "I've been saying it since the second they slapped the

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cuffs on me—I didn't hide anything in that car."

* * *

*333 West 35th Street
Chicago, Illinois*

"It's the top of the eighth, and Jerald is limping off the field," the sportscaster announced. "This doesn't look good for the good guys."

Bullets of sweat appeared instantly at Mark's temples. *What's Jerald doing? He barely rolled his ankle. He has to be all right.* The stadium looked enormous from his safe haven in the dugout, and the prospect of heading onto that field left a lump in his throat.

The announcer continued. "Jerald was last year's third string, but recent roster changes landed him in the starting position this season. If the ankle's given out again, that leaves third base in the hands of rookie Mark Hennessy, awarded his jersey only days ago. Management brought Hennessy up from the double-A club in Clearwater, Florida."

The infield coach nodded at Mark. "Get out there, Hennessy."

Mark swallowed hard. *This is it.* Glove on hand, he trotted up the dugout steps and into streams of lights illuminating the field.

No chants of "Hen-ah-see!" welcomed him, but the crowd roared, just the same. He turned to acknowledge them and nearly lost his breath. Cameras flashed and flickered throughout the lower grandstand, and when his gaze trailed up toward box seats and the upper deck, the pounding in his chest warmed into pride. He could do this. He'd been doing it his entire life, and there was no feeling quite like this.

His father was in the stands tonight, the last extra-curricular activity before open-heart surgery. Faith was there, as was Kyle and his mother. He took his position and smiled up at the owner's box. And Catherine Ramsey-Hart was in *there*.

* * *

APPLE PIE

“What can I say?” Mark lifted the cap from his head, wiped sweat from his brow, and spoke into the microphone. Flashbulbs lit up the field, and while he knew he wasn’t the only player being interviewed, at the moment, he felt as if all eyes were on him, instead of just—more likely—his family’s. “I appreciate the chance the team’s given me, and the coach’s confidence.”

Bundled in her woolen coat, the female reporter tucked a tendril behind her ear when a frigid breeze whisked past. “Rumor has it you deserve a raise.”

As many times as he’d fantasized his first interview, he’d never dreamt his answers would flow naturally, from the hip. So far, he hadn’t used any of his practiced responses. He couldn’t stop the grin from overtaking him. “Well, I deserve what they offer.”

“Do you expect a better offer?”

“Naw.” He shook his head. “Who am I? I’m a kid from the army base at Fort Sheridan, and until I prove myself, I’m nobody.”

“You don’t think you proved yourself out there tonight?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “The only thing I need to prove is that I love this game, and I’m glad I’m playing it here in Chicago. God, it’s good to be back home!”

* * *

What an interview. Catherine turned off the television in her private skybox and turned to the Fistons. “You were right, Scout. The kid’s a winner. Loves the game, loves Chicago...and a nice blurb about the military, for good measure.”

“Verve, I tell you!” Scout helped Sue, now with a calmer shade of red hair, to her feet. “He deserves more than league minimum.”

Sue slapped at her husband’s hand. “You and your I-told-you-so. Can’t you gracefully acknowledge—”

“Graceful! You’re one to talk about grace.”

Sue looked over her shoulder. “Are you coming, Miss Ramsey?”

APPLE PIE

“Not tonight. I think I need some time.”

Scout approached, and patted her on the head. “There are people who understand what you’re feeling.” He spoke quietly, out of Sue’s earshot. With a wink, he turned and escorted his wife out of the skybox. Her heart warmed with the rare sight of Scout and Sue’s loving looks.

It appeared she had more in common with Mark than love for the game, and suddenly, she longed for the comfort of his company. Dinner with him the other night had been easy, enjoyable. They’d talked about the game the entire time, discussing his hopes and dreams. She couldn’t help thinking Rock would’ve approved of him—in many capacities. As a ballplayer, *and* as company for his daughter.

Attending this game without her father had been harder than she’d imagined. At high points of the game—particularly when Hennessy caught a line drive and fired it off to second before his feet hit the ground—she caught herself glancing toward the leather armchair, where Rock had always sat.

The skybox smelled like him, felt like him, surrounded her like a bear hug. She sank against the comfort of her own regular seat—a deep, suede loveseat—and wrapped her arms around her body.

After a while, thoughts of her father blended with thoughts of Mark Hennessy and the battle his father was fighting. As impractical and inappropriate as it was, she longed to hold her third baseman, assure him that, while his father’s recovery wouldn’t be easy, it would be better than the alternative. She wished Rock had had a chance to recover.

Her father hadn’t known his heart was weak, and by the time he realized he had a problem, he’d been slumped over his desk in his Gold Coast condo, in the middle of a massive heart attack. The entire league grieved with her, but she mourned alone. LJ had stood at her side until Rock’s casket disappeared into the hole in the snow-covered earth, but then her husband had fled, presumably to the comforting arms of the

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exotic Bellia Scuzzi.

Mark should know she understood the fear he must be feeling. She wanted him to know she'd be there for him, should something go awry on the operating table. And no sooner had the thought crossed her mind than she realized she *would* be there. Not because Mark had sparked a flame in her drawers, not because he loved the game as much as she did, but because she wished someone had been there for her.

If nothing else, he was part of her team, and teams stuck together. Even the Fistons, for all of their bickering, knew what it meant to stand by one another.

Some team she and LJ had turned out to be. She'd signed the last of the papers before game time today. One era ended as another began.

She pulled herself out of the loveseat and meandered toward the window, where she gazed down at her now-barren field, surrounded by empty stands. Once upon a time, she'd made love on that diamond. It seemed only fitting that the grounds staff just now covered it with a tarp, as if preserving what it represented to her—sharing her life with another. A cold reminder she was alone.

"Miss Ramsey?" Maintenance staff rapped on the door and peeked inside. "Do you need anything else?"

She pulled her coat from the hall tree. "I'm going to have a look at the field tonight. Will you alert the grounds crew, so they'll leave a few lights on for me?"

"Sure thing, miss."

"I appreciate it."

"Tonight wasn't the same without him, miss."

"No, it wasn't. Thank you."

She strode through the stadium club and past the team locker room, where sounds of a dying celebration emanated out into the cold night air. By now, most of the players would have been dressed, and they'd be leaving soon. Home to their wives and children, or off to the latest

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downtown hot spot, where they'd meet lovely ladies, whom they'd discuss at practice tomorrow.

She made her way to the dugout, where she and LJ had first consummated their love. But she wouldn't be thinking about her soon-to-be ex tonight. She'd decided that before she saw Mark Hennessy, clad in his team jacket and jeans, gazing out over the field, leaning against the dugout railing. But once she'd caught sight of him, she'd decided it all over again.

"Good game today." She pulled her coat more tightly around her body and smiled when he looked her way.

"I never imagined..." He was grinning like a cat with a paw in the fish bowl. "God, it was amazing! Looking into the stands from the field...amazing."

One by one, the stadium lights shut off, dimming the scene, until only the bullpen light and those in the stadium club shone. Mark was a silent silhouette against backlight, but by the way he stood, hands clasped on the railing and chin up, Catherine sensed the magic of the atmosphere still awed him.

"Listen." She briskly rubbed her arms and looked out over the dark field. "Given what happened in Clearwater, this might be awkward for you, but I want you to know I'll be here for you, you know, through your father's ordeal." She sounded so false, so neighbor-with-a-cup-of-sugar, but his "Thanks" was sincere.

"It's a terrible time to feel alone. I know." Her gaze trailed back to him, and she found he'd been staring at her. "You have a close family, but if you need to talk to someone not so involved, or whatever you need, let me know."

"Actually, there *is* something I need." He inched closer and, amid the dim illumination, she could see his smile had faded. "I need to set the record straight with you about Florida."

"I've already told you—"

APPLE PIE

“First of all, I knew who you were—that’s true.”

“We don’t have to talk about this.” She tried to look away, but the clean scent of recently showered male lured her. As did the finger brushing a curl from her cheek. A shiver danced up her spine. “You know what? Let’s just forget it happened, wipe the slate clean, and—”

“You want to get a drink or something?” His voice was husky, seductive.

“Considering what happened last time I had a drink in your company, no. Not really.”

“Ms. Ramsey, with the exception of a shockingly memorable kiss, *nothing* happened that night. I’ve been trying to tell you—”

“You don’t have to say that, Mark. I appreciate it, but I’m a grown woman, and I’m responsible for my own actions, and you have to understand. I was thirsty for attention. Parched. LJ hasn’t kissed me—really kissed me—”

“His loss.”

“In years.”

“I think about that kiss a lot.” He licked his lips. “I wonder what it might’ve led to, had things been different that night. If you hadn’t recently lost your father, if your husband wasn’t the biggest idiot on the face of the earth. If my brother hadn’t just created another stressful situation for my family. I like to think things might’ve escalated, if you’d had a clear head that night.”

“Things escalated enough on their own, don’t you think?” Her voice was a whisper in the wind, but apparently, he heard her because he touched her elbow.

“You want to know the truth, Catherine?”

His fingers massaged her arm, sending jolts of desire rushing through her veins. She nearly gasped with the feeling, coupled with the look in his smoldering eyes.

“I looked at you”—his hand traveled up to her shoulder and back

APPLE PIE

again—“stole glimpses of your belly, your thighs, and even your breasts. I wanted you—*God*, I wanted you—but I didn’t lay a hand on you. I tucked you in and left you. It’s what I’d want for my sister, and I know it’s not a popular thing to do among athletes, but I’m not the usual ballplayer.”

There was nothing usual about him. She realized that now. His answers to the interviewer’s questions, his élan, his love for the game...all genuine. He wasn’t a smooth-talker. He told the truth. She relaxed under his caressing and allowed her jacket to fall open.

His fingers folded around her hand. “Believe me, if we’d done what you think we did, you’d remember it, and I’d be thinking about a hell of a lot more than a kiss, a hell of a lot more often.”

“You flatter me. You’re so young—”

“I’m old enough.” He flashed a smile.

“And you can have any woman you want.”

“Is that right? In that case...” He stepped in closer and slipped an arm into her coat and around her waist.

She gasped.

“Are you still married?” His spearmint breath wafted over her lips.

She felt heady, tingly. “Legally, I’m separated, but it won’t be long before I’m a free wom—”

“Good.” He licked his lips and pulled her body tight to his. “I don’t do this with other men’s wives.” He lowered his mouth to hers in a sweet, open-lipped kiss.

When her eyes flickered open, she saw him staring down at her, with serious, penetrating eyes.

“You deserve so much more than the hand you’re playing,” he whispered.

“Thank you.” She focused on his eyes, and dared to dream about falling for him, about staring into his sage eyes as he made love her night after night after night after—

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"I'll walk you to your car." He began to lead her away, but she held her ground.

"Wait."

"Catherine."

"We have a connection. I feel it." She swallowed hard. "And I don't know what it means, but you make me feel...I don't know...alive. And I haven't felt this alive since...I don't know when."

Her flesh sizzled beneath his touch, and those familiar sparks started popping in her nether regions. She knew what she needed, what she wanted. She grabbed his official team jacket and yanked him closer. "Put up or shut up, Hennessy."

"Catherine"—she loved the sound of her name, when he spoke it—"if we do this now...with everything going on with my dad, and LJ..."

"You're wiser than you look." She brushed his lips with hers. He was right, of course. Bad timing. Bad location. Their first time should be someplace special, at an appropriate time. Her new condo, maybe. Or his. But not here. Not where LJ Hart had devoured her. Then again, what better way to wash the memory away than to replace it?

His chest rose and fell against her, stimulating her now-hard nipples, and she realized he was struggling to keep control. One corner of his mouth twitched upward.

"Call it a celebration," she whispered.

Suddenly, her back was against the dugout wall, and Mark's mouth sealed hers with a deep kiss. One of his hands raked through her hair, and the other hiked her up higher against the wall. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing her silk to his denim, he groaned and bunched her rayon skirt around her upper thighs.

His lips trailed to her neck, melting kisses over her flesh. She felt soft and feminine in his rugged embrace. He felt trim and sinewy and hard and masculine against her, and because it had been so god-awful long since her husband had entertained her body, her nerves were

APPLE PIE

sparking like livewire. "I need this."

He yanked her blouse from the waistband of her skirt, and explored beneath it, tweaking at her nipples with gentle fingers, kneading her flesh. She reached to unfasten her buttons, to allow him full access, and the moment he brushed his lips over her bra, his mouth on her bare breasts became a necessity.

As if he could read her mind, he unclipped the front clasp and freed her bosoms, buried his face in her cleavage.

"I have dreams about these breasts." He took one in his mouth and sucked. Hard. Swirling his tongue around her nipple, he sent a jolt directly to her clitoris, which she rubbed against his fly.

"You need so much attention." He yanked on his belt and tore open his fly, as his lips followed a path to her mouth. "You deserve it."

Out sprang his shaft, smooth, beautiful and rock-hard. He nudged its head against her clit, and she tensed amid the pleasure. "Do you have anything?"

"Yes," he murmured. The head of his dick parted her outer labia and may as well have struck gold for the friction it caused against her clit. "But I don't need it."

"We shouldn't—"

"I'm not going to make love you," he said between kisses.

"So, fuck me instead."

"Not here. Not tonight."

With every stroke between her legs, her pussy became wetter and needier. She tightened her grip on his shoulders and bucked against his cock. "Fuck me."

"No."

"I want it."

"So do I." As he lowered his body to his knees, he lifted her, to align her privates with his mouth. Her thighs rested on his shoulders, her high-heeled shoes dug into his back, and her fingers knotted in his

APPLE PIE

hair.

He pulled aside her panties. His tongue darted in, and his lips closed over her hard, sensitive nub. *Suck.*

"I'm going to come," she breathed.

* * *

He sucked harder and brushed his tongue faster and faster, lapping against the walls of her cunt.

His cock twitched—*feed me*—and while he had no intention of sating himself tonight, he longed to enter her, to love her right. She was thirsty for it.

As he drank from her, he reached to stroke his shaft.

"Ohhh. Please," she whispered. "Please! I want to feel you inside me."

Better give the lady what she wants.

"Please. I need it."

While his tongue was fast at work, he fished in his back pocket for his wallet. From it, he extracted a condom.

Her thighs tensed at his cheeks. "I'm coming, I'm coming!" She yanked at his hair and writhed on his mouth, unashamed, unafraid, uninhibited.

Damn! Experienced women held an advantage over the young ones. Once she stopped rutting on his mouth, he maneuvered to open and apply the condom. She'd just barely caught her breath when he stood, jeans and boxers around his knees, and slammed up into her.

Hot, wet woman surrounded his shaft, and he swore he heard the pipe organ burst out a chorus of *Charge!* She gripped and massaged him with her insides, enticing him to dip into her with rhythmic strokes.

Her mouth landed on his, and he could've kissed her for a decade. Why her husband had chosen to neglect her mouth, let alone her body, was an enigma he had no desire to unravel. Not when he'd unraveled *her*.

APPLE PIE

"It feels *so* good to be with someone who doesn't come in two minutes. Never stop. Never stop."

"Never."

Their tongues tangled, and he slipped in and out of her hole with precision, taking care to fill her completely with each entrance. "I want you to gush on my cock."

"Ohh, keep talking to me."

"Your husband never talked to you?"

Slam, slam, slam.

"Not. Any. More. Ohhhhh."

Her breasts jiggled against his chest. "I could kiss your nipples for hours."

"Oh."

"I want to. I want it all."

"Oh."

"Can I have it all, sweetheart?"

"Oh, yes." Her arms tightened around him.

"Reverse cowgirl?"

"Yes!"

"So I have a great view of this great ass?" He squeezed each cheek.

"Yes!"

"Will you massage yourself?"

"Yes!"

"Can you make yourself come?"

"Yes!"

A warm gush of her fluid saturated his cock, and kept coming. But he wasn't done with her. Not by a long shot.

* * *

*Sherman Hospital
Elgin, Illinois*

APPLE PIE

Mark arrived, jetlagged and exhausted, in the best cardiac unit in Illinois an hour after the bypass had been pronounced a success. Hours ago, he'd played against the Oakland As, and now, he was ready to relieve Faith of her post. He'd been on the go so often, home had become a mélange of memories—Christmas with Kyle and Faith, shrieking Gretchen, West Thirty-fifth Street, Mom's pot roast.

He sat on a hard chair at his father's bedside. Faith had been right. He'd aged considerably since Mark had moved to Florida, but now on the road to recovery, his color was improving. "How is he?"

"You have to force him to do his breathing exercises, but don't worry. He won't remember you bullying him. He's kind of out of it." His sister yawned and stretched. "He's babbling a lot. I can't make sense of what he's saying, but whatever it is, it's about Kyle."

"What's up with Kyle's mess?"

"I'm not sure what strings Captain Whalen pulled, but the charges have been dropped."

"Dropped?"

Faith began to gather her things. "Kyle's been saying he was set up, and apparently, the captain agrees it's a possibility. In hind sight, it worked itself out without your bankroll, but I didn't know what else to do. I'm sorry I—"

"Don't be. You've been handling too much on your own for a long time now. I'm glad I could help."

She hoisted a tote bag over her shoulder. "I wish I could stay and catch up with you, but I have an early day at work tomorrow."

"Heard from Troy?"

With lips pressed together she shook her head. "No. Not in a long time."

"He'll call."

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"I'll see you Sunday, right?"

APPLE PIE

"Dinner for Dad's homecoming, right." She pecked him on the cheek on her way toward the door. "Oh, I almost forgot. Your friend Catherine was here. She left you a note."

Mark's gaze traveled to the white envelope propped on the rollaway tray. "When was she here?"

"You missed her by an hour or so. We're taking shifts with Dad. Mom'll relieve you around eleven, and she'll stay with him overnight. Sorry you have to do this so soon after your game, but—"

"Faith, I want to be here. Go home. Relax."

* * *

*Fort Sheridan
Waukegan, Illinois*

"I'm sorry for what my dad did." Brittney's tired voice sounded over the line. "Jeez, trying to entrap you with oregano? Especially now, with your dad's operation, I don't know why he'd do such a thing. I mean, I know he doesn't like you, but..."

Recently, he'd learned Captain Whalen hadn't acted alone. Major Hennessy, while under deep sedation, had admitted to having a hand in the pie also. The whole thing was a ploy to scare Kyle straight, in case something unforeseen happened during the bypass surgery. The major felt it was time his youngest son learned to keep himself out of trouble. A rather elaborate scheme, but Kyle had to admit it might have worked, had he not recognized Britt's herbs.

"Listen, I know you have a lot of studying to do, and practical exams, and all that, so I won't be calling you for a while," Kyle said.

"Are you breaking up with me? Are you letting him win?"

"No, Britt. I need some time to get my head together, figure out what I want to do with my life. When you come home in May, you can decide if you want the new me."

She sighed. "You've been a royal pain, you know."

APPLE PIE

“So I’ve heard.”

“If anyone should be dumping anyone, it’s me.”

“You’re right.”

“You know I might not be willing to take you back.”

“I’ll understand.”

“You want my car for the rest of the term? Your sister has enough to do without carting you around. I can talk to my dad, and—”

“No, thanks. I have to learn to do things on my own.”

* * *

Sherman Hospital
Elgin, Illinois

Mark opened the envelope. A single page spilled into his hands. *You know where to find me.*

He closed his eyes and pictured her flowing, black hair, her intriguing, violet eyes. He imagined the sweet taste of her pussy, the gush of her orgasm. Desire, need, lust. He’d missed her during his trip to Oakland, and while he’d had plenty of opportunity to sow some oats, he’d wanted none of it. The memory of their rendezvous in the dugout had sustained him during the road trip, but it wouldn’t be enough forever. Eventually—now, actually—he’d need another fix.

It wasn’t her body, or even their sexual connection, that he craved. It was *her*. All of her. She was the whole package.

When the nurse came for evening rounds, Mark slipped out to make a phone call. “Catherine? Hi, it’s Mark.”

“You made it back safely from Oakland. Had a good game.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I heard Nike’s looking at you. They like the all-American types.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see.”

“Whatever *it* is, you have it. Only a matter of time now. Just so you know, if you land a gig like that, you’ll have to learn how to iron a

shirt.”

“Don’t worry about my collars.” He chuckled. “I found a service.”

“How’s your dad?”

“He appears to be getting better. Thanks for stopping by. Means a lot. I’m sorry I missed you, but traffic from O’Hare was terrible.”

“Well, I know what you’re going through, and I’m here if you need me.”

“Interesting you should mention need.”

“About what happened in the dugout that night...” She sighed.

He braced himself, waiting to hear how she thought it had been a mistake. It *had* happened quickly, and it hadn’t been all that romantic, considering they were in a dark, uncomfortable dugout on a forty-degree night.

“Wow.” She laughed. “I mean...wow. Talk about need.”

He released his held breath. “I assure you, need is no laughing matter. What are you doing Sunday afternoon?”

“That depends. What do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know...kind of a date, I guess. Do you date younger men, or do you draw the line at kisses that leave us contemplating you for days on end?”

“As a matter of fact, I *don’t* date younger men. Sorry.”

“Pity for you. I was going to invite you out to Fort Sheridan for my father’s homecoming. My Great Aunt Buffy’ll be there. She collects Hummels. The company will be stunning. You might want to invite the Fistsons.”

“In that case, I might make an exception for you.”

He grinned. “I promise. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’ve seen your stats, Hennessy. I just might take a chance on you.”

PENNY DAWN

All right, so who among us doesn't have a few demons to exorcise?

Penny Dawn began her writing career at the tender age of seven, before she realized it's impossible to be All Good, All the Time...at least in the religious sense (grinning like a Cheshire.) Romantic stories with passionate twists have since become this Good Girl's forte...and she unleashes her demons on paper, over and over and over again.

Penny Dawn holds a B. A. in history and English from Northern Illinois University and an M. A. in Creative Writing from Seton Hill University, whose alumnae include spicy novelists Jacki King, Shannon Hollis, Suzanne Forster, Dana Marton, and others. When she isn't writing, Penny enjoys tap, ballet, and jazz dance, photography, physical fitness, and renovating her 1906 Victorian Lady with her husband and two daughters.

Drop by her website www.pennydawn.com to discuss all things decadent.

* * *

***Don't miss Blue Silver: Making Noise, by Penny Dawn,
available at AmberHeat.com!***

Youth counselor Faith Hennessy is experiencing a summer drought, which has nothing to do with the weather. Her would-be boyfriend/sometime-musician Shontae has been making and breaking

plans for months, her career demands the wardrobe of a kindergartner, and over-wrought with sexual frustration, she threatens to wear out her Vibraltex. Musicians can't commit, and at long last, she's quitting them. When faced with the opportunity to live out an old fantasy with four high-school friends and a backstage pass, however, Faith rediscovers the woman she used to be.

Once all-the-rage, Blue Silver kicks off a comeback tour in central Pennsylvania. Camera-shy drummer Troy Douglas steps back into the limelight that nearly destroyed him a decade ago. Only after a trip to India and a failed marriage has he regained a sense of inner-settling. If he didn't possess a passion for making music, he'd never pick up his sticks again. There are certain advantages to life on the road, however, and he spies one at the New Moon Lounge before the show.

If he expects to make a little noise with this brunette beauty, he has his work cut out for him. Not only is Faith preoccupied with a pregnant ward-of-the-court gone AWOL, she's sworn off musicians, as well. But Troy's determined to charm her out of her cat suit.

Paparazzi, homeless teens, life on the road. Yet amid it all, two passing ships in the night find peace and serenity...and a connection through the waters of the Great Lakes.

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