

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

MR. *Fullservice*

RUBY STORM

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Mr. Fullservice

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MR. FULLSERVICE

Ruby Storm

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Chapter One

Maisy Collins braced herself over all fours. Her breasts swayed slightly as she adjusted her position to better the entry. Spine arching, she reached back to grasp the hard tool that would shortly make her life much more bearable. Though she hated this pose, it was something she had to do. She had no choice.

Her fingers tightened around the unseen steely hardness resting in her palm. Bracing herself on her opposite elbow, she spread her knees wider and prepared herself for the odious task.

Everything happened at once. At the same moment something wet and round prodded the line of her ass, she squealed, jerked her head up and banged it hard against the leaking pipe. Stars burst inside her brain when the wrench flew out of her hand.

Clutching her bruised scalp, she backed out from beneath the sink, flipped onto her butt and gasped one breath after another to help ease the stinging pain. Still wincing from the horrible ache, she squinted through one narrowed eye at her dog sitting on the rug. His furry head tipped in wonder at the odd sucking noises wheezing through her compressed lips.

"Max, you son of a bitch," she gritted.

His ears instantly perked at the sound of his name.

Maisy continued to rub the swelling bump and leaned back against the open cabinet door until the pain eased a bit. Finally with an exasperated sigh, she glared once more at the yellow lab. "You keep your nose where it belongs," she muttered. "Damn!" she winced out again. Her head hurt like hell.

Max woofed as his tail swished against the kitchen linoleum.

Try as she might Maisy couldn't stop the grin that tugged at the corner of her mouth. The silly son of a bitch actually looked like he was smiling. Max was such a goofy-looking lab. More white than yellow, ears too long and legs so short that he'd earned the moniker of "culvert dog" by her ex-husband Ted.

"He never did like you, Max," she mused aloud. "Screw him. We should have given him the heave-ho a lot sooner than we did." She reached out with one hand to pat the animal because the fingers of the other still massaged her aching scalp. "Now that the kids are in college it's just you and me and we can say anything we want about the old turd, can't we?"

Max let out a yip and raced to the cabinet that held his treats.

"I said 'turd', Max, not 'treat'."

Now, however, the dog spun circles with yips of excitement. With a sigh, she heaved herself up from the floor and shuffled along behind him. Once a dog biscuit was

in hand, she ordered the lab to sit and shake a paw. With a wry snort, she flipped him the goody.

Maisy plopped into a chair and watched Max lick up the last few crumbs from the floor. Once the dog realized he wasn't going to get another treat, he flopped down, lifted a back leg and began to lick his balls in earnest.

Maisy snorted a humorless laugh. "Too bad Ted couldn't do that. It would have saved him the trouble of begging me all the time and me telling him to go to hell."

Her chocolate brown gaze moved from Max and settled back on the leaking pipe beneath the sink. She'd been fighting the damn drip for over a week and just couldn't get it fixed. It was getting worse. As much as she hated to spend the money, she would have to concede defeat and call a plumber.

Her body jerked with a start when the phone rang beside her. Reaching up, she grabbed it without moving from the chair. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mom!"

"Hey, Nick. What's up?"

"Just thought I'd give you a call and see how your first week of empty nest syndrome went. You haven't said anything about it when I've called."

"Empty nest? Hell, I didn't even realize you were gone." The hell she didn't. She'd cried for two full days when her twins, Nick and Annie, left to begin their first week of college across the state. The three of them, no—the four of them including Max—had been a collective group for the last six years since Ted had walked out with his little chippie beneath his arm. Now the house was suddenly void of teenage voices and much too quiet for her liking.

"Liar," her son chuckled on the other end.

"I'm not lying," Maisy returned. "I've been partying every night and waking up with an extreme hangover each morning."

"Like that would actually happen," her son chuckled. "You hardly ever have a drink."

He was right. Maisy couldn't even remember the last time she'd had a hangover. "Is Annie there?"

"Nah. She and her new roommate went out for breakfast. When I talked to her last night, she said she was going to give you a call sometime today." There was a slight pause on the other end. "Mom? We feel real bad we're not home to celebrate your birthday with you."

Maisy cringed then glanced up at the circled date on the calendar and tried to push aside the fact that she never would have guessed she'd be celebrating her forty-sixth birthday with only a floppy-eared dog that fluctuated his affections between her and his hairy testicles. She shrugged even though her son couldn't see it. "That's okay, Nick. Hey, we had a little party before you guys left for school. Besides, I'm getting too old to celebrate birthdays anymore."

Suddenly, she batted away the instant tears that had sprung from nowhere. This was crazy. When had she become such a sniveler? She'd been weepy as hell since the kids had driven off. To get past the thought of her current depression, she glanced down at the slight bulge of her belly rounding beneath the ripped waistband of her favorite pair of sweatpants. Poking at it simply to get her mind off the lonely day in front of her, she tried to remember her exact age when she'd begun to look like a slightly slimmer version of the Pillsbury doughboy. She sat straighter and sucked in her stomach to see if the bulge would disappear. It didn't. Crap.

"So are you still going to celebrate with a wild and crazy night?" Nicky asked. Humor laced his voice.

"Yup," Maisy replied as she continued to poke at her belly. "So if Annie calls and I'm not here, don't worry until the police call one of you to bail me out." Damn kids. One or the other had been calling and checking on her daily since leaving. Damn they were wonderful.

Nicky laughed again, a knowing chuckle because his mother most likely had never done anything erroneous in her life. "Did you find some kid to mow the grass for you? I don't want you out there doing those things. I want you to enjoy yourself now that you don't have the two of us to worry about."

"Hey, not gonna happen. I worry more about the two of you now than when you were three."

"We're fine, Mom. You taught us everything we need to know to survive. You were a great teacher."

Silence crackled over the line. Did her kids really think that? Since the divorce, Ted—the lousy bastard—had only flipped into their children's lives off and on over the last years, always doing something special with them, something Ted felt would make him look like a great father. The son of a bitch. Had her kids seen through his charade?

Ted had never been around much when they were married. Always had the guys to visit with at the local bar, a bowling league twice a week, extended hunting trips and then finally a girlfriend—probably one of many. Maisy hadn't believed him for one shitty second when he'd stated that his little girlfriend, Pearl, was the only time he had strayed. Maisy would like to take Ted's little "pearl" of wisdom and shove her right up his ass.

"I love you, Nicky."

"I love you too, Mom. Happy birthday. Enjoy your day."

"I will. I miss you and Annie."

"We miss you too. As soon as we get settled in with a routine, we'll set up some plans to drive home."

Would they? Maisy struggled against a lonely picture of the future but couldn't stave it off. The kids were on their own now. Life would be so exciting for them that it would become more and more difficult to plan a six-hour drive home. She took a deep, silent breath and hoped her next words would sound sincere. "That sounds great. Hey,

Nicky, I'll really understand if you can't make it home until Thanksgiving. I know how busy you two are going to be."

The statement out of her mouth transported Maisy into the past. She had been busy with college at one time. Excited and loving life, then her four-year college degree had been flushed right down the shitter along with an excellent job as an entry-level marketing director for a computer company. Why? She'd met Ted when she was twenty-five. He'd swept her off her feet with his beach-boy looks and bedroom eyes. They had dated a year, he'd asked her to marry him—she had and was still kicking herself in the ass because of it—then had two great years before she'd gotten pregnant with the twins. Ted had wanted her to stay home and enjoy life.

She'd been so fooled. She had stayed home and then years later when the asshole walked out, no one wanted someone her age to jump into marketing. Those types of positions were given to younger, more energetic people. She'd finally managed to find employment with a local travel agency. It wasn't a glamorous job but it paid the bills. There were the perks of always finding a great vacation deal but she'd never had the time, the inclination or the money to go too far afield—not when she had the twins to take care of and an ex-husband who always had some excuse why he couldn't take his children overnight.

Stop it! She chastised herself. If it weren't for the idiot, you'd never have the two great kids that you have.

"Mom?"

"Um...yes, honey, I'm here."

"Is everything all right?"

"Except for the damn sink still leaking, yes, things are great."

"You haven't called a plumber yet?"

"I thought I could take care of it myself." She would not admit to him that she hated to spend the money. Every extra penny she had went for the kids' expenses even if they did have jobs, plus keeping her own head above water. Ted, the lousy bum, didn't have to pay any more child support now that the children were eighteen and she knew he'd be pretty tight with his money from here on out.

"Just call someone."

"What?"

"Just call someone to fix it."

Maisy's brow furrowed as she watched a small puddle grow beneath the dripping pipe. "I just might have to."

"Call Fullservice Fixit. Mom? Are you listening to me?" he asked when she didn't respond.

"I'm listening."

It was so like her Nicky to be concerned with the stupid details of running a home. She got up off the chair, her nose wrinkling a bit when she heard her knees creak.

"Call them, Mom."

"Okay, I will." Her spirits plummeted lower when she heard an unfamiliar muffled voice call out to her son and tell him to get his ass in gear. Maisy sighed. "You had better get going. Sounds like someone is waiting for you."

"Okay, happy birthday again. Treat yourself today. You deserve it."

"Say hi to Annie for me."

"Will do. Love you."

The line went dead.

"Love you too..." Maisy whispered to the empty kitchen and then hung up the phone and stared at the sink. "Shit." She opened a drawer, yanked out a phonebook and flipped through the yellow pages until she came to Plumbing. Her eyes followed her finger down the page until she came to Fullservice Fixit. If it wasn't for Nick, she would have just called A-One, the first listing, because Chicago had a ton of listings. But if he said Fullservice, then Fullservice it would be.

Still rubbing the goose egg on her head, she dialed the number. After four rings, someone answered. "Hi, I was wondering if you could send someone over today to look at a leaking pipe under my kitchen sink." She paused as she listened to the voice on the other end. "No, it has to be today." To hell with her birthday. She wasn't doing anything anyway. "I'm off work today and it really needs to be looked at." Another pause. "No, I can't be here on Thursday, no one can." She tapped her foot as she was put on hold. Finally, the gravelly voice came back. Maisy listened then responded. "Yes. That would be wonderful. One o'clock it is."

* * * * *

Maisy had just checked the pail under the leaking pipe when her front doorbell rang. Max took off with a barked greeting. She trailed after him into the living room.

"Quiet, Max!" she called out as her eyes darted to the window to see a van parked in front. It had been a long time since she'd had to call in any sort of maintenance service, but if history stayed true, she would shortly be putting up with a pimply beer gut rolling out from beneath a T-shirt, sweat-stained armpits and an ass crack that needed to be spackled shut every time its owner bent over.

"Max! Sit!"

She opened the door.

And all she could do was stare—and try to catch her breath as she struggled to stay upright and not faint dead away at the sight standing on her front steps.

Adonis? The Marlboro cowboy? Her heart thumped against her ribs.

Whoever he was, he definitely wouldn't be fixing any leaking pipe. He was too fucking beautiful to do anything but pose in her doorway with the sun at his back. Damn, because of it he looked like a heavenly halo circled his gorgeous head of hair. She gulped. His deeply tanned arms bulged with bluish veins that ran just beneath the

dark skin. Maisy gawked like a teenage girl and wondered if the flush of heat infusing her cheeks was because of the sexy package of testosterone or if she was simply having a hot flash.

"Hi, are you Mrs. Collins?"

Oh god...his voice. Slightly raspy and sensual enough to literally tickle over the skin of her face. Her gaze jumped up. Oh man—his eyes. Fuck Ted and what she'd always thought were his bedroom eyes. Ted's eyes looked like two piss holes in the snow compared to Mr. Marlboro's. Long dark lashes the same color as his thick, wavy hair framed sparkling hazel eyes that twinkled as if he'd just told a funny joke.

Helplessly, her gaze drifted over a wide chest. Lucky goddamn jersey. Maisy would have sold Max to be this man's T-shirt lying against what she suspected to be taut, bronzed skin with a slight dusting of wiry dark hair.

Maisy gulped again. Whew, it had been years since she'd reacted to a man like this. Good god...was she getting wet?

Wait a minute. A man? *Come on, Mais...you could be his mother...*

So why was she holding her breath in order to keep her belly sucked in as tightly as she could? Little sparks of excitement pinged their way right from her clenched stomach to her pussy—and back. Sheesh. Just looking at the guy was foreplay at its best.

"Excuse me. This is the Collins residence, isn't it?"

She dragged her thoughts from her suddenly damp crotch and her gaze from the crispness of his white shirt and met his sparkling hazel eyes—and once again experienced a bout of lightheadedness. "Um," she swallowed. "Yeah. Can I help you?"

"I was sent over to take a look at a plumbing problem."

Oh my god! To be a dripping pipe with his hands running sensuously across her... Hell, she very well could be. Her panties were moist enough.

Suddenly, Maisy wished she had taken a shower, fixed her hair instead of having pulled it back into a short, curling ponytail and worn jeans instead of ratty sweatpants. Shit! Her black jeans would be perfect because they took off about ten pounds—and a nice loose cotton shirt that hid the rise of her belly. Her peach blouse. That's what she wished she had on. The color had always accentuated her medium-toned skin.

Oh double shit! Now she'd have to lead him to the kitchen. What if he looked at her ass? Her *ass* that was covered with sweatpants! Damn. She would never be caught looking like this again—ever—for the rest of her life. From here on out she was going to take a shower first thing in the morning, put on makeup and comb her hair instead of waiting until noon to brush her teeth.

"Nice dog," the hunk said.

Maisy dragged her eyes away from his square jaw and lowered her gaze to Max. The dog licked Mr. Marlboro's hand. Damn! And doing it with the same tongue that had just thoroughly cleansed his fuzzy dog balls.

"Would it be okay if I took a look at your problem?"

Her gaze jerked back up. Good god, no! She didn't want him to see her ass that was slightly wider than it should be or her hidden slightly stretch-marked belly, but she had no choice.

Wait! He meant the plumbing.

God, she had to get hold of herself! Her fingers tugged down the bottom edge of her short sweatshirt. "It's my kitchen sink faucet, or pipe...or something... Um, why don't you follow me?"

His smile just about melted the sweatpants right off her full hips.

As she led him to the kitchen, Maisy cringed at the sound of his heavy footfalls behind her. It was so terribly difficult to stride normally as she struggled to suck in her belly and to not swing her backside in a wide swath. He had to be looking at her backside and thinking she was a middle-aged crone with a cottage cheese ass. *Oh come on, Mais...you don't have cottage cheese.* But that didn't change the fact that he might be eyeing it right this moment. She clenched tighter. How could he not miss it? Her butt cheeks swelled out beneath her hips for everyone to see! Shit!

Once in the kitchen, she pointed out her problem then made quick tracks to a stool on the other side of the nearby snack bar in order to hide her bottom half. The seating also allowed her a perfect view of his drop-dead, jean-clad butt as he leaned over the sink.

Good god! Maisy wondered what her adult children would say if they knew she mentally drooled like a sixteen-year-old.

She imagined him naked. Whoa! Her stomach somersaulted at the thought and her heart rate picked up. She sucked in air through her nose and let it slowly whisper out through parted lips to help capture some sort of sanity.

After sending her a bewildered and hesitant grin, he hunkered down, dipped his head and glanced inside the cabinet beneath the sink. Maisy's eyes bulged at the sight of his flexing biceps then dropped her gaze lower. No sweaty ass crack hanging over a tool belt here. But god she wished there was. Well, not sweaty—oh hell, it wouldn't matter. Sweaty or not, she'd give anything to see his bare buns. A fleeting thought crossed her mind that if she concentrated hard enough the edge of his T-shirt might just ride out of the waistband of his jeans. She'd love to see some bare skin. Again Max would be on the selling block in a second flat if that's what it would take.

Maisy blinked when Max sat down beside him, blocking her chance to see anything. Silently, she willed the dog to move.

When the hunk came out from beneath the sink and turned his head, she managed to yank her gaze from his ass before he spotted her spying direction.

"Doesn't look too serious. I should have it fixed in no time at all."

No! She wanted the project to last all afternoon just so she could sit and sigh her enjoyment. It was her birthday after all and she could wish for anything she wanted.

And she wished to take in Mr. Marlboro's—no, Mr. *Fullservice's* physique and simply imagine that she was young once more. This guy wouldn't have a chance if she could turn back the clock. "Take all the time you need. I want to make sure I don't have any more problems with it."

He grinned wider.

Good god. To top it off, deep dimples cut into those shadowed cheeks of his. Why in hell hadn't she noticed that before? Yes, Maisy would give anything to be in her twenties again. Mr. Fullservice would be the guy she'd take out for a road test. Probably nothing permanent but he was like a piece of delectable cotton candy she could slurp up, lick up—it didn't matter—and enjoy for the moment at hand. Shit. She hadn't thought about "licking" a man since she had been in her twenties. Ted had turned into a real asshole early on, therefore screwing himself out of ever getting a blowjob. The vision of cotton candy disappeared and morphed into a vision of Mr. Fullservice's cock.

Maisy gulped and clung to the edge of the snack bar.

"I'm just going to get my tools out of the truck. Be right back."

Don't go, she pleaded silently as she watched the curve of his ass disappear around the corner. *You've got the tools you need right in your jeans!* She listened to the front door open and close.

Her forehead dropped to the surface of the counter. Slowly, she tapped it against the cool surface with eyes closed. Oh, to just be a bit younger. "Get hold of yourself," she murmured.

She stayed in that position until she heard the front door open again then quickly sat up. At a loss, she grabbed a small stack of bills and pretended interest in them. She glanced up when he stepped back into the kitchen.

A hesitant smile ghosted his full lips as he crossed to the sink. "Nice weather for this time of year," he stated when he crouched, opened his toolbox and rifled around inside it.

"Yes, it is." She couldn't think of a damn thing to say after that. He must think she was a real dunce.

His body was half inside the cabinet once again. "How long has the pipe been leaking?" he questioned with a muffled voice.

To hell with it. She was getting closer while she had the chance. Max wasn't going to be the only one with happy thoughts after the man left. Maisy slipped off the stool, yanked on her sweatshirt hem to assure it covered her belly and joined him by the sink. She hunkered down, hoping like hell he didn't hear the creaking of her knees. "For quite awhile. I tried to fix it myself by tightening up all the fittings. Guess that wasn't the problem?" Would he catch the fact that no husband had checked things for her? If so, he gave no indication.

"Well, you're close to what the trouble actually is. The fittings are simply worn out, so I'll replace them and you'll be good as new." He backed out slightly from beneath the sink. His hazel eyes met hers.

Maisy drowned in their twinkling depth. It was a good goddamn thing that those eyes disappeared from sight a second later when he ducked back into the cabinet. If not, there would have been a good chance she would have grabbed his broad shoulders and kissed him, maybe even would have tackled him to the linoleum and straddled the tight bulge at his crotch. Then she would strip his jeans past his knees and enjoy the feel of the soft fur on his legs against her naked breasts as she kissed her way down a muscular thigh...

She shook her head to clear it.

What the hell was the matter with her? Maybe it was the slight hint of cologne he wore. It was so mild that it left her thinking maybe the scent was simply the natural delicious smell of his skin. She liked a man who didn't douse himself in liquid "sure-fuck" like her ex used to. By the time Ted had finally removed his cheating ass from the house, the smell of his heavy cologne had almost gagged her on a continuous basis. Hopefully Ted's little Pearl would choke to death on it sometime in the near future.

She shot up from where she crouched on the floor and returned to her stool, suddenly realizing her armpits were moist. Hell, she never perspired to the point of getting wet. With a sigh, she plopped her chin into an upturned palm and watched as he removed half full bottles of cleaners and neatly lined them on the edge of the counter. Once he had some fittings set out under the sink and a trouble light hooked to the pipe, he grabbed a wrench and wiggled in on his back with only his lean belly and long legs left to Maisy's view.

Her mouth hung agape. His thighs were slightly spread with his feet flat on the floor to brace himself as he worked quietly. Her eyes instantly leapt to his crotch. She slapped her fingers over her mouth in order to stifle a moan of pleasure but in her mind she peeled away the layer of blue denim then worked his thong down to his ankles. Of course he wore a thong because thongs were sexy as hell. His cock would be thick and long, the tip perfectly rounded. And the more she would play with it, the harder it would get. And when he slipped it into her hot pussy? Well, good god it would fill her up tighter than anything she'd ever experienced. She would have an instant orgasm, then another...and another.

Maisy wiggled on her stool for the next fifteen minutes, her pussy in near spasms with her lurid thoughts until Mr. Fullservice was packing his tools. She watched him snap his toolbox shut and slip out an invoice from a nearby folder.

He made polite conversation as he calculated his bill after a quick glance at his watch. "You shouldn't have any problems with the pipes but the faucet looks pretty old. Maybe you should discuss with your husband the possibility of replacing it before the gaskets go."

"I don't have a husband." Oh no! Would he think she wasn't sexy enough to ever have married? "I mean, I did at one time. I'm divorced." Oh god. Now she sounded desperate. Hell, maybe she was.

He stepped closer and handed over the invoice. "Well, just call the office if you think you want to spend the money. Eventually, it really should be changed out. I'd be happy to come back and take care of it for you."

Maisy blinked. What? Take care of what? The orgasm that screamed for release? The trembling she felt in his presence? Mentally, she shook herself for the hundredth time then reached blindly for her checkbook as she studied his signature on the invoice. Dean Martini. Oh my god. Italian. Her heart rapped against her ribs.

Dean.

Martini.

A sudden image of the movie star Dean Martin and his variety show on television flashed through her brain.

"Hmmm, hmmm...moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore..." She quickly tossed aside the vision of the two of them dancing about the kitchen to the tune.

Martini – what a wonderful name.

"I'll do that. I'll give Fullservice a call when I know I'll have a day off from work."

He finished gathering his gear as she wrote out a check and tried not to hum aloud.

"Thank you, Ms. Collins," he said as he took the check.

By some trick of fate, their fingers touched. Maisy thought hers were going to burn right off then disintegrate into a puff of smoke. "Thank...thank you, Mr. Martini."

"I'll see myself out." He paused for a quick second and scratched Max behind the ears. "Nice dog."

"Bye!" Maisy scooted after him, enjoying the sight of his lean hips and tight ass as he walked away.

When the front door closed, she raced across the living room and flopped onto the couch assuring the curtain hid her peering eyes. She studied him as he climbed into his van. Max jumped up beside her and laid his snout on her shoulder.

"Nice guy, hey, Max? I would have jumped between the sheets with him in a second." She tipped her head and glanced at the dog. "Did you hear what I just said? Cripes, I haven't thought about being with a man since yucky Ted left. Always too busy." Her soft brown eyes turned back to the window and the empty driveway. "Always too busy taking care of the twins, working, cleaning, running to school programs and trying to keep our heads above water." She cringed when Max ran his tongue across her cheek, remembering that earlier it had thoroughly cleansed his hairy balls. "How did those years fly by without me realizing it? Here I am, Max, middle-aged and not a clue as to what I'm going to do with my life now that Nick and Annie are gone. Guess things will just go along like they always have."

One more time, her gaze strayed to the empty street outside. "It would be nice to have someone like him to cuddle up to. Mr. Fullservice is a pretty sexy guy. Well, not that you know what sexy is or isn't. Isn't that true, Max? The only thing you ever worry about is where your next meal is coming from and licking your balls."

The dog woofed and tilted his head.

"All right. It's my birthday. How about you and I have a little party?" She ruffled his ears. "I'll make a big batch of spaghetti sauce, bake a cake and we'll eat until we feel like puking. How does that sound?"

Max took off for the kitchen. With a heartfelt sigh, Maisy followed, fighting the sudden urge to cry because she had been reduced to sharing her lonely birthday with a goofy dog and knowing that only in a dream could she have sex with someone like Mr. Fullservice.

* * * * *

The next morning Maisy dragged herself from the driver's seat of her car and headed for the front door of the Swift Travel Company. She hadn't slept very well at all and it wasn't because of impending menopause or the fact that she'd eaten two huge plates of pasta. It was simply because every time she'd closed her eyes and drifted off, a pair of twinkling hazel orbs appeared. If that wasn't bad enough, she'd dreamed about Mr. Fullservice's naked knees spreading open her thighs. His smooth, muscular shoulders had gleamed softly as if he sat in the center of a halo and his corded arms had folded her close to the hard swell of his chest as his cock probed against her wet, throbbing pussy.

Maisy had awakened in the middle of a full-blown orgasm that had had her heart pounding as she'd gasped for breath and she hadn't even experienced the feel of his thick cock sliding into her before she'd awakened.

Talk about being cheated.

She'd spent the rest of the night thinking about the fact that she hadn't had an orgasm in years and all it had taken was one leaky pipe under her kitchen sink to conjure up a living dreamboat like Dean Martini. No wonder she'd felt like the experience had sent her into a tailspin, creating a horrible, unfamiliar longing for a big, thick vibrator to be stashed somewhere in the house. Like she would have had the foresight. Maisy was just too damn prudish to be the owner of a sex toy.

Good god. She didn't even know what one really looked like. Okay, so she joked about such things with her friends but she'd never possessed the nerve to walk into an adult store and purchase one. Mr. Fullservice sure had her thinking, however, that maybe she should reconsider the possibility – and soon.

As she reached for the handle on the door, her thoughts turned back to earlier when she'd prepared her bag lunch for the day. Her gaze had been glued to a big cucumber sitting on the bottom shelf of her fridge as she'd dug around for the mustard. She had gulped and suddenly wondered if she'd finally toppled over the edge of sanity as she'd thought about the need to have something big and hard inside her. Then she'd turned and eyed a banana on her counter. Christ. She couldn't get out of the kitchen fast enough to suit her riotous emotions.

Maisy shook her head and jumped forward a step before the door smacked her in the ass as she stepped over the threshold.

Lizzy, her best friend and coworker, glanced up from the reception desk. "Hi, Mais."

"Morning, Liz."

"Did you have a nice birthday?"

"The best ever."

"What did you do all day since you wouldn't go out to lunch with me?" Lizzy asked as she rounded her desk to follow Maisy down the short hallway to her office.

"I never even brushed my teeth. I cooked up a big batch of spaghetti and Max and I pigged out." Maisy reached out and grasped the doorknob. "Was it busy around here?"

Liz shrugged. "The usual. Are you ever going to let me take you out to lunch for your birthday? How about this afternoon?"

Maisy eyed her, wondering if Lizzy was going to badger her the entire day. "I told you I didn't care to celebrate. Silly, I know, but I'm not enjoying being on the downhill slide to fifty." Even as she said it though, she wondered about the fact that Lizzy hadn't even gotten her a card. The woman was her best friend. Oh well, Maisy was the one who had turned down the luncheon invitation in the first place. "Where is everyone today? I know I'm a bit early, but it seems awfully quiet around here."

"No one has come in."

Not even her boss, Terri? That surprised Maisy. Terri was always early. She shrugged and opened the door.

"Surprise!"

Maisy gasped as the platitude echoed around her head. Bright colored streamers hung from the corners of her office, twirled in a decorative fashion all the way to the ceiling fan in the middle of the small space. Her boss and two other girls leapt out from various spots with wide smiles of excitement.

Maisy glanced around. A birthday cake perched in the middle of her desk and a "Happy Birthday" sign was taped on the wall behind it. "What did you girls do?"

Lizzy stepped forward and gave her a hug. "You didn't think just because you skipped out on us yesterday that we were going to let your birthday go by?"

Maisy accepted her friend's squeeze and then was immediately passed off to each of her co-workers. "This wasn't necessary," she babbled amid the many hugs.

"Oh yes it was," Terri replied. "Maisy, you're so good to all of us. You're always ready to cover for us when someone needs the day off. You do nothing but work your ass off around here and rarely take a day off. Okay, sit down and open your gift."

Jenna and Susie agreed in unison.

Maisy shook her head in wonder as her gaze settled on a brightly wrapped package on her chair. She lifted it, set it on her desk and plopped into her seat. Her eyes sparkled

with anticipation. She'd received a new blender and a bathrobe from the twins at her early birthday party before they'd left—things that she needed and were sensible. But the big bow on the package and bright red paper promised something fun and totally impractical.

"Well, go on!" Lizzy urged.

Carefully, Maisy removed the bow and ribbon. Letting her excitement get the best of her, she then ripped the paper off with a flourish. The package was rather light and she couldn't imagine what it would be. Opening the box, she dug through the layers of sparkling tissue paper as she glanced up at her co-workers' secretive glances darting across the desk. When her fingers came in contact with an envelope, she lifted it out. "Anyone care to give me a hint?"

"Uh-uh, Mais," Terri giggled.

It had to be a trip. But how in heck could they afford to put that much money together even with the perks granted to the business by vendors? What would she say? She didn't have a whole lot of money to be wasting it on a vacation because of course she would need extra. With a deep breath, she opened the flap and pulled out two gift certificates. Her brow furrowed as she stared at the first. It was a certificate to a local beauty shop for a manicure and pedicure and an hour-long massage afterward. "Oh wow! Thank you! I've never had a manicure or pedicure before. I mean...I have...at home...but I've never paid for one. And a massage? Do I have to take my clothes off?"

Terri laughed uproariously. "You're a piece of work, Mais. Every woman deserves an afternoon at the beauty shop simply to relax and get the full treatment. You can leave on your panties and bra during your massage if you're so damn worried about it. Now look at the next one."

Maisy set the first certificate on her desk with cheeks slightly red for being such a prude. She picked up the second. "Oh come on. This is too much." When she received only silent smiles, she hurriedly opened the envelope.

Her lips parted. She read it once, reread it, then glanced up with confusion clouding her eyes. "What is this?"

Lizzy bent over the desk and eyed the paper in Maisy's shaking hand. "It's the best part of your birthday present. This Friday, *you* are going on a date. We've hired an escort to take you to dinner *and* dancing down at the Spindle."

"What? The Spindle? Me at the Spindle? On a date? With who? When?" The questions rattled out of her mouth.

Everyone started talking at once. Terri waved her hands in the air and got their attention. "That's the surprise. You're getting paid for Friday but you're taking it off, going shopping for something fun to wear then heading for the beauty shop. After a couple of hours of pampering yourself, which you *never* do, you're going to go home, get dressed and wait for your date to pick you up."

"Oh my god! You're all crazy!" Maisy cupped her heated cheeks. "I haven't been on a date for—well, it's been a long time." She shook her head. "This is too much. You all spent too much money. Oh my god, I'm too old to go on a date."

That brought on even more laughter from her friends.

"You're not too old and you know it. Maisy, you never do anything but work. You've been a single parent for some time now, taking care of your kids' needs twenty-four hours a day," Terri stated as she perched on the edge of the desk. "Now it's time for you."

Maisy gathered the certificates with shaking hands and stuffed them inside the box. She never imagined herself dating anymore. Dating was for younger women. How in hell was she going to get out of it? "This is so nice but you didn't have to do it. Hell, what is Max going to do without me on a Friday night?" What else could she say?

"Shut up, Mais," Lizzy ordered. "You're going and that's that, even if we have to drag you to the beauty parlor."

Maisy hesitated. "Well..." Then a wide grin broke out. "All right." Excitement pushed aside her angst. "But if this turns out to be a bad blind date, I'm coming after each and every one of you."

Chapter Two

Maisy stifled a contented groan as she stared down through the opening of the massage table. Her forehead rested heavily against the thick pad with her cheeks encircled by the cushion. Magical fingers worked her shoulders and back, soothing away the tension she felt at being partially naked before a complete stranger. Not that the cute little girl who worked for Dana's Beauty and Massage Parlor hadn't seen a partially nude woman before. In fact, the little blonde had been surprised when Maisy insisted on keeping her panties in place for the hour-long session. Hell, it had been brazen enough to find the nerve to toss her bra on top of her shirt. Actually, before she'd reclined on the massage table, she'd tucked it inside a shirtsleeve so the masseuse wouldn't see that she wore a 36B cup.

Stifling another groan of delight when two not-so-very-delicate thumbs worked the base of her neck, she squinted through the hole again to once more admire her fake fingernails. Honest to god she'd never had fingernails. Real or fake. Long fingernails weren't conducive to a housewife's daily chores and these were stellar. Long, rounded and painted a shiny hue of rose red. And her toenails matched. Thinking about it, she wiggled her toes beneath the sheet. Now she'd have to take a quick detour into Payless and buy a pair of open-toed shoes. No way would she hide those suckers in old shoes from home. If she was going to do this, then dammit, it was going to be done right—well, as *right* as Maisy could afford.

Her stomach rolled once before finally settling down again. Tonight was the night. This evening she would be picked up by the escort service in a limousine, no less. What the hell were the neighbors going to think? That she'd won the lottery? Maisy couldn't remember when or if a limousine had even ever driven down the block where she lived.

Ah shit. She hadn't even hauled the plastic recycling bin back into the garage this morning. She couldn't forget. How kosher would it be to have a stretch limo pull up to her house and have to park beside a garbage bin? And, hopefully, all the grade school kids on the block wouldn't be lined up on their bikes, gawking like idiots.

That train of thought led her to her escort, something she'd purposely tried to keep at bay. What would he look like? Hell, he had to be good looking or how could he have been hired to work for the company? Suave, that's it. A suave, knockout gorgeous gentleman with silver sideburns—a man who cut quite a flashy figure in his expensive suit. And even though he was middle-aged—he had to be, right? Maisy was positive the service matched the ages—he would still be in great shape for his age, kind of like the movie star type who never sported potbellies over the tops of their belts. Hopefully he'd wear a great suit because she'd purchased a smashing black sheath that took off at

least ten pounds—one that hid the slight bulge of her belly. It was perfect. Not too clinging, yet sexy.

Me? Sexy? She hadn't thought of herself as being sexy in years. But the salesclerk had gushed at how great she looked. Were the woman's chatty comments made simply as a sales ploy to get a middle-aged, not-able-to-make-up-her-mind woman to purchase something? Shit. Maybe she should try to hide the tag, be careful about spills and then take it back on Monday saying that she had decided not to wear it after all. Spending seventy-five dollars on a dress was ridiculous. That amount of money would pay a utility bill.

Stop it! You've gone over all that, Maisy. There was no way out of this. Besides, earlier she'd made a deal with herself. Her friends had been good enough to spend a fair amount of money, so she would do this and do it well—just like her toes.

Abruptly, she bit her lip and squeezed her eyes, lying still as death beneath the sheet. The little blonde masseuse had moved down her back while Maisy was lost in a whole shitpot full of insecurities. And even though the sheet was between the employee's hands and Maisy's ass cheeks, the idea that a stranger rubbed her butt had Maisy wincing.

Damn, it felt good though. No one had ever rubbed her ass—unless they were looking for a piece of it only minutes later. Ted, that butthead, had been famous for that little move.

Sighing deeply, Maisy shoved away her doubts, the image of a limo with a debonair fifty-year-old gentleman in the backseat and pretended it was Dean Martini massaging her butt. Oh yeah. Much better.

"Hmmm, hmmm...moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore..."

* * * * *

Maisy splashed around in her tub, wishing like hell she could simply rest her head against the back and soak in the wonderfully hot water. She didn't want to chance having her date wait, however, as she finished getting ready for the upcoming evening. Nope, that wasn't going to happen. She didn't care if she was ready an hour early, as long as she was all set and not looking like she'd just finished running a race.

As the afternoon passed, her excitement had built. When she'd gotten home after the massage, there had been a message on her answering machine from the escort service stating the limousine would arrive at seven-thirty sharp. For a split second in time, she'd actually entertained the idea of calling them back and canceling. But to do so would hurt the feelings of her wonderful friends at the travel agency. And if there was one thing about Maisy Collins it was that she didn't have a mean bone in her body. Besides, she had some great fingernails and toenails to show off.

She balanced her foot on the faucet, took a moment to admire the shiny red polish, then reached for the shaving cream. When she squirted it into her hand, Max bounded up from where he'd been sleeping on the bath mat and cocked his head.

Maisy giggled. "Getting the full treatment today, Max." She spread the cream below her knees as she eyed him. "Not that anyone is going to be feeling my leg but I don't want one thing left to chance." Next she picked up her razor then rolled her eyes. "In my dreams, hey?"

Max woofed.

"Like that's going to happen. Okay, Max. If you ever have to shave your legs, this is how you do it. You have to be real careful so you don't slice off the top layer of skin over your ankles. See how I'm doing it? If you don't pay attention, it bleeds like hell and stings even worse. What would my date think if I had bandages stuck all over? Not the perfect way to accessorize my new dress. Here's another spot." She pointed to her knee and carefully ran the razor over it until it was as smooth as a baby's butt. "The rest is pretty easy. Just be a little careful around the shin. The calves are a piece of cake." When she rinsed the blade in the water, she shook her head. "Pretty sad. Here I am trying to teach a dog how to shave his legs. Man, I have to get a life. Must be nerves."

Maisy finished her other leg then paid attention to her armpits. She half entertained the idea of shaving her patch. After all, it seemed these days everyone was doing it. Even Lizzy. Maisy had just about died one day when her friend told her how her husband loved a shaved pussy. In fact, she'd just about fallen off her chair at being told something so intimate. Glancing down, she shook her head. No way. It was bad enough she had to take care of two legs and two armpits. Besides, who would see it anyway? Certainly not her date that evening. Shaved pussies were for twenty-year-olds and Maisy was on a downhill slide to fifty.

She finished her bath and hurried out of the tub. After slathering on some scented lotion, she donned her new bathrobe and headed for the bedroom. Her dress hung on the edge of the doorframe and her new open-toed shoes were on the bed beside her underwear and new strapless bra. Strapless. Hmmm. That was an article of clothing that Maisy had never worn but white cotton bra straps wouldn't look too fashionable beneath the spaghetti straps of her dress.

Normally she would keep her bathrobe on and fix her hair before getting dressed but Maisy felt wickedly naughty. Assuring that the curtains to her bedroom were drawn tightly, she took a big breath, untied the sash and tossed the bathrobe onto a chair.

Naked. She hadn't pranced about in the nude since before the twins were born. Then before she knew it the kids' friends were filling the house to the rafters.

Oh yeah, she felt naughtier by the second. A quick flick of the wrist and her clock radio boomed out a tune from the sixties.

"Hey, Max, wanna dance?" She smiled as her eyes closed. Her full lips formed a sexy pout and her hips began a slow gyration to the subtle beat of the music. She laughed out loud when Max yipped excitedly. "Just warming up, puppy-dog. I'm going to be tripping the light fantastic tonight in the arms of what damn well better be a good-looking date or I'm going to kill the girls from work."

Grabbing a pillow from the bed, she held it close and continued to move about the room, her mind branching in a thousand directions as scenarios played through her head.

She felt good. No, she felt even better than good. It had been years since she'd felt this lighthearted. No worries, no problems, no running to school events. It was just Maisy and her pillow and her not feeling silly for dancing in the nude. She wasn't worrying about her slightly rounding belly or her somewhat sagging breasts or the fact that she didn't have a whole lot to look forward to as far as her future went. She had tonight and that's all that counted. And it would be one to remember.

She nearly stumbled when the phone rang and scared the hell out of her. Racing to the small table beside the bed, she shut off the radio and snatched up the phone as she tossed the pillow back in its place. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mom!" Both twins' voices could be heard on the other end.

"Nicky! Annie! What are you two up to?" She glanced down at her nude body and winced. "Hey, wait one minute." She couldn't stand naked and talk with her kids. Now she felt a bit foolish for having acted so out of character. Once the bathrobe was shrugged on, she picked up the phone again. "Okay, sorry. I'm here. So what's up?"

"Just thought we'd call and say hi," Nicky returned. "And goodbye."

"Goodbye? Where are you going?"

"A bunch of us have decided to head out for the weekend. We're going to a concert."

Maisy smiled. "That sounds fun. You two don't have to work this weekend?"

"No, we both managed to get it off. Just couldn't pass up a chance at a great concert."

Maisy struggled against the bit of jealousy that raced through her. She worked her ass off for those kids, yet they thought nothing of losing an entire weekend's pay just to go listen to some band. Getting on top of her building anger, she decided she couldn't blame them. Look at what she was doing that evening simply because the opportunity had arisen. She managed to swallow her bit of exasperation, forced a light tone and sank to the edge of the mattress. "Can I talk to Annie for a minute?"

"Sure thing. Hey, I'll call you next week. Love you, Mom."

"Love you too, honey."

Annie's voice came on. "Hi, Mom."

"Sounds like you're going to have fun this weekend."

"Yeah, we couldn't believe it when we were still able to get tickets. So what are you doing this weekend?"

Maisy's fingers tightened around the lapels of her bathrobe to draw it closed. "Um...nothing." She didn't want her kids to know she was going on a blind date. What would they think? "I'm just going to get into a good book and lay around."

"You should call up Lizzy and go to a movie or something. You never go out and have fun."

That's because I was always too tired... "We'll see." Her eyes darted to the clock. Six o'clock. Jeez, she had to do her hair yet. "Well, hon, you have a good time. Call me and let me know how the concert was."

"Sounds good. Hey, get out of the house, would you? You're not an old lady."

Maisy blanched. "Sure." She wasn't lying by not telling them her plans, was she? She was simply omitting a few details of the evening. "Love you."

"Bye, Mom. Kisses!"

The phone went dead.

Maisy placed the phone back in the cradle. Turning her head, she stared at the dress hanging across the room. Emotionlessly, her gaze moved to the strapless bra. Her eyes closed, she swallowed then inhaled deeply. Forcing herself up, she shuffled across the room to stand in front of a full-length mirror. Slowly, she untied the sash again and shrugged off the bathrobe. It landed in a pile at her feet.

Her gaze flowed over her nearly dried hair, noting the color. The first thing she'd done on Tuesday night after work was to stop at Kmart and buy some coloring. She turned her head slightly, noting the tint had toned down a bit, looking more like her natural deep brown with hints of auburn. Her fingers trickled over her scalp. At least her hair still had body.

From there, her eyes traveled over the skin of her neck. It looked pretty good. Not too loose like some of her friends who were the same age. Her breasts? Well, there wasn't too much there in the first place, but they still sagged slightly with age. Damn gravity. She thanked her lucky stars though that she didn't have to haul her tits around in a shopping cart because they were so big and droopy. A humorless smile touched her lips at the thought.

She watched her reflection as her hands slid to cover the slight mound of her belly. Breathing deeply to find the nerve, she let one finger trail along a white spidery line, then on to the next. Lizzy called them battle scars, those fine lines left over from having a baby.

Ted had called them ugly.

Her eyes narrowed in surprise. Just thinking about Ted's taunting remarks still had the power to make her heart ache. Maisy sighed. Stretch marks sucked but at least hers were white now and not the pronounced reddish tint they'd once been. Did all men think they were ugly? Probably. That's why they headed out in search for a more youthful body when they themselves hit middle age.

She turned away from the mirror and glanced back over her shoulder. Her butt was wider than of twenty years earlier but at least it didn't look like a bowl of cottage cheese. Thank god she'd had the foresight to do squats every morning. It also helped to keep her thighs in shape. Her eyes moved back to her belly when she faced forward again. There hadn't been a thing she could do about it. Mother Nature was a real turd.

She poked at it with her finger. It could be worse but she'd give anything for few grand to have a tummy tuck. Maybe if she took off fifteen pounds it would disappear. Oh hell, who had time to diet? The squats would have to be good enough.

She took a step back and perused the entire length of her body, trying to see it through the eyes of a man. Was it really that bad? Ted had always given her shit about the stretch marks and the rounded stomach. Jesus. Her body looked like it did because she'd given him the children he'd wanted. Was he just the world's biggest asshole? Would another man think she was in pretty damn good shape for her age? Ah hell. It didn't matter. Nicky and Annie had been worth every day of morning sickness, every line on her belly and all the sleepless nights she'd fretted over them.

Besides, why worry about it. She'd never find the nerve to get naked in front of another man anyway. And even though she'd fantasized all week about letting down her hair and having a wild time between the sheets with a complete stranger, she knew it wouldn't happen. That's all it had been. Wishful thinking and the urge to feel like a beautiful, sexy woman one more time before life tossed her into old age.

* * * * *

Dean shrugged on his suit jacket and glanced one more time in the mirror before picking up a slip of paper to study the name on it.

Maisy Collins, 235 Centennial Boulevard.

He couldn't believe it. He knew the woman whom he'd be escorting to the Spindle tonight. Of all things he'd fixed her sink earlier that week. He shook his head. Who would have guessed?

Shoving the paper into his pocket, he pictured Maisy Collins in her beat-up shirt and sweatpants and wondered what she would look like cleaned up. Because to be honest, she really had been cute the way she was.

At first he'd been a little leery, though. It had been easy to see that his presence had had an effect on her. More than once he'd caught her in the act of ogling him. But then he'd realized that it hadn't bothered him so much. In fact, the idea of Ms. Collins' furtive attention had made him feel good.

Dean shook his head.

It hadn't bothered him because for some strange reason he'd also felt attracted...sweatpants and everything. It was the strangest damn thing. A flash of her chocolate eyes whispered through his brain. He'd never seen brown eyes that color before. And even when he'd lain on his back halfway into the cabinet and tried to concentrate on the job, he had wondered if she stared at his crotch. Christ, he'd worked like hell to focus on not getting a hard-on and embarrassing himself.

That strange carnal hunger that was sensual, alluring...almost gripping when in the presence of the opposite sex had happened to him before. It was an emotion that could catch a man completely off guard, grabbing him when he least expected it and making

him yearn for the touch of her skin against his and her scent in his nostrils, even though she was a stranger. It was instinctual. But damn, that intense emotion had never happened with an older woman.

Maisy Collins. He'd never known someone with that first name. She was middle-aged, but Dean certainly didn't think she was old enough to possess a name like Maisy.

He'd caught himself looking at her mouth that day. She definitely had not been wearing any lipstick but she possessed nice full lips with a natural slight coloring all their own. He'd wondered at the time what her body looked like beneath the baggy sweats. He'd seen her continually tug at the hem of the ratty shirt as if trying to cover up the lower half of her torso. What had she been hiding? From what he could see, it looked pretty damn good.

He shook his head again. He should be ashamed of himself. Mrs. Maisy Collins was a lot older than he. Well maybe not a whole lot older but by the time he'd left her house, he'd felt like a pubescent teenager being lusted after by his mother's best friend and he'd rather enjoyed it. He'd been damn glad to get out of there before he popped a boner and embarrassed himself.

Strange how fate played with people's lives. Because he wasn't making enough money from his and his father's home maintenance service, he'd decided six months earlier to take up the offer of occasional forays into his best friend Mike's escort service. Mike had been after Dean for months, telling him he had the looks and physique to make some quick money. His friend had been right. At first, Dean enjoyed the dating, the fine meals, the nights on the town and even having to slip out of the arms of some overzealous woman who hoped for a quick fuck between the sheets. His bank account was finally beginning to look like it should. The nights devoid of real emotion soon got old, however. It was tough to stay on top of his act when most times all he wanted to do was to go home and get some sleep instead of fighting off amorous clients.

He snorted quietly, thinking how Mike continually made an issue about Dean having sex with the clients. He'd stated that it was Dean's choice—that he should accept what was offered and have some fun. Hell, no one would know if Dean was slipped some extra cash for making some old broad come in spasms.

Dean rolled his eyes as he checked his wallet to assure the company credit card was in place. No damn way would he accept payment for sex. If he wanted sex, he could get it at a host of other places—and usually did. He didn't need a pimp even in the guise of an escort service.

He glanced at the clock. It was almost seven. Mike's limousine would pull up shortly to pick him up and then it was off to Maisy Collins and what would hopefully be a night of fun. Dean was definitely ready for something different from the norm and for some reason he thought Maisy was going to be the one to provide it.

As he strode down the steps to the first level of his house, he pictured her goofy smile and the silky, thick ponytail that had been pulled up slightly off center on the top

of her head. Another reason he looked forward to tonight was because he couldn't wait to see the look of surprise on her face.

He almost wished he'd bought her a birthday present. Mike's company would have a bouquet of flowers waiting for him in the limo as requested by Maisy's friends but he'd bet that something personal from him would have topped off her night and made it a little more special.

A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. Special was right. He had a feeling that Maisy Collins was going to surprise the hell out of him. He couldn't put a finger on it but there was something different about her. With a lighter step, he headed out for the evening.

* * * * *

Maisy had paced from the living room window to her kitchen and then back again more times than she cared to count. Now she sat without moving a muscle on a dining room chair. It was a game now. She'd bet herself she could stay there until the limo pulled up to the curb. It was stupid but if she didn't sit and stay put, she'd chance blisters from her new shoes. Even Max had had it with her pacing. He now slept on the couch with his back to her, finally having figured out that she wasn't going to take him outside for a walk because she'd already done that before getting dressed.

Ah hell. It was a stupid game.

She bolted from the chair, headed down the hallway and stood in front of a full-length mirror. Her eyes traveled over the reflection of the woman in the black dress that stared back with round, twinkling eyes. They looked bigger because of the sable-brown eyeliner that made them stand out. She leaned in closer. Her eyes actually resembled the color of milk chocolate. Maybe she should make a habit of using eyeliner all the time.

Maisy drew a breath and studied her hair. She'd swept it up in just such a way that it looked natural as hell. No one would ever know how many times she'd practiced the look all week.

Taking another breath, she ran her hands slowly down her midriff and over her belly. Did she look fat? Did her damn stomach stick out too much? She'd thrown caution to the wind and hadn't worn her control-top underwear. Well, what she'd really done was finally sent them fluttering to the floor after trying them on four different times. The dress looked better without the elastic line at her waist making her look like a pear wrapped with a rubber band. She didn't have any control-top pantyhose on either. It was almost *au naturel* with only a little pair of new silk undies she'd purchased that morning. She swiveled and eyed her backside. Thank god for black. She looked a bit slimmer—slimmer and no elastic lines. Maisy didn't want to be dancing with her escort and worrying about his fingers coming in contact with bulging skin.

She sighed again. It almost wasn't worth it. Her stomach had flip-flopped all afternoon. She'd run a hundred different scenarios through her mind. A handsome man. A not-so-handsome man. A date who drove her crazy. A date whom *she* drove crazy simply because she had no clue how to act. So many years had passed since she'd done something like this.

She retraced her steps with a groan, picked up her small purse, carefully sat in a chair so as not to wrinkle her dress and rummaged around inside her bag. Lipstick, comb, cheater glasses, a small bottle of hairspray and Beano. Thank goodness she'd remembered to pick up the last. She'd never bought it and couldn't imagine that she'd have to take five pills before she ate dinner but with the way her stomach was jumping around, there was no way she would allow an accidental fart to sneak free and embarrass the hell out of her. When Max barked, one almost did squeak out.

Maisy leapt to her feet and peeked around the edge of the curtain and saw the beam of headlights sweep across the yard. She almost pissed her new undies. The moment of reckoning was here.

Ducking, she crept away from the window, battling the urge to stay rooted to the spot and get an early glimpse of what her date looked like. She tucked her purse beneath her arm, stayed low and hurried across the room to stand by the door.

Her eyes fell to her fingers where they tightly clutched the purse. Christ. Now she looked eager as hell. She tossed the bag on the small foyer table, stepped away then darted forward to straighten it. Exhaling slowly, she smoothed the front of her dress and waited for the doorbell to ring.

"Well, this is dumb," she hissed aloud to no one. What? Was she going to fling open the door and look like she was desperate? She'd count. That's what she'd do. She'd count to ten after the bell rang.

Her shoulders jerked when it did.

One...two...three... "Quiet, Max! Sit!" she hissed. *Four... Five...ah hell,* "...six, seven, eight, nine, ten!" she whispered quickly.

Taking one last settling breath, she opened the door.

"Hello..."

Whatever else she had planned to say disappeared right into thin air.

Dean Martini?

Her jaw sagged open.

"Hello, Ms. Maisy Collins. Remember me?"

Remember him? Hell, she'd almost gone and purchased a vibrator because of him. "Mr. —" she swallowed. "Mr. Martini?"

He dipped his head. Dimples creased his smoothly shaven cheeks. "One and the same."

She tipped her head and peered around one broad shoulder to see if anyone else stood between him and the waiting limo, her mouth still gaping open. "You...you're my escort for tonight?"

Again, he nodded.

She grasped for something to say. "Well that's...that's good. I'd hate to see you have to fix a faucet in such a nice suit." She could have kicked herself in the ass for making such an inane comment, yet her heart sang louder and louder and the blood pumped in her ears with excitement as she realized a fantasy coming true.

Maisy Collins of all people was going to get the dream date of her life. Of all the many men she'd pictured in her head throughout the week, Dean Martini was the one man her thoughts had always brought her back to. And good god in heaven he stood before her in the flesh. She glanced down when his hand came out from behind his back.

"These are for you. A birthday bouquet from the escort service. Would you like to put them in water before we go?"

She reached out with a shaking hand and took the sweet-smelling flowers. "I-I suppose I should. Oh, please, come in." Maisy stepped back, waited for him to step into the foyer, looked heavenward and mouthed a thank you behind his back then closed the door.

Dean was already scratching an exuberant Max behind the ears. Glancing up with a smile, his dimples deepened. "I couldn't believe it when I saw your name on the escort order. It's kind of funny, isn't it, that we've met already?"

Maisy grinned back. "You could have knocked me over with a feather. I guess I didn't imagine... Oh never mind. I'll get a vase for these flowers. Thank you...or thank the service for me when you get a chance." She had almost blurted out she couldn't imagine she'd be escorted by someone who just might be young enough to be her son. She wasn't going to ruin the night. She was simply going to have fun. "Why don't you take a seat and I'll be right back." Damn, now she wished she had her control tops on as she walked away.

Dean ruffled the dog's ears and watched Maisy disappear into the kitchen, completely amazed at her transformation. She looked wonderful. She looked delectable. She looked absolutely scrumptious. And try as he might, he couldn't place her age. He'd purposely called the escort service's office and asked for that item to be checked. But nothing. The women who had hired him hadn't leaked out that information.

By leaning back a bit and tipping his head, he was able to see around the corner of the kitchen doorjamb. Maisy's back faced him as she filled a glass vase. His eyes drifted over the bare skin of her creamy white shoulders, down the straight line of her spine and across her ass. Luscious. That was the only word to describe it. Maisy didn't possess a flat backside. She was deliciously curvy where it counted. Dean loved how the back of her dress stretched slightly over her buttocks as if teasing his senses, as if calling out to his fingers for a gentle caress.

Taking a deep breath, he shoved aside the thought, knowing if he didn't get hold of himself, he'd get an erection. He sat on the couch as his gaze flowed about the room. She had a nice cozy home. He remembered that from his first trip inside the house at the beginning of the week. Hand-knit afghans softened the backs of a chair and couch. A smile turned up one corner of his mouth as he took in the numerous little fairy figurines scattered about on tabletops and wall shelves. Maisy must like them.

Then his gaze stopped on a built-in bookcase that held more framed pictures than books. Maisy was there in the images with her arms around a boy and a girl in graduation gowns. Those same faces, only younger versions, peered out at him from a host of photos placed about the room. He knew she was divorced because she'd told him so. Now he knew she had children. They had to be hers because the resemblance was remarkable.

Before he could begin to calculate Maisy's possible age she reappeared in the living room. He quickly shot to his feet. "Well, Ms. Collins, are you ready?"

"Um...yes I am, Mr. Martini." Her smile widened as she met his gaze directly. "But you're making me feel like a grande dame with the formality. I'd love if you would just call me Maisy."

Dean wondered at the quick jump of his heartbeat as he looked into her sincere brown eyes. "Then I insist on you calling me Dean."

Where Maisy had found the nerve she'd never know, but her hand shot out and she waited for him to take her fingers. "It's very nice to meet you again, Dean."

Her soft hand fit perfectly into his palm. Letting go of her fingers, he bent his elbow and waited for her to slip her hand into the crook of his arm. As they passed the table in the foyer, she picked up her purse and waited for him to open the door.

He guided her to the waiting limousine, concentrating on the fact that he'd been hired to show her a good time. Dean had a sneaking suspicion that tonight was going to be easy work.

Chapter Three

Maisy clutched her purse in her lap as she stared about the interior of the limousine. She'd never been inside one before and this one seemed to stretch for miles. Forty-six and a limousine virgin. How did that ever happen? Not once had she and Ted ever celebrated anything in their married life via a stretch limo.

Soft music floated out from hidden speakers. Unobtrusively, she sucked in air through her nostrils and let it trickle out between her lips. Just sitting on the expensive leather seat with Dean—even though there was a good-sized space between them—was enough to almost make her pee her pants. She felt like a modern-day Cinderella on her way to the ball.

"Would you care for some champagne?"

His voice startled her.

"Or if you don't like champagne there's a cabinet here with just about anything you could think of to drink."

Swallowing her trepidation, Maisy smiled at him. "I'd love a glass of champagne."

She watched him take out the bottle from the built-in ice bucket, loosen the cork then wrap the end with a towel. A loud pop filled the limo's interior. He poured two glasses, handed her one then smiled disarmingly, which set her stomach flopping about once more.

He held his glass higher. "To a fun night of dinner and dancing."

Mesmerized, Maisy responded with a clink of her glass against his and staved off a sneeze when the effervescent bubbles tickled her nose. Try as she might she couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Dean settled back against the seat, took another sip and eyed her. "I couldn't help but notice all the pictures you have in your living room. I'm assuming those two kids are yours?"

Maisy nodded, finally finding her voice. "Yes. Nicky and Annie. They're my twins."

"Twins," he chuckled. "Must have made for some interesting days when they were babies."

She nodded with a smile.

"Are they living with you?"

"No, they're in their first year of college. They left last week. It's kind of strange to think that the two of them are old enough to be on their own."

Relaxed and debonair above the starched collar of his snow white shirt, Dean lounged back comfortably.

Because of it, Maisy struggled to appear just as composed and figured she'd go for broke. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure thing. This is your night. Ask me anything."

"How old are you?"

His head tipped back for a moment when he smiled, exposing his throat. Maisy had the strangest feeling that if she leaned closer she'd be able to count each soft spike of his eyelashes as they lay against his cheeks.

Finally, he glanced her way. "I'm thirty-one. I was wondering when that question would arise."

Maisy rolled her eyes. "I figured you were around that age or maybe even a bit younger. How is it just a few days ago you were fixing my plumbing and now you're a paid escort hired by my friends for my birthday present?"

"My dad and I own Fullservice. We do okay, but it's always nice to have a little extra money to play with. I have a friend who runs this escort service. He was in a bind one night and asked me to fill in. I did. It worked out." Dean surprised the hell out of himself with his response. He never told any client how old he was or what else he did for a living. Although most times his clients didn't care enough to ask. He leaned over and added more champagne to Maisy's glass. "Anything else you want to know?"

She took a sip, realizing how the champagne warmed her belly. She was more relaxed as each mile passed. "Um, yes. How do you feel about escorting someone who feasibly is old enough to be your mother, Mr. Martini?" My god, where had she found the nerve to ask a question like that? *Liquid courage, Maisy. Liquid courage.*

He studied her momentarily, his gaze pensive. "Are you old enough to be my mother? You know what, Ms. Collins? I—"

"Stop right there. My name is Maisy, remember? It's bad enough we're discussing age. Remember I told you that calling me *Ms. Collins* makes me feel even older?"

"Sorry. I was going to say that I was always taught it wasn't very gentlemanlike to ask a woman her age. I apologize for that. How about we put aside our age questions and simply have a good time? Let me ask you this. Do you like to dance?"

He'd changed the subject so quickly that she had to blink. "Dance? Yes, I used to love to dance. I haven't done it for a while though. Always too busy or too tired."

He clinked his glass against hers once more. "Well, Maisy, tonight we're going to trip the light fantastic. A nice dinner at the Spindle to celebrate your birthday and then we're going to dance until our feet hurt. How does that sound?"

To Maisy it sounded wonderful. Dean was so suave and self-assured that he could probably talk Max right out of licking his balls.

Her smile widened.

* * * * *

Dean's gaze flicked over Maisy's tempting backside as she made her way through the tables toward the ladies' room. As soon as they'd been seated, she'd asked to be excused. She'd only sipped two glasses of champagne on the way to the Spindle, but watching her sashay across the dining room now, he had to smile. Maisy was by no means drunk, but her stride and the set of her shoulders was so much more relaxed than when he'd picked her up. When she wasn't conscious of how she moved, she possessed an easy, sensual swing of her hips and Dean suspected Maisy wasn't even aware of it.

Settling back in his chair, he enjoyed the sight of the material clinging to her ass until she disappeared around the corner. She had stated she needed to powder her nose. A corner of his mouth turned up in a grin. How many women ever used that phrase any more when finding a need to use the restroom? Even when he'd escorted other ladies in the past who were older, he'd never heard them say that. Coming from Maisy it sounded cute as hell. It was easy to see she was nervous about the coming evening. She stuttered a bit, played continually with a gentle curl lying against her forehead and had kept crossing one leg over the other when they were in the limo.

His grin widened. It was going to be a fun night seeing if he could coax out the woman he suspected lay just beneath the staid exterior Maisy unconsciously exhibited. It hit him that this was *the* one and only date he couldn't wait to get revved and moving.

* * * * *

Maisy nearly choked on a Beano tablet when the bathroom door opened and a stately older woman entered. Damn. All she wanted to do was eat her pills and get the hell back to the table. Fumbling to keep the bottle hidden, she shoved it inside her purse, smiled at the other woman and then headed for the privacy of a toilet stall.

Damn! The old broad entered the one beside hers.

Rolling her eyes, Maisy perched on the edge of the toilet seat and being as quiet as she could, she dug back inside her purse, unsnapped the lid and counted out four more pills. Tossing them in her mouth, she nearly gagged. They tasted like chalk. She'd give anything at the moment for some more champagne to get the taste out of her mouth.

As she chewed she could hear the lady beside her, tinkling. Suddenly, a sharp little fart echoed over the top of her stall. Maisy clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle a burst of laughter. Maybe she should offer the woman a few tablets of Beano? A snort erupted between her fingers.

Maisy squeezed her eyes even tighter, struggling desperately to control her laughter. What on earth had gotten into her? Here she was, sitting on a toilet stool in a fancy restaurant that she'd never thought to visit, near tears because some old lady was

tooting in the next stall. She tightened her fingers over her mouth when another little noise that sounded like a cricket was heard from next door.

Maisy gulped in what little air she could between her fingers to restore some semblance of sanity. Her reaction to the older woman's squeaks had to be hysteria—had to be a panicked and delayed response to the thought of spending an entire evening with Dean Martini and his wonderful smile. That's it. That's what it had to be.

She was just going to bolt out of the stall, but the old broad flushed the toilet. Maisy couldn't leave the sanctity of her small cubicle until the woman left. She must be embarrassed for crissakes. Maisy sure as hell would be if she had farted for the world to hear. So she dropped the plastic bottle into her purse, waited for the woman to wash her hands then finally opened the swinging door when she heard the click of heels leaving.

Approaching the marbled vanity, she set her purse down and stared at her reflection, trying to see herself as Dean might. Leaning in, she did a closer inspection of her face. Her eyes seemed to sparkle—maybe because of her earlier laughter in the stall, or was it pure excitement? Lines feathered from her eyes, but nothing too deep. Deciding to call them laugh lines instead of crow's feet, she formed a cute pout with her lips. Not too bad. She had friends the same age whose mouths already looked like prunes. Without taking her gaze from her face, she lifted out a tube of lipstick and applied another layer then rubbed off a tiny smear of mascara below her eye. Patting her hair, she took a deep breath and decided she needed to get her ass back to the table. After all, Mr. Fullservice was waiting.

* * * * *

Maisy crossed the dining room, noting the soothing strains of the orchestra in one part of her brain as another part registered once more how handsome Dean was. When he looked up and saw her on her way back, he rose from his chair. Pulling hers out slightly, he waited until she sat.

Dean smiled at the becoming flush of her cheeks as he returned to his seat. "I hope you don't mind but I ordered us a bottle of wine. It should be here shortly."

"That sounds wonderful." *God, wine on top of champagne.*

They made small talk, well, mostly Dean made small talk until the maitre d' appeared silently with a bottle in one hand and two goblets in the other. Maisy sat quietly and watched as the man poured a small amount into Dean's glass and waited for his patron's approval. It hit her that this was something Dean must have done numerous times with other women whom he had escorted. She didn't like the queasy emotion that flipped inside her stomach when she realized an evening like this was probably old hat to him. She didn't like it at all. Once the waiter poured a bit of wine into her goblet he dipped at the waist and left them alone.

Dean held up his glass for the second time that evening. "To us and a fun night."

To us? She smiled shakily. "To us." *I wonder how many times he's said that.*

"While we're waiting to order why don't you tell me a little more about yourself, Maisy?"

"There's not a whole lot to tell."

He leaned closer.

She could feel his warm breath as it fanned her cheek, shocked to realize that a blaze of heat pinged straight to her womb.

"Oh I think there is. You intrigue me."

She simply stared back at him, in awe that she could intrigue anyone.

"Don't look so surprised, Maisy Collins. You're a beautiful woman, alone and facing the world on your own. How many years have you been divorced?"

Maisy smiled hesitantly. "Six years." He thought she was beautiful? *Wonder how much the girls paid him to say that?*

"Six years? And no one has scooped you up in all that time?"

She shrugged. "All that time..." Then she sighed. Despite her pounding heart, Dean made her feel at ease even though the compliment was something she wasn't used to. She still wasn't going to unload on him, however. He'd probably excuse himself, leave the table and never come back if she did. She took another sip of the wine.

"Come on, Maisy. Tell me about yourself. Let's make a pact. You know about me needing a little extra cash. Now it's your turn. Tell me why after six years someone like you is still alone."

What the hell? If they didn't talk about this, then they'd have to find another subject to fill time until they ordered their dinner. "Are you sure? I mean how could something like that be even the least bit interesting to you?"

"Like I said, I find it hard to believe you're not married again. Tell me, Maisy."

Sipping her wine, her mind shuffled back over the years. "When you toss that out here in front of me, it suddenly makes me realize just how long six years is." *Yeah, what the hell.* "I never had time, Dean, to have any fun once I was divorced. I had two kids on the threshold of their teenage years. They were shocked and confused—angry at their father and angry at me for upsetting their lives. It took every ounce of energy I had to be there for them. I had to find a job because the money my ex gave me was barely enough to pay the bills. He was too busy enjoying his life with no responsibilities to worry about it."

Dean settled back in his chair. "And..."

Maisy shrugged. "And that's about it."

"No it's not. There's more. I can hear it in your voice. I really would like to know." He waited.

Maisy fiddled with her necklace while staring at him. Maybe he was paid to draw out the conversation she already played over in her mind. "Okay. It's not a very nice story. When I was sitting in the bathroom with a sick kid, he was spending money on flashy cars and clothes he thought made him look good." She shrugged and suddenly

became braver. For as much as Maisy continually flayed the asshole in her mind, she'd never spoken badly about Ted to anyone. Maybe it was the champagne combined with the wine. Who knew? Who cared? For some reason, she wanted Dean to know. "He made my life miserable before he even walked out on us and continued to do so afterward. I finally found a job, got the kids through high school without too many adolescent problems and just tried to get from one day to the next."

"Why did he leave? Do you mind me asking?" Dean poured more wine into their glasses and waited for Maisy to speak.

She squirmed in her chair then gulped her wine as her suddenly moist eyes darted about the restaurant.

Dean reached out and took Maisy's shaking fingers in his own and gave them a squeeze. "You don't have to answer. I'm sorry for prying. You know, you haven't told me how old you are. I told you. Maisy?"

"I thought your mother told you to never ask a woman that question."

Dean chuckled. "See? That's what I like about you. At times you seem very quiet and shy. The next? You're ready to stand up on your own two feet and take me to task. Come on. I want you to tell me how old you are. Let's just get it out of the way so we can enjoy the night."

Maisy took another sip and looked him square in the eye. "I just turned forty-six. There, are you happy?"

This time he laughed out loud. "Yes I am. Now that we've established that, I want to tell you something. I don't know how you perceive yourself but I'm sure there's more than one man here tonight thinking I'm one lucky guy to have such a sexy date. Don't look so surprised, Maisy. Do you ever look at yourself as the woman you are? I love the chocolate color of your eyes. You give away many of your emotions with a simple glance. I love how you're curved in all the right places. You've got the world at your doorstep and you don't even realize it."

Maisy choked on her wine with that last bit. Even though she didn't believe him for a second, her heart still leapt for joy at just the words. Finally catching her breath, she set down her glass and stared at him. "Thank you, Dean, but I imagine you get paid to make those comments. After all, you've seen me at my worst. Okay, I'm forty-six, I dye my hair and my favorite pastime is curling up on the couch with a good book. Doesn't sound like someone ready to leap into life, does it?"

"Why not? And contrary to what you might think, I'm not paid to say anything. I'm simply telling you how I see you. You'll always worry about your kids but they've got their own lives now. You can do anything you want. You can go anywhere you want. You can be with anyone you want no matter the age. I'll tell you what. Let's further this pact between us. We've got an entire night ahead of us. How about you quit worrying about anything and simply concentrate on me and I'll concentrate on you. We won't think about the fact that you're forty-six and I'm thirty-one. Ah...see, Maisy? Your eyes just flashed when I said that. You're calculating the years in between. I know our age

difference is bothering you. Let's just forget about it, can we? We'll eat, we'll drink, we'll dance. My hope is that when you wake up tomorrow you'll be thinking this was the best night you've had in a long time. What do you say?"

Maisy took another good chug of her wine, feeling her belly warm further from the expensive liquor. Why not? She was sitting at a table in a posh restaurant with a man she'd dreamed about all week long. In the morning it would be back to her boring life as usual. For the first time in a long time Maisy was going to put herself first.

Bravely, she clinked her glass against Dean's. "Okay, you've got yourself a deal."

Chapter Four

Even though she'd made a pact with Dean, Maisy couldn't help but wonder how a man his age could really enjoy the evening. She was having the time of her life, however. His arms were around her and even though she loved the live orchestra they waltzed to, she almost felt bad for him. He was too young. She pictured his body gyrating about to loud, blaring music rather than the tempo they now moved to amongst all the "blue hairs" out on the dance floor. To Dean's credit, his smile had stayed on his gorgeous full lips the entire time.

Okay. Maybe it was because of her. After all, it was fun to pretend.

Of course she looked at it entirely differently than she normally would. Maisy was drunk. Not plastered, falling-down drunk but soft and fuzzy drunk. Comfortable drunk. Hell, she hadn't even thought about the fact that his palm, lying against the small of her back, might possibly come in contact with a soft piece of flesh at the waistband of her panties. She should really worry about that but somehow the touch of his hand on her body erased her niggling doubt simply because of the heat it produced.

She wanted the night to go on forever. She wanted to remember this evening as one of the best she'd ever experienced simply because of Dean. He was a wonderful escort, checking constantly if she needed anything, attentive, and he laughed just at the perfect moment when she expected him to. But was it an act brought on by the fact that he was paid to do so? She couldn't get that possibility out of her mind.

He held her deliciously close while they danced. His leg occasionally bumped in between her thighs as they turned about the dance floor, bringing with it a flush of heat that went straight to the pit of her stomach. At times even the bulge of his cock brushed against her. She didn't think he was doing it on purpose. Why would he? How could someone like her thrill a man like him? But it was her night and she was going to reside in the fantasy as long as she could.

"Say, Maisy, I have an offer for you." His words whispered by her ear.

In the space of a split second, a ton of different options raced through her brain. He wanted to whisk her off into the sunset, he wanted to spend more time with her, he wanted to make hot love...

If only.

She leaned back in his arms, disregarded the quick thump of her heart and stared up into his chiseled face. "Will it be one I can't refuse?" She giggled then, thinking about Don Corleone from *The Godfather*. She had better quit drinking.

"I really want to get out of here," Dean stated.

She should have known. He'd had enough of the evening.

"That...that's fine, Dean. I should be getting home anyway. I really want to thank you. It's been a lovely night." She stumbled a bit as she tried to back out of his arms.

"What?"

Geez, he looked confused. Maisy shook her head. Didn't she say her thank-you loud enough? "I said thank you for the lovely night."

"You don't really want to go home yet, do you? The night is young. I want to leave but not to take you home. We've got the limo at our disposal all night. What do you say we head on out and go someplace where we have to scream to hear one another? I know a great place to go dancing—the type that gets the blood rushing through your body as you're gasping for air. What do you say? Want to see the other side of me?"

Of course she wanted to see the other side of him but not the side he was talking about. His bare ass would do perfectly. *Good god, Maisy, you have to quit thinking about that or you're going to drive yourself crazy!* Hey, if he wanted the night to keep going, she was game. Anything to simply be able to look at him. "Sure! I'm up for it."

He grasped her hand and hauled her from the floor. It didn't take long to settle the bill and they were out the door, in the limo and heading downtown to one of the livelier clubs.

Maisy giggled loudly when Dean rattled around inside the limo's built-in fridge and turned with two cold bottles of beer. The giggle quickly turned to a groan. "Oh no. You're not going to keep forcing booze down my throat, are you? I'm going to have a horrible headache in the morning."

Dean chuckled as he opened one of the beers. "I have to get the taste of that wine out of my mouth. Nothing like a good cold beer to do just that. Are you sure you don't want one?"

"Ah heck." She reached out. "Might as well. The headache will be worth it." She took a sip and swallowed back the burp that bubbled in her throat. "I'm having the time of my life, Dean. I just can't thank you enough."

He moved slightly closer and propped his elbow on the back of the seat as he studied her. His smile drifted away. His gaze took in her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Maisy was quite a woman. She'd had him laughing all through supper with her wonderful sense of humor as she'd begun to relax and open up. Throughout the course of the night, he'd discovered a few other things about her. Maisy was as honest as the day was long but he suspected she'd held back when talking about her ex-husband. As far as Dean was concerned, the bastard was a no-good stiff who'd never deserved a woman like Maisy in the first place. Their discussion had gotten back to the fact that Ted had never really been home even when her children were younger. The man had to be the reason for her low self-esteem. He'd bet the bastard had just kept pounding her into the dirt every chance he'd had. Right then and there he'd decided that Maisy was going to have a great time and go home believing she was the beautiful, viable woman Dean saw her as.

His gaze took in the soft features of her face, knowing he wasn't going to make her believe her own self-worth just because he was paid to. He liked Maisy – more than any other woman in a long time. And he believed she most likely had a vibrancy that she kept just beneath the surface. Well, he wanted to let out that spunk that hadn't shown itself yet. He wanted to experience the full force of Maisy Collins.

His hand slid across the soft leather until his fingers rested against the soft hair at the nape of her neck. Feeling her tremble slightly beneath them, he met her dark brown eyes. "I'm going to ask you something, Maisy." He watched how her lips parted slightly and how her teeth nibbled her bottom lip but she never said a word. "I'd like to kiss you."

"Me?" she finally squeaked out then swallowed. "Really?"

He grinned. "Really. Would that be okay with you?"

She nodded hesitantly and waited. She stared as if in a trance when his mouth neared hers. His fingers brushed against the soft skin of her neck, which in turn raised the hair on her arms. Her stomach flopped about, her heart banged wildly against her ribs and her eyes drifted closed.

His kiss was tentative, a small caress against her lips as if he tested the waters.

She tasted the beer on his breath, savoring the flavor along with the softness of his lips. Defenseless, she leaned closer to return the kiss.

"That was nice, Maisy," he breathed against her cheek before seeking her mouth once more for a quick kiss. Moving away again to nuzzle her cheek, he sighed. "I've wanted to do that all night."

She leaned back, absolutely amazed how her belly clenched with instant desire, pulling up emotions she'd buried years ago. It had been so long since she'd even thought about kissing a man. Well, a long time before Dean strolled into her kitchen with his sexy butt and sparkling eyes. Since then it had been the only thing she'd fantasized about the entire week. "You...you really wanted to kiss me?"

He set down his bottle and brushed her cheek gently with a roughened knuckle as his gaze moved over her face. "Of course. There's something about you, Maisy." His fingertip followed the curve of her cheek, down across her chin and back to brush across a moist bottom lip. "You're fun, you're honest to a fault...you blossomed as each minute passed tonight. You're one helluva a sexy woman. What man wouldn't want to kiss you?"

She had to curl her fingers in her lap before she wrapped them tightly in the lapels of his suit jacket and tossed him onto his back. Was it the booze or just the simple fact that she was deeply attracted to him, whether real or fantasy?

"And I want to kiss you again."

Her eyes fluttered shut as he lowered his mouth. Their breath mingled, building a sense of complete and utter contentment within Maisy. She let go all her anxiety and simply enjoyed the moment, capturing it and tucking it away in a safe place within her

mind. As he continued to press light kisses against her lips, she knew she'd visit that cozy little hideaway in days to come.

Her hand lifted and hung in the air when Dean ran his tongue over the curve of her full bottom lip. It was just about the sexiest thing a man had ever done to her. The caress of his tongue was intimate, sensual...seeking permission...

"Open for me, Maisy..."

The near-empty bottle of beer slipped from her fingers and rolled across the limousine's floor. She welcomed his tongue, flicking it bravely with the tip of her own. Her hands clung tightly to his broad shoulders as Dean's arms drew her closer. His head tilted slightly and his tongue delved deeply within her mouth, sweeping the inside, fluttering over her teeth then back to dance with hers.

Maisy moaned at the same time her fingers came in contact with the soft waves of thick hair at his neckline. She'd wanted to touch those silky strands for most of the night. She could feel Dean's large hand cupping the back of her head as he pressed her entire body deeper into the soft cushion behind her.

Her body erupted into flames. Her pussy clenched as she gripped his shoulders and returned the hot kiss with unexpected ardor. Her hips arched with a will of their own. God, if she ever wanted anything in her life, it was that at the moment, Dean Martini would fill her tightly—a finger, his cock—it didn't matter because he had awakened something inside her that had lain dormant far too long. Her hard nipples ached as they scraped against the silky material of her bra. It had happened that quickly...just the touch of his mouth and his clothed body pressed against hers and she was ready to explode. Soft music swirled around her. His musky cologne filled her nostrils. She wasn't thinking about age differences, her middle-aged body or that she was a mother of two adult children. The only thing she was aware of was how her body flickered to life.

"Oh god...Dean..." she mumbled against his mouth.

His kiss deepened, demanding that she give back to him, that she ride along on the sensual journey he'd initiated. His hand came out from behind her head. A finger drifted along the hard edge of her collarbone and lower. Teasingly, he followed a path across the top of one breast until it rested in her cleavage. The rapid beat of her heart strummed beneath his touch. He hadn't planned on this. He hadn't planned to have her partially beneath him with the sweet taste of her mouth on his tongue. But he'd had to kiss her. Something about Maisy called to his male senses with an urgent need.

His groan matched hers when surprisingly Maisy pressed his hand to her breast. She surged forward, filling his palm delightfully as her tongue lapped against his. It was crazy. It had started so innocently but her round breast within his hand hardened his cock. Right now, right at that very moment, he could easily fuck her—and he was only supposed to be escorting her on a purchased date.

"Maisy..." Try as he might he simply couldn't pull his hand from her breast.

"Dean," she murmured against his lips as sanity returned. What about the driver? Could he see them? She struggled up, noticing how quickly Dean withdrew his hand and bolted up beside her.

"I'm sorry... I just meant to kiss you," he apologized quickly.

A rattled breath left her and she cautiously met his eyes. "Thank you."

"Thank you?"

She nodded. "It's been a long time since someone kissed me. It felt good." Her eyes darted to the black glass that separated them from the driver. "Do...do you think... Can our driver see back here?" Her hands flew to her cheeks. "I don't know what got into me." Good god, he must really think she was desperate to come on to him like she had. Jesus, she'd even dragged his hand to her breast. Her eyes flicked down and widened. Dean's hard-on edged along the side of his zipper. Even in the state of embarrassment that she found herself in, it was all she could do to stifle the urge to reach out. To keep her fingers busy, she tucked wayward strands of dark hair behind her ear.

Dean adjusted his jacket to cover the bulge at his crotch. "No he can't, Maisy." He reached up to stay her hand. "I want you to know something. I think you're sexy and sweet and I'm not sorry I asked to kiss you."

She rolled her eyes upward and studied the roof of the limo. Peeking over at him finally, she smiled. "I'm not sorry you did either." She couldn't think of a damn thing to say after that.

Dean finally broke the ensuing silence that bounced off the interior walls. "Here," he said as he reached for two fresh beers. "How about we enjoy another beer and catch our breath? We should be at the dance club shortly."

Maisy accepted her bottle, straightened her dress across her thighs and tipped up the beer, wishing it was twice as strong to help quell her still-racing heart.

* * * * *

Strobe lights flashed and the harsh bass from speakers beat around them as they made their way to the bar. Dean had left his suit jacket in the limo alongside Maisy's purse. The press of bodies inside the club heated the air and Dean rolled up his sleeves even though they hadn't started dancing yet.

"What do you want to drink?" he hollered over the pounding music.

"What?" Maisy hollered back with a smile as she pointed to her ear. "I can't hear you!"

He leaned closer, enjoying the sweet smell of perfume that drifted from her warm body. "Drink?" He made a motion as if he was sipping from a glass.

She forced her eyes from his before she drowned in them and searched the bar. Seeing a tall frosted glass filled with a slushy red substance, she pointed at it with a huge grin. "What the hell! I'll have one of those!"

He nodded his head, got the attention of a harried bartender, pointed at the glass and lifted two fingers.

It was useless to talk, so both simply watched the writhing bodies on the dance floor until the bartender placed two frothy drinks in front of them and two paper soufflé cups filled with what looked like green jello.

Maisy couldn't believe the noise but the combination of thumping bass with the flashing lights had her head bouncing to the music. She watched the young man behind the bar scoop up a fifty-dollar bill that Dean handed him and head for the cash register.

"What's this?" she hollered out when Dean handed her one of the little paper cups.

"It's a jello shot!"

"What?"

"A jello shot!"

Unbelievably, she managed to hear him. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

He smiled, lifted his to his lips and sucked the shot up in one slurp. His eyebrows lifted with humor as he waited for her to do the same.

"Oh what the hell..." Maisy repeated his gesture with one swallow and smacked her lips together, wondering what the hell she'd just downed. A second later Dean shoved her drink into her hand, grabbed her other and led her across the room to an empty table. It was a little quieter, enough so that they could at least hear one another.

"Crazy, isn't it? Is the loud music too much for you?"

She pursed her lips in feigned annoyance. "Do you think I'm too old or what?"

His head fell back with a laugh. "Ah, Maisy Collins, you don't know what you do to me. Okay, let's suck down these drinks and hit the dance floor."

* * * * *

Three hours later they were still dancing and guzzling quick drinks every chance they could. They laughed crazily at the table while racing to see who could down theirs the quickest, then would make their way back out into the throng of gyrating bodies. Maisy had totally forgotten that she was a mother of two children, a lonely divorcee and had been completely sexless for over six years.

Dean had spent the first hour laughing at her antics on the floor as Maisy really got into the beat of the music. He then spent the next one trying to keep his hands off her but had finally given up. Maisy was simply too alluring as she held her arms above her head, closed her eyes over flushed cheeks and swayed sensuously during slower songs. Now she was bumping and grinding with the increased tempo, along with everyone else on the floor.

He needed to touch her again. Whether it was holding her hand or feeling her body pressed close to his, it didn't matter. Every time he looked at her, a slow burn ignited in the pit of his stomach.

Reaching out, he took her hands as she smiled up at him, gently turned her away to the tempo of the music and pulled her against him.

Maisy clutched his forearms as his hands settled on her full hips, her body continuing to swing sensuously back and forth as her head sank back against the hard plane of his chest.

The sweet scent of her hair clouded his mind as his fingers moved to splay across her belly, urging her to sway with him.

His erection against her backside excited the hell out of her and she completely forgot about what he might be thinking in regard to the swell of her stomach beneath his hands. She didn't care. She felt good about herself. She felt sexy and wicked and was having more fun by the second. Although her brain was fuzzy from the numerous jello shots and countless drinks they'd had, one thing was as apparent as the nose on her face. Dean wasn't having fun because he was being paid to do so. The hard line of his cock against her ass was proof.

She struggled to keep her balance when he spun her back to face him, placed one firm hand behind her back, one thigh between her legs and began to rock to the music. The dance was like being fucked each time his firmly muscled leg rubbed against her pussy. It was the only way to describe it. A delicious friction built with each rhythmic step he took, even further sensitizing the hot bud of her desire.

Her smoky eyes took in the glittering ones above her. Her heart skipped a beat when Dean dropped his mouth to hers for a quick kiss. He hadn't asked permission and had given no notice that he wanted to kiss her. He'd just lowered his mouth.

What the hell? It was her birthday celebration. She was free to do what she wanted and right now she wanted to be kissed.

She returned his kiss with a fevered pitch, nipping at the fullness of his mouth. She loved his lips. She loved the smell of him. She loved how soundly he dirty danced and how the pressure of his thigh between her legs sent shivers of delight straight to her pussy. And she loved how he made her feel like a woman for the first time in a long time. But as brave as she'd become, Maisy was no fool. What she had with him was for the moment only but she was taking every last second of it.

At some point during the night, she had calculated the age difference between them. She struggled to remember now. Sixteen years? Or was it fifteen? No matter. Once she bid him good night at her door, her fantasy would fade to a wonderful memory and so would the breathtaking man who held her now. After tonight, Dean would leave her fantasy to find someone who had more in common with a man his age than she ever would.

She laid her head against his chest—anything to be closer. Her eyes snapped open, however, when she stumbled slightly because the room spun behind her closed eyelids. She was stinking drunk and didn't much give a damn. That's what this night was about. It was Maisy Collins' birthday celebration and she was going to squeeze every ounce of pleasure out of it.

"You okay, Maisy?" Dean's arm tightened about her waist, but they continued to rub against one another as they danced.

"I'm perfect," she smiled and tightened her hold around his neck.

He kissed her cheek and gave her a squeeze. "Want to sit this one out?"

"I'm not too old, Dean."

"I didn't say you were," he chuckled. "But I'm dry as can be. Let's get a beer."

A beer? Is that what they were drinking now? All she could remember was the gooey lime taste of the jello shots. He led her back to the booth. A booth? She thought they were at a table. Oh well. As long as he didn't let go of her hand, she wouldn't get lost in the maze of gyrating bodies all around her.

Dean waited for her to slide onto the vinyl and slipped in beside her. Because of the music, he leaned in close. "If you don't care for a beer, I'll order you something else. What do you want?"

He still held her hand. The smile resting on his lips was just for her. She'd seen others throughout the night necking in the privacy of their booths. In fact she'd seen one man with his hand inside a woman's shirt as the two kissed and fondled one another. That's what she wanted. She wanted to be fondled and not wait a second longer for it. Dammit, she was forty-six years old and no one was going to tell her she couldn't go for it. Hell, no one would because she didn't know a soul in the place.

"I want you to touch me."

"What?" he asked and leaned even closer.

"I want you, Dean Martini, to hold me close and kiss me. Then I want you to touch me."

"Maisy, I..."

"Now, Dean." She sidled up tightly beside him. Without hesitation, she nabbed his hand and placed it over her breast. She then pulled his mouth lower without another word. "It's my birthday," she mumbled as she pressed kisses against his unresponsive lips. "I want the moon to hit my eye like a big pizza pie... So shut up and kiss me, will you?"

And he did. He kissed her for all he was worth, because the feel of her tongue darting between his lips and a pebbled nipple beneath his palm had him instantly hard—again. Maisy was hot for him and he felt the same way. Nothing had prepared him for how good it felt to finally let out the emotions of desiring her after struggling against them all evening. He pressed her body into the soft cushion she leaned against, tilted his head and devoured her mouth.

Maisy moaned beneath his sensuous assault, grabbed at his shoulders and struggled to stay upright as her world spun around her. The giddy sensation wasn't from all the booze. Dean was quickly turning her world upside down.

"Excuse me! Did you want another drink?"

The voice drifted around them. Maisy ignored it. She was taking every minute left in the evening that she could. Screw the waiter. She'd never see him again anyway.

Dean simply took his hand off her breast, felt around for an empty beer bottle and held it up in the air. Maisy wanted him and he couldn't be happier. Besides, she had him in a lip lock that threatened to suck the air right out of his lungs.

They continued on that way, kissing, stroking one another with hands that drifted about but never below the waist. Both wanted to delve lower but neither would be responsible for the first move. By the time the waiter showed up with another round of beers they needed air. They finally parted, each gasping quietly as Dean paid for the drinks.

Maisy grabbed her beer, chugged it and couldn't stop the burp that burst out a second later. She shrugged when Dean grinned a crooked smile, tipped her beer again and guzzled, not caring what he thought. She needed to cool down. If she didn't, she'd explode and burping would be the least of her worries. At least the Beano was working. She gave praise to the gas god wherever he was and tried to focus on the swirling bodies on the dance floor instead of the intense throbbing between her legs. The blinking lights were killing her eyes. Without thought, she lifted the cool bottle upward and pressed it against her cheeks.

"You want to get out of here, Maisy?"

She glanced at him, noting how wavy strands of dark hair stuck to his forehead. No she didn't want to go. She didn't want the night to end. She didn't want to become that same person she had been that morning when she'd awakened. She wanted to...

She blinked. She wanted the damn room to quit spinning. "Maybe I need a little air."

Dean downed his beer, grasped her elbow as she continued to suck on hers and helped her up. Prefaced by another burp from Maisy, he pried the beer loose. Setting it on the table, he grabbed her hand and she wobbled through the door and out to the curb, leaning against him so as not to topple to the concrete.

Dean shook his head with a laugh as they waited for the limo to drive up. "I can hardly hear."

"What?" Maisy returned loudly. "Damn, my ears are ringing." Then she burst out laughing. Not an enchanting giggle, but a full-blown chortle worthy of attention. "I tell you what, Dean," she stated as she wiped the tears of laughter from her cheeks. "My kids would have a regular shit fit if they knew I'd spent the evening shimmying around the floor like a twenty-year-old. I bet I'm gonna feel it in the morning."

He tightened his hold on her when, without warning, she bent slightly and tried to get a shoe off by toeing it against the other. "What are you doing?" he laughed.

"My feet are killing me. Screw these shoes." She managed to kick the second one off and bent to retrieve them and almost executed a header into the light post.

Dean clung to her hips with both hands and helped her straighten, his chuckle rumbling deep inside his throat. "You're gonna hurt yourself. Here..." he propped her against the light post. "Stay right there." He bent and picked up her shoes.

When he straightened, Maisy reached out and touched his shadowed cheek with one finger. "My knight in shining armor, come to rescue the damsel in distress..." she grinned crookedly then the smile drifted from her lips. Taking a deep breath of the fresh night air, she focused her gaze on his. "Thank you, Mr. Dean Martini, for a night I'll never forget. Although," she giggled lightly again, "maybe I won't remember too many details to forget." Her brow furrowed and her nose wrinkled. "Did that make sense?"

Dean snorted. "I think it did. Scary. You crack me up, Maisy."

At that moment the limo pulled up to the curb. Ben, the driver, jumped out, nodded a welcome to Dean then opened the door. Once the men helped Maisy inside, Ben stepped back, winked at Dean and headed back to the driver's seat. Dean's jaw tightened, not really enjoying what the driver had stated with the silent glint in his eye. No, he didn't like it at all, especially in reference to Maisy. Letting it go, he climbed in beside her.

Maisy should have used the thirty-minute ride to sober up. Instead she asked for another beer. Neither she nor Dean mentioned the hot kisses shared in the booth. To do so would put them on uncertain ground that neither knew if they should explore further—especially when the night was coming to a quick end. So instead they babbled about inconsequential matters and the color of Maisy's toenail polish, laughed about nothing and were extraordinarily careful not to touch one another.

The limo finally pulled up in front of her house. When Maisy remained seated, but leaned forward to pick up her shoes, Dean stayed her hand. Instead, he sank to one knee, rested her foot in the palm of his hand and slipped the shoe on her foot.

Maisy quietly watched as he repeated the action with her other foot. The entire time she struggled against instant tears and the lump in her throat. She'd just had a fantastic evening with a gorgeous man at her beck and call. She should be joyous beyond belief.

His touch was tender and his smile gentle as he placed her foot on the floor.

Her shining eyes took in the waves of his thick hair, committing to memory the sexy line of his jaw when he glanced up with a smile. In a few short moments he would be gone from her life and she'd have to face her lonely existence once more. Expelling air, she smiled. "You make me feel like Cinderella."

He settled on the seat beside her. "It was either that or I would have carried you inside. Don't want you to stub those pretty painted toes of yours."

The side door swung open. Ben stood there, his gaze averted from the interior of the vehicle. Dean took her hand. "Ready, Ms. Collins? Let's get you in the house."

Helping her from the vehicle was the last thing he wanted to do. He wasn't ready to say goodbye. He could stay up all through the night and simply listen to the sweet sound of her voice as she told him silly little stories.

Be realistic, Dean. Maisy was from another world, one he didn't belong in, even though at the beginning of the date he'd told her how silly it was to worry about age differences. The thought unexpectedly sickened him. He'd love to get to know her better...mind and body. Maisy was...amazing. Amazing Maisy with the leaking sink. He smiled to himself. That's how he would always think of her.

"You don't have to walk me to the door, Dean. I can make it." She dug around inside her purse in search of her house key as she wobbled atop her heels. "There! Got it!" She held it up and forced a smile as she swayed precariously.

"No problem, Maisy. I want to make sure you're safe inside before we leave. I'll be right back, Ben."

"Yes, sir." The driver nodded and hopped back into the front seat.

Dean cupped Maisy's elbow and headed up the sidewalk. Max's bark could be heard from the other side of the door when they reached the porch.

"He's going to wake everyone in the neighborhood," Maisy mumbled as she tried to get the key in the hole. Damn thing. It just wouldn't go in. Damn thing kept moving around on the door. Damn, damn, damn.

"Here, let me," Dean stated quietly. Taking the key, he took only one try and the door popped open. Max barreled outside with a whine and raced around the corner of the house into the dark.

Maisy shrugged. "Guess he really had to go." She wasn't good when under pressure...and drunk. She could at least have said something a bit more eloquent, something charming and giggly and sounding like it came out of a twenty-year-old's mouth.

She stepped into the house, turned to say good night and met the solid wall of his chest and the warm male scent that surrounded him. It was better when he'd been behind her. Better because she couldn't see him—easier to keep her desire hidden when she didn't have to stare it in the eye. She glanced up and held her breath as the doorway framed their bodies.

"I had a great time tonight, Maisy. You're a pretty special lady."

"The feeling is mutual." Jeez, she was drunk. Her head was spinning. "This was the best birthday present I've ever had." *You were the best present I've ever had. Shit. Did I just say that out loud?* She blinked and tried to figure out if she had.

He didn't want to leave. Dean stared down and decided to... "Can I kiss you good night?"

Surprisingly, Maisy reached out and swung the door shut. "Ben can mind his own damn business. I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

When their mouths touched it was as if a jolt of electricity bolted through them, binding them together with something that was as old as time. They had both thought about the possibility of this final kiss for the last half hour. And even though they'd

spoken about trivial things on the ride home and had stayed in their separate corners, the flames had simmered just beneath the surface.

Dean slipped his arms about her waist, yanked her close then guided her a step backward until she was pressed tightly against the wall.

Maisy? Well, Maisy did something she hadn't done in a long time. She dragged one knee upward, delighting in the fact that his muscled body was so close, and wrapped her thigh around his, hugging him even tighter to feel the press of his lower body against her. A moan feathered from her mouth when his cock burgeoned against the silky crotch of her panties.

His hand grasped her hip as he ground forward in sexual response. His fingers brushed down the smooth length of her exposed thigh. The blood roared through his body.

"Oh god, Dean...I don't want you to leave," she panted between wildly hot kisses. "This is insane..."

"Why, Maisy? Tell me why," he whispered fervently against her lips as his hand found her breast again. Immediately his thumb was drawn to the hard dart of her nipple.

"Because...because we've just met."

"Then tell me to leave," he breathed hotly as his fingers slipped inside the bodice of her dress. "Tell me that I don't want you. Tell me I don't want to be buried inside you. I promise I'll leave, but only if you tell me that's what I really want."

Maisy battled the blaze of lust that burned through her. She was primed. She was a woman who had remained celibate for too many years. Her head sank back against the wall as Dean's mouth scraped down her neck. Her mind skittered from his seeking lips to the hand that cupped her bare breast. She loved how he pushed the soft mound upward as he massaged an erect nipple. The hot bulge between his legs burned against her covered pussy. It was too much. It was too insane to even think about. He was too young. He was too perfect.

Lust heated her blood. She was wet with desire.

"Fuck me, Dean. Don't leave until you fuck me. Just this once." Her head spun and she would never know if it was the many drinks or the flame he stoked with his hard cock surging against her. She had asked him to fuck her. She couldn't take it back. She never wanted to take it back.

His hand lowered to the smooth skin of her outer thigh and followed it upward beneath her dress to her hip. When she groaned against his mouth and her lower body pitched forward, he slipped his hand between her legs until his fingers came in contact with her moist panties. The heat of her wet pussy drove him wild. The soft coating of pubic hair just behind the satiny material ruffled against his fingers. Dragging the elastic band of her underwear down, he slipped his hand past the warm skin of her belly until the back of his finger found her clit.

Maisy's body bucked when his hand quickly twisted in order to slip his finger into her hot, welcoming hole. He wanted to fuck her so badly that he ached. But he couldn't. Even in the heat of the moment, it suddenly hit him between the hot kisses and the wild strokes into her hot pussy that he had no protection, no condoms...he'd never thought he would need them.

"Maisy..."

Her hips began to undulate. "Oh god, Dean..." Her muscles sucked at his fingers.

She was going to come. He knew by the way her clit swelled and throbbed every time he drew his finger from her pussy and dragged it through her wet slit to circle the hard bud. His cock ached. He wanted to be inside her, pounding and fucking until he came hard.

"Dean...I'm...please!"

He braced his hip against her body and used two fingers to fill her. Stroke after hot stroke, deep into her wet heat until Maisy began to shudder around the length of them.

She whimpered against his mouth, clawing at his shoulders as her hips jerked. It was only his hand between her legs that kept her on her feet. His wonderful hand and his magical fingers that filled her tight and stretched her wide.

She gasped for air, her body's rhythm a silent demand for him to keep going even as the hot orgasm subsided. "Dean...oh god, it's been so long. I'm sorry, I couldn't wait... I'm sorry that you..."

"It's okay, Maisy," he whispered and enjoyed how her body jerked when he slipped his fingers from inside her pussy and used his thumb to play about her swollen clit.

"Don't stop..." she breathed. "Don't stop touching me..." Her mound arched into his hand. "It's been so long since..." Suddenly her words drifted off.

Dean leaned back and saw her glazed eyes widen. Her mouth sagged open.

"Maisy?" he asked cautiously. He had just been ready to finger her again, but at the sudden sight of pasty white that replaced her earlier pink cheeks, he yanked his fingers from her underwear. "Maisy, are you going to be—"

She managed to shove him backward just before she turned her head and threw up all over the foyer rug. She glanced at him once, tried to focus, then slipped down the wall and rolled to her hands and knees as her body contracted, preparing to throw up again.

Dean finally reacted. He grabbed a nearby garbage can and managed to dump the dirty tissues out of it. Just in time he shoved it under her drooping head as round two started.

"Oh...god..." she moaned as her body contracted with another bout.

Dean turned his head away, taking deep breaths to halt the bile that rose in his own throat. As Maisy continued to empty the liquor from her belly, his hand rested on her back and rubbed hesitant circles as he waited for her to finish. Finally, only small

shudders trembled through her. She slumped against the wall, her head rolling slowly as she gasped for air.

His gaze settled on a nearby tissue box. He grabbed a handful and shoved them into her hand. "Maisy, just stay here. I'm going to get a damp towel for you."

"Go away," she mumbled and wiped her mouth as her eyes focused on the floor.

"Just stay here." He rose and hurried down a hall, looking into doorways until he found the bathroom. Shame raced through him as he searched through drawers, found a washcloth and quickly dampened it. They'd been having so much fun throughout the evening, but he should have called a halt to the many shots and drinks. Shaking his head at his own irresponsibility, he shut off the water and raced back out of the room.

He found Maisy still slumped against the wall with her eyes closed. Hunkering down, he wiped her pale face.

Her eyes fluttered open as her hand swatted out weakly. "Go away..."

"Nope," he smiled. "Not until I know you're safely tucked into your bed."

"Just...leave..." She attempted to draw her legs beneath her, but when the room tilted, she gave up the battle.

He would not leave her close to passing out on the foyer floor. Careful not to step in the first puddle of Maisy's vomit, he gathered her into his arms and easily lifted her off the floor even though she was dead weight. "I'm not leaving you here all night."

"No..."

"Maisy, you can't even walk. Which way to your bedroom?" Jeez, he could smell the vomit that trailed down the front of her dress.

She mumbled something unintelligible, so he headed back down the hallway until he found a room that had a bed covered with a feminine-looking coverlet. Pictures of the same children that adorned her living room hung on the wall so hopefully it was her room. No matter. This was the bed she was going to pass out in tonight. Maisy wouldn't know the difference anyway. Not until she sobered up.

As he laid her down, he couldn't help staring at her breasts that bulged slightly above the neckline of her dress. She lay halfway on her side, one arm draped over the side of a soft mound, forcing it against the other to create a deliciously deep cleavage. Too bad the damp spots evidencing her earlier sickness splattered the front of her dress.

Dean rolled his eyes, took the wet cloth out of her clutching fingers and wiped the stains from her dress. She'd have to sleep in the dirty garment. There wasn't a thing he could do about it. Then he scrubbed his jaw with one hand. Shit. He hated to leave her alone. But what could he do? The limo still waited outside for him. It wasn't as if he and Maisy were great friends — or lovers.

That thought stopped him dead in his tracks. For most of the night he'd thought about what it would be like to slip his cock inside her body. The sexual episode in the foyer came back to haunt him. His lips tightened in a wince when he remembered how her pussy had sucked at his fingers. He could still feel the satiny smoothness of her

thigh beneath his hand when she'd wrapped it around his hip and pressed her mound against his cock.

Dean shook his head. Despite her sexuality, Maisy's whole aura of innocence cloaked his senses no matter how he struggled to force it from his mind. His eyes shifted to her parted lips. If she hadn't just thrown up, he would have been tempted to kiss her one more time before he left. Glancing around, he spotted a thick quilt, yanked it from the back of a chair and draped her inert body. All he got in return was a small moan as Maisy rolled onto her side and began to snore.

Just this once he wished he wasn't a paid escort. He wished like hell he could be around in the morning to hear her stutter apologies for getting so drunk.

He didn't kiss her but he did reach out a hand to brush aside tendrils of hair against her cheek. "Maisy Collins, you're something else and you don't even know it."

Tucking the quilt a little more snugly about her shoulders, he then flipped on the bedside lamp in case she woke up sick again, placed a garbage can beside the bed, glanced one more time at the sleeping woman and left the room.

Chapter Five

“Oh...”

Maisy whimpered the rasping groan. Her head throbbed horribly. Someone or something jostled the mattress, sending another wave of agony through her brain.

Carefully, without moving a muscle, she opened one eye and squinted into the bright light of the morning sun filtering through a slit in the curtains. Forcing her other eye open, her sluggish gaze moved lethargically around the room. There was no doubt. She had been hit by a truck.

She rolled a shoulder and realized her arm was asleep. The movement was enough to let Max know she was awake. He immediately wiggled closer to lick her ear.

“Oh god, stop it, Max,” she muttered. The dog leapt over her inert body, hit the floor and swung about to look at her expectantly. When she didn’t move, he barked loudly, sending waves of pain streaking through her head once more. “No...quiet. Please don’t bark,” she pleaded desperately.

By some miracle he actually shut up. But his silence didn’t stop him from placing his paws on the edge of the mattress nor his tongue from taking another swipe over her face.

Fumbling to shove him aside, Maisy slowly dragged her legs over the edge of the bed while clutching her head. Her stomach heaved a bit, then finally settled down. Max stood at the doorway, waiting eagerly to be let out.

It took all her effort to rise bit by bit and shuffle across the room. It was her hand against the wall for support and the other cupping her forehead that got her down the hallway and into the foyer. Her fingers fumbled at the bolt lock and her foggy brain finally realized it wasn’t in place. Only the little button on the doorknob had been locked. She twisted her face from the bright sunlight of the morning, waited for Max to bolt outside then shut the door carefully.

God, it felt so good to rest her forehead against the coolness of the wood.

It was when she turned that the events of the evening before rushed in. She grimaced with a low moan when she remembered Dean’s lusty embrace against the wall. Then...

Her gaze scurried to the tiled floor. No vomit.

Maisy slid down the door to the cool tile as her knees gave out. Good god, he’d had his hand in her underwear. And for as lousy as she felt, her misery still coupled with a clenching of her pussy as she remembered his thick fingers coaxing her through a breathless orgasm.

“Oh...” she gasped loudly. Then she thought about throwing up. “Oh god...” Her fingers wove precariously through her tousled hair.

What had Dean thought? She’d been the one who had started the sexual shenanigans while sitting in a booth at some loud bar. Her head swam as she tried to remember the succession of events afterward.

It was all too fuzzy. Kisses. Her breasts aching to be squeezed. Thick, slippery fingers inside her. An orgasm like she hadn’t had in years—no, probably never. Maybe. Then she’d lost her cookies all over the rug.

Her gaze dropped. The floor was shiny and dry. Nothing there to tell the truth of what would probably be her most embarrassing moment. Had she cleaned it up? The last thing she could remember was Dean squatting in front of her and wiping her face with a cool cloth.

Her head sank back against the wall. Where was the big, black hole in the floor that would swallow her up and hide her forever? Crap. She needed an aspirin the size of a dinner plate and a bottle of mouthwash—and maybe a big glass of hemlock.

* * * * *

Dean glanced up at the kitchen clock. It was noon. All morning long he’d worked around the yard, but no matter how hard he’d concentrated, he couldn’t get the picture of Maisy’s smile out of his head. He’d continually run the events of the evening before through his mind, trying to figure out what the hell it was about the woman that had him in a half hard state since he’d rolled out of bed. Everything about her had him in a quandary.

He sank into a chair, leaned his elbows on the table and settled his chin atop his entwined fingers. His job with Mike’s escort service was old hat. Most times he’d found himself checking his watch and waiting for the night to be over as he fought off advances and made excuses. He’d always smiled though, always said the right thing and always acted the proper gentlemen.

Dean had been on enough paid dates to know that last night was different. Not once had he looked at his watch because he’d been too busy having fun with Maisy, too busy early in the evening trying to convince her what a great lady she was and then too concerned later on with trying to keep his hands off her luscious curves.

He smiled as he leaned back in the chair, picturing Maisy on the dance floor as she rolled her hips with abandon to the music. He hadn’t been able to help himself when he’d pulled her luscious round butt up against him while they danced or the instant hard-on her nearness had created. At that juncture he’d sworn to keep his hands to himself. He had been working for crissakes and it was the first time he’d ever done something like that.

Because of his reaction to her, he’d purposely led them back to the booth so he could cool down. But what had she done? She’d asked him to kiss her then pressed her breast into his hand.

Dean swallowed, sucked in a deep breath and let it feather out slowly over his lips. He was hard again. Ah hell. As long as the damage was done, he finally let his mind wander to the intimate moment in her foyer.

Fuck me, Dean. Don't leave until you fuck me...

His belly contracted into a shuddering ball. That's what she'd said. And somehow between kissing her and burying his fingers deep inside her pussy, he would have had to discover the ability to walk away before tossing her onto her back for a hot fuck. Dean shook his head, wondering what would have actually happened if she hadn't gotten sick.

His eyes darted to the clock again. She must be up. Maybe not moving too quickly because of the jag she'd had, but maybe at least showered? What would it hurt for him to take a quick ride over to her place just to check up on her?

He snorted into the quiet of the room. She'd have a heart attack if he showed up because he suspected that the events of last night were completely out of character for Maisy.

His fingers drummed against the table. A muscle ticked in his jaw as his gaze settled on the phone. Dean took a deep breath and thought for a moment more.

What the hell. He got up, yanked open a drawer and pulled out the phone book. He just couldn't let last night go.

* * * * *

Maisy sat at her dining room table tearing little chunks off her dry toast. Her stomach had finally settled down, allowing her the opportunity to chance a bite and not lose her cookies again because that's exactly what she'd done when she'd stepped out of the shower about two hours earlier. And she'd thrown up again right after she'd managed to get Lizzy the hell off the phone because her stomach had rolled and twisted and turned as she had struggled to be nonchalant with her nosy friend who had called for every juicy detail. Maisy hadn't had to feign sickness when she hurriedly stated she'd call Lizzy back on Sunday when she felt better or possibly not even talk to her until Monday at work. Then she'd almost fainted when Lizzy said she was coming over. No, Maisy had stated fervently. She really had needed to lie down...after she threw up one more time.

Thank god Lizzy had taken the hint and as soon as the phone was in the cradle, Maisy had managed to get to the kitchen garbage and empty her stomach again. Whether it had been from all the booze or simply a physical reaction to how upset she'd been all morning over her actions from the night before, she'd never know.

So she'd rested another hour and now munched on the toast to get something in her belly because she'd managed to finally choke down a couple of aspirin and not throw them up.

When the phone rang in the quiet of the room, she started a bit, then got up and shuffled to the kitchen, hoping like hell it wasn't Lizzy calling back. She picked it up just as the answering machine clicked.

"Hello?"

The automated response on her answering machine echoed in her ear.

"Just wait a sec. I'm here," she stated. Finally, there was a beep. "Okay, hello?"

"Hi, Maisy. It's me, Dean."

Her knees nearly buckled. She winced and couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Maisy? Are you still there?"

"Um, yeah."

"I hope you don't mind me calling. I just wanted to know if you're okay."

"After what?" she blurted without thinking. Oh good god. What was he talking about? If he brought up the incident of her coming in his hand, she'd die. She'd absolutely die.

"You were pretty sick last night. I hated to leave you alone but..." his voice trailed off. "How do you feel today?"

Maisy sighed into the phone. "Not good," she croaked. Maybe she should pretend she didn't remember anything. Not that it would be a huge lie. She still couldn't remember walking to the bedroom or getting into bed. Ah hell. As miserable as she felt and embarrassed beyond belief, she still couldn't help how her heart beat a little quicker at just the sound of his voice. "I don't think I've had a hangover like this since my college days." She heard his chuckle resonate over the line. "So you think that's funny?"

"No. I'm sorry, Maisy. It's just that I can picture you rolling your eyes as you said it. The image is cute as hell."

There was a slight pause.

"I also wanted you to know I really had fun with you last night."

Maisy did roll her eyes—albeit with heightened embarrassment. Fun? With an old lady who threw up all over her floor—just after she'd come? Well, of course that last part was fun for him. What thirty-some-year-old guy wouldn't like the fact that he had his fingers in someone? She rolled on past that fact and gathered her courage. "I'm sorry about the throwing up part. I usually save that little bit of enjoyment for a private moment."

This time he laughed out loud.

"I take it you were the one to clean up the mess?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, I did. I figured you might not have the reserve this morning to do it yourself," he chuckled.

Maisy had to smile for the first time since she'd dragged her butt out of bed. Dean was so easy to talk to. And it seemed he wasn't going to bring up what had happened up against the wall. Even so, her cheeks burned. "Well, thanks for taking care of it. And

thank you for last night. I had fun too." God, she hoped he didn't think she was thanking him for the finger banging. Shit, she didn't know how any of this was supposed to play out. Did younger women get finger-banged then thank the person responsible for it the next day?

"I was thinking, Maisy. If you're feeling up to it tonight...how about a hamburger someplace? No drinks, I promise. Just a little dinner—a way for me to apologize for shoving those jello shots into you."

Her stomach rolled at the mention of it. He wanted to take her out again? Why? "That's not necessary. I'm sure what my friends paid the escort service wouldn't cover a second date. Oh and I'm a big girl, Dean. I could have said no to all the alcohol. I'm way past the point of giving in to peer pressure."

"This has nothing to do with the escort service. I really enjoyed your company last night. How about it? Just a guy and a gal having a burger, shooting the breeze and enjoying each other's company."

Maisy was stunned. He really wanted to take her out? This handsome younger man who drove her crazy with his sexy smile, bedroom eyes and thick, talented fingers?

"Come on, Maisy. Take a nap this afternoon. Take a couple more aspirin," his voice quavered with another chuckle, "because I'm sure you've already done that and you'll feel good as new later on. What do you say? I'll even buy you some ice cream."

How could she resist ice cream? She rolled her eyes at the idiotic excuse to spend another evening with him. "All right. But I really do need to nap first."

"Good! Does seven o'clock sound okay with you?"

She suddenly felt sixteen again and going to her first prom. "Seven will be fine." Then she couldn't resist adding, "And no drinks. Not even you. I don't think I could stand the smell of any liquor."

Despite her pounding head, Maisy flushed warm and fuzzy when he laughed again on the other end.

* * * * *

Initially, Maisy was speechless when she opened her front door. But that could very well be because Dean took her breath away dressed in his fitted jeans, polo shirt and an expensive black leather jacket. He looked casual, comfortable and even sexier than he had in his tux the night before. Once she got over being nervous in his presence, Maisy decided to bury the age difference between them for one more night. It was just a hamburger with a new friend—that's all.

Once they left Maisy's house, Dean had the time of his life. They found a quiet booth in a small mom-and-pop diner where they ate, sipped coffee and laughed over the ice cream he had promised.

He'd pegged her flawlessly. Maisy was a perfect dinner companion. In fact, he was beginning to think there weren't too many things about her that weren't perfect. She

had a great smile—one that was natural and sweet—beautiful dark eyes a man could drown in and a sense of humor that was never-ending. The one thing, however, that had him second-guessing was the reason for Maisy's ego problem. It wasn't because of anything she'd blatantly declared but more the simple derisive comments she dropped here and there that formed his opinion. Someone had really done a number on her at some point in her past. Must have been her asshole ex.

She seemed too down on herself. Earlier, she'd made a flippant comment about the hamburger going straight to her hips and how it didn't matter anyway because the damage had already been done. But when she'd excused herself for a trip to the ladies room, he'd watched her walk away. For some reason, Maisy thought she was slightly overweight. Overweight?

Dean mentally shook his head at that. Maisy was far from it. He'd describe her more as filled out in the right locations. Hell, she was nicely rounded and looked much better than a bony woman in her twenties who spent hours at the gym to get into a size zero. Dean liked a "fuller cut" woman and Maisy imbued every facet of that description.

They discussed her college marketing degree and her current job at a travel agency. They talked about gardening, laughed about Max and even acknowledged her teary eyes when she spoke about her twins leaving for school across the state. But not once did she mention her ex-husband, *or* the fact that Dean knew what it was like to hold Maisy in the middle of an orgasm.

If he mentioned those two things now, what would happen to the rest of the evening? He wanted to discuss the incident against the wall. His desire was to assure her he hadn't taken the whole thing lightly. What would Maisy say if she knew his biggest wish was a repeat performance and not just because he was looking for a quick fuck? Maisy tantalized his senses. All day long he'd tried to figure out why and the only thing he could come up with was the fact that she was a wonderful person—one he wanted to spend more time with.

The waitress appeared and asked them if they would like a refill of coffee. He watched Maisy offer her cup. As she glanced up at the girl, her eyes sparkled and her heartfelt smile widened as she said, "Thank you."

See, that's what he liked about her. Maisy was genuinely kind and it shone for all to see.

Once the waitress left, Maisy glanced over at him with that light of humor sparkling in her eyes. "I'm probably not going to sleep tonight with all this caffeine bubbling through my system. I used to be able to handle it but middle age reared its ugly head." She rolled her eyes with a grin tugging at her mouth. "When you're an old lady, you learn what you can have and what you can't." *Boy*, she thought as she drank in the sight of him, *if that's not an understatement.*

Dean grinned back. "You keep making little comments like that, Maisy. You're not old. You're far from it." Just before she ducked her head, he saw the light in her eyes dim for a mere second. "I want to ask you something."

She quietly played with a napkin, but Dean spotted the slight trembling of her hand.

"We've discussed just about everything there is to talk about except for two things. Tell me if I should mind my own business but with all the many things you've told me about your kids growing up, you haven't mentioned their father again." He watched her continue to sip her coffee but her eyes darted about nervously.

She leaned back into the cushioned booth, set down her cup and simply stared at it for a moment. Finally, she took a deep breath as her gaze met his. "I told you last night that basically he wasn't easy to live with. I can't stand thinking about him, let alone talk about him out loud. The champagne must have loosened my tongue."

"I want to know everything about you, Maisy. I want to know why you joke and laugh but beneath it all there's a hint of insecurity. Did he do that to you?"

He watched her nibble her bottom lip as if trying to make a decision. Dean leaned forward and took her hand, noting the surprised arch of her eyebrows as she stared at their clasped fingers. "Let me tell you what I think, Maisy Collins. You're a vibrant woman. That's the only way I can describe you. I think your ex might have tried to take that away. Am I right? Shame on him if that's the way it was. He doesn't know what he lost."

She stared at him, the light of earlier humor in her eyes gone even though her cheeks flushed pink with his compliment. Then strangely, she blinked back an instant bit of dampness. At that moment she would have given anything for Ted's character to have been like Dean's. What would life have been like if she had been lucky enough to have a husband who was as understanding and one who wanted to have fun with her instead of his many friends at some local bar? What would it have been like to have a marriage where her husband thought she was the most important thing in his life? She'd tried so hard to get Ted to change because she'd loved him so much, struggled for years to make him realize what he possessed. Maybe in some part of her she still did love him, as idiotic as that sounded. He'd stomped on her heart and made her life miserable after the twins were born but that didn't belie the fact that if he hadn't left her for a younger woman, Maisy might be still putting up with Ted's special brand of mental abuse.

She sighed when she felt the brush of Dean's thumb across the top of her hand. It was so nice to have someone do that. "Thank you, Dean, but it takes two to tango. I should have been more aggressive as far as keeping my husband interested in staying home."

Damn, Dean thought. *The asshole left her for another woman.* That had to be it. "He strayed?"

Maisy snorted quietly at the same time she pulled her hand from his. "If that's what you want to call it. I think of it as a total breakdown in loyalty to the person you're supposed to be committed to."

"Tell me about it, Maisy. I figured as much."

Maisy didn't like to talk about Ted. As much as her ex-husband had broken her heart, it wasn't in her nature to talk disparagingly about him to anyone. She found great satisfaction in calling him an asshole when she was discussing it with Max and there was no one else around. "There really isn't a whole lot to say," she shrugged. "Ted struck out for greener pastures about six years ago. Our marriage was a mistake. I've learned to live with it."

The hell you have. Dean didn't believe it for a second. If Maisy had learned to live with it, she wouldn't be so close-mouthed now or have that horrible sadness in her eyes at the moment. Whether she knew it or not, he could still see evidence of her ex-husband's betrayal written all over her face. He eyed her fingers where they were securely wrapped around her coffee mug. No chance there to hold her hand anymore.

"So what was the other thing you wanted to talk about?" Oh god! Maisy groaned silently. She had grasped for anything to change the subject but she just might have opened herself up to something even worse.

Their eyes locked and she knew what was coming before he even opened his mouth.

"I want to talk to you about last night."

"Last night was wonderful! I can't thank you enough for the fun. I love to dance." The words tumbled from her mouth to stave off what she suspected he really wanted to discuss. "I'm just sorry I drank so much. I'll guarantee I won't be doing that for a while. You know last night was the first time I've ever been inside the Spindle. What a wonderful place. If I can save my money, I just might treat myself again to another delicious dinner. I—"

"Maisy." Dean cut her off. "That's not what I wanted to talk about. You remember everything that happened last night, don't you?"

She felt like a rabbit caught in a snare. She couldn't look at him. Even so, the hair rose on her arms and her stomach clenched as the memory of his touch between her legs blazed through her brain. Her gaze dropped to the cup in her hands. "Yes," she squeaked out. "I don't know what got into me."

Inwardly, she cringed. *Bad choice of words, Maisy, you dumb shithead.* She knew exactly what had gotten into her. His long, thick fingers—and it had been wonderful. It had been a magnificent sexual experience for a lonely middle-aged woman who hadn't come in a long time...except for a few nights before when she'd dreamed about him. She sucked in a deep breath. Dean could have melted the panties right off her if she hadn't gotten so sick.

"Would you please look at me?" Dean uttered quietly. "Please, Maisy?"

Tucking her cowardice away, she peeked up. God he was handsome. His hazel eyes softened when she met his gaze. She clutched her cup tightly. It was the only thing that kept her from reaching up and running her fingers through the thick waves of dark hair at his temple.

Dean watched with fascination when she captured her bottom lip with her teeth. "I did not plan for the evening to end that way."

She was utterly and completely embarrassed at her behavior but she had to get past it. "Dean...before you go any further, let me apologize. I'm sorry I came on as an oversexed older woman. Between the wonderful evening and the liquor I consumed, I just lost my head. I'm not that kind of woman."

"Well, that's a disappointment."

Her head snapped higher. "What? I-I don't understand."

Dean's cheeks dimpled when he smiled. "You just stated the two reasons you lost your head last night—a fun evening and liquor. I didn't hear my name in there anywhere. I was hoping maybe it was because you felt something special between us. Something akin to what I felt when I kissed you. We had a connection, Maisy, and not just sexual—it went deeper than that. It was powerful as hell for me."

Her mouth sagged open. Dean reached across the table, placed one finger beneath her chin and gently pushed upward to close her lips. "Don't look so surprised," he chuckled. "I told you a few minutes ago that you're a vibrant woman and I meant it. It's so refreshing to sit here with you and have an adult conversation. No giggling, no flirting, no double meanings. I love your dry wit even when you don't realize that you just said something funny as hell. Maisy, you might see yourself as staid and hokey and old. Let me assure you, you're not. Most definitely not. You didn't even realize last night the number of men who gave you a second and even a third glance. You were hot and I'm so glad I'm the man who took you home."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

She pressed back hard into the cushion behind her. Anything to break contact with the touch of his finger. She couldn't think, let alone breathe. "Why?" she questioned. "I'm not the woman you just described. I'm plain old Maisy Collins who couldn't hang on to her husband because I wasn't exciting enough or beautiful enough. And if I was getting second and third glances last night it was because I probably made an ass out of myself on the dance floor." She ran a trembling hand through her hair and darted her eyes about. "I'm sure those men were looking at me because they were wondering why you were having such a good time with your mother."

"Stop it, Maisy. Stop thinking of yourself that way and stop thinking of the age difference between us. When a man and a woman find a special connection like I know we did, age doesn't matter. I think it merits some exploration."

"What are you saying?" she returned with a horrified look. Her head wagged back and forth as she cupped her warm cheeks. "Impossible." She stared at him and wondered why he grinned like the village idiot.

"I'm not taking back what I just said. I would love to see you again." He leaned forward, surprised that she looked as if she would bolt from the booth at any second. "In fact, I would love to have a chance to kiss you again. Tomorrow. Next weekend. It doesn't matter. I would love to show you that our age difference doesn't matter. Why not relax and give it a chance?"

For one split second Maisy's heart leapt with joy as she considered his request. To be kissed by him again, to have him make love to her would be a dream come true. But reality smacked her square in the stomach. What would her children think? What would her co-workers think? And eventually, she wouldn't have to wonder what Ted would think because as sure as the sun came up he'd come looking for her, open his mouth and scathing comments would tumble out and flay her wide open.

She had to stop this right now. Right this very minute.

"Dean. Thank you for your compliments. And thank you for supper tonight. But I really need to get home. I-I'm sorry but exploring a relationship with one another is out of the question." She swallowed the sob that suddenly threatened to close her throat completely.

"Maisy, please listen—"

She held up her hand to halt anything else he might say. If he kept it up, she was doomed to look like a fool, traipsing around with a man years younger than herself. "Would you please take me home?"

His shoulders fell with the huge sigh that left him but he continued to stare across the table. He never would have guessed she could be so obstinate. He'd give her a couple of days. Then he would call her because right now she wasn't going to budge.

Maisy stood up and slipped into her jacket, her stone-cold eyes daring him to even try to help her as he quickly followed her up. Just then the waitress appeared with the check. He glanced once more at Maisy's shuttered features, sighed again then tossed some loose bills on the table. He hurried to follow her out of the restaurant.

Chapter Six

They talked on the ride back to Maisy's house but the conversation remained generic, stilted and on safe ground because Maisy refused to discuss another date. Dean didn't want to push her any more and risk total alienation. He would give her a few days but he was coming back. He'd give her a run for her money as far as stubbornness went. He would change her mind. Her being older made absolutely no difference to him. He'd been in more than one relationship in his life and never had he been so quickly captivated by a woman. Never.

He pulled his vehicle up to the curb and shut off the engine. Maisy silently fumbled with the door handle in the dark. Dean leaned across the seat and found the latch for her, noticing how her body shrank against the seat in order to not make contact but he didn't pop the door open.

He sighed heavily. "You were just going to hop out and not even say good night?"

"Of course I planned to say good night." Her features were tight in the small bit of light from the overhead street lamp. "Good night." She stared through the windshield and waited for him to move his hand from the latch.

"I'll walk you to the door."

"That's not necessary."

"Well, I think it is." Ignoring her slight gasp, he popped the driver's side door open, slid out his side and hurried around the front of the car.

Maisy was already out on the sidewalk when he rounded the passenger side. Silently, he shut the door behind her and they walked up the sidewalk to her porch.

* * * * *

Just a few minutes longer. If she could just hang in there and find her goddamn keys, she'd be safely inside her house and Dean would be heading home and out of her life. He probably thought she was acting like a cold-hearted bitch, but that was so far from the truth. It had taken all her might to keep up that front and all her stubborn will to not throw herself into his arms and beg him to stay.

Just a minute more. No, maybe less than that. Where were her fucking damn keys?

He was standing too close. She could actually feel the heat of his body surrounding her on the tiny porch. She could smell his cologne. God, it filled her nostrils with a deliciousness she knew she'd crave for the rest of her life.

"You didn't forget your keys, did you?" he asked quietly.

"No," she almost sobbed out. "I know they're here." Finally her fingers came in contact with a leather strap. She yanked them out of her purse, feeling as if her nerves would snap. "I knew I didn't forget them." Stupid. Here she was talking about misplaced keys and all she wanted was to recapture what she'd lost with him. Drawing in a deep breath, she finally looked up, then quickly away, anything to simply keep from drowning in the sorrow she saw in his eyes. "Um, thank you for bringing me home when I asked."

"Maisy?"

"What?" she snapped instantly. *Go away!* she screamed silently.

"Can't you even look at me?" His sigh whispered past her ear. Dean shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "I've really enjoyed your company. Thanks for coming with me tonight."

She blinked to keep her tears at bay and continued to study the railing of her porch. "Thank you, Dean, for a birthday gift I'll never forget." She turned to the doorknob and with a shaking hand, slipped the key into the hole.

"Maisy?"

His hand touched her arm. She snapped her eyes closed. Max whined loudly on the other side of the door. "I really have to get inside, Dean."

"Can I kiss you good night?"

She refused to take her hand off the doorknob. Glancing over her shoulder, she grimaced what was supposed to have been a smile. "Dean...I really don't—"

Too late. He'd already sidestepped a bit, tipped his head and pressed his mouth against her lips. Nothing demanding or even sensuous for that matter. Just a light brushing of a friend's mouth against another's. It was over as quickly as it had begun but Maisy's lips burned. All he would have had to do was press his mouth against hers one more time and she would have been lost but he took a step back.

It was for the best.

"Good night, Maisy. You're a great lady. For both our sakes, I wish you'd forget for just one minute the differences in our ages."

She couldn't look at him. Her jaw clenched as she flicked her wrist and heard the lock open. "Good night, Dean."

He turned and headed down the steps without another word but his disheartened sigh whispered on the breeze.

Maisy couldn't get inside fast enough. She fought Max as he tried to slip outside and slammed the door. "Just wait, Max," she sobbed. "Just wait until he's gone. Sit!" Tears sprouted from her eyes as the dog smacked his butt down, waiting to see what she would do next.

Slumping against the inside of the door, Maisy used the back of her hand to brush away a tear. "It's not fair, Max. He's so damn wonderful. Why can't I have him, if only for tonight? But I don't want just tonight. I want..."

The dog barked loudly. The sharp sound crackled through her senses.

Maisy straightened. What did she want? She swallowed, wondering why she felt so panicked. Suddenly it was crystal clear what she wanted. She desired a life. She desired more than what she'd had for the last six years – no, longer than that. Maisy wanted to feel the thrill of a man's touch and not just any man's touch. It had to be Dean.

Her hands flew to her dampened cheeks. She had to make a decision! Like instantly before his car drove off. She was a big girl in a big girl chair, wasn't she? Why couldn't she have what others had? She'd done her time as a parent. She'd given up enough of her life for others.

In a wild panic, Maisy yanked the door open and ignored the muffled thud as it slammed against the wall. She raced out onto the porch. Dean was just slipping inside his car. Oh good god, for some reason he was still here! For some wonderful reason he hadn't driven off into the dark night to leave her lonely and bereft!

"Dean!" she hollered as she took the stairs then stopped on a dime on the last to simply stare as he turned in her direction.

Neither said a word.

He watched Maisy lift her hands in supplication. When a smile appeared on her face at the same time she wiped away a tear with one hand, he got out of the car and slammed the door shut. Paying no attention to Max as the dog raced by him, he strode purposefully up the sidewalk, loving the fact that her smile widened with each step he took.

No words. He wasn't going to say anything and give her a chance to change her mind.

When he reached out, her arms were there to greet him. Maisy flung herself into his embrace. Tilting his head, he captured her lips in a bruising kiss.

She whimpered as she clung to him, meeting each of his deep kisses as her fingers raced through the thickness of his hair, cupped his face then slid to the waves resting against his neck. The touch of his tongue against hers was electrifying. She opened her mouth wider to let him sweep inside. Her heart slammed against her ribs when his large hands cupped her ass to hold her body tightly against his own.

"Maisy..." he mumbled.

"I was so scared," she murmured between kisses. "So frightened that I might never see you again."

"I was coming back," he breathed. "Tomorrow, next week, it didn't matter. But I was coming back."

Their hands raced over one another's bodies as they continued to kiss, stepped up the stairs toward the door and somehow managed not to trip as they clung to each other. Once inside the foyer, Dean kicked the door shut with his heel and followed Maisy's lead as she walked backward down the hall, pulling him along. Neither noticed the bright overhead hall light that she'd left on. The frantic kisses never stopped when

he shrugged the jacket from his shoulders and let it fall to the carpeted floor. His teeth scraped down the length of her neck as they entered her bedroom and he stripped off her jacket, fingers immediately plucking away at the buttons of her blouse. Once he had her shirt open, he slipped it from her shoulders as they crossed the room then he cushioned her fall to the bed by holding her tightly with one arm. Her breasts flattened against his chest as he drew her up and over his body.

Maisy's brain spun wildly as she kissed him. There were no doubts. She had not made a mistake by racing out onto the porch. How could there be any reservations when her blood sang through her veins? His cock throbbed against her thigh, hard with promise. It had been so long since she'd felt this way. So many years since she'd felt this electrifying thrill of desire course through her body. There was no age difference, no hesitation on her part. Only a raw sexual need to be fulfilled heated her blood.

One minute Dean's hands squeezed her ass as his lower body surged against her, building that need with each sensual thrust. The next, his fingers unfastened her bra.

"God...Dean..." she whispered against his mouth.

He easily rolled her to her back. She clung to him as his hand plumped her bare breast. When his lips captured her nipple and sucked, she gasped at the hot streak that raced straight to her pussy. She was hot. She was ready. She was wet.

Maisy wanted him like she'd never wanted anything in her life.

His tongue swirled around her hard nipple as his hand dropped to caress her covered pussy. Maisy's thighs opened wide, her hips already pitching into his cupped hand. Her clit throbbed within the confines of her jeans, sensitized by his caressing fingers. Another whimper escaped the back of her throat when Dean's hand left the heat between her legs, reached up and clasped her hand. "No, Dean...don't stop..."

His tongue was back to dance with hers as he guided her hand to the bulge at his crotch. Between licks inside her mouth, he mumbled, "Touch me, Maisy. I have to have you touch me..."

"Oh god," she moaned when he flattened her hand over the hard ridge of his cock.

"Hold me," he whispered beside her ear as his mouth caressed the line of her neck.

Her fingers wrapped around the outline of his cock. Dean circled his hips, pushing his erection deeper into her palm. "Take it out."

She rolled to her side with her mouth grinding against his again. Dean was on his back, his fingers massaging her breast. Suddenly, the urgency left both of them as they waited on the precipice of desire.

Maisy's hand drifted over the flat of his stomach, loving how his stomach muscles sucked in when she ran one finger along the waistband of his jeans.

The air sizzled between them.

"You're teasing me," he said just before his teeth captured her bottom lip and held it.

They stared into one another's eyes as she unsnapped his pants with a trembling hand. Their breath mingled and the echo of sensual panting joined with the sound of his zipper opening. Maisy could feel the hard outline of his cock beneath her palm as she slowly dragged his pants open.

Time stopped as their gazes continued to lock. Her fingers rested against the waistband of his underwear.

Dean released her lip but his hand cupped her face, keeping her mouth near. Maisy could hardly breathe. She couldn't believe he was here in her bedroom.

Flashes of Ted snarling his disgust that she couldn't even keep a dick hard swooped in to bite at her shaky confidence. She hesitated and her eyes fluttered shut. Her hand stilled.

"Maisy, look at me. I want to see your eyes."

Slowly, she opened them, amazed at the shuttered desire resting in his. Half of his face was shaded from the light that spilled in through the open doorway, making her feel as if she resided within a wonderful dream.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

She swallowed and struggled against a wince. "I-I just don't want to do something wrong." It had been too perfect up to this point. Maisy was scared to death that the moment would shatter and she would be embarrassed beyond belief.

"Touch me," he urged her once more. "I need your fingers around me."

Her gaze shifted uncomfortably. She didn't move.

Dean's hand left her cheek and followed the line of her arm until he came to her wrist. With his eyes still boring into hers, he guided her hand inside his shorts. Her lips parted in fascination and the warmth of her breath flowed over his face as her fingers circled his cock. Soundlessly, he taught her the rhythm he sought, wondering about her ex and what had happened to make her blind to her own sexual appeal.

"How could you do it wrong? God, Maisy. It feels wonderful. Having your hand around me feels wonderful." He reached up, ran his fingers through her hair, cupped the back of her head and guided her mouth to his once more. "You're wonderful..." His tongue licked across her bottom lip before he tilted his head and kissed her deeply.

Maisy's heart thudded. His rigid cock was silky smooth beneath her touch. Hot and throbbing because of what she was doing to him. Pre-cum wet the tip of it. With more confidence, her thumb circled the head in exploration then she tightened her fingers and stroked down his shaft until she came to his tight balls. Gently she ran a fingertip around his sac.

Dean growled low, his chest expanding with each excited breath he took. When he felt his restraint waning, he snagged her hand and rolled Maisy to her back. Her wide and questioning eyes forced a grin to tug at his mouth. She was so damn cute. Sultry, yet innocent. "I had to stop you or risk coming before I had a chance to get you naked."

Her eyes rounded even more but a slow smile spread across her face as he used his knees to part her thighs, settled between them and propped himself on his elbows. His cock nestled against her covered pussy. He loved her lying beneath him. The anticipation of fucking her drove him crazy, but he wanted to take his time. "And I do want you naked, but I'm glad we slowed down here. I want to remember every detail of this first time. What? You looked surprised, Maisy." He dipped his head and kissed her swollen lips. "I plan to fuck you all night. I plan to make you come time after time after time."

She reached up and trailed a finger across his shadowed cheek. "No one has ever said that to me. You saying that, Dean, makes me feel sexy—makes me feel like a woman for the first time in a long time." She was comfortable with him but she still couldn't stop her next words. "But I'm so afraid because I don't have the perfect body anymore, not what I'm sure you're used to."

"Maisy—"

She raised her finger and placed it against his full lip. "Dean, I'm not twenty anymore. I'm soft in places that I never thought would be soft. I carried twins for almost nine months. My belly isn't flat anymore and carries the fun little scars of pregnancy called stretch marks. And—don't look down—my breasts aren't perky anymore." She closed her eyes for a moment to get her thoughts in order, a hard thing to accomplish when his erection lay against her. "When I closed the door earlier, I felt sick because I wanted you so badly. I wanted you to make love to me. For once in my life I wanted to think about what I needed. I wanted you so badly that I forgot about what I would look like and yanked the door open without thinking past the moment. A part of me hoped you had driven off already. The other part thanked god that you hadn't. But now that we're here on my bed..." Her voice trailed off as she looked into his eyes. She would survive if he heeded her warning and left. But then? She'd slowly suffocate with despair if he did.

Dean adjusted his position lower. Now his bare belly rested against the hot center between her legs. His fingers moved from where he'd just been playing with the hair spread out across her pillow, down over her neck and, balancing on his elbows, he cupped each of her breasts. A soft gasp left her when his fingers brushed across her nipples. "Nothing could have made me happier than you opening that door, Maisy. There isn't a place in the world I'd rather be right now."

He lowered his head, took one erect nipple into his mouth and gently licked it. "You're beautiful." Slowly, he kissed his way down the side of one breast and up to the nipple of the other. He squeezed her breasts with just enough pressure to excite her.

Maisy's stomach flipped crazily. The heaviness of his mouth around her nipple and the memory of what it felt like to have his fingers inside her had her hips undulating beneath him. He was going to fuck her. He was going to make her come time after time. It didn't matter how she felt about herself. Dean thought she was beautiful. She clung to that thought.

His lips left her as he pushed himself into a kneeling position between her splayed thighs. His hands moved to the snap on her jeans. Oh my god. He was...

Oh my god!

"Dean. Stop! I..."

What if she got pregnant! She hadn't been on birth control for years. She didn't have any condoms! Shouldn't she have condoms if they were going to do this? Her zipper was almost all the way down. She hadn't even thought about this possibility. Unbelievably all the articles she'd read about unprotected sex raced through her mind.

"Dean, stop!"

"Don't be afraid, Maisy."

"No! It's..." She clutched at his hands. "I want this. I want this so badly but I don't have any protection. Oh my god, I don't have *any*."

Dean's head fell back with a chuckle as he reached back into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. In a matter of moments he pulled out a condom. Then another. Then another. Then one more. Holding them up with a grin, he nodded his head. "It's a good thing you got sick last night. I didn't have any of these with me." He tossed them on the table beside her bed. "And just for the record, I have more of these than are on the table. I came prepared. Last night we could have been left hanging worse than we were if things had progressed." One of his eyebrows curved up. "Although you did get off. And I can't say that I didn't enjoy how that happened."

Embarrassed heat burned across her cheeks. Here she was, lying bare-chested with her pants partially open and she couldn't fight the blush that stained her skin. She immediately forgot about it though when he leaned over to turn on the bedside lamp. "Don't! Please don't turn it on!" The light filtering in from the hallway was bad enough. She would be too embarrassed with the light on.

A smile appeared on his face. "I want to see you, Maisy, but we'll do it your way. Okay, I'm warning you. There'll come a time when you'll be the one to turn it on."

The sound of his thick, husky observation mesmerized her, clouded her mind...until he lowered his head and slowly ran his tongue over the skin of her midriff. Her brain emptied of everything as a hot streak of excitement rolled through her body. Oh Jesus, they hadn't even had sex yet and already he was talking about the next time.

He didn't have to ask her to lift her hips when his fingers returned to her partially opened zipper. She wanted her pants off or she was going to explode. Her panties were wet and he hadn't even touched her pussy yet. But he would—soon. His naked skin would slide across hers. His muscular thighs would demand that she open wide to him. His cock would slip in to fill her. The muscles of her vagina clenched because she instinctively knew what his touch would bring. Sweet pulses would clasp his cock tightly to keep him buried inside her.

She lay in only her underwear now. She blinked to better focus on his face.

His smile was sexy in the dim light. Earthy. Oh god. His hand was between her legs, massaging her pussy lips beneath the wet silk. Now he teased. Now he was the aggressor.

His fingers slipped past the elastic at each of her hips. Slowly, he followed the line of the waistband until his fingers dipped in just below her navel. Then he tugged ever so slightly at her panties so his knuckles could drift through the soft curls of pubic hair.

Sweet torture. That was the only way to explain what he was doing to her.

She wanted him to take his pants off. She wanted him to fuck her. Right at that moment but he was going to make her suffer. The sexual anticipation was driving her to the edge of reason. Ted had never drawn out the act of foreplay. He'd never built the fire in her blood until its flow pounded in her ears and clogged the breath in her throat. Maisy's hips came off the bed as she sought his touch.

"Steady, Maisy. We've got all night."

Her head rolled slightly on the pillow. It was so hard to remain still when one of his fingers teasingly dipped lower into her underwear to touch her only a breath away from her clit. She throbbed in agony. Her legs spread wider. "It's been so long, Dean. I...please don't make me wait. Please." She was on fire. Her hips undulated but her underwear kept his hand in place. Cream spilled from her pussy. She knew it coated his palm when he cupped her. The feel of his hand against her swollen lips, the warmth of his skin, that damn thumb teasing within a breath of her clit. "Please..."

Dean's cock ached. Watching Maisy writhe beneath him was almost more than a man could take. He rose higher onto his knees, balanced on one arm and jammed two fingers into her pussy. Her hips bucked beneath his imprisonment when he ground into her. He wanted to kiss her, to drink in the already discovered sweet essence of her mouth, but he would wait. He wanted to witness when her eyes turned the same deep smoky color he'd seen the night before. He slipped his fingers out until the tips rested at the wet opening of her pussy then began to drive them in and out. "Come for me. Come for me, Maisy."

Her hips pitched forward and her muscles sucked at him. At the exact moment her eyes darkened and her mouth sagged open, the contractions of her orgasm sucked tightly at his fingers, over and over again. A deep moan from her throat echoed past his ear as he bent forward to drive his tongue into her mouth, finding the same rhythm as his fingers into her body.

Maisy clutched at his shoulders and dug her heels into the mattress. She couldn't get enough. His thumb rasping against her swollen clit fueled the passion that raced through her blood. Her heart pounded, her belly clenched as the heat of his sexual onslaught clogged her throat. The slick muscles of her pussy wrapped tightly around his fingers. Nothing mattered, not his age...and not hers. They were simply a man and a woman who had discovered one another by chance.

Dean continued to fuck her with his fingers even as the shards of Maisy's passion quelled, turning into warm shivers of delight as her legs fell limply to the bed. She

gasped to fill her lungs when his mouth left hers, struggling to clear her brain. Her body jerked slightly when he slipped his fingers from her pussy but trailed them through her wet lips to flick at her clit.

Her hands came up and her fingers slid through her tangled hair. Eyes closed, her teeth captured her bottom lip and she spread her thighs wider when he dipped one finger back into her pussy to stroke gently. The heat of her orgasm still warmed her body. She trembled and her mind simply centered on the thickness of his finger and the sound of his heavy breathing above her. If she died now, she would leave the earth knowing what it was like to be completely lost within a man's touch. Her hips began to circle slowly, the motion forcing his finger deeper with each light stroke he administered. She was in heaven. And the only thing that could make it better would be his cock pounding inside her.

Her eyes opened slowly. Dean's hooded gaze, half hidden in the shadows of the room, would forever stay in her mind. She wanted him to experience heaven with her. "Take your pants off."

He smiled a bit roguishly, trailed his finger through her wet slit once more, chuckled lightly when she started and traced his hand back over her belly until he hooked the waistband of her panties. "Not until you're completely naked." With both hands now, he drew them slowly down her legs and tossed them away without another thought.

Maisy's heart rapped crazily when he reached down and nudged her legs open. "Just a lick, Maisy. Just a taste to tide me over until I'm buried inside you."

"What?" And then she knew what he was going to do. It was something that Ted had refused her most nights. She watched trancelike when he dragged her knees farther apart, scooted lower and settled on his belly between her thighs. He dipped his head.

Looking down, all she could see was the soft crown of his hair but she could feel his lips nip at her stomach. My god, he was going to kiss her down there. She couldn't look away. His tongue left a damp path as his mouth traveled lower. His fingers touched her pussy then spread her feminine lips wide.

Maisy's head fell back as her eyes closed. Her jaw clenched in her effort to remain still when he blew softly across her cunt. Her back arched. His tongue teased through her pubic hair. The air that cooled her exposed, open pussy was soon heated by his breath.

Any second. Any second his tongue would lap against her. Maisy purred then her breath became nothing more than quiet, excited pants. Her toes curled into the mattress as she waited breathlessly now. Her fingers tightly clutched the edges of the pillow. She strained to open her legs wider. The muscles of her vagina clenched.

And then it happened.

His tongue flicked at her clit.

Her body surged upward as the air was sucked from her lungs.

Another flick of his tongue against her clit. Then Dean's lips moved through her wet slit and little laps of his tongue sent spirals of heat straight to her tender breasts. She arched helplessly, her pussy seeking more when he nipped at her inner thigh. Her engorged clit tingled.

That same blaze of hot, passionate desire that had continued to build since the first time she'd seen him was back. It was stronger. It was hotter because Maisy now knew the pleasure of Dean's sensual caresses. My god, she could come. Just like that—with a snap of his fingers—she could come again, something that she'd never done before. Multiple orgasms in one night? Only in her wildest dreams.

Maisy loved the idea of being a sexual toy for Dean to do with whatever he desired. Right then and there, at that moment, she knew she would agree to whatever he suggested. Anything. She would worry about repercussions in the morning but right now all she could think about was his thick cock that soon would fill her tightly and she was heading for the brink.

The mattress shifted beneath her. Her eyes opened to see Dean straighten beside the bed.

"You're ready to come. I can feel it in the way you moved against me. I can smell it, Maisy."

Her entire body flushed hot at the sight of his sexy smile even as the tingling of an impending orgasm lessened. Just one touch, however, and it would be back and ready to explode.

Her eyes fell to where the broad head of his engorged cock poked above the waistband of his shorts then darted back up to his hooded eyes. He winked slowly, impishly, as he drew his jeans over his hips, taking his shorts with. Only a second later, he kicked away the mass of denim material around his feet and stood naked before her.

Maisy licked her lips. She couldn't help it. He was beautiful. Fucking beautiful was the only word. Dean's narrowed hips were a perfect frame that emphasized his thick cock springing from the dark hair that surrounded it.

He reached down and scooped up one of the condoms he'd tossed on the table beside her bed. Holding it up, his eyes twinkled. "Care to help me?"

"Me?" she squeaked.

Dean ripped open the plastic, pulled out the condom and took her hand to help her into a sitting position. Placing the rubber in her palm, he smiled wider. "I'd much rather feel your fingers around my cock than my own."

She scooted to the edge of the bed, a little leery as to what to do. She glanced up at him with a shrug.

"Just roll it over the tip and all the way down."

She nodded her head slightly and circled his cock with one hand. It jumped at her touch. God, he was hard. And soon, he'd be pumping inside her. With a hesitant smile, she started at the top of his cock and did what he'd told her.

His quick breath whisked over her face. Holding him tightly, she glanced up again.

The look in his eyes had changed and it was because she had his cock in her hands. Dark. Appraising. Hungry. Feeling a bit more powerful, she got the condom rolled all the way down his shaft then she gripped his erection with both hands and slowly stroked him, sensuously, loving how his hips moved in time with her motions. Bravely, she tenderly cupped his balls with one palm as she continued to stroke him.

"God, Maisy. That feels hot and sexy." His eyes closed as he stood there and let her milk him until he couldn't take any more. His hand suddenly clasped hers and stalled the motion. Soundlessly, he gently pushed her to her back as his body slid over hers. He wiggled just enough until her pussy lips cradled the hard line of his cock and he rested against her heat. Capturing her hands, he dragged them up onto the pillow, circled his cock against her slit once more and lowered his mouth to steal a kiss.

Maisy was there to meet him. A strangled moan sounded in the back of her throat when his tongue filled her mouth with the taste of herself. Her breasts ached wonderfully where they were flattened against the breadth of his chest. She ground her pussy against him, loving how his hard, steely inches split her and rubbed against her clit. It was magical. It was perfect. It was a sexual experience like she'd never encountered before. So new. So exciting. So overwhelming.

The first thing she felt was the wiry hair of his thighs against the inner smoothness of her own as he bumped them open. Maisy brought her knees up slightly and spread them as wide as she could.

They stared into one another's eyes.

Her stomach clenched and her heart skipped a beat when the tip of his cock prodded against the wetness of her pussy. She wanted to grab his ass and guide him in but Dean masterfully teased her opening without letting go of her hands against the pillow. He moved slightly and let his cock slip into her only an inch. He held himself still.

Maisy throbbed around his cock head, sucking at it with a silent plea to slip deeper.

Another inch.

Her heart slammed in her chest.

"Dean," she gasped quietly.

Letting go of her wrist, his hand slipped beneath her ass, the action angling his body and forcing one of her legs to wrap around his thigh. Still, he paused with only a few inches of his cock inside her. Sweet merciless taunting. Maisy anticipated the slow slide of his penis and waited on the edge of a precipice. He was so big...so hard.

"Dean?" she gasped again.

"I want to see your face."

He accomplished that by changing his position. The full light from the hallway spilled across her flushed cheeks.

“Maisy.” That was all he said then he slowly slipped into her heat, filling her, stretching her until he was buried.

The base of his erection pressed against her clit. He ground slightly forward then pulled back, stopping just before his cock slipped from her body. Then he repeated the same motion—slowly, intimately—grinding sensually against her clit each time.

Maisy was breathless as a fire started deep in her womb and spread to the muscles that sucked at his cock. Her breasts tingled and her clit throbbed. The heat built as his strokes became faster, driving into her welcoming body—pistoning sharp thrusts that burned to the end of her pussy and back.

The friction re-ignited her passion instantly. He freed her other wrist. Her hands clawed at the firm muscles of his tight ass. She had never fucked someone back with so much passion. A rush of hot, pleasurable quivers tightened her clit.

Maisy’s orgasm exploded, careening her into a blazing inferno as he pumped into her body. His breath hissed above her as she came. His cock throbbed inside her and still her orgasm continued with wave after heated wave. It was a mind numbing sensation but her body rolled wildly along on the tide Dean had created.

She new the exact moment he came. His body tensed and he drove into her with one piercing thrust, burying himself as deep as he could go. His cock throbbed deep. Her hands rushed up and down the bulging muscles of his arms, feeling the raised bumps on his hot skin as he continued to come.

Dean’s lips scorched a path of kisses up her neck until he found her mouth. Their tongues melded as slowly, the sensual tremors lessened.

Chapter Seven

Even as his cock softened, Dean stayed buried inside Maisy as they kissed. Her hands drifted over the hard plane of his shoulders, subconsciously noting the fine sheen of perspiration that covered his skin. Her pussy contracted around him as her breathing slowed. Having sex with him was the most wonderful thing she'd ever experienced and when he slipped out of her, rolled to the mattress beside her and pulled Maisy into his embrace, she drew in one more long breath before nuzzling her head into the crook of his arm. Lying naked beside Dean was like being a heroine in a romantic movie.

She listened to his breathing slow and wondered if life would ever be the same now that she'd experienced the passion she'd discovered in his arms. Even as his warmth surrounded her and a peacefulness she hadn't felt in years settled in her chest, she wondered about the future. Where were they going to go from here? Maisy didn't know the rules and had no idea how this would play out.

Dean's arm tightened around her shoulder as his fingers brushed the bare skin of her upper arm. She hugged his chest a little tighter.

"Are you sorry this happened?" he said quietly.

She heard the hitch of his breath as he waited for her answer. Rubbing her nose against the wiry hair on his chest, she sighed. "No...and yes. It's hard to explain, Dean. I've never done something like this. My ex was the only man I've ever slept with. Even if we go back to the beginning of the week when you showed up to fix the sink, it hasn't been that long that we've known each other. To me, something like this only happens in the movies or between the pages of a book. For the last six years I never thought beyond the day. And I never imagined myself between the sheets with a virtual stranger. Yet when I closed the door earlier and thought about never seeing you again, something urged me to fling it back open and take a chance." She paused hesitantly as one finger played across his chest. "Are you sorry?"

Dean rolled to his side, propped himself on one elbow and stared down at her. A smile tugged at his lips. "Sorry? No way, Maisy. I knew it would be like this. I felt it when I left your house last week. That emotion gained strength when I stood on your porch last night waiting for you to open the door. And by the time I brought you home, I wanted nothing more than to make love to you." He brushed aside a silky strand of hair on her cheek. "There isn't any other place that I want to be. You're an amazing woman. And I say woman in the best sense. You've laid your cards on the table with 'what you see is what you get'. I love that sort of honesty. And what I got is exactly what I was looking for."

Bravely, she reached up and cupped his shadowed jaw. "And where do we go from here?" She had to say it aloud because Maisy couldn't decide for herself. She needed to

hear the answer. Did he expect only a one-night stand? If so, she would remember it forever. She would remember the one time she'd gone after what she wanted with no regrets. But if he wanted to explore something further? She'd have to set aside her angst at their age difference just to see where the next weeks would lead her. He was hot, he was young and he literally turned her inside out with his sexual energy and hard body.

"We go forward. There's no way, Maisy, that I can just get up and leave and never come back. Not after meeting you. Not after having made love to you. How do you feel about that?"

She shrugged aside the problems they were sure to encounter. "I need to hear you explain again why you and I will move forward, especially when you could have someone who has more in common with you. Someone who—"

His finger pressed against her lips. "No more, Maisy. I don't want to hear that anymore. Not tonight and not all the other nights I plan to be around. Let's just enjoy being together and not think of anything else. Let's just remember what we do have in common. Like the fact that we're sexually attracted to each other. Like the fact that I see your smile when I close my eyes. There's chemistry between us that neither you nor I can deny. I'm a man. You're a woman. And that's the only thing that matters to me right now." His head dipped and kissed her full on the mouth.

Maisy's heart immediately knocked about in her chest. As she returned the kiss all she could think about was how happy she was at the moment. There was something that connected them. Whether sexual or not, she was going to hold on to the fact that she loved being in his arms. She loved his young body in her bed and she loved the mature but easy way he looked at things. And she loved seeing herself through his eyes.

Dean kissed her once more on the mouth. "Can we not talk about this anymore—at least not tonight?"

Her sigh accompanied a smile. "All right."

He rolled away and dropped his long legs over the edge of the bed. His gaze drifted out and settled on a partially open door. With a nod in that direction he asked, "Is that the master bathroom or do I use the one across the hall?"

Maisy sat up, careful to hold the sheet over her breasts. "Use the one in here."

He stood up. "I'll be right back."

How strange, Maisy thought. He was here in her bed, had just sent her into a tailspin of orgasms and he didn't even know where all her bathrooms were. Her eyes trailed down his back and rested on the firm globes of his ass as he strode across the room. Holy shit. Dean was male perfection. Her mind flashed back to almost a week earlier when she'd wondered what his ass would look like naked. Well, now she was seeing him in all his glory and the sight sent tingles shooting up her spine.

As he walked away a flicker of a thought crossed her mind. How many times had she seen Ted stride across the room after they'd had sex? And how many years had it

been since she'd felt the same sexual excitement that rushed through her now at the sight of a bare male ass?

Years, that's what.

But she wasn't being fair. Ted was older. Softer. But another side of her brain argued loudly with her. When she'd watched Ted leave their bed for far too many years, it was mostly with a sense of frustration because she hadn't found sexual gratification. At some point in their marriage, Ted had started to take and never give back. There had hardly been any foreplay, just a quick fuck—him grunting on top of her, him coming and then pulling out with a quick mindless kiss before he headed for the bathroom to clean himself up. She'd been left with come dribbling out of her and a snort from him saying he got the bathroom first.

No cuddling, no murmured words of love.

Maisy's shoulders drooped as she settled against the headboard. Ted had always wanted her to wait until he got back into bed so he could watch Maisy walk naked across the room when she took her turn. But when he began making fun of her widening hips and stretch-marked belly, she'd started assuring her bathrobe was always close by.

Her eyes darted wildly about the room. Her robe lay across the room draped over a chair. With one quick glance at the closed bathroom door, she leapt from between the sheets, almost fell flat on her face when her foot tangled for a second, then hurried across the room, snatched up the robe and raced back to the bed. Folding it quickly, she placed it across the bottom then gasped quietly when she realized Dean would probably notice that it hadn't been there earlier. Snapping it up once more, she quickly tossed it on the floor by her side of the bed. No way would she strut around naked and have him wondering what the hell he was doing with an old broad like her.

With a squeak, she dove back beneath the sheets when she heard the toilet flush and the doorknob turn only seconds later.

* * * * *

Dean closed the bathroom door behind him. A second later he made a tight fist, let a smile break across his mouth, then pumped his arm and hissed, "Yes!" Maisy wasn't going to fight him—at least not yet. He was shrewd enough to understand some head-butting with her was going to happen in the future just because of the fact that she kept bringing up the span of years between them. She might try to state it in different ways but it always came down to the same insecurity that she couldn't understand why he would want to get to know her better.

"Jeez," he muttered as he stepped farther into the bathroom and carefully peeled off the condom. The last thing he wanted to do was walk away from her. He'd followed his gut reaction earlier and called her. Then, after spending time at the hamburger joint, had brought her home.

Nothing had prepared him for the horrible emotion of remorse when she did her best to get into the house as quickly as possible—anything to be away from him. She had fooled him for a moment with her whispered thank-you. He'd headed back down the sidewalk feeling sick that she'd rejected him even though some sixth sense screamed that wasn't what she truly wanted.

He would have been back. Dean had no doubt in his mind he would have given her a few days then tried again to get her to see him.

She'd come back out on the porch though. He remembered the panicked look on her face when she called out his name while racing down the steps and how that look had changed to one of desire just before he'd pulled her into his arms.

Sex with Maisy was out of this world because it wasn't mindless fucking with someone who wasn't as sweet as the woman just on the other side of the door. And even though it had been wonderful, Dean knew it was only going to get better. Hell, Maisy was holding back. Don't turn the light on, she'd said. Don't look at me, she'd pleaded. But there would come a day when all that would change and she would take the lead.

Dean couldn't wait. Thinking about it was making him hard. To get his mind off the next sexual adventure with Maisy, he wrapped the used condom in some toilet paper, dropped it into a garbage can and used the facilities. With a flick of the wrist, he flushed the toilet and reached for the doorknob. Stepping out, his eyes immediately went to Maisy where she lay in the bed with the sheet pulled up to her chin. Her eyes rounded in surprise as she stared at his crotch. He smiled inwardly. As soon as he'd spied her, his cock had twitched and started to get hard again. Even in the muted light, he knew she could see it. One day she'd be sprawled naked in all her glory for him to see.

Strolling over to the bed, his eyes locked with hers as he reached for another condom, ripped the package open and rolled it expertly over his hardening cock. She watched him hungrily. Man, he loved to see that reaction in her eyes.

Slipping between the covers, he gathered her close and started to kiss her again. Her hands grabbed at his shoulders when he cupped one of her breasts and flattened her to her back. "I missed you," he said as he moved his mouth over her skin. His lips closed over an erect nipple.

Maisy trembled. "Dean..."

"Are you ready again, Maisy? Because I am. I want to fuck you again."

She sighed with longing when his hand brushed across her stomach. This time her legs opened eagerly as he sought her heat. He stroked a finger inside her warm body then ran the moistened tip over her swollen clit, circling it with a small amount of pressure. The surge of her hips was a silent demand that she needed his finger back inside but he wasn't giving in. He wanted her panting and ready to come instantly when his cock stretched her pussy.

Dean teased her, building the fire between them once again, loving the fact that she was a willing participant. Oh, the things he would do to her as he chipped away the barriers between them. "Tell me you want to fuck again. I want to hear you say it."

Maisy nipped at his mouth, her hips rolling, her knees spread wide. "I do want it. Fuck me again, Dean."

She gasped lightly when he suddenly rolled to his back and dragged her on top of him. Their eyes locked. "I have a better idea. You fuck me."

"Wh-what?" she breathed.

"Fuck me, Maisy." Without another word, he grabbed her ass and urged her hips upward. Reaching down between them, he wrapped his fingers around his cock and dragged the tip between her pussy lips. "Want to go for a ride?"

Hot, audible pants came from the back of her throat. Dean let go of his cock and slipped his finger in her to assure she was wet but it wasn't necessary. Maisy was creamy and hot, ready to accept him. Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment as he continued to finger-fuck her. Yes, she was ready again.

Dean held his cock with one hand and cupped her hip with the other, guiding her onto his erection. When she slipped down the length of it, her head fell back with a moan. She sat motionless. Her tongue flicked once at her bottom lip, mesmerizing Dean with the intense sensual expression he witnessed.

Placing a hand on each of her hips, he began to surge upward, amazed that he had to work for control. If he didn't, he was going to come far quicker than her. The power of his emotions shocked him. He pumped harder. It was as if he couldn't get deep enough into her pussy.

Maisy's hips rolled then she began her own rhythm atop him. Up and down, sliding sensually, building friction that heated her pussy and scorched his cock. Her nipples pebbled hard as her breasts swayed.

Dean reached up and cupped both, squeezing and kneading as she continued to slip the hard length of his cock. He had some control now. He was going to hold out because he wanted to watch her face when she came again. He wanted to feel her shudder before rolling her to her back and slamming into her pussy.

One of his hands slid over her bare skin to her hot opening. His finger found her wet clit. As he began to stroke it roughly, a low moan escaped from Maisy again. Her hips rocked faster. His finger flicked harder, grinding against her as her ass bounced. Suddenly her rhythm changed. Each time she slipped down his cock, she ground her hips, forcing his cock tight inside her, circling to feel the tip of his cock pressing hard against her cervix.

Her face changed the moment she shuddered with an orgasm. The fine lines about her eyes softened. Her lips rounded as if in surprise then her head fell back, but still she ground against him. One time after another her strangled moans were panted out as her fingers wildly thread through her hair. She rode him hard. The pulses squeezed at his cock and still she ground her clit against the base of his erection. Her sexual delight was

transparent as she captured her bottom lip with her teeth and whimpered groans of pleasure.

Dean dragged his gaze away, struggling to stay his own orgasm. He wasn't done with her yet. He waited on the edge until her hips began to slow to a sensual roll, slowly slipping up and down his cock, milking every ounce of enjoyment she could.

Dean sat forward, clasped one muscular arm around her waist and levered both of them to the mattress with his cock still in her. She was now on her back staring up through hungry dark eyes. Taking one leg, he guided her knee over his shoulder as he began to pound into her. He fucked her hard, banging into her cunt, a silent dare to meet him again at the threshold of orgasm.

Maisy met his challenge, arching against his pelvis, her pussy sucking at his cock.

The headboard slammed with a staccato beat against the wall, but neither heard it. Lust, desire and heady passion rioted through his body when she struggled as deeply as he did to bring on another rush of orgasm. His fingers tightened around her round ass, holding her in place as he continued to fuck crazily, wondrously. The scent of their sex surrounded him, enticingly sweet and musky.

In one fluid motion he withdrew. Maisy didn't even have a chance to groan her displeasure when he flipped her over and dragged her ass into the air. Guiding one of her arms up, he forced her hand to the brass rung, urging her to take hold of it and rise up on her knees.

Maisy panted hard and grasped another rung with her opposite hand as Dean forced her knees wider. Her head lolled as she arched her hips, waiting for him to penetrate her again. It was wild, it was wonderful and she toppled toward the edge of reason.

His cock probed against the opening of her dripping pussy before he drove it into her. Maisy braced herself and began to bang backward against him, loving how his belly seemed to spank her with each forward thrust of his hips.

Heat shot through her belly when he reached between her legs and massaged her clit, catapulting her body into an even hotter inferno.

Her spine arched as her body began to shudder, signaling him to join her in the ecstasy of release. Dean's strokes became short and hard. One last deep thrust and he rode the edge of the blaze with her. His heart pounded and muscles flexed as he worked to bury himself deeply. His mouth nuzzled her soft shoulder as their bodies slowed, his hand smoothing a path across her belly to a peaked nipple. Gently massaging the soft mound, he rested his cheek against the crook of her neck, waiting a moment to catch his breath.

Maisy's shoulders heaved beneath his shadowed jaw as she gasped for air. Turning her head, she sought his mouth. Dean slipped his cock from her and turned her body to face him. They knelt there, kissing and touching, exploring the dips and valleys of the other until he pulled her down to the mattress, stretched across her body and gently caressed the soft skin of her neck with his mouth.

"Maisy..."

Her fingers slipped through his tousled damp hair, loving the feel of its texture and the tenderness of his lips against her skin. How many times had she come tonight? Maisy didn't have a clue. But her body was totally sated, totally replete with the fantastic sex they'd shared. "God, Dean. That was wonderful. I can't even explain it."

She felt more than saw his smile against her skin.

"Neither can I."

When he rolled a nipple in his mouth, she shivered deliciously and ran one fingertip across the breadth of his shoulder, amazed at the power she felt beneath his sleek muscles. She shivered again.

"Are you cold? You're trembling."

"No. I'm...I'm perfect. You make me shiver."

This time she saw him smile when he raised his head and stared down through dark, sexy eyes. "You do the same thing to me." Never taking his gaze from hers, he reached for the quilt rolled up at their feet and drew it over them.

Settling her head against his shoulder, it wasn't long before their breathing changed as they fell into a deep slumber.

Chapter Eight

Maisy's eyes fluttered open to the bright morning sun slicing through her bedroom window. She stared at the indented pillow beside hers.

Dean.

Where was he? Her eyes moved to the clock. Nine-thirty? It was nine-thirty! She hadn't slept this late in years!

The scent of fried bacon reached her nostrils. Lifting her head slightly, she sniffed the air and heard him moving about in her kitchen. A fantastic night of sex and now he cooked her breakfast. That had to be it. Ah, to be pampered like this every morning for the rest of her life. To feel like nothing could ever come in the way of spoiling one's happiness. The peacefulness of the morning settled inside and Maisy smiled simply for the sake of smiling.

As she rolled to her back, her muscles protested. The area between her legs ached but it was a wonderful ache. The muscles of her ass spasmed when she stretched, bringing on a wince that replaced her smile. If she kept up the workouts like she'd had the evening before, she'd be able to bounce a quarter off her ass by Christmas. That thought immediately brought the smile back to her face.

Maisy giggled, sat up slowly and hugged herself. Sighing deeply, she carefully stood up, ignoring the tightness of her inner thighs. Yup, she'd be in great shape if she could keep up with Dean. Bending over, she grabbed her bathrobe but as she wrapped the sash around her waist, her hands suddenly stilled.

She was thinking as if she and Dean were an item. Were they?

Maisy headed for the bathroom and closed the door quickly. Her eyes found her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was a riotous mess. Slowly, she combed it back into a semblance of neatness as she continued to stare at her face. Was it her imagination or were her cheeks still flushed? She leaned in for a closer inspection, trying to focus on her skin instead of thinking that even though Dean cooked her breakfast, he just might kiss her goodbye and walk out the front door forever. The idea was simply too frightening to consider.

"Don't be foolish," she whispered to the image in the mirror. Feeling blindly behind her, she closed the toilet lid, slumped down on the stool and stared blankly at the shower curtain. Her hands finally came up to cup her cheeks. What was she going to do? She was the one who had said nothing could ever come of any sort of relationship between them.

But now?

Her eyes closed as she huddled on the toilet. Could she let him walk away? Last night was like rediscovering her youth. But was that possible? Were people reborn? Was any kind of relationship possible with a man so many years younger than herself?

And what about Nick and Annie?

She ran her fingers through her thick hair. Never in her wildest dreams would she have thought on Friday afternoon that she would be hiding here in her bathroom only two days later, her body aching from Dean's hot lovemaking and feeling like it was the first time she'd ever been with a man.

Her chin came up. That's why she looked at things so differently. It had been so long since she'd made love. No, not *only* making love. She had fucked last night. Wild, hot fucking with a wild, hot man. She shook her head. What was the difference? At one time she didn't think that having sex with Ted could be classified as making love. She had opted to think of it more as fucking because the emotion of deep love and caring had simply disappeared to be replaced by distrust and ambiguity.

Dean, with his wonderful body and hands, had changed her tune. Making love was fucking and fucking was making love. It all depended on who you were with and the emotions they evoked in your heart.

She shook her head in dismay. She shouldn't even be thinking about matters of the heart. No words were exchanged. No words should have been exchanged. It was far too early for something like that.

Stop it, Maisy! She had no business even thinking about this. Hell, for all she knew, it could be one of her kids cooking breakfast for her. *Oh my god!* That would have been terrible. What if for some reason they had showed up at the house to find their mother groaning and hanging on to the bed rails as some young stud screwed her from behind?

She almost slipped right off the toilet when she remembered the hot feeling of orgasm that Dean had produced more than once last night before they fell asleep. Sometime during the night, he'd rolled her to her belly and climbed on top, spread her legs and played with her pussy until she was wet and writhing on the bed again. The sudden memory of his lips whispering across her shoulders and his finger following the line of her ass crack came back to haunt her. Then he'd imprisoned her against the mattress and fucked her as both his hands slipped between her and the bed. He'd played with her clit and twice she'd careened through hot orgasms as he thrust his cock in and out of her.

Maisy leapt up and clapped a hand between her legs, feeling the soft chenille material against her bare pussy. If she didn't stop thinking about it, she'd come on the spot. Even in her younger days she'd never been reduced to this state of sexual intoxication. And never, never had she experienced multiple orgasms.

She flipped the lid up on the toilet, used it, then quickly washed her hands and brushed her teeth. She had to see him.

As she stepped quietly into the kitchen, the sight of him standing at the stove made her heart skip a beat. His boxers clung sexily to his hips. Her gaze traveled the length of

his muscular legs. A second later, she lifted her eyes to scan his tapered waist then up to drift across his broad shoulders. Her stomach clenched. He was prime, he was perfect and she'd had him all to herself last night.

Max sat beside him waiting for anything to fall from the spatula that Dean held in his hand.

Max! Oh my god. When had he gotten back in the house? She and Dean had been so busy kissing their way up the steps that they'd shut the door and completely forgotten about him!

The dog woofed when she took one more step into the kitchen.

Dean glanced over his shoulder. His face lit up at the sight of Maisy standing tentatively in her bathrobe. "Good morning, sunshine."

Sunshine? No one had ever called her sunshine and made her feel as if she'd just been caressed.

"Good morning." Warmth spread across her cheeks. Thinking about what they'd shared the night before—especially in the glaring light of day—had her shuffling her gaze about the room.

Dean set the spatula down, crossed to her and pulled her close. "You ruined my surprise. We were going to have a breakfast picnic in bed. I hope you don't mind that I went through your freezer looking for something to go along with the scrambled eggs."

She smiled against his skin, sniffing at the fresh odor of soap. He must have showered and she'd never heard the water running. "It's been so long since someone cooked me breakfast in bed that I can't even remember what it's like." She tipped her head, her eyes quizzical and questioning. "In fact, now that I think of it, I don't think anyone ever has."

Dean leaned back, framed her face with his hands, dipped his head and kissed her.

Maisy kissed him back with her hands resting on his forearms. She was amazed that one minute his kiss could drag the breath from her lungs and the next? He could make her feel the comfort two people can find simply being in one another's presence.

Max whined beside her. She smiled against his lips. "We forgot about him, didn't we?"

Dean chuckled. "Sure did. I didn't even think about him until I heard him scratching on the back door this morning. Come on. Want a cup of coffee?"

Maisy giggled as she followed him to the snack bar. "I'm going to have to keep you around if I can get this treatment every morning." Before she even shut her mouth, she blanched. What on earth had ever possessed her to say such a thing? "Dean...I didn't mean to...to..." The words drifted away as she stood there feeling like a total idiot.

"Sit down."

"What?"

He pulled out a stool. "Sit down. I'll get us some coffee then we're going to talk."

Quietly she obeyed, not wanting to stick her foot in her mouth again. What an over-aged imbecile she'd become. Just because they'd shared one rousing night of passionate sex didn't mean they were tied to one another now...did it? The younger generation accepted promiscuous sex like a trip to the movies. It was something that happened. Hey, when one had urges, one had to get rid of them.

Dean set the coffee before her, straddled a stool and stared.

Maisy eyed him back. "What?"

"Let's talk about last night."

She grabbed her cup and almost burned her tongue when she took a gulp. Finally setting the coffee down, she turned slightly and met his gaze. "Dean. I'm not going to cry if you tell me thanks, I had a great time. I'm a big girl."

Amazingly, he burst out laughing. Swiping his deeply shadowed jaw, he shook his head. "Like hell you say."

"What?" she straightened. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because you crack me up. Don't for one second think you're fooling me. Come on, Maisy. Are we going to go through this again? I'm not going anywhere. Well, yeah I am. I have my own house. But I'm coming back. Thought maybe we'd have dinner somewhere again tonight. Or we'll cook a meal together. I have to get home and check a few things for the business—things I normally get in order for the coming week. You're not going to get rid of me unless you kick my ass out of here and tell me to never come back. Although I don't know if you could kick me far enough. I'd come back and try to change your mind. I'd come back because I want to keep seeing you."

She was stunned. She hadn't scared him away with her not-so-perfect body and acting like she hadn't been fucked in years and years and years. Could she do it? Did she dare?

Dean didn't give her a chance to respond. He leaned across the small space between them, cupped the back of her head and Maisy again experienced one of the sweetest kisses of her life. His mouth was as light as the touch of a butterfly. The scent of his clean body swirled about her.

She would give this a chance. She had to. She'd never, ever felt as lighthearted as she did at the moment. She had shed her loneliness and never even realized it was gone. All because of Dean Martini and his beautiful hazel eyes, dark curling hair and electrifying touch.

Suddenly he was off the chair and running across the kitchen as smoke billowed from the pan of burnt bacon. He grabbed the handle and slid the pan across to a cold burner. "Shit!" he mumbled as he looked over his shoulder. "Sorry, Maisy. I was going to show off my culinary expertise." He eyed the pan with a furrowed brow.

By this time, she was beside him, giggling a bit at the pissed-off look on his face. "It's a pan of bacon, Dean. No big deal."

He turned and pulled her into his embrace. "You're right. I do want to know your thoughts though about something that *is* a big deal."

She tried to ignore the expanse of bare chest her breasts were crushed against and pay attention to what he was about to say. Even if she had planned to send him packing, that chest and the hardening cock against her belly would have changed her mind. She was drowning and only Dean could throw out the lifeline and he'd already done that. Her smile drifted away as she saw hope flare in his eyes. An impish smile curved her mouth. "I'm glad you're here. I'm glad the bacon burned because it just gave me the opportunity to be pulled into your arms again."

Dean let out a whoop and almost hugged the stuffing out of her. "Ah, Maisy, you have made me the happiest guy in the world. I want you to promise me something. Let's take this day-by-day. And let's do it without the mention of all the reasons why you think it might not work. Do we have a bargain? Will you just let us explore where this might go?"

She hugged him back. "I promise. The only thing is —"

"Maisy...shut up."

She giggled. "Okay, but only if you kiss me."

He leaned back with one eyebrow cocked higher than the other. Instead of kissing her lips though, he headed for the softness of her exposed neck. His hand at her waist lifted between them and he gently clasped a breast. Maisy's warm sigh whispered past his ear. He was just about to open her robe when the phone rang shrilly, making them both start.

"Don't answer it," he begged with a roguish smile.

She didn't want to but sensibility returned. "I have to. I won't be long." She ducked out of his arms, tightened her sash and reached for the phone. "Hello?" Her eyes found Dean's and she smiled at him, but the grin disappeared immediately. "Hi, Annie. I didn't think I'd hear from you until tonight. Um, how was the concert?"

She half listened to her daughter's detailed explanation as she watched Dean scrape the burned bacon into the garbage can. Maisy felt like she was in some sort of strange time warp. Annie blabbered in her ear while a nearly naked man walked about her kitchen as if he'd been there for years. Impossible. She'd really only met him a week ago. Losing track of what her daughter had just asked her, Maisy turned from the sight of Dean's firm abdomen and faced the wall. "What did you say, honey?"

"Mom, are you okay? I asked you like three times how your weekend was."

"It...it was good. Quiet." Except for her passionate moans. Maisy had always been quiet and reserved when having sex. Was that because of Ted or the fact that she'd always had children in the next room? That had definitely changed last night.

"Well, what did you do?"

"Not much. The girls at work got together and purchased me a massage and manicure. I did that on Friday afternoon."

"You never told me that on Friday when we talked. Sounds divine."

"It was."

Maisy jumped when Dean's arms circled her waist from behind. Her heart pumped when his fingers plucked at her sash. Biting her lip, she tried to tug his hand away in a half-hearted attempt. Closing her eyes, her knees nearly buckled when he didn't easily give up the fight. His hand dropped lower. It wasn't long before he slipped it inside her robe and whisked his fingers through her pubic hair. She should step out of his embrace but she couldn't. She just couldn't.

"Mom? What the heck? Did you run to the phone? You sound like you're out of breath."

Good god. "No...no." *Think!* "I was downstairs throwing in a load of laundry." Think? How could she when Dean's fingertip teased her clit? She tried to dip away and only heard a low chuckle for her efforts. He tightened his arm around her waist, let his hand drift around her hip and began to massage her ass cheek beneath her robe as he nuzzled the back of her neck.

"Mom, you there? Hey, sorry, but someone just motioned me. We have to head back to the college. Better get on the road."

Maisy cleared her throat. Dean's hand was back between her legs. "Um...okay, dear. I'll call you tonight, okay?" She was never going to make the end of this phone call.

"Okay. Love you! Hey, hope you have a good day!"

A good day? Of course it was going to be a good day. The hand between her legs proved that beyond a doubt. "Love you too, Annie. Say hi to Nick."

"Will do!"

The dial tone was the only sound as Maisy struggled to get the phone back into the cradle. Before her hand left it, Dean turned her in his arms. He easily grabbed her waist and lifted her to sit on the edge of the table. Before she could say a word, he grabbed her ass and pulled her against the bulge at his crotch. The air left her lungs as she stared into his shuttered eyes. Here? On the table?

"Lean back," Dean grinned.

"Dean...I..."

He took her hands and guided them slightly behind her to the table's surface in order to help brace her. His hungry eyes never left hers as he gently clasped her knees and spread her legs. "I'm not going to take your robe off. I know how you feel about that. But it doesn't mean that I can't play with you. Hell, the bacon is burnt, so breakfast is out...for the moment. Stay right here. I'll be right back."

She perched there with her legs spread wide. She knew if he looked close, he'd see her bare bottom hiding in the fold of the robe. "Where...where are you going?"

"The condoms happen to be in your bedroom. But I want to fuck you right here. Are you up for a little fun?"

Maisy's eyes rounded when his hand slipped up one inner thigh then a finger traced through her slit. It was decadent. It was dirty. And she couldn't wait. She nodded her head because she couldn't find the air to speak aloud.

He swirled a finger inside her, pressed his lips against hers in a quick kiss and was gone a split second later.

Maisy's harried gaze darted about the room. Suddenly, it looked different to her. Why? She figured it had to be that she was seeing it through Dean's eyes. Or maybe she was seeing it through the eyes of a woman who had never had sex in this room. The kitchen? A shiver raced up her spine when Dean returned. Her eyes fell to the crotch of his boxers. He didn't have a condom in his hand. Had he put it on already?

He sidled between her legs, grasped her wrists and guided them up his chest until she locked her hands behind his neck. His breath mingled with hers as he pulled her closer. Slowly, he spread the top of her robe and nestled it around her bare shoulders. Dipping his head, he began to press soft kisses along her collarbone. His hands fell to her thighs. Brushing aside the material, he lightly massaged the inside of them.

She breathed a soft sigh as her eyes fluttered shut. Her hands brushed the bare skin of his shoulders, loving the feel of his hard muscles beneath her touch. Her heart started a bit when his fingers moved up her legs. Her pussy clenched in anticipation just before he slipped a finger into her. A quiet gasp left her. She was wet already. Wet with desire and hot at the thought of what was going to happen. Dean was like a drug that clouded her mind. His covered cock was only inches away from her.

Reaching down between them, she slipped one hand past the waistband of his shorts as their tongues danced. His hard cock pulsed beneath the thin layer of latex as she wrapped her fingers around it. Using her other hand, she pulled his underwear down over his hips. Would it always be like this with him? That wanton urge to have him lying inside her, filling her with his hardness as she quaked around him?

Dean grabbed her wrists again and placed them behind her so she could brace herself. His eyes never left hers as he pulled her lower body closer to the edge. With his height, his cock fit perfectly against her wet slit. Maisy's hips surged forward. Here she was, sitting in the bright light of morning and not worrying about a thing except the fact that he was close to fucking her. So unbelievably hot and close.

"Dean..."

"What do you want, Maisy?" he asked softly with a sensuous smile. "Tell me. Whatever you want."

Ted had never asked. It was crazy. This moment quickly became the most sexual she'd ever experienced. The sessions with Dean were just getting better every time they fucked. And all she could think about was the fact that for years she'd just wanted her ex to get it over with. Now? She wanted the intense fluttering of her stomach to go on forever. She wanted Dean's cock. She wanted an orgasm to scorch her insides.

"Don't make me wait," she breathed. Reaching down, she clasped her hand around his cock and guided him inside until he was buried. Dean didn't move. He just lay deeply inside her pussy as her body stretched around him.

Maisy bravely swiveled her hips, provoking Dean, teasing him as she clenched tightly. His hands fell to her hips and he began to move. Long, drawn-out slides into her cunt, sensual glides meant to call her bluff. She might have started it but he would finish it. He wrapped one arm around her back as he continued to thrust smoothly into her hot sheath and helped her lie back. Tightening his grasp to hold her in place, he upped the pace. Maisy spread her legs wide, her head rolling slightly against the table as he buried himself time after time, fucking her with wild abandon.

Her eyes flew open for only a second when the sudden touch of his thumb against her clit sent a shaft of heat sailing through her belly. The action drove her wild. Her hips bounced against the pressure. She wanted him deeper. She wanted him wilder and rougher.

Her knees came up and she hugged them against her chest as he pounded at her. Dean's body shielded hers as his breathing rasped above her. The table shook. Hearts pounded.

Hot streaks of desire tightened in her womb and shot to her breasts. When she orgasmed it was painfully sweet, tossing Maisy into a heady state of ecstasy. Her pussy sucked at his cock, milking his hard length until his strokes became short and furious. His fingers bit into the flesh of her hips. With a growl, he buried himself deep, letting himself come along with her. It was decadent and wonderful to be flat on her kitchen table with his cock pulsing his release.

He kissed her hard with both hands at her breasts before slipping out and then helped her to a sitting position. Between licks against each others' tongues, their hands drifted crazily across the contours of the other's body.

Dean hugged her tightly with a deep sigh of satisfaction. Maisy's eyes drifted about the kitchen as she peered over his shoulder. Yes, the kitchen truly looked different to her now.

* * * * *

Maisy crawled into her bed that night feeling as if she resided within a wonderful dream. In the space of one week her life had changed drastically. Reaching up to shut off the bedside light, she pulled the covers over her shoulder just as Max jumped up beside her. She reached her arm back out and cuddled him close.

"Hi, Max. Got your bed back tonight, didn't you?" An instant ping of pleasure zipped through her stomach as soon as the words were out of her mouth. They evoked the image of Dean walking about naked in her bedroom. The next? She could almost feel his strong arm slung over her waist as they'd fallen asleep the night before. Then when he'd finally had to leave this afternoon, Maisy had stood wrapped in her bathrobe at the front door. She sighed, remembering how Dean had said goodbye but still

continued to kiss her for another full ten minutes. They were like two teenagers drugged by the presence of the other with pounding hearts and desire coursing even stronger through their veins.

"Oh Maxie. What to do, what to do? Who would have ever thought the weekend would turn out like it did?" She winced with a shake of her head. "How in heck am I going to act normal tomorrow when Lizzy and the rest ask about my date on Friday? I'm not sure I want to let them know about what happened afterward. I know they're going to bombard me. I can just picture what today was like. I bet they burned up the phone lines after not hearing from me. Shame on me, Max. It's because of them that Dean ended up here in the first place." She thought about the many times today she had ignored the phone and heard one or another of her co-workers on the answering machine. How could she answer? Dean had stayed until three o'clock. Later that afternoon they'd had near sex one more time after the kitchen table incident. Near sex because as one heated up the other, they suddenly realized Dean had used all his condoms. But that hadn't stopped them. He'd fingered her until she came. In turn, she'd stroked his cock until he'd spilled into her hand. Finally he'd had to leave. But it was with a promise to call her and he had. It was a wonderful phone call with giggling and whispering and making plans to get together during the week.

She wouldn't tell anyone what had happened between her and Dean. No way. What if he suddenly decided that he wasn't interested in her anymore? No matter what he'd emphatically stated, there would come a time when some young woman sashayed by him and it would be all over. But for now? Maisy was going to take everything that she could, enjoy the hot sex with a young hot stud and go to her grave knowing she'd had one helluva fling.

* * * * *

Maisy shut off the engine of her car and stared at the glass door of Swift Travel. The moment of truth fast approached. She'd be met with a barrage of questions that she'd be expected to answer and she sure wasn't looking forward to it. Dropping her keys into her purse, she zipped it shut and continued to stare through the windshield.

She'd battled with her emotions all morning and then on the entire drive to the travel agency. A part of her wanted to shout out her happiness, wanted to tell the world of a wonderful man she'd met – a younger man who had taken her lonely existence and changed it the moment his mouth kissed hers. To do so, however, would be one of the biggest chances she'd ever taken. Her eyes drifted shut and she sighed deeply.

To do so would be like an admission of sorts. An admission that yes, she could see herself with a younger man. And then just as she started to get comfortable, started to trust that she just might have a shot at a second chance of love, there could be every possibility that he would walk away and she would be left looking like a middle-aged fool who had tried to rediscover her youth.

Maisy popped the door open, squared her shoulders and headed for the entrance. She was keeping Dean undercover for a while. Ah yes. She'd love to have him under the covers. She almost tripped at the thought. Since the day he had walked into her house, she'd turned into some kind of horny broad who thought about cocks and screwing all the time. She shook her head and entered the building.

Lizzy leapt up and raced around her desk to wrap Maisy in a huge hug. "Thank god you're here!"

"Did something happen?" Maisy quickly asked as Lizzy grabbed her hand and hauled her toward a chair.

"Sit," Lizzy said.

"What?" Maisy asked again. She glanced around the empty room. "You're scaring me. Where is everyone else?"

Lizzy stared as if trying to comprehend Maisy's panic then a huge laugh burst from her mouth. "No, nothing is wrong. Sorry I was so...exuberant and you took it the wrong way. Susie called in sick and Terri and Jenna are at a meeting. I've been waiting all damn weekend to hear about your date. Where in hell were you yesterday? I almost came over to check on you when my calls went unanswered."

The blood drained from Maisy's face then came back just as quickly as she thought about her and Dean having sex on the kitchen table. In fact, her face got hotter and hotter. Her hands flew to cup her cheeks.

Lizzy leaned forward, a touch of a smile still on her lips. "That good, hey?"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about. My date was a real gentleman. Supper was absolutely delicious and I had a lot of fun."

"Why didn't you pick up your phone yesterday?"

"I just had a lot of things to do. I went grocery shopping, came home and then got involved in a good movie."

Lizzy cackled loudly, sat on a chair beside Maisy and crossed her arms. "You liar. Oh to have been a mouse in the corner. You and I go way back. What I have always loved about you is how your face gives away your emotions. You're blushing like a schoolgirl. So he really was that good, hey?"

Maisy peeked from where she now hid behind her fingers. She had always shared everything with Lizzy. They were like two peas in a pod. By admitting how wonderful the weekend was, would she really be hanging herself? She was dying to tell her friend all about it. *Oh hell...why not. I'll just leave out his age.* Her hands fell away from her face.

"Oh come on, Maisy," Liz whined. "Please, please give me some details. You're killing me here."

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of Maisy's mouth. Soon it spread wide. Her eyes glowed. "The date was fantastic. The supper was fantastic. The dancing was fantastic. And Dean?" She rolled her eyes and fanned her cheeks with one hand. "Well, Dean is about the sexiest man in the world!"

Lizzy squealed like a three-year-old. "Ooooooooo! Shit! Did he kiss you good night? Oh my god, Maisy. Tell me that he kissed you good night."

"He kissed me good night. And Dean Martini's kiss can suck the breath right out of your lungs."

Lizzy gasped. "Oh shit. If he can suck the breath right out of you then it wasn't just a peck on the lips good night." She watched Maisy's eyes round wider and her cheeks turn red again. "Come on, keep spilling it. If you're redder than a beet and he kissed you like that, he just didn't walk away, did he? I mean did you hear from him on Saturday or Sunday?" Her second gasp was louder than the first. "You shit! You weren't answering the phone because you saw him again, didn't you?"

Lifting her nose in the air, Maisy sniffed, affecting an air of boredom. "Whose story is this anyway? You seem to have figured out all the details, so I'll just sit here and be quiet." It was all she could do not to laugh out loud. She was having a fine time keeping Lizzy in suspense and she couldn't resist adding, "But I sure enjoyed the hamburger he bought me on Saturday night."

Lizzy launched right off the chair. "Another date? That's what it was, wasn't it? A date—one that wasn't paid for. Oh...my...god! What else did you do?"

Maisy was so caught up in the thrill of the moment that she threw caution to the wind. Lizzy was her best friend. She had to tell someone. She had to.

Lizzy spied the exact moment that Maisy's face softened. Her friend's brown eyes mellowed to a warm glow. Physically, she looked...different. The sharp edges of worry and responsibility that Maisy normally wore like a cloak had disappeared.

"Maisy?"

Maisy peeked up. "Max had to sleep on the floor on Saturday night."

Now it was Lizzy's turn to cup her cheeks. "He...you...this Dean guy..."

She didn't have to finish asking because Maisy frantically nodded her head.

"You did it?"

"I did it. *We* did it." Maisy hugged herself as a shiver raced down her spine. "In fact we did it *really* good. And we're probably going to do it again...at least I damn well hope so." She jumped up from her chair and grabbed Lizzy's hands. "I can't even explain to you how he made me feel!"

Lizzy squealed with delight as they hopped about laughing until Lizzy forced Maisy back into a chair and plopped down beside her in another. "I can't believe it! What got into you? Whoa... Wrong way to phrase that," she snorted with glee. "This doesn't sound like you but you go, girl. Okay. When do I get to meet him? What does he look like? What does he do for a living?"

Maisy shook her head with an unladylike grunt. "Now wait a minute. I don't know where this is going. There are so many things to think about. Hell, Lizzy, this is the first man I've dated since Ted walked out. I'm not ready to go out and balance on that limb yet."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "Because we've just met. And there's something else."

Lizzy snorted again, this time with exasperation. "Oh, you're a fine one. Don't tell me it's because you just met. Hell, you've rolled around under the sheets with this guy. I know you. There's no way in hell you'd do that if you didn't really feel something for him. So what's the 'something else'?"

Maisy's eyes fluttered shut when she took a deep breath. "He's...well, Dean is...he's a bit younger than me."

"So?"

Maisy's gaze shifted uncomfortably. "Well, maybe more than a bit younger than me."

Lizzy crossed her arms nonchalantly but her eyes sparked excitedly. "Like how much younger?"

"Dean is thirty-one."

Lizzy yelped then slapped her thigh. "You're shitting me. You lucky turd!" she shot out with a huge grin.

"You don't think it's weird?"

"Hell no! That just sweetens the pot. I'm so happy for you, hon. Must be a pretty heady emotion."

"Oh yeah. I'd forgotten what it was like. Who knows, Lizzy. I just want to take it slow. The age thing has me a bit tentative."

"Slow my ass. You had sex, Maisy."

Maisy grabbed Lizzy's hands. "Listen. This is between you and me. Okay? I wasn't going to say anything to anyone but I just couldn't keep it a secret. Do I have your word?"

"You bet! But only if you keep passing along the juicy details as they happen."

Maisy laughed as she stood. "Only *if* there are juicy details."

Lizzy followed her up. "Oh I have no doubt about the details."

Maisy simply rolled her eyes then headed for her office.

* * * * *

That afternoon, Lizzy had just hung up the phone when the deliveryman walked through the front door. The man carried a bright floral bouquet of carnations and yellow tea roses.

"Wow, who's the lucky girl?" Lizzy asked.

"Is there a Maisy Collins here? I have flowers for her."

Maisy sat in her office and tossed her reading glasses to the desk, her heart leaping around in her chest as she listened to the conversation. The flowers had to be from

Dean. Who else could it be? She was out of her chair, rounding the desk and through the door in a flash. "I'm Maisy Collins."

"Then these are for you, ma'am." He set the bouquet on the front counter and nodded. "Have a nice day."

"I will. Thank you."

Before he had even left the office, Lizzy skipped around the edge of her desk. "Oh man, Maisy. Flowers. They have to be from Dean. Hurry up! Open the card."

Maisy was already removing the clear plastic bag. "We don't know that for sure, Liz." But in her heart of hearts, she wished it to be true. Her breath hitched when her fingers pulled out a small plant spike with the cutest little fairy on the end. Seeing it, a rush of disappointment trickled through her brain. Whoever had sent the flowers knew her penchant for fairies. She and Dean had never spoken about her love of the tiny winged creatures. Sighing, she opened the card.

A second later her lips moved silently as she read. She laughed lightly, nodded her head and kept on reading. Then she giggled out loud.

"Well, are they from Dean?"

Maisy's eyes sparkled when she looked up. "Yes! He's going to call tonight to set up dinner for tomorrow. Lizzy, he wants to see me again."

"Well, of course he does, you ninny. What man wouldn't want to go out with you?" She bent over, sniffed the flowers and poked at the fairy. "You know, this is pretty damn sweet. I mean for him to include a fairy shows that he's paying attention to the things around you."

"I can't believe it," Maisy breathed out. "We never talked about them. He must have noticed them around the house." She reached out to stroke the delicate wings. Ted had only noticed her love of them because it had become another way for him to control her. He'd always complained that she had too many. One time in a fit of anger, he'd actually grabbed one of her favorites and thrown it against the wall. Thinking about how the porcelain figurine had shattered into pieces still made Maisy's stomach roil with nausea. Ted had found such enjoyment in hurting her feelings. After he had done that, Maisy had packed them all away in boxes to keep them safe from harm.

Contentment warmed her blood. Dean had figured it out all on his own. She knew that because in the note he'd stated that he hoped she liked the fairy as much as all the others in her house.

"Maisy?"

Maisy glanced up and grinned at Lizzy.

"I think you have a boyfriend."

Chapter Nine

That same night, Maisy paced and fretted and even took the portable phone outside when she walked Max around the yard. She wouldn't chance a walk around the block in fear she would miss the call. It was after ten o'clock and she had just about given up.

Wanting to scream, she headed back inside and plopped onto the sofa. Nabbing the clicker in frustration, she channel surfed. It didn't look too promising that she would hear from Dean tonight. Sighing loudly, she leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Finally, she turned her head and stared at Max who lay beside her.

"Well, Maxie. It doesn't look like Mr. Martini had time to think about us tonight. I have half a mind to not even answer the phone if he does call. What the hell? Does he think we're just gonna sit around and wait for him?"

The phone rang shrilly at that moment and she nearly sent it flying off the coffee table as she grappled for it. Glancing at the caller ID, she didn't recognize the number. Drawing in a deep breath, she struggled for nonchalance. "Hello?"

"Hi, Maisy. Man, I'm sorry it's so late. Damn, I wanted to call you earlier but my dad and I had an emergency call. One of our business customers had some major water problems and I just now got in my car."

She gripped the phone as her face split in a smile. "That's fine, Dean. I hadn't gone to bed yet." There she went again. Blushing because she'd said the word "bed" and wondering if the same images were flashing through his mind. "Um, thank you so much for the flowers today. It was a wonderful surprise and one that I didn't expect. I loved the fairy."

"I'm glad you liked them. I just wanted to let you know that I've been thinking about you."

Her finger twirled a lock of hair as she cuddled into the cushion behind her. "I've been thinking about you too. I'll be honest. I haven't thought much about anything else." The chuckle on the other end of the line sent shivers scattering across her arms.

"Okay, how about you say yes to dinner tomorrow night? Something a little nicer than a hamburger and fries. Maybe not as elegant as the Spindle but I bet I could talk you into a little out-of-the-way place that serves a mean dish of pasta."

Maisy rolled her eyes heavenward. Pasta gave her gas. She would have to get another bottle of Beano.

"Maisy? You there?"

She giggled suddenly. Not because of anything he'd said or anything she'd thought about. It just felt good to laugh just for the sake of laughing. Her smile widened further. "I'm here. I'd love to go. How do I dress?"

"Doesn't matter to me," he replied. "Just make sure whatever you put on is easy to strip off."

Her heart dropped right into her stomach.

* * * * *

They sat in a quiet corner speaking softly over the candlelit table while holding hands. Mellow-tasting wine, quiet music floating around her and a wonderful man who hung on her every word. To Maisy, it was the most romantic night of her life.

Dean brushed his thumb over her soft knuckles as he listened to her tell a story about her children. The candle's luminescence flickered across the curve of her cheek, softening the already gentle angles of her face. Staring at her, he could see the flame's reflection sparkling in her eyes. She was animated, relaxed and about as sexy as a woman could be. His heart kicked up a beat every time she smiled. There was no false pretense on her part. Her lips didn't curve upward because she thought others might be watching her. Maisy smiled for the sheer joy of it.

He could easily drag her from the table, stuff her into the car and make crazy wild love to her. She was captivating, alluring and didn't even realize it. But the night would progress to them making love. For now? He enjoyed himself immensely simply basking in the sound of her voice and thoughts of how the evening was sure to end.

Her eyes twinkled as she looked around the dining room in surprise. "Where did everyone go?" Glancing at her watch, she gasped quietly. "Oh wow, it's after nine. I've been rambling so much that I never noticed the time." Then that bit of low esteem poked away at her joy. "Probably because I've been talking all night. I'm sorry, Dean. I hope I didn't bore you."

"Absolutely not. I'm having the time of my life listening to you. I feel like I know your kids already. I really do hope that I'll get to meet them some day."

The air rushed from her lungs. Did he really? "Dean...I have to ask. I know this is silly because you want to explore this connection that we have, but..." She shrugged with a questioning look in her eyes. "You really see us continuing a relationship, don't you?"

He clasped her fingers with both of his hands. His smile sent a shudder straight to her womb.

"Yes I do. I'm serious about the kids. They are a part of your life so I want to get to know them. I want to know everyone who is special to you."

Maisy watched him as he reached for the half-empty bottle of wine they shared. With a sexy smile aimed in her direction, Dean refilled both their goblets. "We should probably finish this and get out of here. It looks like they're ready to close."

She took a sip then giggled. "So what's your plan? Get me drunk and take advantage of me?"

"So you've done this before?" he asked innocently.

She laughed gaily. "Recently. In fact, I ended up in the arms of a swarthy Italian. It didn't end well. He plied me with so much liquor that I threw up and passed out."

Dean leaned over the table and captured her free hand. "Well, I know one Italian who would love to relive the Saturday night that followed." Hope rested in his sexy, dark eyes.

"Can we leave?" Maisy didn't even blush. All she could think about was the coming hour in his arms.

Dean blinked at the instant change of conversation but a slow, appreciative smile appeared when he spied the hunger in her eyes.

* * * * *

Max raced past them into the dark. The door no sooner banged shut than Dean scooped Maisy into his arms and headed for her bedroom. She clung tightly to his neck, nipping at the full lower curve of his lip—teasing, enchanting—with no pretense. When he deposited her on the bed and fell beside her, he immediately licked at her lips, cupped her hip and drew her against him. Nestling his cock against her crotch, he muffled her excited gasp with his tongue, swirling inside her open mouth and groaning when the taste of her filled his senses.

His teeth scraped down her neck as his hand found the hem of her sweater. In an instant, he dragged it over her head and tossed it away. Then in a flash, he was back kissing the soft spot beneath her ear.

Maisy met each of his eager kisses with fervor as he rolled, pulled her on top of him and easily unhooked her bra. Their tongues danced as his hands swept over the curve of her ass, massaging and pressing her firmly against his erection.

"God, I can't wait to be inside you," he groaned as once again he rolled her to her back and tore at the snap of her jeans.

Maisy already had his shirt unbuttoned and her hands flew across the solid plain of his chest as she stripped it away then lifted her hips when he tugged her pants down. Her panties followed and went flying to the floor.

Their heavy breathing filled the room as his warm palm flew over her skin, heating it, sensitizing it, skipping from her thigh to a breast and back. Maisy's fingers cupped the hard bulge between his legs then joined Dean as they ripped open his snap and dragged his zipper down. In an instant her hand wiggled inside his shorts to circle his hot cock and stroke him.

The heat between her legs burned hotter. Maisy was wet and ready. She needed him. She needed to feel his cock pounding deep, to feel it stretching her, filling her.

Somehow Dean managed to get his fingers into his pocket and find a condom. "Here," he said as he pressed it into her hand. "Rip it open." Without another word he dragged off his pants and boxers in one swift motion. By the time he tossed them away, Maisy had grasped his cock and was rolling the condom down his hard length. Before

she even had a chance to drop beside him, his fingers were filling her, pushing deep. His thumb rubbed her clit hard, working it in rhythm with his strokes inside her.

Falling to her back, her thighs opened wide. Her hips surged upward. It was wild and sexy and wonderful to be in his arms and there was no other place in the world that Maisy wanted to be. Her heart rapped against her ribs when Dean positioned himself between her legs. His fingers disappeared but the tip of his cock instantly replaced them. One swing of his lean hips and his cock slid deep.

Her eyes shuttered as she stared up, filled with hot passion that leapt bright when he pulled nearly all the way out of her pussy then slammed back in. Maisy dug in her heels and began to meet each stroke, faster and faster. The bed shook around them. Dean couldn't bury his cock deep enough, couldn't stroke hard enough.

Maisy's hips ground upward as her cunt sucked at him. Her hands clawed at the banded muscles of his shoulders, her open mouth filled by his tongue. And still they fucked on. Harder and faster, building the friction between them, fanning the sexual tension that had built throughout the night.

Suddenly she was on top of him again and accepting each stroke as he pierced her. Maisy's thighs bunched tightly as she ground down, slipped halfway up his cock and ground down again. She couldn't get enough. Dean gripped her hips to guide their frenzied coupling and Maisy followed his lead. Her hands cupped her breasts and her head fell back as her hips rocked. She was alive, she was hot and she wanted to fuck forever.

The sensual flutters of an impending orgasm strengthened when Dean's fingers brushed over her swollen clit. Maisy's hips jerked forward with frantic urgency. She needed to feel the rough pad of his finger rolling her sensitized bud, yet fought desperately to keep his cock buried deep. Shivers raced up her spine as she squeezed her breasts and gasped. Over and over she ground her body down until suddenly shards of heat exploded through her cunt and upward. She came hard, trembling, groaning with sexual delight.

Dean's hands were back gripping her hips tightly as he stroked upward and growled with release, holding her as tightly as possible on his cock.

Maisy's shudders finally slowed and she slumped forward, wisps of hair sticking to the light perspiration dotting her forehead.

"Oh god...Dean..."

In one easy motion, he had her lying beside him. His fingers massaged the soft skin of her ass while he kissed her passionately between gasps of air. His heart still thundered wildly and he was simply amazed that he wanted to immediately begin another round of sex with her. Maisy had him in a tailspin. Taking a deep breath, he kissed her one more time then tucked her head against his shoulder. "Damn, Maisy," he sighed with satisfaction. "That was fantastic."

She smiled against his skin as her fingers played across his hard chest. Fantastic didn't begin to cover what she felt. Dean made her feel sexy and horny and above all,

fulfilled. It had been years since she'd felt that way. Lifting her head, she stared at him in the muted light filtering through her bedroom window. Her teeth tugged at her bottom lip. What should she say? To whisper lovingly after sex wasn't something that she was used to. "I...Dean...I can't believe it took me this many years to feel about the act of sex as if..." Her words trailed off.

"What, Maisy?" Dean's fingertips brushed the skin of her shoulder.

"As if no one has ever experienced it like I have over the last few days."

Dean chuckled. "I don't know what it is but you're right. I feel the same way. When I hold you it's perfect. When I'm fucking you, it's even more perfect. And I find myself wanting to do it again and again and again."

Her gaze darted to the clock on the table beside her bed. Ten thirty. She had to get up for work. So did Dean. With a heartfelt sigh, she scooted up and tucked the sheet over her chest. It didn't matter that the room was dark. When they weren't in the middle of fucking, Maisy's insecurities always reared up. "If you'd like to, I wouldn't mind if you stayed overnight. I don't know what time you have to go to work. I usually get up around seven."

Dean rolled to his side, tugged at the sheet and nuzzled the breast closest to him. "I'd love to stay. But I'm meeting my dad bright and early at five. We've got a long day at some new condos. Shit, I don't even know if I'll be able to see you tomorrow. I might not even be able to call until Thursday to set something up."

His words sent a warm shaft of happiness through Maisy. He hadn't even left her bed and already he was talking about the next time.

Dean rolled to his butt, dropped his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his pants. After a few moments of shuffling in the dark, he turned. "Can I turn on the light, Mais? I can't find my shorts."

Immediately her fingers curled tightly around the edge of the quilt and she yanked it upward to cover her chest. "Sure."

A click of the switch and the room flooded with light. Her eyes widened a bit as he strode about picking up bits of clothing, tossed them on the bed and turned for the bathroom, totally unconcerned that he was naked. God, she wished she was twenty years younger and could join him. He returned a few minutes later.

Dean slipped on his shorts and his jeans soon followed. "Hey," he said with a smile as he zipped them up. "Let's do something this weekend."

Maisy found it hard to concentrate on what he was saying. The way his upper arms flexed when he shrugged his shirt over his head had her stomach jumping about.

"Let's go somewhere. My treat. I know a little place up the shore of Lake Michigan. Thick, juicy steaks and great seafood. We could rent a cottage and stay the night."

That got her attention. "You want to go somewhere? With me? And stay overnight?"

Dean knelt on the bed and leaned over to kiss her gaping mouth. "Yes, with you. What do you say? I think it would be fun to have no worries and no telephones ringing. Just you and me. Say yes."

Her rounded eyes blinked once. Her first instinct was to say no. What about the kids? What if they called? But when Dean's tongue whisked across her lips to beg entrance, she changed her mind. Wrapping one arm about his neck, she sighed against his mouth. She'd figure it out. She'd come up with something plausible that they would believe.

"Are you going to say yes?"

"Yes," she giggled.

"All right!" he chuckled. "Don't fret if I can't call tomorrow. I've got one helluva busy day. I'll try to make arrangements and call you Thursday. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," she returned. "But it would be better if you could tell me in person. Want to share a nice home-cooked meal with me on Thursday?"

The smile left his face. Dean reached up and gently rubbed a knuckle across her cheek. His eyes softened as he stared. "Thank you, Maisy. I would love that. I can't tell you how happy I am that you're giving us a chance."

Cupping his hand, she dragged it closer to her mouth and kissed his fingers. "It's because you're too irresistible. I just can't say no."

* * * * *

"You're going away for the weekend? With who? Oh my god! Dean?" Lizzy squealed.

"Shhh!" Maisy laughed as she glanced quickly around the small diner. She hadn't said a word to Lizzy about Dean's offer all morning. It wasn't until she remembered that she had to find someplace for Max that she'd had to come clean. "Can you believe it, Lizzy? He wants to take me somewhere! He's so absolutely perfect that you wouldn't believe it. Last night at dinner, it was as if we'd known each other forever."

"Dinner? Last night? Man, you're withholding a lot of information. You never said anything this morning. Even when I hounded you to tell me if the two of you had talked."

Maisy reached out and clasped her hand. Her brown eyes sparkled with happiness. "I just feel that if I say too much out loud, he's going to go away and this will all have been a wonderful dream. So will you take Max? I'm not sure if we're going for one night or two."

"Damn, I'm jealous." Lizzy sighed then smiled. "Of course I'll take Max. I'm so happy for you, Maisy. I can't wait to meet Dean. Hey, how about the four of us go out for dinner some night?"

A squeamish shudder raced through Maisy. "I'm not so sure that we're ready for double-dating. This is all so new. I just want to take it slow."

Lizzy's head fell back and she laughed hysterically. "Slow?" She wiped her eyes. "Maisy, the guy is taking you away for the weekend. You've already been to bed with him—numerous times might I add. I haven't seen you this happy in years. I say good for you. I'm happy that you're finally seeing someone else. I don't care if he's younger or not and neither should you. If he makes you smile and keeps the glow on your face, then I like him already." She crossed her arms with a smug grin. "I have only one condition. That I get to meet him when you drop off Max."

"Lizzy," Maisy whined.

"I'm holding my ground. I want to meet this guy. It's either that or Max spends the weekend alone."

Maisy shook her head and laughed. "All right. It's a deal."

* * * * *

Dean did manage to call Maisy late Wednesday night. She had already gone to bed thinking she wouldn't hear from him no matter how much she willed the phone to ring. She had been tucked beneath the quilt, missing his presence horribly when he'd finally called. At least she'd had the chance to hear his voice no matter how tired he sounded.

Now it was Thursday and she hustled about the kitchen. Everything was ready to go except for the two big steaks marinating on the counter. As soon as Dean showed up, she'd pour him a glass of wine and let him relax while she finished preparing their meal.

His arrival was heralded by Max's sharp barks at the front door. Maisy headed for the living room, her heart leaping with excitement. When she yanked open the door, he was just climbing the front steps to the porch. The sight of his sensual smile and handsome good looks nearly made her knees knock.

"Hi!" she greeted him.

He swept her into his embrace and dragged her through the front door before planting a sweet, tortuous kiss on her mouth.

"Shit, I missed you."

"Not any more than I missed you," she murmured against his chest as she hugged him. "I know it's only been two days but it felt like two months. Join me in the kitchen. The steaks are ready to go on but would you like a glass of wine first?"

Arm in arm they headed to the other side of the house. Once the wine was uncorked, she sat a moment, made small talk with him then he accompanied her to the backyard despite her protests. It wasn't long before they were back in the dining room enjoying a hearty, candlelit dinner and discussing the coming weekend.

"So where are we going?" Maisy was excited beyond belief.

"I rented a small cottage up the shore. I hope you enjoy plays because I purchased tickets to the local theater on Saturday night. Sorry I didn't call and ask you. The receptionist at the resort told me they had tickets available so I reserved them."

"Oh Dean! I love going to plays! Thank you so much. It sounds like fun."

"I'm hoping the weather holds. If it does, would you like to take the early dinner cruise on Saturday? If it's too cold I'll just have to wine and dine you at a trendy restaurant."

She leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his mouth. "I could sit on a rock and eat a bologna sandwich and have the time of my life. Just as long as you are sitting beside me I'll have the best time ever." She loved the sound of his low chuckle when he took her hand and stared into her eyes. She watched them soften to a look that made her insides quake.

"There'll be no rock, Maisy. It'll only be the best for you. And then? I'm taking you back to our cottage and I'm going to make love to you all night long. Hot, sizzling love that will make you come time after time."

Maisy gulped and found it hard to breath. No man had ever talked to her that way, had ever made her feel as if she stood on the edge of a cliff with just his sensual words of hot promise.

She took a deep breath and struggled for a bit of sanity but not before she uttered, "I'm going to hold you to that last part."

He winked and poured the last of the wine into their goblets and raised his glass. "To us, Maisy. And to a fine weekend that neither of us will forget."

With a shaking hand she tapped her glass against his.

They lingered over their meal, laughing about Lizzy's response when she'd discovered that Maisy was heading out with Dean for a couple of fun-filled days. He stated he was thrilled to meet her friends. They spoke of her children and he told her about the long two days he'd had prior to Thursday. Dean was so sinfully delicious and sexy that Maisy found it hard to believe she could be so comfortable in his presence. He made her laugh and he touched her heart with his sincere compliments.

As the meal progressed, Maisy spied the weariness of his labor-filled days. With a fair amount of resolve and stubbornness, she insisted that he relax on the couch while she cleaned up the kitchen. Dean finally conceded and left her after a breathtaking kiss and a promise of the coming hours.

She worked quickly, finding it hard to concentrate as she thought about his magical fingers. That led to daydreaming about his lean, athletic body and thick erection. As she scrubbed the last of the pans, her hand froze. What would it be like to suck on his cock and give him the same pleasure that he'd given her? Maisy's cheeks flushed hot. It had been years since she'd given a blowjob. Suddenly, she wanted to do it. She wanted to surprise Dean. But if she was going to do this, she didn't want to do it with a condom between them. Would she be taking a chance?

The rag dropped into the sudsy water as she stared out the window over the sink. She and Dean used condoms for two reasons. One, at her age, Maisy wasn't going to go on birth control pills. Two, safe sex. How many partners had Dean been with? It was something they hadn't ever discussed. He had to have been with a lot of other women.

Of course he hadn't been celibate. Had he always played it safe though? Maisy was in the clear. She knew that for a fact because even though she'd never had sex with anyone other than Ted, because of his philandering she'd gone to her gynecologist and asked to be checked for any kind of disease. At least the bastard must have played it safe when he'd cheated on her.

Tonight. She was going to talk to Dean about it tonight. Not about the blowjob for crissakes—when she did that it was going to be the surprise of his life. But she was going to talk to him about past partners. Then she'd put the moves on him. Leaning against the counter, she imagined what the soft dusting of hair on his belly would feel like beneath her lips as she kissed her way down the length of his body. Then she'd stroke his cock as she nuzzled the side, teasing him until his fingers clamped about her skull and...

Maisy shook her head. Christ she was acting out of character. She stifled a hysterical giggle over the fact that one of the sexiest men she knew waited for her in the other room as she planned just how she would give him a blowjob. Her eyes flashed to the clock. It was getting late. If she was going to be blowing anyone, she'd better get her ass in the other room and start a discussion. Turning off the kitchen light, she hurried past the dining table and into the living room, but skidded to a stop.

Dean was stretched out on the couch...sound asleep. He looked so damn delectable that she had to smile. Maisy crossed quietly and stared down at him. Her gaze took in his long lashes and parted lips. From there, she did a slow perusal over his chest and across his flat belly to the slight bulge between his legs. A fleeting thought of what he'd say if she woke him up by stroking his cock crossed her mind.

She smiled tenderly. It wouldn't happen tonight. Why? Because he'd had a long week already. Besides, she'd let him rest and build his stamina for the coming weekend. Reaching for an afghan, she did her best not to disturb him as she draped it gently over his length and waited tentatively when he adjusted his position in his sleep. Maisy grabbed another afghan and settled in a stuffed chair across from him.

Curling her legs beneath the blanket, she simply stared at him and relished the secure feeling of having him close. At some point he would wake up and would have to leave. For now? She settled her head back, closed her eyes and sighed with contentment.

Chapter Ten

The wind whipped Maisy's hair as she stood in the circle of Dean's arm at the front of the boat. The day had dawned bright so they'd decided to enjoy the afternoon dinner cruise. Even though it was much colder on the water, she wouldn't change the day for anything.

Cuddling closer to Dean's warmth, she smiled happily when his arms instantly tightened around her.

"Are you sure you don't want to go inside? You're trembling."

"It's from excitement, not cold. I can't believe I've never done anything like this. I've lived in Chicago for most of my life and never cruised on the lake."

Dean tucked his chin against her ear. "Tell me what else you've never done and I'll make it happen. Anything for you."

Again her heart leapt in her chest. He'd been this way since they had left the city and headed north. Attentive, loving and always aware of her and what she might be thinking or feeling.

Turning, she clamped her arms around his waist and looked up. "You are amazing."

His head fell back as he chuckled. "I think you have it wrong. You're amazing and I'm having a great time. It's fun watching you. You're like a little kid who has just visited a candy store for the first time. I'm glad, though, that you're not a child and that you're the woman I get to take back to our room."

Her mind flashed back to the evening before when they'd arrived at the resort. The cottage was a welcome retreat after the long week they'd both had but it was the gentle, slow lovemaking they'd shared that continued to happily haunt her throughout the day today. The sex hadn't been frantic and wild but more loving, a sharing of two souls. That's the only way she could describe it.

At first Maisy had been a bit uncomfortable as they lay in front of the fireplace, slowing taking off their clothes, kissing and touching each other. Of course, the lights were out but the flames' luminescence had flickered across their skin. She'd also managed to talk Dean out of showering together afterward. Maisy was still frightened to be totally naked in front of him in any kind of glaring light. Dean, to his credit, had only laughed and warned her that the day would come when all of Maisy's insecurities would fade.

"Can I tell you about the first time I saw you?" Maisy uttered quietly as she stared with large, luminous eyes.

"You can tell me anything." He tightened his hold around her waist.

"You wowed me from the moment I opened my door and let you in to fix my leaking pipe. I was stunned. I felt like I was sixteen and in the throes of my very first crush. The whole time you were working under the sink, the only thing I could think about was how you would look naked – and what I would do to you if you were."

Dean laughed. "I saw those looks. I was trying not to get a hard-on in front of you."

"You're kidding!" Maisy giggled. "That's too damn funny. Okay, there's more. Then when you told me your name, all I could think about was Dean Martin, the actor. I kept singing his signature song about the moon and the big pizza pie and of course 'that's amore' in my head. I wanted to dance with you to that song."

Dean belted out a laugh. "I can't believe it! Do you know that my mother has been singing that song to me my entire life? That's one of the reasons she insisted on naming me Dean. With the last name of Martini, she said it just couldn't be any other way. Especially when she adores the man." He cuddled her closer. "Hell, Mais, we had 'our' song before we knew it. Especially the part about amore." Tilting his head, he firmly kissed her.

The boat docked a short time later. They hurried back to the cottage, changed for the evening's play and headed out once again. Dean never ceased to surprise her as he spoke about theater culture and the many times he'd enjoyed more than one musical. Though Maisy suspected he'd become knowledgeable because of the escort service and the many dates he'd been on, she refused to ruin the night by bringing it up. Maybe later. Dean had his own past and she had hers. Now she only wanted to look to the future.

After the pleasurable night of entertainment, they returned to the resort both infinitely happy that they were once more alone. They shared a beer and Dean left her to take a quick shower, knowing she wouldn't join him. Then it was Maisy's turn.

She didn't waste a whole lot of time behind the closed door. All she wanted to do was climb into bed beside Dean.

Tonight was the night. At some point, the condom would have to go on but Maisy was going to be the aggressor tonight. He had been so patient with her as far as lovemaking without lights and her lack of self-confidence. Didn't a guy deserve a bit of a reward because of it? She licked her lips, donned her robe and quickly tied the sash before opening the bathroom door.

The breath caught in her throat when she saw him on the bed. He was stretched out crossways on his back, totally naked. When she'd gone into the shower he'd had his boxers on.

Her gaze drifted over him. His cock was half hard. She smiled but couldn't help a quick glance at the lamp beside the bed and wished she could be as comfortable in the nude as he was.

Dean turned his head and smiled. "I've been waiting for you." His hand stroked his cock and amazingly it grew before her eyes.

"I see that," she murmured.

"Well then, come on over."

She literally floated across the room, but faltered a bit when he scooted closer to the edge, still on his back. His dark head hung over the edge of the mattress.

"What are you doing?" she said with half a laugh.

"Wouldn't you like to know? Come closer."

She moved within reach. He lifted his arms and cupped her thighs, pulling her closer. Maisy still wasn't sure what he wanted until slowly he began to slide her robe up to her thighs.

"Dean...the light is still on."

"No worries, Mais. You can leave your robe on. Come closer," he said as he urged her to take one more step. Scooting a bit farther, he now had the chenille material bunched around her thighs. His hands slipped beneath the robe and curled about her bare buttocks. Then they slipped down to coax her legs apart until she stood directly over him. His head disappeared beneath the flowing length of material

A shock of pure pleasure raced through her stomach when his tongue flicked at her clit. How strange to feel the pressure of him parting her cunt lips when his face was hidden beneath the folds of her robe. His fingers clutched at her ass as he licked through her slit.

Maisy's head fell back as she closed her eyes. Wrapping her arms about herself, her body swayed, dipping to allow him better access. The sensation was decadent as his tongue wiggled into her vagina then flicked back across her clit. Holding her in place, he gently nibbled at the swollen bud, working it until Maisy's knees began to tremble. From behind, a finger played between her lips, easily slipping through the moisture that streamed out of her.

Her eyes flew open when that same finger slipped up her ass crack until it came to her anus, then stopped to gently massage the tight, puckered ring. And all the time he licked at her.

Maisy swam in a sensual haze. His tongue in her cunt. His finger pressing against her ass. So much pleasure. Raw, sexual awareness that at any moment... Her hips rocked over his mouth as a slow burn began deep inside.

Dean slipped a finger into her ass and began to thrust it forward, pull it back, then thrust again. His tongue lapped at her.

A blaze of heat sliced through her. Her knees were going to give out. She rocked on the edge of orgasm. Suddenly, she fell forward, landing with a hand on either side of his chest, bracing herself as she ground her pussy against his seeking mouth, barely balancing on her trembling legs. His finger slid deeper into her ass and she shuddered crazily, hotly. Heated bolts whipped through her lower body, sizzling to her breasts as she gasped and came hard. Her hips moved over him, drawing out the orgasm until she moaned. She wanted it to stop and she needed it to go on forever.

She wasn't even aware of how she ended up on her back on the bed, but suddenly Dean was looking down at her, his face shiny with her cream as he dipped his head and whisked his tongue into her mouth.

Maisy sucked at it, tasting the clean, musky essence of her body on his tongue. Her heart rapped crazily and her rectum clenched with the remembered thickness of his finger. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back for all she was worth. It was when Dean's knee nudged her thighs open and she heard the crinkle of a condom package being opened that she pulled back and gasped out, "Wait! I...I want to do the same to you. I want to give you the same pleasure. And I don't want to do it with a condom between us."

Dean lifted his head and stared. "Maisy —"

"Please tell me, Dean, that it'll be safe for me to do. We haven't talked about it. We need to use the condom because we can't take the chance of me getting pregnant. But I want to lick you."

A smile broke out across his face.

"Will it be okay?" she asked, her shuttered eyes filled with desire.

"It'll be more than okay. Yes, Maisy. You don't have to worry. You sucking me is something I've thought about since the first time we made love. I figured it was something you weren't comfortable doing, so I wasn't going to ask."

A smile split her face. "I've thought about it too. In fact..." Maisy's hand settled against his chest, urging him to his back. "I think we'll take care of this right now. I've been thinking about it for a couple of days and I don't want to wait any longer."

Her hand drifted over his chest, down to the flat of his belly then back up to rest over his thundering heart. Dean exhaled a slow breath as his eyes narrowed.

"Your heart is beating a bit fast."

"Of course it is. You're about to give me something I've been dreaming about."

"No more dreaming," she quietly returned. Her tongue traced over her top lip as both hands brushed over his stomach. Tearing her gaze from Dean's lust-filled eyes, she turned her attention to his hard cock. The tip glistened with moisture. She rubbed the pad of her thumb across it, enjoying how Dean's belly sucked tighter with her touch. Bending forward, she began to press soft kisses down the dark line of hair from navel to crotch. Dean's fingertips brushed the back of her neck as she teased him. Her mouth repeatedly came close to his cock but when he would surge upward, she was off exploring the other hard planes of his body.

"Maisy... You're driving me crazy."

She smiled against his skin. Of course she was. That's what she had planned. After all, Dean had teased her the same way.

She dragged her tongue across his lower belly as she stroked his cock. He was rock-hard and squirming. There was no doubt that Dean wanted her lips wrapped around his dick, sucking hard.

Her tongue flicked out and lapped the bit of moisture on the tip of his cock. Dean growled. His fingers stroked the back of her neck with more force. Maisy slid between his legs and grasped his erection with both hands. Slowly she nibbled a trail down his rigid length, again teasing as she stroked him.

"You taste wonderful," she murmured.

His hips swayed in an effort to nudge his cock closer to her mouth. "Maisy," he begged huskily, "don't make me wait any longer. God, I want you to suck me hard."

Firming her grip at the base of his cock, she kissed the tip, opened her mouth and slipped over the swollen end of his penis. Dean groaned his pleasure as her tongue flicked into the slit then out to swirl around it. The blood roared in her ears as she clamped her lips tight and sucked hard, over and over, as she pulled on his cock. His flesh filled her mouth as her head bounced. She lapped at his creamy tip, determined to keep going until he lost reason and came hard. She went after him, lost in the thrill of pleasuring him.

Even when Dean urged her to flip around and lie on her side, Maisy never stopped her sucking. Even as he lifted one smooth thigh upward and dragged his tongue through her wet slit, she kept going. Nibbling and sucking and refusing to let his cock go.

She emitted a tiny gasp of pleasure when Dean slipped two fingers into her cunt. His tongue still licked at her clit, drawing her close to orgasm once more. He filled her senses, clouded her mind with his sexing until her hips jerked in rhythm with his thrusts into her mouth.

Maisy came hard. Whimpers of pleasure sounded in her throat as she thrust her pussy against his biting lips.

Hearing them was all Dean needed. His orgasm sent hot jolts through his groin. The muscles of his ass tightened when he swung his hips, relishing the feel of Maisy's tongue lapping at his dwindling erection. His fingers slipped from her as his digging tongue replaced them. He'd never enjoyed a sexual bout more than the one they'd just shared.

Dean rolled to his back and took great pleasure in what he could only describe as Maisy purring while she continued to lick him. His fingers played through the thickness of her hair. Wanting to kiss her mouth, he curled them firmly within the strands and urged her body upward until she flattened herself against his chest. The rough kiss was eagerly accepted as she met each thrust of his tongue and rubbed her body against his. To Dean it was a perfect moment in time.

They finally broke apart and lay limply on the bed, sucking in deep breaths to still their hearts.

* * * * *

An hour later they lay in the dark, simply stroking each other and whispering about the coming week. Already they made plans to find time to be together.

Maisy sighed happily, silently thanking the unknown force that had brought such a wonderful man into her life after so many years of heartache. If she'd had a choice, it would be to stay cuddled beneath the blankets for an eternity. In her mind she followed the path of Dean's hand as he cupped her ass and began to press warm kisses against her naked shoulder.

Maisy giggled. "Does this mean that you're ready again?"

"Sure does," he chuckled and rolled to his side then nestled his growing cock against her belly. "I just can't seem to get enough of you. I'm so glad we left Chicago, aren't you?"

"Oh most definitely." It was hard to keep track of her thoughts because the tips of his fingers were running up and down her ass crack. His touch was deliciously wicked, evoking a growing heat in her womb once more. Scooting closer, she lifted one knee to rest over his hip and was instantly rewarded when his fingertips slipped to the opening of her vagina. Kissing him, she smiled. "You make me so hot and ready to have you inside me."

"Want to try something else?"

"And what would that be? We've done just about everything."

"Not everything." He paused as his finger prodded her then slipped back up between her ass cheeks. "Have you ever tried anal sex?"

Maisy's eyes rounded in surprise. This was something she had never thought about. Immediately, however, her mind spun back to the moment an hour earlier when Dean had pierced her ass with his finger. It had been erotic as hell and definitely had spurred her to orgasm.

"I'm not pressuring you but I think we should give it a try." He waited breathlessly to see what her response would be, wondering if he might have pushed her too far. He couldn't help himself though. Being with Maisy over the last week was like watching a flower ripen to full bloom.

"Dean...I've never tried something like that. If we do, would you stop if I asked you to?"

"Of course. I would never do anything to hurt you." He wanted to say more but didn't dare. Just thinking about being buried deep in her ass had him hard as a rock. But it had to be Maisy's choice.

"All...right," she replied softly. "I want to try."

He kissed her softly, running his tongue across her lower lip. "I'll get a condom on and some gel. You just roll over. We'll take it slow."

He left her on the bed, filled with anxiety. What if this wasn't something she cared for? She and Ted had never even broached the subject of anal sex. Full of resolve, though, she rolled to her belly beneath the blankets and closed her eyes. Up to this

point, there wasn't one thing distasteful about having sex with Dean. In fact, she suspected he was quickly becoming the drug she couldn't do without. She couldn't help but clench her rectum in anticipation.

The bathroom light flicked off and a moment later, the mattress dipped with Dean's weight.

Her body started when she felt his hand on her butt. Her breath feathered over her lips when he bent forward and gently kissed her ass.

"Have you changed your mind? Just tell me, Maisy, if this isn't something you want to do."

"I want to do this, Dean. I trust you completely."

"And I'd never do anything to break that trust. Here, lift up your hips and let me put this pillow under you."

She did as directed. Settling back onto the pillow beneath her belly, she could see why he wanted her in this position. It lifted her ass higher and gave him easier access. Maisy gulped and wondered what the hell had come over her to say yes in the first place. Quickly, she tossed aside any doubt. After all, this was Dean. And Dean hadn't done one thing that hadn't thrilled her. She gently captured her lower lip with her teeth when his hand pressured her thighs apart.

"I'm going to prepare you, Maisy. At first it might hurt a bit but it will be wonderful. I guarantee it. Are you ready?" He squeezed one round globe and was back nuzzling her ass cheeks with his mouth.

"Yes," she replied breathlessly.

Dean's moistened fingertip pressed against the hollow at the top of her crack. The lube was chilly against her skin and sent a rush of goose bumps up her spine. Her eyes squeezed shut when he dragged his finger sensuously down her crack and stopped at the tight sphincter to massage the puckered ring. "Just relax, Maisy. I'm going to make sure you're ready."

His voice washed over Maisy's tense body as he continued to rub circles. Soon the tip of his finger pressed firmly, breaching the tight hole.

"I can feel you clamping down. Just relax. I was here already tonight and you loved how that felt, didn't you?"

Maisy's fingers curled around the pillow. "Yes. Keep going, Dean. I'm okay."

His finger slid deeper into her ass. Maisy gasped when his free hand slid around her waist and tunneled between her and bed to stroke her tight clit. What he did was sensual as hell. Taking a deep breath, she forced her body to relax further.

Soon, Dean's finger slid in and out. He kissed the ass cheek closest to him, licking with soft flicks and made Maisy feel wickedly naughty and hot to have him take the sexual escapade a step further.

She bit down on her lip when Dean adjusted his position, removed his thick finger and crawled between her legs. A small gasp flowed from her mouth when she felt the round bulb of his cock press against her hole.

"You doing okay?" he asked.

Her heart hammered as the tip of his cock massaged her anus. A warm flush suffused her entire body.

"Yes...oh god, Dean. It feels wonderful so far. I...I can't believe it."

"Just relax. I'm going to push deeper into you now."

She shuddered when the slight burn of entry raced through her but it wasn't anything that was too painful to bear. In fact, Dean paused, letting her body adapt then tightened his hold on her hips and thrust slowly forward until he was buried deep inside her rectum.

She grappled with the pillow, her forehead rolling against the softness as Dean began to fuck her ass slowly. In and out, steady slow glides. The burning sensation slowly filtered away and was replaced by a flame of desire. Now her hips moved in response as her ass sucked at his cock. She rose to her knees with Dean's help, gasping for air as his body began to move in unison with each heady thrust into her ass.

"Yes... Oh god, yes..." she purred. Having Dean fuck her this way was wonderful, was mind-boggling and she couldn't imagine why she had had any reservations at all.

Dean instantly picked up the pace of his strokes. Maisy met each one feverishly. She braced herself and squeezed her ass muscles, sucking at Dean's cock to draw him even deeper. Her head rolled forward as she moaned with sensual delight. Dean's breath was hot across her back. His fingers clutched tightly at her waist.

They continued on, Dean always driving inward.

Maisy's orgasm was upon her before she realized that she rode the edge of it. "Oh god, I'm coming, I'm coming!"

Dean's strokes were now hard, determined, as he rocked into her ass, instinctively knowing how hard she came. The thought excited him beyond belief—Maisy excited him beyond belief. He drove in and let himself go, pumping semen into the tight cavern that squeezed at his cock.

When Dean pulled out, Maisy slumped forward and rolled to her back, her limbs shaking and weak, her ass clenching and unclenching. He was suddenly on top of her, kissing her passionately. Her fingers slid across his scalp and through the thickness of his hair as she answered him with darts of her tongue and a tightly wrapped leg around his hip.

Chapter Eleven

"Thanksgiving is next week."

"Ah, the turkey dinner and all the trimmings." He rolled to his side and pulled Maisy closer. "So, now the question."

"Question?"

He reached out and tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "I've met some of your friends, we've even double dated with Lizzy and Mike. I want to meet your kids."

She stared at him. The last two months had flown by like a dream. The old Maisy had disappeared and in her place a new woman had emerged. One that eagerly looked forward to Dean's presence in her life, his sexy smile, his heartfelt integrity, his passionate fucking whenever the chance arose. It didn't matter if it was in his car, on her bed or in his apartment. Each time was better than the last. Each day with Dean was better than the last.

"Have you told them about me yet?"

Maisy sat up and leaned against the headboard. She reached out, took his hand and lifted it to her lips.

"I guess that means no, you haven't." Dean pushed himself up to sit beside her. "What are you afraid of?"

A smile ghosted her lips. "You're going to laugh."

He nuzzled her neck. "Try me."

"I haven't told Nick and Annie anything because...because I've been afraid that we wouldn't still be together."

"Maisy..."

"I know, Dean. It's silly." She rested her cheek against his chest when his arm coaxed her close. "Now suddenly two months have flown by and here we are—still together." Her finger swirled through the dusting of hair on his chest and she listened to the steady beat of his heart.

She wanted her children to get to know him. It would be another cautious step to the future but it was something that Maisy suddenly wanted more than anything in her life. She wanted Dean forever and ever. She simply couldn't imagine waking up in the morning knowing that she wouldn't be sharing some part of her day with him. Without his presence, she would return to the same old staid person she'd been before he stepped into her life. She...

Maisy's eyes closed as she breathed in his familiar scent. The hand gently rubbing her bare upper arm was something she could not live without anymore. She couldn't live without him. The realization of that notion swelled inside her heart.

I love him...

Strange how the thought didn't terrify her any longer. They could accomplish anything as long as they did it together.

She sat up and pressed a kiss against his full mouth as she slid across his lap and stared him full in the eye.

His eyes narrowed when his lip curled in a devilish grin. "What are you up to, Ms. Maisy?"

Her hands brushed over his pecks. His muscles flexed beneath her gentle touch but he kept his hands at his side and waited for her answer.

"What am I up to? Hmmm...I need to tell you something."

"You're looking pretty serious."

"This is pretty serious."

"Listen, Maisy. I'm sorry I pushed you. If you're uncomfortable with me meeting Nick and Annie, well, that's okay. I'll live."

"But that's not it. I want you to meet them. They're going to love you because I do."

His body tensed beneath her but he only continued to stare through those dark, gorgeous eyes.

Maisy sank against his chest and rubbed her nipples through the coarse hair. God it felt wonderful. He was wonderful. Cupping his face with gentle hands, she kissed him full on the mouth. And when the kiss was over, she let her lips waver only a breath away from his. "I love you, Dean."

His arms were suddenly around her and he flipped her to her back as she squealed with delight. His eyes moved across her face, taking in her full lips and her pert little nose. "Christ, Maisy. I've waited to hear those words come from your lips. It's for real, isn't it?"

She ducked her head and nodded but instantly brought her eyes back to his. "It feels so good to say it."

"I think I've loved you since our first week together," he said quietly as he dipped his head and kissed her again. "No, I don't think. I know. I didn't want to say anything because I was so afraid I would frighten you away. I love you, Maisy, more than you'll ever know. I want to keep on loving you."

* * * * *

Maisy kept an eye on the front drive as she busied herself with mundane details. The twins were arriving any time and she was excited as could be. Everything was ready for her Thanksgiving meal tomorrow. The turkey was cleaned and ready to be

stuffed, two pies cooled on the counter and more appetizers than were necessary took up two entire shelves in the fridge. She'd prepared as many of her children's favorites as she could.

She'd spoken to Dean an hour earlier, giggling and whispering over the phone. She had asked that she be able to tell her children in private about the blossoming relationship she'd discovered with him. Of course Dean had totally agreed, knowing that Maisy needed to have an evening alone with them.

When a car slowed in front of the house then turned into the driveway, Maisy literally squealed with joy as she raced to the front door. "Max! Come on, boy! They're here!"

Whipping open the door, she rushed out onto the porch and down the steps. By the time she reached the driveway, Annie had stepped out from the passenger side.

"Mom!"

Maisy spread her arms and clutched her daughter to her breast. "Oh Annie. It's so good to see you! Oh I've missed you."

"Me too, Mom."

Max yipped excitedly as he jumped up and pawed at the embracing women. Annie ruffled his ears. "Hiya, Max. How's my boy?"

All she received was a quick lick as the dog raced to the back of the car when he spied Nick rounding the trunk. Nick held out his arms and sent Maisy a wide grin. "Mom."

Maisy moved into his arms and almost had the stuffing squeezed out of her. "Welcome home, honey."

A whisper of a kiss was pressed against her cheek. "It's good to be here."

Batting away her tears of happiness, she took both her children's hands. "I can't believe you've been gone as long as you have. But you're here now, so let's grab your bags and go inside. I have all kinds of goodies to tempt you with while you fill me in!"

* * * * *

Thirty minutes later they all sat at the snack bar in the kitchen. After all the weeks of silence in the house, the music filtering in from the stereo in the living room and the kids' voices filled Maisy with a sense of contentment. As they relayed stories about dorm life and the college campus, she had been able to put aside her angst. She loved having them home and in her life once more. She was going to stay positive. The future would work out because she was going to demand that it did.

She smiled as she listened to them chatter away, loving the fact that the two seemed closer than ever. They'd always had such a good rapport but now it was on a more mature level. From what she could gather by Nick's comments and Annie's punches to his arm, she knew that Nick always watched out for his sister's best interests. The two spent a lot of time together and traveled in the same circles.

Maisy's eyes took in her son's handsome features. She knew it was silly but for some reason his good looks were more honed. He looked older to her even though he'd only been gone for three months. He'd always been the more serious of the two children having had to take on the role as the only male in their home. Annie on the other hand was more apt to fly into any situation since she was the more adventurous one. But all and all, each of their attributes is what gave them their own distinctive personalities. She was so proud.

Laughing at something Nick said to his sister, which earned him another playful punch to the arm, Maisy refilled the near-empty bowl of chips. She shook her head with a smile. "You know, since you've been gone I haven't even had any snacks like this in the house." It hit her that she hadn't needed them because she and Dean were always busy doing something. Dean had become her snack. Her heart picked up a quick beat. She was going to have to tell them about him soon. She just didn't know how to bring it up.

"I can tell that, Mom, just by looking at you. You look like you've lost a few pounds. I can't put my finger on it, but you really look good."

Annie's statement astounded Maisy. Lost weight? Hell, she hadn't even been on a scale since meeting Dean. She was probably down a few pounds because of the nightly workouts she'd experienced of late. She fought the heat that threatened to stain her cheeks.

"So what have you been up to, Mom? I bet it's been busy at the travel agency. Hey, Annie and I were talking. Next year we should plan a trip somewhere. Heck, you can get some great deals. Wouldn't that be fun?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course it would, Nicky. But it still takes money no matter what the perk is."

"Mother," Annie replied with feigned authority. "You can't be worrying about that all the time. Besides, I talked to Dad last week and he asked if Nick and I wanted money for Christmas to put toward a trip. I told him most definitely but that we wouldn't be able to do it this year."

At the reference to her ex-husband, Maisy's entire mood changed. That asshole. Why hadn't he offered to give them living expenses on a monthly basis? She sighed and swallowed her bitterness. It was over and done with. "So how is your father?" She asked the question simply for her children's sake and hid her distaste of the subject.

"Okay," Annie replied as she scooped dip onto her chip. "He and Pearl are going to Florida in January. Pearl's brother lives in Miami. From there they're heading out for a Caribbean cruise."

Maisy gritted her teeth, breathed deeply through her nostrils and forced a smile to her lips. "That's nice." Ted had never taken her anywhere. All it took was a nice perky set of tits and a tight round ass and he had suddenly become a jetsetter.

Nick rested his elbows on the table. "Do you ever run into him, Mom? I mean, the two of you live in the same city."

"Surprisingly, no." It wasn't that Maisy wasn't always on the constant lookout for him or Pearl. The two of them lived in a nearby suburb. She hadn't seen Ted since last May at the kids' high school graduation. That was perfectly fine with her. The instant memory of standing outside the school and watching Pearl hug her children nipped at her brain. She also remembered feeling like a dowdy old divorcee. Pearl had worn a clingy spring dress with a bodice that had been cut too low and the hem too short. It had also niggled at her how Ted always seemed to be touching some part of his petite girlfriend's body. Maisy had even wondered at the time if he did it simply to piss his ex-wife off. Mentally, she shook her head. Fuck him.

"Hey, you still haven't told us what you've been up to. You must have something besides work that keeps you busy."

Maisy's stomach churned. She had something all right. He was six feet tall with dark eyes and a body that drove her to distraction. "Well, now that you mention it. My life has changed a bit since you two left." Her eyes came up and she looked from one child to the other, took a deep breath and dove in head first. "I've actually been dating someone."

"What?" They replied in unison.

"Why are you so surprised?" What the hell. Did they think she was too old or something. Shit. She was too old for Dean. It was something she hadn't worried about for quite awhile—not until she stared into her children's faces. Shit.

"Well, yeah we're surprised. You haven't said a word," Annie replied but her smile was wide. "Okay, out with the specifics. How long have you been hiding this? I think it's cool, Mom. Where did you meet him? What does he look like? What's his name? Man, you're blowing me away with this."

Maisy lifted a palm with a hesitant smile. Oh hell, maybe everything would be fine. "One question at a time."

"Yeah, shut up, Annie, or we'll never get the details," Nick joined in. "Okay, spill it, Mom."

Maisy giggled, feeling better by the second. They would love Dean. Who wouldn't? He was a wonderful person. "I haven't been hiding it. I just didn't want to say anything until I was sure that it wasn't going to be a passing thing."

Annie gasped behind her smile. "You mean it's serious? Oh Mom, I'm happy for you!"

"Yeah, I'd say it's getting serious. We spend a lot of time together. His name is Dean Martini."

Nick snorted. "Like the drink?"

"Yup."

"Where did you meet him?"

This was where Maisy planned to fudge a bit. "Um, through work." That wasn't an outright lie, was it?

"So did he ask you for a date? Come on, Mom. You're making us drag out the details."

"Okay." She had to be truthful. "If you have to know, it was more like a blind date that the girls from work set up for me." Her smile widened as her eyes softened. "And of all things, he was the man who came to the house to fix the leaking sink. Dean and I hit it off right away."

Annie jumped off her stool, rounded the snack bar and hugged her mom. "I'm so happy for you! This is great!"

"Well, I can't tell you how happy I am that you both seem so okay with this."

"Why wouldn't we? Is he handsome?"

Now would be the perfect time to tell them that Dean didn't have gray hair or wouldn't be the person they expected but she couldn't. She was probably being too cautious but she just couldn't handle it any other way. They would discover soon enough.

"Well, you'll see for yourself tomorrow. He's coming for dinner. Really, I can't wait for you to meet him. And he's excited about meeting you two."

Nick's brow furrowed a bit above his twinkling eyes. "Hey, Annie. Does it look like Mom is blushing?"

"Nonsense, Nick," Maisy said as she grabbed at something to head the flow of conversation in another direction. "He's just a nice man. Hey, how about we lie around in the living room and watch a movie or something? It'll be just like old times." She stepped from Annie's embrace, grabbed the chips and dip, took another deep breath and hoped like hell her cheeks would cool. "First one in the living room gets the couch!"

Nick and Annie exchanged knowing glances. Their mother had easily and quite adeptly changed the subject. For now, they'd let it go but tomorrow would be interesting.

* * * * *

Maisy hugged the phone between her ear and her shoulder as she counted out plates. The twins had headed out earlier that day to visit some friends. She was alone and loving the fact that Dean was on the other end of the line and she could speak with him privately.

"I can't wait to meet them."

"They can't wait to meet you either. I managed to hold them off last night but before they left today, they sure as hell were full of themselves. Annie dogged me all morning asking questions about you. Nick was a little more subtle but both are chomping at the bit."

"Mais, hon, are you feeling better about this? I'm listening to your voice and I don't hear any strain."

She smiled as she placed silverware beside the stack of plates. "You were right. I should have just listened to you rather than fret. I really think everything is going to be okay." Maisy believed her own words wholeheartedly. Annie had told her numerous times how happy she was that her mother might have found someone to spend the rest of her life with. Maisy wasn't going to be that brazen and relay that information to Dean, however. Thus far, they hadn't talked that far into the future. Dean and Maisy were simply taking one day at a time and living for the moment.

"I miss you, Dean. I'm absolutely thrilled that the kids are home this weekend but I missed you last night and I'll miss you every night until they head back to college."

"Then you'll just have to call me when the kiddies are all tucked in and we'll have phone sex."

His lurid chuckle on the other end made her heart beat erratically. "Oh you think so, do you? Well, not going to work for me, Dean. I want the real thing." Good god she was getting brave.

"Okay, let's make a date. Sunday afternoon. As soon as Nick and Annie leave for school, I'm going to sweep you under the covers and not let you come up for air until Monday morning. Ah, the things I'm going to do to you, Maisy."

"Ha!" she exclaimed. "I won't give in without a fight." Even though she joked with him, a slow flush ignited inside her. Maisy couldn't wait.

"That's exactly what I hoped you would say. I'm going to enjoy breaking down your defenses."

"Dean..." Maisy was breathless and happier than she'd been in years. "I love you."

"I love you too. But let's talk about something else. I've got a hard-on just from listening to your voice. That's all it takes."

Maisy collapsed onto a stool. Who would have ever thought that she could give a man a hard-on just by talking to him? God, she loved this man. "Okay, why don't we talk about how I really should get going—not that I want to. I could have you talk dirty to me until you are hoarse. But the kids will be here shortly. Are you almost done at your mom and dad's?"

"Yup. I told them about you."

"You did?"

"Yes. They can't wait to meet you. Everything is going to be fine, Maisy. I'll tell you more about our conversation later."

She flushed with happiness.

"I can't imagine eating another Thanksgiving dinner. I'm gonna have a huge gut hanging over my belt by Christmas if I keep this up."

Maisy laughed outright. "I highly doubt it. You're in too good shape for that to ever happen." That was the gospel truth. Dean possessed washboard abs and buns of steel. Just thinking about his body had her trembling. "Okay, really. I have to go. Nick's car just pulled in. See you in an hour?"

"Sure thing. It's going to be harder than hell keeping my hands off you."

"Promise me you'll behave in front of them."

"I promise," he laughed. "See you soon."

"Bye."

She hung up the phone and stared across the kitchen, paying no attention to Max whining in the other room. Instead, she snagged a magazine on the counter to quickly fan her hot cheeks. She couldn't wait to see Dean. Rising from the chair, she nearly skipped into the living room to greet the kids.

* * * * *

Maisy's eyes flicked to the clock above the kitchen sink. Dean's arrival was imminent. She could hardly contain her excitement in regard to the four of them sitting down to a dinner she'd labored over for days. A moment later, Max barked. It had to be him.

Annie sat at the counter cutting fresh bread. "Do you think it's Dean?"

Maisy struggled to appear calm. "I hope so. Everything is ready to go." She shed her apron with a smile and headed for the living room.

Nick glanced up from where he lay on the floor with a pillow in front of the television. "I think your boyfriend is here," he teased.

"You behave," Maisy admonished with a pointed finger and a smile.

Nick laughed and heaved himself up.

Maisy opened the door before Dean even had a chance to knock. He stood on the porch with a bottle of wine in his hand, looking absolutely gorgeous in his leather jacket and tight jeans. Her heart skipped a beat. "Hi, Dean. Come on in!"

"Hi, Maisy. Happy Thanksgiving." He glanced up to see a young man standing in the archway that led to the front room. Extending his hand, he stepped forward. "Hi. You must be Nick. It's nice to meet you after hearing your mom talk about you all the time. I'm Dean."

Nick stared. Snapping out of his surprise though, he shook hands with the tall stranger. "Nice to meet you." His eyes darted back and forth between Dean and his mother. He didn't have a clue what else he should say. He'd expected someone with gray hair and glasses, maybe a bit of a protruding stomach or even a white goatee. But never in his wildest imagination did his mother's boyfriend look only a few years older than himself, wearing a leather jacket and looking like he was here to pick up Annie for a date rather than be his mother's guest of honor.

Maisy glanced from one to the other. "Why don't you give me your jacket, Dean, and I'll hang it up." She turned to call Annie but saw her daughter's stiff form standing in the kitchen doorway. "Annie? This is Dean."

Annie's face showed no emotion. She just stood there and stared.

What was wrong with her? "Annie?"

Annie didn't make an attempt to come any closer and leaned against the arched doorway. Her soft jaw hardened as her eyes shifted to her brother's.

Nick jumped forward. "Hey, give me your jacket, Dean. I'll hang it up. Mom's been at it all day."

Dean shrugged it off and handed it over. As soon as he did, he crossed to Annie and held out his hand.

Annie had no choice but to accept it.

"It's nice to meet you, Annie. I almost feel like I know you already. Your mom talks about you all the time."

She pulled her hand from his warm grip. "Funny, she hasn't said a word to me about you."

Sudden thick tension lay heavy on the air as the four of them stood silently.

Getting over the shock at how her daughter had greeted Dean, Maisy rushed forward. "Why don't you help me with the turkey, Dean, and then we can all sit down and visit over dinner." Conflicting emotions darkened her eyes as she shot Annie a glare before placing her hand on Dean's arm to usher him into the kitchen.

"Do you need *me* to help you?" Annie gritted out.

Maisy hesitated. "I think I have everything under control. It shouldn't take long but you're more than welcome to join us."

Annie straightened from where she'd leaned against the edge of the open archway. "I think I'll go check my email if you wouldn't mind."

Maisy forced a smile. "Sure. I'll call you. Thanks for setting the table." She watched Annie stride down the hall and into her old bedroom. When she shut the door quietly, Maisy pulled Dean into the kitchen, pulling the pocket door closed behind them. "I'm so sorry, Dean. I don't know what got into her." She wrung her hands as she stood in the middle of the room. "She owes you an apology. I-I'm sorry."

Dean pulled Maisy against his chest and wrapped her in his arms. "Don't worry about it. I'm not what she expected. You should have told them, Maisy. Maybe it wouldn't have been such a shock to them. Ah hell. She'll come around."

Maisy wasn't so sure. The entire evening before, Annie had been her usual happy self, teasing her mother about the new love in her life. All morning long she'd chatted about being excited to meet him. And then? She'd suddenly turned into a little snot-nosed brat. Maisy sighed against the comfort of Dean's chest. She never should have let her guard down. "I hope you know what you're talking about because her reaction surprised the hell out of me. I'm sick about it."

"Don't worry. We'll do this together. Now what about that turkey? What can I do to help?"

* * * * *

As far as dinner went, Maisy thought it was a disaster despite the fact that Nick and Dean seemed to hit it off. The two of them spoke about Nick's classes and moved on to college sports with a fair amount of enthusiasm. Whether it was real or faked, Maisy could have kissed her son for making Dean feel so welcome.

Annie on the other hand sat sullen and uncommunicative. Throughout the meal she'd answered Dean's many attempts at conversation with one- or two-word responses. She hardly said a word as she picked at her meal. The only time she became animated was when Nick addressed her directly.

Maisy was ready to kill her. She did her best though to keep an even keel for Dean's sake but it was an extreme struggle. All hell was going to break loose when he left for the evening. Annie's behavior was unacceptable and had peaked to being just flat out rude. Poor Dean. He was still doing his best to draw Annie into the conversation but nothing worked.

They finally finished the meal and decided to wait a bit before tackling Maisy's fresh pies. Wanting to get her daughter alone, Maisy insisted that Dean and Nick catch the end of a football game. Annie fell right into her plan by stating she would help with the dishes, which Maisy was sure she would do just so she wouldn't have to be in the same room with her mother's boyfriend.

Maisy stood and began to stack empty plates and dirty silverware when the men headed out. Her teeth clenched tightly with an angry tick but she refused to say anything until Dean and Nick were in the other room and she and Annie were behind the kitchen's pocket door. She couldn't even look at her daughter. Scooping up the armful of dirty dishes, she stalked to the kitchen. Annie followed her in a minute later with two of the half-filled serving dishes and set them on the counter none too gently.

Maisy marched across the room, slid the pocket door into place and spun around. Anger seethed in her eyes. "How dare you treat a guest of mine the way you did Dean."

Annie's nose lifted. "I don't know what you're talking about. I couldn't get a word in edgewise. He and Nicky seemed to have a lot in common. Although it's not surprising when they're so close in age."

Maisy's heart pounded and her stomach clenched with nausea. "That is enough! I'm ashamed of you, Annie. I taught you better than that. And they are *not* that close in age."

Annie's lips drew into a straight line as she crossed her arms tightly over her chest and leaned against the counter. "What do you expect me to do, Mother? You could have told me you robbed the cradle when you went looking for a new boyfriend."

"Annie. Stop. Don't even go there." She watched her daughter roll her eyes in disgust. "I'm going to swallow my anger at your behavior over the last hour and hope we can discuss this like mature adults."

"Go ahead, Mom. Explain it to me. I'm all ears."

Maisy closed her eyes, placed one hand across her brow and heaved a great sigh. It was a supreme struggle to keep her anger leashed or there was a good chance she'd

slap Annie right across the face—something she'd never done nor had even thought of doing. "Would you please sit down?"

Her daughter looked as if she were ready to bolt. Instead she stalked around the corner of the snack bar and plopped onto a stool. Her eyes bored into her mother's, a silent dare to continue the conversation.

Taking another settling breath, Maisy cautiously approached, thinking it better to stand on the opposite side of the bar. "Annie...I've never known you to be rude to anyone. Dean didn't deserve what you put him through tonight. He's the kindest man I've ever met and has been so excited to get the chance to meet you and Nicky."

Annie's eyes narrowed. "How old is he?"

"Why should that make a difference?"

Annie shook her head. "He must be pretty young if you won't give up his age."

"He's thirty-one."

Annie's head fell back as she silently stared at the ceiling, silent and condemning.

"Let me ask you this. Did you treat Pearl the same way when you met her?" Maisy watched her daughter avert her gaze after a quick flash in her mother's direction. "Tell me, Annie. She's a lot younger than your father."

"It's different."

Maisy placed both hands palms down on the snack bar as she leaned forward. "Why is it different?" When Annie refused to answer her, Maisy plunged on. "I'll tell you why it was different. You were twelve years old when your father walked out on us." That got her attention.

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Annie, you were young enough that the only thing you could think about was that your dad was gone. There's an eighteen-year difference between them. You didn't even realize that at the time, did you? Do you ever think about that now?"

"Why are we talking about Dad?" she spouted. "This isn't about him. This is about you making a fool of yourself by hanging out with someone almost young enough to be your son!"

Maisy's entire body jerked back with a start. The blood drained from her face.

"It's embarrassing as hell, Mom. You should be ashamed of yourself for prancing around looking as if you're trying to be young again. How many of *my* friends have seen you with him? I bet they're laughing their asses off."

Maisy struggled against the quiet voice that began to chant inside her brain. *I told you so. I told you so...* She blinked back the tears in her eyes, struggling against the crushing pain inside her heart. She met Annie's accusing stare. Her lips parted.

"Is that what you think of me? That I'm an embarrassment?" she asked quietly. "I just want to be happy again, Annie. That's all. Honey, I've given my entire life to you and your brother *and* years to your father who just happened to walk out on *me*."

Annie shot up from the stool. Her usually soft features were pinched and accusing. "That's what a mother is supposed to do! She's not supposed to embarrass her children with some stupid fling with a younger man!"

"Lower your voice."

"I will not! Don't try putting a guilt trip on me so you can continue to play with your little boy toy. Is that what you're doing? It makes me sick to think about you rolling around in bed with him!"

Both Annie and Maisy jumped when the pocket door slammed back into its hiding place. Nick's thunderous expression brooked no resistance. "That's enough, Annie. We can hear you in the other room."

Maisy wished she could faint dead away. Dean. He had heard Annie's horrible outburst. "It's okay, Nicky."

"No it's not, Mom." He turned his angry gaze on his sister. "Annie? You're acting like a spoiled little snot. You can apologize to Mom and Dean and then you can shut your mouth right now."

"Fuck you, Nick," Annie spat out.

"Annie!" Maisy gasped. "Don't turn your anger for me onto your brother." My god, what did Dean think? She only had to wait two seconds before she knew. He stepped up behind her son. One look at his drawn features and she knew how upset he was. "Dean...I'm sorry."

"I think I'll head home, Maisy. It's probably for the best."

She wanted to race across the room, wrap her arms around him and tell him how much he was loved. But between the sparks of anger shooting from her son's eyes and Annie's biting comments, she'd had enough. It was better that he left. Everyone needed to cool down.

"Thank you for dinner, Maisy. I'll see myself out."

Before she could respond, Dean turned and was gone. Only seconds passed before the click of the front doorknob signaled his exit.

Annie stalked across the kitchen but had to halt her stilted departure because Nick refused to move from the doorway. She stared him down until he finally took a step sideways and let her pass.

Maisy spun away, gripped the edges of the counter and stared out the window above the kitchen sink. Her eyes filled with tears. To halt them, she sucked in huge gulps of air but they returned tenfold when she felt Nick's hand on her shoulder. She hadn't even heard him approach.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I don't know what's wrong with her. She had no right to say the things she did."

Maisy raised a hand in the air as she tried to get past the lump in her throat. "Thank you, Nicky."

"Do you want to talk?"

She shook her head. "I-I think I'm just going to clean up and go to bed."

"Do you want me to talk to Annie?"

"Not tonight. It's probably best to let her think about all the horrible things she said. If I had enough energy, I might try, but I can't take another argument with her." Inhaling deeply to stop the trembling of her body, she opened the dishwasher and began to load it.

Nick's troubled gaze followed, feeling horrible that the long holiday weekend had started out the way it did. He found it hard to understand how his mother had become involved with someone so different from her, but Nick wasn't making any judgments. As long as his mom was happy that was the only thing that mattered. Quietly, he headed for the dining room to help clean up.

Once Maisy had everything in order and the kitchen was clean, she grabbed her coat and told Nick she was going to take Max outside for a bit. Neither had said a word about the earlier scene and Annie hadn't come out of her room.

Good. She can stay there. Maisy would probably slap her face if Annie opened her mouth again. There was no way Maisy was going to go another round with her. Not yet. Not tonight. Her own wounds were still too fresh.

She slipped out the back door and trudged across the deck. It was chilly but the wind wasn't blowing and she so desperately needed the fresh air.

More than once she'd thought about picking up the phone and calling Dean but each time she tossed the idea away. What could she say? She was still too upset with Annie's behavior and the horrible things that were said. Then she'd entertained the idea of getting in the car and heading to his house just to hold him in her arms. Maisy was caught between a rock and a hard place. He was there but her children were here. By leaving she just might open another can of worms.

Sad and confused beyond belief, she closed her eyes but instantly snapped them open when Dean's distressed expression appeared. She needed to have everything settled in her mind before talking to him. They were both adults. Dean would certainly understand why she couldn't go to him tonight.

She watched numbly as Max sniffed about until he disappeared into the shadows. He wouldn't go far. He never did.

Hugging herself to ward off the sick feeling roiling in her stomach, she sank into a chair and stared into the darkness through eyes that blurred with unshed tears. Soon, however, she couldn't hold back the dam and they coursed down her cheeks. Maisy slapped her hand over her mouth and cried, alone and bereft and wondering how the situation could ever be fixed. Over and over she kept hearing Annie's words. They plucked at her heart and tore it to pieces.

Don't try putting a guilt trip on me so you can continue to play with your little boy toy. This is about you making a fool of yourself by hanging out with someone young enough to be your son...

Maisy pinched her lips together and struggled to keep her sobs under control. The last thing she wanted was for Nick to find her in such an anguished state. She battled anger and she battled weariness. Never, ever had she and Annie had an argument like they'd had tonight.

Her daughter was totally embarrassed by her relationship with Dean.

Totally repulsed to think that Maisy could be happy with him.

Boy toy.

Is that what everyone thought? Did the people who saw her and Dean together think they were mother and son? Humiliation burgeoned inside her. All her doubts from three months ago came back to haunt her. No matter that she loved Dean with her whole heart and her whole being. She should have seen this coming. She should have realized how her children would feel. Nicky, bless his heart, hadn't said anything derogatory but she had seen the surprise in his eyes when Dean had first stepped into the house tonight. If Annie hadn't made such a fuss, what would her conversation have been like with her son? Would he have pointed a gentle finger of accusation at her and told her to act her age?

Too many questions without answers.

Max loped across the yard and padded up the deck stairs. He trotted to Maisy's side, sat down and plopped his head on her lap, licking at her fingers until Maisy was forced to scratch him behind the ears. She looked at his big brown eyes and swiped at the tears on her cheeks. "Why couldn't they be more like you Maxie? You have totally accepted Dean." She continued to scratch him as her watery gaze shifted to the darkness once more. Her shoulders rose then fell with a deep sigh. She was numb with pain. She wished she had the nerve to just leave the house and head for Dean's. If ever she needed the comfort of his strong arms, it was now.

That voice was back, however. The one that taunted her. The one that said she was going to have to make a decision. Her brow wrinkled in pain. It was the one that had already sealed her fate.

"Don't be silly, Maisy..." she whispered aloud, her voice shaky and hoarse. "You made your decision. Dean is simply too important to you."

I love him!

But she also loved her children...

Max woofed when a car turned off the street and pulled into the driveway.

Dean! Had he come back?

Maisy leapt from the chair. Joy filled her heart. She raced off the deck and around the back corner of her house. Ducking around the next corner and the cedar bushes, she came to a screeching halt as Ted stepped out of his little red sports car. He didn't see Maisy but quickly marched around the hood of the Jaguar in the direction of the front door.

She stepped bravely into the light of the yard lamp. "Ted. Stop right there."

He spun around. His thin lips formed a straight line and his brows furrowed.

He's all I need...the asshole. Maisy sighed quietly and struggled to remain calm. "What are you doing here?"

His gaze drifted up and down her body with distaste. "Like you don't know," he scoffed.

Maisy stepped onto the driveway. "Know what?"

"Annie called me crying and begged for me to come and get her. We were having a nice Thanksgiving evening with Pearl's parents. Thanks a lot. Once again you've managed to screw up everything."

"What the hell are you talking about?" She asked the question but her heart already pounded erratically.

"You've embarrassed your daughter horribly. What?" He spread his hands wide with an arrogant shake of his head. "You can't find anyone your own age to play with? Annie told me all about your little playboy and how you took his side over hers."

Maisy's blood ran cold. Her knees began to tremble. "No one took anyone's side. Annie and I had a disagreement because she stepped over the line of rudeness."

"Can you blame her? Come on, Maisy. She said this kid is young enough to be yours."

"Get back in your car and leave. Annie isn't going anywhere." Why had Annie called him? Not once since the asshole had left had he ever been there for her children. Now because her daughter was acting like a spoiled little brat, she'd called Daddy and the idiot had once more come into Maisy's life to make it miserable.

Ted shoved his hands into his expensive leather jacket pockets, ducked his head for a second and laughed quietly. Finally, he looked at her as he shook his head. "What are you doing, Maisy? Trying to get even with me?"

"Whatever you're talking about, this has absolutely nothing to do with you."

"Ah, I think it does. You wanted to make me jealous with this choir boy of yours. Instead you ended up looking totally ridiculous. An older woman searching for her youth. Christ, you haven't let him see you naked, have you? Sorry to say, but he'll run like hell. I bet he's not used to sagging breasts and stretch marks."

Maisy physically jerked back when his words slammed into her brain. Ted might as well have physically punched her in the stomach. Tears blurred in her eyes and her entire body began to shake. The breath caught in her throat and for a split second, she thought she was going to faint.

"Daddy?"

Ted turned his grinning mouth in his daughter's direction, held out his arms and welcomed her into them. "Annie. I'm here, baby." He rubbed circles with his gloved hand against her back and kissed the top of her head. "Ready to go?"

Annie's head nodded. She refused to look at her mother as she clutched at her backpack.

If Maisy had been able to, she would have called out to have Annie rethink her decision to leave with Ted. As it was, her throat was thick with unshed tears. She simply stood forlornly in the cold, waiting to see if Annie would at least say goodbye.

Nothing. The girl allowed her father to lead her to the car.

Maisy spun and raced to the backyard before Ted even backed his car out of the driveway.

* * * * *

Dean leapt from a kitchen chair when the phone rang the following morning. God he hoped it was Maisy. He hadn't known what to do. Should he call her? Should he go back to her house?

"Hello?"

"Hi, Dean," Maisy stated quietly.

"Hi, baby. Are you okay?"

"I should be the one asking that question. You beat me to it."

"You sound horrible."

"Jeez, thanks. Just what I wanted to hear."

Dean gritted his teeth and mentally flayed himself. He hadn't meant it the way it sounded. "I want to see you."

"I don't think that's going to work out. Not when the kids are home."

His head fell back and he winced in fear. His heart constricted. "Don't do this, Maisy. I know last night didn't go as planned."

"You don't know the half of it."

"So meet me somewhere and we can talk."

Silence.

Not even a breath.

"Please, Maisy. We both knew there could be a reaction like this from the kids. We talked about it and decided we would get through it together. How was Nick with you after I left?"

Nothing.

"Maisy..." He heard her rattled sigh.

"Nicky was great."

"Well then we'll sway Annie over. It'll be okay, you'll see."

"How can we do that when she's not here?"

"What?"

"She left, Dean. She called her father and insisted he come and pick her up. Annie left with him last night." Her voice quavered. "She left with that asshole who has never, ever, been there for her. Suddenly, I'm...I'm nothing."

"Don't you dare think that. She's young. She's immature. Honey, I want to come over."

"No, don't," she returned quietly. "Not now."

Dean had never heard Maisy sound so weary...and resigned.

"I have to do what I think is right. If Annie comes back, I need to be here and ready to talk to her. And if she doesn't come back, I'm going to enlist Nicky's aid and have him go get her. She's my daughter. And no matter how rude she was last night, I just can't let her head back to college until I know things are good between us again."

"Maisy..." Dean stood and traced a hand through his thick hair as he paced. "It'll be good again. It has to be. You're too good of a mother not to have had something rub off on her."

"See, that's the thing, Dean. You've never seen me with my kids. You really don't know what kind of mother I am. You and I have no history but I have years with them, years I refuse to throw away. Please understand that I need some time."

Dean didn't have to see Maisy's face to know that she had already stepped away from him, that she would give up her own happiness if that's what it took to regain her relationship with Annie. "Don't do this, Maisy. I'll give you the time you need but please don't make it sound like you and I are over. I love you. You know that, don't you?"

Silence again.

His eyes snapped shut. *Goddamn it!*

Dean had never felt so helpless in his life.

"I...I have to go, Dean. I'm sorry. Once the kids leave, I'll give you a call. I promise. Please don't try to contact me while they're here."

"Maisy —"

"I have to have time with them — alone. I have to fix this. Goodbye, Dean. I'm really sorry that Annie treated you so badly."

The dial tone buzzed loudly in his ear.

Dean stared at the phone in his hand with a feeling of utter dread trickling through him.

Chapter Twelve

"Damn, Maisy. It's taken us until January to finally have a Christmas lunch and now all you're doing is pushing the food around on the plate."

Maisy shrugged with a cursory glance about the restaurant. "I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought."

"Oh come on. That's bullshit. You led me to believe that we were going to have a fun Saturday and now I can hardly get you to even talk to me." Lizzy sat back and folded her arms beneath her breasts. "I've been looking forward to this. I've been on a mental treadmill for the last month. Between getting things ready for Mike's in-laws to visit over Christmas, planning a New Year's party—which by the way I'm still upset with you because you didn't show—and just life in general, this is the first Saturday I've had off in weeks. Come on. Talk to me. Anything."

Maisy shrugged an apology and picked at her salad.

"Christ," Lizzy said with a shake of her head. "Call him."

Maisy's head snapped up as pain filtered through her chest. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"Oh you can ask that? Lizzy, it's over. I'm finally back on good ground with Annie and I won't do anything to ruin that."

"Have you heard from him?"

Maisy set down her fork and wiped her mouth, more in an effort to cover her quaking chin than anything. Taking a deep breath, she regained her composure and placed her napkin on the table. "No. I think I finally convinced Dean I didn't want to hear from him again."

"You never even heard from him over Christmas? And don't give me that look, girlfriend. You haven't told me one thing except the Thanksgiving fiasco. I've bided my time because I knew how upset you were but no more. Dammit. You're a shell of your old self. You hardly ever smile anymore, you've got dark circles under your eyes and you do nothing except head for home every night after work. Honey, I'm worried about you."

"I'll be fine. I'm sorry, Lizzy. I just couldn't talk about our breakup. I was too upset but I'm over him and that's that."

"The hell you are. If you were over him, you wouldn't be dragging your ass around like a kicked puppy." She leaned forward and reached out a hand. "Tell me about it, would you? Damn, I'm your friend. All I want to do is help you." Lizzy sighed deeply. "Okay, let's go back a few months. I know that eventually Annie came back and you talked. Then the kids left for college again. After that it's a blank slate."

Tears welled in Maisy's chocolate eyes. As much as it hurt to think about Dean, maybe if she talked about him out loud, the pain would lessen. Maybe she could convince herself that she didn't love him anymore. "We just talked that following week and I told Dean that I needed to make sure the kids and I were fine. You know, Lizzy? I don't know what the hell I was thinking. We were too different. It never would have worked out anyway."

"How can you say that, Maisy? Those months you were with him were the happiest I've ever seen you. Remember that night the four of us went to dinner? Hell, the entire way home all Mike could talk about was what a great guy Dean was. He thought the man was perfect for you—even when we discussed the age thing. Mike didn't think it was that big of a deal. And anyone with any kind of sense could see how he felt about you. Maisy, it was the real thing."

Maisy didn't want to think of it as the real thing. Believing that would make her life just that much more miserable. Her head wagged as she reached for her water glass and took a sip

"Yes, it was," Lizzy continued. "Why are you so damn stubborn? Annie would have learned to live with it. Don't get mad at me but she was a selfish little snout. You gave them the years they deserved. Now you need to take what's left of your life and go for it. Call him, Maisy. Just call him and ask him to dinner. You can't tell me that he's forgotten about you."

"He has. He was so angry the last time we spoke. He...he told me to grow up and act like the woman he thought I was." A flash of that last conversation raced through her brain. She remembered hearing the pained frustration in his voice though it had been easier to think of it as anger. "I haven't heard from him since the week after Thanksgiving. Of course, I told him over and over to not call me, that...that there wasn't any room for him in my life."

Lizzy shook her head, amazed that her friend had thrown away the one thing that she had waited for her entire life—a man who worshipped the ground she walked on.

"Don't shake your head. Those few months with Dean were just a fantasy. This is not a fantasy world, Lizzy. Forty-six-year-old women do not date thirty-something men without raising eyebrows. If it hadn't been Annie raising hell with me, it would have been someone else."

"Yeah, someone else by the name of Ted. Just because that ass wiggled his way into the picture doesn't mean you have to let him have the upper hand. That's what you're doing whether you realize it or not and you did that for too many years. He's out of your life and has absolutely nothing to say about how you live yours." She squeezed Maisy's hand. "He burned you good. I remember the hurt in your voice when you told me about Thanksgiving when he showed up to get Annie. I watched him do that to you for enough years. He doesn't have the right anymore."

"Stop it, Lizzy. We're not discussing Ted. This was my decision."

Lizzy opened her mouth then snapped it shut. Damn. No matter what a bastard her ex was, Maisy would never put him down in front of anyone. It was so easy for Lizzy to see that Ted's influence during Maisy's married life with him still had an effect. But rather than discuss her friend's low self-esteem because of a bullying ex, she sighed and decided to drop the subject for the time being.

* * * * *

That night Maisy lay curled beneath a blanket on the couch with Max beside her. Try as she might, she could not concentrate on the movie she'd rented. Instead, thoughts of the day with Lizzy and the things her friend had said prodded her mind.

Pointing the clicker at the television, she shut it off, rested her head on the cushion behind her and closed her eyes.

Where to start? Maisy knew she shouldn't risk thoughts of the past but at times like this when her loneliness bounced off the walls around her, that inner voice refused to be shut down. She knew what to expect. Heartache, pain and aching reminders of what her life could have been like. She sighed deeply and felt the tears burn behind her eyelids. All the "ifs" in the world wouldn't change the present.

Dean.

Just the silent word in her mind evoked an image of his sexy smile and sparkling eyes. Images of him danced through her mind like pages of a photo album. Dean standing in her doorway the first time she'd seen him, Dean with his head thrown back as he laughed at something she said. Dean's shuttered, hungry eyes as his cock slipped into her.

She physically ached for him. Her woman's body cried out. Her heart splintered again as if it were the first day she'd sent him from her life.

Maisy leapt off the couch, sending Max into a panic. The dog raced, barking, to the front door.

"Shut up, Max! There's no one here," she sobbed. "Especially Dean. He's never coming through that door again!" She stumbled down the hall and into the bathroom, the deep sobs harsh and rasping in her throat. Cranking on the cold water, she splashed handfuls over her face until she finally calmed a bit. Grabbing a nearby towel, she sank to the edge of the tub and wiped her face as she gulped breaths and rocked.

It wasn't fair! What had she ever done to hurt this badly? It sucked, just royally sucked that mothers put their children first no matter their ages.

Damn, she missed him with all her heart. The pain of it knifed through her chest.

"You did the right thing," she muttered hoarsely. "You acted responsibly!" she screamed a second later. Maybe if she continued to shout that aloud, she would some day begin to believe it.

"Responsibly," she groaned again as her fingers clutched her aching head. And the proof of that statement was the fact that Maisy and Annie were back on good terms.

Their relationship was like it used to be. Maybe better if Maisy was willing to believe everything her daughter had said over the last month. Christmas with the kids had been wonderful. No tension, just laughing and joking and them going out of their way to make the holiday perfect by telling Ted they couldn't share the holiday with him and Pearl until the day after Christmas.

Maisy tossed the towel on the counter and traced both hands through her tangled hair.

Mothers and daughters were supposed to have a tight bond of love and trust. Twice in Maisy's life, that strong attachment had nearly been broken. Annie had been so young when Ted walked out and had turned all her anger onto Maisy. It had happened again when she felt her mother was making a fool of herself by dating a younger man. Maisy would never chance that again. She loved Annie too much.

But you loved Dean too! You loved him with all your heart and you hurt him terribly!

She rose slowly, flicked off the bathroom light and trudged to her bedroom. Numbly, she shed her clothes and crawled into bed. And like every night since the day she'd sent Dean away, her hand fluttered to the spare pillow, imagining that he would join her at any moment.

* * * * *

The following morning Maisy's puffy eyes opened. It had been a long night of dreaming about Dean, waking up to tears rolling down her cheeks, then struggling to fall asleep once more. She rolled to her back and stared blankly at the ceiling.

I can't keep doing this. It's over and it's for the best.

But what was going to make the memory of Dean Martini disappear? Maisy didn't have a clue.

Max whined as he leapt off the bed and raced from the room. With a heartfelt sigh, Maisy tossed back the covers, surprised for a moment because she hadn't remembered that she was naked. As she slipped off the mattress, she grabbed her robe and followed the dog to let him out.

Opening the kitchen door, she was surprised to see four inches of snow that had accumulated overnight. It was to be expected. After all, it was the middle of January. Max took off, leaving a trail through the powder as he rounded the house. Now she had something to look forward to, however mundane. Shoveling snow wasn't her favorite thing to do but it would get her outside. Maybe the cold, fresh air would clear her foggy brain.

Ten minutes later she poured herself a cup of coffee as the shrill ring of the phone gave her a start.

"Hello?"

"Good morning. You up?" Lizzy asked.

"I answered the phone, didn't I?"

"Ooo, someone woke up on the wrong side this morning."

I did, Maisy thought. I woke up on Dean's side of the bed. Stop it! "It's Sunday morning, Lizzy. Shouldn't you be in church?"

Laughter rolled across the phone lines. "Yeah, in your dreams. Hey, I was talking to Mike and he said to give you a call. The kids are old enough to fend for themselves and we wanted to have a nice quiet breakfast somewhere. Why don't you join us?" She wasn't about to tell Maisy that she and Mike had decided to include Maisy from here on out on weekends. Anything to help their friend move on.

"I don't know. I haven't even showered. I was planning to shovel the walks."

"Oh Christ, you can do that later. Come with us. We'll pick you up."

Here was the perfect opportunity to quit feeling sorry for herself and start living again instead of huddling in the house every chance she had and getting more and more depressed. "Oh all right. Tell me where you're going and I'll meet you. I want to have my own car. I think afterward I'm going to head to the mall and do a bit of shopping. I haven't done that in a long time."

"Are you sure?"

"Yup," Maisy replied, a bit more resolute. "I need to buy a new jacket. I should be able to find something reasonably priced with all the after-holiday specials. Can you give me an hour?"

"Sure thing. I'll see you at Dougan's Diner at eleven. Sound good?"

"I'll meet you there." Maisy hung up the phone, actually looking forward to spending the day away from home. Today was day one of getting back on track. It was do or die.

* * * * *

Maisy took the last sip of coffee before sliding out of the booth. She did feel better. She had a good breakfast in her stomach and it was the first meal in a long time that didn't seem to lodge in her throat. Lizzy and Mike were always so much fun to be around. Old friends—you couldn't beat them.

But young friends can be just as wonderful...

Nope. She squared her shoulders. Maisy wasn't going to revisit the misery of the night before.

They left the restaurant and were met with blowing snow that whipped around their legs and snatched the breath from their lungs.

"Geez," Maisy whined as she tightened her coat about her. "Makes me want to head for home and burrow in where it's warm but I've got to get some shopping done."

Lizzy gave her a quick hug. "Well, we're heading to the mall too. We'll follow you and maybe have coffee later on. How does that sound?" She hopped from foot to foot to ward off the chill.

"Sounds good. Thanks so much for breakfast. Next time it's my treat."

"Watch the roads!"

"I will," Maisy hollered back as she turned and hurried across the parking lot while digging for her keys. She jumped into the front seat, thankful to be out of the weather. Stowing her purse beside her, she started the car but as her hand moved to the shifter, it froze.

The blood drained from her face as she stared through the windshield to the drug store across the street and to the man who stepped through the doorway onto the snowy sidewalk.

"Dean..." she breathed, drinking in the sight of his tall body, the wind whipping through his dark wavy hair. She hadn't seen him since the week of Thanksgiving and the sight of him immediately made her hand tremble and had her stomach doing somersaults.

He stopped outside the door and looked over his shoulder. Then he quickly grabbed the edge before it swung back into the woman exiting behind him. Taking her elbow, they hurried to his car parked on the street. Her youthful, slim body curled into him as he sheltered her from the freezing wind.

Maisy's fingers clutched the steering wheel as she watched Dean dig for his keys then help the blonde woman into the passenger side and all the while Maisy gasped for air to halt the nauseous bile that rose in her throat. Seeing him with another woman was like being kicked in the stomach.

She refused to cry even though she blinked back burning tears of mortification, unable to drag her eyes from his handsome face as he rounded the car and slipped in behind the wheel. Once inside, the woman said something and Dean's head fell back with a chuckle, an action that used to send warm shafts of loving heat through Maisy. His car pulled away from the curb and in a matter of seconds, he was gone.

Maisy stared numbly at the empty spot, blinking. She had tried so hard to forget him, thinking only that morning her life would improve because she was going to make it so. But seeing him, seeing his smile, brought everything back. The way his arms felt about her, the way she felt totally complete when he pulled from her body and nestled her head lovingly against his shoulder. All of it. It all came back with painful, glaring clarity.

A sob escaped as she slammed her fist against the seat. If anything, seeing Dean again had only reinforced the love she still carried in her heart.

The sound of a honking horn finally penetrated her agonized thoughts. Lizzy and Mike had driven closer and were waiting for her to back out.

Maisy slammed the car into reverse, backed out and drove onto the street, still gasping from the pain. Dean had moved on and she had pushed him in that direction. She should be happy, shouldn't she? No more wondering if the next phone call would be him pleading to see her. It was a fantasy she had thought about over and over. But he wouldn't call and she'd never feel his arms again. Why? Because she was older and

less attractive. No matter how much she missed him and cried about the mess that her life now was, it just was the way things were meant to be...wasn't it?

She automatically clicked on her blinker and turned the car onto the entrance ramp that led up to the freeway, swiping at the heavy tears of remorse, sobbing aloud in the quiet of her car.

Maisy never knew what hit her as the driver-side glass shattered and her car spun out of control.

* * * * *

Lizzy paced the sterile hallway, her blue gaze continually darting from Mike to the swinging doors that separated the intensive care unit from the normal hustle of activity in the hospital corridor. She drew in a ragged breath and once more seated herself beside her husband.

"Damn, I wish I didn't have to worry about Nick and Annie on the roads. They should have been here already."

Mike curled his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "I told them to drive slowly and take their time if they insisted on coming. They're her children, Lizzy, and we couldn't stop them."

"I just wish they would have waited until the storm was over." Her hand slipped through her short hair as her frightened gaze found the clock. It had been ten hours since the accident. Maisy was out of surgery but hadn't wakened yet. "Christ. I can't believe she just drove onto the freeway without even braking. How can you not see a semi?" A flash of Maisy's car spinning out of control and flipping over the guardrail seared her brain. How her friend had lived through the crash was nothing short of a miracle but it was still going to be a long night of praying and hoping that Maisy would still be alive come morning.

She took a deep breath, remembering the sheer dread and panic that had raced through her moments before the collision. Watching Maisy's car enter onto the freeway had been surreal as the semi bore down. Lizzy remembered screaming when she realized there was no way the semi could help but sideswipe the merging car.

She closed her eyes but immediately snapped them open to rid her mind of the memory of seeing glass shatter and the car roll end over end until it bounced against the guardrail and flipped over the embankment.

Bits and pieces of the early afternoon were now coming back to her. Cars slamming on their brakes, traffic piling up, people leaping over the smashed rail and racing to help. The ambulance with its screaming siren and flashing lights of the rescue squad as the jaws of life were used to get to the bleeding and unconscious woman inside.

Lizzy shuddered, knowing she would never forget those first moments of pure helplessness. She and Mike had followed the ambulance to the hospital, tried to get as much information as possible on Maisy's status then they had called Nick. At first

they'd begged him and Annie to wait before starting the six-hour drive home but the kids had refused to listen.

She saw Nick's grim features through the waiting room window before he even opened the door. He and Annie raced to them, their cheeks pale and fear building stronger in their eyes now that they had arrived.

A sobbing Annie threw herself into Lizzy's waiting arms as Mike shook Nick's hand.

"Thank god you got here in one piece."

Nick attempt to smile but came up short. "The roads were pretty bad but I promised I would take it easy and I did." His fearful gaze met Lizzy's. "Mom?"

"She's out of surgery, Nick. Come and sit down, Annie." She led the girl to a couch. "It's going to be okay," she stated as she kept her arm around Annie's quaking shoulders. "Your mom is in critical condition but the doctors said surgery went as well as could be expected. She's alive and that's what you need to hang on to."

"Can...can we see her?"

"I'm sure the nurses will let you in. Mike will go ask. You just sit here for a minute and collect yourselves. If you go in there and your mom happens to wake up, it won't do her any good to see either of you falling apart."

Mike came back a few minutes later. Both Annie and Nick shot up from where they sat. "They'll let you in for just a few minutes," he stated quietly.

They walked with Maisy's children to the door leading into the intensive care and nodded to them when the nurse approached. Annie clasped her brother's hand tightly and they followed the woman through the door and into the quiet of the unit.

They were led to Maisy's room. Nick immediately hugged Annie's shoulders with one arm when a strangled sob escaped her mouth.

The woman in the bed didn't even resemble their mother. Maisy's head was wrapped tightly in gauze. Except for the horribly bruised skin, her cheeks were an ashen white. Tubes were everywhere. The steady rhythm of monitors was the only noise.

"I...we didn't even ask what her injuries were," Nick uttered before meeting the sympathetic eyes of the nurse. "Is...is she going to make it?"

The nurse's hands were busy as she checked the various monitors. "She came through surgery like a champ. She's sustained quite a few injuries but we're all hopeful. She has a nasty gash on the back of her head and another on her right leg. The doctors repaired some badly damaged tendons. She's also sustained some broken ribs. The doctors removed her spleen." She watched them inch closer to the side of the bed and decided no more information was necessary. It was enough for them to digest everything they'd already heard. The night was going to be long however. If her patient lived.

"I'll leave you alone for a few minutes with your mother. Then you'll have to wait outside." She patted Nick's shoulder and left them.

Annie carefully placed her hand on Maisy's forearm, the only place that seemed to be free of needles, and swallowed down another sob. "She can't die," she whispered. Her tearful eyes turned to look up. "I'm so scared, Nicky. What will we do if something happens to her?"

"She's going to be okay. She just has to be."

* * * * *

Maisy floated on a soft cloud of white.

She's going to be okay. She just has to be...

Nicky? His voice floated around her. It was so good to hear it. Other voices came to her. Annie.

I love you, Mom... Please be okay... Please stay with us...

She loved them too. Stay with us? Of course she would. Nicky and Annie were the two most important people in her life. She would do anything to keep them safe and within the circle of her love forever. She had proved it, hadn't she? Did they know that she'd given up the one thing that would have made her life complete? Yes, yes they did. Annie loved her. Annie would never be angry with her again...

A handsome dark face materialized in her brain, coming out of the fog until Dean's twinkling eyes sparkled and his full mouth smiled. Then the smile drifted away...

I'm sorry. I loved you so much...

Slowly, he faded away until only the darkness surrounded her.

Chapter Thirteen

One week later, Dean had just sat down to watch some television when his phone rang. He got back up and mindlessly clicked through channels as he crossed the room.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Dean, this is Lizzy McDermid."

His heart thudded when he recognized the voice. "Lizzy? This is a surprise. How are you and Mike?"

"We're fine. Dean...I..."

Dean tensed at the faltering sound of her voice. "Can I help you with something?"

"I wanted to call you about Maisy."

A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He had a horrible premonition that not all was right.

"I'm just going to plow right in. I've been debating about calling you for a while. Maisy was in a car accident last week. At first it was touch and go."

He sank to a nearby chair, feeling as if the wind had been knocked out of him. Fear like he'd never known rendered him speechless.

"She had a rough time of it but she's doing all right now. I hope I'm not stepping out of bounds here and I'm sure Maisy would not appreciate me calling you, but I figured to hell with it. I know Maisy broke it off with you and I know why." Lizzy sighed deeply. "Why she let her kids run her life is beyond me. And I say that because I've watched her go through hell. She's been miserable and I'm not talking about the accident that almost killed her. She's not fooling anyone. She's never loved anyone like she loved you. I just know that the two of you should be together. I know she still loves you because I know my friend better than she knows herself. I'm hoping you still feel the same." There was a pause. "Do you?"

Dean shot off the chair. "Christ yes, Lizzy. I've been horribly miserable myself. I tried so many times but Maisy refused to see or talk to me after that last week of November. I didn't know what else to do but back off and give her time to fix things with Annie." He began to pace and get his thoughts in order. "Where is she?"

"St. Luke's. She's in a private room on the sixth floor. Dean, please go see her and please forgive her."

He gripped the phone. "Thank you, Lizzy. Of course I'll go see her. I'm leaving immediately."

"Dean? Before you hang up, I want you to know that the kids are home. They drove in the night of the accident. Do you want Mike and me to head for the hospital in case

you run into Annie? Even for moral support? That girl is just going to have to understand that her mother has her own life now."

Dean smiled. He couldn't help it. Maisy didn't realize what a great friend she really had in Lizzy. "Thanks for the offer but she's not going to scare me away again. Thank you for calling. Thank you for caring so much about Maisy."

"No problem."

Dean heard the smile in Lizzy's voice and had to grin himself. "I'm taking off right now. If I don't see you, I'll give you a call as soon as I can."

"Hey, Dean?"

"Yes?"

"Good luck. Tell Maisy to shut up if she turns into a smartass."

That drew an outright laugh. "Will do. Thanks again."

Three minutes later, he was out the door.

* * * * *

Dean forced himself to drive the speed limit the entire way. It was quite a trial. Thoughts of Maisy flew through his brain. The past and the present. He could easily handle anything she might dish out because he still loved Maisy with all his heart. Lizzy had asked him to forgive Maisy. For what? She had only done what she truly felt was right, despite the fact that she had loved him. Had loved him and still did. Thank god. A grin broke out across his face.

He reached St. Luke's, parked on the street and hurried through the huge glass doors. Racing by the gift shop, he saw something on a shelf and quickly detoured inside to purchase it. Tucking the item into his jacket pocket, he headed for the elevator. Just moments later, he marched down the white sterile hallway to the sixth-floor desk. Getting directions, he rounded a corner and ignored how his heart picked up a beat when he spied Nick and Annie standing outside Maisy's closed door.

They glanced up in unison. Nick's eyes glowed his welcome but Annie's face turned to stone. It hardened further when Dean stopped before them.

"What are you doing here?" she questioned. The slant of her eyebrows showed she was none too pleased to see her mother's ex-boyfriend.

"Lizzy called me."

"Well, she had no business doing that."

Dean gritted his teeth. Now was not the time to tell her what he thought. Quite frankly, he didn't care. He just needed to see Maisy to assure his troubled mind that she was going to be okay.

"Be quiet, Annie," Nick shot out.

He stepped forward but Dean held up his hand to stall any words he might say to his sister.

"Well, Annie, Lizzy did call me. And nothing you say will make me leave until I see your mother."

"I'll call security."

"Stop it, Annie," Nick admonished.

"I won't!" she flung at her brother. "He's just going to create trouble. Mom is done making a fool of herself."

Nick's thunderous glare deepened. "Dammit, Annie—"

"I can fight my own battles, Nick," Dean stated firmly as he met Annie's angry stare. "You can think what you want, Annie. Right now, I don't much care. I'm going to see your mother because she was hurt and because I still love her. And just so you know, I'm going to tell her that. And I'll keep telling her that until she believes me and until I hear her repeat it back."

A murderous glare appeared in Annie's dark eyes just before Nick took his sister by the arm. A firm smile curved his mouth when he met Dean's bewildered but angry stare. "I'm going to take Annie for supper, Dean. That should give you the time you need with Mom. The nurse is in with her at the moment but should be out shortly. Tell Mom we'll be back to say good night. Contrary to my sister's wishes, which I couldn't give a fuck less about, I hope you and my mom can fix things between you." Without another word, he hauled a surprised Annie toward the elevator.

Dean's hand scrubbed over his jaw. He took a deep breath of relief. One down and two to go. Regardless of how Annie felt, he wasn't leaving until he got Maisy to admit out loud that she still loved him.

He was leaning against the wall with his eyes shut when the nurse opened Maisy's door. She sent Dean a smile and continued on her way to the desk.

"This is it, buddy," he murmured to the empty hall. Squaring his shoulders, he stepped into the room and took in the sight of the woman he'd come to love so much. Though she sat propped against pillows and looking out the window, she looked fragile and pale.

He would never forget the surprise on her face when the click of the door shutting drew her attention to the other side of the room. He saw shock, happiness and then sadness like he'd never experienced before. He was going to erase that flash of sorrow if it was the last thing he ever did.

She said nothing, only stared warily.

"Hi, Maisy." He stepped closer. She sank into the pillows behind her. "When I heard about your accident, I had to come."

She shook her head as if snapping herself back to the present. "Thank you. As you can see, I'm fine. A bit banged up, but I'll be okay."

He continued to advance. She pulled the edge of the blanket closer to her chin.

"Thank god for that. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you." Never hesitating, he withdrew a small bag from his pocket and set it gently in her palm.

"Sorry it's not wrapped. When Lizzy called I bolted out of the house. Go ahead. Open it."

Confused, her brown eyes rounded against the backdrop of her pale features but she silently obeyed. The quietest of gasps left her and her fingers shook as she lifted out a delicate porcelain fairy. Maisy battled the tears threatening to escape and managed to murmur, "It's beautiful."

"I couldn't believe it when I raced by the gift shop downstairs. There it was, just sitting on a shelf. Hopefully it can replace the one that was broken." That's all he dared say yet hoped she realized the significance of his gift. She'd told him one night about how her ex had purposely broken a favorite of hers.

Dean pulled a chair close, sat in it and took her limp hand in his.

"Dean..."

"Shut up, Maisy." When her mouth sagged open, he chuckled. "Lizzy said I could tell you that."

"She called you?"

Dean spied the sudden softness in her eyes. He gently stroked her bruised knuckles, kissed them softly and then met Maisy's wondering gaze once more. "That she did. You've got a great friend there. She asked me a question. She wanted to know if I still loved you. I told her yes." He watched her eyes fill with unshed tears once more. His heart pounded crazily. "She wanted to know if I could forgive you for sending me away. I'm still trying to figure that one out. There was never anything to forgive. You did what you thought was right." His smile cut into his swarthy cheeks. "Which brings me to the reason I'm here. I'm going to do what *I* think is right and that is to keep badgering you until I hear you say 'I love you' out loud. I'm not going to go away this time. There is nothing and no one who can make me leave until I hear those words from your mouth. Not Nick or Annie. And most certainly not you. I know you still love me, Maisy. I can see it in your eyes. I can feel it when I'm near you. Twice, I almost lost you. It's not going to happen again. Just say the words. Please."

"I wasn't supposed to love you anymore," Maisy sobbed out as she squeezed his hand. "There're just too many things—"

"There's nothing, Maisy. Can't you see that? There's nothing except how we feel about one another. Together we can get through anything. Say it, Maisy. Please."

She was in his arms before understanding how she got there.

"Oh god, Dean," she cried against his chest. The warmth of his arms was like coming home. "I do love you. I thought I'd lost you. The day of the accident?" She leaned back and saw tears shining in his eyes as she mopped her cheeks with the back of her hand. "I had finally decided that I was going to forget you, that you and I could never happen. I saw you with someone else. I knew it was over then."

Dean's brow furrowed as he cupped her soft cheek. "Someone else? There's never been anyone else."

"It was the day it stormed. I had gone out for breakfast with Lizzy and Mike. I saw you coming out of a store with a blonde woman." Maisy sniffed and wondered where the jealousy she'd felt had disappeared to. She didn't care because Dean was close now and that was all that mattered.

His mind raced. Another woman? He'd never even looked at another woman since Maisy had wiggled into his heart. Then it hit him.

"Was it a Sunday?"

She nodded with glistening eyes.

"Damn, Maisy," he said as he pulled her back into his arms and tucked his chin against the soft cloud of her hair. "You saw me with my cousin. She had flown in that morning for a job interview. I picked her up at the airport. We'd stopped at the drug store because she needed a few items. To think that you..." His words trailed off as his thumb brushed away a tear on her cheek. He dreaded the answer to his next question. "When did you have the accident?"

"Stop it, Dean. I can see it in your eyes. You are not the reason I had the accident. I was being stupid and not paying attention to my driving. It was my fault."

His chin dropped as he struggled with the realization that Maisy hadn't paid attention because she'd thought he'd found someone else. "God, Maisy. I'm so sorry."

She cupped his jaw with both hands and made him meet her firm stare. "It wasn't your fault. I never want to hear you say that again." Her gaze flowed over the line of his straight nose and the deep hazel of his sexy eyes. He was so ruggedly handsome and she knew she'd never loved a man like she did Dean. She couldn't fight it ever again because that deep emotion would never leave her. She would love him forever.

She met Dean's tender kiss, her heart pounding and hands trembling.

* * * * *

There was a knock on the door as it opened.

"May we come in?"

Nick stood in the open doorway. Annie was behind him, staring intently at the couple who held hands, sharing intimate whispers.

Maisy's gaze shot to her daughter. "Of course. Nothing would make me happier." She waited until the kids approached, noting how Annie looked everywhere but at Dean. Before she said anything, Maisy squeezed his fingers then gave her children her full attention. "I want you both to know how much I love you. Nothing or no one will ever change that." She peeked at the man who smiled back at her, a smile full of love and encouragement. "I love Dean. For some wonderful reason, he also loves me. Neither of us knows where the future will take us but we refuse to be apart any longer." She let go of Dean's hand and held out her arms. "Come here, Annie."

Her daughter shuffled closer, her head hanging as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Maisy gently played with the long strands of silky hair resting against Annie's shoulder. "I know this is hard for you, honey. It was for me. I fought my feelings of love. I thought I was doing what was right by sending Dean away. I did that for you." Maisy sighed then smiled when Annie finally met her gaze. "Now I have to do something for me. You and your brother have your entire futures in front of you. You'll find someone to love and you'll both live your own lives. I'm not fortunate enough to have a whole world in front of me but I do have the chance to take what I have left and share it with someone who loves me deeply. You gave your father the chance to be happy. Can't you at least try to do that for me?" Maisy waited for a response, stopping just short of telling Annie it didn't matter how she felt. Maisy was not about to give up a chance at love again, no matter how her daughter felt.

Annie's shoulders slumped. She took a deep breath as her brooding eyes darted between her mother and Dean. "When Daddy left, I was so angry."

Maisy continued to play with her daughter's hair, wondering where the conversation would lead. "I know you were. I did everything I could to make things better for you."

"I know, Mom. I was a real jerk, wasn't I?"

Maisy laughed softly. "I wouldn't put it that way, honey. You were so young when the rug was pulled out from under you. Your father had to do what he had to do. He wasn't happy with me anymore. That was never your fault."

Annie shrugged. "Nicky and I talked during supper." Her head came up slowly. "It was never your fault either. I forgot about that until Nick made me remember. Daddy was never there for us, Mom. Never. Not even when we were little. I remember waiting for him to come through the auditorium doors but he rarely ever showed. But you?" She smiled. "You were always right up front no matter what, always waving your encouragement. When we were sick, it was you who took care of us. It was your hand on our foreheads checking for fever. It was you sitting beside our bed at night when we woke up. Always you and never Daddy. You were always the only parent we could ever depend on." Her eyes flashed quickly to Dean and back. "I know I sounded happy when you told us about meeting someone. But I wasn't. Not really. All I could think about was the one guiding force that I'd always depended upon might disappear. Dean being younger than you was the one thing I latched onto, thinking it was the only thing to keep you the way you always were. And I know it was stupid of me to have called Daddy that night to come and get me. Daddy never cared about any of us. Him coming to pick me up was just another way to be mean to you. That's all it was. He couldn't have cared less that I was with him for those few days at Thanksgiving."

Maisy cupped her daughter's cheek and struggled with her tears. "Oh honey. I'm sorry."

Annie threw her arms around Maisy's neck and hugged her tightly. "I'm sorry, Mom. Nick made me see how stupid I've been. He made me realize that you'd always be here for us, no matter what."

Her brother chuckled. "I also told her I'd kick her ass if she screwed up your chance to be happy and not be alone anymore."

"Shut up, Nicky." Annie's muffled voice was loud enough for everyone to hear.

Maisy's winked at her son over Annie's shoulder.

Dean cleared his throat, infinitely happy that Annie realized what a wonderful mother she had in Maisy. "I really do love your mother, Annie, whether you believe that or not. I want us to get to know one another. Do you think we can do that?" Dean waited on the edge of his seat, hoping she'd at least give him a chance for Maisy's sake.

Annie sat up and wiped her face. "I'm sorry, Dean. Yes, we can try. Mom? I'm going to drop my classes this semester and come home. You can't stay in that house by yourself when you're still recuperating. Maybe Dean and I can become friends."

Maisy darted a glance at Dean before returning it to her daughter. "You'll do no such thing. Those classes are too important. I just need help for a few weeks until I can get my bearings. Dean wouldn't take no for an answer. He's going to take some vacation time and care for me. I'm not picking him over you. I just think it's a good idea. You won't have to get behind in your studies. And honey...I've missed Dean so much that nothing would please me more than to see him every day. Is...is that all right with you?"

Annie smiled, the first real one that Dean had ever seen appear on her face. At the moment, she looked more like Maisy than she ever had.

"Yes, it's okay. Dean? I'd like to apologize to you. I'm sorry I acted the way I did."

"Apology accepted." Dean reached out a hand and waited for Annie to take it. Once she did, he grinned widely. "Thanks, Annie."

* * * * *

Dean pulled into Maisy's driveway and parked behind Lizzy's car. The McDermids had said they'd be waiting when the two arrived from the hospital.

It had been two weeks since the accident but Maisy felt as if she'd been gone from her home for a lifetime.

"I can't believe this day finally came," she sighed with a huge smile. "It's so good to think I'll be in my own bed tonight."

Dean squeezed her fingers. "How are you feeling after being bounced around in the car?"

"I feel wonderful. Tired, but wonderful. Oh, there's Lizzy!"

She watched Lizzy and Mike step off the front porch and hurry across the yard. Dean hopped out and pulled Maisy's crutches from the trunk. Instead of setting the crutches close to Maisy's open door, he let the McDermids take them into the house as he leaned into the passenger side. "To hell with those things. I want you in my arms. It's been far too long."

"Don't be silly, Dean," Maisy laughed. "I'm perfectly capable of getting into the house on my own."

"Don't care," he chuckled. "Now hang on to my neck."

Carefully he slid one arm beneath her legs and the other around her waist. Maisy squealed with joy.

"You're going to break your back."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Just let me know if your leg hurts. I'll be as careful as I can." He easily lifted her from the seat and tucked her close. "Doing okay?"

Her fingers lovingly drifted down his firm jaw. "I've never been better. My knight in shining armor."

"Yeah, sure. As long as I don't trip and dump you on the ground." He tilted his head and stole a kiss. "I love you, Maisy Collins. Welcome home." He headed for the house, loving how she nestled her head against his shoulder and sighed happily.

* * * * *

"You look exhausted."

Maisy grinned sleepily from the couch. "No, just a nice tired. It's so good to be home. Having you here is the icing on the cake. I can stay up for a while yet."

Dean rose from an adjoining chair with a gleam in his eye. "No you can't. I'm tucking you in whether you want it or not." Once again, he scooped her into his arms and turned for her bedroom.

"Really, Dean. I can stay up. There's no nurse here to tell you to leave the room while they check my vitals, no one to tell you that I had therapy and that you need to leave. Having you all to myself today has been wonderful. You've been wonderful with cooking dinner and taking care of me like I was an invalid."

"You are an invalid."

She smacked his shoulder playfully. "Shut up! I just know how lonesome I'm going to be when you leave."

"What are you talking about?"

She nuzzled her nose against his cheek as he carried her down the hallway. "Just what I said. Morning won't come fast enough. What time are you planning to come back?"

He sat her carefully on the edge of the bed and placed a pillow beneath the soft protective cast wrapped around her leg. "Who says I'm leaving? I'm in this for the long haul, Maisy. I don't plan to go anywhere, except around to the other side of the bed."

"You're staying? Really?"

"Of course I am. I thought that was understood."

"No, Dean, it *wasn't* understood," she said as a smile of dawning understanding split her face. "I figured you'd be here every day. You never said anything about moving in for a couple of weeks."

He placed a hand on either side of her hips and dipped his head close. "Do you want me to leave?" he asked huskily. Before she could utter another word, he kissed her a bit more passionately than he had planned. He couldn't help himself. Finally pulling back, he rubbed his nose against hers. "Change your mind yet?"

"Absolutely not," she whispered back. "I would have gotten myself out of that hospital a lot sooner if I had known what the reward was going to be. Thank you, Dean. I—" She yawned in his face. "Oh my god, I'm sorry! I tried to fight my weariness all evening because I didn't want you to leave. To think I could have been snoring in your ear already." Maisy giggled. She'd never been happier in her life.

"Okay, Ms. Collins. I'm going to run out to the car and get my bag. How about I get your nightgown, help you into the bathroom and then I'll pick you back up on my way to bed?"

Maisy belted a tired laugh. "Sounds good, even though I know I could easily make it. Could you help me slide my windpants off before you go?"

He cocked a brow and grinned evilly. "Need help with anything else?"

Despite the fact she was tired as hell, a becoming flush reddened her cheeks. She would love to have him strip her bare and make wild and crazy love to her. It had been so awfully long. She knew, however, that it would not happen tonight. "Just help me with my pants, Martini. You just wait until I'm healthy again. You'll be sorry then."

He kissed her, the warm caress sending a message of love. "I'll never be sorry. You just wait. If you think you're tired now..." He left the rest to her imagination as he removed the air cast and tugged at her pants carefully until he had them off.

Once Dean deposited her in the bathroom and left a bit hesitantly as she leaned against the vanity, Maisy clicked the lock. Thank god she'd showered at the hospital before leaving that morning. The next few weeks would prove interesting with him around. But if Dean thought he'd be giving her baths, he had another think coming. She used the facilities, changed into her nightgown and quickly brushed her teeth when she heard him walking about the bedroom. It was a very comforting sound to say the least. Maisy couldn't wait to climb into bed. She opened the door and instantly he was there to carry her to the bed.

Once he had her settled beneath the covers, he stripped to his shorts, shut off the light and rounded the mattress to climb in on the other side. "Are you okay?"

"Quit asking, Dean. I couldn't be any better than I am right now. Just hold me."

"Ah, Maisy, that's exactly what I was planning to do." He scooted down and welcomed her against his chest, assuring that the pillow supported her leg and she was as comfortable as possible. "Damn but it feels good to be here beside you."

Maisy's fingers brushed across his chest. "I was so stupid, Dean. I'm so sorry if I hurt you." She kissed his chest and sighed.

"We're all done with that, Maisy. No more apologies from either of us. We're here together and that's what counts. Are you sure you don't need a glass of water? Anything?"

"Well, now that you asked..." Her fingers followed the bulging length of his arm until she came to his hand. Taking it, she slowly guided it to the vee at her thighs then dragged her nightgown upward beneath its weight. "There *is* something that I want." She could only figure that her brazenness had come from too much time without him. She needed to feel his fingers deep inside and had easily assured it would happen when she'd tossed her panties into the bathroom hamper.

Dean rolled slightly to his side and studied her face in the shaft of light streaming through the window from the yard light outside. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you." Already though, his fingers played through the dusting of pubic hair covering her pussy.

"I'd be hurt if you said no. I love you, Dean. I want you even if this is the only way." She tugged his head until his lips touched hers.

When the kiss ended, his warm chuckle rumbled against her cheek. "I thought you were tired."

"I am, but I found something to keep me awake for a bit longer."

Nothing else needed to be said. Dean's finger slid to her clit, past it to gather moisture and then back. Maisy lifted one knee to spread her legs farther apart and closed her eyes as she felt his lips softly kissing her neck. Instantly, the remembered heat of his touch was back. As he slipped a finger inside her pussy, a small whimper feathered past his ear.

"Yes..." Her body trembled as he completely burrowed inside.

"You feel wonderful, Maisy. Hot and wet... Just like I remember. I can't wait until I can fuck you hard."

She grasped his shoulder and moved her hips with each stroke as he pleased her. Passion coiled in her belly as his caresses became harder with her urgent pleas.

"Two fingers...please!"

She instantly was filled tighter. Her clit swelled and her breath rasped out.

"Come for me, Maisy. Come hard..." Dean inserted a third finger. His seeking mouth found her lips, his tongue licked across her teeth until she opened wide. He breathed in her moans of ecstasy and buried his fingers as she shuddered around them, her orgasm going on and on until her uninjured leg sank limply to the mattress.

Dean continued to kiss her passionately, his cock hard with the sensual interlude. "Maisy..." he growled.

She knew what he needed. Her hand circled his erection as he rolled to his back. She kissed his chest as she pulled on his cock, long slow sweeps up his length until his shifting hips coaxed her to a faster tempo. Suddenly his hand clamped over hers and he helped her stroke him until the breath rattled in his chest and their hands became wet

with his release. Dean refused to let her fingers go even as he shrank in her clasp. He rose on his elbow and kissed her hard, murmuring words of love until the raging passion became tender caresses, nips of elicited pleasure that only the two could share.

"I love you, Maisy. Thank you."

"I love you too. I'm so glad you're here with me."

"Me too. I'll be right back. I'm gonna grab a towel. Will you be okay?"

She laughed gaily. "Of course I will. You're just going to the bathroom."

He was gone in a flash and back just as quickly. Using the dampened towel, he washed her hand then cuddled her close. Guiding her head to his shoulder, he wrapped a protective arm around her and sighed with contentment. "Sleep. If you need anything, just wake me up."

"All I need is you." Maisy smiled as her eyes fluttered shut.

Chapter Fourteen

The Caribbean wind tossed Maisy's hair into a riotous mess about her head as she lounged on the deck of the sail boat. They were anchored inside a beautiful cove just around the bend from where Cozumel's first of many tourist hotels lined the beach.

"Dean! Where are you?"

"I'm coming," his muffled voice answered from somewhere below.

His dark head finally appeared as he came topside. One hand carried a bottle of champagne and the other held two glasses. A lopsided smile greeted her when he plopped into the chair beside her. Pouring a glass for each, he handed one to Maisy and settled back to enjoy the blue sky. "Damn it's beautiful down here."

Maisy wrinkled her nose to ward off the ticking bubbles. "I can't tell you the times I booked trips like this and wondered if I'd ever get to experience the warm winds and crystal water. Look. There's not a cloud in the sky. Nothing. Just blue for as far as the eye can see." She turned sideways and eyed him from behind her sunglasses. "I'm pretty impressed with your sailing expertise. You know, I wasn't quite sure you could be trusted."

Dean chuckled. "I sail all the time on Lake Michigan. I just never had the opportunity to show off. I would have loved to take you out this past summer but I wasn't so sure bouncing on the waves would have helped you heal. You know, I waited months for you to heal after the accident. Then you go and have your tubes tied in the middle of summer. Christ, talk about putting a guy through misery."

She leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth. "Well, I'm all healed now and we're both benefiting from it. No more condoms. Problem solved." Maisy sighed happily. "I can't thank you enough for this trip. I wonder how cold it is in Chicago."

"It's January, Maisy. Hopefully everyone is freezing their asses off as we sit here and listen to the waves lap against the boat. I had this planned all summer you know. After everything we've been through, I figured we both deserved a vacation. Besides, Lizzy found us a helluva deal."

"Remind me to hug her when we get home. I can't believe she got this all set up without spilling the beans." She took another sip of her champagne and leaned against the back of her lounge. "Did you notice I'm getting a nice tan?" She held up one arm, slipped her sunglasses down her nose and admired the deep brown of her skin.

"You cheated," Dean replied. "A week in a tanning booth will do that. I on the other hand am naturally this color."

"You're Italian, you big dope. You're supposed to have dark skin."

Dean rose to an elbow. Maisy glanced at him, knowing that his eyes sparkled behind the glasses simply by the set of his jaw.

"So let me ask you this, Ms. Collins. Do you have tan lines? Or did you go naked in the tanning booth?"

It had become a joke now between them. Amazingly, she'd still managed to keep from being completely naked in front of him in the bright light of day. If they showered together, it was with a candle on the counter. Maisy knew it was stupid but too many years of being made fun of had cemented her feelings on it. And Dean, bless his heart, never pushed her.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she quipped.

"What?"

"Wouldn't you like to know if I have tan lines or not."

"I would. In fact, let's go skinny dipping so I can check you out."

"Oh shut up and quit joking."

"I'm not joking." He set down his glass, stood and dragged off his swimming trunks as he chuckled. "Let's go skinny dipping. Both of us. Right now, right here."

She sat up and took off her glasses to get a better view. He was absolutely beautiful. That's the only way she could describe his male physique. Broad shoulders, washboard abs, an ass that you could bounce a quarter off and a long cock that could send her body into exquisite shudders of delight.

"I'm going in, Maisy and you're going to be right behind me, naked as the day you were born." With that, he strolled to the edge, swung open the safety gate and leapt into the water, curling his body into a ball so when he hit, water splashed all over her.

Maisy laughed and leapt up to peer over the edge. "You shit! I'm all wet!"

"So take off your suit and join me!" he hollered up.

"You're crazy!"

"No I'm not. Come on, Maisy. I dare you!"

She placed her hands on her hips and stared down silently.

Dean tread water with a sexy grin in place just for her. "Maisy Collins is a wimp!" he hollered out across the deep blue sea.

"Shut up, Dean. You'll have every boater racing around the corner!"

"Maisy Collins is a wimp!" he challenged even louder before performing a somersault.

Maisy belted out a laugh with the view he presented as he twirled in the crystal blue water. "Like I said! You're crazy!"

"Yes I am," he answered with a sputter and a shake of the head. "I'm crazy about you, Maisy Collins! Crazy and wild in love with you! Do you love me?"

She leaned a bit farther over the edge when he swam closer to the boat. "Of course! I love you with all my heart!"

"Then marry me!"

Her laughter faded in the wind as she stared.

"Marry me, Maisy. Marry me because I love you and you love me. I want to be together forever."

Marry him? She had to admit that at times she'd entertained the idea, but they'd never talked about it. Never even hinted at it.

"Maisy?"

His voice shocked her back to the present.

"Marry me. Tell me you'll love me forever." He waited, treading water with hope in his beautiful eyes.

"Stay there!" she hollered.

"What? Where you going?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Just stay there! I'll be right back." She raced to the other side of the boat, closed her eyes with a deep breath and peeled off her suit. If she was going to accept a marriage proposal then dammit she was going to do it right. She chuckled as a flash of her brightly painted toes of a year and a half ago tripped through her mind. "Damn, I remember thinking the same thing on that first date," she muttered.

Tossing her one-piece suit to the deck was like finally finding true freedom from the past. She could do this. She had to. No way would Dean get the best of her. Crouching down, she crept back to the other side and peered over the edge. Dean still tread water.

"Where in the hell did you go?" he laughed when he saw her head poke into view.

"I was making my decision!"

"To marry me?"

"Yup."

"Well, are you going to give me an answer or wait until my balls shrivel up?"

"Wouldn't want that to happen!" She stood and moved to the edge, standing in the bright light of day, nude and loving the fact that she could do this. And it was all because of the man in the water. He'd freed her. He'd pulled the very best from her because he loved her so much.

"Good god you're naked!" His head disappeared beneath the water and he came up coughing and choking. "It's about goddamn time, Maisy. I love you! You're beautiful and you're all mine. That's if you'll give me a goddamn answer!"

Maisy let out a yodel, bunched her thighs and leapt from the edge with arms and legs flying before she hit the water. Her head bobbed up. She sputtered and swiped at the hair sticking to her face. Dean was beside her in a flash. One arm dragged her against his slick body as the other tread to keep them both floating. Maisy wrapped her arms around his neck, laughing and sputtering as she kissed him hard. "Yes! Yes I'll marry you. You're stuck with me now, Dean. No way out of it."

His howl of delight was much louder than hers as he dragged her to the ladder at the side of the boat.

"I thought we were going to skinny dip?" she laughed.

He planted a sloppy kiss on her mouth. "Fuck that. The woman I love just said yes! I have a better idea." He urged her up the ladder, getting his first real view of her luscious ass in the bright light of day and the sight hardened his cock to the point of aching. Well, Dean knew exactly how to fix that.

Once topside he yanked the cushions off the loungers and tossed them to the floor. He swept Maisy up a second later, kissed her and laid her on her back.

"Oooo, are we going to do it right here?"

"You're damn right. Right here in broad daylight." He slipped between her legs and placed a hand on either side of her body. "And I hope like hell someone comes along to watch. I want to see the look of jealousy on their faces. Every man in the Caribbean will hear about the beautiful, sexy and downright wanton broad on the boat with yellow sails. Yup, I'll be the envy of the islands."

"You're crazy."

"Yes I am. For you." His hand brushed over her stomach until his fingers spread open her pussy lips. He dipped inside to make sure she was ready. Funny thing. Maisy was always ready.

"Fuck me, Dean. Fuck me hard."

"That's what I was planning," he returned with a leer. His cock filled her, slipping in inch by hard inch until he was buried. Maisy wrapped her legs around his lean, tanned hips and clutched his shoulders as he began to move with long, hard strokes as the sun beat down on them. His tongue swirled inside her mouth. Words of love were murmured over and over until Maisy clawed at his shoulders, her hips surging with each wonderful thrust of passion.

God he loved everything about her.

Maisy ground her body upward, signaling an impending orgasm. Dean answered her with hard thrusts of his body until she moaned her delight against his mouth.

Epilogue

The warm tropical breeze in the slightly cooler temperature of evening was the perfect backdrop to what had been a perfect day. Maisy leaned on the railing and studied the shore and the palm trees that rustled in the warm wind. After making love on the deck, she'd insisted that they finish skinny dipping and they'd spent the afternoon paddling about and playing closer to shore. They'd raced to the white sand and once more had shared a passionate session of lovemaking with the water lapping at their feet. Once they'd swam back, it had been easier to slip on a robe and not even worry about her suit. That's how they'd shared their dinner of fruit and shrimp. Maisy in her robe and Dean with a pair of low-slung swimming trunks. They'd lit candles and it was as romantic as it could be.

Maisy shook her head in wonder. She would never have believed that she'd be so comfortable in her own skin. If it weren't for the kids back home, she'd never leave.

"What are you thinking about?" Dean asked as he slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her against his bare abdomen.

"How I never want to leave. Let's just say to hell with it and become beach bums."

"I'm in."

She laughed. "You would be."

"I'm serious. If you want to stay, I'll figure out a way for us to do it. Anything to keep you happy."

She turned in his arms. "It doesn't matter where we are. I'd be happy as long as we were together." She sighed blissfully. "I can't wait to tell the kids that we're getting married."

"Me either. Who would have thought that we could do it without shuddering in fear?"

She leaned her head against his chest with a snort then became more serious. "Those first few months together were both wonderful and horrible at the same time. I'm so glad they've come to love you like I do. I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

"Not quite. There're still a few surprises. Come with me." He took her hand and led her back to the small dinner table set up at the top of the stairs. "Close your eyes."

"So you can put something in my robe? I don't think so."

"Oh I'll put something in your robe all right. Me, in fact. But that's later. Now close your eyes."

She rolled them first then did as he asked. "Now what?"

"Keep them closed."

She listened, trying to figure out what he was up to.

He took her hand.

"Now open them."

Her lids fluttered open and her gaze was immediately drawn to the ring he was ready to slip over her knuckle. "I didn't dare give it to you in the water. Hadn't planned to ask you until tonight but you taking your suit off and leaping into the water was well worth a change of plans."

"Dean..."

He slipped the ring on. It was a perfect fit.

"Will you marry me?"

She blinked back tears. "I think you already asked me."

"So I'm asking again."

"Yes. Yes I'll marry you because I could never love anyone the way I do you." She reached up and hugged him tightly. "I've never been so happy."

"Me either, Maisy. It's perfect, isn't it? Thank god for leaking pipes. I've got one more surprise before I peek under your robe."

Her eyes sparkled as she watched him pull out a cassette of all things. "What is that?"

"I checked before we flew down. The boat didn't have a CD player, but it's got a cassette player."

"I know. We've been listening to music the entire time."

"But we haven't listened to *the* music. Hang on." He inserted the tape and hit the button.

Maisy waited to see what would happen as Dean turned and held out his arms. "Your dance, madam. The one you always wished for."

She burst out laughing and almost jumped into them when Dean Martin's husky voice echoed across the dark water and into the night.

Dean spun her about just as she heard, "That's amore..."

About the Author

Picture Ruby Storm with her hair on fire! Yup, that's her every morning when she bounds out of bed and heads for her home office. Ruby thanks her lucky stars that she's a full-time writer and a part-time matchstick. Although, there is a hint of a bulldog somewhere in there, too. Once she sticks her teeth into something, there's no turning back until it works.

Ruby loves to write, plain and simple. So much so that she took a leap of faith in herself and quit her 'professional' job, stuck her butt in front of a computer, and finally discovered what brings her true happiness. Her Romantica® stories for Ellora's Cave spans many genres: Contemporary, Futuristic, Fantasy, Paranormal, Time Travel and Historical. Be sure to check out her sweet historical romance series at Ellora's Cave's sister site, Cerridwen Press. All of Ruby's titles have received top awards for excellence in writing.

Some might think that the life of a writer is glamorous and enviable. This is what Ruby has to say about that: "Glamorous? Think of me in sweats and an old t-shirt just beneath that flaming head of mine, typing with one hand and beating out the fire with the other. Envious? Most times my 'new' job consists of long hours of dedication and damn hard work, cramping leg muscles from sitting too long, and a backside that for some reason is widening by the week. But I wouldn't change my life for the world!"

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

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