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# CHALLENGING CARTER

*Kate Davies*

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# Challenging Carter

*Kate Davies*

## Dedication

For Lucy Monroe—the best mentor, supporter, critique partner, taskmaster, and cheerleader a girl could have. I'm so lucky to call you my friend.

You said this one would be your favorite. I hope it is.

## Chapter One

“You have *got* to be kidding me.”

Carter looked up and smiled. “And good morning to you too, sunshine.”

Dani narrowed her gaze at him, jaw set. “Don’t try to sweet-talk me, you spendthrift.”

Ah, so that was the issue *du jour*. Carter leaned back in his ergonomic chair, fingers laced behind his head. He kicked one foot onto the desktop. “Spendthrift. I can never remember—does that mean stingy?”

“You know damn well what it means.” She slapped a computer printout on the desk next to his foot. “Reckless with money. Extravagant. Wasteful.”

“Hey, now.” Carter shifted his sports-sandal-clad foot slightly to the left. “Watch the prototype.”

Her brow wrinkled in confusion for just a minute before she glanced down at the sandal and rolled her eyes. “New product?”

He nodded, lifting his foot off the desk. He tilted it to the right and back again. “For the spring line. This new closure we’ve developed is going to knock Velcro on its ass.”

“If you say so.” She looked dubious, which was pretty much her daily facial expression. Then she scowled again. “And don’t try to distract me.”

“Ah, but it’s such a lovely sandal,” he crooned, waving his foot back and forth, back and forth, in a soothing motion. “You’re getting veeeerrry sleepy...when you wake from this trance, you will no longer be concerned with the bottom line...”

Dani pinched her lips together. Carter could tell she was trying hard not to laugh.

“So tell me, oh Mistress of the Spreadsheet.” He removed his foot from the desk and rolled his chair in close enough to prop his elbows on the desktop. “What evil use of money is so offending your delicate sensibilities this fine morning?”

She leaned in and pointed at the paper in front of him. “A trip to Hawaii?”

Ah. The e-mail. Carter shrugged one shoulder. “Some of the best surfing around,” he explained. “It should be a good incentive, don’t you think?”

“Incentive? A weeklong, all expenses paid, luxury resort trip to Hawaii?” Her voice rose before she caught herself and lowered it again with a glance to the office door. “Do you know how much that’ll cost?”

He patted her hand and stood. “Yes, I do. I checked rates online before setting it up.”

“So it’s a done deal.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Really, Carter, you should run these things by me first.”

“Always better to ask forgiveness rather than permission.” He rounded the desk to stand in front of her. Then he tilted his head down and batted his eyelashes at her. “Forgive me?”

With a groan, she dropped her head. “Why do I keep this job?”

“Because I’m so darn cute.” He lifted her chin and tapped it with a mock-punch. “And I let you abuse me financially.”

“It’s called a budget.” She drew the word out like she was talking to a five year old. “Bud-get. I’m your senior financial analyst. Paying attention to the financial bottom line is what I do. Somebody has to.”

“Poor, misunderstood numbers-cruncher,” he said, one hand flung dramatically over his forehead like a character in a silent movie. “A lone voice crying out in the wilderness.”

“Oh, stop it.” A thread of laughter laced the muttered comment.

“Trapped forever in a world with people who like to spend money...”

“Okay, Mister Spend-It-All, you might as well explain the rest of the message to me.”

“What, about the Wellness Challenge?” He grinned and sat on the desk, feet swinging. “It’s gonna totally shake up the culture around here.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of.” She straightened the jacket of her boring-as-oatmeal suit. He’d been trying to get her to adopt the casual-Friday look the rest of the staff wore at Outdoor Sports Equipment, but so far had run into a brick wall there, too. Something about making an impression on the people outside the company that she dealt with on a regular basis.

As if OSE’s very healthy financial status didn’t manage that for her.

He tucked his hands into the deep pockets of his khaki beachcomber pants. “I had this brainstorm,” he said over her groan. “We’ve got a corporate membership in the fitness center downstairs—”

She held up her hand. “Don’t remind me. I warned you it would be a ridiculous expense.”

“Nothing ridiculous about it.” He ticked off the benefits on his fingers. “Increased morale, reduced absenteeism, improved job performance. Offering membership as part of the benefits package is win-win.”

“Except right now nobody’s using it.” She tugged her suit jacket closed.

“Yeah, well, that’s what the Wellness Challenge is all about,” he said. “I really want people to get the most out of the health center. I’ve got some ideas about new directions we can go, and they’re tied to health clubs. What better way to get some input from staff, encourage healthy choices, and build a more productive team?”

“You’re losing me,” she warned, eyes narrowing.

“It’s a point system.” He rubbed his hands together. “We’ll start with a work-up from a trainer, get a baseline for blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, body composition. That kind of thing. For the next ten weeks, you get points for using the health club, working out with a trainer, participating in group fitness classes. At the end of the ten week session, you get another work-up, and earn points for reductions in blood

pressure and cholesterol, as well as for improving your muscle to fat ratio. The top point-earner gets the trip to Hawaii.”

“What if someone chooses not to participate?”

“That’s their prerogative,” he said mildly. “But I don’t expect many people to turn down a chance to win a trip to Hawaii.”

“Having to get weighed in for a work-related activity? No, thanks.”

“Oh, come on,” he wheedled. “Your personal trainer is like your doctor. Your lawyer. Your priest. No one sees those numbers except the two of you. All anyone else ever knows is how many points you earned, period.”

“I’m sure you’ll get a good response from the staff.” She picked up the e-mail printout and tucked it in her briefcase. “Count me out, though.”

“Sorry.”

She blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

“Your participation is non-negotiable.”

“You just said employees could choose not to participate.”

He shrugged. “You’re different.”

“Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You are a lawsuit waiting to happen, aren’t you?”

Carter snorted. “You’re as likely to sue me as you are to join in the Polar Bear swim next New Year’s.”

“Hey, it could happen.” She looked offended. “And the Polar Bear swim? Jump in Puget Sound on January first? You’d have to be nuts.”

“It’s invigorating.”

“It’s insanity,” she tossed back. “But I already knew that about you.”

“You know me better than anyone else here.” He nudged her with his elbow. “Come on, Dani, you’ve been with me since the beginning. You’ve never backed down from supporting a new endeavor, even when you thought I was crazy. This Challenge is important to me. Important to where I see the company going in the next few years. I could really use your support.”



She grimaced, but he knew he had her. That I-can't-say-no-dammit look was just way too familiar.

"Great!" He grabbed a brochure from his desk and slapped it into the palm of her hand before she could change her mind. "All the group fitness classes are listed on the form inside the front cover. Just sign up for one of them and turn it in. You've already got a membership, even if you haven't used it yet. Make sure you sign in before each class to get the attendance points. And you'll be meeting with Heidi on Wednesday at six."

"Heidi?"

That wrinkle between her eyebrows was too damn cute. "Your trainer."

Dani let out a low groan. "Somebody kill me now."

Carter laughed. "Hey, you never know. You might end up surprising yourself and winning that trip to Hawaii."

"Damn straight," she grumbled as she headed for the door, the flyer clutched in her hand in a death-grip. "After putting up with this nonsense for the next ten weeks, a vacation in paradise will be the least I deserve."

\* \* \*

Dani closed her office door, leaned back against it and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Nope, the Carter-induced migraine was still there.

Sighing, she walked over to her desk and dropped into the chair. What the hell had she done?

She snorted and flipped through the paperwork Carter had shoved into her hands. She'd done what she always did—given in.

The man could wheedle sequins off a supermodel. And, judging by his dating habits since he'd hit the big time with OSE, Inc., frequently did.

She shoved a hand through her unruly brown curls and blew out a frustrated breath. Now she was stuck doing this fitness challenge for the next ten weeks, all because of Carter.

No, that wasn't quite true. She was doing it because she was a total wuss.

One wistful look from those sexy chocolate-brown eyes, and the word "no" completely disappeared from her vocabulary.

Being in love with your boss sucked.

She hadn't always been in love with her boss. She'd been in love with her best friend first.

Unfortunately, they were one and the same.

She and Carter had been best pals through college, and when he invited her to help him start up a new business after graduation, she'd jumped at the chance to work with him. It was an opportunity to spend every workday with him, to keep their friendship going.

They were still friends, yes, but he was also her supervisor. The one time she'd been impulsive, and she ended up in a situation that made it *more* complicated for their friendship to become a romance.

Not that he'd ever thought of her that way, of course.

Dani started to crumple up the brochures for the health club. Just because he wanted her to do the Challenge didn't mean she had to do it, right?

But even as she thought it, she knew she'd end up participating. Carter could be so convincing, so enthusiastic about everything. And she had to admit, the thought of a trip to Hawaii was tempting.

More tempting if Carter would come along for the ride.

He would if she asked, she knew that much. He was always willing to help out a friend.

The sad thing was, that was all they were.

Friends.

He'd be happy to go to Hawaii with her. And then he'd take the couch, telling her that she deserved the big, comfy, king-sized bed, since she'd won.

As if knowing the man of her dreams was on the other side of the closed bedroom door, completely oblivious, wouldn't be a major loss, instead.

Smoothing out the papers, she started to fill in the blanks. Oh, well. If by some amazing quirk of fate she ended up winning the Challenge, at least she'd look better in a bikini by then. Squinting at the grid listing for the group fitness programs, she tried to decipher the acronyms for the various classes. PLTS? WTRARBC? Her finger stilled above one that looked vaguely familiar. STRPARBCS. Wait, wasn't that step aerobics?

She was probably coordinated enough for that.

Checking her Palm Pilot to make sure the time worked with her schedule, she checked off the aerobics class and signed the forms.

Then she walked out into the main office and put them in the inter-building mailbox before she lost her nerve.

\* \* \*

Her door was closed.

And Dani, dammit, was on the other side.

He could tell by the tapping sounds filtering through the door and the light visible under the frame. The woman never left a room without turning off the light, sometimes even when someone else was still in said room.

Okay, that only ever happened to him. She had no respect for his position and authority in the company.

Not that he'd have it any other way.

Smiling, he raised his hand to knock, when a loud beeping sounded from the other side of the door, followed by a crash and some creative swearing.

He didn't bother with the knock, just opened the door and walked in. He looked around, puzzled.

She was nowhere in sight.

"Dani?"

Another thud, this time from—under her desk? Carter crossed the room just in time to watch Dani extract herself from the tiny space between her desk and her chair.

"Should I ask?" He leaned down and held out a hand, which she took with a decided lack of grace.

"Alarm startled me," she muttered. Dropping her cell phone on the desktop, she added, "Guess I was a little too caught up in my paperwork."

Carter resisted the urge to laugh. "Caught up in her paperwork" was a daily occurrence for Dani.

"You ready to go?"

Dani looked at him, eyes narrowed. "Why do you think I'm going anywhere?"

"Your alarm was a clue."

"But you already know where I'm going, don't you?"

"Yep." He reached down and grabbed her athletic bag, looping the strap over his shoulder. "Your trainer appointment."

Dani hooked her finger through the strap of the bag and pulled it away from him. "I don't need a personal escort, thank you very much."

"Oh, come on." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the door. "I'm heading that direction anyway. We can walk together."

She ducked out from under his arm when they reached the door. "Go away, Carter."

"Not a chance."

She headed toward the elevator. "And why, exactly, do you have to go down to the health club?"

"No reason." He followed her down the hall. "I needed a break."

Dani pushed the down button at the elevator bank with a little more force than necessary. "You *do* think I need an escort."

"The thought did cross my mind that you'd get wrapped up in work, like usual, and miss your appointment."

"And if I did, so what? Why is this so important to you?"

Carter scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I worry about you sometimes, Dani. All work and no play..."

"If you tell me I'm dull, I'll force-feed you my gym bag."

"Of course you're not dull."

"Gee, thanks." She shook her head.

The doors opened and Carter stepped back to let Dani out, glad for the interruption. Man, she was touchy today.

"So what class did you sign up for?"

"Step aerobics." She stopped at the glass doors to the health club, squaring her shoulders. "It's right after my meeting with Heidi."

"You'll do fine." He reached past her to open the door. "I bet you'll be loving this before the end of the week."

She flashed him a weak smile. "Hope so."

Carter stopped at the front desk to show her where to sign in. Then he pointed across the room. "There's Heidi," he said. "You're good to go."

"Okay. See ya."

He grinned. "I can meet you here after your class."

"No."

"Really, it's no problem."

"Go away, Carter."

"I could even hang out *in* your class, if you'd like."

In response, she placed her hands on his shoulder blades and pushed, steering him toward the door. "Goodbye, Carter."

He was still laughing as the door closed behind him.

\* \* \*

The door to the exercise room stood partly open, and the sound of conversation spilled out into the hallway. Double-checking her printout from the front desk, Dani walked inside.

The space was larger than she'd expected, with a gleaming wood floor and a row of floor-to-ceiling mirrors along the far wall. Women stood around in clusters of two and three, some stretching, some just talking with friends. Dani faltered in the doorway, suddenly wishing she were anywhere but here.

"You new?" A perky blonde bounced over, a big smile on her face. "Come on, I'll help get you settled." She started leading Dani toward the front of the room, her ponytail swinging with each step. "You need to meet Jana, our instructor. She's the best."

Dani trailed in the woman's wake, glancing around as she crossed the room. Other class members looked over as she passed. Jana was fiddling with the stereo system as they approached.

"I'm Brenda, by the way." The blonde tugged Dani forward by her elbow. "Hey, Jana, you've got a new victim."

"Go away before you send her screaming from the room," Jana deadpanned. Turning to Dani, she said, "It's really not always a madhouse in here."

"Yes it is," stage-whispered Brenda, before scampering away with a laugh.

Dani handed Jana her paperwork. "I'm, uh, doing this for the OSE challenge."

"Good for you! Love to see people trying new things." Jana scanned the computer printout. "Looks pretty standard. Just bring your form with you each time and I'll sign off at the end of class."

"Thanks." Dani looked around. "Do I need anything else or..."

Jana shook her head. "Nope, just make sure you wear something comfortable and easy to remove. This class is all about your comfort level, so only go as far as you want to. No pressure. And if you have any questions, just let me know." She glanced up at the wall clock. "Oops,

gotta start. Why don't you find an open space and follow along. Don't worry if you don't get every move down right away. You'll get there." With a smile, she turned away.

As Jana clapped her hands for attention, Dani looked around the room. Brenda was in the left hand corner, waving.

*I've got a spot*, she mouthed, gesturing at the open space next to her.

Brenda was stretching her arms above her head as Dani approached. "We always start with some warm-ups," she said. "You might not think of injuries in a class like this, but they do happen if you aren't careful."

"Mm-hmm." Dani winced as she tried to touch her toes, her fingertips barely brushing the tops of her athletic shoes.

Jana had finally gotten the stereo system working, and a sensual, beat-driven song filled the room. Standing in front of the mirrored wall, she began rolling her head from side to side. "Stretch those muscles," she called over the music. "You want to be enticing, not injured."

*Enticing?*

Dani tilted her head down, then rolled it to the left, grimacing as her neck popped with the motion.

"Ooh, sounds tight," Brenda said. She stretched an arm over her head, bending at the waist. "Don't worry, you'll limber up in no time."

Dani nodded as she twisted and bent and stretched, trying to keep up. If she was this far behind during warm-ups, how was she ever going to manage the step routine?

"Everyone to the floor," Jana called, and Dani joined the rest of the class in scrambling to find a spot on the polished wood boards. As she reached toward her toes, feeling the stretch throughout her body, she glanced around.

Where *were* the steps, anyway? It's not like they'd need them during the warm-up, but except for a box of free weights in the back of the class, the space was empty of equipment.

Something didn't add up.

It was a popular class, if the full room was any indication. The group was all female, from tight-bodied twentysomethings to one woman who looked old enough to be Dani's grandmother.

"Okay, now, I want you to roll slowly back up, one vertebra at a time, until you are in a seated, upright position." Jana, stretching forward between her widespread legs, demonstrated the slow position change. "And as you move, slide one hand up your leg, over your hip, across your torso, ending with it in your hair. Come on, be sexy, ladies!"

Dani blinked in surprise. Sexy? In an aerobics class? She glanced furtively around, startled to see her classmates following the instructions with enthusiasm.

"Now lean back on your elbows and bring your legs together. That's it, perfect!" Jana stood and began to circulate around the room, helping the women get into position. "You guys are totally ready for a floor routine."

She struck a pose, pulling her shoulders back. "Here, thrust your breasts out. You're hot, you're ready, you're giving him the biggest boner of his life!"

*Oh, my God.* Dani, who had just managed to struggle into position, sat upright. She did *not* just hear that.

Did she?

A movement to her right caught her eye and she turned, jumping a little when she saw her instructor right next to her.

Jana crouched down, a patient smile on her lips. "Everything okay? I know it can be a bit overwhelming the first day."

"I, uh..." Dani wished she didn't blush quite so easily. "I guess it's not quite what I expected."

Jana nodded sympathetically. "Getting used to being sensual in front of other people can be a bit of a challenge."

Sensual? *What?* "Well, I mean, I just thought it'd be more aerobic."

"This is only the warm-up. It'll be plenty aerobic once we get into the main routine."



Dani bit her lip. "Is that when we get the steps out?"

"The steps?" Jana's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "We don't use any steps."

"Then why call it step aerobics?"

Jana tossed back her head and laughed. "Oh, honey, you poor thing! You thought you signed up for step aerobics?"

Dani nodded, her blush rapidly turning crimson.

"This isn't step aerobics. It's strip aerobics." Jana patted Dani on the shoulder. "But I hope you'll decide to stick around anyway."

## Chapter Two

“So, how was it?”

Dani looked up from her lunch. “You suck.”

Carter laughed and took the seat next to her. The breakroom was almost empty at this hour, only Dani and a couple other employees still eating. “Two-thirty. Early lunch for you today.”

She spooned up another bite of yogurt. “I don’t want to exercise on a full stomach. Have I mentioned that you suck?”

“I believe it’s come up a time or two.” He picked through her lunch. “Non-fat yogurt, tuna and crackers, and a bottle of water. You’re taking this challenge seriously.”

“I take everything seriously.”

And wasn’t that the truth. “It’s supposed to be fun, Dani.”

“Maybe for you.” She looked around the breakroom. “Or the other company employees. People who actually like working out. For me, this is sheer torture.”

“Really?” He leaned back in his chair. “All those endorphins do nothing for you?”

Dani shot him a disbelieving look. “I didn’t even get to the endorphins. Too busy trying not to look like a complete idiot.”

“I’m sure you didn’t look like an idiot.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Hey, it was your first day. It takes a while to get in the swing of things.”

“Do I *have* to take a group fitness class? Can’t I just work out on my own?”

Carter shook his head. “Sorry, babe. You have to do both, not one or the other.” He eyed her more closely. “But you could change to another class if this one isn’t working for you.”

To his surprise, Dani looked a little annoyed at the suggestion. “Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “You were complaining, so...”

“Maybe I want to take this class.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Or are you trying reverse psychology on me?”

*What?*

“Do you think I’m not good enough for str—step aerobics?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” He held up his hands. “Turning a little intense on me, here.”

“Sorry.” She took a bite of cracker, grimaced and tossed the rest of her lunch in the garbage. “I can’t eat chocolate. I get a little testy.”

Carter leaned back, balancing on the rear two legs of his chair. “So you *don’t* want to take this class, but you *do* want to take this class. Makes perfect sense to me.”

“I never claimed to make sense.” She wrinkled her nose. “I just don’t want to make a fool out of myself.”

“I’ve got it.” Carter stood, digging in his pants pocket as the chair clattered to the ground. “The perfect solution.”

“And that would be...”

“Practice.” He held up a key triumphantly. “You’ll be head of the class in no time.”

“Carter, what are you talking about?” She sounded weary. The Wellness Challenge must be taking more out of her than she’d expected.

“I’ll get you into the club after hours, and you can practice the routine on your own until you’re comfortable with it.”

“Should I even ask how you ended up with a key to the health club?”

He winked at her. “I wrote it into the contract.”

“Why?”

“So I can work out when I feel like it, especially after a long night in the office.”

“Oh.” She eyed the key, suspicion coloring her gaze. “So you can get me in there, no questions asked.”

“Sure.”

“And I’d just have to make sure the door locked behind me when I left?”

He drew back, frowning. “You wouldn’t be there alone, Dani.”

“But you just said...”

“I’ll hang out until you’re done.”

She was already shaking her head. “No. No way, Carter. Not gonna happen.”

Carter blew out a frustrated breath. “Not in the aerobics room, Dani. The whole point of this is for you to get comfortable with the routine without an audience.”

“So what would you do while I was practicing?” She started gathering up the remnants of her lunch. “Sit in the lobby?”

“Probably a weights workout.” He struck an exaggerated pose. “Have to keep my young and girlish figure, you know.”

Dani burst out laughing. “You’re insane.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that.” He dangled the key in front of her. “Come on, whaddaya say?”

She raised one eyebrow. “I’ll be on my own during the workout?”

He swiped a finger over his chest. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She was wavering, he could tell. Her gaze kept straying to the key in his hand.

Carter stood. “I’ll meet you at the club at quarter to nine. You can get the workout tape from your instructor before they close up, and I’ll clear everything with the front desk. Once everyone leaves at nine, you can practice to your heart’s content.”

Then, before she could object, he left the room.

She'd be there. If only to have the last word.

\* \* \*

Dani pulled the door of the aerobics room shut behind her. Just as promised, Jana had set up a TV with a strip aerobics DVD in the corner for Dani to use for practice.

"A little extra practice is a great idea," she'd said when Dani called that afternoon. "You'll be stripping with the best of them in no time."

Dani rolled her eyes and walked over to the TV. Yeah, right. She was about as far from stripper material as it was possible to get. She was reduced to giving herself homework, for heaven's sake.

Even now, she wasn't sure what had made her decide to stick with the class. Though she'd been ready to drop strip aerobics like a hot brick earlier in the day, something had changed with Carter's flip dismissal. He didn't even *know* she was taking strip aerobics, but she'd been suddenly furious that he thought she didn't have what it took. That she wasn't coordinated enough, talented enough, hell, even sexy enough.

Stupid, predictable, reverse-psychology response, but there it was. She was going to prove she could do it, damn the odds.

The most annoying thing about it was, Carter would never know if she succeeded or not. It wasn't as if she'd ever give him a demonstration.

She laughed, startling herself with the sound. She glanced at the door, aware that the club had a curiously empty feel to it, now that everyone had gone.

The clang of a weight bar dropping into place reverberated through the empty club. Correction—almost everyone had gone.

Somewhere out there, beyond the aerobics room, Carter was lifting weights.

Dani squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the image from earlier this evening. She'd shown up right at quarter to nine, swearing at

herself for giving in to Carter's taunting but unable to back down from the challenge.

He'd already been there, flirting with the girl at the front desk, when she walked in the door. To his credit, he'd cut the conversation short immediately and walked over to her, a big smile on his face.

She was such a sucker for that smile.

At least, that was what she told herself as she followed him into the club. It sounded more appropriate than admitting that she was a sucker for his ass, too.

Really, it should be illegal for him to wear shorts like that. Her gaze kept straying below the waistband as she walked a few paces behind him. They cupped his tight ass as closely as she wanted to. Plus, they left miles of long, lean, muscled legs bare for her to appreciate, too.

And don't even get her started on his arms...

Luckily—or unluckily, depending on your point of view—he reached the workout room before she really embarrassed herself.

"How long do you think you'll need?"

*Years.*

"Oh, maybe an hour," she said, glancing at her watch.

He reached over and slid it from her wrist, leaving a trail of goose bumps in his wake. "Take all the time you need."

She frowned at her empty wrist. "I think that's what *you* just did."

Carter stuffed the watch in his duffel bag. "I'll just put it in my locker for safekeeping."

"Thanks. So what are you going to do while I'm practicing?"

"Free weights," he said. "Maybe some crunches. Don't worry about me. I'll have plenty to keep me occupied."

She nodded, glancing around at the almost-empty club. The sheer volume of exercise equipment was overwhelming. "I'll find you afterward."

He'd walked off with a nod and a smile, striding forward like a man who had the world at his feet.

While she had a strip aerobics workout video and absolutely no coordination.

Sometimes the world just wasn't fair.

Sighing, Dani turned on the TV. The room seemed bigger with no one else in it, and the reflection of herself in the mirror was distracting, to say the least. She eyed herself critically as she waited for the DVD to cue up to the main menu.

She wore a loose T-shirt over a white T-back sports bra, with gray yoga pants to round out the look. Fairly typical for working out, and hardly sexy. That wasn't her goal, of course; the strip video was just for exercise, not turning anybody on.

It wouldn't have bothered her to look a little more enticing, though. After all, it wasn't like it had escaped her attention that Carter had reserved his flirting for the hottie at the front desk.

Wrinkling her nose, she pulled the scrunchy out of her ponytail and let the thick brown curls swing free. Better.

She glanced back at the TV. The DVD was cued up, so she punched the start button. As the slow, sensual music started to play, Dani rolled her shoulders back and forth, trying out some of the warm-up exercises she'd learned the day before.

This part wasn't so bad. She bent over at the waist and dangled her fingers above the floor, rolling her eyes as the model in the video planted her palms firmly on the ground. Limber, Dani wasn't.

Still, it was a real workout, despite the shock-value theme. Muscles she couldn't even name protested as she bent and stretched, reached and twisted. It was obvious she'd gotten her money's worth from the workout the day before. And the music was catchy. If she could just stay on the warm-up portion of the video, she'd be fine.

For a moment, she was tempted. Why did she need to learn the strip routine, anyway? Really, there was no reason for her to stay in the class. The club offered dozens of options, all of them less embarrassing than strip aerobics. Why in the world was she forcing herself to stick it out?

Her first instinct, when Jana had corrected her mistaken impression of the class, had been to book on out of there as fast as possible. A strip aerobics class? Were they crazy?

But another look around had verified that no one in the class looked the least bit insane. They were young and old, model-thin and, well, not. And all of them were at varying levels of skill. It was like any other exercise class Dani had ever seen.

But beyond that, these women were comfortable with their bodies. They stood up straight and proud, grinning into the floor-length mirror as they went through the routine. There wasn't even much actual stripping involved; some of the T-shirts disappeared, leaving their owners in just a sports bra, but that wasn't any more revealing than a bikini.

It was the attitude that was so captivating to Dani. Strong, positive, reveling in their sensuality.

She'd wanted to leave, but in the end she'd stayed. And though the routine was way beyond her limited exercise skills, the enthusiasm of the group spilled over onto her until she'd found herself promising Jana at the end of class that she'd be back next time.

By morning, she'd changed her mind again, ready to drop out. Then she'd talked to Carter and decided to stay in the class.

So here she was, practicing in advance for tomorrow.

The warm-up music segued into a faster tune, matching Dani's heartbeat. The woman on the video smiled and paced out the first few measures of the routine, taking it slowly enough for Dani to keep up.

She followed along as the routine got more complicated, taking the time to go back once or twice to get a better look at the movements. The blatantly sexual moves were embarrassing at first, but as she kept at it, Dani found herself enjoying it more and more.

Slowly she rotated her hips, watching the movement in the mirror. It looked almost—sexy, she thought, trying it again.

She lifted her hair off her nape, letting the cool breeze of the fan tickle her. The shiver that ran down her spine was positively orgasmic.



A knock at the door sent her heart rate into orbit. She spun around, wrapping her arms around herself.

"You about done in there?" Carter's voice was muffled. "It's getting close to ten."

She darted over to the TV and shut it down, heart pounding. If he'd walked in...

"I'll be out in a minute," she shouted, taking out the DVD and putting it in its case. "Hang on."

She scurried over to the door and opened it, her heart doing a slow flip at the sight of Carter lounging against the wall opposite. Sweat dampened the neck of his T-shirt and glistened at his temples. He held out a bottle of water to her. "Just in case," he said.

She uncapped it and took a long swallow, enjoying the cool liquid. "Thanks."

"No prob." He handed over her watch and waited for her to put it on. "Hope I didn't cut your workout short."

"No. I was ready." Fighting a blush, she started for the door, not waiting to see if he'd follow. As she expected, he caught her in just a few strides, and they walked side by side out of the gym.

"So, I was thinking..."

Dani looked at him sideways. "That sounds ominous."

He stuck his tongue out at her. "Why don't we make this a standing date?"

Her traitorous heart fluttered at the word *date*. "What do you mean?"

"If you want to keep practicing after hours, I'd be happy to join you." At her frown, he clarified, "At the gym, not in your aerobics room. We'd each be doing our own thing."

"I don't want to impose," she said, though the thought of running through the routines at her own pace was tempting.

He elbowed her gently. "Dork. If it was an imposition, I wouldn't have offered."

Impulsively, she said, "Okay, let's do it."

Then she headed for the parking garage with him, wondering just what she'd gotten herself into.

## Chapter Three

“I think that’s everything.” Carter glanced around the boardroom at the executive team. “Anything to add?”

Joe nodded. “Can we put the winter line on next week’s agenda? The design team’s come up with some new snow gear with built in locators, and I think the advertising team should have extra time to prep for the campaign. It’ll sell like crazy, as long as people know about it.”

“Good idea.” Carter jotted it down on his notepad. He looked over at the head of advertising. “Thom, can you bring some preliminary workups by then?”

“You bet.” Thom leaned back in his chair. “We need to look at the spring catalog, too, if there are any new developments.”

“Got it.” Carter wrote that down, too. “Okay, that should do it. Hope to see everyone at the annex tonight.”

The noise level in the boardroom increased as the executive team stood to go, chairs scraping on the tiled floor. The hum of conversation rose and fell as people left the room in twos and threes, until Carter was alone in the room.

A quiet cough pulled his attention to the doorway. Dani stood there, manila folder in hand.

“What’s up?” Carter sat down again, waving a hand at the seat next to him. “You look like a woman with something on her mind.”

She tapped the folder on the table. “It’s about this expense request.”

With a grimace, he plucked the folder out of her hand. “I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“Explain to me how a trip for two to Vegas is a legitimate expense,” she said. “I’ve already given in on the Hawaii thing, so don’t try to tell me it’s another incentive.”

“Nope.” He leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. “Trade show next month. We’re going to be meeting with the big box reps, as well as some potential investors.”

“We as in...”

“You and me.”

Dani stared at him. “You’re taking me to Vegas?”

“You bet.” He grinned. “Get it? Bet?”

She groaned at the bad pun. “Carter, don’t make me hurt you.”

“Seriously, I need you there. These guys are the big guns, Dani. They’ll want specific information on our financial status, and a printout just won’t cut it. I need you to answer their questions, walk them through the budget and financial forecast.”

He could almost see the calculator clicking away in her head. “And both of us need to be there?”

“I don’t see another option.”

Dani took the folder back and flipped through it. “Okay. Any way we could cut costs?”

“What’s so expensive? Two plane tickets, two registrations, two hotel rooms.” He turned around and wagged his eyebrows at her. “Hey, we could make it one room, save a few bucks that way.”

Instead of laughing, like he’d expected, she looked away. “Right,” she said with a wry twist to her voice.

Strangely unsettled, Carter looked at Dani. “Hey, just kidding. You’re like family, Dani. I’d never mess that up.”

“Uh-huh.” She turned to go. “I know.”

“So if you’re worried I’ll try to take advantage of the situation or something...”

“Nope.” She flashed him a tight smile. “I know you’d never do anything like that.”

“Good.” Satisfied, he stood and walked over to the window. The city street below was already starting to get crowded as the workday wound to a close. “Getting late. Are we on for tonight?”

“Tonight?”

He turned around. “At the health club.”

She shook her head. “You’ve got Payday Party at the annex, remember?”

Oh, yeah. “Well, tomorrow then.”

She gave him a quick wave and disappeared around the corner. Carter shuffled some papers, clearing off the conference room table. How had he forgotten? He loved grabbing a beer with most of the admin staff down at the corner bar. They did it every month on payday. It was a great team-building activity.

So why was he wishing he could skip the whole thing for a chance to work out down the hall from Dani?

\* \* \*

“Knock, knock.” Caroline walked into Dani’s office, carrying a padded contraption. She placed it on the floor and dropped into the chair across from Dani’s desk, sighing dramatically. “I think my hands are about to fall off.”

Dani laughed and shut the door to her office. “Lots of sign-ups today?”

“I swear, the number of people on that list doubles every week.” She held up a hand. “Not that I’m complaining. This is the best gig in town.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Dani sat back down and tapped a pencil on her desktop. “It’s one expense I was happy to approve.”

“My business appreciates it.” Caroline grinned. “Carter’s been great at talking up the in-office program, too. I’ve had three more companies sign up this month.”

“Great.” Dani forced a smile at the mention of Carter’s name. Then she changed the subject. “How’s Tony?”

“Fabulous.” Caroline’s face lit up, just like it always did at the mention of her new husband. “Do you want to come over for dinner next week? We’d love to have you.”

Dani smiled wryly. “Make it six weeks from now, and you’ve got a deal.”

“Six weeks? Even you can’t be that busy.”

“No, but until I weigh out for the Wellness Challenge, I have to stay far, far away from your husband’s tempting cooking.”

“Wellness Challenge?”

Dani waved a hand. “Work out and eat right for ten weeks, and the person with the best stats by the end of the Challenge wins a trip to Hawaii.”

Caroline sat up and looked closer at Dani, one eyebrow raised. “I hope you’ve picked out a bikini, because you are so going to win.”

“It’s only been four weeks, but...” Dani’s voice trailed off as Caroline urged her out of her chair and made her turn around.

“Oh, yeah.” Caroline nodded her approval. “What have you been doing? You look fabulous!”

Dani blushed. “Oh, this and that.” At Caroline’s pointed look, she mumbled, “Strip aerobics.”

“You’re kidding me!” Caroline grinned. “Introverted Dani? Strip aerobics? I love it!”

Dani bit her lip, trying not to smile. “So do I.”

“That’s pretty clear. Not only are you looking more fit, there’s this whole, I don’t know, confidence about you.” Caroline winked at her. “Has he noticed yet?”

“Has who noticed?” Dani prayed her blush wasn’t noticeable.

“Don’t try to con me, Dani Williams.” Caroline crossed her arms over her chest. “You’ve been in love with Carter since I met you. Probably before that, too.”

"Fine." Dani frowned. "No, he hasn't noticed."

"Is the man blind?"

"I don't think he'd notice if I showed up at work naked."

Caroline burst out laughing. "Honey, that's just not possible."

"Do you know what he told me today?"

Caroline sat, elbows on her knees. "This oughtta be good."

"He said he's taking me to Vegas!"

"That creep!" Caroline bit back a grin. "How could he?"

Dani shrugged. "Okay, it's not heinous. But it's not great, either."

"Going away to the city of sin with your dream guy? What's not to love?"

Dani ticked the reasons off on her fingers. "It's for work, not play. He only needs me there to talk money with some big mucky-mucks. But the worst was telling me we could share a room to cut expenses because I'm just like a sister to him."

The smile vanished. "Yep. Heinous." Caroline pulled out her cell phone. "I think it's time to call in the big guns."

Dani waited as Caroline dialed.

"Mollie?" She paused. "Can you meet us at the downtown Nordstrom's in half an hour? Great." She flipped the phone closed.

"We, who?" Dani glanced at her watch. "It's the middle of the afternoon!"

"And you need some serious retail therapy," Caroline retorted.

Dani started to argue, but closed her mouth instead. Why not? She put in more than enough hours to take off a little early today. "Okay, let's go."

Caroline grinned. "I knew I could talk you into it." She hefted her tabletop massage unit with one hand and slung her other arm around Dani's shoulders. "When we get done with you, Carter won't know what hit him."

\* \* \*

Carter placed the hand weights back in the rack, pausing to run a towel over the back of his neck. Ten more minutes on weights, and he'd hit the treadmill.

Other than the one night he'd missed because of the Payday Party, he and Dani were still keeping to their after-hours workout sessions. Already they were on the downward slope of the Wellness Challenge, with only three and a half more weeks to go.

Back in the aerobics room, Dani was running through her routine, which she guarded as closely as the crown jewels. He shook his head, laughing a little. She insisted the extra workout sessions were helping immensely, but he had to take her word for it. The door to the workout room was always firmly closed.

Well, whatever floated her boat. As long as she was happy, he was happy.

The workout challenge seemed to be working its magic on Dani as well. Her attitude had changed a hundred-eighty degrees. She actually seemed positive about the whole thing, and tonight she'd even mentioned how much she looked forward to their nighttime workouts.

Truth be told, so did he. Some might think it was odd to exercise that late at night, but it worked for them. They'd even taken to carpooling on workout days, giving them a little more time to just chat on the way home.

They'd always been good friends, though with work as crazy as it had been the past few years, they hadn't spent a whole lot of time together. The friendship had just been there, in the background, like the sun rising in the east. Their recent time together had brought it back to the forefront.

They'd been friends for so long, he couldn't even imagine what his life would be like without her in it. Thank God he'd never have to find out, either. Though his relationships with women tended to burn out quickly, Dani had been one of the most stable and long-lasting influences in his



life. Probably because they'd never hit the sheets. He'd never wanted to risk their friendship for something temporary.

Dani's new fitness routine had given her a boost of confidence that spilled over into work, as well. She'd never pulled punches with him, of course; they had too much history for that. But she'd found it easy to sequester herself in her office, buried in her paperwork. This past month, though, he'd seen her in the breakroom at the normal lunch hour more than once, interacting with other employees. She'd even gone out after work one night last week with some of the women in research and design.

It was nice to see her finally coming into her own.

Though she'd probably kick his ass if she knew he was even thinking these vaguely paternal, patronizing thoughts about her.

Smiling again, he headed for the treadmill. He was so lucky to have Dani around to keep him honest. And with a little luck, she'd be around for a long, long time.

\* \* \*

Dani pushed her hair out of her face, tendrils curling at the temples. Say what you wanted about strip aerobics, but it was definitely a real workout.

She'd never thought of herself as an enthusiastic athlete, but something about strip aerobics had caught her. She'd gone from an embarrassed wallflower to one of the stronger students in class in just over a month.

Of course, the three-times-a-week individual workouts helped.

She'd worked her way through the first two videos in the series and was spending this week on the third, the fantasy and role-playing one. She'd even brought a button-down shirt with her tonight, replacing her usual T-shirt for a change of pace.

Slim, stretchy shorts completed the look, for ease of movement. And, if she was being totally honest, they just looked sexier.

She toyed with the top button on her shirt, swiveling her hips. She felt sexier, more in touch with her body, than she ever had before.

Onscreen, the instructor was walking her “class” through the routine, a sexy librarian role-play. “Change it up,” she encouraged, bumping and grinding. “Make it *your* fantasy, *your* desires. What turns you on? Who turns you on?”

Unbidden, an image of Carter popped into Dani’s mind. He was stretched out on a bed, one leg bent at the knee, as he watched her dance.

She’d imagined the two of them together before, fantasized it in the dark of the night when she couldn’t sleep. But in all those scenarios, he’d been the one to take control.

In this fantasy, she called all the shots.

A flash of heat arrowed through her at the thought. To have him at her mercy, his body aching for hers, while she teased and taunted and aroused him—she clenched her thighs together at the unexpected rush of warmth.

In real life, she might never dare to show him how she really felt. But here, in this room, she could do anything she wanted.

The woman on the video slid a hand down her side, emphasizing her curves. “Don’t be afraid to touch yourself,” she said. “He’s watching you. Show him what you want.”

Slowly, Dani closed her eyes. Threading her hands through her hair, she lifted the weight of it off the nape of her neck. She breathed in slowly, reveling in the unfamiliar sensation of cool air on her sweat-dampened neck. One hand trailed down her neck, stroking across the curve of her breast as her hips swayed. Her breath grew shallow and her nipples tightened as she imagined the heat in Carter’s eyes as she palmed the hollow of her stomach.

She echoed the motion with her other hand, letting her head drop back and her hair swing from side to side. As she bent at the knees, she stroked her hands between her thighs, barely skirting the aching flesh above. Using her hands, she mimicked a movement the instructor had

used in the routine, pressing her legs apart and back together in one smooth movement. Slowly rotating to face the other direction, she repeated the motion. Then she straightened her legs so that her ass was lifted high, like a pin-up from the fifties.

Mmm. She was starting to like this.

Dani flipped her head back, curls tossing over her shoulder, and trailed her fingertips across overheated skin as she moved back into a standing position.

Her hands reached for the top button on her shirt. Tugging it free, she ran a finger down the open vee. Swiveling her hips, she popped one button after another until it hung open, leaving her bare except for her sports bra. She gathered the fabric in her hands and stripped it off, tossing it behind her.

But she didn't hear it drop to the ground. Opening her eyes, she glanced in the mirror.

Carter was standing in the doorway to the room, mouth gaped open, her discarded shirt clutched in his hand.

## Chapter Four

*Holy shit.*

“Dani?”

It was her. Of course it was her. He’d left her in this room not an hour earlier, and everyone else had gone home. It had to be Dani.

He just wasn’t sure when the aliens had abducted her and replaced her with this—this living, breathing embodiment of sex.

He’d poked his head in the door, meaning to check on how she was doing. But instead of finding her squinting at a TV monitor, half a step behind as she unraveled the secrets of aerobics, he’d walked in on her taking her clothes off to the beat of the music.

She stood there now, eyes wide with horror. “What are you doing here?”

He simply stared. It was all he was capable of doing. Where did she get that figure? And how in the hell had he never noticed it before?

Dani’s cheeks flushed and she crossed her arms over her chest, trying to hide the fact that she was wearing just a sports bra and he was holding her shirt. “How long have you been standing there?”

A heartbeat. A lifetime. Dropping her shirt on the ground, he muttered, “Long enough.”

Then he strode across the room and kissed her.

It was a crazy, impulsive act, but the minute his lips touched hers he knew it was the right thing to do.

She tasted like sex and sin and forbidden fruit, and he couldn’t get enough.

Which was crazy, because this was Dani, his buddy, his pal, someone he'd never even considered kissing before. But from the moment he'd seen her tight little ass thrust up toward him like an offering from the gods, he couldn't wait to get his hands on her.

Threading the fingers of one hand through her hair, he tilted her head a little. Without conscious thought, he stroked his tongue into her mouth, and after a moment's shocked stillness Dani met the invasion with enthusiasm.

Oh, thank God.

Smoothing his hand down her back, he cupped her backside in his palm and urged one leg up and around his waist. Pulling her closer, he angled his hips so his aching cock was pressed right between her thighs. He groaned at the contact. Only a few thin layers of fabric separated them, and by the breathy little gasps she was making, he guessed that Dani hated those layers as much as he did.

Carter wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but it sure as hell hadn't been this enthusiastic response. Her hands were everywhere, on his shoulders, stroking his biceps, clutching the fabric of his shirt. Her body rubbed up against his as she kissed him back, her lips voracious, her tongue hot and wicked in his mouth.

Sliding his hands up her sides, he caught the edges of her bra with his thumbs and tugged, breaking off the kiss long enough to strip it off of her and toss it away. Her eyes slid closed and her head tilted back as he cupped her breasts, his thumbs strumming the nipples to tight little buds.

It was too tempting. He leaned down and sucked one into his mouth.

"Carter," she breathed, one hand tangled in his hair, holding him closer as he laved the sensitive flesh. He drew a path across her chest with his tongue, tracing around her other nipple before clamping his lips over it as well.

Her hands tugged blindly at his shirt, trying to pull it up and off him. He stepped back just long enough to oblige her, wanting the sensation of

skin on skin as desperately as she did. They both sucked in a breath as his hair-roughened chest brushed against her sensitive breasts.

"Damn," he whispered. Her hips arched against him in time with the music, bringing him to the ragged edge of his control.

It wasn't enough. He needed more.

The elastic waist of her shorts was easily breached, and he slid his hand inside. "God, you're wet," he groaned, stroking one finger through her damp folds. She was tight, so tight, and he clenched his jaw against the hot pleasure of her inner muscles gripping him.

Dani squirmed in his arms, planting breathless kisses everywhere she could reach. Her response pushed him even higher, spiraling out of control until it was all he could do not to take her right here, right now.

"Carter," she whispered, her lips hot against his ear. "More."

*More?*

"I need you." Her hands slid beneath the waistband of his shorts. "Need you."

"Dani." He took her wrists in both his hands, holding her still. "Are you sure?"

"Mm-hmm." She tugged ineffectually at his grip, licked the whorl of his ear. "Very."

He shivered. "Um, okay, why don't we throw some clothes back on you, head over to my place..."

"No." This time, she bit his earlobe. "Here. Now."

*Oh, God.*

She tugged one hand free, slid it down inside his shorts, and curled around his...

He stepped back, gasping for air. She still gripped him, her hand sliding up and down his shaft with just the right amount of pressure. If she didn't stop now, he was going to come without her.

That would never do.

Drawing on the last of his reserves, he lifted her hand away, regretting the loss of her touch on his naked skin more than she'd ever know.

Naked skin.

Holy crap.

"Wait here," he ordered, his voice raspy with need. "I'll be right back."

Then, before she could protest, he took off out the door at a dead run.

Where was he going?

Dani shoved her hands through her hair, knowing there wasn't much she could do at this point that would mess it up more than it already was. It was tousled and snarled, like her worst case of bedhead ever.

Without the bed.

She groaned, letting her head drop down in frustration. One minute, she'd been living out her fantasy with Carter. The next, he was sprinting out the door like the hounds of hell were after him.

This was exactly what she'd been hoping to avoid when he'd suggested they go back to his place. No way was she giving him the opportunity to change his mind. Not when everything she'd ever dreamed about was actually about to come true.

But the longer he was out of this room, the likelier he was to come to his senses.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. A hot blush covered her from chest to eyebrows with the very visual reminder that she was still naked from the waist up. She anchored one arm across her breasts, managing to cover her tightly-beaded nipples at least, and pressed the other hand to her cheek. She looked tightly strung and highly aroused, a combination she feared would continue for the rest of the night.

This could have been her one chance to make love to the man she'd been in love with for years. But there was no way he'd still be interested by the time he got back from wherever he was.

"Hey."

She whirled around at the low, soft sound of his voice. “That was quick,” she said, almost breathless with relief.

“Tell me about it.” He kicked the door shut behind him, arms weighted down with a pile of white towels. “I think I set a land-speed record.”

“So what did you—”

He dumped the towels on the ground in front of the mirrored wall and flashed her that devastating grin. “I thought the floor might be a little hard.”

Before she even had enough time to process his comment, he was standing in front of her, gently moving her arm away from her chest so that she was exposed again.

The look in his eyes was hot and admiring, and she felt a rush of warmth between her legs in response.

“That’s better.” He glanced down at her feet. “Take off your shoes.”

She toed them off, kicking each to the side before tugging off her socks as well. The polished wood floor was cool beneath her toes, a shivery contrast to the heat that coursed through her body.

Carter slid his hands up her arms, pausing at her shoulders to trace her collarbone with his thumbs. Goose bumps followed the path of his touch, causing a delicious shiver down her spine. He trailed his palms down her sides, pausing to cup the fullness of her breasts for a moment before continuing lower. Hooking his fingers in the sides of her workout shorts, he knelt and slid them down her legs to pool at her feet. He waited there, balancing her, as she stepped out of them. He’d managed to snag her panties, too, and she stood before him, completely naked, while he looked his fill.

And look he did, his gaze avid as he tilted his head back from his vantage point on his knees in front of her. His head was at waist-level, the perfect height for—

Dani clutched his head in her hands and groaned. He’d taken advantage of the situation and darted forward, swiping his tongue



through her slick folds. His hands clasped her bottom, holding her steady, as he tasted her with leisurely strokes.

Her fingers clutched his hair, holding on for dear life as he licked her, swirling around her clitoris then back down to her aching core. Her breath came in panting little gasps, her hips starting to move in rhythmic counterpart to his sensual assault.

He gave one final lick, a long, tempting stroke that ended with a flick of the tongue against her clit that made her knees buckle. Laughing softly, he surged to his feet and lifted her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” She clutched his shoulders, a little impressed with her ability to form a complete sentence.

“Impressing you with my manly strength.” He nipped at her earlobe. “Is it working?”

In response, she just laughed, wrapping her arms around him. He took a few steps over to the pile of towels and pretended to drop her. She shrieked, holding him even tighter, as he bent down and lowered her into the nest of white terrycloth.

She sucked in a breath. “Oh, my goodness.”

He stretched out next to her. “Right out of the dryer,” he boasted.

The freshly-laundered towels still retained most of the heat of the dryer, enveloping them both in a cocoon of warmth. Dani stretched out, enjoying the sensation of soft warm fabric against her naked skin.

“Keep doing that, and I won’t be able to take it slowly,” he warned.

“I don’t want you to go slow,” she said, amazed at her own boldness. “I want you to take me now.”

He leaned over and pressed a hot, hard kiss to her lips. “Be careful what you wish for,” he said, before stripping off the rest of his clothes.

She watched him as closely as he’d watched her, still not quite believing that she was getting naked with Carter. Part of her had always wondered if he’d live up to the hype of her personal fantasies.

Dani licked suddenly dry lips. Hell, yeah, he lived up to the hype.

His erection stood full and proud, the tip already glistening with pre-come. Her fingers twitched with the desire to touch him again, to feel that silky-smooth skin as she caressed him.

Skin.

Dani slapped a hand over her eyes and fell back into the towels. "I don't believe this," she groaned.

"Okay, not the reaction I was hoping for," Carter said.

She peeked at him between her fingers. "We can't...you know."

He swallowed. "Mind telling me why?"

"I don't make it a habit of carrying a condom to the gym with me."

He heaved a sigh of relief and fished a packet out from under the pile of towels. "Got it covered." Then he glanced down below the waist. "Well, not technically, but..."

Dani felt her jaw drop. "Okay, Houdini, wanna explain how you managed that little trick?"

Carter ripped the packet open and started to roll the condom on. "Actually, that's why I took off before. There's a condom machine in the men's room." He grinned at her. "The towels were just a bonus."

"Wow." She bit her lip, watching the slow slide of his fingers as he seated the condom. "I don't know what to say."

"How about, 'Come on down'?"

Laughing, she raised her arms to him. "Come here, Carter."

With a smile, he knelt between her legs, pressing her knees apart gently. She opened for him, groaning as he pressed a finger inside.

"You are so ready," he said, eyes half-closed.

"I've been ready for years." Wincing, she watched for his reaction, but he only smiled absently, his attention diverted.

"I can't wait to be inside you." He looked at her intently. "Are you sure that's what you want, too?"

"Oh, Carter." She propped herself up on her elbows and kissed him. "More than anything in the world."

At that, he pressed forward, bracing his arms on either side of her waist. The thick head of his erection nudged against her, sliding slowly inside. He stopped, panting, teeth gritted.

Dani lifted her legs and pressed her heels into his buttocks. “All of you,” she ground out, urging him forward. “I want all of you.”

He surged forward, filling her completely, until he was seated to the hilt. They both groaned at the sensation. “Damn, you feel good,” he said.

Dani clung to him as he pulled back, almost withdrawing, before sliding in again. Her shoulder blades pressed against the thick towels as she arched up to meet him. She felt stretched, full, taking more of him than she would have thought possible.

He slid his hands under her buttocks and tilted her up even further, angling her so that with each thrust he pressed against her clit. Bursts of pleasure echoed through her body, a spiral of desire so hot and thick she could almost taste it.

The music from the TV faded into the background as their panting breaths mingled and echoed through the empty room.

He looked down at her, his motions slowing. The expression on his face—a combination of heat and intensity—made her heart clench.

She was almost afraid to ask. “Carter?”

“You’re amazing,” he said. “And so damn hot.”

Her breath left her lungs in a whoosh, relief washing through her. “I can live with that.”

“I don’t know. This may just be the death of me.”

She laughed and slid her hands down his back, stroking the curve of his ass. “But what a way to go.”

He growled and thrust into her again, pressing her back into the nest of towels. His gaze was captured by something over her shoulder, his expression growing even more intent.

“Carter?”

He tilted his head to the right. “Take a look.”

She followed his gaze, eyes widening as she realized that they were in full, Technicolor splendor on the mirrored wall of the exercise room. She wrapped around him in a human version of yin and yang, her pale skin a striking contrast to his deep, golden tan.

“Yeah. So fuckin’ hot.”

Dani closed her eyes and arched into him, reveling in the feel of his heated skin against hers, the scatter of hair on his chest brushing against her taut nipples. Years of longing rose up in her, threatening to overwhelm her.

He leaned down and pressed kisses to her closed eyelids, her neck, as far down her chest as he could reach. He whispered hot suggestions in her ear, making her blush and bringing her to the edge of orgasm at the same time. Carter must have sensed it as well, because his thrusts grew wilder, more uncontrolled. They moved together in a rhythm that captured them both.

Dani tumbled first, crying out as waves of pleasure washed over her. Carter held her close as he thrust once, again, then a final time, collapsing with a shout on top of her.

Minutes ticked by, marked by the endless loop of the music of the menu screen on the DVD. Dani ducked her head into the curve of Carter’s arm, willing the trembling to stop. He stroked her hair, isolating one strand to curl around his knuckle before finger-combing it back into place.

It should have been awkward. They’d taken their relationship from casual to over-the-top intimate in six-point-two seconds, without all the typical steps in between.

But all Dani could think, wrapped in Carter’s arms, was that finally she was right where she was supposed to be.

## Chapter Five

He woke up in an unfamiliar bed.

Despite his playboy reputation, this was not a common occurrence for Carter. Shifting uncomfortably under the floral sheets, he glanced across the pillows at the woman next to him.

He squeezed his eyes shut again.

What the hell had he done?

Dani rolled over in her sleep, arm flopping across his chest as she snuggled in. She took a deep, contented breath, burrowing even closer.

Carter stared up at the ceiling. Now he was trapped, literally, by the warm, lush body wrapped around him.

Despite his best intentions, his cock twitched at the thought. You would have thought he'd be out of commission for a while, after their marathon last night, but evidently his body had a mind of its own.

How many times had they made love? Three? Four?

Hell, he'd lost count after a while. And he couldn't even remember the last time that had happened.

He'd had the best intentions on the way home last night. It had been his turn to drive, so after the incident at the gym—that's what he was calling it, an incident—he'd given Dani a ride home. It had been a little awkward for both of them, considering they'd just gotten down and dirty in the aerobics room at the gym, but he'd been handling it well, all things considered. He would just drop her off with a kiss on the cheek, head back to his place for some serious alcohol therapy, and deal with it in the morning. Once he had a little perspective on the whole thing.

But when they got to Dani's place, she wasn't following the same script. No, she'd invited him in, eyes sexy and inviting, and then she'd placed her hand on his thigh.

His upper thigh.

Holy hell, she knew how to get to him.

So here he was, in his best friend's bed, wondering how long it would take before she started hating him.

Dani shifted again, snaking one leg over his waist, and he gritted his teeth. She was determined to kill him, wasn't she?

He was trying to be strong, trying to keep the mistakes of last night an isolated incident. If it just happened the one time—okay, four times—it would be easier to get their friendship back on track.

They could agree that they'd gotten this sexual attraction out of the way, and go on like it was before.

But how in the hell was he going to convince her of that if he got hard every time she touched him?

She shifted again, blinked her eyes, and turned a sleepy smile toward him. "Hey," she murmured.

"Morning." He shoved a hand through his hair. "How are you doing?"

"Fabulous." She traced a pattern on his bare chest. Shit. They were both naked, weren't they? "What about you?"

"Great."

This was going to be harder than he thought.

She lifted up on one elbow, hair tumbling around her bare shoulders. With a teasing smile, she leaned down and kissed him.

Her lips were soft and warm, and her naked breast brushed against his arm. That quickly, he wanted to roll her over and slip inside her, lose himself in the honeyed warmth of her body.

He had to stay strong. Had to. Their friendship depended on it.

Slowly she pulled back, eyes wary. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said. But she scrambled to a sitting position, wrapping the sheet around her chest.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “How did I miss it? It’s written all over your face!”

Carter reached out to touch her—pat her shoulder, something—but she slapped his hand away.

“I wake up absolutely thrilled that you’re finally in my bed, and you’re trying to figure out how to get out of here without having to chew your own leg off.”

“That’s not the way it is, and you know it.”

“Do I?” She glared at him. “Look me in the eye and tell me you’re not regretting last night.”

He opened his mouth. Closed it. “Dani, I—”

“Forget it.” She scooted off the bed, taking the sheet with her. It dragged off Carter as well, leaving him naked on the bed. He grabbed a pillow and held it over his lap, but not quickly enough to hide the evidence of his arousal.

Dani gave him a withering glance. “Nice. So flattering.” Her voice was sharp. “I’m going to the bathroom. Do us both a favor and be gone before I come out.”

With that, she slammed the door behind her, leaving Carter alone in the room.

How long before she started hating him? Carter fell back on the bed, one arm flung over his eyes. Evidently, quicker than he’d ever anticipated.

Dani waited until she heard the front door to her apartment slam before she fell apart.

It had been touch and go there for a while, pretending to brush her teeth as she listened to him stomping around her bedroom on the other side of the bathroom door. From all the grumbling and mumbling going on, it was clear that he’d misplaced his underwear at some point last night.

Well, tough shit. If karma existed, he'd get chafe marks in unmentionable places.

Anger sustained her until she was sure he'd gone. Then, like a balloon suddenly losing air, she slid down onto the cold tile floor and started to cry.

Nothing dainty or feminine about it, either—great big heaving sobs, face mottled and tear-stained. Later, she hauled herself under the shower, turned the water on to high, and cried some more.

Somebody up there had a real sense of humor. She'd finally gotten what she'd dreamed of for so many years—the chance to be intimate with the man she loved. It had been the best night of her life.

But for Carter, it had obviously been the worst.

She'd often thought that being just friends with Carter was the hardest thing she'd ever done. But this was infinitely harder.

And it was going to get harder still.

She turned off the now-lukewarm shower and toweled off, padding into the bedroom in a daze. Though the room was deserted, Carter's uniquely masculine scent still lingered. Biting her lip, she headed for the closet. Blouse, slacks, suit jacket. Everything was done on auto-pilot, her mind still racing to the day ahead.

She had to be at OSE in half an hour.

And Carter would be there.

\* \* \*

With luck, the sunglasses would provide some cover.

Carter headed into the building, head down, hoping against hope he could make it into his office without anyone noticing.

"Hey, boss-man!"

Damn. No such luck.

He turned and smiled briefly at the receptionist. "How are you today, Jessica?"



“Great!” She handed over a stack of paper. “Here’s the end-of-quarter review.”

“Thanks,” he said, tucking it under his arm. “I’ll take a look at it later.”

“Oh, and Dani wanted me to let you know that she’ll have the financial report to you by noon,” Jess continued.

Oh, hell. It was worse than he’d thought. They were reduced to passing messages through the receptionist.

In the eight years they’d worked together, Dani had never relied on the grapevine. She’d always talked directly to him.

Damn, he was in trouble.

“Thanks,” he said again, since he couldn’t think of a single other thing to say. Then he turned back and added, “Hold my calls, please.”

“Sure thing.” She laughed. “I’m starting to think that’s the catchphrase of the day.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the second person to ask me to hold their calls today. Dani’s locked up tight in her office, too. If you’re not careful, I’ll start to think there’s a conspiracy.”

He gave her a half-hearted wave and headed for his office, the beginnings of a migraine banding his head.

Oh, there was a conspiracy all right. But it was directed at him.

And the hell of it was, he deserved it.

\* \* \*

If he apologized, she was going to kill him.

Taking a deep breath, Dani opened the door to Carter’s office and walked inside. He was standing opposite his desk, looking out the floor to ceiling windows at the view of downtown Seattle. The Sound was visible beyond the high-rise buildings, gunmetal gray under the clouds.

He turned as she entered, his hands tucked in his pockets. “Hey,” he said softly, a smile curving his lips. Almost immediately, he bit it back, pasting a look of concern on his face that set her nerves on edge. “How are you?”

“I told you. I’m fine.” She knew he was having a hard time with this, but dammit, so was she. Why would fate be so cruel as to give her her heart’s desire, and then snatch it away again?

“Good.” He sat on the edge of his desk, one foot swinging idly. “I’m glad.”

Oh, God. It was even worse than she’d anticipated. They’d been reduced to meaningless platitudes.

Turning, she walked over to the door and shut it firmly. “Okay, Carter, here’s how it is.” She ignored his double-take and charged ahead. “Last night, we had sex.”

“Uh...”

“And I don’t regret a minute of it. We’re both young, single—” She stopped abruptly. “Shit. Tell me you aren’t seeing anyone.”

“Of course not.”

She took a deep breath. “Good.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” He looked hurt. “You know me better than that.”

“You’re right. I do know you better than that.” She paused for effect. “And you know me.”

He nodded.

“So you know that I’d never let anyone take advantage of me. Even you.”

“I never said—”

“You didn’t have to say. It’s in everything you haven’t said, the way you’re tiptoeing around me like I’ve got some terminal disease and you don’t want to be the one who has to break the news. What happened isn’t a tragedy. So just stop it, okay? No regrets. No apologies.”

“Okay. Friends?” He stuck out his hand, waiting to shake on it.

"Of course." A shiver of awareness traveled through her as their palms touched, a vivid reminder of the night before. "Under the circumstances, though, it would probably be better if we stopped the after-hours workouts."

He nodded once. Gaze fixed out the window, he said, "And it's fine if you drop out of the Challenge, too."

"Why would I drop out of the Challenge?"

"I just meant that if you couldn't find another class that worked with your schedule..."

"Wait." She held up her hand. "Who said anything about another class?"

"You're not seriously thinking of staying in a strip aerobics class, are you?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I most certainly am."

He stared at her, mouth open. "You're going to keep taking your clothes off? In public?"

Dani raised an eyebrow. "What I choose to do in my personal time is none of your business, Carter."

"I just don't see how it's appropriate for you to—"

"Give me a break." She glared at him. "If you think I'm going to run around stripping for every guy I meet, you don't know me at all. This is an aerobics class, with a little bit of attitude. I like it. I'm good at it. And nobody, least of all you, has the right to dictate whether I can stay in it or not."

He spluttered a little, but she held out a hand. "Forget it, Carter. Your objection has been noted. Let's just leave it at that."

Before he could say anything, she walked to the door. Then she left his office, shutting the door behind her.

\* \* \*

"I am so jealous." Jessica handed Dani a manila envelope. "You are going to have such a great time."

"Excuse me?" Dani opened the envelope and slid the contents onto her desk. One looked suspiciously like a plane ticket.

"Going to Vegas for the trade show this weekend. Don't tell me you forgot!" Jessica shook her head. "Girl, you'd forget your head if it wasn't stapled on."

Dani frowned. "I didn't forget." Damned if she hadn't avoided thinking about it, though.

"Two nights in Vegas with the boss-man." Jessica fanned herself. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

That didn't leave Dani with a lot of options. "No worries," she said. Even if she wanted it, Carter had made it very clear he wasn't going there again.

"Are you kidding? Just pack a few of those hot new outfits you've been wearing and he'll be all over you."

Hot new...? Dani blushed. "I don't think so."

"Seriously. He won't be able to resist."

Resisting wasn't the problem. Regretting it afterward was. "Workplace romances are a bad idea," Dani said.

Jessica, undaunted, winked at her. "Remember, what happens in Vegas..."

"Is none of anyone else's business." Carter strolled into the room and picked up Dani's plane ticket.

Jessica pushed out her lower lip. "You two are no fun. Can I at least make up some rumors to spread?"

Carter shrugged and sat on the edge of Dani's desk. "Knock yourself out."

Dani watched Jessica leave the room. "Nobody would believe it anyway," she muttered.

"What was that?"

Dani shook her head. "Never mind." She snatched the plane ticket out of his hand. "We leave Friday morning?"

"Crack of dawn." He glanced at the open door to her office and lowered his voice. "Dani, are you okay with this?"

She shot him a glance. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Dani..."

"Don't worry." She held up a hand. "I'll do my best to keep from throwing myself at you."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

She sighed. "Carter, we're going to Las Vegas for work, and that's the one thing I know I'm good at. So you can rest easy. I'll be the consummate professional. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do."

He shook his head and stalked out the door. Dani watched him go.

Jessica had it backwards. The gossip-worthy stuff had happened right here.

It was Vegas that was going to be one long, excruciating nothing.

\* \* \*

Carter shifted in his seat and checked his watch for the umpteenth millionth time.

Where the hell was she?

"Can I get you something, sir?" The flight attendant hovered over him, a concerned expression on her face. "A pillow, something to drink?"

He shook his head. All he wanted was Dani.

Here. He wanted her here, on the plane, on time. He didn't *want* her, want her.

Maybe if he kept telling himself that, it'd be true.

“Sorry I’m late.” Dani dropped down into the seat next to him, her hair tousled and her face pink with exertion. “The tram to this part of the terminal broke down and I had to hoof it.”

Carter glanced at her and looked away quickly so he wouldn’t be tempted to stare. Damn, she looked good. Her sea green, long-sleeve shirt had a scoop neckline, and her cleavage rose and fell as she caught her breath.

Ah, hell. Did he have to notice her cleavage?

He blew out a frustrated breath and tried to think of something else.

No, it was no use. All his attention was riveted on the woman sitting far too close to him.

“First class?” She raised an eyebrow. “Honestly, Carter, are you ever going to stick to a budget?”

“I am,” he shot back. “I upgraded from coach with my frequent flier miles.”

“For both of us?” She smiled at him for the first time in what seemed like weeks. “That was very nice of you.”

He didn’t want to be nice. He wanted to blow off the conference and spend the entire time in bed with Dani. He wanted to strip her naked and keep her that way until he’d sated his hunger for her. He wanted to drag her off to the back of the plane and join the Mile High Club before they even reached the city of sin.

But doing any of those things would be the death knell of his friendship with Dani. He needed her in his life far more than he needed to slake his lust. Again.

Friendship lasted. Relationships never did.

Friendship.

Focus on the friendship.

Dani cleared her throat. Carter looked up and realized that he’d been lost in thought long enough to be rude. “Did you really think I’d leave you back in coach while I enjoyed first class? Damn, woman, you’d kick my ass.”

“No, I’d congratulate you on being frugal.” She laughed, a rich throaty sound that made him shift uncomfortably in his seat. “*Then* I’d kick your ass.”

They were both silent for a while, which didn’t bother Carter nearly as much as it did with other women. But then, most women weren’t Dani.

How could he have been so selfish as to jeopardize their friendship for a roll in the sack?

Her hair, pinned on top of her head in a haphazard knot, managed to look sexy and sweetly goofy at the same time. A few little tendrils drifted around her face and neck. His fingers itched to touch them.

Carter sighed and took the flute of champagne the flight attendant was holding out. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

## Chapter Six

Carter stood next to the wall, nursing a shot of single malt. The conference room had been transformed by the casino staff into a private reception hall, with a half-dozen bartending stations and two long buffet tables down each side of the room. It was teeming with conference-goers enjoying the extravagant buffet and open bar, as well as the chance to network.

Schmooze. And he just was not in the mood for it tonight.

It was crazy. This was the whole reason he'd come to the conference—talking up OSE, meeting people who could help expand their markets and bring their products to a national stage. So why was he standing here in the shadows, the epitome of anti-social?

"Nice presentation today, Matthews," a voice boomed next to him. "You and your partner did an excellent job introducing your products."

Carter turned to see Jack Madison, buyer for a national sporting goods chain, standing beside him. "I'm glad you liked it," he said.

"Absolutely." Jack flung an arm around his shoulder and steered him into the room. "In fact, I'd like the chance to discuss your prospects more in-depth, if you don't mind."

Carter did mind; he'd rather ditch the party and head back to his room to sulk. Over what, he had no idea. And he knew that giving in to his snit would be an incredibly stupid thing to do.

So, instead, he agreed to join Jack at a table across the room. Once there, a few more buyers joined them, as well as an investor who had been making some noises about helping OSE find a wider customer base.



Soon, Carter was deep in conversation, almost able to ignore his bad mood.

Until Jack leaned over and said, “And there’s one of your best assets.”

Carter followed his gaze to the entryway to the room, and his mood plummeted. What the hell was she doing here?

Deep down, he knew he was being unreasonable. She had every right to be here, just like every other attendee. In fact, it would look strange if she didn’t attend the biggest social event of the conference.

But damn, did she have to look so good?

She stood just inside the doorway, her hair tumbling around her shoulders in a mass of curls. A white sleeveless sweater hugged her curves, while her flirty red skirt ended well above her knees. She looked sexy and approachable at the same time.

Carter clenched his jaw so hard he was at risk of breaking a tooth.

She saw him then, and the smile that lit her face warmed a place deep inside that he couldn’t even name. She wove her way through the crowd, making small talk with the other attendees, until she reached the table. “Mind if I join you?”

Almost instantaneously, the other men at the table jumped to their feet, holding out a chair for her, offering to fetch a drink, complimenting her on her outfit. Carter rose as well, holding back a glower with effort.

“Loved your budget rundown this afternoon,” Fred said. The heavysset, balding man was one of the top decision-makers for an east coast department store chain that was looking to expand into outdoor gear. He pushed the platter of appetizers toward Dani. “You’ve got a real handle on money issues.”

“That’s her specialty,” Carter couldn’t help saying. “No one’s better at finance than Dani.”

“Thanks, Carter.” Dani smiled at him. “I do my best.”

“What else are you good at, Dani?” Jack leaned forward, one arm on the table.

"I—I don't know," she stammered. "I'm pretty focused on my work."

"How about dancing?" Jack gestured toward the dance floor at the far end of the room. "Care to take a spin with me?"

Carter smiled inwardly. Jack was about to get his head handed to him. Dani never danced with anyone.

His mouth dropped open as Dani smiled up at Jack and placed her hand in his.

The two of them headed for the dance floor and found a spot... It was like a train wreck—Carter simply couldn't look away. They were closer than should be legal, Jack's hand hovering too damn close to Dani's ass. And what the hell was Dani doing? That hip-wiggle thing?

Then he recognized it. It was the same move she'd been doing in the aerobics room the night he'd walked in on her erotic strip tease.

His jaw tightened and he clenched his hands as Dani and Jack burned up the dance floor. It was—obscene, that's what it was.

"Damn," Fred said as he swallowed the last of his beer. "That is one hot woman."

Carter whipped his head around. "Who?"

Fred gestured at the dance floor with his empty bottle. "Your financial officer. Who'd have guessed she'd have a booty like that?"

"Excuse me?"

Fred, oblivious, chattered on. "I wouldn't mind getting to know her better. Is she seeing anyone right now?"

"What?"

"Of course, you know what they say...what happens in Vegas..." Fred winked at him.

Carter leaned forward, eyes narrowed. "I'd better not hear you say anything like that again."

Fred held up his hands. "Whoa, man, just making an observation."

"A pretty disrespectful one," Carter growled.

"Didn't realize that the two of you had a thing. Sorry."

"We don't have a thing," Carter said. He crossed his arms over his chest. "I just don't like hearing a colleague talked about that rudely."

"Sure." Fred stood and looked around. "Think I'll go, uh, get another drink."

Carter turned back toward the dance floor, where the music had segued into a slow song. Jack was sticking to Dani like Cling Wrap. Slamming his glass down on the table, Carter jumped to his feet. He knew he was being unreasonable—not to mention totally obvious—but he couldn't seem to help himself.

Carter stalked over to the dance floor, his face hot with anger. Barely hanging on to his civility by a thread, he tapped Jack on the shoulder.

Jack turned around, an amused expression on his face. "Did you need something?"

"I need to talk to Dani, if you don't mind."

"In the middle of a song?" At Carter's glower, he stepped back from Dani, hands raised. "Sorry, man. All yours."

Damn straight. Carter took Dani's hand and pulled her into his arms, holding her a respectable distance apart. His body urged him to hold her closer, but he wasn't going there. No matter how much he wanted it.

Dani, however, didn't seem to want it at all. "What the heck are you doing? That was embarrassing," she hissed.

"As embarrassing as all the dirty dancing you and Jack were up to?"

She pulled back, glaring at him. "I don't believe you."

"You were all over each other."

"We were *dancing*. It's normal behavior on the dance floor."

"Please. You couldn't have gotten any closer without removing articles of clothing."

"I think you need to stop now, Carter."

She was right, but he plowed on, too angry to censor himself. "And you sure know something about taking your clothes off, don't you?"

Furious, she wrenched herself from his arms and stalked off the dance floor, heading for the back hallway. Carter followed a few steps behind.

She paused at the door of the women's restroom and, holding a hand out, stiff-armed to stop him from going any further. "Go away, Carter. I can't be around you when you're like this."

"Like what?" He captured her hand against his chest, pulled her close. "Jealous as hell?"

"Jealous?" She swallowed, eyes wide. "What are you talking about?"

"This." And the noise and commotion of the bar faded into nothingness as he lowered his head for a kiss.

There was nothing hesitant about it, a brazen mating of lips and tongues that sent him up in flames. The pent-up frustration of the past week, knowing what it was like to touch her and being unable to do anything about it, finally dissolved in a flurry of passionate kisses.

One hand cupped the back of her head, holding it steady as his lips plundered hers. The other slid down her back, dipping to the sweet curve of her ass.

With a helpless moan, Dani grabbed the lapel of his shirt and hauled him even closer, opening her mouth to his. Carter stroked his tongue inside, sampling the sharp bite of the wine she'd been drinking as it mingled with the heady flavor of Dani.

She whimpered against his mouth, pressing her mound into his erection with little pulsing movements.

Another step closer and he had her back against the wall, one leg wrapped around his. He braced his hands on either side of her head and broke the kiss, lifting up briefly to look at her.

Her chest rose and fell with each panting breath, her pulse beating rapidly in the hollow of her throat. She dropped her head back against the wall with an audible thud, eyes closed, as he planted featherlight kisses down the column of her neck.

He pushed up the hem of her fitted shirt, burrowing his hand underneath to touch the heated skin of her midriff. She sucked in a

breath, inadvertently giving him greater access to her torso. He traced a finger along the band of her bra, knuckles skimming the lace-covered swell of her breasts. They both groaned at the contact.

Damn, he was hard, and growing harder by the second. Her leg was still wrapped around his waist, her skimpy red skirt riding dangerously high up her thigh. One tug at the thin fabric and her undies would be visible to the world.

Undies that, if he didn't miss his guess, were already damp.

He stroked his hand higher, brushing his thumb across one taut nipple. Dani whimpered and laced her fingers through his hair, tugging his head up for another kiss. Her hips pressed against his, bringing her into perfect alignment with his erection.

Lower the zipper, pull aside the scrap of satin covering her mound, and he could be inside her right here, right now.

In the back hallway of the casino, where anyone could walk by at any minute.

Hell, maybe they already had. He was so caught up in the moment a damn marching band could have thundered by and he would have missed it.

Shaken by his lack of control, Carter pushed away from the wall and, by extension, away from Dani. Whirling around, he paced across the hallway and turned back.

Her clothing was askew, her hair mussed and wild. She tucked her shirt in with trembling hands.

"Dani, I—"

"Stop." She looked him in the eye. "I'm going back to the table. I'm going to get my purse, say goodbye to everyone, and leave. I'd appreciate it if you could give me five minutes before you come back." She turned to go, then looked at him over her shoulder. "I'll be in my room in ten minutes. Knock on the adjoining door if you're interested in continuing this."

It took Carter the full ten minutes—and then some—to decide what, exactly, he was going to do.

\* \* \*

Dani paced her hotel room from door to window and back again.

Was she crazy, or what?

She pressed a hand to her stomach, her nerves tumbling around like socks in a dryer. Any minute now, Carter was going to knock on the door between their rooms.

Or not.

She glanced at the connecting door, wondering which scared her more—the idea that Carter might take her up on her offer, or the thought that he'd turn her down.

And why was she coming back for more emotional punishment? The last week had been hell at work, with the two of them avoiding each other as much as possible. She'd even taken to sending him her reports via e-mail, instead of dropping them off at his office on her way somewhere else. She'd stopped inventing reasons to run into him during the day, because the awkwardness between them was too painful.

It was almost like they didn't work together anymore.

Strange as it seemed, some of that had disappeared on the flight to Vegas.

As much as she'd been dreading this business trip, they'd actually seemed to find a way back to their friendship.

Up until tonight.

Carter had been an absolute bear, glaring and barking at everyone in his path, until she'd been certain he'd blown whatever chance they had to expand OSE's reach beyond the Northwest. Talk about burning bridges. She'd been thrilled to have a chance to escape to the dance floor with Jack.

And just when she'd softened him up, convinced him to take OSE's info packet back to headquarters and talk them up to his supervisors,

Carter had to show up like some overbearing Neanderthal and whisk her away.

She could only hope her hard work hadn't been in vain.

She checked her watch again, stomach clenching. He should have been here by now.

Maybe his fancy talk about jealousy had been so much hot air. Maybe that kiss hadn't meant anything more to him than a casual peck on the cheek.

He had a well-deserved reputation as a playboy. A new woman every month, each more stunning than the one before. What did she have to offer a man like that?

Only her heart. And she was so afraid that just wouldn't be enough.

He wasn't coming. He'd come to his senses, realized that if they made love again, it would make things just that more complicated. He was probably still down at the reception, drinking a beer with the guys and thanking his lucky stars he'd escaped with his sanity.

She never should have...

The doorknob turned.

Carter was beyond finesse.

Three strides took him across the room to where Dani stood. Without a word, he took her hand, and led her to the bedroom.

He turned on the bedside lamp and sat on the bed. "Dance for me," he said.

"What?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"I want to see what you've learned in this class of yours. I want you to know that I'm watching this time." He leaned back against the headboard. "I want to know you're dancing just for me."

"I don't have any music," she protested. Her breathing accelerated and her pupils dilated. "I'll look silly."

"No, you won't." Feeling reckless, he added, "Strip for me, Dani."

She closed her eyes. Maybe he'd pushed too far, asked too much. She was going to tell him to get out, to forget the whole thing...

She began to sway back and forth, following an internal beat. She stroked her hands up her sides and into her hair, lifting it off her neck. Then she tilted her head back, swinging the thick brown curls from side to side. Her breasts tilted up, the tight nipples clearly visible through the thin fabric of her top.

She did that little hip-shimmy, the one he'd seen on the dance floor, and Carter sucked in a breath. He could see a wicked smile curve her lips before she turned around and did the same shimmy facing away from him.

His cock was aching, thick and hard behind the fly of his pants. He slid the zipper down, and the sound was startlingly loud in the silent bedroom.

Dani froze for just a moment, but started to move again right away, her dancing growing bolder and more erotic. Still facing away from him, she put her hands in the small of her back and slid them down, cupping her ass. One hand teased the hem of her skirt, drawing it up just far enough to give him a peek-a-boo view of her thigh-high stockings.

Carter groaned.

She lowered the skirt again and gave her left cheek a little slap.

Not taking his eyes off her, Carter slid his pants off, dropping them over the side of the bed.

Dani looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. Then she criss-crossed her arms in front of her, grasped the hem of her shirt, and in one smooth movement pulled it off.

She turned around, her white lace bra barely covering her nipples. She ran a finger along the edges, dipping into the valley between her breasts and back up again. Swaying back and forth, she slipped her hands into the waistband of her skirt and stripped it all the way off.

Carter yanked his shirt off. He was in just his boxers now, his hard-on clearly outlined by the thin fabric. With one hand, he released it and began to stroke, eyes still focused on her.



Dani licked her lips, watching him avidly. She hooked a finger in one bra strap and drew it down her arm, following suit with the other. A flick of the front closure and her breasts swung free, the bra joining her other clothing on the floor.

She was almost naked now, just a barely-there thong and those thigh-high stockings. He crooked a finger at her, still stroking himself.

She crawled up onto the bed, her hair brushing his thighs as she moved toward him.

Her face was just above his, her eyes bright and vivid. Leaning down, she kissed him, her hand replacing his on his cock.

He arched up as she stroked him from root to tip, her thumb spreading the glistening liquid around the swollen head. He slipped her thong to the side. She was wet and ready for him. Not bothering to finish undressing her, he aligned his cock with her opening and slid inside.

He groaned as she took all of him, pressing down until he was fully seated inside her.

Dani lifted up until just the tip of him was in her. Closing her eyes, she pressed back down and began to ride him.

He reached between them and found her clit, pressing gently against it as she moved. Then he raised his head and took one nipple into his mouth.

Dani gasped at the dual assault, her movements growing wilder and more uncontrolled. Carter gripped her hips and began to thrust, powering them both to the edge.

Suddenly, Dani stiffened, her muscles trembling as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her. Carter gritted his teeth against the sensation of her inner muscles pulsing around him. Only after she slumped against him, boneless, did he let his orgasm rip through him.

They lay together for long minutes, struggling to get their breathing under control. Finally, he rolled to the side, sliding out of her—

And swore when he realized there was no condom to dispose of.

“What is it?” Dani rose up on one elbow.

He covered his eyes with one hand. "I can't believe I forgot birth control," he said.

"Oh. That." She shrugged. "I took care of it before you got here."

"What?" He glanced at her.

"There are other methods of birth control, you know."

"But I never forget the condom." What had he been thinking?

He hadn't been thinking. That was the problem.

"I know," she said. "I didn't expect we'd forget tonight, either. But no method is a hundred percent safe, so I figured a backup wouldn't hurt." She laughed softly. "Glad I planned ahead."

He didn't feel like laughing. How could he have been so irresponsible?

"Dani, I'm so sorry," he said.

"Why?" She scooted up on the bed, unconcerned with her nudity. "It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is. All of it."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, all of it?"

"I should have stayed away."

"Don't." She held up a hand, not looking at him. "I don't want to hear it."

"It's just that I—"

"You're sorry. Again. You regret what you just did. Again." She shoved a hand through her hair, working out the worst of the snarls with her fingers. "Want to know what I regret? Letting myself get caught up in the moment with you. Because when you start beating yourself up over *our* actions, I'm the one who gets bruised."

Dani got up and walked to the bathroom, grabbing her robe from the hook on the wall. She came back in, tying the belt around her. "I can't do this anymore, Carter. I can't be some dirty little secret, good only for a quick grope followed by days of self-flagellation. You have to figure out what you want. See, I already know what I want. And it isn't this."

Carter sat back, gutted. "Dani," he said.

She shook her head. “No more, Carter. I have to respect myself more than that.”

Then she reached down, handed him his clothing, and stalked out of the room.

## Chapter Seven

Jessica was on the phone when Dani arrived at work Monday.

It was about the only thing that had gone right that morning.

No, scratch that. It was the only thing that had gone right since her first night in Vegas.

She slipped past the reception desk and into her office, shutting the door tightly behind her.

She didn't want to see anyone, didn't want to have to answer all the inevitable questions about the trip. What in the world was she supposed to say? *Yeah, it was great until I slept with Carter and we ended up not speaking to each other for the rest of the conference?*

Which was pretty impressive, actually, when you considered just how many activities they were required to attend together.

And even when the conference was over and they were on their way home, the tension between them was oppressively thick. Every now and then she'd catch Carter giving her that "just-kicked-puppy-dog" look, like he was the one who'd had his heart ripped out and left bleeding on the floor. By the time the plane landed at Sea-Tac, Dani was ready to scream.

Home wasn't any better. Her empty apartment was another reminder of what she wanted and couldn't have. The dread in the pit of her stomach at the thought of going to work with Carter every day from here on out was enough to keep her awake half the night.

The cold, empty feeling at the thought of leaving OSE so she wouldn't have to be around him every day was enough to ruin the other half.

She'd tossed and turned, finally falling asleep somewhere between two a.m. and dawn, only to discover on awakening that she'd forgotten to set her alarm. She'd still only gotten a few hours of sleep, but was now an hour and a half late for work. Cursing roundly, she'd jumped into the shower to find that the hot water heater had given up the ghost sometime during her absence. Shivering, exhausted, she'd gotten dressed and rushed out the door.

Halfway to OSE she'd realized that she'd left her briefcase on the kitchen counter.

On the bright side, at least I-5 wasn't as crowded this hour of the morning.

She powered up her computer, kicked off her shoes—one black, one navy, she noted with a grimace—and settled back to dig her way through four days of e-mail.

She scrolled through the list, quickly deleting all junk mail and companywide messages that didn't relate to her. Near the bottom of the page one of the messages had a red flag next to it.

Her stomach dove when she saw who'd sent it.

Carter.

Gritting her teeth, she clicked on it. Better to get it over with quickly, like pulling off a band-aid.

It was short to the point of terseness. *We need to talk.*

She hit reply. *I'm pretty busy today.*

This time, an instant message dinged, startling her. Her stomach twisted at the thought of him sitting at his desk, waiting for her reply. *Make time.*

She leaned back, eyes narrowed. She could ignore him, but it was a sure bet that if she did, he'd be knocking down her door in a matter of minutes.

Better not to create a scene. *Fine. When and where?*

*I'll let you know.* And with that, he signed off.

Dani stared at the computer screen, wondering how in the world she was supposed to get any work done after that.

\* \* \*

Dani filed the last of the reports away, glancing out her window at the glow on Puget Sound from the setting sun. The stack of paperwork that had been waiting on her desk when she got back from Vegas had disappeared, but if someone had asked what they'd been about, she'd have been hard pressed to answer. The numbers had flowed together in one big amorphous mess as she powered through the pages, too distracted to really concentrate.

Carter had never gotten back to her.

He'd make a great torturer, she fumed as she checked her e-mail one last time. Leaving her hanging like that was killing her.

Nope, no messages. She shut down the computer and grabbed her purse, stomach growling with the reminder that she hadn't eaten all day. She'd pick up dinner on the way home, hope the super had fixed the water heater so she could soak in a hot tub, and forget she'd ever known Carter Matthews.

She opened the door, not surprised that the office was empty. She'd worked later tonight than she had in a long time, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Dani turned to close the door and was startled to find an envelope taped to it. Inside was a single note card, with Carter's distinctive handwriting on it. *Second floor. 8 p.m.*

She scowled at the note. She had less than five minutes to make it on time. Trust Carter to make a production out of this.

She got off the elevator on the second floor, only to find the health club closed up tight and another envelope taped to the door. She tipped a key into her palm. This note said: *Come in. Check the front desk.*

A little nervous, she unlocked the door and slipped inside. A card propped on the counter read: *Follow the red ribbon.*

The ribbon trailed along the floor, leading past the treadmills and free weights, beyond the racquetball courts and down the hall to the aerobics room. A bright red bow decorated the door.

Taking a deep breath, she pressed a hand to her stomach in a futile attempt to calm her nerves. Turning the knob, she stepped inside.

The room had been transformed. She took a few steps in, turning around to try to take it all in. A round table sat in the middle of the room, covered with a white linen tablecloth. It was set for one.

In front of the table, backed up against the wall of mirrors, a stage had been erected. It was a couple of feet off the ground, and lights shone on it from metal stands on either side.

Right smack dab in the center was—a pole?

“Good evening,” Carter said, in a rough approximation of a waiter at a formal restaurant. Either that or Herman Munster. He was standing near the back, a towel draped across one arm. “Welcome to Carter’s.”

“What in the world?” Dani’s legs felt suddenly weak, and she fumbled for the chair. In a flash, he was across the room, holding it out for her.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but questions will have to wait.” When she was seated, he returned to the back of the room and wheeled over a cart filled with covered dishes. “Your dinner.”

She stared as he whipped off the cover of one of the dishes to reveal a full steak dinner. “How did you—”

“Shh.” He placed a finger against her lips. “No questions. Just eat.”

Shooting him a dubious look, she put her napkin in her lap. At the first bite, she moaned with delight. The steak was cooked to perfection, tender and juicy. Unable to hold back, she tucked into the meal. She looked up to see Carter standing at her elbow, waiting patiently. “Aren’t you eating?”

He just smiled and shook his head, gesturing at her to continue.

She shrugged and kept eating. Finally, she pushed the plate away with a sigh.

He skimmed the plate off her table, replacing it with a smaller one. Under this cover was a chocolate torte, a rich berry sauce drizzled over it.

"I think you've just killed the Wellness Challenge for me," she said with a laugh.

He crouched down next to the table to look her in the eye. "You don't need it." Then he stood and walked over to the side of the stage.

Carter leaned down and fiddled with the stereo system. With a click, the soft instrumental music that had been playing stopped, only to be replaced by a sensual, beat-driven melody. Dani stopped eating, fork halfway to her mouth, as Carter jumped up onto the stage.

"And now for the entertainment portion of our evening." He took the towel off his arm and tossed it offstage.

Dani could only watch, mouth gaping, as Carter began to dance. He swiveled his hips to the beat, toying with the top button on his shirt. One by one, he slid the buttons free, until the white dress shirt hung open, revealing a slice of skin that made Dani's mouth water more than the chocolate had. The music crescendoed, and a half-beat later, he stripped off the shirt, stopping again as he got caught in the still-buttoned cuffs. "Damn!"

Dani stifled a giggle as he struggled his way out of the sleeves. Then the shirt was gone, tossed to the side, and she was too busy admiring his chest to laugh.

With one hand, he grasped the pole, swinging around from one side to the other. Dani supposed it was meant to look like a pole dance at a strip club, but in Carter's hands it was closer to rappelling up a rock wall. He did a little bump and grind to the music, his black slacks incongruously formal against the blatantly sexual setting.

It was both funny and sensual, and Dani sat with her hand over her mouth, dessert forgotten, as her favorite treat made a very sexy fool out of himself just for her.

He reached for his belt buckle, whipping the belt out of the loops so quickly he had to duck to avoid smacking himself in the face with it.



Dropping it to the ground with a curse, he fumbled with the button on his slacks, slipping them to the floor only to get tangled in his shoes.

“Ah, hell.” He stopped dancing and stood in the middle of the stage, pants around his ankles, clad only in a pair of boxer shorts... He spread his arms wide and looked at her, a hesitant smile on his face. “Surprise.”

“Carter, you goofball.” Dani bit her lip to keep from crying. “What the hell are you doing?”

He shuffled over to the CD player and switched it off. Then he sat on the edge of the stage, still partially dressed. “I think I’m apologizing.”

“For what?” She sat ramrod-straight in her chair, fighting the urge to go to him. She just couldn’t, not yet.

“For screwing everything up.” He leaned back, unselfconsciously, and rested his palms on the floor behind him. “I was so afraid of ruining the best relationship I’d ever had, I didn’t take the time to notice that the only thing damaging it was my own attitude.”

“What do you mean?” Her voice trembled a little.

“You’re my best friend, Dani.” He looked at her, eyes intent. “But I haven’t been acting like it lately. I’ve never had a relationship last more than a few months, so I decided a relationship with you would suffer the same fate. I didn’t want that to happen.”

“I didn’t, either.”

“So I pushed you away, trying to deny what was happening between us.”

She took a deep breath. “What is happening between us?”

He hopped off the stage and shuffled over to her, his pants still caught around his ankles. It should have been funny, but Dani felt about as far from laughing as possible. “I’ve fallen in love with you,” he said, cupping her face in his hand.

“I thought I wasn’t your type,” she whispered, leaning into his touch.

“My type?”

“Glamorous, sexy, athletic.”

He laughed softly. “Are you kidding?” He pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her, his hard-on pressing against her stomach. “Have you looked in a mirror lately?”

She glanced at the mirrored wall, their reflection large as life. She blinked in surprise. She did look different—her hair was down, soft curls framing her face. Her sweater and khaki pants were closer-fitting than what she’d worn before the challenge, hugging every curve.

“Why do you think I’ve had such a hard time keeping my hands off you?” He palmed her hip. “God, you turn me on.”

“I thought you were ashamed of me,” she said.

“Never.” He shook his head. “Ashamed of myself, for risking the most important relationship in my life by giving in to my attraction to you. I thought that when it ended, I’d lose you for good.”

“No.”

“I know that now. Just like I know it doesn’t have to end.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I love you, Dani. I want to be with you now and always, as a friend, as a lover, as a partner. Forever.” He reached down and patted his hip, grimacing as he realized that his pocket was on the floor with the rest of his pants. “Maybe I ought to get dressed again for this,” he muttered.

“No way.” She gave him a fierce hug. “I think I want to keep you just like this.”

“Half-naked?”

“In more ways than one.” She smiled shyly. “You love me?”

He nodded. “Everything about you. I love how you get so immersed in your work you lose track of time. I love how you’re willing to try new things, even when they’re outside your comfort zone. I love that you’re a great friend and an even better lover. I even love how you try to keep me to a budget. I love you, Dani Williams.”

Her eyes welled with tears. “I love you, too, Carter. I’ve loved you forever.”

“Thank God.” He crushed her to him, her curves molding to his angles. “Now I really do need my pants.”

She laughed, brushing away a tear as he stepped away. “I never thought I’d hear those words from you.”

“What, that I need my pants?” He hitched them up, letting them hang loosely on his hips.

“That, too.” She watched him dig around in his pocket. “What are you doing?”

He pulled out a small drawstring velvet bag. “Getting this.”

Her eyes widened as he opened the bag and tipped out something sparkly.

He took the ring between thumb and forefinger and held it out to her. “How would you feel about making this partnership permanent?”

Her hand shook only a little as she stretched it toward him. “I think it’s a fine idea,” she said.

Carter slid the ring on; it fit perfectly. “So how tight a budget are we going to be on for the wedding?”

Dani grinned. “Budget? Are you kidding? I’m only ever getting married once. We’re going to do it up right.”

“Good.” He sat on the edge of the makeshift stage and tugged her down next to him. “Let’s consider tonight one of the expenses, okay? You don’t want to know how much this cost.”

“I think you’re right.” She looked around. “How in the world did you manage to set this up, anyway?”

“I have my ways.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “It was convincing them to close up a couple of hours early that took the most doing.”

“Wow.” She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder. “I can’t believe you went to all this trouble.”

He kissed her forehead. “You’re worth it.”

“I do have one question.” She glanced over her shoulder. “What’s with the pole?”

“Well, I figured since you’ve done so well with strip aerobics...”

Dani blushed. “Carter.”

“Why not take the class to the next level?”

“Are you telling me this is my very own pole?”

“Our pole,” he corrected, a gleam in his eye. “Sturdy yet portable.”

“I like the way you think,” she teased.

“Besides, I’ve got a vested interest in helping you win the Wellness Challenge.”

“You do?”

He wagged his eyebrows. “I’m thinking that trip to Hawaii would be an excellent honeymoon trip.”

Dani laughed and threw her arms around him, tumbling him onto his back on the stage. “There’s no one else I’d want to share that with,” she said.

Then she threw one leg over his waist, straddling him, and proceeded to show him just how much they both had to look forward to.

## About the Author

Kate Davies first tried her hand at romance at the young age of twelve. Sadly, that original science fiction/love story is lost to the ages. But after many years meandering through such varied writing fields as short fantasy fiction, playwriting, poetry, and nonfiction, she's made her way home to romance.

Kate lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and kids. When not chasing the rugrats around the house, she loves to write sexy stories about strong, passionate men and women.

Learn more about Kate at [www.kate-davies.com](http://www.kate-davies.com), or check out her blog at [www.kate-davies.blogspot.com](http://www.kate-davies.blogspot.com). Join her newsletter group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/katedaviesupdates/> to keep up to date with new releases, signings, and other news. She can be contacted at [kate@kate-davies.com](mailto:kate@kate-davies.com).

Look for these titles by Kate Davies

*Now Available:*

Taking the Cake

Striptease

Beginnings: Ritual Love

*Darcy and Mac are “best friends with benefits”, but now Mac wants more than just the hot sex. He wants Darcy forever. And he’ll risk everything to get her.*

## The Boy Next Door

© 2007 Jessica Jarman

The last thing Darcy Phillips wants after the end of a disastrous relationship is to get involved with another man. Being free and unattached was the plan until her old pal Thomas “Mac” MacAllister strolls back into her life.

Mac has always loved Darcy but the timing was always wrong. Now, she’s home and unattached. And after a night of wine and conversation, things turn hot fast. But Darcy isn’t ready for more than the physical and she definitely doesn’t want anyone knowing what the two of them are up to. Especially her mother.

It isn’t long, though, before Mac wants more. Much more. Yet Darcy isn’t sure she’s willing to risk their long-time relationship for something as dangerous as love. But Mac is a man who knows what he wants and he’s not afraid to go after it.

Using their incendiary passion as a starting point, Mac sets out to win the girl of his dreams and show her that everything she wants...is right next door.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Boy Next Door*:

Her gaze followed the man as he crossed the yard to the shed and opened the door. He reached in and pulled out...the hose? What on earth did he want with a hose? She continued to watch his back as he attached the hose to the faucet on the outer wall of the small building. She wasn’t sure what to do. Calling nine-one-one was out of the question. What the heck would she say? *Yes, officer, there’s a strange man outside watering my mother’s roses, could you come pick him up?*

Her mother hadn’t said anything about hiring someone to take care of the yard. Curiosity caused her to hold her breath for a moment until he turned toward her. It escaped in a whoosh when she saw his face. For

crying out loud, it was Mac! Thomas MacAllister, the boy next door. With a shake of her head, Darcy leaned back against the sofa.

They were only a year apart in age and their parents were best friends. Every trip, every summer vacation for years had included the two families. In fact, Mac's parents were planning most of the shindig for her parents' anniversary. She'd had tea with his mother just an hour earlier to go over flower arrangements.

A small chuckle slipped between her lips. Both mothers had not so secretly hoped Darcy and Mac would get together. A notion both kids had strived to relieve them of. They were friends, best friends in fact, though they'd lost touch in recent years. They knew they could turn to each other for anything, anything but romance. It was like an unspoken rule. And Darcy hadn't wanted to ruin their friendship by trying to make it more. Their mothers, and fathers for that matter, had ignored their protests and persisted in setting the two up time and time again. Most of Mac and Darcy's teen years had been spent parading boyfriends and girlfriends under parents' noses, in hopes the hints and suggestions would stop. They hadn't.

At least since her engagement to Richard, it had slacked off for a while. Unfortunately, they'd probably pick up where they left off when news of the break up surfaced. She was thirty years old, for crying out loud. She didn't need her mother and surrogate aunt matchmaking for her.

Not that Mac wasn't attractive. He was a hunk in high school. *And still is*, she thought as she gave him the once over. His dark hair was long enough to curl along the collar of his black T-shirt.

Broad shoulders stretched the cotton deliciously as he untangled the hose. Her gaze slid down past his narrow waist and hips to his tight bum encased in faded blue jeans. Yes, siree, he was a hottie.

He turned on the water and began dousing her mother's roses and other assorted blooms. Darcy licked her lips and shifted in an effort to alleviate the tension building between her legs. Her nipples pebbled under her T-shirt and hot wetness pooled in her pussy as she pressed her legs together, gaze fixed on Mac's hard body working out in the yard.



God, it'd been a long time since she'd had sex. Life was busy, she'd told herself, and it was normal to lose interest when you got older. Of course, her so-called lover had been getting it elsewhere. Yet she felt anything but uninterested as her longtime friend finished his task and returned to the shed to pull out the lawn mower.

She mentally shook herself. Mac was a friend, pure and simple, even if her thoughts about him weren't always platonic. Getting involved with him in any other way was a surefire way to mess up the one real, consistent friendship she'd had. Mac had a way of getting her to step back and experience something else besides her obsession, her art.

Darcy leaned further back into the cushions and allowed her eyes to drift shut. Putting extra effort into it, she pushed Thomas MacAllister out of her mind and tried to rest, quite unsuccessfully. Thoughts raced—her upcoming interview, the unavoidable explanations she would have to give her parents about Richard, arranging for the shipment of her things. Finally, her thoughts slowed. She drifted happily between sleep and wakefulness until the sound of the terrace door opening made her sit up with a start. It was him.

Mac grinned as he reached behind him to slide the door closed. "Hey, you."

"Hey back." She returned the grin. "How're you?"

"Great. Mom said you were back in town. Just had to see for myself."

Darcy raised her arms in a small shrug and swung her feet to the floor. "Well, there ya go. You've seen me."

Mac chuckled and walked around the coffee table. Lowering himself to the sofa next to her, he commented, "You've been a stranger around here lately."

"I've been busy." *Don't you sound defensive? Get a grip.*

"I'm sure you have. Which is why I'm wondering what you're doing here a week early and without el crepo."

He never had liked her fiancé. "His name is Richard."

"Yeah, whatever. So what gives? Where is he?" He ran a finger up her bare arm, from wrist to just under the sleeve. She shivered as heat zipped through her body, burrowed in her belly.

*Whoa, what was that?*

“Not here.”

Grasping her left hand, he stared pointedly at her bare ring finger.

“We split up.” She pulled her hand back. “Happy?”

“As a matter of fact...” He trailed off and leaned over to capture her lips with his.

*When two friends share a night of unbridled passion, can their relationship withstand the consequences?*

## **The Rebound Guy**

© 2007 Jennifer Colgan

Catching her boyfriend in the act with another woman should have made Lauren James angry, indignant or even depressed. Instead, it made her horny. The only man in the world she trusts enough to help her through the sting of betrayal is her best friend, Eric Reynolds.

When Lauren shows up at Eric's apartment, it doesn't take much for her to seduce him. She finds solace for her trampled heart and bruised ego in Eric's capable hands. After an unforgettable night of passion, Lauren wakes to the cold reality that she used Eric to get revenge. Will Eric forgive her, even if she can't forgive herself?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Rebound Guy*

Lauren wanted him. Lauren James. His best friend. Had the world turned upside down when he wasn't looking?

Lauren dropped her purse on the floor and pressed her body against him. Together they stumbled back a step. She gazed up at him, her luminous green eyes dilated to huge pools of endless black. Her plump lower lip beckoned him and he leaned in close. His gaze plunged into the deep valley of her cleavage visible in the open neckline of her blouse and his mouth went dry.

She smelled like sultry sex perfume and strawberry shampoo. Would she taste like peach lip gloss and coconut rum the way she had that one reckless moment last July when he'd kissed her and indulged in the fantasy they might be good together as more than just friends?

"Don't say no, Eric. I know you want me. Don't you?" Did she look hopeful, or desperate? God, did it matter?

"A favor..." He repeated the words as he dipped his head into the space between her neck and shoulder. He took in the alluring scent of her skin and thought about planting his lips on the pulse point below her jaw.

“I need you, Eric. I need you to make love to me tonight.”

“You’re a little drunk, aren’t you?” asked the good Eric Reynolds, the corporate security consultant who spent his days building computer firewalls and tweaking virus protection software. *Drunk and horny*, thought the bad Eric, the one who hated being the guy all the women turned to for moral support because he was always honest and trustworthy.

Women liked bad boys. He’d been reminded of that time and time again when his girlfriends left him for ex-cons, compulsive gamblers and rock musicians with coke habits.

Good guys finished last. That was his motto.

“I had one frozen margarita with the girls. I’m not drunk, but I took a cab here since Tara was driving.” As she spoke, Lauren lowered her lips to his chest, to that little hollow at the base of his throat, and licked him there. He groaned as his balls went tight.

Instant hard-on. Bad Eric grabbed her ass and squeezed, pushing her pelvis against the growing bulge of his erection.

Lauren smiled up at him, letting him know she had him right where she wanted him.

The good Eric demanded to know what brought this on. Lauren James was one of those nice girls. She wasn’t loose or slutty. She didn’t bang every guy she met just for kicks. Therefore there had to be a reason for her sudden...attack.

They’d met at one of Roxy’s legendary Christmas parties four years ago and, like ninety percent of the women Eric met, she’d immediately turned to him for advice on how to deal with her current boyfriend. The Neanderthal hadn’t wanted her to have any friends he hadn’t picked. She’d dumped the guy on Eric’s advice, and they’d been friends ever since. Up until this moment, that meant Sunday afternoon matinees, lunch when his job took him to see clients in her office building, and all the requisite birthday, holiday and what-the-hell-it’s-Friday parties thrown by their large circle of mutual friends. Except for that Fourth of July kiss, they’d never even considered...well, that wasn’t true. He’d considered quite a lot of things.

“Have you got condoms?” Her breathy question came with an expert flick of her wrist that caused a button to pop off his shirt. She giggled. “Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“Condoms?” she asked again.

“As in, more than one?”

She gave him a wicked grin and spread his shirt open down to his navel. Her hot tongue branded a line of fire down his sternum. She licked her lips and when she looked up at him, her eyes smoldered. “How many have you got?”

A mental inventory told him he could dig up at least four. “Laur, are you sure you—” The good Eric’s question was lost in a heart-stopping kiss. She drew his tongue into her mouth, playfully at first, then with a sensual determination. She held herself to him with one hand, fingers laced through his hair. Her other hand eased down and popped the final button of his shirt, then grazed naughtily into his jeans to tease at the waistband of his briefs.

When she broke the kiss, good Eric was a memory. Bad Eric was ready to give her everything she wanted and then some. *After all, that’s what friends are for.*

*He's vice. She's nice. This potent mix has to be handled with care...*

## Strip Tease

© 2006 Kate Davies

It seemed easy enough. Hit the local all-male strip club, pick a likely target, and hire him for her best friend's bachelorette party. But the stripper who catches Caroline's eye has a different agenda. He's an undercover cop, and Caroline ends up under arrest – for solicitation!

Tony DiMarco realizes too late that he's made a mistake. Caroline's reputation and business are suffering, and he feels responsible. He feels something else, too – the pull of red-hot desire. He wants Caroline, but she's afraid that he's just trying to make up for his mistake. Can this determined vice cop teach her to trust again?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Strip Tease*:

What the hell?

Caroline stopped at the entryway into the club, staring around in confusion. When she'd slipped backstage, everything had been calm, almost comatose, especially since the stripper who had followed Tony had been the poster child for anticlimactic.

Now, the entire room was in chaos. People were shouting, tables knocked over, drinks spilled across the floor. A uniformed police officer stood in the doorway yelling orders through a megaphone that no one was listening to. One of the bachelorette party attendees was bent over the funky-haired waiter, her knee in the small of his back, cuffing his hands behind him. Another was lining up the dancers against the far wall, holding a gun on them.

A gun! Caroline backed away, trying to escape the madhouse in front of her. There had to be a back exit somewhere around here...

She made it a couple of steps before she ran into a solid object. A warm, well-muscled, breathing object. “Where are you going?” Tony gripped her upper arms.

Any other time, she would have focused on how good it felt to have his hands on her. Right now, though, she only wanted to escape. “We have to get out of here. The whole place has gone crazy.” She turned just enough to see his profile. “I think some people are getting arrested.”

She couldn’t get caught up in this. It was tough enough being a massage therapist, what with all the assumptions about the profession. If news got out that she’d visited a strip club—especially one where illegal activities were evidently happening—it could destroy her career and her reputation.

“This is a bust,” Tony said in her ear, his hands sliding down her arms.

“I know,” she hissed back. “I can’t be found here. Is there a back door or something?”

“Yes,” he said, his fingers circling her wrists. “But you won’t be using it.”

Too late, she realized he was snapping something around her wrists. “What are you doing?” She struggled, but the restraints were metal and unyielding.

“You have the right to remain silent,” he answered. Grasping her by the elbow, he pulled her into the main room. “Everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“You’re arresting me?” Caroline knew she was shrieking, but it wasn’t as if anyone could hear her besides the stripper-slash-cop dragging her into the fray. “What for?”

“Solicitation.” He turned her around so she was lined up with the rest of the criminals. Criminals!

“Solic—” She gaped at him. “You thought I was trying to pay you for sex?”

Silence descended on the room, heads swiveling her direction.

“You have the right to an attorney,” Tony continued, unaffected by her outburst.

“I was trying to hire a stripper for a friend’s bachelorette party, you moron,” she yelled, too angry to care that they were the center of attention.

“Let’s get everyone down to headquarters and sort this out,” a female cop said, placing her hand on Tony’s shoulder. Her lips twitched, as if she were trying to hold back a grin. “Nice show, by the way. I don’t blame her for wanting to see you strip again, whatever the circumstances.”

“Stuff it, Phillips,” he replied, his gaze focused on Caroline.

“You probably do.” Caroline looked at his groin contemptuously. “And after I sue you for false arrest, you’d better believe I never want to see you—in or out of your clothes—again.”



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